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Gendering Citizenship as Enacted: Women Refugees in Lebanon

Dr. Connie Carøe Christiansen

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ABOUT THE ASFARI INSTITUTE AT AUB






The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship is a regional hub of a dynamic community of academics, practitioners, policymakers, activists, and members of the general public interested in exploring traditional and innovative forms of collective actions, locally-grounded policy debates and in advancing realistic solutions to the obstacles to effective civil society and citizenship in the Arab world.

In doing so, the Institute provides training workshops and programs beside regular teaching at AUB, encourages and provides evidence-based research in areas related to political participation, accountability and good governance, produces policy/practice recommendations to improve citizens' engagement and civil society roles in mediation, deliberation and self-organization.

It also promotes public awareness of civil society and civic engagement best practices in the region through its monthly meetings and seminars and stimulates fruitful dialogue among the region's varied publics through its programmatic activities of workshops, conferences, blog and publications.

The Asfari Institute is a research center based at AUB since 2012 and is a solid partner in consolidating AUB commitment to serve, educate and engage the Lebanese society. The Institute is mobilized to develop a new minor program on civil society and collective action with relevant AUB faculties. Among its new activities is the consolidation of three new lines of work: Civil Society Law and Governance, Culture as Resistance, and Civil Society in Conflict and Post Conflict Setting.

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Bridging Academia and Activism

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About the Project

THE LAY OF THE LAND:

A Social Mapping of Daily Practices in Informality amongst Syrian Displaced Communities in Lebanon

Funded by the Ford Foundation

This research project examines how, in the face of conflict and crisis, Syrian displaced individuals and communities in Lebanon are attempting to (re)organize themselves within the informal sector to secure access to essential services. We understand informality as a sector of goods and services that is outside of, but not necessarily disconnected from the formal purview of the state. In Lebanon, most citizens are already accessing resources such as water and electricity from within the informal sector. Whereas access to such services might ideally be seen as indissolubly linked to the rights of citizens, the distribution of such goods in Lebanon is hardly equal in practice. The access to goods and services by displaced populations is consequently further compounded in such a context where, by the nature of the country's political economy, must also acquire and secure their rights through informal networks.

By addressing this question of informalization and displacement, we reflect on practices of exclusion as experienced amongst Syrian displaced communities from different socio-economic backgrounds who are otherwise perceived as non-citizens in Lebanon. We aim to document through qualitative methods and life history approaches some of the ways Syrian communities have attempted to harness basic livelihood necessities. In so doing, we examine how the Syrian crisis is contributing to the reassembling of these networks, their hierarchies, and ultimately reshaping modes of governance and state borders between Syria, Lebanon and among Syrians themselves.

Dr. Connie Carøe Christiansen¹

As recent scholarly work has demonstrated, citizenship may not be perceived as confined within a nation state, but as a notion that points at the rights that one claims as bare life, stripped of any dignity or rights. Among displaced Syrians in Lebanon, enactments of citizenship are acts that defy their predicament as tolerated but not accepted in the country.

When the humanitarian system fails to cater to refugee needs, the defiance that refugees may direct at this system is the only possible protest from subjects acting on the background of the lack of rights. Are enactments of citizenship practicing rights that you do not enjoy gender-specific practices? This question is pressing, given the claim of women's vulnerability as refugees, and given women's second-class citizenship in Syria and in Lebanon, as well as in the Arab region, or even beyond it.

Nevertheless, citizenship as enacted, or the act of claiming rights itself, has hitherto lacked a theoretical

exploration of how gender is shaping the possibility and modality of enactments of citizenship. In this paper, I propose that certain strategies forged by Syrian refugee women who have settled in Lebanon in their interaction with local NGOs, allow the contours of enacted citizenship as a gendered practice to emerge. The aim is to demonstrate that the full variety of enactments of citizenship only comes into view when the gender of the enactor is given due analytical attention.

The discussion is divided into three parts; the interaction of Syrian refugees with the humanitarian sector in Lebanon; Syrian refugee women's new position as breadwinners in Lebanon; and finally, the phenomena of Syrian refugee women's acquirement of Lebanese marriage partners as a highly gendered enactment of citizenship. For displaced Syrian women, enacted citizenship does not represent a circumvention of their predicament; instead, these acts demonstrate how these women adapt and survive in a sexist and patriarchal society, while existing in an insecure limbo.

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Displaced Syrian women are targeted in numerous projects that attempt to respond to the needs of Lebanon's many refugees by implementing humanitarian policies that have identified particularly women and children as 'vulnerable'. This refugee crisis¹ is the result of the violent conflict in Syria, initially an uprising against the regime that from 2012 onwards escalated into a full-fledged war in which a variety of opposition forces fought against the Syrian regime. The war had millions of Syrians escape the country to enter primarily neighboring countries, among of which was Lebanon that by 2016 had received 1-1.5 million people from Syria, more than half of which were women and children (Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017).

