

# Women in the Sun: Precarity and the Future among Syrian Refugee Women in Lebanon

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## Introduction

### Lebanon's Refugee Crisis

During the months of July to September, my fieldwork in Lebanon led me to drastically different places: from the dusty, dry agglomeration of shacks in a small town in the middle of the Bekaa Valley to a hot and humid hectic sewing workshop hidden within the serpentine alleyways of the Shatila Palestinian refugee camp. I ended up in these places to speak with Syrian refugee women about their different experiences of laboring in Lebanon. Through this ethnographic work, I aspired to analyze how the Lebanese state's policies towards Syrian refugee labor have affected the way refugee women navigate the labor market, as well as how the involvement of international and local humanitarian organizations has played into their choices and prospects while doing so.

It is estimated that 1.5 million Syrians are displaced in Lebanon as of 2019. During the initial years of the conflict, Lebanon adopted what analysts have called a “policy of no-policy”. The Lebanese state allowed Syrians fleeing the conflict to enter Lebanon freely based on the principle of *non-refoulement* but did not devise any coherent resettlement or asylum policy. In 2014, however, the Lebanese state began implementing more restrictive laws on Syrian refugees' labor and entry into Lebanon (Geha and Talhouk 2018). Lebanon is often depicted as a ‘weak state’, overrun by corruption, sectarian tensions, clientelism and foreign interference, therefore the influx of refugees is cited as yet another bringer of unbearable pressure on its already crumbling infrastructure. As for the consequences on Syrian refugees themselves, their situation has been described as one of the ‘worst humanitarian crises of all time’, requiring urgent and extensive support and intervention (UNHCR, UNICEF & WFP 2018, 9).

Given these conditions, the landscape of the refugee crisis in Lebanon currently presents a multitude of actors, including the state's legal mechanisms and policies, an array of local and international humanitarian initiatives, a large informal labor market, a tense and often hostile host community, and a largely poor Syrian refugee population making up 25% of Lebanon's. Refugee labor has emerged as a large area of contention in public debates and thus has a highly political resonance: prominent politicians have condemned this ‘immigrant labor’ which supposedly disadvantages nationals and much recent policy has been guided by such a philosophy. But despite the highly political nature of refugee labor, refugee laborers themselves are depoliticized and thought of as charity subjects rather than political actors. Women constitute a large part of this Syrian refugee labor force. Displacement has caused significant changes for women, including in the structure of their households, their roles and responsibilities, and their aspirations. This aspect of refugee women's labor also makes them targets of humanitarian aid and assistance, as development discourses portray women's labor as serving the double purpose both of crisis management and women's empowerment. Since then, multiple initiatives such as micro-credit loans, vocational training, and other related

activities have been organized by NGOs and international humanitarian agencies in order to empower and enable Syrian women to have a better life in Lebanon (IPSOS Group SA 2018). By exploring how Syrian women navigate the Lebanese job market, one can investigate the way a neoliberal ‘absentee’ state governs through complex, contradictory, and sometimes unexpected ways, and how large humanitarian regimes come to play more important roles than simple providers of immediate and in-kind tangible support. Moreover, through an anthropological and ethnographic analysis of these phenomena, one can study the interplay between these forces and their effects on refugee subjectivities. I thus hope to also shed light on how refugee women can appropriate the discourses and practices of powerful institutions and what aspirations emerge from these efforts.

This paper will be divided into two parts; the first part will discuss the structural difficulties that Syrian refugee women have faced in Lebanon, and the state mechanisms that perpetuate their dispossession and precarity. This section will also deconstruct the meaning of precarity in order to arrive at a definition that encompasses both global, local and structural causes as well as the embodied feelings they produce. The second part will explore the moral projects that women devise in order to deal with these and refuse their predicaments and will also consider what this means in terms of the definition of a political actor. I argue that precarity is a structural phenomenon, but it is particular and multiple; the experience is never totalizing or passively accepted as subjects contend with their fates in different ways, drawing on past social roles and networks. As such, though development programs that identify precarity as a problem try to contain it by rendering subjects non-political, I claim that refusal and critique are part of potentially radical political contention.

## Doing Fieldwork in Crisis

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Lebanon between the months of July and September 2018, mainly between Beirut, specifically in the Palestinian refugee camps of Burj al Barajneh and Shatila, and the Bekaa governorate, mostly in the West Bekaa district. I also met and interviewed women in towns in the Koura district, North governorate, and Zahle district in the Bekaa<sup>1</sup>. I conducted twenty-seven recorded and semi-structured interviews with a total of thirty women. I however met many more in the process and spent a substantial amount of time communicating informally with them in their homes, the community centers they frequent, and, less often, their place of work. I was introduced to people through personal networks, NGOs, and community centers I was familiar with, and I also attended several of the training sessions referred to later. I sought to speak to people living in geographically and economically diverse areas primarily because the Syrian refugee population is itself dispersed all over the country. My interest is in how powerful structures, such as the state, international humanitarian agencies, and their partners, shape laboring Syrian refugees’ field of action, and how refugees in turn respond to them. I sought to hear working Syrian refugee women’s thoughts about how these forces have affected their lives, as well as their opinions on their socio-economic situation. In *the Politics of Storytelling* (2013), Michael Jackson writes that ethnographic accounts based on storytelling illustrate personal responses to crisis. Storytelling involves interlocutors recounting their experiences of major events and their personal responses to them, as well as the way larger political and economic dynamics come to be

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<sup>1</sup> Names of individuals, small towns, and local organizations have been pseudonymized for the sake of privacy.

intricately intertwined in everyday life. As such, this paper draws heavily on the long and detailed narratives and accounts women had to give about leaving Syria, settling in Lebanon, the onslaught of challenges they faced along the way. With that said, it was not only the information that was communicated to me verbally, directly and intentionally that turned out to be of great relevance. Rather, engaging in “participant observation”, and seeing in context how life is lived with all of its experiential and sensory dimensions, was crucial. The affective responses of participants were similarly critical to understanding how state processes and other institutions shape the lives of those they govern, and how these in turn navigate the former.

Interviewing Syrian refugee women was a challenging endeavor for all parties involved for many reasons. First of all, the topic of forced migration is in itself often an extremely sensitive and distressing topic to talk about. Second, a large number of agents and institutions have a stake in gathering knowledge about Syrian refugees, including state structures and humanitarian organizations. As such, surveys, censuses and reports that inquire about the most intimate aspects of refugees’ lives have been ubiquitous since the early years of the crisis. I hope that the ethnographic approach I take, and the questions I ask, at least allow for my interlocutors to express themselves along different lines and in a way that feels less intrusive and is oriented towards different goals. I also hope that this approach contributes to a critical appraisal of state and humanitarian enterprise, something that is so often completely absent from conventional analyses, and ask new questions of who counts as a political actor, a qualification that is scarcely ascribed to refugees given the extent of the mechanisms of their exclusion.

## A Precarious Life

Access to formal employment in Lebanon has become increasingly difficult for Lebanese and non-Lebanese alike. As a result, most people seek employment in the growing informal sector. In 2015, an ILO report declared that over half of the Lebanese labor force worked in the informal economy (Ajuni and Kawar 2015). Likewise, in 2018, researchers estimated that around 30% of Lebanon’s GDP originated from the informal economy (Medina and Schneider 2018). Since then, not only has that sector continued to grow, but the influx of Syrian refugees since the start of the crisis in 2011 has triggered both to the informal economy’s soaring and restructuring.

Under mounting domestic pressures and tensions, since 2014 the Lebanese state has been implementing increasingly restrictive measures on refugees’ employment and residency. General Security began in December 2014 by banning refugees from working. It then continued by issuing a directive in February 2015 that banned all Syrians from entry, unless they fall under special circumstances, including having a work permit. This work permit, as instructed by another 2014 General Security directive, can only be acquired by Syrians who have a sponsor. Sponsorships require an amount of money to be paid to the state, a sum that usually exceeds refugees’ means. Moreover, the state has also implemented stricter laws on renewal of residency permits. As of 2015, residency permits must be renewed twice as often and for an increased fee. These factors drive most refugees to a state of permanent illegality, which pushes them to work informally in precarious and low-paid jobs. About 76% refugee households are believed to be living below the poverty line (UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP 2018).

Informality, illegality and the ambiguity surrounding them are three interwoven mechanisms that create a sense of constant precarity and transgression. For Syrian refugees, this condition ends up structuring the framework within which one can act. Marked by vulnerability to exploitation, financial insecurity, and lack of legal support systems, this state permeates the lives of Syrian refugees all over Lebanon. In addition, many feel targeted by the derogatory category of ‘Syrian’ in Lebanon. However, differently positioned individuals, whether with regards to class, gender, age, or other, experience these conditions differently. The consequent tactics that they deploy to deal with their situation, as well as these actions’ consequences are multiple and can have unexpected effects. Despite the vast humanitarian discourse which portrays Syrian refugees as helpless and passively enduring their predicament, refugees are active and play a prominent role in reshaping the environment in which they live. In this first part, I explore how the Syrian refugee women I spoke to are positioned within the informal economy of Lebanon. I also seek to illustrate, given the circumstances and possibilities that this position offers, how these women navigate this labor market. Ultimately, I aspire to highlight the multiple dimensions of what ‘precarity’ means for these women, how it emerges, as well as what kind of ethical projects it may launch in the aim of navigating this arduous landscape.

## The Workshop

In late August I was informed that a workshop on women’s leadership for Syrian refugees was taking place in Beirut. The workshop was running in the conference room of a swanky hotel. There about twenty to thirty Syrian women sat on a semi-circular table, listening to a middle-aged Egyptian woman lecture about the role of women during war and in situations of displacement. Tucked aside was a rectangular table where members of the NGO sat and took notes as discussions went back and forth. About ten minutes after my arrival, the Egyptian woman announced a one-hour lunch break. As everybody stood up to leave the room, I was hurriedly introduced to three women, and we briskly made our way through the noisy crowd with our coffee and sandwiches to the outdoor terrace of the hotel.

The three women led me to a small table outside where they could smoke, eat, and talk. They introduced themselves. Two were sisters: Leila, 29, and Doha, 31, and the third was Ibtisam, 45. In Syria, Leila and Doha were teachers – Leila, who had gone to a fine arts school, taught drawing, and Doha, with a Master’s degree in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and Arabic language, taught Arabic literature in a high school. In Lebanon, Leila and Doha could not find stable employment and frequently quit their jobs and moved on to new ones for a variety of reasons. Yet these always revolved around the same three problems: low wages, racism, and sexual harassment. In the first instance, Leila told me she quit her job in the kindergarten as she was asked to do “two jobs in one,” to both teach classes as and decorate, repaint, and draw on the walls of the kindergarten, while being paid less than total transportation costs. She was paid LBP 200,000 a month (approximately USD 166), LBP 550,000 (USD 363) less than the minimum wage for a full-time job in Lebanon. Her photography job also did not compensate her properly. Doha also said that during her time as a teacher she was forced to come in on weekends.

Leila and Doha lamented the racism that they encountered in the workplace: “People would call us ‘Syrian’ as though it were an insult. We would feel inferior”. Leila recounted how in the photography studio, for whatever task a customer asked about, the owner said they

would ‘get some Syrian to do that for them’. ‘As though Syrians would do anything, as if they had no dignity. They don’t see that in Syria, just as in any country, there is the cultured (*muthaqqaf*) Syrian and the provincial (*rifi*) Syrian. No, they lump us all in a single group.’ Doha added that she also faced this discrimination materially. At the clothing store in which she worked, she was paid significantly less than her Lebanese co-worker for the same work, despite the fact that she had a master’s degree when the other didn’t. When I asked her how she found out, she said: ‘It was not hidden! You can’t talk back. They will tell you there are many Syrians that will work as much as you for less.’ Doha added that in the clothing store she was subjected to sexual harassment by the owner, unlike her Lebanese coworker.

