

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

GENDER CONCEPTIONS, WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT,
AND HUMANITARIAN TESTIMONIES: AN ETHNOGRAPHY
OF A WOMEN'S SAFE SPACE IN DAMASCUS, SYRIA.

by
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: Gender Conceptions, Women's Empowerment, and Humanitarian Testimonies: An Ethnography of a Women's Safe Space in Damascus, Syria.

In this thesis, I explore the role of Women's Safe Spaces (WSSs) in shaping women's conception of gender and personhood. I look at the gender conceptions that WSSs articulate through their services and trainings, and through how they represent these gender conceptions to their participants. I show how Women's Safe Spaces are actively helping to redefine women's conception of gender, how women strategize to share personal experiences, and how they understand themselves and their social worlds. I explore how Women's Safe Spaces articulate gender conceptions that reflect both public discourses in Syria, and neoliberal approaches to women's empowerment, and the way these spaces contribute to the de-politicization of the Syrian war. This thesis combines the collection of oral histories with participant observation in a Women's Safe Space located in Damascus. It will focus on the services and the trainings provided in this Women's Safe Space as part of larger humanitarian intervention programs that target women in Syria. This study of a Women's Safe Space will propose how women's identities and conceptions of gender are changing along with the social meanings that humanitarian institutions attach to gendered interventions.

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INTRODUCTION

A. Entering the Field

From 2014 to 2019, I have been conducting fieldwork in different Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon. Throughout this time, I have been examining various issues, including humanitarian representation of refugees, and the use of art to help refugee children heal from psychosocial trauma. Inspired by the work of Didier Fassin (2007), I explored how humanitarian interventions often represent refugees as victims, confining them to their physical needs, while simultaneously dismissing their political agency. Due to the competitive environment among humanitarian groups, organizations, and foundations, satisfying the donor's needs has become the ultimate priority, which often results in sacrificing or overlooking the needs of refugees. Fassin's work made me aware of many ethical, political, and social issues involved in humanitarian interventions that I even found myself guilty of, such as portraying refugees as helpless victims in need of saving. In my first year of my undergraduate studies, my advisor encouraged me to focus on extracurricular activities as a way to develop my skills and boost my CV. He introduced to me the Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service (CCCS) at the American University of Beirut. During my time as an undergraduate student, I volunteered and worked with more than eight different programs for Syrian refugees run by different organizations through the CCCS. These refugee camps became the spaces that I frequently utilized for my extra-curricular projects and fieldwork, including interviews I conducted for class assignments. However, when I read Fassin's argument about humanitarian intervention as a form of "politics of life"

(2007, 500-501), it was a turning point for my approach to, and involvement in, humanitarian work. In this article, *Humanitarianism as politics of life*, Fassin speaks about the inequality associated with the meanings and representations of the lives of those who are involved across the spectrum of the humanitarian field. While Fassin's argument was regarding humanitarian interventions, his arguments resonated to me with regards to issues and disconnects I have encountered between academic studies, and human rights and humanitarian studies, and realities. As a result, I found myself at various occasions uncomfortable about conducting research in refugee camps, as I was concerned that I may contribute to the inequalities and exploitations of refugees for academic triumph.

One day, when I was visiting my family in Damascus, I shared with them my interest in choosing a topic related to Syrian refugees for my thesis. I explained that I felt an obligation to use my familiarity and experience in working with refugees to write a thesis that would contribute to a better understating of their experiences as subjects of humanitarian intervention. When I was discussing my thesis topic, my mother, a humanitarian employee, suggested that I do my fieldwork closer to home. I had never considered working or doing research in Syria, as I considered it a politically dangerous place to conduct research. But my mother informed me about Women's Safe Spaces (WSSs), and the great work they are doing to help women, especially those who have been affected by the Syrian War. I was curious about these spaces, the organization that runs them, and the women who attend them, and I was interested to learn the ways in which these spaces combined my interests in women's rights, gender issues, and humanitarian interventions. As a Syrian woman, I wanted to write about the experiences of women in the context of the ongoing Syrian War. Academics, researchers,

humanitarians, and NGO representatives often come from western backgrounds to speak on behalf of Syrian women in international conferences, UN assemblies, policy conventions, and the media. In these accounts, Syrian women are often the interviewees, the victims, the applicants, the beneficiaries, and the cases – rarely the spokespeople, the officials, the researchers, or the NGO representatives who produce these accounts. I therefore saw this thesis as an opportunity to write about my firsthand experiences in a WSS as a Syrian woman, and to share my analysis about these spaces, and my understanding of women’s experiences within them. This thesis is not a representation of Syrian women’s experiences in WSSs, but, instead, represents my own understanding and reflection on women’s experiences in a WSS as a Syrian woman and ethnographer.

I contacted the Syrian Family Planning Association (SFPA) – the managing organization of WSSs in Syria – about my interest in conducting fieldwork and research on WSSs, and had to speak with several people before I was able to talk to the person responsible for these spaces. I explained to her the interest and aims of my project, and that I will use the information from my research and fieldwork as the basis for my thesis. She was pleasant and welcoming, and explained that they have three WSS locations in Damascus. She further explained that she needed to check with the space supervisors and her colleagues at SFPA before she could give me permission to conduct my research. When she inquired about which WSS I wanted to conduct my fieldwork at, I explained that, while I was willing to work at any location, that my preference was for the Halbouni WSS, as it was the closest to where I lived in Damascus, and was the first WSS established by the Syrian Family Planning and Association and the United Nations Population Fund. When I followed up with her one month later, she informed

me that would be able to conduct fieldwork at Halbouni. She sent me the number of Lamis, the supervisor at this location, and told me to contact her.

Lamis became my main interlocutor throughout my fieldwork at the Halbouni WSS, and we spoke several times on *WhatsApp* before I visited her at this location. During my first visit, Lamis gave me a tour of the space, and told me about the different services and trainings that they provide. I explained the aim of my project, and told her which trainings I want to attend. Even after I finished my fieldwork at the Halbouni WSS, I stayed in contact with Lamis, reached out to her whenever I had questions, and she often sent me updates and news that she thought may be relevant for my thesis. Throughout my time at the Halbouni WSS, Lamis taught me a lot about the work and policies of WSSs in Syria. As a social support specialist who holds a Master's degree in sociology, she was very supportive of my project. She spent hours telling me about her time at the Halbouni WSS, the challenges she faces, and sharing stories about the women she encountered there. She also shared stories that she referred to as "success stories", which are stories that discuss the achievements of the WSSs in Syria, and the progress participants achieve at these spaces. At one point, she offered to help me in handing questionnaires for my thesis, as she suggested that it is a faster and more efficient way than attending classes. I chose to attend the crochet and sports classes, however, as it offered me the opportunity to talk to the women, get to know them, learn about their interests, engage with them in conversations, and get a sense of what learning in this WSS feels like. My goal was to examine the lives, experiences, and perspectives of women who attend WSSs.

On July 13th 2019, I had my first class in a Women's Safe Space in Halbouni, which is a 20-minute drive from my house in Damascus. It is located down a side road

in a quiet residential area off of a crowded area crammed with bookstores, printing houses, and stationery shops. As I walked to the space, no one paid much attention to me, as the area was full of students, women, and young people. The sign and logo of the SFPA, the organization that manages the locations, along with information posted that included the services and opening hours of the space, were the only signifiers used to show the existence of the space. The waiting room was almost empty, with one woman waiting and a couple of children running around the room. It was a late afternoon on a Saturday and most of the services that space offered were closed. I informed the receptionist that I was there to meet Lamis, who was going to introduce me to the instructor and participants in the crochet class that I wanted to attend for my fieldwork. For the next two months, I struggled in the crochet class. I would often hold the hook in the wrong way, mess up a stitch, or slip the hook in the wrong chain. I used to visit my aunt before each class and ask her to fix the chains and stitches that I did in class. The instructor and the other participants always cheered me when I messed up. In my first crochet class, the instructor came and whispered in my ear “do not worry you will eventually learn, you just have to practice”, and other participants also told me that they struggled like me when they first started to learn crochet as well. In the beginning, I found it hard to focus on crocheting, observing the class, and on engaging in conversation with the participants. The participants and the instructor talked about their everyday lives, the latest news, told jokes, and complained about men. They also discussed the benefits of learning crochet on mental health. These discussions were critical in my analysis of the trainings of the WSS as part of larger gender development programs and gendered humanitarian interventions that international organizations, such as the UN, implement in Syria through local non-profit organizations. They helped me

to explore how the knowledge women receive in this WSS shapes the way they negotiate themselves within their social worlds. It also helped me examine how women come to learn about gender, women's empowerment, their roles as good mothers and citizens, and how they identify themselves in terms of the cultural messages associated with these projects. Gender humanitarian interventions in Syria usually aim to "empower" women through providing services – mostly reproductive and health services, psycho-social support, recreational activities, skills training, and educational classes – that can help women generate income. Some of these humanitarian programs also have awareness sessions that inform women about their legal rights, and teach them how to seek help, and where they can find it. Some of them also organize sessions about raising children, family planning, and maintaining healthy social relations.