The author conducted semi-structured interviews with employees and founders (some of Syrian background, some of Palestinian, and some of Lebanese) of six different NGOs that are active in Lebanon, and running projects targeting displaced Syrian women. The interviews took place in cafés and NGO premises in Beirut and its outskirts during spring of 2017 and 2019. The interviews in this paper were supplemented with interviews conducted during the same time period by other researchers working on the project, "The Lay of the Land", managed by the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University in Beirut. The goal was to include the voices of other displaced Syrians in Lebanon. Humanitarian aid, in contrast to general understandings, brings along more than just aid – humanitarian aid is gifts with 'strings attached' (Bornstein 2012). However, it is seldom questioned what humanitarian aid may bring along apart from aid, as recent literature on the consequences of humanitarian aid regimes points at important emerging dilemmas. According to Daley (2013), who explored humanitarian action in the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa, humanitarian aid should be viewed as being "complicit in the reconfiguration of citizenship and identity that is taking place" (Daley 2013). Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), within this humanitarian regime, are often regarded as 'devoid of agency', 'capable of being shifted and relocated against their will,' and as perpetual aliens in their country of settlement (Daley 2013). In other words, one consequence of the approach

of humanitarian interventions is that refugees and displaced persons are deprived of their political agency.

Aid pledges and aid regulations demonstrate that the need for aid among these displaced populations in Lebanon is accepted among donor countries, and by the Lebanese government. Displaced Syrians (including Palestinian refugees from Syria), women, men, and children are expected to accept the modalities in which aid is given and once resettled in the society of their hosts, they are also expected to ease any political interests and activities. Syrian refugees in Lebanon, irrespective of gender identity, are placed in a limbo; they might be accepted in the country, but they still do not enjoy citizenship, let alone refugee rights, especially not if they are among the many whose permits to stay are overdue, or who were never registered as refugees. Many refugees find themselves in such situations, and the policies of the Lebanese state contribute to this state of limbo. For instance, the Lebanese government ceased to register refugees after May 2015 (Erslev-Andersen 2016), and did not sign the UN Refugee Convention, so leaving Syria to seek protection in Lebanon is no guarantee to, in fact, to obtaining such protection. In this paper, I propose that enactments of citizenship are acts that defy this predicament. When the humanitarian system fails to cater to refugee needs, the defiance that refugees may direct at this system is a silent protest from subjects acting on the background of the lack of rights.

Within the humanitarian regime, the need for aid and protection depends on gender, age, and other defined criteria – but in what ways do enactments of citizenship depend on gender identities and gendered practices? While formal forms of citizenship have been approached as at least potentially inclusive, recent studies have pointed at the way that citizenship instead excludes or creates social hierarchies (Holston 2009, Isin 2012), including gender hierarchies (Joseph 2000). Are enactments of citizenship practicing rights that you do not enjoy gender-specific practices? That question is pressing, given the claim of women's vulnerability as refugees, and given women's second-class citizenship in Syria and in Lebanon as well as in the Arab region, or even beyond it.

¹ In left wing circles in Lebanon, the predicament of 'crisis' is only accepted as a scam used to stir up animosity against the Syrians in Lebanon (interview June 2019 with two employees of Dawlaty, one of the Syrian organizations operating from Lebanon)

Citizenship is a set of rights that are usually excluded from the action sphere of humanitarian activism, which just like the refugee system, depends on, and therefore complies with the nation state system – or ‘the national order of things’, as Malkki formulated it a couple of decades ago. She brought attention to the ‘deeply territorialized’ concepts of identity for people who are categorized as “displaced” and “uprooted”, thereby also to belonging as a precondition for citizenship (Malkki 1992). Still at the core of an existence as a refugee, citizenship may however not be perceived as confined within a nation, but rather approached as a notion that is pointing at the rights that one claims as a human being, as bare life, stripped of any dignity or rights, or *zoé*, in contrast to being a political subject, *biós* (Agamben in Isin, 2012).

Patricia Daley (2013) posits, in her study of refugee camps in Central Africa, that humanitarian action has consequences for citizenship. However, Daley does not question how citizenship is gendered, or simply consider how the changes in citizenship provoked by the humanitarian regime may differ between women and men. Neither do other studies from that region, such as Turner’s from Burundi (2005) in which the author notes the existence of ‘bare life’ in refugee camps, destitute of any form of right. Burundi also modifies Agamben’s conceptualization since the “refugees themselves seek to maneuver in this temporary space, thus creating pockets of sovereign power outside the reach of either the commandant’s restrictions or UNHCR’s benevolent control (Burundi 2005)”.