Ibtisam sympathized with the sisters, and recounted her own story:

In Syria, I was a university graduate, with a degree in Arabic literature. I graduated and got employed. Not because I needed the money, but because I had seen that all my friends were doing it. My father found me a post in a research center, in the best position, where I was in charge of seventeen people. Everything was wonderful until my family and I came to Lebanon. We immediately had to spend all the money we had. Our old house – which had been newly refurbished – was now in rubble. When I arrived here, I was not well. I always stayed home. I was far away from my parents and my friends. I became ill with a lump in my chest. My family and I were afraid. We had seen war. We always cried.

Eventually I felt I needed to start going outside, to have friends. I went to see the local businesses. But working in Lebanon requires concessions. You have to smile and respect people that don’t deserve it, and you need to take orders from people who don’t know anything, when you know better. My husband now works for a doctor even though he was trained as a lawyer. The doctor has been stealing from his wage for four years. My husband toils and the doctor doesn’t give him his labor’s worth. His hands were smooth and now they are rough. His clothes became dirty. He’s different, he’s a laborer. And I am now a laborer’s wife. My children will not get used to how we had everything and now... My children kept demanding too much. And I did so much for my son. I have only him. I always tried to hide from him the toys that others have. I had left him an entire floor in our old house for him to live in. He could have had all he wanted. My husband and I had left him an inheritance so that in case anything happened he would be comfortable financially... Anyway, nothing happened, and we are fine. I kept changing jobs each time the wage is low, and people order you around and disrespect you. I am a Syrian woman; I have stature in Syria! How can this happen?

This ordeal continued for four years. We moved to the Bekaa. When I went there, I met the community and that’s when I started to get better. I had a small baby! And I started to heal physically, because I had gotten a lump and with breastfeeding the lump went away. You see that God— [Doha: God achieves] God provides the solution. This baby came and filled my life. But we still had a problem with money. We are cut off from the UN and get no assistance— they said our family is too small. But this year I consider that God rewarded my patience and my children’s patience. I got this big, private and commercial job. And God sent me a boss from Syria. Because he is Syrian, he understands and empathizes with me, and knows what ordeal we went through. I feel like I deserve this work opportunity and I deserve the money I am making. My toiling does not go to waste now.

I conserved myself all of this time. I did not offer concessions, and I would only look for a job opportunity that is with honor and with dignity. There were many who didn’t recognize my worth. They see us as a number, as mindless, and we are not like this at all. We are dignified people and we are as knowledgeable and educated as anyone. We might stay displaced for another ten years, are we going to keep

crying? No. We think of the present. Suppose God did not decide for us a return to Syria. Our country will remain Syria. For these five years I have not stopped learning, developing, so I want to teach my children optimism. My work now is very demanding. But here I am with you right now and no one from work is bothering me. I have friends who keep calling me, telling they miss me. I have a nice group of friends now. We are all working together to provide work opportunities for ambitious people who do not want to be pitied by anyone. For people who know themselves, know that they deserve good opportunities, and are committed to working hard for them. Praise be to God I am comfortable now.

## Living Illegally and Informally

What Doha, Leila, and Ibtisam recounted to me were tales of debasement and ruination, and feelings of deep frustration and dissatisfaction. These feelings arise from a specific political and economic context, where several factors come together in Lebanon to form this particular affectation for Syrian refugees. I first turn attention to the various legal and institutional processes that drive Syrian refugees to a position in which is perpetually characterized by precarity and ambiguity. This position I interpret as both illegal and informal, or both enmeshed in the language of criminality as well as pushed beyond the purview of the state.

I qualify these intricacies of Syrian refugees' situation as 'precarious'. As such it is crucial first to unpack this concept without simply using it as synonymous with poverty. This section will explore how political and economic struggles and conditions create the challenges, obstacles, and structural walls that women refugees are faced with. This situation I generally refer to as 'precarity', however I approach precarity as a product of a larger, albeit fragmented and contradictory, process of class and identity formation. This condition is embodied and understood by refugees themselves, colliding and intertwining with previous social understandings of identity and social difference. Precarity is a concept with its own politics and genealogy, therefore it is critical to deconstruct it and use it in a way that does not reproduce the power, assumptions and inequalities that it has been used to perpetuate. The "precarious class" as a stable, defined category has recently been described as a novel subject that emerged as a result of the Eurocentric decline of the welfare state and the wage relation. The concept nostalgically conjures up Fordist pasts that often have never existed in countries of the Global South. Scholarship on precarity has romanticized the wage relation which in many parts of the colonial world was fiercely resisted as a capitalist imposition. Ronaldo Munck argues that "precarity" in the Global South has always been a part of fraught labor and capital relations – as such, it must be located within particular economic dynamics as well as a phenomenon of global capitalism which manifests in different ways (Munck 2013).

The framework of precarity in this text as such is not an attempt at a rough translation of how this scholarship of labor in Europe and the Global North defines the concept, namely a historical moment in which labor has become underpaid, unstable, and low-skilled partly as a result of collapse of the welfare state (Standing 2014). Nor is it a reference to a more generalized condition of being, whereby all social existence is precarious due to its dependence on, and hence vulnerability to, the lives of others (Butler 2004). This precarity, by which I generally mean an existence marked by insecure livelihood and unstable employment, is neither a translation of a particular, European, historical moment nor a more abstract human affliction. As maintained by Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, it is more than a position merely determined by material wealth and is a flexibilization of labor integral to

capitalism and largely present under this mode of production (Neilson and Rossiter 2008). But more so, I consider precarity to have multiple dimensions, and as being a sense of vulnerability conditioned by certain institutional and historical, as well as contingent setups (Han 2018). But it is also one that opens up certain possibilities for a political and ethical responses (Das and Randeria 2015), as I will show later on.

In order to explore the particular vulnerability that is faced by a majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, it is important to situate it within the political economy of Lebanon, that which makes certain working conditions and hierarchies of labor possible. Lebanon is a financialized capitalist economy, and its economy is reliant on banking, consumption and the services sector (construction and real estate, notably). In order to support the economy, the state has enabled the high pricing of commodities, and increased their profitability by ensuring low wages of workers (Gaspard 2003, Baumann 2016). Though labor organizations and unions (syndicates) exist, they are intricate institutions that have been overrun by sectarian politics since the civil war, and are vehicles for patronage and clientelism rather than workers' rights. Trade unions such as the General Confederacy of Lebanese Workers also saw their movement and capacity to mobilize weakened by their refusal or inability to include Syrian and other migrant workers which made up a large part of the labor force in Lebanon (Baumann 2016). Migrant workers (or all non-Lebanese, regardless of whether they hold a work visa) are forbidden from both joining an existing syndicate or creating their own.

A major factor to take into account when understanding the conditions of labor in Lebanon is the huge informal sector. Over 70% of the labor force in Lebanon works informally, or, in other words, are not officially registered by the state as workers nor entitled to benefits (ILO). The conditions that lead to this informalization are multiple, and have much to do with the lengthy, confusing, and unclear bureaucratic processes as well as expenses that they entail under the stipulations of the state. As such, this system allows for the creation of a flexible and cheap labor force that is easily exploitable given that it both operates in an unregulated market and is barred from access to any protective mechanisms or political representation. While this informality is usually attributed to 'weak' states with a shortage of public resources unable to manage its economies, Ananya Roy maintains that it can actually be integral to maintaining a certain structure of production and inequality (Roy 2005). In this setting, informality is a deliberate policy in the service of keeping wages low, contracts unstable, and accountability impossible. Development discourses of informality ignore the continuity between formal and informal markets, though some have acknowledged this and celebrated it as beneficial for capitalism given that it places more burden on the informal sector for the costs of production (Munck 2013). But what is unique to the Syrian refugee labor force is another predicament in Lebanon that serves similar purposes: that of illegality.

## Becoming Illegal

In the early years of the Syrian crisis, the Lebanese state maintained an open-border policy, allowing all Syrians to cross the border into Lebanon without needing any particular documentation through official border crossings based on the principle of *non-refoulement*. The state however, considered these migrants to fall under the category of 'displaced' (*nazihin*), as opposed to 'refugees' (*laji'in*) (Government of Lebanon and United Nations 2019), which allowed for the withholding of many benefits normally granted to this category of people. Lebanon, likewise, is not a signatory of the UN 1951 refugee convention. The state

has consequently forbidden the establishment of camps, and though hundreds of informal settlements have been created across the country, all refugees, regardless of where they live, see their presence becoming commercialized and must pay for rent as well as all other needs (Ullrich 2018). Apart from limited monetary assistance from the UNHCR, they receive no other systematized support. As another informant once recounted to me, this was not an anticipated situation: ‘I couldn’t believe we were just left like this. In Lebanon even taking a breath costs money’.

In understanding themselves as ‘refugees’, many women told me they were looking for ‘some sort of support’ in order to be able to settle decently before figuring out their next steps in Lebanon. Instead, they found themselves having to immediately spend the money salvaged from Syria on settling down. Illegality also meant continuously having to put money away for renewing residency permits, though actually achieving this feat proved either impossible or unsustainable over time. Around 74% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are not properly documented, meaning that they do not have valid residency permits (UNHCR, UNICEF & WFP 2018). Much of this can be traced back to the increasingly expensive cost of renewing them. Many refugees recount simply having to prioritize food and rent over permit renewal. Restrictions on Syrians’ residency are progressively imposed and costs increasingly prohibitive for the 1.5 million refugees already settled on Lebanese soil. The result is that the overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is illegal, a fact that the state is well aware of.

‘Illegality’, contrarily to how much of public discourse presents it, is neither as an inherent personal or collective quality nor one that results from certain modes of being. It is rather a position vis-à-vis the state, and as such a fundamentally political identity. It is constructed first through legal schemes and public policies but furthered by various regulative practices and everyday discourses. In this manner it is deeply embedded in the particularities of the context, state and society within which it is found. As such, just as ‘precarity’ was understood above, the category of ‘illegal’ also emerges contingently within economies, political landscapes, and social relations (Chavez 2007). What it means to be an ‘illegal’ migrant in Lebanon, therefore, is a distinct experience, as will be shown. With that said, a tremendous heterogeneity is seen within those who are glossed as ‘illegal’, as with those termed ‘displaced’ or ‘refugees’. With that said, the category itself produces an essential, singular, and seemingly static object. The essentialized figure of the ‘illegal’ from the standpoint of the law parallels that of the ‘Syrian’ in public discourse, though the latter, as will be discussed later, has more salience in everyday life.

An issue I find pressing with this conceptualization of illegality is that it rests, directly or implicitly, on a distinction from what is ‘outside of the purview of the law’. In this view, illegality is actively condemned, criminalized, and pursued by the state. What I find in Lebanon is no systematic pursuit or penalization of illegal refugees, nor is the condition of ‘illegality’ singled out as a problem in policy or political rhetoric the way it is done in the United States or Europe (as opposed to the sheer presence and labor of Syrian refugees in Lebanon that serves as fodder for political debate and inflammatory speeches<sup>2</sup>). The state seems to impose regulations, only to deal with their consequences and never actively pursuing their cause. Nevertheless, the consequences and experiential dimensions of illegality cannot be ignored.