By using the WSS in Hallbouni as a case study, my goal in this thesis is to produce an ethnography of the role WSSs play in shaping women's conception of gender and personhood in Syria. Doing research in a humanitarian space such as women's safe spaces presents critical questions: how are gendered subjects produced? How do institutions contribute to the production of gendered subjects? How do humanitarian spaces produce new forms of meeting spaces and sociality, and deploy new kinds of ideas about gender and self? And, how are the categories of "gender" and "empowerment" changing the understanding women and humanitarian agents have regarding the meaning of what is to be a woman? While the initial intention of my fieldwork was to focus on understanding how gender-based violence (GBV) shapes women's lives, there was a far more prominent focus on love, family, marriage, and social relations among the women that I worked with that made it clear these areas were more prominent areas in their lives. The informal conversations, how the women

presented themselves to me, and the life history interviews expanded my conception of what really matters to these women, and about how their lives have been shaped in the Syrian War. Instead of fully focusing on the theory and literature about violence against women and gender-based violence, I started to explore work on women's empowerment discourses, subject reformation, and humanitarian testimonies, to better understand how the WSS shape the social worlds of the women I worked with.

Two aspects of my fieldwork are striking to me as I think about the process: first, how I dealt with conducting research in my own country as a Syrian woman; and, second, the realities of conducting research in a country that has experienced war in the last eight years, and the overwhelming atmosphere of terror, fear, and mistrust that has increased as a result.

I was very excited about doing my fieldwork in a WSS. As a Syrian woman, I hoped that my familiarity with the language, tradition, education system, and the social and religious rituals would help the women in these spaces to accept me. At the same time, I was conscious about my education that has shaped my social knowledge and skills. However, doing research in my own country presented many challenges as well. Because of my intimate knowledge and experience as a Syrian woman, I had concerns over the terms I used, voicing my own opinions, and sharing my personal information and experiences. I realized that deciding between using war, revolution, unrest, or conflict was an important distinction that defined the extent to which the women would trust me, and thus how much and what kind of information they would be willing to share, and how they would tell their stories.¹ I shifted between using the different terms,

¹ Different terms were used by different parties to describe the events in Syria since 2011. For instance, the Syrian regime and its supporters use "crisis", whereas the Syrian opposition use "revolution". However, it must be noted that the use of "crisis", or "revolution" do not always reflect the political

sometimes consciously and other times unconsciously. In many instances, I was also uncertain about the extent to which I should share my opinion, especially about topics related to women's issues. When the women were having a heated debate about women's capacity to study some scientific subjects, for example, I hesitated to share my opinion on the matter, as I did not want to influence their opinion. I was also uncertain about the amount of personal information I wanted to share with the women. Since I was from Syria, personal information, such as my family name, could offer them insight regarding my social background. I was afraid that they would judge me based on general information before they had the chance to know me. The women who I worked with were often curious about my life. They wanted to know about my family, where I lived, the district my family is originally from, why I am still unmarried, and how I find living abroad alone.

Another concern I had was conducting fieldwork in a war-torn country, with a legacy of oppression, war crimes, and fear. I was aware that many women, despite what I thought of as a Syrian woman, may fear sharing information that they think could get them into trouble with the Syrian regime. In Syria, it is common to hear about someone who has been interrogated by the intelligence service (the *Mukhabarat*), because of a false report accusing them of terrorism or anti-government plotting. I often heard stories about neighbors, business partners, and family members that reported each other to the intelligence service because of personal disputes. This has led to a justified atmosphere of fear and mistrust, and so it was not surprising that some of the women I worked with approached me with much caution. What was surprising, however, was that their doubts were related to my research methods. Many women found it strange that I was regularly

affiliation of people. Some people may use the term "crisis" in areas controlled by the Syrian regime in fear of prosecution.

attending their classes, rather than handing them questionnaires or interviewing them. Many of the women who have been part of the WSS for a while were used to doing interviews and filling questionnaires. I explained to them how a participant observation approach can help me in my research. On different occasions, the women would approach me to ask when I would interview them or give them questionnaires. As one woman later shared with me, some thought I was using my research as an excuse to attend classes, as a few had a long waiting list. These doubts were at the heart of my research focus – to understand how people’s identities are changing along with the social meanings that humanitarian institutions attach to gendered interventions. They were also my starting point to explore the way women understand the trainings they attend, and how they learn to share narratives about gender and self.

B. Methodology

In this thesis, I explore the gender conceptions, public discourses, and women’s empowerment approaches that the WSS in Halbouni articulates through their services and trainings. I attempt to understand how these WSS employees represent WSS participants, and how these representations shape the participants’ social worlds. I look at how the WSS shapes women’s social worlds and sense of gendered self, and explore what ideas about gender are deployed and how the WSS articulates these ideas through services and trainings. I also aim to understand how this WSS changes the way women perceive, feel, and think about their own gendered subjectivity and their social worlds, and explore the way the WSS produces new experiences and ideas of gender. I examine the lives, experiences, and perspectives of women who come to the WSS. My aim is to provide a sense of what engaging in a WSS looks like and means in the context of the

ongoing Syrian war. The main question that guides my research is how Women's Safe Spaces (WSSs) shape women's conception of gender and personhood.

I conducted fieldwork for three months in the Women's Safe Space in Halbouni, Damascus in the summer and fall of 2019, particularly in July, August, and September. During my fieldwork, I did participant observation and conducted life history interviews.

For my participant observation, I regularly attended two classes over the course of two months. The main class that I regularly attended was a crochet class for beginners, though most of the women in that class had some knowledge of how to crochet. I chose this class because the women have the chance to talk to each other while they are crocheting, which gave me material and information that I could take notes on, including themes and issues that come up during different conversations, and allowed me to engage in conversations and interview them informally. The second class I participated in was a sports class. While these classes did not allow me to engage in as much conversation, they helped give me insight to better understand how women's bodies are being shaped at the WSS. In addition to the crochet and sports classes, I attended at least one session of other trainings and classes that WSS offered such as the English class, International Computer Driving License training (ICDL), and the self-defense class, to get a sense of what it is like to participate in these classes, and what the women's relationships were like within them. I also spent time at the WSS outside of the classes, where I talked to the WSS employees, attended employee meetings, and engaged in conversation with women that I encountered in the WSS.

I also conducted life history interviews with 14 women aged between 18 and 60 years of age. I conducted two separate interviews with each woman, and each interview

took approximately one hour. I attempted to select women from different ages, socioeconomic classes, and neighborhoods. I tried to mostly select women from the classes I attended because I had developed a rapport with them, and had learned basic information about their socioeconomic background from earlier conversations. In the first interview, I focused on their life histories. I asked them about major personal events as well as public events in their lives, their displacement or movement history, about important people, the social relations in their lives, and their future plans. The purpose of these life histories and information was to understand their experiences as Syrian women, and to contextualize their experiences within their wider social, economic, and political contexts. It allowed me to understand their socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, and what roles the WSS played in their lives. The second interview was more guided, where I asked more specific questions about the WSS, gender, and what they learned in and from the classes. I asked them questions along the following lines: how did you learn about the Women's Safe Space? When and why did you decide to come to this WSS? How would you define gender? And, what are some of the challenges you face both, in your daily lives, and in the WSS? The aim of these questions was to understand their narratives of their life history, and how the WSS intervened in their narratives. To protect my research participants, pseudonyms are used in this thesis.

C. Theoretical Framework

I based my research on the fieldwork and participant observations I conducted in the WSS at Halbouni, and on the in-depth interviews and life histories of WSS participants and employees. I also use theoretical analysis based on various bodies of

literature (women and subject-making, gendered NGOs practices, honor-and-shame systems, and women's issues in Syria). My theoretical analysis is also inspired by the work of various scholars who have written about women and gender in the Middle East, by humanitarian practices, and by modern disciplinary techniques. I hope that this study of a Women's Safe Space will contribute to cultural anthropology by documenting the production of theories about gender and self, by tracing the changes in the nature of social objects to propose how people's identities are changing along with the social meanings that humanitarian institutions attach to gendered interventions. I also build on, and hope to contribute to, the body of anthropological scholarly work about women and gender issues in the Middle East.

My work in this thesis has been greatly influenced by the work, theories, and approaches of Leila Abu-Lughod. From her early work in *Veiled Sentiments*, she presents, through ethnographic work, the rich, diverse, and complicated cultural life of women in a Bedouin Arab Muslim community. She shows how women express their feeling about men, and how they open up about social and family relations, through reciting poems in intimate settings. She presents how social contexts affect how women are able to express sentiments that are otherwise restricted by codes of honor. Her approach helped me to think about the importance of contextualizing local forms of expressions to unpack the complicated cultural life of the women I worked with. In her second work, *Writing Women's Worlds*, she presents women's desires, aspirations, and disappointments in a way that challenges many stereotypes about Arab and Muslim women, and offers the public unusual insights about the experiences of women they often claim they know so much about. Abu-Lughod (2013) writes, "I called what I was doing "writing against culture." I was convinced that generalizing about cultures

prevents us from appreciating or even accounting for people's experiences and the contingencies with which we all live" (6). In my work, I attempt to move beyond an approach that represents the culture of Syrian women as a homogenized cultural group that are solely responsible for the production of their own subjectivity. I aim to address the experiences and suffering of the women I encountered through their political, economic and social context, rather than solely focusing my analysis on culture.

