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## Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures

### Migration: Refugee Regimes: Arab States/Mashreq

(8,839 words)

#### Introduction

In the Middle East, the prolonged mass displacement of Palestinian refugees has transformed the practices of humanitarianism in the twentieth century (Petee 2009, Feldman 2015). Today, regional wars and sectarian and state violence have affected many countries in the region, leading to unprecedented displacement, and waves of migration into Europe. Iraqis, Sudanese, Libyans, Yemenis, Palestinians, and Afghans, among others, have become humanitarian communities; the Syrians are considered the quintessential refugees of the twenty-first century. Within these emerging refugee crises in the Middle East, refugee women and girls have been exposed to new forms of violence and vulnerabilities, leading to specific kinds of humanitarian policies and intervention.

The management of refugees in the Middle East has both reshaped and was influenced by humanitarianism's new identity and politics, which arose after the fall of the Soviet Union and the forming of the globalized world order. This management relied on a set of gendered practices and discourses that define what a true refugee is and how to intervene on her behalf. The article focuses on the gendered aspects of this form of governance, addressing the effects of refugee policies and programs on women and girls. It examines the refugee regime in Lebanon. The United Nation Higher Refugee Council (UNHCR) offices in Lebanon constitute it as a "first asylum" country, where displaced communities can file for refugee status and resettlement. Jordan and Turkey are also countries of first asylum, but Lebanon provides an interesting angle on the transformations of refugee regimes in the

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Middle East because of its history with humanitarian interventions. Moreover, Lebanon hosts Palestinian, Syrian, Iraqi, and Sudanese asylum seekers and refugees. One of the limitations of focusing on Lebanon, however, is that this article does not capture other forms of refugee governance in countries such as Libya, Yemen, and Afghanistan. It is thus non-representative of all refugee regimes in the Middle East. It does nonetheless provide an informative overview of the ways in which refugees are governed in a country of the Middle East and how this management affects women, family, and social relations.

The article provides a brief history of refugees in Lebanon and of the transformations in the identity and politics of humanitarian governance. This history helps contextualize the experiences and vulnerabilities of refugee women and girls by identifying the various actors, institutions, and programs involved in governing them, as well as the bureaucracies and policies adopted in countries of first asylum. By following the journey of displacement, life in countries of first asylum, and the ways of becoming a refugee, this article traces the gendered governance of refugees in the Middle East.

## Refugees in Lebanon: A Brief Overview

Al Nakba (“The catastrophe,” denoting the expulsion of Palestinians following the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948) displaced around four hundred thousand Palestinians into Lebanon, with no right to return to Palestine. The United Nations Refugee and Works Agency (UNRWA) was established to carry out relief and work programs for these refugees. Palestinian refugees remained in Lebanon but had no right to work, own property, or acquire Lebanese citizenship (Abdulrahim and Khawaja 2011). They came to depend on UNRWA and other humanitarian organizations. This was particularly true for women, especially women who in 1948 (and 1967) found themselves, with few skills or resources, heads of households as their men were detained or killed.

Israeli wars and invasions since 1982 have also internally displaced communities in Lebanon and provoked several forms of humanitarian interventions to manage the health and well-being of the displaced. The July War in 2006 internally displaced more than one million people, some of whom fled to Syria. The Nahr el-Bared conflict—clashes that took place in May 2007 between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Fatah al-Islam militants in Nahr el-Bared Palestinian refugee camp—destroyed the camp, officially hosting around 31,000 Palestinian refugees. Internal displacement of Palestinian refugees and the camp’s reconstruction became urgent humanitarian issues. In both instances, women refugees faced tremendous challenges, challenges that were increased by the constant lack of attention by humanitarian and development agencies to their particular gendered needs. The Nahr el-Bared conflict led to increased funds and aid being channelled to Lebanon, reanimating the humanitarian market, which had been winding down after the July War.

Iraqi communities escaped to Lebanon following various violent events (sectarian violence, state violence, regime oppression, massacres, US war on Iraq). They became a humanitarian priority in 2008 as humanitarian reports (ICG 2008, O’Donnell and Newland 2008) declared the need for assistance to an estimated 20,000 to 50,000 refugees (IOM 2008). Humanitarian interventions, refugee registration, and aid for asylum seekers were provided. High levels of psychological distress were detected for Iraqi asylum seekers, who had witnessed the assassination of relatives, massacres, kidnapping, torture, and rape (IOM 2008, Hijazi, Weissbecker, and Chammay 2011); many showed signs of psychological disorders (Hijazi, Weissbecker, and Chammay 2011).

Sudanese asylum seekers have been arriving to Lebanon since the 1990s, following various episodes of state violence. There are far less published humanitarian reports on Sudanese asylum seekers in the Middle East than any other asylum seeker community. Sudanese asylum seekers have resorted to peaceful sit-ins and protests in front of UNHCR offices in various countries of first asylum (e.g. Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan) to object to the discriminatory treatment they face in the resettlement process (Davis et al. 2015). Protesters have been arrested and detained, most brutally in Egypt, where the Egyptian police opened fire on Sudanese protesters in 2005, reportedly killing 20 refugees (Whitaker 2005).