As a tentative formulation, I propose that refugees who “maneuver in temporary space”, in words or deeds insist on rights beyond the right to protection, and in such a way, enact citizenship. Formal citizenship in both the sending state (Syria) and the receiving state (Lebanon) is unequal and hierarchical along gender lines. It is likely that enactments of citizenship are also differentiated along gender lines, but in what particular ways?

The ventures into an anthropological approach to citizenship as enacted as opposed to rights issued by states or other institutions is more recent (Isin and Turner 2007, Isin 2012, Clarke, Coll, Dagnino & Neveu, 2014; Turner, 2015). The isolation of the claim to rights itself goes beyond both ideologies and material resources, and has hitherto lacked a theoretical exploration of how gender is shaping the possibility and modality of enactments of citizenship. This is surprising given the significance of gender for belonging and construction of the polity that enactors of citizenship are claiming (Yuval-Davis 1997, Joseph 2000, Maratou-Alipranti et al 2013). It is also surprising since the field of gender studies, more than any other field, has struggled to come to terms with how women’s rights may be extended, and with this purpose, or to explore how empowerment may be achieved.

The possible relationship between empowerment as a well-elaborated and well-tested notion of studies in gender and development may be contrasted with the notion of enacted citizenship. A KIT (Royal Tropical Institute) report from 2013 titled “Women in Search of Citizenship: Experiences from West Africa” provides a recent example of how ‘women’s empowerment’ is applied in feminist research. The project aimed to find ways in which women might gain access to citizenship rather than being citizens by name only. In this report, the authors, Ayesha Imam and Evelien Kamminga wrote:

“Investing in the personhood of women and girls requires initiatives that help change the ‘meaning’ of the social identity of women for the women themselves and others in relation to them. It requires initiatives which both provide ideological resources (i.e. a vision of other ways of being) and material resources (real alternatives that make it possible to embrace other ways of being without fear of censure and social ostracism)” (Iman & Kimminga 2013).

Following a rights-based approach, the WAGIC (West Africa Gender Inclusive Citizenship) program focused on “making rights real” and on practicing citizenship – being a status; an identity, and a right (Iman and Kimminga 2013). In their stories, women who participated in this program emphasized how they acquired the ability and capacity to claim their rights, and to access them, confirming the fruitfulness of an empowerment approach. These West African women’s and human rights organizations rely on acting rationally, wisely, and cautiously in order to get access to rights, and their strategies are, to some extent, shared with women’s organizations in Arab countries, and equally intend on “making citizenship gender inclusive”.

In contrast, enactments of citizenship do not, as such, entail change. They are a cry for acknowledgement that one exists and that one as an existence counts on line with other members of human society. It is this existence that Agamben calls *biós*, in contrast to *zoé*, or bare life. Enactments of citizenship may be spontaneous and less rational than the well-elaborated strategies outlined by Iman and Kimminga. For displaced Syrians in Lebanon, the issue is not access to rights alone, since their rights claims are not sustained by regimes of rights in the national context², even though in a human rights framework they are. Consequently, the navigation between different rights regimes, including human rights, is a strategy that displaced Syrian women resort to in their Lebanese surroundings, and share with their fellow second-class citizen women of the WAGIC program.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO)s that address refugees, irrespective of gender, may in the objectives of their work include empowerment, understood as the increasing ability to make choices (Kabeer 2005). Since the promotion of citizenship rights is less likely in NGO programming within the refugee regime where refugees are approached as only temporarily in the country, those rights are not pursued *vis-à-vis* the host country, Lebanon. Nevertheless, Syrian civil society organizations operating in and from Lebanon offer citizenship education to refugees, and not only to activists in Syria³.

Since possibilities and conditions for enacting citizenship tend to touch the core of gendered practices, they are dissimilar for women and men, as demonstrated by a case from Yemen. Paradoxically the Muhamesheen, an ostracized population group in that country, typically working in the trash business, despised and relegated to slum dwellings on the outskirts of town, is central for the ability of other Yemenis to see themselves as morally elevated. This position is obtained in highly gendered practices that the Muhamesheen are assumed not to observe, such as veiling and avoidance of mixing with men, which in the eyes of many Yemenis, is a strong indication that they are non-believers and sexually available (Christiansen and Al-Thawr 2019). Non-observance of practiced norms that are innately gendered constitutes highly morally charged justifications for the lack of access to rights and equality with their Yemeni compatriots (Christiansen and Al-Thawr 2019).

By focusing on certain strategies forged by Syrian refugee women who have settled in Lebanon, I argue that the contours of enacted citizenship as a gendered practice emerge. The discussion is divided into three parts; first, I discussed the interaction of Syrian refugees with the humanitarian sector in Lebanon, then I looked into Syrian refugee women’s new position as breadwinners in Lebanon; finally, I discussed the phenomena of Syrian refugee women acquiring Lebanese marriage partners as a highly gendered enactment of citizenship. The aim is to demonstrate that the full variety of enactments of citizenship can only come into view when the gender of the enactor is given due analytical attention.