Furthermore, Abu-Lughod's work in *The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women* has shaped my understanding of cultural forms and power. She also builds on Foucault's work about the work of power in *The History of Sexuality*, in which she explains:

I also want to show that these same contradictory details enable us to trace how power relations are historically transformed—especially with the introduction of forms and techniques of power characteristic of modern states and capitalist economies. Most important, studying the various forms of resistance will allow us to get at the ways in which intersecting and often conflicting structures of power work together these days in communities that are gradually becoming more tied to multiple and often nonlocal systems. These are central issues for theories of power which anthropologists are in a unique position to consider. forms of resistance/forms of power (1990, 42).

I borrow from her the concept of "power relations", which she adapted from Foucault, to analyze the social, political, and economic relations that the women I worked with were caught in, and how these relations interweave to shape the women's lives.

Through the lens of the WSS, I aim to account for the diversity of women experiences and relations to dominant structures of power. These power relations are a set of social, political and economic relations that limit and extend the possibilities of women's experience. I also build on Michel Foucault's insights about the work of modern disciplinary techniques in *Discipline and Punish*. I employ his term "docile bodies" to explore how women's bodies are subjected to subtle remodeling and control in the WSS

I attended. Foucault's arguments about the disciplinary techniques of institutions also inspired me to look at the WSSs as "reformatory" spaces. I look at how the Halbouni WSS uses systems of techniques, which Foucault calls "discipline", to transform women into reformed subjects.

I also found Abu-Lughod's insights in her article, *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others* (2002), and her subsequent book *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving* (2013), useful to explore participants' understanding of freedom, and how they perceive liberal women's empowerment discourses. In these texts, she calls for a need to appreciate and accept differences among different groups of women around the world. She demonstrates how these differences are a product of different histories and different structured desires. In the first chapter of *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving*, she writes "[b]orn into families, we all find ourselves in particular social worlds. We are placed in certain social classes and communities in specific countries at distinct historical moments. Our desires are forged in these conditions and our choices limited by them" (2013, 18). Her argument helped me expand how I conceive and understand women's choices and desires, without falling into the trap of cultural relativism. I attempt to look at how the current historical moment is shaping Syrian women's desires and choices. I explore women's choices and desires "as products of different histories, as expressions of different circumstances, and as manifestations of differently structured desires" (Abu-Lughod 2002, 787).

Another anthropologist who has informed my analysis about women's desires is Saba Mahmood. Her feminist critique that "...speak back to normative liberal assumptions about freedom and agency" (Mahmood 2001, 203), has greatly informed

my analysis about women empowerment discourses employed by the WSS, and understanding the WSS has regarding women's desires and conceptions of freedom. Mahmood's ethnographic work about women's participation in the mosque movement in Egypt has challenged many assumptions about women's agency and desires that are at the heart of liberal feminism. She has shown how models that are based on liberal thoughts are not always sufficient to understand the lives of women whose desires has been shaped by non-liberal discourses.

The work of Jane F. Collier (1986) has shaped how I engage with gender as an analytical tool. I borrow "gender conceptions" from her to explore the gender ideologies that WSSs articulate through their different services and trainings. Collier (1986) writes, "[t]o understand conceptions of gender, we cannot look at what men and women are or do, but rather must ask what people want and fear, what privileges they seek to claim, rationalize, and defend. To understand gender, we must understand social inequality" (101). The author tries to understand gender not by asking how men and women behave – assuming there is a meaningful difference – but rather by asking how people use gender ideologies creatively, strategically, or sometimes self-destructively. I adapt Collier's approach to interpret cultural gender conceptions as aspects through which people can produce, manipulate, and resist social inequality.

I draw on the insights of Didier Fassin for my analysis about how WSSs represent and understand the lives of the WSS participants. I build on his work in *The Humanitarian Politics of Testimony: Subjectification through Trauma in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict* to explore how the success stories shared by the Halbouni WSS as forms of humanitarian testimonies shape the subjectivities of participants and their representations in the public arena. I also consider the political implication of how the

WSS represent women in their success stories, because, as Fassin (2008) demonstrates, “[i]mages have concrete and effective implications—to this extend, subjectification is political. However, we need also to consider the restriction imposed by a testimony that reduces violence to trauma and the subject to victim” (552). His critique of humanitarian practices and logic has informed my analysis of how the practices of the WSSs shape the identities of participants, and contribute to the de-politicization of the Syrian war. Likewise, the analytical approach of Sarah Hansen (2013) in *Constructing Identities in UN Refugee Camps: The Politics of Language, Culture and Humanitarian Assistance* has inspired me to think about the implication of representing women as traumatized victims and the material power of this representation. In chapter two, I critically reflect on the material power of the WSS representations of women, the discourses these representations are associated with, and the implication of these representations.

In the next section, I present the Women’s Safe Spaces in Syria, the organization that manages them, their main donors, and their services and classes.

D. Women Safe Space

Women’s Safe Spaces are places for women that offer recreational activities, psychosocial support services, awareness-raising sessions, formal vocational trainings, life skills training, and livelihood activities, that can help women generate income. These spaces also have GBV referral services, in which GBV survivors are referred to a case employee who assigns them to different classes and services, or to a health provider. Most WSSs have associated women’s health clinics that offer free reproductive health services for women, as well as children health services. The referral services also include referrals to external legal associations, or, in rare cases, to the

police. These spaces are not women's shelters, as they do not provide immediate security for survivors escaping abuse, but rather, they provide services that support women long-term socially, psychologically, and economically, and referrals to external women's shelters. They offer a space for women to socialize and interact together, that they particularly enhance in areas where women have restricted movement. I conducted my fieldwork in the Halbouni Women's Safe space in central Damascus. This space offered the following trainings and classes: sports classes, self-defense, English, International Computer Driving License (ICDL), needlework and embroidery, and adult literacy. These trainings and classes last on average from one month to three months, and are usually held three times per week, for about one to two hours. Each training serves about 10-25 women, and most of the women I encountered in the Halbouni space were lower-middle class women.

The organization that manages WSSs in Syria is the Syrian Family Planning Association (SFPA), known in Arabic as *jameiat tanzim al'usrat alsuwria*. It was established in 1974, and is part of The International Planned Parenthood Federation, a global non-governmental organization that works on promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights. SFPA is responsible for delivering services and prompting awareness related to family planning, sexual and reproductive health, and GBV in Syria. It has eighteen static safe spaces around Syria: three in Damascus, six in rural Damascus, two in Homs, and one in each of Aleppo, Deir ez-Zur, Lattakia, As Suwayda, Tartus, Hama, and Daraa. All of the spaces are based in areas controlled by the Syrian regime. The first WSS, which is located in Halbouni, was established at the end of 2015. Each static space has one or two mobile teams that are responsible to conduct social awareness sessions, as well as introductory sessions about the services that each WSS offers.

SFPA runs its services in partnership with the Syrian Ministry of Health and other related government agencies, and local and international non-government organizations. On their website, the SFPA argues that communities in Syria historically had limited awareness of family planning and the economic and health benefits associated with it, and states that, through their services, advocacy, and awareness work, that they have become the leading agency in Syria regarding issues related women's reproductive health.²

The SFPA is the primary partner of United Nations Population Fund (UNPFA) in Syria, which is the United Nations agency responsible for sexual and reproductive health. The UNPFA is the main donor of WSSs in Syria, and is the agency responsible for setting the criteria for the creation and management of WSSs. UNFPA states that WSSs were created in Syria for the protection and empowerment of women affected by what they refer to as the "Syrian crisis" (UNFPA Regional Syria Response Hub 2015, 4). In a guidance note based on lessons learned from the Syrian crisis (2015) published on their website, they include the main principles that guide the establishment and the management of WSSs in "humanitarian and post-crisis contexts", as well as the services WSSs should provide, such as medical services for women and children, individual psychosocial sessions, and recreational and skill-based training workshops (UNFPA Regional Syria Response Hub 2015, 16-18). In this guideline, UNFPA defines a Women's Safe Space as "formal or informal place where women feel physically and emotionally safe. It is a space where women, being the intended beneficiaries, feel comfortable and enjoy the freedom to express themselves without the fear of judgment or harm" (UNFPA Regional Syria Response Hub 2015, 5). With the Syrian war,

² SFPA's "About Us" homepage: <https://www.ippf.org/about-us/member-associations/syria>

women's mobility has become more restricted, and, as a consequence, many women become more isolated. WSSs are therefore important because not only do they provide women a space through which they can access many services and trainings, but they offer those who attend the opportunity to engage with other women, they help women establish social networks, and they facilitate the exchange of experiences and information.