<sup>2</sup> While in 2019 the then-minister of labor did in fact dubiously justify a crackdown on Palestinians citing “illegal labor”, such comments are not commonplace and do not constitute a coherent discourse.

## Policing Illegality

Because of the state's erratic and irregular policing and penalizing of illegality, it is not a perpetual affliction. It may come into the fore only in specific situations (Coutin 2000). This is furthered by the fact that there seems to be no public condemnation of 'illegality', or any overarching sense of antagonism on behalf of the Lebanese for that reason specifically (as opposed to that towards the category of the 'Syrian' more simply). Given that the overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon do not have valid documentation, illegality becomes a given, and is not necessarily something that is taken notice of or relevant in the everyday, even for its subjects. As mentioned previously, the state has not launched a large-scale project targeting illegal refugees. On the other hand, the looming threat the condition of illegality presents can come into use as a disciplinary strategy by which refugee's bodies seem at the mercy of the state's whim, and as such must act discreetly, unobtrusively, and complacently.

The policing of illegality is highly arbitrary; it appears to happen at random moments, whether on a relatively larger scale or in everyday encounters with soldiers and police. Lebanon's Internal Security Force has organized sporadic raids on Syrian refugee informal settlements, arresting dozens of undocumented refugees, with the pretext of a 'crackdown' on terrorism. Soldiers and officers at random checkpoints sometimes haphazardly stop people who appear to be Syrian, asking for their papers, which most of the time they do not have. Thus we see the emergence of an illegal 'profile', an 'extension of migrant illegality, moving it away from actual infractions and towards material and behavioral symbols' (Andersson 2014). 'Looking Syrian' can mean many things, and can be located at the level of physical characteristics or accent, but it can also be working in certain jobs: delivering goods, domestic work, and so on. Yet the Lebanese state has not officially singled out lack of documentation of Syrian refugees as an urgent problem (either to punish or remedy), and raids remain sporadic, unsystematic, and seemingly random and unprompted. Thus there is a sense that many refugees' presence in Lebanon is both illegal, but also turned a blind eye to by the state, or pushed out of its purview, given the well-known fact that upwards of at least 700,000 refugees do not have valid residency permits and no action is taken at that scale.

The arbitrariness of policing is furthered by the fact that exact laws and policies are ambiguous, mystified, confused, or deliberately manipulated by authorities, and not always clear to refugees themselves. When discussing working in Lebanon, Doha interpreted hers and other Syrian refugees' labor as happening 'in the black', or unofficially (*bi shakl ghayr shar'i*). The expression *ghayr shar'i* in itself carries connotations of both illegality and informality, or as criminal or unregulated. It is technically not illegal for a Syrian refugee to work informally, as they are only barred from formal employment. However, those legal details are often unclear and mystified. For example, there have been widespread reports of arrests being made informally on the basis of work, then actual charges being pressed for improper documentation. This ambiguity permeates many dimensions of refugees' lives. This socio-political condition makes refugees not only barred from employment and any labor and protective rights, but also a highly vulnerable population, prone to exploitation in the workplace and also deterred from any public and visible organization as that would expose them to legal pursuit.

It would be an overstatement, however, to conceive of illegality as produced in a coherent and comprehensive manner, thereby reifying the state as totalizing and unassailable. Laws pertaining to Syrians' legal status and their consequent labor entitlements reveal the inconsistencies inherent in what comes to be understood as the 'state'. Until 2015, in the

absence of an overriding refugee settlement or border policy, two state institutions took direct measures geared towards the management of the refugee situation: The Lebanese General Directorate for General Security and the Ministry of Labor, each acting more or less towards their own institutional and party interests. As such, the different regulations as they pertain to refugee legality and labor seem to have contradictory intentions and do not seem part of a comprehensive campaign by the 'Lebanese state'. However, the one thing that is certain as to the Lebanese state's approach to the refugee presence is that it has become increasingly restrictive and geared towards diminishing refugees' numbers after 2015, when these swelled significantly. For refugees, the options after 2015 were redefined: one might stay and work cheap, escape through the land and maritime routes, or be forcibly 'repatriated' by the Lebanese army. With that said, these different policies, laws, or even internal circularies and memos end up having pervasive effects, and they thus accord the state this powerful and controlling illusion, not least for those subjects which are reminded and instilled with this idea at encounters such as checkpoints, policing, and so on (Mitchell 1991, Aretxaga 2003).

When illegality becomes a permanent and large-scale state of being, and one that few do anything about, it has repercussions on Syrian refugees' place in Lebanese society, as well as the way they navigate it and its labor market. This practical impossibility to renew residency permits, though the latter is still seen as a responsibility to meet, contributes to a feeling of permanent anxiety about one's status in Lebanon, and hampers one's already compromised ability to access legal and institutional support and protective systems. Moreover, invalid papers also constrain one's mobility and by extension relations with kin, friends, and possibilities for alternate life paths, and so on. Illegality as such frames, conditions, and textures the field of action of Syrian refugees in the Lebanese context, and delimitates it. But it also creates a space for different ways of being and can mobilize different resources to that end. This is exacerbated when it comes to labor, where illegality and informality come together to create a sense of continuous precarity and inability to 'get one's right', and thus sees people understanding the only solution as cultivating strength, or amassing skills to better one's proficiency within this field. What all of these mechanisms have produced is a classed socio-political condition of illegal affecting the majority of the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon. Without access to protective mechanisms and constantly at the mercy of the state and authorities' disciplinary power, the body of the refugee is subjected to forces meant to make it docile, flexible, and exploitable labor power, or, alternatively, readily expulsable. The threat of the latter on laborers reinforces the aims of the former.

Informality and illegality, as was apparent through the testimonies of many of the women I spoke to, are generally not seen as two distinct mechanisms. Rather, the vocabulary surrounding these two institutional arrangements are often conflated, confused, and unclear. I do not mean to say that this is simply a misrecognition on behalf of refugees who are not perceptive enough to differentiate them, rather, it is a direct effect of ambiguous, haphazard, seemingly contradictory enforcements and discourses on behalf of authorities, institutions, and the state. These policies as such result in an ambiguity that is integral to the way in which the Lebanese state has chosen to manage the refugee population and driven many to the bottom of both the social and economic hierarchy.

Nicholas De Genova posits that illegality, both theoretically and practically, is a social relation that is inextricably linked with that of citizenship (De Genova 2002). In a similar vein, 'illegal' migrants become a constitutive Other by which 'actual citizens' can be defined (Fassin 2001). In Lebanon, this Other is racialized as the 'Syrian'. Moreover, given that the Lebanese state accords little benefits to its citizens in terms of social welfare, the further criminalization and marginalization of foreign refugees cements a sense of original belonging to the nation and

as such defensiveness about its borders and threats of perceived infiltration. But despite the rigidity of the distinctions at play, it does not result in segregation; ‘illegal’ migrants interact in the everyday with various categories of documented persons, and so it is not possible to conceptualize of the ‘illegal migrant’ in isolation. In Lebanon, Syrian refugees’ lives are both spatially and socially intertwined with the Lebanese’s in the everyday, as the voices heard in the following paragraphs will show. This precarious position of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, at the juncture of both informality and illegality, is made all the more complicated when one considers the derogatory category that they face in Lebanon emerging from these encounters, namely, that of the ‘Syrian’.

## The Category of the Syrian

After Ibtisam told her story, Leila took the floor again to reiterate how, in Syria, they did not need much and could consume beyond the necessary. This, along with many of the three women’s statements, were revealing about their perception of their own predicament in Lebanon. Their situation was undignified, as all prior marks of status, both their material and cultural capital, went unrecognized. Their wealth had been materially destroyed or lost, and their merit and achievement diminished and reduced to the undifferentiated, derogatory Lebanese category of the “Syrian”.

The category of the “Syrian”, as it has achieved a particular salience in Lebanon, consists of a low-skilled, low-paid laborer, who readily accepts to work in any demeaning job. This has been observed prior to the influx of refugees beginning in 2011. A bilateral agreement in 1993 between Lebanon and Syria stipulated that an open border would allow the flow of laborers from Syria to Lebanon in such domains as construction and manual labor, which saw many seasonal workers flow to the country and launched vehement discourses and concerns ranging from classist commentating to fears about sectarian imbalance that have put the Syrian presence as a central problematic. Moreover, The Syrian occupation of Lebanon from 1976 to 2005, along with the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, has provided many Lebanese with an alienating rhetoric directed indiscriminately towards Syrians. The category as such is not particularly new and has become the topic of ferocious contention (Chalcraft 2009).

In accordance with this, for the three women themselves, the ‘Syrian’ is the frequent subject of exploitation, be it in the form of nonpayment, low wages, or physical and verbal disrespect. The Syrian, for Leila, ‘will do anything’, whereas my three interlocutors clearly feel some work is beneath them and unacceptable, and manifest this by quitting. What is most outrageous for all three is to be associated with this perceived degrading category, one for which they had an equivalent back in Syria, but would never identify with. This consists in the uneducated, ‘uncultured’, and ‘provincial’ Syrian, a category that they are familiar with, and whom their identity is partly based on rising above. The *rifi* Syrian is not one that is essentially based solely on nationality. It is a particular type of Syrian, and for the three women it has an analogous counterpart in Lebanese or any other society. The *rifi* Syrian is a more complex position than that of the ‘Syrian’ Lebanese category. It exists at the intersections of the lower class, uneducated, and rural populations. For Ibtisam, Doha, and Leila, three highly educated women coming from an urban milieu and reputable families, the sort of treatment they faced is inappropriate for someone of their class and status, as they belong to the higher strata of society, that of the *muthaqqafin* as opposed to the *rifiyin*. Forced migration in the cases of these

three women recast them in a lower position within the social hierarchy, and they saw significant decrease in status. Their prestigious backgrounds were neither acknowledged or recognized in Lebanon and it is merely their nationality that was responsible for their descent into the echelons of the hierarchy, at a level viewed to be as undignified as the *rifi* Syrian. In addition, they saw that the Lebanese state and social environment did not provide them either with the tools or resources to gain their status back, which caused them great distress and anxiety. Displacement thus acted as a leveler, through the informal and illegal predicament as well as the ‘Syrian’ category which collapsed all these differences.

Which differences are collapsed, however, is experienced differently according to one’s position and profile. Jana, for example, another woman whom I met and interviewed, recognized the category of the ‘Syrian’ as one that was deployed by Lebanese people against her. She found it offensive, reductive and derogatory, but not for the reasons mentioned above. Jana did not dissociate herself from the Lebanese category of the ‘Syrian’ on a class basis, rather she found it to be an unrealistically and unfairly homogenizing category as it made all Syrians seem as though they are deviant, criminal, and immoral people, whereas such individuals in reality constitute only an ‘odd’ group within Syrian people as a whole.

Jana, a 29-year-old woman from a village in Hama, fled to Karm El Loz in 2014. Jana came from a very different background than that of the three women mentioned above. Jana was the daughter of a lamb shepherd in Syria. She was only educated until the elementary school level, and she describes herself as only being able to read and write only. As time passed, Jana realized her family would be unable to join her, so she began working in Lebanon.