² Most displaced Syrians do not have a permit to stay in Lebanon, let alone citizenship.

³ Author’s interview with Syrian NGO employee-cum-refugee in Beirut, April 2019

The fear and bitterness towards Lebanese authorities are shared between displaced Syrian men and women, and have far more consequences than apathy. An elderly woman residing in an informal tented

settlement in Lebanon gives an insight about the kind of fear that she experiences whenever she gets a glimpse of Lebanese officials:

“Whenever I see any governmental official, I feel very scared to the extent that I feel my heart pounding out of my chest. Sometimes, just hearing of them makes me scared. From time to time, these officials conduct search and arrest operations in the camp, looking for people that are illegally settled or those with unregistered motorcycles. I also have no idea about the laws in Lebanon; I only know that there are some documents that have to be renewed once every six months and others yearly. The Lebanese government has not helped us with anything; instead, it requires us to pay US \$200 in return for residency documents”.⁴

.Despite equal experience of exclusion among displaced Syrian men and women in Lebanon, they do not share experiences of citizenship. In Arab states, formal citizenship is gendered, with each country, including Lebanon and Syria, presenting their own particular version of gender inequality, turning

women into, at best, secondary citizens (Joseph 2000, Moghadam 2003, Sparre 2008, Khatib 2010, Maktabi 2010, Christiansen and Al-Thawr 2018). In Syria and Lebanon, the constitution guarantees equality for all citizens. Below is a paragraph in the Syrian constitution that mentions opportunities available for women:

“The state guarantees women all opportunities enabling them to fully and effectively participate in the political, social, cultural and economic life” (International Constitutional Law in Maktabi 2010).

⁴ Interviewed by Fadel Saleh, South Lebanon, July-August 2018

Nevertheless, in Syria, legislation tends to construct women as second-class citizens, often produced by contradictory statements in different sections of constitution and other legislation, notably the

citizenship law, criminal law, and a state-sanctioned family law (Maktabi 2010). Legislation in Lebanon follows this pattern; the constitution of Lebanon declares that all citizens are equal, while the sectarian system in the country finds expression in everyday life and in fifteen different family laws that are curtailing women's rights in the family, and rights within the family cannot be delinked from the ability to act and maneuver as citizens (Khatib 2008, Human Rights Watch 2014, Mikdashi 2014). Many features of the family laws that stipulate inequality in the family are shared by both countries, such as male guardianship, requiring a woman to have a male guardian accept her marriage, and a husband's right to unilateral divorce. In Syria, a woman needs to obtain the permission from her guardian (husband or other male relative) to travel, while this is not the case in Lebanon; however,

women's mobility is already curtailed by provisions about guardianship in the family that are mirrored in the family laws that regulate both Sunni and Shiite Muslim families in Lebanon.

The equality granted by the Lebanese constitution has been criticized as insufficient (UN Women 2018). The pledge of equality is not reflected in the laws of citizenship, where Lebanese women married to foreigners, in contrast to Lebanese men, are not able to pass citizenship to their children. Importantly, however, contradictory laws enable argumentation that one set of laws precedes the other, e.g. that the equality guaranteed by the constitution or human rights should be reflected in citizenship laws and family laws. Critical voices often point out that these inconsistencies reflect that rights are given to religious sects in Lebanon at the expense of women's rights.

Before Syrian refugee women entered Lebanon, they found themselves in a hierarchy of rights, which is only exacerbated in displacement, where second class citizenship based on their gender is replaced with an equally gendered and an unfulfilled right to protection.

In humanitarian policies, respect and the building of dignity among beneficiaries of aid is an important aspect of objectives (Plambech and Sørensen 2019, Humanitarian Policy Group 2016; Halloway, Grandi, and Mansour 2018) – without reference to obtaining citizenship rights and belonging. This is no coincidence; via membership in the UN and UN agencies – UNWR, UNHCR, UN-OCHA – that give assistance to people who are persecuted and forced to leave their country, the refugee system is dependent on the nation state system to sustain it. That hitherto. The system that handles refugees is sustaining ‘the national order of things’, when it confirms that subjects who do

not belong to particular nation states constitute an anomaly (Malkki 1992).