Most Women's Safe Spaces identify women's empowerment as their ultimate goal. Contemporary WSS practices include developing safety plans for women once they leave the safe space, ensuring women that they are not alone, and that patriarchy and male partners are the ones who are responsible for gender inequality (Davies & Krane, 2003). However, some of these practices and assumptions about women's experiences may not conform with the feelings and aspirations of women who attend the WSS. Therefore, I attempted to explore women's experiences at the WSS in the context of the ongoing Syrian war. I hope that this can help humanitarian programs that target women in Syria better understand the experience of women that they aim to "help" and "empower". This required a reflective framework that focuses on diversity rather than on a coherent homogenous narrative

E. Thesis Structure

In this thesis, I explore how the Women's Safe Space in Halbouni actively help to redefine women's conception of gender and self. In chapter one, I look at the gender conceptions, women's empowerment discourses, the disciplinary techniques that this location deploys through their services and trainings, and explore how these conceptions and discourses shape participants' perception of gender. I also investigate

how these conceptions and discourses align with neoliberal thoughts about women's desires and public discourse regarding women in Syria.

In chapter two, I focus on the WSS success story models. I present four stories that show how the practices of the space impact the ability to understand and represent the lives of the WSS participants. I show how the use of the language of psychology reduce the identities of WSS participants to victims, and argue that this representation has material power, in which the representation employed by this WSS not only shapes the participants' conception of themselves, but also contributes to the de-politicization of the war in Syria.

CHAPTER I

GENDER CONCEPTIONS AT WOMEN SAFE SPACES

In chapter one, I explore the fragility and contradictions of the gender conceptions that the Women's Safe Space (WSS) articulates through their services. By focusing on the fragility of gender conceptions, I draw attention to how gender is deployed in the institution, I explore the role the Halbouni WSS plays in shaping participants' conception of gender. I argue that the ideas that the space articulates are conflicting gender conceptions that are shaped by the power relations they have with other institutions. Participating in the different classes and trainings, and engaging in conversations with WSS employees and participants revealed insights about the conflicting gender conceptions that shape WSS aims and services, and their participants' perception of gender.

WSS services and trainings deploy conflicting gender conceptions. WSSs depend on international organizations to fund them, for governmental authorities to grant them permissions to run their services, and they require a certain level of acceptance of local communities in order for women to be able to attend their trainings. WSSs aim to show women that their services are worthwhile, and to show their communities that none of their services are against their norms and traditions. WSSs also work to fulfill the requirements of international organizations' by adhering to their pre-structured guidelines on how to implement their services and trainings, and how promote their values, while aligning themselves with official public discourses in Syria regarding women. Several studies have shown how governmental and non-governmental interventions aim to transform women into particular kind of subjects

based on expectations drawn from liberal and national discourses (e.g., Ong 1996; Werner 2004, 2009; Ameeriar 2015; Najmabadi 2015). Similarly, WSSs aim to fit women into particular expectations that are drawn from multiple, and sometimes conflicting, discourses. These expectations translate into gender conceptions that reflect the social, political, and economic power relations WSSs have with other institutions.

A. Idioms of Honor and Shame

The WSS employees in general, and at Halbouni, assume that the women who attend their services come from “traditional communities”, where gender systems are dominated by ideas of “honor and shame” [*Al-Sharaf wa Al-A’ar*]. The honor-and-shame system is “a complex, a syndrome, which justify women’s multiple forms of exclusion” (Behzadi 2019; 145) that defines local idioms, and genders roles and practices through a fixed system solely based on religion, traditions, and/or culture (Behzadi 2019; Feldman 2010). In this system, analyses of violence against women, forced marriage, and honor killings [*Jarayim Al-Sharaf*] are linked to local conceptions of shame and honor (Feldman 2010, 306). To ensure that women are able to attend their services, WSSs present themselves as spaces where women’s honor and chastity is protected and preserved. It is common for family members to be invited to visit a WSS before women can join. Lamis, the space supervisor, often told me about her adventures in accompanying angry family members during their visit to their WSS before they would allow their female relatives to attend. During these visits, family members are assured of the “good reputation” of WSSs, and are even invited to ask neighbors and people who live in the surrounding areas about the reputation of these spaces, and the women who attend them. The WSS employees at Halbouni often emphasized their efforts to choose places, instructors, and volunteers with

“good reputations”, while many of the participants often spoke about the good reputation of WSSs and the women they socialize with in this space. Sarah, a 23-year-old participant who attended two trainings at WSS, told me:

As you know our friend's reputation [suma'a] and manners [adab] reflect our own. After I left school at the end of the 9th grade, it was very hard for me to make friends. I only had one friend who was our neighbor but she moved two years ago when she got married. Since then I almost had no friends. Like where would I meet friends? In the street? I never imagined that I would make friends here. A year ago, I came with my mom to visit the gynecologist in the women's clinic and I saw that they also offer different classes and trainings. The social support specialist spoke with me before my appointment. After she learned about my situation, she encouraged me to join the computer skills class as a way for me to learn new skills and meet women my age. She even helped me convince my mother to allow me to join the class. The second time we came, she spoke to my mother and ensured her that this space is only for women, and all the women who attend the classes here are respectful people [nas muhtarimin]. She was right! I meet a lot of respectful women that I consider my friends now.

WSS employees emphasize their devotion to preserving women's reputation. At the same time however, they use idioms of shame and honor to justify women's inabilities to attend WSSs. Such idioms include women's chastity, women bringing social disgrace to their family by not respecting traditions, and women behaving in ways that disrespect local religions and traditions. For instance, some of the reasons the WSS employees told me about women's inabilities to participate in WSSs included: “her family would kill her [byadbihuu] if they knew their daughter want to attend such space”, “some family consider that it's very shameful [Eib katir] for their daughter to come here alone”, “some communities in Syria think that attending WSSs will make people talk about the honor of their daughters [yahku bisharaf banatun] if they see them attending these spaces”. WSS employees always discuss and debate ways in which they can reach more women. When they discuss challenges women face, they often refer to culture and traditions as the main barriers preventing women from attending. In a

conversation with Lamis about the challenges their WSS face in this regard, she explained:

We care about the wellbeing of women, wherever they are! But sometimes whatever we do, we cannot reach a lot of women. You know how traditional communities in Syria are. Until this day, a lot of women are not allowed to leave the house, and when they do, they need to take permission from their husbands and fathers. Not all women are like me and you. A lot of communities do not allow their women to come to places like WSS, they think that such places will spoil [tafsid] women. Some of them think that we will encourage women to behave against their customs and traditions [a'adat w taqalid].

Lamis saw that many women are unable to attend their WSS because of local traditions and customs that believe that women may behave against their traditions if they attended places like WSSs.

Participants also engaged in discussions about the barriers that prevent women from attending WSSs. In one crochet class, the participants were discussing why one women who used to attend the class with them stopped coming. A conversation ensued as follows:

Rima: Has anyone heard from Samia, she was really nice, I liked her a lot.

Fatima: Ohh! You are right! I have not seen her or Ruba for a while!

Dina: I have heard that she has moved from her in-laws' house to her old house, which is far from here.

Rima: That explains why Ruba stopped coming to the Halbouni WSS as well. Teacher [Anseh], (calling the instructor) have you heard anything about Samia!

The instructor: As Dina said! I think she has send on our WhatsApp group that she has moved! Didn't she?

Rima: I am not in the Whatsapp group, can anyone add me please?

The instructor (continued): Well as she moved to an area far from here, I doubt that her husband will allow her to come anymore, and Ruba's parents only allowed her to come if Samia came. They insisted that they walk together to the space, so that explains why Ruba stopped coming.

Dina: And the transportation from her new area to the space is difficult!

The instructor (interrupting her): Yeah but I think it's her husband. He is the one who does not allow her to come anymore. Even the old cleaning lady! Didn't you see? We have a new one, because the husband of the old one asked her to quit because he claimed that her job is distracting her from taking care of their children, and that it's not acceptable for him anymore for her to stay away for her house that long.

The instructor (turned to me and explained): Ya Haram, a lot of women stop coming because of this issue, their family or husbands stop allowing them to come. This happens especially when the women move to a new place or get engaged or married. If you ask me, I think that even if the family used to allow her to come to the space, after they moved or she got married, the family do not want the reputation of their daughter to get affected. They think that even if they believe that these spaces are good for their daughter, they know that our communities [Mojtma 'tna] have traditions and customs that need to be respected. They tell themselves we do not want all this hassle [ma bdna klu hal alqisa]. But if you think about it, our spaces respect all our communities' traditions and customs. I would not have promoted them if they did not!

Rima (jumped in): True! Especially in new situations neighbors or your husbands' family may not understand what these women spaces are.