Jana initially worked at a neighbor’s restaurant, then a factory. She spoke fondly of the small restaurant and its owners: “They were very good to me. It wasn’t like ‘that’s a worker (*shaghil*) working for me’. It was like a daughter and her parents.” The factory, on the other hand, did not leave such rosy memories. She frequently lamented the physically demanding aspect of the work and the toll it took on her health, but also on several occasions mentioned the discriminatory treatment she received on the factory floor: “The boss called my friend and I ‘the Syrians’. We couldn’t leave for lunch when the Lebanese girls could. We were afraid to tell them what we wanted. It bothered us. Because we are just like our coworkers, we are doing the same work, and yet we are treated differently.”

There is a different argument at play in Jana’s words – she stresses her and her Syrian coworkers’ equality in the workplace, rather than distinguishing herself from them, or claiming she deserves better work or treatment as someone of a more elevated class or status. She complains, like Leila and Doha, of long working hours and unfair treatment, but not of the nature of the work unlike Doha, who was outraged that she was asked to prepare coffee and tea as a university graduate. She also added: “You can’t always blame the Lebanese either. Surely there some Syrians, like some Lebanese, who are bad. Perhaps some people, their character and their intentions are not good.”

Jana, stressing that this is something present in all societies, draws a distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Syrians. In this manner it is individual good character, intention, and ‘good person’ that is the prime determinant of one’s moral worth. This moral worth in turn should determine the treatment one gets. As such, one should only receive disrespectful or disdainful treatment if one is a disresponsible person. Disrespectable people for Jana are those who are dishonest, conniving, and uncaring. The category of the ‘Syrian’, for Jana as such, is one that homogenizes all Syrians into such ill-intentioned people. This offended Jana as she does not perceive herself as such. Jana, to the contrary, often stressed her virtuous qualities, and spoke of those as the reason for her warm relations within her social circle, and for the opportunities she had been granted. She describes herself as a careful, honest, and hard-working woman.

Speaking of her first job at the restaurant, she said: ‘They saw that I was trustworthy, and many times when they couldn’t be in the restaurant for whatever reason, they left me in charge. The lady, she even told me where her wallet was, and let me make the sales and everything.’ In addition, she mentioned that her friends at the factory would often tell her ‘you work with all of your person,’ explaining why she deserved better than the condescending remarks she received for being Syrian on the factory floor.

Most of my interlocutors recognized the existence of a ‘Syrian’ category in the Lebanese vocabulary, and saw it used as a label for them. Those same women noted its negative connotation, and its condescending or derogatory use. With that said, their objections to that category differs, as do its implications on their understandings of themselves, and what they do in order to deal with it. The urban and educated Leila, Doha, and Ibtisam objected to it as it was a misrecognition of their class status. The rural Jana, on the other hand, viewed as the conflation of nationality to matter of personal character. The category of the ‘Syrian’ in Lebanon obscures and levels these differences, rendering all to face this similar debasing social force. But conflict, war and bloodshed affected massive swaths of land in Syria, resulting in diverse people with widely differing backgrounds fleeing the country to Lebanon. Although the large majority of them found in Lebanon hostile conditions and environments, those left different traces and provoked people to act in different ways.

It is these mechanisms that collectively constitute Syrian refugees in Lebanon’s particular vulnerability, and the sense of precariousness that they experience and embody on an everyday basis. Responding to Das and Randeria’s call to avoid conceiving of the poor as passively experiences the conditions, contingencies, and institutional setups which are imposed upon them. Rather, we must look at what kind of politics they make possible, and the struggles that Syrian refugees in Lebanon engage in, as well as the ethics these responses carry. I do not mean to suggest that the projects Syrian refugees embark on are homogenous, coherent, or collective, as they are just as contingent and fragmented as the structures that bring them into being. Regardless, I hope to hint at the ways in which people under these conditions commit to or invest in surviving or improving their condition. The new politics of class and social status are not totalizing, nor are they simply imposed and passively accepted by those who are to become their new subjects. Rather, they become sites of critical reflection and struggles for those who, in multiple ways, do not feel at home with in these ascribed social positions and responsibilities. Rather, these powerful structures, institutions, and so on provide and impose a language with which people may still engage, contend, and struggle. The next part will see how these are entangled with other aspects of Syrian refugee women’s ethical commitments and choices as well as with their aspirations for the future and memories of lives otherwise.

## The Politics of Survival

Part of the hostility and its resultant anxiety experienced in the Lebanese labor market was not only due to the exploitation and derision faced at the hand of Lebanese employers, but also from the lack of resources available to counter it. The low wages and precarity that came with being ‘Syrian’ in Lebanon were not accompanied by any legal mechanisms that could protect them from abuse and discrimination in the workplace. All of Ibtisam, Doha and Leila

recognized the absence of state protection and regulation in Lebanon, and attributed some of the hardships they have faced to a lack of morality among the people of Lebanon. When explaining to me why she started learning Thai boxing, Leila said she felt the urgency of knowing some form of physical self-defense given the lack of ‘laws, knowledge, and tradition,’ in Lebanon that would prevent people or hold them accountable for committing acts of abuse. This regulative vacuum requires one to cultivate personal and moral strength, as ‘no one is going to help you.’ I see these behaviors as akin to what Foucault described as *technologies of the self*, whereby people ‘turn themselves into a subject by acting on their own bodies, souls, thought, and conduct, and ways of being in order to transform themselves’ (Foucault et al. 1988, 18). Technologies of the self involve constant practices, as will be shown below.

The women see no legal avenues existing to address the exploitation of their labor, as the latter is supposedly unlawful. For laws pertaining to other matters, such as sexual abuse, the legal mechanisms are seen as existing but inaccessible due to their exorbitant costs. Doha described to me an instance when her sister Leila was hospitalized following a nervous breakdown: “It was because of something that happened to her. Her employer had closed the store, closed the overhead door and assaulted her. Later we went to the protection office of the UN and we complained. They asked us if we wanted to transfer the case to the legal office. They told us, ‘all Syrians are facing these situations, and we can’t help you’. But alternatively we could make a legal case. And I would have to pay a lawyer, you see, to get my rights respected. Well I can’t even fill a dinner table, and you want me to get a lawyer! We’ll have to quit the work and that’s it.” Leila added that another feat of strength was that she could personally overcome the emotional hardship that resulted from traumatic events such as the one described above, as well as the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness that accompanies the impossibility of taking action.

This strength also included putting one’s standards higher — the extensive skill set and experience the sisters amassed in Lebanon made them highly desirable in the local labor market. Doha told me of extensive offers made to them because of all they had to offer: ‘But we have to refuse, if it is not dignified and not our worth’. The turning point in Ibtisam’s story reflects this as well, where virtue is being patient and only accepting work that is well-remunerated and stimulating. In this sense, it is only if one stays ambitious, strong-willed, and emotionally sturdy that one can overcome the hardship that Lebanon offers, and can use this struggle in order to put them to better use in Syria, as will be seen later. As such, what can be seen in all the women’s statements is a statement on their own moral worth, an ethical vision that allows them to externalize the degrading category of the ‘Syrian’ as well as other perceived abusive practices on behalf of the state and community. But while priorities remain on finding sources of subsistence, the quest for maintaining dignity and the demands on personal strength can lead one towards an alternative path, that of voluntary work. As such, ethical projects need not stay at the level of self-fashioning but can lead towards significant choices and action. Voluntary work covers a range of different activities, but is mainly associated with work from NGOs, mostly international aid agencies and their local partners. The next section will explore the political economy of voluntary work within the framework of development programs. This will serve as an entry point into the analysis of these broader schemes and the way refugee women engage with them, as in everyday life it is these volunteer jobs that provide women with their first close engagement with international aid agencies’ rationales.

## Voluntary Work

Among the multiple jobs Leila and Doha enumerated were included a few that caught my attention – unpaid, ‘volunteer work’ (*tatawu*). Doha said she had undergone training with an NGO and was instructed to go to schools to lecture about women’s rights and gender equality. Both sisters had also participated in a program conducting surveys on sexual violence against women in refugee camps. Their training included the present workshop, through which I met them. Doha explained: “It’s true that this work is without a wage, it’s voluntary, but I wanted to do it. First of all, there is no ‘boss’ to control you. Second, I realized from personal experience that this is a big problem we need to talk about. My niece and my sister went through it”. Leila added: ‘We know now that this is happening to people. We want to raise awareness about it, tell people to wake up to the situation, to do something, not to stay silent and endure. We woke up by ourselves, we got stronger, and others need to learn to defend themselves in the same way.’

Volunteer work, clearly, is imbued with strong moral and political meaning. As Hannah Brown and Ruth Price have shown, it is a powerful concept that can mobilize people. In recent years, it has become part of neoliberal governmentality, shifting the responsibility to find solutions to problems lying outside the formal reach of government from the state’s to the citizen’s (Brown and Prince 2015). Yet this work, despite its most often low wage (if it is paid at all) is still attractive to many who struggle in the informal economy as its moral salience resonates with people’s dreams and aspirations, and it confers values and identity – and as such can become a tool for those struggling to reconstitute themselves in an environment that strips them of dignity.

As mentioned previously, this voluntary work, though unpaid, was listed by the sisters alongside other paid jobs. What was emphasized about these activities is their juxtaposition to the other work experiences: It is a labor in which one does not feel controlled and exploited, as with wage theft and sexual harassment, but rather, contributes to the cultivation of strength of character that was so highly prized by my interlocutors. It does so by shedding light precisely on those issues that made previous work so unbearable and undignified. In this sense, what is valuable and dignified about the volunteer job teaches others about the precarity and vulnerability of the refugee condition, and provides them with a solution. It instructs others to value themselves and avoid the undignified since Lebanese social, economic and political conditions will inevitably push Syrian refugees down the social and economic ladder. Paralleling Ibtisam’s claims about her initiative to provide work opportunities for the ‘ambitious person who knows their worth’, the objective is to enable others to choose and follow an alternative, dignified path where such undesirable experiences are not commonplace, and where self-reliance is the successful and exclusive way of establishing oneself. In this way, it also validates the volunteer’s dignified position. Yet this course of action is exclusive to a specific subject, namely the ambitious, cultured, and hardworking Syrian, qualities which surely do not apply to the *rifi* Syrian, who will always be content with mediocre and degrading work and treatment.

Power, in Foucault’s work, seeks to shape and create subjects with new aspirations, desires, and ambitions (Foucault 1997). The connections between the ethical practices and contemplation, as well as the paths for action described above emerge parallel to larger institutions’ attempts to create and arrange people’s ‘ways of doing things.’ These include the state through its myriad organs and legal apparatuses, and the market as it presents itself to the women. Volunteer work, however, introduces another major actor to the landscape, that of

international humanitarian agencies and their NGO partners. These have specifically targeted women since the beginning of their interventions, and the kinds of complex dimensions they have added to the labor regimes are what I turn my attention to now.

The figure of the refugee worldwide has often been ‘feminized’, as women are believed to be the primary subjects moved by conflict (Malkki 1995). Men, as studies of conflict portray it, are more likely to be left behind, either fighting the wars or dying from them. Concurrent with this image is the narrative that sees women as the prime recipients of assistance and support, and the most in need. It has become commonplace for NGO and international groups to target women specifically in their campaigns, or call for investment in them as having the potentiality of a better future. This is no exception in the case of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Countless projects have singled out women as their primary target, focusing on issues from reproductive health and child marriage to economic empowerment.