It is not a surprise then, that as much as humanitarian aid in refugee crises is necessary, it also creates new sets of problems related to rights, that have bearings on the lack of influence on one’s own daily life conditions, and on shortcomings of meeting the needs of refugees. Syrian refugees, like the male head of a household here below, tend to blame the humanitarian organizations that initially had means for aid, when they no longer have them:

*“Most of the organizations help us for a short time, and then they say their money has run out and they leave all of a sudden. The camps always need them because without their help nobody would help us, and we do not have the money to provide everything for ourselves. I lost hope in calling the people I know who work at NGOs; they would either say they work in a different area now or give me a hotline number to call, who in turn would say they have registered my concerns with no follow up”.*⁵

When aid and assistance cease in this sort of ‘dead-end solutions’, i.e. sudden discontinuations of aid despite continued needs, humanitarian action hardly lives up to its own ideal of ‘dignity’ in humanitarian relief contexts. However, dignity still counts as a nominal objective for humanitarian aid, and does not pose a challenge to the nation state system, in which citizenship rights are delegated exclusively by a state authority. Nevertheless, citizenship, when understood as acting out rights that one does not possess may be prompted by humanitarian practices, e.g. when

refugees refuse to play their part by not accepting to participate in activities organized by humanitarian NGOs, as reported by, for instance, the Lebanese NGO, ABAAD⁶. This refusal carries, at closer look, more meaning; it demonstrates agency and position; it signifies an opinion formed by a person, a subject, and it wipes away the perception that refugees are passively accepting their lot. Needless to say, such refusal does not alter the fact that citizenship, as a set of rights related to the membership of a national polity, goes beyond the objectives of the humanitarian

⁵ Interviewed by Fadel Saleh, South Lebanon, July-August 2018

⁶ Interviewed by author, Beirut, July 2017

system, where return upon the end of conflict instead remains as prescribed course of events.

Interestingly, the perception of dignity is shared between many refugees and NGO employees. The difference lies in the details, according to a survey among humanitarian NGOs and Syrian refugees in Lebanon (Halloway, Grandi, and Mansour 2018). Keywords signifying dignity for displaced Syrians in Lebanon are rights, respect, and independence. Irrespective of gender, age and status in Lebanon displaced Syrians, claim that the most fundamental aspect of their dignity are their rights, and the most important factor that undermines it is their lack of citizenship. For NGO employees, or humanitarian actors, they are not dissimilar, but when discussing rights, protection preceded treatment as any other inhabitant of Lebanon and ability to make choices preceded employment and economic independence (Halloway, Grandi, and Mansour 2018). Despite these important differences highlighted above, notably a difference vis-à-vis the importance of citizenship for dignity, there are also overlaps between dignity as an objective for humanitarian practices and dignity as “rights”; subjectivity and decision-making ability, essential for citizenship, are also essential for dignity.

Women refugees who came to Lebanon as a consequence of war in neighboring Syria are categorized as vulnerable in humanitarian policies, and in line with men, they are entitled to humanitarian aid (UNHCR and Government of Lebanon, 2018). Nevertheless, differences in the details reveal that humanitarian policies are not addressing the core of refugee women’s predicament in a patriarchal and violent society. For the majority of Syrian refugees, their existence in Lebanon is an existence in limbo and insecurity, since the right to stay in Lebanon is not a corollary of the right to protection, guaranteed by the refugee system.

Humanitarian aid is dependent on neutrality, understood as an impartial position in any conflict, enabling humanitarian actors to operate in conflict zones. This position is however not defined easily, and more broadly, humanitarian principles are increasingly under attack, according to the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG), at least in part because their quality as humanitarian is questioned by ‘new’ humanitarian actors, or actors outside of the main humanitarian regime:

“For some, the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence are universally applicable, regardless of context or culture. But like the organizations that claim adherence to them, they were established at a particular historical juncture: they are not necessarily innate or intrinsic to humanitarianism, and for actors outside the tradition that created them, they may represent a Western ethos they question or reject, and may not speak to the type of ‘humanitarianism’ they wish to espouse” (HPG 2016).

As a whole, the sector seems incapable of meeting the wide range of requirements that have been imposed on it in order to adjust misapprehensions or to instigate reform in accordance with new challenges. Factors of change are so-called new actors, or non-system actors, e.g. religious charity groups that are becoming more numerous within the sector. These actors contest the international power hierarchy that has dominated the field since the emergence of the humanitarian system after WW2, primarily underpinned by Western donors, Red Cross organizations and UN-agencies (HPG 2016).⁷

The critique of the humanitarian sector – from the sector itself⁸ – is severe, since it has failed and continues to fail in responding to the needs caused by war, including the war in Syria (Mansour 2017). Further

critique includes its closed and centralized character leading to a failure to connect “meaningfully” with national and local actors, by for instance including them in aid coordination, demonstrating “an inability to embrace the diversity of values, individuals and organizations involved in humanitarian work” (Mansour 2017), while noting that these organizations are increasingly so-called “multi-mandate organizations,” i.e. organizations that have objectives in addition to humanitarian aid, typically development goals (Mansour 2017). Involvement of ‘beneficiaries’ or the recipient, local community through an engagement with local NGOs in the coordination, and not only distribution, of aid has as a requirement largely failed (Olivious 2014, Mansour 2017, Christiansen 2019).