The Syrian revolution in 2011 quickly escalated into state violence against different opposition factions and the emergence of radical Islamist groups like ISIS, resulting in civilian massacres and the displacement of Syrians and Palestinian refugees living in Syria into neighboring countries (Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon). Most Syrian refugees are women and children (Yasmine and Moughalian 2016). They have been exposed to war, bombing, and state violence and struggle to secure basic needs (food, education, water, housing, healthcare, and protection) (Yasmine and Moughalian 2016). Women experience different kinds of sexual and other gendered violence along the way and in host countries. Many left Syria after horrific experiences of physical and sexual torture by various forces opposed to and allied with the government (Nasar 2013).

Many global humanitarian organizations that had left Lebanon returned, shifting their assistance to the Syrian refugee emergency. Aid provided by these organizations included relief, food distribution, psychiatric and psychosocial support, housing, vocational formation, and health awareness and treatment. The United Nations declared the Syrian crisis to be the worst humanitarian crisis of the twenty-first century (UNHCR 2016). An estimated one million Syrian refugees and asylum seekers were said to reside in Lebanon in 2015.

Despite the moral humanitarian commitment to a shared understanding of “humanity” and of saving all lives (Feldman and Ticktin 2010), not all refugees are treated equally. Priorities in humanitarian emergency can shift funds and interests in a refugee crisis. Geopolitical influences can also affect refugee resettlement and public interest in a certain crisis. This creates a hierarchy of refugees and of their suffering. The refugee regimes in the Middle East constitute a good case of this hierarchy, especially if we consider the cases of Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis, and Sudanese refugees in Lebanon. In 2012, the scale of the Syrian refugee crisis drastically shifted aid priorities in Lebanon. Competing for aid and refugee status became a reality for many humanitarian communities.

One example of this hierarchy is the situation of Sudanese refugees in Lebanon. In 2012, Sudanese refugees started a hunger strike outside UNHCR offices in Beirut. They protested UNHCR’s racist treatment and the almost suspended process of gaining refugee status and resettlement. Sudanese strikers, many of them women, spoke of being treated like “children” by UNHCR staff and officers (Famarziha, Gaspais, and Moghnieh 2015). Fifty days into the hunger strike, some Sudanese protesters were arrested outside UNHCR offices and detained in prisons. Another open sit-in took place outside UNHCR headquarters in Beirut in 2015. Many of their refugee files were still closed and left unprocessed, and the resettlement process was either suspended or very slow to take place (RadioSawt 2015a, b, c). Today, an estimated one thousand Sudanese asylum seekers remain stuck in Lebanon waiting for their cases to be resolved and for their refugee files to be reopened. Similar protests have also taken place in Jordan and Egypt.

Another example is that of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Most Palestinian refugees coming from Syria ended up in the already overcrowded Palestinian camps in Lebanon. The newcomers received support and guidance from the residents of the Palestinian camps on how to secure aid and survive (Parkinson 2014). However, a new category of aid emerged, that of the Syrian Palestinian refugee, to differentiate them from Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon. The result was a drastic shift in aid from what came to be called Lebanese Palestinian to Syrian Palestinian. UNRWA prioritized aid for Syrian Palestinians, sometimes cutting aid access all together from the latter (Moghnieh 2016), including for programs of particular importance for women, such as reproductive health and domestic violence prevention. These shifts in aid can be temporary, but they are telling of how hierarchies of victimhood are created in the Middle East.

## Refugee Regimes: The New Identity and Politics of Humanitarianism

Any historical account of refugee regimes must consider the challenges in defining humanitarianism, especially after the post-Cold War period (Barnett and Weiss 2008). Defining humanitarianism has been historically contingent, making it hard to represent this institution's ethics and politics (Feldman and Titckin 2010, Paulmann 2013). The first attempts to institutionalize humanitarianism, in the nineteenth century, identified it as a set of affective moralities acquired by those motivated to save others and provide unconditional aid (Barnett and Weiss 2008, Feldman and Titckin 2010). Until the late 1980s, the International Committee of the Red Cross's main principles of humanitarian action—e.g. impartiality, independence, and neutrality—were the unchallenged and standard principles for all humanitarian industries. Humanitarianism meant relief, and nothing else (Barnett and Weiss 2008).