The instructor stressed that the participant is unable to attend their WSS any longer because of the beliefs of her husband and customs of her local community, ignoring other factors such as the transportation issue that one participant mentioned. Generally speaking, the WSS employees, like the crochet instructor, would emphasize the role of traditions and cultural norms, particularly those related to idioms of shame and honor, in preventing women from attending. In their view, traditions and cultural norms serve as the primary barriers that restrict the empowerment of women. They assume that cultural norms are fixed norms that communities in Syria strongly hold on to. Many scholars who have conducted research in Mediterranean societies and the Muslim world have deconstructed the myth of unchanging societies caught in fixed systems where only culture, religion, and traditions are relevant (Abu-loghod 2016, Collier 1986; Behzadi 2019; Feldman 2010). Collier (1986) reminds us that ideas of gender must be

viewed as part of cultural systems, where people interpret and reproduce larger existing inequalities. She explains that, in order to understand ideas of gender, we must look at what people want and desire, and what privileges they pursue and defend, rather than what men and women are or do. An approach that interprets the concept of gender as aspects of cultural systems can demonstrate how people deploy gender to negotiate larger relations of inequality. This is not to suggest that participants and employees in the WSS are unaware of wider social, economic and political issues that impact their lives. On the contrary, women inside and outside of the classes debated and talked about a variety of topics such as the economic situation, women employment in Syria, the education system, or how the war [*Harb*], or what others refer to as “the crisis” [*azma*], impacted their lives and changed them completely.³ In one of the classes I attended at the Halbouni WSS, the participants were discussing with the instructor the economic situation and how crochet can help them earn money. The conversation went as follows:

Sarah: Teacher [ansa]! I wanted to tell you about my neighbor, she has been crocheting for over five years, and now she started a Facebook page where she shows her pieces. Since she started the Facebook page, she has sold many pieces.

Dina: Good for her [Wallahi bravo aliha]

The instructor: I always tell you, keep practicing so you can master crocheting and start selling some pieces. It's not wrong if you started to earn extra money.

Sarah: Especially in these days. How long do you think the salary of a governmental employee lasts? It can barely last for the first ten days of the month.

Rima: With the high prices of rents, food, and everything else, even people who work in the private sector are not happy!

Rima: May God be with the people [allah yueayin aleaalam]

³ The Crisis [*azma*] is used by the Syrian regime and pro-regime supporters. I am aware of the implications of using the word crisis instead of revolution or war. However, I would argue that the use of [*azma*] by WSS employees and participants is not necessary an indicator of their political affiliations or opinions as the use of [*azma*] could be linked to many other reasons such as fear of precaution.

Sarah: Inshalla all of us can start selling our pieces soon.

The instructor: When you start to sell your pieces, and earn money your husbands and family cannot make excuses anymore, because you are earning money to help them.

The participants at the Halbouni WSS engage in discussions about economic and social issues that they encounter in their everyday lives, and the employees here are aware of many of the economic and social challenges women face daily. When the SFPA asked WSS employees about suggestions to improve WSS services, they suggested giving a small transportation allowance to women who attend WSSs, as it can encourage women to keep attending. However, generally speaking, outside of this suggestion, WSS employees tend to cite cultural norms and traditions as the main barriers of women's empowerment, without recognizing how these norms reflect broader social, economic, and political inequality. They link women's inability to attend WSSs to local idioms of gendered roles and practices. For instance, they argue that many communities do not allow women to move freely. They do not consider how the war impacted existing inequality, including women's movement.

Honor and shame are still significant idioms in the gender systems of women who attend WSSs, however, as Behzadi (2019) notes, looking beyond a fixed system of honor-and-shame does not indicate that cultural norms are not relevant anymore in the understanding of gendered identities (145). Rather, it means that the honor-and-shame system should be explored to understand how it reflects broader power dynamics. Additionally, changing systems of inequity introduced by the Syrian war has impacted many cultural values, including gender norms. Collier (1986) explains, "[a]nd, if gender conceptions are idioms for interpreting and manipulating social inequality, then we should expect notions of femininity and masculinity to change when one organization of

inequality gives way to an- other” (101). For example, with the death and travel of male members of the family, many women became the supporter of their families. Other families have been displaced and forced to move in shared living spaces with other non-family members, where women were required to share these living spaces and socialize with men who are not family. These changing social and economic relations introduce new gender norms, and new inequalities. Paying attention to what these new gender norms and inequalities tell us about broader gendered power dynamics can be useful to understand how women adapt, resist, or challenge, new and existing inequalities in times of war. It also tells us how women navigate, push back, and/or transform themselves by attending institutions like WSSs, and what challenges other than cultural norms prevent them from attending.

B. Women as Subjects of Neoliberal Discourses

In the previous section, I argued that WSS employees imagine cultural norms, especially those related to idioms of shame and honor, as barriers to women’s empowerment. In this section I explore some strategies and ideals the WSS deploys through their services to empower women, and the discourses these ideals are based on. One of the key ideas for creating WSSs was to empower women and help them enjoy freedom in various aspect of their lives. The main organization that funds these spaces, UNFPA, describes a women safe space as the following: “[i]t is a space where women and girls, being the intended beneficiaries, feel comfortable and enjoy the freedom to express themselves without the fear of judgment or harm” (UNFPA Regional Syria Response Hub 2015, 5). Freedom is a value that underlines the purpose of many of the services WSSs provide throughout Syria. WSS employees often speak about how they

have helped women to be freer and more independent, and success stories of WSS participants often included references to freedom. These stories include cases of participants who, through their learning experiences at WSSs, were able to gain more freedom in different aspects of their lives. For example, WSS employees in these stories speak about how women after attending a WSS became more financially independent, and thus more “free”. It is worth noting that references to freedom that WSS employees mention are often related to culture. Leila Abu-Lughod in her work on Muslim women (2002; 2013), notes that much of the debates and questions about women in the Middle East and the Muslim world have been discussed in relation to culture or religion rather than history, politics, or political economies. While Abu-Lughod’s observation is about public discourses in the west, they are also valid in the case of many non-western government and humanitarian interventions. The value of freedom that WSS articulates is restricted to the domain of culture. Freedom is assumed as something women can achieve through vocational courses, recreational activities or/and psychosocial support, without taking into consideration political, legal, economic, and social power dynamics that prevent women from achieving their proclaimed freedom.

Furthermore, the WSS presumes that freedom as understood by liberal thoughts is desired by all women, and that it is a prerequisite for the empowerment of women. Scholars, such as Saba Mahmood and Leila Abu-Lughod, who worked with women in the Middle East and the Muslim world have challenged many assumptions that are at the heart of liberal thought and liberal feminism.⁴ In her reflective essay about women participating in the Islamic revival movement in Egypt, Mahmood (2001) explains that

⁴ Saba Mahmood, in her ethnography about women participating in the Islamic revival movement in Egypt, challenges many of the arguments of liberal thoughts, especially freedom, that has informed many approaches in feminist theory. See Saba Mahmood 2005, Chapter title: *The Subject of Freedom*

her ethnographic account challenges many conceptual assumptions of feminist and gender analysis. She argues that models of agency and freedom that are based on liberal thoughts are not useful to understand the lives of women whose desires and aspirations have been shaped by non-liberal traditions and discourses. In her conclusion, Mahmood (2001) writes:

The liberatory goals of feminism should be rethought in the light of the fact that the desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori, but needs to be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspirations, and capacities that inhere in a culturally and historically located subject (223).

Similarly, Leila Abu-Lughod (2002) suggests an approach that recognizes that Muslim women may have other desires that may be more meaningful to them, such as living in peace or in close families and communities (788). Both Abu-Lughod and Mahmood's arguments highlight the fragility of articulating freedom as posed by liberal thoughts as a universal desire that women need to achieve in order to be empowered. What is more problematic is associating freedom with values grounded in capitalist socioeconomic systems, such as wage labor. Hasna, a 34-year-old unmarried woman, and the oldest of her sisters and brothers, explained to me that the most difficult thing that has happened to her after her father's death is being the main supporter of her family. Hasna felt that having to work outside of her home has undermined her own sense of dignity. She explains:

There were times when everything I needed was provided to me by my father. I am his eldest daughter and my happiness and dignity were his main concerns, but after everything that has happened, after his death, and after we lost our house and everything my dad built, I had to work for other people. I feel like I have lost my dignity [Karamiti]. If my father was still alive he would never allow this to happen.

Some women, like Hasna, feel like working outside of the household undermines their

sense of dignity and threatens what they perceive as their traditional gender roles. Similar insights were reported by a study about the gendered impact of the Syrian conflict among Syrian and Palestinian refugees from Syria now living in Lebanon (El-Masri, Harvey, and Garwood 2013). Many women in the study reported that working in paid informal employment, making decisions on behalf of their families, and doing chores outside of their household, threatened their perceived gender identities, and made them feel like they lost their “femininity”, and that this exacerbated their stress. The study states that one of its main findings is that “women’s sense of self-worth is closely linked to their traditional gender roles” (El-Masri, Harvey, and Garwood 2013, 13). Other women felt, however, that this change in gender roles empowered them. It is understandable that different women experience the shift in gender roles differently. However, associating freedom with wage labor becomes problematic when WSS employees assume that women’s employment will empower women and make them freer, without asking what freedom means to these women. Yousra, a 35-year-old married woman, discussing freedom explains:

After we have been displaced [baed ma nzahna] due to the war [alharb] I had to move with my husband and our three kids to his family house. At the beginning, I did not mind living with my in-laws because I thought it is a temporary situation, but with time I realized that we may never see our house again. Some people told us that our house is completely destroyed, other said that everything was stolen. The idea of living with his family for a longer period made me really depressed. My main issue was his mother. Do not get me wrong, I swear to God [wollahi] I used to love her like my own mother but she started to get involved in every small detail of our lives. She started to consistently lecture me on how to raise my children. I do not like anyone to tell me how to raise my children, especially her. She has an old mindset [eaqlia qadima] and I do not want to raise my children according to this mindset. When I used to tell my husband about how his mother is involved in our lives, he would get angry and there was no point of arguing with him. I would fight everyday with my husband, I felt like I lost my freedom, my independence and my marriage. After a year and half of constant fights with his mother, he finally decided to rent a house for us. You cannot believe how relieved I was! I asked for my family help in order to pay rent for the new house. But I do not care. I

feel like I gained my independence and freedom back. It is my house, I can decide what to cook, how long I talk on the phone or watch TV, how to raise my children, and how I spend my time and everything else. I was thinking the other day that maybe if I was still living with his mother, I would not have been able to come to WSS.

