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**Gender Relations among Neighbors**  
**- a Study of Humanitarian Practices Addressing Syrian Refugees in Lebanon**

By

Connie Carøe Christiansen

Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World

Lebanese-American University

Beirut, Lebanon

[connie.christiansen@lau.edu.lb](mailto:connie.christiansen@lau.edu.lb)

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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this paper is to study the perceptions of gender relations among Syrian refugees as presented by employees of selected local NGOs in Lebanon. These NGOs form part of a civil society undergoing changes since the refugee crisis of the Syrian war, and now collaborating with Syrian NGOs, and engaging Syrian refugees in humanitarian projects. Their participation in humanitarian response occurs in Lebanon in several contexts, ranging from handicraft workshops to neighborhood committees, civil society activism and business initiation. Gender relations among Syrians are presented by such NGOs as more patriarchal and harmful for women, but Syrian activists in Lebanon contest this indictment. Nevertheless, these conceptions become a pretext for the approach that refugee women are more vulnerable not only due to the war, but also due to their relations to Syrian men. The paper forms part of a study, which asks what consequences the engagement of Syrian refugees in humanitarian work may have for citizenship transformation– with particular urgency and value for women who are denied equal citizenship with men.*

## **Introduction**

Al-Akhbar English, Monday January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015:

*An assembly of organizations and activists gathered Saturday on the front steps of the National Museum in Beirut in protest of the Lebanese government's recent decision to impose visa restrictions on Syrian refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria.*

*Approximately 80 people were present, holding banners such as “We refuse any sectarian intervention by the Lebanese powers in Syria” and “Let Lebanon be a warm and safe shelter for them all, and for their dreams of a free Syria: Dignity, Justice, and Humanity.”*

*“They are attacked by people on the streets, they hit them, and insult them, they even on occasion go to the camps and destroy their tents. The government rather than protecting them has contributed to this abusive behavior,” - Lawyer Camil Dagher*

<http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/23404>

Gender inequalities have been on the agenda of humanitarian interventions for almost two decades (Hyndman 1998, Busher 2010) and it is now common knowledge that the needs of refugees are differentiated along gender lines. These inequalities are taken into consideration in contemporary humanitarian interventions, and one example of measures taken is the use of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC's) 'gender marker' tool, which assigns an alphanumeric score that

measures the impact of humanitarian projects on gender relations.<sup>1</sup> International humanitarian agencies, national, and local and diasporic NGO's, are working to alleviate the desperate situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Refugees from Syria, women and men, may be more than subjects of the humanitarian regime; however in line with children, women refugees are considered vulnerable (Turner 2004) – confirming the idiom of ‘womenandchildren’ (Enloe in Fidiyan-Qasmiyeh 2014: 4) as one category of vulnerability.<sup>2</sup> Highlighting ‘womenandchildren’ Maya Mikdashi asks if Palestinian men can be victims, and she warns:

This trope accomplishes many discursive features, two of which are most prominent: The massifying of women and children into an undistinguishable group brought together by the “sameness” of gender and sex, and the reproduction of the male Palestinian body (and the male Arab body more generally) as always already dangerous. Thus the status of male Palestinians (a designation that includes boys aged fifteen and up, and sometimes boys as young as thirteen) as “civilians” is always circumspect.

(<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18644/can-palestinian-men-be-victims-gendering-israels-w>).

In a similar vein, frequent references to Syrian refugee women as victims of sexual violence indirectly assume Syrian refugee men as perpetrators. Based on these observations, the question of whether Syrian men can be victims is a question worth asking, given that Syrian men and women refugees are almost equal in number, even though this number is obscured in references to 75% of refugees being women and children (Davis 2016: 49). Apart from survival and relief there may be other important consequences of humanitarian aid donated with strings attached rather than unconditionally (Bornstein 2012, Fox 2001); transformations in citizenship are one such consequence. Refugees do not hold full citizenship in the receiving country, whether or not they are registered or recognized as refugees by the receiving country. Without citizenship, refugees do not have full access to rights.

The purpose of this paper is to study the perceptions of gender relations among Syrian refugees as understood and conveyed by NGO employees in Lebanon, and to ask what the consequences of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/topics/gender/page/iasc-gender-marker>

these perceptions are on the citizenship of Syrian refugees. It is not the intention to question the needs of refugee women and men as distinct from each other, nor to emphasize gender-based violence (GBV) in the work of these NGOs. The fact that humanitarian aid is indispensable and insufficient does not preclude inquiry into its consequences. This paper is part of a broader project in which humanitarian aid and activism that depends on and perpetuates particular understandings of gender relations are studied to analyze how they intersect with citizenship transformation. The approach builds on research that approaches citizenship as a set of practices and as *enactments*, rather than applying the classical, normative framework, which views citizenship as conditional upon a state or other institution issuing rights and demanding obligations (Isin 2012, Clark, Dell, and Neveu 2011, 2014).

### *Vulnerability, participation, and resistance in the humanitarian response*

In a description of the needs of refugees, the most recent terminology relies on the term of *vulnerability* – vulnerable in terms of economy and food security or physical security and under-age marriages (see Government of Lebanon 2017, UNHCR 2016). Vulnerability was frequently applied to refugees in my interviews with employees of local NGOs. Syrian refugee women in Lebanon are initiating and participating in humanitarian work (Napolitano 2017), some of which is managed by local NGOs; this can include organizing life in makeshift settlements, advocacy, and other civil society activism. A survey conducted among Syrian activist refugees in Jordan found that one-third are women (Khoury 2017: 38). Such activism invariably has an impact on political subjectivity and citizenship - and may oppose or at supplement normative images of Syrian refugee women as constrained by conservative gender ideologies and subject to the humanitarian regime (Olivius 2014).