The post-Cold War period represented an important rupture from the defining moral imperative behind neutral humanitarian action. Sexual violence, rape, and other types of violence against women emerged as an urgent area of intervention in humanitarian emergencies that require particular attention and assistance. The Rwandan genocide in 1994, more than any other event, shattered humanitarianism's confidence in its own principles and interventions (Kuperman 2001, Lewy 2012), provoking severe criticism of humanitarian organizations' neutrality in genocides and massacre. Aid organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders, MSF) (Redfield 2013), and later Médecins du Monde (Doctors of the World, MDM), attempted to chart new directions for humanitarian action. They abandoned the principle of neutrality, adopting instead the principle of "witnessing" and then, for MDM, "the right to intervene" (Pandolfi 2003, Barnett 2011), which justified humanitarian military intervention in the name of human rights (Rieff 2002, 85).

From the end of the 1980s, the United Nations began increasingly to manage conflict, involving itself in peacekeeping operations, emergency interventions, and development work. This meant "a whole new agenda for the United Nations and international peace work" (Agger 2001, 306). Today, humanitarian work can include women's empowerment and protection, development, democratic promotion, therapy, recording human rights violations, and postconflict peace building—all of which are highly political and ideological activities (Barnett and Weiss 2008, Feldman and Titckin 2010). the Inter-Agency Standing Committee—a forum for coordination, policy development and decision-making between UN and non-UN partners—developed numerous guidebooks on ensuring that various refugee populations traditionally excluded or silenced not only have their needs met but also are empowered and opportunities for gender equality are promoted (IASC 2009). The Women's Refugee Commission recommends that "programming

and planning must now move beyond addressing the differing needs of women, men, girls and boys to creating equal access and opportunities, advancing social inclusion, tapping potential and planning for and working towards gender equality and a more gender-equitable world” (Zaatari 2014, 22).

Humanitarianism’s extended role was followed by aid donors’ increasing funding of emergency and development work (Fearon 2008), blurring the boundaries of humanitarianism—longstanding humanitarian organizations were now funded by private agencies, states, and other sources. This once again challenged humanitarian principles of neutrality and aid (Summerfield 1999, Fearon 2008, Feldman and Titkin 2010). Increasingly, non-Western countries have functioned as humanitarian donor states and aid organizations, problematizing the idea of humanitarianism as a Western project.

Three new transformations are noticeable today in humanitarian action:

- (1) There is a growing humanitarian interest in women’s rights and protection, especially violence against women “as a problem at the highest level” in conflict-affected countries (Titkin 2011, 240). In 2009, the UN Security Council (UNSC) unanimously adopted a resolution to end violence against women in conflict-affected countries.
- (2) There is a growing willingness to extend relief to different emergencies around the world simultaneously. This is broadly facilitated by technology, increasing numbers of relief organizations, and globalization (Barnett and Weiss 2008).
- (3) Psychological interventions are increasingly being incorporated into humanitarian emergencies as part of aid and relief (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). Just as humanitarian relief workers mend victims’ physical wounds, they must now attend to their psychological wounds as well. The growing urgency for psychological humanitarian assistance in sites of conflict is in line with the increasing concern regarding sexual violence experienced by refugees (Atlani and Rousseau 2000, Agger 2001).

## Governing Refugees in the Middle East: Actors, Institutions, and Bureaucracies

A simple mapping of the different humanitarian and state actors, institutions, and bureaucracies governing refugees in Lebanon today can show us how intricate and complex refugee regimes have become. They rely on a network of technologies, policies, and organized interventions. These various levels of governance (policies, programs, actors) directly affect the mobility, freedom, and choices refugee women and girls have in countries of first asylum, and the violence they are exposed to.

### United Nations’ Agencies

Agencies such as the UN Higher Refugee Council (UNHCR), the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), and the World Health Organization (WHO) declare humanitarian emergencies, coordinate humanitarian interventions, design action plans, and encourage state institutions to intervene during conflict. Other UN agencies, such as the UN Development Program, UN Women, and UN Habitat, attend to development work. Although some UN agencies have become dedicated particularly for women, this is a recent phenomenon, and most UN agencies remain male dominated in terms of leadership and expertise despite policies and

attempts to transform them (Ourania 2016). A recent investigation by the Associated Press (AP) has revealed that the UN received around two thousand allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse between 2004 and 2016 against its peacekeepers (Essa 2017).

## International Organizations Working with United Nation Agencies

Based on the IASC—“a unique inter-agency forum for coordination, policy development and decision-making involving the key United Nations and non-UN humanitarian partners” (IASC website)—international humanitarian organizations respond to UN agencies’ call for humanitarian assistance to coordinate interventions in emergency and development, implement their interventions, and divide tasks. IASC has developed numerous guidebooks that articulate how to incorporate women’s and girls’ needs and promote gender equality in all of the various humanitarian services, such as in-camp management, food distribution, wash and sanitation, registration, health, nonfood items, and livelihood.

## International Organizations Not Under the United Nations

International humanitarian organizations that are not committed to UN charters and its interagency coordination plan include organizations that work independently of UN’s priorities of aid and intervention, such as Médecins Sans Frontières.