Censuses indicate that a large proportion of women has indeed fled Syria to Lebanon. Once in Lebanon, most have found work in agriculture and the services sector (Gohlke-Rouhayem, Melki and Weinmann 2016). Men on the other hand, in line with the precedent set by the 1993 Syria-Lebanon bilateral agreement, concentrate around jobs in construction, agriculture, maintenance, and waste management. Since 2015, the Lebanese Ministry of Labor has imposed restrictions on the particular jobs that Syrians in Lebanon on work permits – in other words, formally employed – may take. As most recipients of work permits are men, this has led to an increased scrutiny of officials and authorities towards Syrian men. Moreover, as construction sites and scrap yards have been for decades a Syrian realm of labor, they become spaces of increased visibility, which leads to a more acute vulnerability to interrogation, raids, and arrests on the basis of legal residency (Saleh 2016). For these reasons, women’s labor emerges as a more discreet and inconspicuous alternative.

Women repeatedly recounted to me the difficulty for their husbands to find work. Work permits are expensive and scarcely granted. Agricultural jobs are usually seasonal, rarely lasting more than a month, and low paying. This situation often entailed a restructuring of the household, and the devising of new ways to cope with the dire situation outlined in part 1. In this section, I will detail the changing forms of the household and how this comes to characterize the responsibilities women have towards multiple commitments in Lebanon. I will analyze these changing roles and responsibilities while looking at their entanglements with the international and local humanitarian organizations, which actively single out women as sites of ideal intervention. I examine the different attachments, considerations and expectations that arise due to women’s often new position as wage laborer, and how these affect the way they navigate the informal economy. I argue that wage work in itself often carries consequences and pressures that are far from the neat and empowering pictures painted by NGOs’ discourses. Nevertheless, I show that humanitarian and development schemes are still impactful, as they provide new ways for refugees to articulate their experiences and integrate them within broader moral projects.

As the economic activities and roles of women change, however, they have to interact with other social mores and expectations. It is in this way ‘gender ideologies serve to cheapen the direct costs of labor to capital by defining key segments of the population as supplementary or devalued workers’ (ibid, 43). Many women face the resistance of kin, who believe the purpose of marriage is to ensure women’s financial stability and who worry about women’s work posing a threat to their respectability and loyalty to family and network. Gossip by overzealous neighbors and friends, lamenting a woman going out into the streets on her own at odd times, emerge as a similar form of social control and devaluation of women’s labor. The consequences of this are not limited to tensions within the community, as employers often share

these notions of femininity and respectability (Ong 1987). As such, one sees the devaluation of Syrian women’s labor according to the idea that those who are reduced to working are undignified, ‘loose’ or ‘selfish’ women, and the emergence of disciplinary strategies that ‘position female workers as sexualized bodies whose subordination is maintained through erotic banter and other forms of sexual harassment’ (Mills 2003, 43). In the face of such pressures and abuse on the labor market, many women seek instead to find jobs in NGOs.

## Emancipatory NGO Work

The UNHCR, international aid agencies and NGOs become implicated in these political and economic struggles – but not simply as a mediator or as an external supporter of refugees. As mentioned in Part I, while international aid agencies and their officials ascribe to themselves the role of neutral “trustees”, their interventions are more far-reaching than they describe and their relationship with state and market far more complex. However, just as any form of power, there is always a gap between what is sought to achieve and its actual effects. As such, these programs to improve become implicated as sites of struggle. Those with whom development projects are entrusted are “prickly subjects”, shaped and identified by those programs but also critical. Another tension involving development projects is their assumption that their target, be it “women refugees” or “highland farmers”, are a homogeneous mass (Li 2007). The goal is not simply to show the diversity of people subsumed under these categories but to argue that these different forms and hierarchies of social belonging shape the entanglements between powerful structures, economic changes and everyday life (Gramsci 1971). As such, people articulate their concerns and criticisms at this encounter with power while also drawing on their own understandings of society, status, class, gender, and so on. These encounters, however, may also shape new desires and ambitions, yet these are not free of their tensions and contradictions. It is such unresolvable dilemmas that push those dispossessed to refuse and reject their predicaments, even though they do not articulate it as an anti-capitalist or anti-state struggle as scholars and academics might.

As mentioned previously, ethical self-fashioning, and the drive to live virtuously and with dignity are the moral principles with which women navigate the thorny economic and social conditions that constrain them in Lebanon. These heterogeneous ethical projects come into play in response to the onslaught of new and difficult responsibilities that come with changing configurations of the household and the increasing and contradictory burdens these carry. Refugee women’s will to work in order to improve their situation resonates with humanitarian projects that target women as ideal sites of intervention. Their emancipatory discourses often become adopted by the women themselves, who come to see work as desirable, rather than a simple necessity due to lack of money.

Nour, whose husband was arrested in Syria along with his brother, had never worked prior to coming to Lebanon: ‘I never thought of working, I did not have any enthusiasm for it. I was a homebody, I liked staying in with the family and the kids.’ When she arrived penniless to the West Bekaa, she and her children stayed in a single room with no ventilation or lighting, as she could not pay rent: ‘My mental state became very bad. I went into a terrible depression. I never went out; I got no sunlight and I had no friends. I was afraid of the world.’ Eventually as Nour began navigating the job market, she became increasingly displeased with it and focused her efforts on finding something to do within an NGO or community center, even if it were to be an unpaid position. As a university graduate, she felt that it would be most suitable

for her. Beginning as a volunteer, she eventually secured paid employment in psychosocial support for children in an NGO. Nour believes she was able to enter this domain through her instinctive caring qualities as a woman and mother, and through the training sessions she attended for the job.

According to Nour, the pay for this work is largely ‘symbolic’, and contributes little towards her rent. Nour was only able to move out of the small room through living with her sister in law, with whom she shares expenses. Nour in addition receives food assistance from the WFP and UNHCR. Regardless of this, Nour speaks of this experience in an emancipatory light:

When I worked I started mixing with people, and through work I started participating in activities and workshops, I refined my skills, and I felt like I benefited from my education. Even if I had major issues, they made me stronger, they enabled me to overcome obstacles. I feel more comfortable with myself now, despite all the things that are my responsibility now that my husband is gone. Despite all the pressure, what matters is that I don’t need anyone, I stand on my feet thanks to my own efforts, and I am so happy with that.

Despite the little money involved in the work she does, and her dependence on humanitarian assistance, Nour still sees the situation she is as overall positive. She values it as a learning experience in harnessing strength and developing valuable skills. Most of all, she praises the ability to be independent, in the sense of not having to rely on a male head of household’s work to survive. This sentiment was shared by many women, especially those who had worked or been otherwise involved with NGOs. Many of them deem the nature of the work dignified and not degrading, as it is often within ‘feminine’ domains and involves forms of care work (teaching, administration, nursing). NGOs often state that the wage paid is ‘symbolic’ and does not normally exceed USD200 a month<sup>3</sup>. According to the organizations, a symbolic wage recognizes the effort and initiative of working women within the former’s limited funds. Women who work in these organizations would often justify this low wage with moral claims, such as an appeal to the fact that it is a labor of love, and that it serves a greater purpose than selfish gain. They would add that the wage still helps them out financially, and that even though it is not enough to fulfill all household needs, the work itself is fulfilling and empowering. Its humanitarian project, as Nour emphasizes with regard to her education, is worthy of the class status and cultural capital accumulated prior to coming to Lebanon. The work environment, moreover, is less prone to harassment and abuse, as colleagues are most often like-minded people with the same aspirations. It is under these conditions that ‘work’ becomes valued as an emancipatory activity, a means of self-development entangled with humanitarian grand projects, regardless of its little material value. This is not true of all work, however, as the same women who speak highly of NGO work lament other jobs as being undignified and degrading. Therefore, though humanitarian discourses stress the virtues of women’s labor in general, the labor market and its forms of exploitation limit the possibility of working with dignity to the few, equally low-paid jobs available within humanitarian organizations themselves.

Narratives such as Nour’s present opting for NGO work as a technology of the self, a way of seeking a dignified life. NGOs, through jobs and training sessions they offer, provide the means towards this goal, and through their discourses cultivate new desires regarding work. Nour, prior to coming to Lebanon, had never felt the wish to work. Once she began doing so,

<sup>3</sup> As of 2018. The recent economic, financial and currency crisis may have changed this.

she started seeing it as a virtuous and noble activity, so long as it is within the humanitarian domain, and despite the low pay. Besides some paid positions, NGOs provide many training sessions for women, which also become technologies of the self, and where humanitarian discourses on work are propagated. In the next section I explore how training sessions provide a new vocabulary and system of values to articulate refugee women's experiences in Lebanon, as contrasted with pre-existing understandings of class, education, and status – yet these do not provide a neat framework which resolves all the difficulties and tensions they face.

## The Training Session

The *Nabta* (Seedling) children's center sits between the narrow unpaved roads of the town of Khafid, West Bekaa. Behind the green gate, the white walls are painted with drawings of blonde and blue-eyed children scurrying amongst trees, flowers, bees and squirrels. These enclose a small concrete courtyard of no more than 10 m<sup>2</sup>, where the real children run frantically around playing hopscotch and taking turns attacking each other with toy trucks and dolls. As I stumble around the yard trying not to knock anyone over, Mona, one of the center's teachers, leads me across the crowd to a small kitchen where she makes us coffee and sits down to tell me about her life:

Mona: My husband and I separated as soon as we arrived in Lebanon. We couldn't last through the war. So you can imagine, when I first got here I was in a terrible financial situation. I had a lot of difficulties at the beginning with finding work because I don't have any diplomas, I am only educated till the ninth grade. So I attended many training sessions. I would attend whatever session I heard about. From English to awareness raising, communications, sewing, everything. I did at least one a month. I worked a lot on myself.

Mona is one of thousands of women who attend these vocational training sessions, usually organized by various local and international NGOs and community centers. Although they are sometimes open to men and children, they primarily target adult women, both in response to the mass movement of single women and their families and due to the discursive conception of women as ideal sites of humanitarian intervention. These NGOs frame this through the lens of economic empowerment of women, in the aim of increasing their job prospects. On other occasions, training seeks to foster 'community leadership', and teaches women to raise awareness about a myriad of issues facing Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and to support their peers through their struggles.

In *The Will to Improve* (2007), Tania Li asserts that such development schemes are always a form of governmentality in the Foucault's terminology. Governmentality refers to a particular way in which powerful entities 'dispose of things', or structure fields of action through policy, discourse, and knowledge (Foucault 2002, Li 2007). These involve the emergence of specific subjectivities, and so also consequential by educating desires, configuring habits, aspirations and belief. As such, they resonate with the technologies of the self, described previously, as the ethical projects of strength and dignified behavior are intertwined with international humanitarian agencies' cases for women empowering themselves economically and spearheading the effort towards peace and prosperity. Such ideas are recurrent in the training sessions Mona mentions, and constitute the most fundamental

purpose for their introduction. However, as will be shown later, they are not fully internalized especially as they fail to deliver their promises.

The concept of precarity has also made its way into development discourse as a source of moral panic about the “new dangerous class”. Echoing fears about “marginality” and “social exclusion” by international aid agencies, the precarious as such constitutes a “dangerous class” likely to wreak havoc upon societies and challenge the dominant economic order. The response by aid agencies and international development organizations has thus been to devise plans and agendas to contain this threat, such as the ILO’s “Decent Work” program. Such measures seek to depoliticize actors and to guide them towards better ways of living that do not require them making political demands. Rather, they identify subjects by their ‘deficiencies’, rather than structural arrangements that lead to dispossession and poverty. The state, as mentioned previously, is critical in creating the conditions of dispossession and precarity, yet for development agencies they occupy the rather awkward position of “partner”, albeit a weak one, in the humanitarian enterprise. Capitalism, moreover, serves as the solution rather than the problem for poverty and precarity. The key to empowerment, subjects are told, is better integration into the market through such measures as cash-transfers, vocational training, and microcredit, programs friendly to corporate and financial funders and investors (Atme 2019). The language of improvement addresses these measures as “capacity-building” and “empowerment”, and they also seek to reform subjects’ desires to ones more appropriate to capitalist markets. In this vein, failures of improvement become attributed to personal, ethical, and moral failures, a product of an individual choice not to improve.