The activism of Syrian refugees does not erase the effects of humanitarian discursive practices and the *governmentality* they entail, producing certain subject positions and delimiting the way that refugees are approached in humanitarian aid and understood more broadly. Nor do they erase the way that gender relations affect the discourses of the humanitarian system and in the management of refugees. (Olivius *ibid.*, Turner 2004).

If we want to understand how discursive practices are accommodated or resisted, a discussion of agency (Khoury 2017), political subjectivity, and citizenship may offer better tools. In Lebanon, the

government does not recognize the status of refugees<sup>3</sup> and does not accept the establishment of formal refugee camps<sup>4</sup>, the majority live in residential buildings, 29% live in informal settlements of which 17% in informal camps (UNHCR 2016). Across these various locations, the humanitarian regime and relevant discourses continue to impact Syrian refugees.

In the Beqaa Valley, which borders Syria, it is estimated that almost 240,000 Syrian refugees are staying in informal settlements (Government of Lebanon & UN 2017: 136). In those settlements a *shawish* structure persists, indicating that the governance of the humanitarian system over these settlements is contested. The *shawish* is the informal representative of the camp vis-à-vis authorities, be it neighboring camps, the municipality, land owners (the municipality may also be the landowner), UNHCR, or local NGOs. The *shawish* is generally an established member within the community who already has connections to these authorities and is apt in negotiating and keeping a dialogue with them. In many instances, the Lebanese army and security forces recognize the authority of the *shawish* in an almost formal manner: they have to contact the *shawish* before they enter the camp to get his permission. However, authorities do not recognize just any representative – the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) would not respect someone who does not appear strong – emphasizing the critical importance of camp security and the role of the *shawish*. A manager replaces the *shawish* in more formal shelter settings, as is the case when an NGO is renting the land and tents are replaced with caravans. Some *shawish* are, as expressed by the UNHCR outreach volunteers interviewed for this project,<sup>5</sup> “dictators” and corrupt, empowered by the ISF in exchange for information about settlement inhabitants. Even before the war in Syria the *shawish* existed as a pioneer and gatekeeping migrant, able to receive new migrants from Syria, and to let his own connections work for the benefit of the newcomer. The *shawish* is a man, but in the informal camps a parallel female *shawish* exists, channeling women’s needs and influences. The

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<sup>3</sup> The Lebanese government closed the border to Syria in 2015, but in 2017 the government waived its LBP 300,000 annual residency fee for Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR, excluding those who had entered Lebanon after January 2015 (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/lebanon/report-lebanon/>).

<sup>4</sup> In the Lebanon Crisis Response plan the terminology for “persons who have fled and cannot return to Syria” is carefully spelled out as follows: Either they are “persons displaced from Syria” or they are “displaced Syrians” – i.e. Syrian nationals, or they are “persons registered as refugees by UNHCR” (p. 4); a terminology which mirrors that Lebanon is not a signatory of the Convention of Refugees, and does not accept the population in Lebanon from Syria as refugees (Erslev-Andersen 2016, Carpi 2015, Janmyr 2016). Here I use the term ‘refugee’ to denote all the categories spelled out in that report.

<sup>5</sup> Among these four male UNHCR outreach volunteers, the eldest of them (approximately 60 years old) was himself a *shawish*.

woman *shawish* is not the wife of the male *shawish* but a woman who is equally well-connected and respected among women in the informal settlement or camp.

Lebanon has not signed the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, and refugees in Lebanon have to obtain documents legalizing their stay in line with any other migrants. This is in contrast with practices prior to the war in Syria where there was free movement between Syria and Lebanon (Dignigi 2017, Eslev-Andersen 2016); consequently, most do not have legal residence, rendering the situation for these refugees precarious.<sup>6</sup> Lebanese political activists have protested these new regulations as well as the general animosity towards Syrian refugees in Lebanon, whereas protests from Syrian refugees themselves have been limited: From June 2014 to January 2017 only 18 incidents of protest among Syrian refugees in Lebanon were registered.<sup>7</sup> As Clarke notes, the Syrian refugees in Lebanon are generally dispersed widely, minimizing opportunities for organizing and solidarity; moreover the reported incidents were primarily staged in areas where international agencies did not (yet) have access (Clarke 2017). Nonetheless, the lack of open protest should, according to Carpi (2015), not be mistaken for consent. On the contrary, Carpi quotes a number of local Lebanese and Syrian refugees who are highly critical of the approach that international and local NGOs take towards them, among which they highlight an imposed de-politicization, which is in contrast to the politicization of the NGOs themselves (Carpi 2015: 35). In Carpi's account, the alleged neutrality of the donor community rings false in the ears of Syrian refugees. Organizations at across local and national levels approach refugees as homogenized entities according to ethnic categories, not as political subjects that have an opinion about the kind of aid given, or that require a space to discuss the latest developments of the war itself. In these circumstances, a refugee selling food vouchers from UNHCR in order to donate to the Free Syrian Army is an enactment of citizenship (Carpi 2015: 34). UNHCR outreach volunteers in the Beqaa Valley similarly attest to the fact that lack of fulfillment of the basic needs of refugees means disappointment with the humanitarian system and results in rejections to participate in activities organized by its partners or

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<sup>6</sup> In the Lebanon Crisis Response plan the terminology for “persons who have fled and cannot return to Syria” is carefully spelled out as follows: Either they are “persons displaced from Syria” or they are “displaced Syrians” – i.e. Syrian nationals, or they are “persons registered as refugees by UNHCR” (p. 4); a terminology which mirrors that Lebanon is not a signatory of the Convention of Refugees, and does not accept the population in Lebanon from Syria as refugees (Erslev-Andersen 2016, Carpi 2015, Janmyr 2016). Here I use the term ‘refugee’ to denote all the categories spelled out in that report.

<sup>7</sup> (see the news report introducing the article.

representatives. These rejections, I argue, are also subtle enactments of citizenship – to make a statement refugees use the limited forms of agency at their hand.