## Local Partner Organizations

Local NGOs working in countries of first asylum include community-based, development, and women’s advocacy organizations. Their level of coordination or work with the UNHCR varies depending on their type and vision. They partner international organizations, implementing designed global interventions for refugees. In many cases the relationship between the local and global organizations is more top-down than a partnership. Local organizations execute global policies and interventions but are unable to sustain their interventions and services or continue with these services once they leave (Lebanon Support 2016a). Frequently, however, local organizations influence and transform global and standardized interventions based on the expertise of local practitioners knowledgeable of community needs. Local organizations in Lebanon can be Lebanese, Syrian, or Palestinian, or a combination.

## Human Rights Organizations

Human rights organizations record human rights violations, including how refugees and asylum seekers are treated in countries of first asylum, and violations of women’s and refugee’s rights. Examples include Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

## Legal Organizations

Legal organizations that provide advocacy, legal services and representation for asylum seekers and refugees.

## The Private Sector

The private sector is a rising actor in governing refugees in the Middle East. One example is a start-up company in the United States that designed an artificial intelligence software functioning as a therapist in Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon (Solon 2016). Another is engaging local entrepreneurs in first asylum countries to design a way for clean water for refugees. The inclusion of the private sector into refugee regimes is based on World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s recent recommendations for more innovation in dealing with refugee crises by including the private sector (UNHCR 2017).

## Donor Organizations and States

Donor organizations and nation-states fund humanitarian organizations. They direct funds to serve and develop communities that host refugees to ensure social cohesion.

## Experts, Practitioners, and Knowledge Producers

Experts, practitioners, and knowledge producers design and implement interventions for refugees. They also contribute to producing knowledge about refugee communities, many of whom are over-researched and constantly scrutinized for information (Nayel 2013, Sukarieh and Tannock 2013). This group includes global and local consultants, policymakers, practitioners, intervention designers, academic and independent researchers, humanitarian workers, nongovernmental workers, doctors, public health workers, psychiatrists, psychosocial practitioners, and social workers.

## Aid

Aid includes both emergency and development forms of assistance that can range from food and shelter, psychotherapy and vaccination, to education and rehabilitation.

## Country of First Asylum's Institutions

Countries of first asylum's institutions, policies, and programs impose forms of governance on refugees. Government ministries such as the Ministries of Health, Education, and Social Affairs work closely with UN agencies. Municipalities govern refugees locally, organizing and managing refugee housing and other aspects of refugees' their lives in host communities. In Lebanon, many municipalities have imposed curfews on refugees in certain regions (HRW 2014), and there have been reports of forced eviction of refugees from certain regions. The police and the army impose refugee governance by detaining refugees, raiding refugee camps, and arresting and sometimes forcibly deporting refugees. Recently, reports of the torture and killing of Syrian refugees by the Lebanese army have surfaced (Reuters 2017). Border control also restricts entry to countries of first asylums or prevent refugees from leaving the country. Nonformal policing groups, ranging from elite members of refugee settlement to members of the host community to armed militias, police refugees and monitor their whereabouts, unlawfully detain and arrest them for reasons of alleged security, restrict their movement to protect honor and reputation (especially for women and girls), and so forth.

## State's Refugee Policies and Regulations

This includes the different formal and nonformal state laws, regulations and policies produced by the state to govern refugees.

## The *Shawish*

The *shawish*—a word originally used in Lebanon to describe a prisoner who monitors other prisoners and mediates between them and prison guards—is typically a Syrian man who takes charge of refugee camps and is the middleman between NGOs, municipalities, and refugees. Reflective of the patriarchal structures and practices, there have not been any women *shawishs*. Some agencies tried to install programs to support women’s leadership in camp and host community life, making use of the changing context of being refugees, but the long-term effect of this is unclear (El-Masri, Harvey, and Garwood 2013, Zaatari 2014, 19). The *shawish* directly governs the mobility, choices, and livelihood of refugee girls and women in particular (Al Masri 2017, August 2016). He is a local actor who mediates the governance of refugees, somewhat determines their livelihoods through aid distribution, and manages refugee settlements. Al Masri provides a detailed description of how the *shawish*, originally an intermediary for labor between Syrian workers and farms, became an important actor between Syrian refugees, NGOs, and municipalities:

The Al-Shawish role consists of supplying labour to the Lebanese farm operators, allocating work, guaranteeing the workers a place to live, and generally serving as the link between the local farm operator and the daily workers. Before the Syrian refugees’ influx, many of the Bekaa lands were farms employing seasonal migrant workers from Syria that lived, for the work period, in tents on the land under the management of intermediaries known as “Al-Shawish,” commonly a Syrian. The system of living in tents and on agricultural land developed gradually and the Al-Shawish practically makes money from this intermediary role, while also ensuring competitive wages so that employers make a profit margin. The patronage role played by the Al-Shawish has significant impact on the lives of refugees living and places him in a position of authority that could facilitate the exploitation of refugees living in a settlement he manages. (Al Masri 2017, 11)