NGOs such as the ones that the women I spoke to get involved with, in part single out women due to their conception that women’s usual economic activities lie in the informal economy, where small-scale production or non-monetary exchanges that are too small to be registered occur through social networks and affinities. (Elyachar 2005) These networks, coupled with their idea that women are more ‘trustworthy’ in managing affairs due to their strong presence in and therefore dependence on social bonds, make women the most ideal subject of investment (Karim 2011). Though I do not discuss micro-credit in this paper, I do look at the training session as part of such broader efforts. None of the organizations I have encountered work towards the economic protection of refugees, whether through advocacy or labor organization. Moreover, these ideas around women and social networks have been adopted international aid agencies under the term *social capital*. As such, social capital becomes a variable that can be classified and manipulated towards the ends described above (Li 2007). In Lebanon, economic protection involves a degree of legal recognition, or formalization. Rather, organizations share the assumption described by Julia Elyachar that women’s labor has its rightful place in the informal economy. Informality, as I have argued previously, is an important means through which capitalist production takes place in Lebanon, and labor becomes precarious. Thus, NGOs’ efforts at ‘economic empowerment’ fail to account for the exploitation and abuse enabled by informality and rampant in the job market.

Moreover, the informal labor NGOs and international agencies seek to encourage ultimately little material results. As mentioned previously, many women in volunteer positions do so for no wage, and NGO jobs to not pay more than any other service position. Though Mona, through these extensive training sessions, managed to secure a job as a teacher and psychosocial worker at the kindergarten – which also ran a program for vocational training for adult women – she claims, as Nour did, that the wage is largely ‘symbolic’:

Mona: It doesn't even cover all the rent and electricity bills. We live at the expense of the UN. On the vouchers that we get from them.

Author: So how has work affected your family financially?

Mona: I mean, I wish I could achieve more... In order to be comfortable, so that I can give my children a dignified life. But for now this is what we need, and what we can't have. Rent, electricity, water, school. These are our greatest dreams in Lebanon.

Mona expressed that she had a positive view of her life in Lebanon despite this uncertainty. It is there that she freed herself from her abusive husband and became stronger, and, in her own words, became independent financially. However, she still expresses a feeling of lack and shortcoming, and claims she is totally dependent on the UNHCR. So went many statements of women who began working only in Lebanon, who claimed their situation was 'difficult, but empowering'. Though Mona does not feel financially stable and says that money is a source of great anxiety, she nevertheless articulates her experience through the NGOs' empowering language of emancipation. Given that NGOs do little to tackle economic precarity and vulnerability, 'independence' is limited to the virtue of working and assuming the burden of responsibility for one's family, regardless of whether or not one earns enough to sustain them. The moral ideal of independence also means taking responsibility for one's own person, and, as Mona mentioned, working on oneself. In this way, independence can coexist with critique of material dependence on the UNHCR. Thus, NGO training sessions effectively end up constituting an alternate form of cultural capital, and a type of social mobility and status, not at the level of material wealth but at that of social and emotional strength, as the example below demonstrates. This is not to portray these discourses as a sort of 'false consciousness' that misrecognizes developmental forms of neoliberal subjugation. Freedom, ultimately, is relative and contextual, and how women reconstitute themselves is not a simple matter of imposed consent on behalf of the state or international aid agencies that misrepresent their identities, desires and ambitions (Sopranzetti 2018). Nor is it a freedom in the absolute which removes all structural obstacles and renders them solely responsible for their own failures and miseries.

Returning to the principal's office of the Nabta center after an emotionally straining talk with Umm Walid, the center's cleaner, I meet Mona and Ghinwa, another teacher. Ghinwa takes a look at my pale face and says:

Ghinwa: You feel bad for her, don't you? Poor Umm Walid, she has been through a lot. But you know, she could also work on herself a little bit. She should stop begging. She could get involved in activities, take some vocational training, maybe it will improve her situation.

Mona: Yes, if you put your mind to it you can achieve a little. At least it could help her mentally. She ought to try that.

Though Halima and Mona do not earn significantly more than Umm Walid, they still see themselves as having a moral high ground in their determinacy and will to become stronger, most accurately materialized through the attendance of these vocational training sessions. Umm Walid's miseries, on the other hand, are seen as evidence of personal failure (Marsland and Prince 2012). Training sessions become a form of cultural capital, though one that most likely does not lead to material wealth. Women may access more 'dignified' work positions through training sessions, but would not earn a significantly higher wage, or a dignified standard of living as Mona imagines it. Nevertheless, training sessions create new hierarchies

between Syrian women, those who ‘work on themselves’, attend training sessions and thus obtain cultural capital come to be seen as better achieving and of higher moral worth. Volunteer work, for example, has been noted for its increased professionalization and its creation of new hierarchies (Brown and Green 2015), which resonate with old divisions such as rural/urban, educated/uneducated by elevating some labors (teaching) over others (cleaning). While this moral self-fashioning and ethical striving is crucial to regaining a sense of pride and dignity, it does not erase either the wish to improve one’s financial situation nor the moral and seemingly innate responsibility to provide for one’s family. Rather, these three schemes exist together, sometimes posing contradictory obligations and responsibilities on women, and fueling critique of the structural failures and unfulfilled promises that led to these predicaments. These tensions escape the narratives of NGOs, who see women’s labor as a silver bullet for both financial and personal difficulties.

## Women in Tension

The programs described above instill new desires that become perceived as more modern, such as being a self-sufficient, autonomous woman. Yet these are never fully fulfilled given that wages never meet the threshold of providing self-sufficiency, especially as women are scarcely only responsible for their individual selves – rather, they have obligations for extended family, community and so on. While there is a striving to bridge this gap, the disappointment of this unfulfilled promise becomes grounds for critique while drawing on the language of independence and empowerment to fuel demands. Sara Ahmed likens these invisible obstacles, persistent and structural challenges to “walls”. When people come up against these walls, there is a feeling of a shattering of oneself, which thus requires that one picks up the pieces, and reconstitute oneself by the means at hand. (Ahmed 2017) Such narrative, discourses, and strategies are used by Syrian women to bridge the gaps they experience between what is expected of them under new and old hierarchies and what they are capable of doing. Thus is the struggle to reconstitute oneself as an honorable, dignified person. These struggles and strategies are different and varied depending one’s social position, and they always entail risk, uncertainty, and possible failure.

When Jana began working at a rotisserie chicken restaurant, she said she would make around LBP 15,000 to 20,000 (USD 10-13) a day, depending on sales: ‘In a month I would make between 200 and 300 dollars. I would give about a hundred to my uncle who I was staying with, a hundred I would save, and the rest was for expenses’. Those savings would eventually be sent to her family. Jana devised a similar system when working at the factory: ‘Every four or five months I would send my family the money. Over time it became a serious quantity. It’s worthwhile. My parents would be shocked by the amount. I became like the young man who leaves, travels to work and sends money back to their parents. This is what I became for my parents.’ Jana thus witnessed a change in the household structure and gender roles, where she became the main breadwinner, taking the place of the ‘young man’.

Jana frequently mentioned her will to help out her parents, as well as her uncle’s household that hosted her, despite the difficulties that the work presented, the stigma it often carried within the community surrounding her, and the privation she imposed on herself:

The conditions were very hard. You have to pay rent, expenses, electricity...  
 Sometimes I would crave a biscuit, the one that costs 250 [LBP, or USD 0.2], but I

would say no, I will save for my parents, they need it more. I was staying with my uncle – him, his wife, and three children were living in a room half as big as this one here. They made me a little tent outside, like a doghouse, but worse. In the winter the rain would leak in onto me. I would be ashamed to ask to sleep inside the room with them. Would I sleep piled up over my uncle or his wife? I thought no, better work, depend only on myself. I'll let my family's situation improve, and mine will improve too with time. So my uncle was able to move, and things got a bit easier. There was a little space on the balcony where I could put a mattress my employers gave me. It was a big relief.

Author: Did your parents know about this?

Jana: No. I never told them about my issues, work or otherwise. When they asked me how I was, I would say I'm very good, I'm happy. You know, to this day my parents have no idea that I was giving my uncle money for his rent and expenses. Because most people would be shocked that I was staying with my uncle and working to contribute to the rent. They would say that I should be treated like his daughter and taken care of. I didn't want to cause any trouble between my father and my uncle.

While the connections between kin and the significance of the familial relations between Jana and her uncle, parents, and so on, were maintained, the role that Jana would take on as part of this network of relations, as well as her rights and responsibilities were transformed. This does not imply that kinship relations are conceptualized here as abstract rules of conduct or as an authoritative institution, as bonds with family carry highly emotive, affective, and sentimental value. The will and drive to contribute materially to the immediate but distant household do not stem simply from a social structure that would penalize adverse behavior, as Jana asserts that she could have just as well behaved like her uncle's daughter. Rather, it was a deeply affective sense of guilt and of being a burden that drove her actions. More so, she felt an intense joy and sense of purpose doing so:

It's true that work was hard. The shift was eight hours, and you have to stand all the time on your feet. There isn't even a chair to sit on. All day you have to be there with the camera right above you, like this lamp here facing me right in the eyes. The screen is in the office of the director who is watching the workers, and you have people going around all day telling you to fill the soap, move the boxes, which sometimes would reach 40 kilos. But I would go to sleep and think, Praise be to God, I am content. All of my being is content. I am working, I am toiling, and I am sending money to my parents. I find it has affected my parents a lot. Their situation improved; Praise be to God. I have helped them a lot. I would always sleep impatient for the sun to come out so I could go to work.

This guilt can also have a gendered dimension; it can stem from some women's responsibilities. But the responsibilities specific to women may actually contradict and complicate other obligations of this sort. Yet, these are not understood or expressed as being in conflict. Jana left her uncle's home two years prior to my meeting her, as she got married to a Syrian man and moved. She tried to go back to work after her marriage, but her physical ailments prevented her from lasting more than a week. At the time that I spoke to her, Jana was unemployed. When I asked her whether she was looking for work again, she said:

If I find work that is suitable me, then yes, of course. Something that does not go all day. Maybe from 7 to 1, or from 7 to 2. I wouldn't want to work all day. Because between the husband, the house, the cooking, and the job, it's not possible. Marriage

is a responsibility after all. Even though my husband is very understanding. He is not the kind to get angry – for example if he comes home and finds that I have not cooked, he won't say anything. If his clothes are not washed, he won't say anything. He's very understanding, Praise be to God. But I have to be fair to him too, I have to give him his right. He needs to come home and at the very least find his dinner ready, his clothes clean.

The marital responsibilities Jana values clash with her desire to work as driven by her motivation to help her parents financially, as working for less time would mean less money to help them. Yet these are all coexisting desires and feelings of responsibility, and while they do cause anxiety and frustration, and feelings of pressure, they are not seen as competing, but rather different frameworks that guide action on different planes and levels.