In contrast to civil society activism, humanitarian aid is according to international guidelines apolitical - impartial<sup>8</sup> - but since development objectives are increasingly integrated in humanitarian response, it is hardly possible to categorize humanitarian aid as outside the realm of politics (Barnett 2005). Moreover, humanitarian activism is no longer separate from civil society activism more generally. In Lebanon civil society organizations are heavily engaged in humanitarian response, and there is a good chance that NGO-ization and professionalization derails or compromises political agendas of the NGOs and of refugee activists. In other words, political movement, civil society activism, and humanitarian aid are all deeply entangled in the humanitarian sector in Lebanon, rather than constituting separate spheres of action. Is it possible for women Syrian refugees to enact citizenship – claim it and grab it in one action – in such an environment?

### **Humanitarian work and citizenship transformation**

Syrian refugees where they have settled in Syria's neighboring countries – primarily in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon – constitute a current example of refugees struggling with the range of problems that war and an uprooted life brings along which in Lebanon includes legal stay. However, an uprooted life has consequences that are specific for men and women, especially if women are heads of households. For women the precariousness is further compounded by if they experience a violent husband or other family members on which they are dependent, or they do not have access to income and housing that would enable them to manage on their own (Norwegian Research Council 2016; UNHCR, *no year*; Goleen 2015).

In contrast to general understandings, humanitarian aid brings more than just aid – humanitarian aid has 'strings attached'. In other words, conditions exist in relation to humanitarian aid relief that may be spelled out explicitly or implicitly as expectations of return or modified behavior (Bornstein 2012). It is seldom questioned that humanitarian aid might bring something other than desperately needed aid, but recent literature on the consequences of humanitarian aid regimes is pointing toward emerging dilemmas. Thus, according to Daley (2013), humanitarian action should be viewed as being, "complicit in the reconfiguration of citizenship and identity that is taking place" in the Great

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance the International NGO, Oxfam's statement about being 'impartial and independent', <https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/hpn-role-humanitarian-action-010613-en.pdf>



Lakes Region in central Africa (ibid. 908). Refugees and IDPs in this humanitarian regime regarded as “devoid of agency” and as “capable of being shifted and relocated against their will” and as perpetual aliens in their country of settlement (ibid. 894). In other words, one consequence of the approach of humanitarian interventions is that refugees and displaced persons are deprived of their political agency; other studies (Turner 2005) point at the existence of refugees in camps as ‘bare life’, destitute of any form of rights, following the conceptualization of Agamben (1998). The transformation of citizenship within the framework of camps where refugees are not only supported, but also managed by the international humanitarian regime is perpetuating the deprivation of citizenship and rights more generally for displaced populations. Instead, citizenship is increasingly reserved for those who are regarded as ‘indigenous’. A strong feature of the Lebanese approach to the large refugee population in the country is precisely indigenesness (Erslev-Andersen 2016). This indigenesness, or the emphasis on differences between Lebanese and Syrian styles and practices, is concurrent with a discursive linkage between gender transformations and refugee communities (Olivius 2014, El-Masri, Harvey and Garwood, 2013).

A consensus about the concern and priority of refugee women and their rights has been formed in the international aid community over the past couple of decades;<sup>9</sup> however the General-Secretary still finds that appeals are in order. In his report from the World Summit on Humanitarian Response in Istanbul 2016, the UN Secretary-General refers not only to women’s rights, underlining their right to protection, he also determines that women have agency and on this issue he concludes:

I call on all Member States to meet their obligation to protect and fulfill the human rights of women of all ages and call on all stakeholders to ensure that these rights are promoted at all times in the implementation of their commitments in all aspects of the Agenda for Humanity.

Women’s rights and gender equality have within recent decades made way to the top of the agenda of international development, and in humanitarian assistance, guidelines and tools are offered to ensure that gender inequalities are considered and compensated for. The Lebanese Crisis Response Plan 2017-2020<sup>10</sup> notes:

Gender analyses and separate consultations with all demographic groups will be part of the methodology used to conduct assessments, along with protection monitoring visits and structured consultations with communities. Sex and age disaggregated data

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<sup>9</sup> According to Edwards, 2010 UNHCR has since 2009 released this approach with an Age, Gender and Diversity Management – AGDM.

<sup>10</sup> Available at <http://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-crisis-response-plan-2017-2020>

will be collected for protection, child protection and SGBV prevention and response activities. Training on key protection principles, including safe identification and referral of individuals at risk, will be conducted for frontline workers of health, shelter and food security sectors (Government of Lebanon and UN 2017, p.126).

Assessments, data and monitoring should be alert to gender differences (age, gender and other dimensions that generate certain needs) – and aid workers should be trained to identify these differences. Finally, guidelines for how gender-based violence should be prevented are standard, in addition to encouraging women’s participation in the community:

The 2015 Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action will be contextualized and rolled-out in 2017 across all sectors of intervention of the Lebanon response, in order to support them in the implementation of effective risk mitigation measures in their programming. Special efforts will be made to support the active participation of women in community groups (Government of Lebanon and UN 2017, p.127).