## Refugee Regimes of Countries of First Asylum in Lebanon: Contradictory Bureaucracies and Policies of Governance

A review of policies managing refugees in Lebanon reveals an intricate and diverse web of bureaucracies determining the mobility and choices of asylum seekers, and the structural violence they face. Even though humanitarian policies have established networks and agencies for refugee women’s rights and protection in countries of first asylum, especially with regards to violence against women, state policies prioritize a different set of regulations and governance, which directly impact the lives and well-being of refugee women and girls, and many times end up exposing them to more violence. While these policies and the political conditions that allow for them differ between countries—and Feldman (2015) argues that policies in Lebanon are particularly restrictive—this remains informative of the contradictory policies of refugee management in which an asylum seeker finds herself.

### Limited Legal Status

The first policy deals with the limited legal status of refugees and asylum seekers. In Lebanon, a memorandum of understanding between UNHCR and the state allows the former to register asylum seekers (Janmyr 2016). However, Lebanon has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention—a UN treaty that

defines who is a refugee and what rights individuals have in nations that grant asylum—thereby offering no formal protection or acknowledgment of the legal status of refugees on its land (Aranki and Kalis 2014, Janmyr 2016). Asylum seekers in Lebanon are not protected by UNHCR and are liable to be arrested, detained, and deported. Furthermore, the new entry requirements, set in 2015—by which all refugees are required to obtain residency, visas, and Lebanese sponsorship, among other requirements—make it difficult, if not impossible, for many refugees to sustain a legal stay in Lebanon (Janmyr 2016). Palestinian refugees, especially those recently displaced from Syria, suffer the most from these restrictions (Janmyr 2016).

This institutional and legal gap creates an intricate form of governance that leads to more gendered forms of precarity and vulnerability in countries of first asylum. This limited legal status has made women refugees particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and harassment in the workplace and in public, without having the ability to report these abuses to the police. Given that they thus can only find employment in the informal sector, they become more vulnerable to exploitation, including sexual exploitation. The limited legal status has also affected children's education—it became harder to register refugee children in public schools—and ensure women's protection and livelihood in general (Al Masri 2017). Limited legal status also hinders refugees' access to aid services, limits their freedom of movement, and makes registration at the UNHCR centers more difficult (Janmyr 2016).

## Refugee Housing

A second policy concerns refugee housing. The Lebanese government has strongly resisted installing proper refugee camps for displaced Syrians, mainly because Lebanon has a complex history with Palestinian refugees and the Lebanese Civil War and fears upsetting the country's delicate sectarian balance (Janmyr 2016). Today many women refugees live in unequipped tents and temporary refugee settlements with their families and are exposed to the harsh winter weather. Unable to live in the sanctity and privacy of their own homes, women and girls are further vulnerable and threatened.

## Not All Refugees Are “Abstract” Refugees

A third contradiction in the bureaucratic management of refugees is that not all refugees are considered “abstract” refugees, or treated equally as humans-in-need who require assistance, aid, and empathy. Syrians, Palestinians, and Sudanese, for example, have also formed a big part of the worker base in Lebanon and are perceived as both asylum seekers and potential cheap labor. This creates tensions in communities hosting refugees, as many refugees work in the informal economy. For newly arrived refugee women and girls, finding paid work to sustain themselves might be harder and less safe. But many must find employment (Errighi and Griesse 2016) as “women are now increasingly participating in the economic life, in part because the spouses [mostly wives] of registered refugees were never requested to sign a pledge to not work, but also because their husbands' freedom is restricted due to fears to cross checkpoints” (Lebanon Support 2016b).

## Humanitarian Space

Finally, countries of first asylum are imagined in principal to be sites that host, protect, and, at the very least, provide a “humanitarian space” for the displaced communities (Feldman 2015). In many cases however, host countries can be directly implicated in the conflict communities are escaping from or keep

putting asylum seekers at risk of more violence. The sexual violence faced by refugee women and girls in Lebanon has been recorded and experienced in every aspect and place, including the workplace, public streets, and refugee settlements. Some Syrian and Palestinian refugees also speak of their fear of being detained by political parties and military groups allied with the Syrian regime, some of which (Hezbollah, for example) have been directly involved in the fighting in Syria. Some of the Iraqi refugees who have suffered from torture based on sectarian violence also speak of their fear of being identified and tortured based on their sect by other sectarian groups in Lebanon. This also fosters policing of the contours of communities and their interaction with others under the guise of protection and safety, particularly impacting women and girls as their mobility is curtailed and their behavior strictly monitored.

## Seeking Asylum and Refuge: Arriving in the Country of First Asylum

There is not one way that could summarize the journey taken by people seeking safety and fleeing violence, war, and regime violence in the Middle East, nor a single story that can show one's path to resettlement in asylum countries. Cattle herders in South Sudan, single young men from Deir ez Zor in Syria, Palestinian women from Yarmouk camp in Damascus, Iraqi families in Kirkuk—all tell diverse but connected stories of loss, violence, and migration.