⁷ See HPG 2016 for a number of definitions of ‘the humanitarian system’ (p. 9).

⁸ HPG programming is funded by a range of donors of humanitarian aid, including Red Cross and state aid agencies.

The New Status of Syrian Refugee Women as Breadwinners

After Syrian refugee women embarked on a new position as breadwinners in Lebanon, it was in contrast to expectations, and it was not a solution to problems related to status and rights. Many Syrian women in Lebanon stay in their homes or local communities, whereas claims to citizenship by enactments occur in a public, and are visible (Isin 2012). The distinction between the public sphere where gender equality is the legal norm, and the private sphere where women are discriminated and unequal with their husbands and male relatives (Maktabi 2010) applies to both

countries. This distinction means that the claims of women who do not have access to formal citizenship are probably more subtle, and may take more efforts to uncover, since women have relatively limited access to the public. These limitations, whether in Syria or in Lebanon, are not only related to the law but also to social norms about women's access to the public, including access to the formal labor market. An employee in a Syrian diaspora NGO operating in Syria and Lebanon is nevertheless aware of the openings that the war paradoxically created for women:

“These women [attending the ‘safe spaces’ offered by the NGO] started to develop strategies in the face of war, and they need to develop an income, so they found themselves in a new position. I do not want to sound cynical, but the war also opened for some opportunities for women.”⁹

The need for women of Syrian refugee families in Lebanon to contribute to family income means that social norms about women's access to the labor market are adjusted. In Syria, the share of women participating on the labor market is very low (13 % in 2011), compared with other Arab countries (22,2 % in 2011 for Lebanon), but until the mid-1990s, this share in Syria exceeded both that of Lebanon and the Arab region as a whole (World Bank 2019). During the first decades after the establishment of the Syrian state, the Ba'ath regime emphasized women's contribution to the development of the nation, and women took advantage of the offers made to them in education and occupation in the Syrian public sector. However, more recently, Syrian women have used the status attributed to women via their contribution to development as arguments and justifications for their aspirations outside of family life (Sparre 2008).

While the position as an important contributor to development may still be possible for women in Syria, it is not likely for refugee Syrian women in Lebanon. Compared with refugee Syrian men who tend to work in construction or in the service sector (restaurants and shops), their female counterparts have less access to the formal labor market. Their contribution to family income is nevertheless unprecedented, as local NGOs providing services to refugees point out; refugee women's chance to find an income in Lebanon is more likely than men's. Since the income of women refugees is primarily gained within the informal sector, despite working, they are often confined to their communities. The confinement to one's own community is partly due to fear for repercussions from the Lebanese host population, perceived to be hostile towards them (Holloway, Grandi & Mansour 2018). However, if a refugee opens her own business and finds a Lebanese

⁹ Interviewed by author, Beirut, July 2019

partner or sponsor – a kafeel – this refugee obtains permission to stay in the country. According to the kafala system, a citizen of the country can provide a foreigner with permission to stay but only as long as the sponsor is the guarantor of work and income. Evidently, this means dependency on this sponsor or partner for the refugee.

An example of this practice is the business that one interviewee opened. She is a Syrian woman who came to Lebanon in December 2012. Her vegetable business is located in a small town in the Beqaa valley, where she and her family now reside. Beyond their children, she has her husband who has a bullet wound and breathing problems, and her mother-in-law who suffers from Alzheimer's as dependents. She is now sharing the surplus of her business with her Lebanese partner. This interviewee told us that she depends on this friend/sponsor, but at least she is working with her, and could not manage it on her own anyway.¹⁰ Similarly, another Syrian woman in Beqaa, opened a mini-market with her husband, made possible by the sponsorship of a Lebanese man who accepted to share the costs of opening it, and now gets his share of the revenues from the shop.¹¹ Thus, the kafala-system enables Syrian women in Lebanon to

assume responsibility as bread-winners, while creating dependency on Lebanese sponsors.

As already made clear, women are second class citizens in Syria, a status which during the Baath regime was partly counter-weighted by their status as equally important for the development of the Syrian nation. More recently, family laws have been foregrounded and served as a mean to regulate power positions between religious sects (Maktabi 2010), not much different from the bargaining which occurs in Lebanon. Inequality in family laws and other legislation is in other words no longer counter-weighted by education, employment, or by constitutional rights that enable navigation among these different rights regimes, e.g. constituting an argument for women's rights to work outside the home.