Such measures – guidelines for gender mainstreaming, gender marking, and others – may have limitations of their own, such as the transformation of gender inequalities into technicalities rather than an issue involving power relations (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009). These ‘tools’ for gender mainstreaming within humanitarian aid are justified by the existing and worsening inequalities, violence, and suffering that many female Syrian refugees experience as a result of displacement, but should be subject to critical analysis. In project implementation, aid workers and program managers are in direct contact with beneficiaries, in this case Syrian refugees, and they are the likely transmitters of the policies formulated at higher levels in the aid chain, a transfer which involves a process of interpretation (Mosse 2005). The call itself from the Secretary-General and aid scholarship alerts us to a gap between aid policies and aid practices that aim to further gender equality (Cornwall 2007); this interpretation may however mean a careful adjustment of these policies to local contexts (Mosse 2005). The question is how aid workers apply humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees in Lebanon and other host countries, considering the emphasis in policies on the vulnerability of women and children, and considering the emphasis on indigenesness.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This inquiry is based on the assumption that in the practices and discursive strategies of the international humanitarian regime more broadly, illustrative examples of how refugees are gendered

are immanent. These gendered subjectivities impact the perception of the status and opportunities of Syrian refugees among not only the host population and the humanitarian sector itself, but within the refugee community as refugees often appropriate and re-interpret these gendered subjectivities (Turner 2004).

Syrian refugees are not passive recipients at the end of ‘the aid chain’ – they are active participants in humanitarian action and are co-organizers of life in the make-shift camps. This participation forms part of the current humanitarian policies within forced migration. Since the early 2000s UNHCR has emphasized that refugees, especially women, should be actively involved in the refugee community, and refugees are encouraged to participate in boards that represent the refugee community vis-à-vis donors (Olivius 2010). In Lebanon’s Beqaa Valley, Outreach Volunteers constitute a link between the UNHCR management and the refugee communities, giving refugees a chance to voice their concerns and needs; however, these comments and complaints very rarely influence the management of aid. Neither do the volunteers know what happens with the cases they report to UNHCR. The agency fulfills diversity requirements when its employees select these volunteers,<sup>11</sup> in accordance with the Age, Gender, Diversity Management (AGDM) guidelines. In the case of Outreach Volunteers, who are operating under a program of UNHCR but are under the supervision of local NGOs, the question is how this involvement or outreach of the humanitarian regime impinges on citizenship as a set of practices for female and male refugees. Do refugees that have been activated into boards, committees or as outreach volunteers behave and comport themselves in specific ways to become ‘worthy’ of participation? How does this inclusion into the humanitarian sector impact on political subjectivity? These are all questions that require careful attention as to how expectations of refugee women and men respectively are differentiated.

Although citizenship is nominally equal for men and women in the Lebanese and Syrian constitutions, unlike men, women cannot unequivocally pass their nationality to their children if the other parent is not a citizen. The legal possibilities for expressing political subjectivity are consequently not equal for women in either country. Gender inequality also comes forth in other legislation, primarily in the personal status and penal codes; both countries have ratified the CEDAW convention but with reservations. (Moghadam 2003, Kelly & Breslin 2010, Joseph 2000, Ghaddar 2017). In both countries, citizenship in practice signifies inequality rather than equality

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<sup>11</sup> As UNHCR’s community-based protection officer in Beqaa explained to me, they tried to secure diversity in the group of volunteers, and it was not difficult to find women who would qualify, but there was a limit to how old the volunteers selected would be.

(for a comparison with inequality in Brazilian citizenship, see Holsten 2009: 6). As women in Lebanon and in Syria are unequal to men across all areas of life, there is inherently a particular value and urgency in refugee women's civil society activism (Krause 2012), including, I argue, humanitarian activism. Consequently, I ask how gender intersects with citizenship when Syrian refugees in Lebanon engage in civil society work and/or humanitarian activities. The task for this paper is limited to asking how the implementing organizations perceive gender relations among the Syrian refugees that they engage in projects, a perception which is indicative for concrete approaches, and to indicate its significance for citizenship. It is based on explorative interviews among project managers of local NGOs. An everyday experience approach to humanitarianism (Carpi 2015) will frame the responses to this inquiry. It captures the experience of everyday interactions within the humanitarian regime.

## **Methodology**

For this study, preliminary interviews were conducted in the city of Beirut during May-July 2017 with three local NGOs – ABAAD, MOBADEROON, and Basmeh w Zeitooneh. Of these, one is Lebanese and established by Lebanese; one is Lebanese-based but established by a mixed group of Syrians, Palestinians and Lebanese; and the final one is Syrian, established in Syria but has since relocated to Lebanon due to the war. After giving a presentation on conflict and gender transformations to outreach volunteers, I conducted brief interviews with 10 UNHCR outreach volunteers in the Beqaa Valley, all of them Syrian refugees. In addition, I did an interview with a CSO manager who is engaging Syrians, as an observer of Syrian activism in Lebanon. At least two project managers and workers from each of these organizations have been interviewed, from the mentioned local NGOs a total of 8 interviews, lasting between 1-2 hours.<sup>12</sup> Interviews occurred primarily at the premises of the organizations, at a café, in my own office, and one over the phone. I gave interviewees and organizations brief introductions to the research topic, and feedback on interview transcripts was sought from each interviewee.

All three NGOs that I approached are working on projects that address the needs of Syrian refugees. They also provide what they unanimously call 'safe spaces' to refugees that differ highly in purpose, structure and origin. ABAAD is a Lebanon-based professional NGO promoting gender equality and specializes in gender training, analyses and social services. ABAAD has expanded and

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<sup>12</sup> This paper therefore constitutes only a temporary analysis

professionalized over recent years and is today the leading NGO in Lebanon with gender relations as a primary area of activity. MOBADEROON is a Syrian network to further dialogue and conflict resolution whose activities now take place in Lebanon and in Europe as a result of the Syrian conflict. The organization has a safe house also used for activities for Syrian activists and refugees. Finally, Basmeh w Zeitooneh is a smaller NGO in Lebanon, which was established by a group of five people of mixed gender and national background – Palestinian, Lebanese, Syrian in 2014. The latter is the youngest NGO, and the only organization of the three that was established specifically in order to meet the needs of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Information about the NGOs gathered during interviews has been supplemented with information from their respective websites. In order to put this particular selection of NGOs into a broader perspective, CSO platforms such as [www.lebanon-support.org](http://www.lebanon-support.org) and their website announcing events and job vacancies [www.dalaalmadani.org](http://www.dalaalmadani.org), in addition to the parallel platform for Syrian CSOs, [www.rawabet.org](http://www.rawabet.org), listing 158 CSOs<sup>13</sup>, gave insight to the diversity of local CSOs. Olivius demonstrates that the degree of cooperation with UNHCR on terms set by the agency to transform gender relations in the refugee community is determining whether refugees are positively categorized as development agents, or negatively as conservative or as ‘too political’ (Olivius 2014). It was not the approach during interviews to ask directly about how gender relations among Syrian refugees unfold in the eyes of NGO employees; rather, focus was on how the NGO is working with selected sections of the Syrian and Palestinian refugee population. Interviewees however revealed during the interviews that certain patterns have emerged during project implementation.