On arriving in Lebanon, women asylum seekers might apply for refugee status or not; might live in refugee camps, settlements, or rent an apartment, or might secure an organization to provide housing for them. Some of them flee their countries to work formally or informally, then seek refugee status when the conflict in their home countries worsens. Others come to countries of first asylum to apply for refugee status and wait for resettlement. Many undergo informal forms of migration by sea, while pregnant or nursing young children, arriving to their destination if they are lucky. The roads taken by asylum seekers are diverse.

The Syrian refugee crisis seems to have particularly led to more women going through this journey alone or with their children, leaving their husbands behind, to seek refuge in countries of first asylum. In 2014, the UN estimated that around 145,000 refugee women resided in Lebanon alone. With no male heads of household or viable income, they are caught in poverty, isolation, and fear (UNHCR 2015). Moreover, research by Amnesty International (2016) revealed that “women and girl refugees are subjected to violence, assault, exploitation and sexual harassment at every stage of their journey, including European soil” (Amnesty International 2016). Many of the interviewed women and girls reported physical abuse, financial exploitation, and sexual violence from smugglers, security staff, or other refugees (Amnesty International 2016).

On arriving in a country of first asylum, a woman can apply by herself for refugee status even if she is married. She goes through various interviews that determine whether her refugee claim is truthful. She can also ask for her family members to be added to her refugee claim. During this process, she becomes eligible for healthcare, relief, and aid, including housing and monthly stipends if available. These programs and interventions are contingent on funding and are subject to cuts and suspensions. Some asylum seekers are found “untruthful” in their claims and are invited to appeal. If unsuccessful on appeal, their refugee file is closed. Others are granted refugee status and wait for resettlement. Based on one observed case while the author volunteered with asylum seekers in Lebanon, getting a refugee status does not automatically secure resettlement in a country. Some countries, such as the United States, have their own interview process, so can deny entry—based on the ineligibility of the refugee claim—to a person who has already been granted refugee status by the UNHCR and is waiting for resettlement.

Additionally, repatriation has proven to be problematic, especially with multiple reports emerging about the forced deportation of refugees in the Middle East. In the Palestinian case, refugees still await the execution of the right of return to Palestine. In other cases, forced repatriation and deportation has been facilitated by the limited legal status of refugees (Alabaster 2016, Al-Zubaidi 2016), state-enforced deportation (Staton 2016), and strategies of intimidation and bullying. Deported refugees fear torture, abuse, and detention in their home countries. In many cases, forced deportation separates families, leaving refugee women and girls further isolated and vulnerable.

Some women refugees wait years for resettlement and have to seek labor to ensure a sustainable living for themselves and their families. The result is that host countries end up receiving and managing refugees for a long time. In the case of refugees in the Middle East, the policies of the European Union and of the United States have hindered the resettlement of most refugees. They have urged countries of first asylum to tighten their border controls to prevent further mobility of refugees, while providing financial stimuli for these countries. What falls through the cracks is the inability to live one's life meaningfully or practice basic activities of living. Many newborn refugee babies are unregistered, so are not formally recognized by the host state. Refugees also lack a place to bury their dead properly. These crucial social practices affect the meaning and concept of "family" and family ties for refugees and strip refugees' lives of meaning and importance. Despite this, refugees still "craft meaningful places for them" (Petee 2009) through contesting, negotiating, and articulating their claims for rights, agency, health, and political mobilization (Petee 2009, Feldman 2015, Parkinson and Behrouzan 2015).

## While We Wait: Refugee Life in Countries of First Asylum

How is it to live in countries of first asylum, stuck between humanitarian and state forms of governance (Nayel 2014)? And how does this affect women refugees and transform family relations?

The conflicting policies of countries of first asylum and humanitarianism produce a kind of double vulnerability for refugees: first, as asylum seekers who need to prove the legitimacy and truthfulness of their refugee claims and victimhood; and second, as unlawful subjects who are prone to arrest, harassment, illegal curfews, and exploitation. Refugee women and girls stand out as the most vulnerable refugees in this equation, where exploitation includes sexual harassment, sexual violence and rape, police arrests and raids, and organ trafficking (Mis 2017). Refugee women face "an increase in GBV [Gender-Based Violence], especially intimate partner violence, early marriage, transactional sex, sexual assaults as well as lack of access to emergency obstetric care, limited access to contraception, forced cesarean sections, and the high cost of healthcare services" (Yasmine and Moughalian 2016). Within these restrictions, Aranki and Kalis (2014) argue that more men tend to stay at home, sending their wives to receive assistance and register at UNHCR, because they fear being arrested at checkpoints. Women refugees therefore gain more mobility and independence. They become, however, more vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation, violence and exploitation that women refugees rarely report to the police because of their limited legal status (Aranki and Kalis 2014). Adults also tend to send their children to work instead of themselves because children are less likely to be arrested (Aranki and Kalis 2014).