Syrian women who have relocated to Lebanon now find it more difficult to continue to aspire to education, due to their new responsibilities as providers. Hanine is an example of these women; she used to go to a university in Syria before she came to Lebanon in February 2012:

“I just want to study a field that I can eventually work in. My father just started working now, and it's very hard for him to work because he is always tired. So it's basically only me working. In Syria, I wanted to study telecommunications engineering or maybe even pharmacy. I was the first in my class. But this was all long ago. I don't think of this anymore.”¹²

Most refugees work informally under the kafala system's dire conditions. The need for Syrian refugee women to contribute to family income provides them with a new status as the breadwinner of the family which generally means a stronger position within

that context. In contrast to what was the case in Syria, the spill-over to citizenship rights is absent for Syrian refugee women in Lebanon.

¹⁰ Interviewed by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

¹¹ Interviewed by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

¹² Interviewed by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018

In Lebanon, the lack of conformity among several Syrian refugee women with gendered norms in their approach to mothering and their strategies for finding a new marriage partner, serves as a justification for their social marginalization and for the discrimination directed at them. A Lebanese volunteer aid worker in a Beirut neighborhood where Syrian families now outnumber Lebanese, pointed at Syrian mothers as giving their children less priority than would a Lebanese, when they leave their Syrian husband to the benefit of a new, Lebanese man. The Syrian mom, the volunteer maintained, runs and leaves her children when she gets the chance. The children are then left to roam the streets, with no one taking care of them (Christiansen 2017).

Considering the legal vacuum of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon, this is how Syrian women take advantage of the highly limited forms of agency within their reach. It is moreover a highly gendered form of agency, since it constitutes a path for citizenship and rights for women, and not for men. Similar complaints about materially-less demanding Syrian women being attractive for Lebanese men were voiced to me in Beirut neighborhoods and in the Beqaa Valley. They were rather complaints about Syrian refugee women taking advantage of these highly gendered and limited forms of agency. Evilsizor also finds that Lebanese women express their concerns with Syrian women "stealing" Lebanese men, and offers the birthrate of Syrian women as the framework for understanding the construction of Syrian women as a threat to Lebanese women; their boys born in Lebanon will eventually want jobs and their girls will want husbands (Evilsizor 2018.). While refugee Syrian women are not claiming rights that they do not have, when they abandon their families to form a new one with a Lebanese man, they are enacting citizenship in a highly gendered form, moreover in a double sense, since by taking advantage of nationality rights that are unequal between genders, they acquire the possibility of Lebanese nationality and citizenship.

Despite a common status as second class citizens for women in Lebanon and Syria, it is a point of view among particularly NGO-employees of Lebanese NGOs that Syrian women are more vulnerable than Lebanese women, not only because they are refugees but also because they are married to Syrian men. Since gender relations in Syria are more conservative, the relation between the married couple is more unequal compared with Lebanese couples, putting women in danger when there is a heightened level of violence in the home, due to the tensions of conflict and war (Christiansen 2017). While I do not mean to deny the existence of this kind of violence, nor that it is important to cater for those who have experienced it, the particular formation of gender relations among Syrian married couples becomes an explanation and a justification for their lower position in the moral hierarchy. WomenNow is an NGO initiated in the Syrian Diaspora and run by Syrians (and a few Lebanese). In this organization, vulnerability is, in contrast, approached as vulnerability of Syrians facing the consequences of war in their own authoritarian country and facing the hostility and discrimination of their Lebanese hosts. The organization is twisting vulnerability to become a common predicament for Syrian women and men, confronting the morally charged gendered practices.

Many Syrian refugees in Lebanon are not easily targeted by aid organizations, since a large part does not reside in camps – or informal settlements (the preferred wording of the Lebanese government). A fieldwork study of Turkmen Syrians (Saleh 2017) reveals that a share of women refugees (who are Turkmen Syrians) are begging and providing sexual services in the streets of Beirut – under the pretense of selling small items. They offer these services, despite the disapproval of shop owners in their vicinity, and despite their status as registered refugees (Saleh 2017). In their begging, they are enacting citizenship; they defy the rights regime of the humanitarian system, when they, rather than accepting or passively waiting to accept donations from this system, insist on the need for an income,

and to do everything that would possibly provide them with this income, including begging and sexual services. As an enactment of citizenship, it is not rational in the meaning of the word applied within the humanitarian regime, or in the development sector. Their services do not entail change, or empowerment. Still it is significant as an activity of a subject able to 'act on oneself' (Isin 2012).