Below, I first discuss the consequences of the war in Syria for civil society and NGOs in Syria and in Lebanon. Subsequently I discuss gender relations among Syrian refugees as perceived by these local NGOs. Gender relations among Syrian refugees are contested within Lebanese civil society, which has an influx of Palestinian and Syrian refugees.

### **Civil society transformation as a consequence of the war in Syria**

Allegedly, the relation between Syrian refugees and the Lebanese host population is tense; in addition, Palestinian refugees already burden the Lebanese society. Only a minority are settled in camps, many are not registered, and neither can they afford the fees they need to pay in order to get

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<sup>13</sup> Accessed June 2017

or have their residence permit renewed (Erslev-Andersen 2016, UNHCR 2016). A range of INGO's is operating in Lebanon, including the ILO, CARE, the IOM, and OXFAM, alongside UN agencies, constituting a fertile ground for local NGO's to present projects, obtain funding, and collaborate.

The border between Lebanon and Syria was always porous, even before the uprising in Syria. Work migrants commuted to and from Syria, and in the Beqaa Valley trade and family networks contributed to the creation of a trans-border society (Erslev-Andersen 2016, Dionigi 2017). In Beirut, these labor migrants preferred working and living within Palestinian neighborhoods and camps, such as Shatila, due to the low housing prices. In the words of a young woman of Lebanese-Palestinian descent working in a local NGO:

In Shatila they have a saying that 'dead people have come to dead people'. In Beqaa and other places, such as Shatila there was already a relation between the two people, maybe for twenty years. Syrians – along with workers of other nationalities in low-paid jobs – also used to stay here in Naba'a when they came to Lebanon for work.<sup>14</sup>

Refugees from Syria do not constitute one coherent group. Many refugees from Syria manage without any assistance, but a proportion of Syrian refugees are in direct contact with organizations. Many Syrians access these organizations as volunteers, employees, and as beneficiaries. Refugees differ in levels of income and assets, education, religion, political views and belongings, and work experience. According to Khoury's survey from Jordan, the majority (70%) of activists among Syrian refugees is aged 18-30, and almost one-third has tertiary education (Khoury 2017: 38). Those who become involved in coordinating or distributing aid in local or diasporic organizations (Svoboda & Patalino 2015) are primarily the most resourceful, notably in terms of education;<sup>15</sup> others may confront the administrative or managerial approach of humanitarian aid organizations in other ways, for example by not joining the activities of NGOs addressing them. In the Lebanese context, where the government has consistently rejected to establish refugee camps for Syrians, this regime is however not the only site of practices to include in order to identify the political subjectivity and limitations of citizenship among refugees. Refugees from Syria, including women, initiate and participate in humanitarian work and civil society activism in Lebanon and these activities may equally define status, delimitations and opportunities (Napolitano 2017).

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<sup>14</sup> Interview by author, April 26<sup>th</sup> 2017

<sup>15</sup> This is the case for the outreach volunteers who typically have an education e.g. as school teachers

Not much information about humanitarian activism among Syrian refugee women in Lebanon (or elsewhere) is currently available; therefore, a mapping of the types of humanitarian activism in which Syrian refugees participate is useful. According to my inquiries, Syrian refugee women participate in humanitarian activism by working as volunteers in civil society organizations, as employees or volunteers in local NGOs, as initiators or participants in business-based humanitarian projects or as outreach volunteers for UNHCR, and finally they assist other refugees outside of any institutional setting.<sup>16</sup>

During the Syrian crisis, aid organizations have boomed in both Lebanon and in Syria, and have given cause to new cooperation between Syrian and Lebanese civil society. The Lebanese portal for civil society organizations ([www.daleelmadani.org](http://www.daleelmadani.org)) has been instrumental for the establishment of a parallel Syrian platform ([www.rawabet.org](http://www.rawabet.org)). Since Syrian organizations are not permitted to operate in Lebanon without formal registration, displaced Syrian NGOs collaborate with Lebanese NGOs. This kind of collaboration – for example, Lebanese NGOs transferring money to and from Syrian NGOs – is paving the ground for further collaboration. In many cases, Lebanese NGOs have welcomed Syrian volunteers in response to legal work barriers for Syrians, while others have crossed further national divisions to include other displaced populations such as the Palestinians.

In some cases, CSOs or NGOs working outside of humanitarian aid have, as a result of the conflict, turned towards humanitarian response. Both the conflicts in Syria (Svoboda & Pantuliano, 2015) and in Yemen (Christiansen 2016) have exemplified this trend. This has given women's rights organizations an opportunity to continue their work, albeit in a new context – a turn which may jeopardize, but not erase the women's rights framework within which these organizations work.

In a similar vein, humanitarian activism organized in local coordination committees in war-torn Syria are combined with different forms of political agency, or solidarity with certain groups. Some are openly supporting the Syrian opposition, which raises skepticism from international humanitarian organizations bent on maintaining their apolitical stance (Svoboda & Pantuliano 2015: 15 – see also Barnett 2005). Politicization – or political identities and activism of organizations that are humanitarian actors – is also regarded as disturbing for the distribution of humanitarian aid among Syrians in Lebanon (Mitri 2015). In another perspective, however, political activism

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<sup>16</sup> See also Mitri 2015

constitutes a resource platform for the (re)production of citizenship in a situation where political action otherwise has become impossible.