Securing basic needs (e.g. shelter, food, and education) becomes a complicated process involving many obstacles and tensions (Al Masri 2017). Housing can be secured through an NGO, through mediation from brokers (such as the *shawishs* in rural areas—who can rent directly to refugees in exchange for money or labor, and who can impose additional fees on tenants), and through various landlords (Al Masri 2017). In a

revealing case study, Al Masri (August 2016) interviewed a refugee, from a village in northern Syria. The refugee described life in the settlement in Akkar and the sexual exploitation faced by his young daughters, facilitated by the *shawish*:

*Another* problem he described was sexual harassment of the daughters, and he shared how in that settlement there were too many men “coming and going, day and night” asking his daughters to “serve them tea and coffee” and making sexual advances. When the girls were not responsive, the whole family faced further harassment, and would be targeted by stone throwers at night. Ahmad described that he had no power to ask the young men to stop visiting, and told of stories of another family who also had to leave because of the repeated harassment of their young daughter. In that settlement ... the Syrian al-Shawish who was reluctant to share much information with me had a large tent that served as a guesthouse for the many visitors. Local Lebanese contact described the cars of the many visitors parked outside and assume the al-Shawish was directly benefiting *from facilitating these visits*. (Al Masri, August 2016, 20)

The *shawish's* role in governing refugees and facilitating sexual violence is reinforced by the fact that an international humanitarian organization had appointed him as an entry point for aid distribution and organizing in the refugee camp. In this sense, humanitarian governance continues to reproduce and rely on patriarchal relations to distribute aid to women and children (Petee 2009), allowing for further sexual violence against women refugees.

Partly a result of this form of management and the sexual violence and exploitation, early marriage has become a way of securing a form of safety for refugee girls. A research study conducted by the Women's Refugee Commission in four sites, including a Syrian settlement in the Bekaa, Lebanon, identified early and child marriage as an emerging phenomenon during conflict (Schlecht 2016). Early marriage is considered a form of gender-based violence by the international community, but research shows that young Syrian refugee women, particularly from rural areas, describe an increasing need to protect their reputation and honor by marrying early (Schlecht 2016). Young Syrian women from urban areas have reportedly experienced the greatest change in marriage practices, as they were pulled out of school and universities and married off (Schlecht 2016). Fear of sexual violence, getting pregnant, parents' inability to monitor their teenage daughters after displacement, and poverty were all factors cited in the research study as reasons for early and child marriage (Schlecht 2016).

Another challenge faced by refugee families in the country of first asylum is that social traditions and expectations are transformed, including those relating to gender roles within the family unit. When refugee families are faced by violence, harassment, and exploitation and by the new conditions of being displaced, their ideas about what is meant by “the head of household” and what a family is can change drastically. The terrifying violence Iraqi refugees have experienced, their displacement and loss of belonging, the different social traditions in Lebanon, the dire economic situation, the loss of their rights and class position—all these experiences produce a special kind of distress that affects the family as a unit. Moreover, women typically seek and negotiate aid, create ties and become “aid communities” invited to training, research

studies, and interventions. They gain more power and become head of household. This change in gender roles can lead to a rise in domestic violence (and is consistent more generally with literature on the changes in gender roles in refugee families).

Finally, women refugees' experiences differ depending on where they have settled. As Al Masri has argued, all these conditions have "loosened social restrictions and possibly allowed for a greater freedom for women in big towns" (Al Masri 2016a, 13). Among smaller populations, however, women have been more restricted socially, especially when refugees from the same town or family have resided together. As Al Masri has noted, "members of the Syrian community monitored each other to ensure that a single individual's behavior does not jeopardize their relationship with the Lebanese host community" (Al Masri 2016a March, 13).

## Becoming a Refugee: Gendered Victimhood and Health Interventions

One of the crucial practices that an asylum seeker goes through to become a refugee is to prove the authenticity and truthfulness of her refugee claim. United Nations agencies and humanitarian organizations collect information about whether the person qualifies as a refugee by compiling different indicators and signs of victimhood, such as persecution based on religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, sexual violence, trauma, torture, and/or exposure to war and conflict. The indicators of victimhood are, as Ticktin has suggested (2006), gendered, meaning that the human/refugee of humanitarianism is feminized and reproduces patriarchal values. Sexual violence and rape stand out as visible and truthful forms of suffering worthy of humanitarian care, where women become "the poster child for humanitarian interventions" (Ticktin 2011, 259).