For Yousra, freedom meant having control over her life and the life of her family. Her mother-in-law's need to exert control made her feel as if she had lost her freedom and her own agency, and she was only able to recover them once she had her own home, where she was able to have control over her marriage and the lives of her children.

Samah, a 39-year-old divorced woman who got married when she was 21 years old to a man 12 years older than her, also spoke about how learning to manage her anger gave her a sense of freedom and liberation that she never felt before, she explains:

I wanted to get divorce from the first month of my marriage, but my family refused. They said people would talk about me [btahkiy ealayki alealam]. In the beginning, he was financially okay, but he was very stingy and he followed everything his mother told him. After we were displaced [nzahna], everything became worse. He rented a house for us made of mud, the rooftop was leaking water, and he did not do anything to change our situation. On top of that he used to hit me. But what was worse to me is that my relationship with him made me very angry at myself and my children. I became very angry all the time and I could not control my anger. That is when I knew I had to do something. Joining WSS and the hairdressing training in another WSS before I came to this one, allowed me to gain skills that helped me to start working and earning money. I left my husband and moved to a small room next to my family. I started working as a hairdresser. Everything changed, I even became close to my family again, and I started to attend this WSS. No one could tell me I cannot come here. What was even better is that I learned how to control my angry. That made me feel happier, more in charge of my life, and more free. Controlling my anger [tahakam bieasbiti], and moving next to my family made me feel a freedom [his bihuriya] I have not felt in a long time.

Similar to Yousra, freedom for Samah is not necessarily linked to economic independency. Being close to her family again and learning how to manage her anger gave her a sense of freedom. The way Yousra and Samah discussed freedom can help us understand how women whose lives are shaped by non-liberal discourses understand freedom. Women's varied experiences highlight the tension of articulating freedom as

understood by liberal thought as a universal ideal, without asking what freedom means to the women in question. This kind of argument supports the approaches of Mahmood and Abu-Lughod, along with other scholars, who have shown how national projects imagine, transform, and produce women as subjects of liberal governance and modern freedom through embodiment discourses (e.g., Noble 2016). In the next section, I employ the concept of “disciplinary techniques” from Michel Foucault’s work in *Discipline and Punish* (1995) to explore how the WSS deploys disciplinary techniques that aim to reform women into subjects that act, think, and behave in accordance to gender conceptions, and the nature of women’s empowerment discourses that WSS deploys in their services.

C. Disciplinary Techniques at Women Safe Spaces

Another key strategy that the WSS articulates through their different services is to teach women the importance of disciplining their bodies and thoughts. In the crochet class, the instructor always reminded the participants about the importance of controlling their bodies and thoughts in order to master their work. In one session, the instructor explained:

You should relax your body and especially your hand, if you are tense, it will show in your work. Empty your mind and put everything aside and just focus on the needle. It takes a lot of patience [saber] and practice [tadrib], but if you keep practicing it will become something natural to you. It will not only reflect on your work, but you will also see how it can help you feel more relaxed and positive. Crochet will make you more patient and help you to clear your mind [tasfi dihanak].

When I finished writing what the instructor said, I looked around and almost every woman in the class was taking notes on what she had said as well. On the one hand, the WSS functions in specific ways to achieve certain goals, while, on the other hand,

participants learn how to act and think in a way that fulfills the function of the space. All of the WSS services, whether they are skill-based classes, recreational activities, or psychosocial support, aim to teach women to take control of their lives, and to be productive. In such an approach, there is an emphasis on the soul, where even the work on the body aims to reform the soul. Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1995) points out how modern institutions deploy systems of discipline that attempt to reform the soul by training the bodies to act in a certain way. Foucault reminds us that with the radical shift that took place in disciplinary practices in the late nineteenth century, the reform of the individual as a whole became the aim rather than focusing on changing specific behaviors. Even though each service at the WSS aims to target one aspect of women's lives, the space attempts to reform women as a whole.

Many women who attended WSSs learned about these spaces when they visited the women clinics. Most WSSs have an associated women's clinic that has a gynecologist, and sometimes a pediatrician, and middle and lower-income women visit these clinics because they provide free reproductive healthcare. Several women that I interviewed told me how the space supervisor or the gynecologist advised them to talk to the psychosocial support specialist, even when they only came for the reproductive health services. Similarly, in the skill-based classes that aim to help women generate income, or learn new skills, women are taught about the importance of being positive, patient, and productive. Women who attend a class at the WSS are also encouraged to register in other classes when they finish the first one. The other classes usually target other aspects of their lives, but as a whole all of them aim to achieve the same goal, which is to "reform" women. This process involves the production of subject who act, think and behave in accordance to the gender conceptions, and women empowerment's

discourses that the WSS articulates through their different services. While the WSS is trying to empower women, it is actually “reproducing” gendered norms. For instance, if a woman was attending a crochet class to learn a new skill, she is advised to register in the self-defense class or the sports class in order to make progress in her journey at the WSS. What is worth noting, is that both skill-based classes and recreational classes focus on “reforming” women through teaching them to manage their thoughts. The approach at the WSS highlights Foucault’s (1995) arguments about modern disciplinary techniques, which focuses on “the reform” of women as whole, and shifts the focus from the body to the soul.

These disciplinary techniques that the WSS practices, attempts to produce what Foucault (1995) has called “docile bodies” (135-170).⁵ Foucault (1995) writes, “[a] body is docile that may be subjected, used, transferred and improved” (136), and *docile bodies* refer to bodies that are being manipulated, used, and transformed in order to be controlled. In the WSS, women’s bodies are viewed as objects of control. The way women learn to act and think reflects the needs of the WSS and the power relations that exists between the space and other social, economic, and political institutions, such as the government and funding organizations. The work for discipline in the WSS may not be as obvious as it is in a prison or a military institution, but similarly, women’s bodies are subjected to subtle remodeling and control. As mentioned earlier, women are taught to act and think in a certain way. They are encouraged “to be patient,” “to think

⁵ In *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* Michel Foucault discusses the concept of docile bodies and the disciplinary techniques that aim to produce “docile bodies” (pgs. 135-170). Since reforming women are at the heart of the logic of the services at the WSS, Foucault’s argument in *Discipline & Punish* is helpful, because it not only explains transformation in the nature of discipline, it presents insights about the radical change in the organization of modern societies, specifically the relation between individuals, institutions, and society.

positively,” “to take control of their lives,” and “be productive”. Second, every woman, whether an employee or a participant, has a specific place in the hierarchy of the WSS. For instance, participants are only allowed to wait in the common area, while employees, official representatives, or important visitors are invited to wait in the supervisor room. Whenever I came early for class, Lamis would invite me to wait in her office. When I would politely tell her that I will wait in the common area in order to chat with other participants, she would insist that I wait with her in her office, where is it more comfortable and suitable. Participants are not allowed to enter other rooms than their assigned classes. The kitchen, the supervisor room, and psychosocial support room are only accessible to employees. These rooms are locked whenever an employee leaves them. Another example of the hierarchy at the WSS was showcased whenever an instructor or an employee entered the class, as the participants would stand up to greet them. Participants always refer to the instructor as teacher [‘*ansa*], and to the WSS employees as Madame [*madam*]. I was surprised to see a 60-year-old woman referring to an employee half her age as “madam”, as, traditionally, younger women refer to older women as madam out of respect. Then there are hierarchies present that are reflective of pre-existing social hierarchies. For instance, in one session there were not enough chairs for all the class participants. The instructor suggested that younger women give their seats to older women, lecturing them about the importance of respecting the elders. Women who attend the WSS are also consistently tested in different ways, which is another technique of discipline Foucault discusses regarding “docile bodies”. For instance, women who are assigned to join the sports classes to lose weight as a way to gain confidence in themselves, are consistently followed-up by the sport instructor to check on their progress. In the English classes, computer skills class, and literacy

classes, women need to pass an exam at the end of each level. Similarly, in skilled-based classes, such as the crochet class, women need to show improvement in their techniques and work.