In Lebanon the influx of Syrians has also meant a blossoming of NGOs, some of which already had expertise in handling and assisting displaced populations.

Pre-war Syrian society was characterized by unequal gender relations in judicial, political, and social sectors of society (Moghadam 2013), and by a Syrian civil society under tight governmental control (Samar 2012). Although a number of CSOs were operating before the conflict, an emergency law effective since 1963 allows the government extensive control, and the major women's CSOs were cooperating with and funded by the government (Mitri, 2015). In Lebanon, however, CSOs (including women's organizations) are better able to navigate the advantages and disadvantages of 'NGO-ization', negotiate and form alliances with government bodies, and collaborate with Lebanese sectarian (Clark and Salloukh 2013, Mitri 2015a). Both of these national contexts of civil society activism impact the current room for maneuver of the many exiled or in exile-emerging Syrian CSOs in Lebanon (Napolitano 2017: 37). Thus, according to a British-Syrian CEO of a Lebanon-based NGO, there has been a certain development in the activism of Syrians in Lebanon:

Actually, the last six years are actually very interesting, because at different periods within the past six years, Syrians engaged more or less publicly in NGO activity. The first two years they would use false names and were rather nervous, partly because it wasn't clear how that would impact them and their family back home, but also because their status wasn't clear. Then with time the status became more accepted, it was clear that this was going to be more long term. But in the past two years visas lapse and you are technically illegal here, you are again not being publicly active - they are active, just not under their names, not publicly.

There is a link, this activist finds, between legal status and activism, a link which defines the extent to which Syrians feel safe to be public in their activism, not whether or not they are active. Not only Syria's refugees in Lebanon, but also Syria's NGOs are displaced, and now in different constellations co-exist with Lebanon's NGOs.

### **The approaches of local NGOs to gender relations among Syrian refugees**

Irrespective of gender, Syrian refugees in Lebanon are in a highly precarious situation due to insecure housing, lack of income, and lack of legal documents and registration. Female refugees are



subsequently singled out from men as being particularly vulnerable and in need of protection. They are placed in line with other vulnerable groups, most often children (Government of Lebanon and UN 2017). In the context of local NGOs, such approaches are supplemented by more localized perceptions of gender relations among the refugee population.

*Women are vulnerable – but so are men*

In his narration of how the organization was initiated, the CEO of one of the NGOs I approached pointed at the vulnerability of women:

We chose Shatila camp to start our first interventions. In the beginning we didn't know what to do there, but we knew that we needed to work with women, because we realized they were among the most vulnerable, they were left alone at home most of the time in dark, humid places, and they had nothing to do, so we started to the embroidery workshop, the aim was to provide them with a space for psycho-social support, for them to chat and meet while also learning something new and gain a very modest income.<sup>17</sup>

Syrian refugee women need a place to meet outside of the home to escape from isolation in their bad quality housing, they need an income and they need something to preoccupy them, and in response to these needs the NGO establishes a handicraft workshop in a safe space of a community center. The needs identified by this local NGO are, in accordance with other analyses of international NGOs and research, pointing at the particular problems that refugee women are presented with; many women who used to work in the household and for an income relied on male members of their households, have lost that income and are forced to seek opportunities for income in insecure areas of activity, putting them at risk of violence or exploitation (Norwegian Refugee Council 2016, Amnesty International 2016). Syrian refugee women and girls in their areas of settlement may resort to survival sex (Charles & Denman, 2013). The demand for a specific approach to women's needs is well-documented; especially life in makeshift camps or other illegitimate forms of housing is presenting women with a number of particular risks, including physical and sexual assaults, exacerbated by lack of access to health services and social protection (Amnesty International, 2016; Samira et al 2014; Rola and Moughalian, 2016). Moreover, women of Palestinian background who are escaping from long-term residence in Syria to Lebanon (Erslev-Andersen 2016), meet discrimination and are often denied residence (Napolitano 2017).

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<sup>17</sup> Interview by author, 12<sup>th</sup> of May, 2017

However, local NGOs do not always share to the belief that sees women as particularly vulnerable. In these instances, they tend to favor a more holistic approach in their humanitarian practices, because they find that men are just as vulnerable, or they find that children are a more immediate response group. The latter point was presented to me by a Lebanon-born Palestinian NGO project manager emphasizing that for the NGO, access to children means access to families as a whole.<sup>18</sup> A 25-year-old Syrian man active in a Syrian NGO and himself a refugee escaping from military service in Syria, relayed to me that he found the focus on refugee women exaggerated: “in Lebanon women can do everything.” However, he also pointed out that many women coming from Syria have lost their household income because they lost their husband. He then gave me two or three examples of Syrian women in Lebanon who have set up businesses and now are employing a number of other people.<sup>19</sup>

During an interview with a local activist and a program manager of a local NGO, it was made clear to me that the main problem emerging in the local committees comprising both Syrians and Lebanese was the broken families resulting from newly arisen opportunities for Lebanese men to find a Syrian refugee woman as a lover or a new wife: “A Syrian woman would die to have a Lebanese man, because he is able to take care of her”. The couple may run away together, even though both of them are married. Divorce becomes an easy solution:

One husband divorced his wife because he was suspecting that she was talking to someone on Whatsapp. So he got married to another woman, because it is easier now to get married to another woman.