Samuli Schielke, in *Egypt in the Future Tense* (2015), speaks of such different projects and commitments as “grand schemes”, that guide action but do not determine it. All of these may be connected to larger powers, institutions, discourses, and so on, which influence and shape people for different purposes. However, for Schielke, it is not possible to speak of people as singular subjects, whether religious, class, kin, or otherwise, and so of being entirely molded by a single external system. Rather, all projects and promises coexist on the same plane, and are simultaneously a part of people's life worlds. They may interact in different ways, sometimes seemingly at odds or in harmony with each other, without people perceiving them as contradictory. Thus, the drive to be a dedicated mother, an entrepreneurial woman, and a responsible wife can seem to pull the same person towards different directions, but they all constitute the drive to live a dignified life in an imperfect world. This does not mean that all these schemes are easily solved in people's consciousness. Rather, it creates deep senses of anxiety and ambivalence, as many of the statements relayed so far show. Schielke calls for taking this ambivalence as a starting point as the existential grounds of people's various commitments. I seek to do this, along with exploring the structural and systemic fields that pose challenges to the fulfillment of these strivings. I saw such an example in Ghazal, who bore different obligations due to her situation and had to make choices accordingly. Ghazal was the only woman I spoke to whose husband had successfully obtained a work permit, as a construction worker. Under the kafala system, this means that he was bound by law to his employer. But as expected, the wage was low, and Ghazal had to work as well in order to support the household. Back in Syria, Ghazal ran her own hair salon: “It was excellent, a great salon. I called it ‘Light of the Sky’. I had two girls working for me. Back then I only had one son, and I could set my hours the way I wanted, so that I could take care of the kid. I used to get one or two brides every day, and they would come with all their siblings and friends.”

In Lebanon, as a Syrian, Ghazal was not legally permitted to open her own place. Even if she were to find a Lebanese partner, the costs would still be too high. When she tried to get hired as a hairdresser in salons in her neighborhood, Lebanese employers would not take into account her experience in Syria but rather would only accept to hire her as a cleaner, which caused Ghazal great offense. Alternatively, Ghazal tried to draw on her working knowledge of sewing, and got hired in a factory, a job she found dignified enough. However, it soon proved to be unsuitable for her: ‘I didn't last a month. The job was difficult, but the problem was that I couldn't leave the kids all day. It was from seven to six, or six thirty. We had an hour for lunch, and I would go check on my kids at school during that time, but it wasn't enough. When I came back home the kids were unruly because they needed to eat, and my husband was angry that all the housework was not done. So, I decided to work from home. This way I can help us within my abilities.’

Though her husband also worked away from home for long hours, it was Ghazal who bore the sole responsibility and felt the obligation to quit her job and find a way to fulfill both her duties to her children and the need for her to work as well in order to make a living for her family. Her solution was to work as a hairdresser from home. Ghazal speaks mournfully of the time in which she used to own her salon. Nowadays, she works for extremely cheap, and feels as though her work is devalued as a result, but it is the only way in which she can successfully fulfill her responsibility towards the household.

Falling short of such expectations towards familial life can become a severely troubling experience, especially since these carry and are constituted through deeply emotional bonds. This distress was evident to me when I met Faten, a middle-aged woman from Zabadani who fled to Lebanon in 2013 with her two children, one seventeen and the other sixteen years old. When she first arrived, she managed to get employed as a teacher for a school for refugees founded by a religious mission, who promised to retain her ‘for as long as the war goes on’. But a few years later Faten’s uncle married her daughter off against her will. When her daughter escaped her husband, he harassed and stalked her violently, driving Faten to ask the UN to be relocated. The request was successful, and Faten and her two kids thus moved to another town in the West Bekaa. The job market there, however, proved less fortuitous for her. She could not find work as most shops turned her away due to her older age: ‘Most of the shops I asked for a job at said they wanted a young woman. I don’t understand, do they want someone to work or to display?’ Unable to eke out a living for her family, her only choice was to have her children work. As she mentioned this, she frowned and tightened her shoulders, exclaiming: ‘Look, I have to make them work! What else am I to do? And don’t think it’s not affecting me, that my children are not getting an education. It affects me all the time.’

Having to pull her children out of school so that they would work came with a great sense of shame and failure. But Faten tried to manage the consequences as best as she could and compensate by screening through the opportunities that presented themselves to her children. One of the greatest challenges that faced her daughter, according to her, was sexual harassment: ‘I went with Samira to every shop when we were trying to get her a job. I only approved when it looked like it would be safe. The first time, it was a bookstore, it looked decent, and the owner was an old man. He was over sixty years old. But still, from the first day he started saying inappropriate things. So, she quit. The second time, a clothes store, the owner was disabled, and there were two other girls working. I thought nothing could happen. But he turned out to be worse, there were words and touching. So, she left again. Now I only accepted because she found a job in a big store, with many employees and customers going in and out all the time. This way she’s never alone. And I keep an eye on her always. But you know, either way, if I find a job, I will not let her work.’

A changing division of labor means women must take on new responsibilities through wage work while still retaining old ones. Past obligations also change, as commitment to kin now means providing financially for them as well. Work in itself may provide feelings of pride and empowerment, as development projects would assert, but providing materially for a family is also an important way of feeling content and satisfied with oneself. Given the low wages refugee women are paid in Lebanon, earning enough to support kin cannot be taken for granted. Moreover, the responsibilities borne by refugee women can also be contradictory and attempting to satisfy the demands of being an empowered woman, and a good wife, mother, daughter, Muslim, laborer, etc. often requires complex and conflicting actions. Nevertheless, ethical striving persists, and the unfulfilled promises of development as well as the state’s hindering of women’s efforts and ambitions crystallize their refusal of this condition. As such,

contradictory commitments and subjectivities end up pulling women in a radically different direction: Syria.

## The Burden of a Nation

The women I spoke to often reiterated their pursuit and claims of dignity. As John Holloway demonstrates, a life of dignity is never private, so dependent it is on mutual and social recognition. In a global system where dignity is subordinated to labor, or human creativity subject to private ownership, fetishization, and subordination to the market, such a claim is an imagination of a world otherwise, a rejection of the way things are. It is critique, even though this critique is not total – it cannot be, as it comes for within the experience of the everyday and cannot be divorced from it (Holloway 2005).

Many of the grand schemes that pull Syrian refugee women towards various paths of action create profound feelings of ambivalence, and overall feelings of injustice and refusal. International agencies, kin relations and social mores around all contribute to a sense of great urgency and responsibility in face of the tragedy, loss and economic difficulties that Syrian refugees are faced with. These all seem to congeal in one aspect: The duty and responsibility to Syrian society's postwar future and its reconstruction. People's attachments to their home country and their imaginaries of past and future life in Syria also inform the commitment to this higher purpose.

Though the training sessions seem at first hand to have a quite straightforward goal, namely the honing of new skills in order to improve job prospects in the Lebanese labor markets, they form part of a larger ideology of humanitarian intervention in the refugee crisis in Lebanon (as well as worldwide). Women as a result bear the responsibility not only towards themselves and their households, but the onus is on women to also rear an entire generation of people disposed towards the rebuilding and reinvention of the Syrian state. Of course, this national imaginary is one that espouses the fundamentally liberal values of the international humanitarian organizations' sponsors, and also presupposes specific subjectivities and relations between people, at the heart of which is the family. This work involves raising children with certain democratic and humanistic values, establishing a financial status that enables consumption at a sustainable level, and positioning women as the prime actors in this whole project. These ideas are in some sense the very *raison d'être* of the whole humanitarian enterprise. As Nour concisely put it:

We are not simply refugee women; we are carriers of the burden of a whole generation. Women need to continue their education, not only through university but also through technical skills such as information technology, nursing, health, raising awareness. We are responsible for an entire new generation of people. So I feel that we need this space, these opportunities, and if we do not cooperate, seize these chances, and work collectively towards that goal then a whole nation will be lost.

It is in such perceptions that women's assumed role of social reproduction becomes all the more significant in that it is geared towards a whole generation of citizens. This perception combines social ideals of motherhood, humanitarian goals of reconstruction, and emotional commitments to kin. All of these elements create a much larger burden of responsibility, as the future of a whole nation becomes at stake. Most importantly, however, this speaks to the

complexity of refugees' relationship with Syria and Lebanon, and their views on the time that passes as displaced. Ultimately, within such vague and hypothetical scenarios, 'Syria' becomes an imaginary of a radically different future.

## What the Future Holds

Refugees feel a fondness for Syria for various reasons. Though women's lives may have been imperfect in Syria, their current feelings of loss retrospectively create a sense of relative prosperity in Syria. Lebanon's 'policy of no-policy' towards the refugee crisis allowed it to avoid turning refugees away at the border or devising resettlements programs. Instead, the state devised exclusionary mechanisms. The illegalizing and informalizing mechanisms of the Lebanese state described in part 1 constitute what Etienne Balibar (2014) calls 'internal exclusion', or institutional arrangements that neither accept nor fully effectively eliminate the excluded. These practices, typical of modern nation-states, operate on both a 'logic of commodification of individuals on the capitalist market' (201), and on one of racialization that project fantasies of essentialized and homogenous national identities. Loss is perpetual and plural; though one may experience certain pleasures, benefits at one point, in the long run there is a sense in which things are moving in a negative direction. As such, the only appropriate reaction is refusal; for women whose search for dignity leads them to reconstitute themselves, this refusal takes the shape of reorientation, specifically towards Syria.

At a kitchen in a community center in Baladine in the West Bekaa, Nariman sleepily slouches back into her plastic chair, sips on her coffee and says: 'Lebanon is not a place to think about the future. You live only day to day.' Nariman's statement echoes Bourdieu who, in *Pascalian Meditations* (2000), writes about the subproletarians of Algeria as people without a future, subject to the 'game of chances' that comes with affording only to seek the most immediate opportunities (211). Thought in these situations of crisis and emergency becomes disorganized, fragmented, and visions of the future become impossible as people live at the mercy of what each day brings. Given this fragmentation, it is impossible to cultivate *habitus*, practices and dispositions that make sense of the present and allow one to behave appropriately within it (Bourdieu 1997). Understanding the present and how to act within it is essential in order to have any hope of controlling one's future. Bourdieu, however, adds that being reduced to immediacy paradoxically creates a radical break from the present, and enables a radical doubt, a reflection and critique of the social order and conditions which make the present what it is. My interlocutors do not radically reject social, political, and economic institutions such as the Lebanese state, the market, or international organizations. Rather, they appropriated the hardship the economic, social and political landscape created. By cultivating the dispositions and skills described in the previous sections, women saw themselves as experiencing hardship, and surviving it while cultivating strength, and without despairing. Cultivating these dispositions and achieving the moral ideal of strength allowed the women to have futurity, or to act towards and think about the longer term rather than just the most immediate of opportunities. Rather than seek 'bare survival', women rather amassed skills to navigate the present proficiently and put their experience towards a radical, albeit imaginary future, that of return to Syria.

Later on that day, Nariman was joined by Afaf, who is also from her city of Zabadani, and the two discussed the men still stranded in the region: 'None of them can leave anymore. Now you need new proof you're exempt from military service every time you want to cross the border.' 'Yes it's because of Idlib. They're taking all of them away already' "You know,

when we return to Zabadani, we will have to have a sign saying ‘women only!’” Being displaced and living precariously in Lebanon did not detract from having a final vision of return to Syria. During the workshop break, Ibtisam emphasized that ‘our country is Syria’, that despite displacement, and despite the possibility that one may never return, hopes, ambitions, expectations, and the future must be oriented towards it. Leila and Doha confirmed this, stating that if they were to consider the positives of all of this experience, then the corpus of skill and character that they have accumulated in their time laboring in Lebanon is one that would be greatly enabling in Syria: ‘Financial accounting, Excel, nursing, these were all new to me. If we were to come back to Syria, we could do so many things with those. I learned here that nothing is impossible, and there is no work that is too difficult for a human, whatever that may be.’ As a result of the feelings of rootedness emerging through displacement, going back to Syria seemed to be, for most, the ultimate horizon, even if conditions there or in Lebanon made it impossible for the moment.