WSS employees consider these observations and examinations as knowledge that they report to the managing organization for recommendations, best practices, and success stories, all which are common practices in the work of humanitarian interventions. Combined with hierarchies, these practices constitute disciplinary spaces, which, Foucault (1991) explains, “in organizing ‘cells’, ‘places’ and ‘ranks’, the disciplines create complex spaces that are at once architectural, functional and hierarchical” (148). In summary, the WSS in Halbouni articulates disciplinary techniques that aim to “reform” women, who in return learn how to act and think in a certain way that is in alignment with the aims and function of this institution. Thus, this WSS serves as an “architectural, functional and hierarchical” space that aims to reform and discipline women, while these disciplinary techniques may be seen as the result of the power relations the WSS has with other social, political and economic institutions. In the next section, I show how these disciplinary techniques are part of a public discourse in Syria that aims to produce women as good citizens.

D. The Production of Subjects: Women as Good Citizens

In the previous sections I have shown how the WSS in Halbouni deploys disciplinary techniques through its different services to reform women. In this section, I will show how these disciplinary techniques are part of public discourses in Syria that aim to produce women as good citizens. Scholars in different fields (e.g. feminist studies, sexual and reproductive health, and anthropology) have shown how

interventions by governmental and non-governmental organizations work to fit women into idealized standards of citizenship associated with equally idealized discourses on womanhood and motherhood (see Hunter 2014; Ramsay 2016; Paxson 2004). For instance, family planning, which is the main aim of SFPA, the organization that manage WSSs, is an obvious example of an instrument by which institutions and the state manage and control populations. Scholars, such as Hunter (2014), argue that family planning is more associated with state ideologies and power than with women's reproductive health (169).

In the self-defense classes and the sports class, women are taught about the importance of devoting time to take care of their bodies. They are taught that it is their responsibility to control and take care of their body, which includes exercising regularly, and eating healthy foods to stay in shape, so that they are better able to take care of themselves and their families. In one sports class, a participant was complaining about exercising and dieting. The instructor told her:

If you do not want to do it for yourself, do it for your husband and kids, you are still young and your family needs you to be healthy and strong. Exercising has many benefits that you will see, you will thank yourself later for doing this exercise now. You will be more energetic and feel happier. This will reflect in every aspect of your life, you will have more energy to do housework, to keep up with your children, and even your husband will notice the change in your energy level.

The sport instructor stressed on the participant's responsibility to take care of her body in order for her to be able to take care of her family, and thus be a "good mother", and "good wife". The WSS employees assign women who are diagnosed with depression to sports and self-defense classes as a way to help them regain their productivity.

Likewise, they assign woman who are recently divorced, or who have free time, to skill-

based classes so that they will be able to generate an income, or simply make use of their free time. Samiha, a 24-year-old who was a new mother told me:

I gave birth about 8 month ago, my body changed and I did not feel like myself anymore, I used to look in the mirror and hate what I used to see. The way my body looked made me really depressed. When I came to the gynecologist in the women's clinic she referred me to the WSS where the social support specialist encouraged me to sign up for the sports class as a way to love myself again, and as a way to get over my anxiety so I can take care of my daughter in a proper way.

The social support specialist encouraged Samiha to join the sport class to gain her confidence and productivity in order to be able to take care of her daughter again. For the social support specialist, the aim was to help Samiha to fulfill her role as a good and productive mother. Encouraging women to be productive, similar to the articulation of liberal freedom as universal desire, is shaped by women's empowerment practices that are based on neoliberal discourses as well as national discourses regarding women. Moreover, this notion of "reforming" women to be productive or regain their productivity is also associated with the formation of "good citizens". Foucault (1991) explains that the expectations of "good citizens" are embodied in and reproduced in everyday institutional practices and power relations⁶. Many of the women I conducted interviews with expressed how the WSS helped them to be productive in some way.

Ferial, a 58-year-old woman, explained her motivation to attend the WSS:

After all my children were married, I had a lot of time. I usually work from 8 am to 3pm in a governmental ministry, come back home, cook lunch for my husband, and finish all the household chores and still have a lot of time. I did not want to sit around and do nothing. I already knew how to knit. I had the basic skills but I wanted to learn crocheting more professionally, so I decided to

⁶ See Foucault, Michel, Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller. 1991. *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality, With Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault*. Chicago, ILL: University of Chicago Press.

join WSS. I also wanted to set an example to my daughters and grandchildren. I wanted them to see how I can be a good mother and wife, be employed and still enjoy and learn a new hobby. WSS made me feel active again [nshita], instead of sitting at home all day, watching TV.

Ferial felt like making her leisure time productive made her an example of a good mother and wife for her daughters and grandchildren. While Farah, a 36-year-old woman came to the WSS to overcome what she described as “her depression”:

Me and my husband had issues for years, it became even worse after he lost his job and we were displaced. We felt hopeless, like everything is closed in our face [Klshi tskar bi wejna]. He decided to go to Turkey. When he decided to take this move, I felt like he was willing to risk his life for our future. I felt like he loved me and our children more than anything. He promised that once he is settled he will bring me and our children to Turkey. I was willing to wait, I knew it may take some time. Two years passed and he started making excuses, I felt like he was hiding something. After a while I learned that he married someone else. I was shocked and became really depressed. I did not get up from bed until noon. Everyone around me started to criticize me for neglecting my children and house. My sister used to attend a WSS, and she made me come with her. I told the social support specialist about my story and she encouraged me to sign up for the sports classes as a way to regain my energy and confidence. After attending the classes for a while and working with the social support specialist, I started to wake up early again, cook, clean my house, help my children with their homework. This change did not only reflect on me, but also on my children. I became the mother that my children deserve.

Women like Farah and Samiha expressed how the WSS helped them to regain their confidence and productivity. However, their focus was on their role as mothers and wives, and the effort and labor they made to take care of their children and to maintain their household. These images of women as good mothers, and thus good citizens, are not new in public discourses in Syria. As Sara Pekow (2019) notes in her article about rural and urban women in Syria after World War I, middle class women were frequently reminded by the media and the classrooms about their role in taking care of their families and households. From the late nineteenth century to the mid twentieth century,

images of women as patriotic mothers, who devote their energy and time to take care of their homes, and raise good citizens, was common in the press throughout the Middle East (Pekow 2019; Thompson 2000). Thompson (2000) argues that these images of patriotic mothers were a means to include women in the nation-building project, without including them in the real political processes. Nonetheless, these images of patriotic mothers are not exclusive to that period of Syrian history. Similar representations of women are found in popular rhetoric of the Ba'ath party, the leading party of Syria since 1963. The images of women as good mothers and wives were used as symbols for the possibilities of the nation's progress (Rabo 1996; Lei Sparre 2008). Sara Lei Sparre (2008) notes that in the 1970s and 1980s, the Syrian regime needed to mobilize women as public employees, as it needed labor (9). However, with the economic recessions of the 1980s, there was a shift in the Syrian regime's approach toward women as it failed to address the needs of the middle and lower classes (Lei Sparre 2008). The Syrian regime was no longer interested in mobilizing women for the public sector. This resulted in a new approach that placed more emphasis on the role of women as wives and mothers (Lei Sparre 2008). With the realization of Syrian regime leadership of their incapacity to secure the needs of the growing populations, the state started to emphasize the role of the family in nurturing their members, especially the role of women. Furthermore, Lei Sparre (2008) explains that, in popular rhetoric of the Ba'ath party, women are portrayed as both the symbols of the nation's backwardness and its possibilities for development and modernization (7). Similarly, in her article about the civil society in Syria, Annika Rabo (1996) shows how women are portrayed as the victims and the reproducers of backwardness (106). Rabo explains that women are trapped in a dilemma, where, on the one hand, they are expected to take care of their

household and children, while, on the other hand, they are viewed as the victims of “backwardness” if they cling to family bonds instead of the “progressiveness” of the Ba’ath party. Women at WSSs are caught in a similar dilemma, where their perception of gender and selfhood is shaped by several, and sometimes conflicting discourses that aim to produce reformed subjects.

E. Final Word

I have shown how the WSS in Halbouni aims to produce women into a “reformed” subject through disciplinary techniques that aim to reform them as a whole. These techniques are in accordance with public discourses that aim to produce women as good mothers and citizens. Moreover, I have also shown how the WSS borrows ideals, such as freedom and wage labor, from liberal thought, without asking what these ideals mean to the women in question, and how the women understand and perceive these ideals. I have also pointed out how the WSS employees imagine culture and traditions as barriers to women empowerment, while, at the same time, ensure WSS participants and their families that they follow traditional values and norms.

We cannot understand the ambiguity and contradictions of the gender conceptions that this WSS articulates unless we view them in their historical, political, and social contexts. These gender conceptions are the product of a historical moment where gender roles are changing as a result of the war that followed the Syrian uprising. They are also the product of WSSs power relations with other institutions, such as the funding organizations. Most importantly, they are the product of a failed nation-state building project, where manipulation of gender idioms has been employed by the Syrian regime since 1963 to serve its goal. In Rabo’s (1996) analysis of the role of gender in

political struggles and the relation between state and civil society in Syria, she writes “[w]omen have had to pay, and continue to pay, a very high price for the contradictions between state patriarchy and state feminism and between what might be conceived of as state and civil society” (107). Rabo’s observations of how women in Syria are limited between the ideals of good mothers and wives who are expected to manage the responsibilities of their households and children, and the ideals of good citizens who are expected to participate in the building of the society, are still relevant today, with the added burden of state and non-state terror, displacement, loss, and war.