She raised the view that there is a difference between Lebanese and Syrian mothers:

Lebanese mums are sacrificing more to keep the family, even if the Dad is treating her in a bad way – she is sacrificing with her life to protect her children and to keep her children with her, while the Syrian when they have the opportunity will run, and they will leave their children. The main problem is the children, because they are always forgotten, so we have here in the streets children, and no one is taking care of them.<sup>20</sup>

Not only this Lebanese volunteer woman, but local NGOs implementing humanitarian response projects more broadly approach gender relations among Syrian refugees as problematic,

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<sup>18</sup> Interview by author, April 26th 2017

<sup>19</sup> Interview by author, May 17<sup>th</sup> 2017

<sup>20</sup> Interview by author, July 12<sup>th</sup> 2017

conservative, and oppressive for women in some cases leading to violence. The way that Syrian refugees treat their children, are used to create a hierarchy between the Syrians and the Lebanese – corresponding to a study of how inhabitants of a Swedish town pointed at the treatment of children among Syrians to construct an understanding of Swedes as morally superior (McClusky 2017). Further, the program manager and the local volunteer both agreed that these conflicts were related to the perception that Syrian women do more to please their husbands, also sexually (and as evidence they pointed at the local shop which sold out of gear for Valentine’s day to Syrian women).<sup>21</sup> Both of them made the point that Lebanese men’s preference for Syrian women and vice-versa creates broken families. For the Syrian refugees, settling in Lebanon means a challenge for the family to stay together, further tensions, and instability. This is a problem existing in Beirut neighborhoods and in the areas where Syrian refugees live in informal settlements. The *shawish* settled in the Beqaa Valley, reported that Syrian women are seen as a threat to local Lebanese women, who therefore reject taking part in any activity which involves Syrian women.

Finally, a program manager of another NGO explained to me that the NGO was providing safe spaces for women and girls in areas where women are vulnerable, for example in the Beqaa Valley, and the services offered in the project are for both Lebanese and Syrians. Generally, the women are facing problems with obtaining permission to attend the safe spaces from their fathers and husbands, more so the Syrians than the Lebanese. The program manager emphasized that the project is based upon the finding that men are also victims, and that they are now being offered courses in anger management, among others (in accordance with the periodization of humanitarian gender policies, outlined by Edwards 2010). A Lebanon-based Syrian activist, herself a woman of Syrian origin and running an NGO, similarly noted that prioritizing women in humanitarian relief is a mistake. This activist considered it a move that the Lebanese government is making to please foreign donors.

### *Safe Spaces and residence*

In the eyes of governments of less developed countries, refugees are not able to make claims on par with citizens (Kibreab 2003: 63). Conditions in which there is no possibility for naturalization and citizenship tend to result in repatriation when the situation in the home country allows for it or in ‘voting by the feet’ (Ibid.). While ‘voting by the feet’ hints at citizenship rights, the ‘safe spaces’

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<sup>21</sup> Interview by author, July 12<sup>th</sup> 2017

methodology that local NGOs apply to provide safety for Syrian women and children does not, even though these spaces are directly related to the lack of legal stay. Safe spaces are equally justified by the violence committed by Syrian men who are under pressure from their own precarious existence in Lebanon, and attending the safe spaces is often opposed by male relatives.

Not only are many Syrian women without legal stay in the country, many also work without a work permit. One of two leading figures of a Syrian NGO expressed her unease about working in Lebanon:

I feel afraid to say that I am working here, it might affect me badly. It is not easy to be open to anyone – not all would support. There is a narrative that Syrians in Lebanon are competing with the Lebanese, and the reality is that most Syrians work here in Lebanon. They only allow us to do certain kinds of jobs, like construction.<sup>22</sup>

Syrian organizations are not allowed to operate in Lebanon, unless they are registered in the country and refugees are allowed to do voluntary work, but not take ordinary, paid work. Palestinian refugees and their off-spring are also restricted on the Lebanese labor market. A project manager who is of Palestinian identity lamented:

I can only work in certain branches – I cannot be a doctor, an accountant, a nurse, and if I work as a teacher I cannot be part of the teachers' council. I have to work in the private sector, even there some companies will not accept you. My brother is a nurse from AUB and he is still not working since he is lacking approval from the government.<sup>23</sup>

While a precarious status among refugees pertains to women and men alike, more may be at stake for women where conservative sociocultural gender norms often prevent women from accessing the labor market (Kelly and Breslin 2010, Moghadam 2013, Joseph 2000). Women are often allowed to only work in sectors deemed “appropriate”; this is a problem for Syrian refugees, given that the majority of sectors they are allowed to work in – such as construction – are not considered appropriate for women. Unlike shifting Lebanese governments, the Baath regime in Syria actively promoted women's participation in the labor market and in the field of education – women were also represented in the Parliament prior to the uprising, although not prominently (12% in 2013), but higher than in Lebanon where it was close to nothing (4%) and where for decades only minor improvements have occurred. In other words, formal and state-based citizenship is unequal and

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<sup>22</sup> Interview by the author on June 9<sup>th</sup> 2017

<sup>23</sup> Interview by the author, April 27<sup>th</sup> 2017

discriminating women in both countries, but in contrast to Lebanon limited progress have occurred in Syria, where state-feminism until the uprising was combined with very strict control and delimitation of civil society organizations (Sparre 2008).