When refugee Syrian women do not participate in activities offered to them by humanitarian or development organizations, they apply another highly limited form of agency that are at their disposal. Acting by not acting –is the kind of agency left for those that do not have access to other kinds of agency. Meanwhile an emphasis on protection for refugee women is prompted by news articles and reports that find that particularly women who are escaping the violence of war and conflict may encounter new threats of violence, and often sexual violence. These threats exist for these women first during the journey of escape, and then during the temporary settlement in camps or other insecure forms of housing that they are forced to accept as refugees (e.g. Freedman 2016, Charles and Denman 2013). This narrative clarifies that women are vulnerable, not only because they are refugees, but because they are women, often separated from the male family members and local community that would otherwise constitute

a safety bulwark for them. Within this narrative, it makes sense for the NGOs that cater to refugees in Lebanon's recent 'refugee crisis' to establish 'safe spaces' for refugee women. An example of this is the successful gender advocacy organization in Lebanon, ABAAD that offers safe spaces presented as an opportunity for women to go to a group where they may seek psycho-social support (ABAAD 2019). When refugee women decline the invitation to participate in the safe space, it is a rejection of this narrative, and one of the few acts of defiance and protest at their disposal. Two Syrian women started an NGO originally in Syria. However, since the outbreak of war, their organization has been operating from Lebanon. This organization has a different notion of 'safe space'; it rented a house where it occupies one floor, and a section of that floor constitutes an apartment that welcomes people who have recently left Syria, e.g. to escape military service, and others who need a place to stay during their first weeks in Lebanon. The threat identified is then different – it derives not from sexually violent assaulters or traffickers in women, but from the militaristic government in Syria and the unwelcoming Lebanese society. The Syrian Diaspora organization WomenNow also offers psycho-social support to refugee Syrians in their centers; this offer is to women and men, and in addition they offer citizenship education.

The full variety of enactments of citizenship can only come into view when the gender of the enactor is given due analytical attention. Enactments of citizenship among refugee Syrian women are the practices that sustain their political subjectivity, not only as refugees but as women, despite their exclusion from the Lebanese polity. Acts deemed as irrational may, at a closer look, be understood as politically charged enactments of citizenship. Syrian refugee women are much more than vulnerable – or victims of the conflict and the sexism of their male compatriots; they are agents who both rely on and cannot escape their gender when they defy their predicament as displaced Syrians. Attention to the ways that enactments of citizenship are gendered serves here to understand that Syrian refugee women have the capacity to act upon themselves, and take advantage of the limited forms of action that are within their reach.

Highly gendered practices differ from one context to another, and the Muhamesheen are not refugees like the Syrians who came to Lebanon as a consequence of the war in Syria. Nevertheless, in both cases “the

political community of citizens depends on the exclusion of certain human beings that are reduced to ‘bare life’ (Turner 2005). The Yemeni case serves to learn how gendered practices relate to morality and to processes of exclusion. Similarly, McClusky found in her study of a Swedish village receiving Syrian refugees that moral arguments placing gendered practices at the core were justifications for creating a hierarchy of ‘decency’ where the villagers were above the Syrians and Syrian refugee men were seen as menacing for the village (McClusky 2017). It is therefore not surprising that gendered and morally charged arguments are also at the core of enacted or defiant forms of citizenship practiced among refugee Syrian women who are dependent on aid.

Humanitarian action is subject to criticism for a range of shortcomings, including the reluctance of the sector to deep-seated reform and lack of ability to leave coordination and control to the people who are supposed to be receiving it. As the HPG notes, reform requires that organizations are open about their mission beyond relief:

“...redefining humanitarian action requires acknowledging the specificity of different spheres and approaches, implementing more developmental or solidarist responses where appropriate, while safeguarding independent and neutral humanitarian action in a limited number of situations where it is essential. This would not make one form of humanitarian action less valuable or legitimate than another, but it does require that aid organizations be explicit and upfront about the nature of their aspirations, objectives and operational frameworks, and transparent about delivery lines and methods” (HPG 2016).

Humanitarian aid and policies have the potential aggravate the division between those who have citizenship rights and those who do not. Enactments of citizenship address this transformation, defying the predicaments that this transformation fosters. In contrast to approaches that are addressing processes of empowerment as the building of a capacity to decision-making, it is important to “consider political subjectivities and acts, which are not contained by right claims” (Turner 2016, 141). Leading attention to enacted citizenship is to highlight these acts, not as amputated, but as political activity in full. In contrast to participation in the kafala system, which creates dependency, some Syrian refugee women in Lebanon act defiantly within the range of possibilities at their disposal – they leave their kids and marry Lebanese

men and obtain citizenship rights. Others reject the narrative framework of humanitarian activities targeting them by not attending them and by securing an income from sexual services, just as they do not leave their ambition for education and a professional life behind in Syria. The value of these highly gendered enacted forms of citizenship for Syrian women refugees does not represent a circumvention of their predicament; instead their acts demonstrate how they adapt and survive in a sexist and patriarchal society, while existing in an insecure limbo. Moreover, these practices are gendered, but usually not associated with political agency. In the Lebanese context, however, they emerge as highly contested and political actions, and within that particular context, they demonstrate political subjectivity.

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