I argue in this section that despite one feeling at the whim of a game of chances, ethical projects such as harnessing strength and amassing skills, as well as the virtue of enduring hardship with patience and contentedness (*sabr*) become the means by which Syrian refugee women reassemble their vision of the future and their recognition of themselves as humans with dignity. Such was apparent in the constant practice of restraining oneself from expressing one’s unhappiness too much, or to lament one’s condition. Statements that complained about one’s situation were quickly followed by religious idioms such as ‘God provides’ and ‘Praise be to God, things will be okay’, reasserting oneself as a moral, pious subject, as well as providing resilience and hopes of futurity through an appeal to a reality that transcends the immediate and present one (Perdigon 2015). The purpose of this virtuous endurance of hardship is also oriented towards the future, in that it is often geared not only towards return but also rebuilding one’s life in Syria. Though some women conceded that as time passes, the Syria they remember or reconstruct in their imaginary changes, decays, and becomes unrecognizable to them, it is the cultural and social capital amassed through a moral response to precarious life that will allow them to remake it as they wish to see it. What exactly this entails is connected to how ‘Syria’ as place of belonging stands for; what a dignified life looks like, what social hierarchies are in place, and so on. The fatalistic Umm Walid, while discussing what she could have possibly gotten out of all her experience in Lebanon, had the following to say: ‘I suffer but this is what I have to do. At the very least so my children will have it better than I did. And, God willing, I hope we will return and they will be happy there’.

In his article “Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics” (2002), Arjun Appadurai examines how NGOs employ a discourse of patience in order to reintroduce a dimension of futurity in the lives of the urban poor of Mumbai. In Lebanon, I see the NGOs described in the previous sections as serving a similar role. Futurity, as their discourse sees it, is not only towards return to Syria but its rebuilding and healing as nation. The goal of the economic empowerment initiatives in Lebanon is not only enhancing Syrian refugee women’s job prospects in the Lebanese labor market but also equipping them with moral, social, and practical skills in order to take on the endeavor of rebuilding a nation. As mentioned previously, humanitarian discourses see that refugee women bear the burden of rearing the generation that will be in charge of post-war reconstruction. This social reproduction does not involve only the raising of healthy children, but also cultivating within them certain values, ones that adhere to the ethical project of living a dignified life. The NGO provides avenues such as the training session to be used as technologies in order to reshape oneself as an ethical subject for a collective purpose. As such the fostering of these values, not only within oneself but also within generations to come, forms a sort of ‘moral community’

that is crucial towards nation-building (Malkki 1992). What refugee women imagine this moral community to look like, however, is far from homogeneous, as the language of virtue varies drastically according to the social position of each person – and these may not match aid agencies’ visions.

Syrian refugee women orient their future towards Syria following the nostalgic images the country evokes in them. The love and passion towards what constituted women’s everyday life there makes them eager to direct their efforts into Syrian future for them and their children. However, they are aware that this hope is not just a matter of sacrifice and effort. As time passes, so does that image of Syria crack and crumble; their memory of their towns fade. War damages the country further, new people take over their home town, the regime ruthlessly reappears, and the place’s familiarity and quality are no longer what they were. Regardless, return still is a plan, as nebulous as that might be, since Lebanon itself presents no futurity. Economic, political and social conditions make it so that one may only live day to day, and as such only survive. All the potential accumulated in this place may only be actualized outside of it. What refugee women are demanding is a life of dignity – located in a hypothetical, imaginary Syria. Such desires are essentially refusals, political in their damning of the conditions which strip them of dignity.

It is critical of course not to equate these types of refusal and contestation with any and all mass mobilizations. Resistance, of course, is also a matter of scale – yet the argument here is that these collective everyday discourses do indeed constitute a refusal rather than passive consent. Such an approach differs from humanitarian approaches which seek precisely to diminish and depoliticize their demands. It is also an exercise in solidarity to recognize that, as Sopranzetti claims: “After all, political struggles take place in the world of people who battle every day to make ends meet. They pertain to people who work and save money to send their children to decent schools, to provide them with opportunities, and to have some extra cash to drink, eat out once in a while, or bet on sports on the weekend. The people who engage in these everyday struggles “are often mythologised as Prometheans, but Hamlet would equally serve as a model. [They are the result of] people’s midnight ruminations about a daily humiliation they suffer, about the shame they feel, about the claims to honor they would like to make. (Metcalf 1991, as cited in Sopranzetti 2018).”

## Conclusion

In his classic 1962 novella *Men in the Sun*, Ghassan Kanafani tells the tale of three Palestinian men’s attempt to escape the refugee camps of Iraq towards Kuwait, where the oil boom had promised lucrative opportunities and fantasies of endless wealth. In the story, Abu Qais, Assad, and Marwan each have independently made their way to Basra from Palestine through various illegal means, all three hoping to reach their final destination in Kuwait. In Basra, all three cross paths to meet a Palestinian lorry driver, Abul Khaizuran. After much hesitation, the three finally agree to be smuggled from Basra into Kuwait, across the Iraqi desert, in Abul Khaizuran’s vehicle. The men are off to a difficult journey, as they will have to travel for hours under the scorching heat of the desert sun in the middle of the summer. They are warned by Abul Khaizuran that in order to pass undetected by Iraqi border patrols, they will occasionally have to hide for a few minutes in the burning hot and airless steel water tank, located in the back of the lorry. As the story unfolds, Kanafani’s agonizing description of the road under the

heat serves as a backdrop to the men's efforts of enduring the pain, sweat, and breathlessness of the journey by retreating into their own thoughts. The men think of their traumas, aspirations, their obligations to their families, and their urge to restore their honor by making a living for themselves in Kuwait.

The tale is an allegory for the condition of Palestinian refugees at the time, one that also strives towards establishing certain universal themes pertaining to displacement that resonate with this paper. Kanafani wrote the story in order to condemn the way of living that his people have been reduced to, scrambling for any opportunity of menial labor and having to endure poverty and instability, one that leads to permanent physical, psychological and emotional suffering. The sun, in this novella, is a symbol for this condition (Neimneh 2017). The sun's heat and brightness are punishing, merciless, and constant. The sun's physical toll on the body is represented by the sweat described throughout the novella, flowing relentlessly, clouding the men's visions and obstructing their ability to focus on what is happening. The sun, moreover, also conflates times and brings forth memories of traumatic events associated with war and dispossession. The sun, in this novella, is responsible for much of the humiliation, suffering, and physical and psychological pain that all four men endure. It thus stands for the harsh reality of Palestinian refugees' life in exile and the conditions they have been reduced to, as well as for the amalgamation of all its perpetual loss, destitution and decline. The burden of historical forces, state-imposed constraints, economic hurdles, and concrete experiences of trauma are amalgamated in this single element in Kanafani's story. It is based on this metaphor that I title this paper *Women in the Sun*, based on the difficult and enduring hurdles that constitute the field of possibilities for Syrian refugee women. The sun, moreover, stands as the struggle and scramble to find employment, a task that is at once long, uncertain, as well as recurring due to the precarious and unstable nature of the available jobs. I find the symbol powerful and fitting not only as a description of the quest for work, as the tale in part uses it, but also of work itself. Given the hardship that looms over whatever these women engage in, as well as the often unbearable difficulty of labor itself, they are working 'in the sun' in Kanafani's sense. And this applies to agricultural work, picking olives in a large field in the Bekaa, industrial work, standing indoors operating heavy machinery for long hours in a factory in the outskirts of Beirut, or service work, stacking racks and tending to customers at clothing store while being berated by a manager. Kanafani's tragic statement is that this predicament, like the sun, is not temporary but rather is perpetual and characterizes all life of those who are living it.

In a critical analysis of the novella, Amy Zalman (2002) analyzes the gendered relations between return and resistance in the story, arguing that Kanafani disrupts the masculine virility that underlies discourses on exile and forced migration. He does this in his damning of the men's inaction and passive endurance of what is happening to them. Moreover, he depicts a gendered politics of exile by portraying the homeland as feminized, and through the novella's minor female characters. Women, such as Abu Qais' wife Umm Qais or Marwan's mother, stay behind and 'establish the idea that women, like the land itself, have never left but await male return' (Zalman 2002, 20). This once prominent idea that men are those primarily moved, whether because of conflict, poverty, or other reasons, has been challenged and problematized by writers and scholars. These authors, in calling for attention to women's movements and migrations, have established that though women are less noticed in much of the migration literature, they are even more mobile (Lutz, 2010). Kanafani subverts conventional readings of gender and action as he implies that women, by staying behind and committing to the homeland, are much more oriented towards its greater cause than their male compatriots, who in living only for the most immediate of opportunities, cannot possibly be achieving anything greater than these short term goals. However, rather than seeing women as active only in their

ability to remain physically and socially tied to the homeland, I seek to see how through the conscious choices they make even when outside national boundaries, they are able to create and sustain links to their country of origin. Even as these choices are supposedly ‘immediate’, and confined to the present or very short term, there is constantly an orientation towards the future. This is also seen through their efforts towards their children, for whom they act through their gendered role as caretakers in order to rear them as future bearers of national life.

The men in this tale are portrayed as tragic figures as they have no vision or intention towards return. Part of Kanafani’s condemnation of them is due to their inability to process time in a way that could allow them a future. All of their memories are fragmented, conflated, and they are portrayed as having an inability to process what is happening to them at the moment versus what is now distinctly in the past (Pappé 1995). Abu Qais, the eldest of the men, experiences visions of past life in Jaffa with his son and wife as merging and fluidly flowing into moments of the present. Assad, a younger man, experiences the present as fragmented, processing it only in terms of key events that get truncated one in favor of the other. The sun, in this sense, is part of this mystification as it triggers memories of violence, crisis, suffering, and pain in ways that do not seem to conform to a linear conception of time. Unlike the men in the sun, the women I spoke to in this paper unequivocally expressed a desire to return. They felt an attachment to what they saw as their country, however much this attachment was an accumulation of different emotions, feelings, and strivings. This allows them both to make sense of the past and have an imaginary of a collective future, one that, through endurance of hardship, they are able to concretize and make real. Living under the sun is not simply a matter of survival, but rather of cultivating and amassing skills and dispositions that are oriented towards the future, and specifically towards a future in Syria. As the allegory goes, they do not suffocate silently in a water tank, but rather forge with every step different and changing selves as well as craft elaborate and complex futures.

If there were any takeaway from an analysis of these struggles, it is also that power and neoliberal governmentality are no closed systems. Improvement schemes and state policies can create challenges they cannot contain, as we see from those tensions that are productive of critique. We must not seek “to empower”, but rather have solidarity with people’s struggles as they are in order to strive for any liberatory politics from within the interstices of power. Accounts which have emphasized heroes or enlighteners that emerge from a mythical domain external to power have unsurprisingly elevated masculine figures of revolutionaries and rebels. Women, on the other hand, get portrayed as staying behind and waiting, or worse, being sacrificed. A focus on refusal from within highlight women who can engage in political struggle and reflection through the complications of everyday life. Such engaged investigations can thus become anthropologies of hope, a movement against the invisibility of such labors that are deemed inferior, and a recognition of negated political actors.

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