The ‘safe spaces’ methodology is based on an evaluation of gender relations among Syrian couples combined with the precariousness that an unwelcoming Lebanese environment bestows on women. They are justified in the insecurity and lack of protection of female refugees, disregarding that male refugees also have a precarious existence in Lebanon. In the words of one program manager:

Both kinds of women [i.e. those who are alone with their children and those who have a husband with them] tend to stay at home where they feel they have some protection, especially during the cold weather in winter where they need to take care of children and make sure that they stay warm etc. Men can move about more freely. Therefore, we provide them with a time and space for women to work. All Palestinian women in Shatila may have sense of security, but Syrian women do not have that security, and the center provides certain services enabling them to move about.<sup>24</sup>

According to the rationale behind the safe spaces-approach, Syrian refugee women are not secure in their new environment, and they are the ones who care for the children. For these reasons, they are not able to leave their houses and are isolated more than Syrian men. Since male refugees are not provided with safe spaces, in this methodology the protection from violent male family members, tend to take precedence over the protection from an unwelcoming host community. Thus, NGO workers confirm that Syrian women sometimes are rejected permission from their male relatives or husbands to attend the activities in the safe spaces; the husband says that he would divorce if she goes to the safe space.<sup>25</sup> These rejections stand in contradiction to another observation also reported to me by NGO workers – that Syrian women have become breadwinners since they are better able to acquire a job, and less harassed by police who wants to see ID papers and permission to stay at checkpoints. Both observations, however, support the finding that conservative and unequal gender relations are presenting Syrian women with problems in the Lebanese setting – either they become isolated at home, or they are working outside of home, in which case it brings an unbalance into the family, for some husbands an encouragement to beat his wife – to be violent.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>24</sup> Interview over phone, March 27th, 2017

<sup>25</sup> Interview with the author, July 12<sup>th</sup> 2017

In Lebanon, just like in other less developed countries, the many people who have taken settlement in the country are not recognized as refugees by the Lebanese government and therefore do not acquire legal status and protection. Despite the fact that Lebanon did not experience repatriation as a consequence of their exclusion of access to citizenship for Palestinians (Erslev-Andersen 2016), the current blocking of rights and citizenship is not reconsidered (Janmyr 2016). Pushing for voluntary repatriation by blocking access to rights is not effective in situations of protracted crises or war. Although some have returned after the safe zones in Syria were established in late 2017, the majority remain, despite the lack of rights. Still the question is if possession of rights is a precondition for claiming rights, and access to citizenship is the only way to ‘stand up like men’ and to be ‘properly proud’, to have minimal self-respect and human dignity (Feinberg in Kibreab, 2003: 63).

Gender relations are instrumental – specific representations of gender relations can be put to effect for politicized purposes (Abu-Lughod 2002, Abirafeh 2009, Christiansen 2012). In this paper I have approached humanitarian response and civil society activism which have fused and professionalized local NGOs operating within a broader humanitarian regime and which approaches women refugees primarily as vulnerable and as victims. It is a work-in-progress, and this paper presents only preliminary findings. Olivius (2014) is pointing at transformations of gender relations as an imperative within the humanitarian regime, and local NGOs operating within the humanitarian sector and providing relief and services to refugees in Lebanon, perceive gender relations among Syrian refugees in particular ways.

Two policy strategies of the humanitarian regime at work in current humanitarian response in this country are relevant here: first, the emphasis on women as vulnerable and the encouraging of women’s participation in humanitarian work and second, the explicit strategy of project implementation to support not only the refugees but also the host population.

In the interpretation of these guidelines in localized humanitarian practices in Lebanon, both of these strategies perpetuate an on-going compartmentalizing of ‘beneficiaries’ into nationality frameworks. They spur a comparison between on the one hand Syrian and on the other hand Lebanese practices; gendered practices emerge as an opportune area of comparison. These findings are akin to findings from a Swedish village hosting a group of 120 refugees from Syria, indicating that such comparisons are not limited to populations from less developed countries. In the Swedish context volunteers and villagers alike used designations of Syrians as ‘less gender equal’ to create a

hierarchy of decency and reconfigure the benevolence of governmental discourses, and in that process constructing the Syrian refugee man as a threat to the villagers (McClusky 2017).

Local NGOs in Lebanon that are implementing humanitarian response projects approach gender relations among Syrian refugees as problematic in comparison with gender relations among the Lebanese host population they are conservative and oppressive for women, in some cases leading to violence and usurpation. Such hierarchical presentations of gender relations among Syrian refugees, themselves a violent construction, is given another framing in the formulations of male outreach volunteers, who are themselves refugees from Syria; they pointed at Syrian women as having ‘less needs’, and therefore these women constitute an affordable possibility for Lebanese men to take a second wife – emphasizing economic differences. Syria’s refugees in Lebanon and Syria’s NGOs are displaced, and now co-exist in different constellations with Lebanon’s NGOs, allowing for another counter-narrative, which emphasizes that refugee men and women are equally vulnerable.

Syria and Lebanon are neighboring countries, and their closeness is often emphasized. Initial findings of this research show that since the recent six-seven years of influx of Syrian refugees to Lebanon, the neighboring populations co-exist in Lebanon, and within this context the illegal or semi-legal residence of Syrians emphasizes a hierarchy between Lebanese and Syrian. Among local NGOs the perception of gender relations among Syrians as more patriarchal and harmful toward women becomes a pre-text for the approach that refugee women are vulnerable, not only because of their semi-legal or illegal residence in Lebanon, but also due to their relations to Syrian men. Ironically, at the level of law and formal rights, this relationship is reversed, with Lebanon as the more conservative, allotting less influence and rights to women. The *shawish* interviewed implied that “many Lebanese women are afraid of Syrian women” and that “Syrian women are suffering because of this hostility”. The mutual perceptions of gender relations in host and refugee communities, including the perception that Syrian women do not make many demands compared with Lebanese women therefore constitutes an issue contributing to the tensions between host and refugee communities often ignored.

The participation of refugees in humanitarian response occurs in several contexts and institutional settings, ranging from project-organized handicraft workshops to neighborhood committees, civil society activism and business initiation. As already indicated, these activities, especially those directly framed by humanitarian programming, will not erase the ‘casting’ of refugees resulting from the governance of the humanitarian regime, nor the way that gender relations are put to effect

in them (Olivius *ibid.*, Turner 2000). As I have suggested, this does not mean that an investigation of how these discursive practices are accommodated or resisted, and how gender relations feature or are represented in them superfluous, quite on the contrary.



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