In practice, this becomes problematic when humanitarian workers are taught to scan for signs of sexual violence and rape in refugee women as "true victimhood," especially when these women are not comfortable disclosing these experiences (Moghnieh 2016). As Syrians fled to Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon in unprecedented numbers, humanitarian and media reports poured in about the sexual violence against and rape of Syrian women (Masterson 2012, FIDH 2013). By August 2012, the International Rescue Committee published the results of a rapid GBV assessment of Syrian women and girls based on a series of focus groups conducted with Syrian women and girls displaced to Lebanon. Rape and sexual violence were identified as the most extensive form of violence faced by these women during the conflict (IRC 2012). Survivors of GBV were, however, seen as reluctant to report the violence they went through "due to restrictive cultural values and stigma." They refrained from getting support because of the shame they would face by dishonoring their families (IRC 2012).

In 2012, UNHCR was only able to identify around two hundred refugees as victims of sexual and GBV. It provided them with medical, psychosocial, and material support (UNHCR 2012). Identifying women exposed to sexual violence was crucial to know whether to register them as refugees. As a result, humanitarian workers in Lebanon were asked to identify sexually abused women to provide them with proper medical and psychological interventions, even when refugee women were not comfortable sharing this information with registration officers (Moghnieh 2016). What emerges, therefore, is a tension between the humanitarian bureaucracy of victimhood, the ethical practices of care, and the freedom of disclosing information about one's self. Similarly, health and mental health interventions designed for refugees produce several forms of gendered and racialized knowledge about them in the Middle East. Two examples are relevant here: reproductive health and mental health interventions.

Yasmine and Moughalian (2016) provide a powerful and rich critique of the situation of Syrian refugee women and health in Lebanon. Drawing on the attitudes of healthcare providers, landlords, aid workers, and employers, Yasmine and Moughalian provide an ecological analysis of refugees' structural conditions and their impact on the health of Syrian women. Women refugees' health is influenced by their surroundings (husband, neighbors, extended family, friends, health practitioners, and landlords), by the conditions of the camp, by the *shawish* and elite members of the refugee community, by their employment and type of work, and by the shifts in gender roles. Furthermore, female heads of household face racism, discrimination, and violence from landlords, employers, and the police, which prevents them from seeking proper healthcare. Refugee women are also criticized by healthcare practitioners for having many children in the host community, as "women recount being rejected from hospitals while in labor, either because of lack of finances, or shortage of delivery beds or neonatal care incubators. Even in the case of hospital admission, negligence, low standards of care and blatant racism are experienced" (Yasmine and Moughalian 2016, 31). The humanitarian aid system and national social policy are another layer of systemic violence, where expensive health services, distance and transport, fear of mistreatment by aid workers or healthcare providers, security concerns, shame, [and] unavailability of a women doctor" (Yasmine and Moughalian 2016, 30) all restrict women refugees from accessing reproductive healthcare.

A second example concerns the mental health interventions designed for refugees who have experienced violence or have pre-existing psychiatric disorders. These interventions often pathologize forms of motherhood, womanhood, and masculinities that do not conform with the classed understandings of gender roles as framed in psychiatry and psychology (Moghnieh 2016). These mental health interventions, in many instances, read patriarchal violence as individual pathologies that require therapy and medicalization (Moghnieh 2016). One example for this is mental health interventions designed for Palestinian refugee children suffering from early developmental problems. They focus on educating Palestinian women refugees on how to be a better mother, without any understanding of the structural conditions behind which so many Palestinian refugee children are born with developmental problems or acquire developmental difficulties in refugee camps (Moghnieh 2016).

## Conclusion

Looking at refugee regimes from Lebanon, as Feldman has argued (2015), does not provide an exceptionalist angle on the practices of refugee management. It does, however, reveal new trends in humanitarian and state governance, many of which have emerged to respond to the violence faced by women refugees today. Examples of "prolonged humanitarianism" (Atshan 2013), where humanitarian assistance almost becomes part of everyday life, has also transformed humanitarianism from a life-saving act to one of endurance and coping with chronic structural conditions of displacement (Feldman 2015). Many of the humanitarian projects in Lebanon today are projects of endurance. These projects intersect with the country of first asylum's regulations for refugees. Together, they constitute a form of refugee management that produces and reinforces gendered understandings of refugees. This article has traced the gendered classifications embedded in refugee policies, organizations, health, aid, and bureaucracy. It has unraveled how women and girls are affected by this governance and by the challenges they face as refugees. Based on the history of Lebanon as a country of first asylum and a site of violence and humanitarian intervention, it shows how different actors, institutions, and policies affect the mobility, choices, and lives

of refugee women and girls. Following the refugee's journey of displacement, from leaving their home country to resettlement, this article has explored the gendered process of becoming a refugee and the violence female refugees are exposed to.

## Acknowledgements

This article was made possible (in part) through the support of the Arab Council of the Social Sciences (ACSS) by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the ACSS or the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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Cite this page

Lamia Moghnieh, "Migration: Refugee Regimes: Arab States/Mashreq", in: *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*, General Editor Suad Joseph. Consulted online on 02 November 2017  
First published online: 2017