CHAPTER II

WOMEN SAFE SPACES SUCCESS STORIES

In this chapter, I present the success story models that the WSS employees use. I explore how these models impact the abilities of the employees to understand and represent the lives of WSS participants, and argue that WSS employees reduce the identities of the participants to victims, detached from their social, political, and economic contexts. Production of success stories has become a critical element for non-profit organizations (NGOs) to secure funding and control their brand identity within the humanitarian sector (Kloster 2020). I build on Kloster's (2020) research that illustrates how chasing success stories can impact the ability of NGOs to understand the lives of women and girls, and how it could lead to the de-politicization of gender. Kloster (2020) argues that gender in global health has shifted from being a radical political case to being a de-politicized technical enterprise (2). I also engage with the work of Didier Fassin (2008), where he asks, "what does it mean to bear witness to violence using the language of trauma?" (2008, 534). I argue that the success stories produced by the WSS employees does exactly what Fassin ascribes to humanitarian testimonies, which is to "reduce violence to trauma, and the subject to victims" (2008, 552). I argue that the use of the language of psychology and trauma in success stories contribute to the de-politicization of the war in Syria.

Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan (2012) argue that the social theories of sociologists are uniquely positioned to address issues concerning the work of NGOs. Similarly, anthropologists are qualified to raise questions and address concerns about the impact of NGOs and humanitarian interventions on their participants' identities and conception of their social worlds.

A. WSS Success Story Models

The WSS employees use success stories to report about their work and progress to the managing organization (the Syrian Family Planning Association), in their progress reports to funding organizations (the United Nations Population Fund [UNPF] and other donors), and use these narratives to demonstrate their achievements to the general public and governmental institutions. The SFPA, UNPF, and other donors publish this information on their websites and social media platforms as a form of advertisement about their work with the WSS, and/or refer the WSS to their donors and sponsors so that they are able to increase the amount of funding they receive. The WSS supervisors and case managers write tens of stories each week, however, only few of these stories are reported to the funding organizations, and only one or two stories make it to public platforms or the reports that are sent to donors. When I asked one employee about which stories are reported to the funding organizations, she used the language that the funding organization use in its manuals and guidelines about WSSs (see: UNFPA Regional Syria Response Hub 2015). She explained that “stories that adhere to universal standards of GBV programming and are endorsed by the [*sunduq*]⁷ (referring to the UNFPA) and other international organizations.” In chapter one, I touched on the issue of articulating rights that are shaped by liberal thoughts as universal rights, without considering their local context and what they mean to the women in questions. In this chapter, I will present four stories to explore how pressure to show “success”

⁷ WSS participants and employees refer to UNFPA as *sunduq* because, in Arabic, the UNFPA is known as *sunduq al'umam almutahidat lilsukkan*, which means “The United Nations Population Fund”.

impacts the abilities of the WSS employees to represent and understand the lives of their participants, and how this shapes the participants' identities.

The WSS employees change the model of the success stories according to the requirements of each funding organizations, which means that, sometimes, the same organization changes their requirements based on the needs of their donors. The funding organization usually sends guidelines to the WSS employees about what they want in success stories, what format they need to use, and which beneficiaries are the most ideal for such stories. During my fieldwork, the employees used two models to report about success stories. The first one included a summary of the participant's life, the participant's achievements after attending the WSS, and a quote from the participant. In the second model, they included a summary of the participant's life, interventions by the WSS, improvements achieved by the participant, and a quote from the participant. The WSS employees refer to the participants in these models as "the case" [*Alhala*]. In both models, success stories need to have a life-changing event such as securing a job, or getting a divorce, and such pre-requisites often lead success stories to be narratives that report predetermined results. In the following section, I will present three success stories that employees shared with me during my fieldwork.⁸ They included these stories in reports sent to the managing organization and donors. I will also present one story that WSS employees shared with me, and considered as a "successful story", that was not included in any report. I present the success stories the way the WSS employees presented them in their reports.

B. First Success Story: A Strong Independent Woman

⁸ I present these stories the way the WSS employees present them to the funding and managing organizations. However, the titles of the stories are written by me.

In the first report, the WSS employees included what they referred to as “the summary of the case life”, as the following:

The case is a 35-years-old woman, has a four-year-old girl. She was displaced from Zamalka in rural Damascus, and currently living in the Sahnaya area in Damascus. The case was living in her own house, but after the crisis [‘azmeh] she left her house and is currently staying with her mother. The case suffered from psychological and economic violence by her husband and his family. She was subjected to constant insults, which made her live in a state of anxiety, and tension. She also lived in a state of fear for her life and the life of her daughter, because the husband’s mother hated girls and used to discriminate against female children. She even threatened to kill the case’s child. The case had a weak personality and had difficulty in communicating with others. She came to the WSS to seek help. She was assigned to support sessions to help her relieve her stress and anxiety and guide her on how to improve her communication skills, and increase her self-confidence. She was also informed about her rights and duties. After that, she was assigned to a sewing course because of her desire to learn this profession. She wanted to be financially independent. Now she is an independent woman who mastered sewing, and currently working from her home as well as in a local sewing studio in her area.

In the report, they also included two achievements and a quote from the participant.

They wrote:

Achievement one: the case was able to purchase a sewing kit from the money she got from working in a beauty salon.

Achievement two: the case started working from home after she mastered sewing.

Quote: the case said “I was able to overcome tension and anxiety and increase my confidence in myself. Now, I work as a tailor from my home as I have a stronger personality and mastered this profession. This has allowed me to start to support myself and my little girl.

C. Second Success Story: Finally, she realized her Worth

In the second report, similar to the first one, they included a “summary of the case life”, as the following:

The case said: I got married when I was 16, I stayed with my husband for 14 years. In these 14 years, I did not experience one good day with him. I gave birth to two sons. He used to insult and beat me all the time, but I stayed with

him for the sake of my children. My husband believed that women have no value, nor rights. Even my husband's mother and sister mistreated me. They controlled everything in my life. They used to choose my cloth and my children cloth. I lived with my husband family for 8 years. I never felt independent. After everything I have experienced with my husband, I discovered that he was cheating on me with another woman. He divorced me and married her after 4 days. I was devastated. I kept thinking about all the time I wasted with him. After my husband's marriage, my son had a very difficult time and suffered from a psychological crisis [‘azmeh nafsia], my friend was a psychiatrist and she started to treat him without him knowing. Then, my husband took my children and that made me suffer from a psychological crisis. He took the children from me because I could not support them financially.

Then they included her achievements and a quote:

Achievement one: She learned crochet, and she was enrolled in a nursing course in another training center.

Achievement two: She taught Arabic and worked as a teacher in a public school. She also learned how to work on a sewing machine and started working from home.

Quote: the case said her personality became stronger and now she is able to face all the challenges that come along her way. She also said that now she is able to defend herself, and she realized that life goes on and it does not stop for anyone. She said that she realized that she has to count on herself, and work hard no matter what happens in the future.

D. Third Success Story: From a Victim to a Super Mother

In the third report, WSS employees received instructions from the managing organization for a slightly different format for success stories. They started by a

“Summary of the Case Life” as model one, they wrote:

The case said: My family forced me to marry my husband when I was 14 years old. They forced me to leave school before the ninth grade. I had two children with my husband and our life was just fine. However, our problems started when the crisis [‘azma] started in Syria, and we were displaced several times. The last area we were displaced in was sieged [tahasarat] and my husband's friends convinced him to register our name with an armed group [Musalahin], in which we were moved to another Governorate in Syria. I refused to move with him, but he said I either stay alone without our children or came with them. I couldn't leave my children so I went with him. I hated living in that area and tried to kill myself several times. I became depressed and lost my appetite. I became very

thin, and weak. One time, I attempted to poison myself and I was transferred to a local hospital. When I left the hospital, I started to plan how to run away with my children, and I succeeded. I went back to live with my family and got a divorce. Now, I support myself and my children.

The story included a note that the case refused to share how she was able to flee that area and go back to her family. Instead of the achievements, in this model WSS employees included WSS's interventions, improvements in the case life, and a quote as the following:

Psychosocial intervention: The case was assigned to a psychological support group on how to deal and raise children in a healthy way after the case said that she was facing difficulties in dealing with her children. She was also assigned to individual psychological support sessions to help her overcome what she went through, increase self-confidence, and learn how deal with stress.

Professional intervention: she was assigned to a hairdressing and beauty course in another WSS to help her find a better job. The case worked as a makeup artist, but that was not enough. She needed to learn hairdressing in order to find a better job.

Educational intervention: she was assigned to an English class in order to learn how to teach her children English, and be able to read makeup label for her work.

Improvements: The case was able to successfully learn hairdressing and find a better job that allowed her to support herself and her children. She was also able to communicate with her children in a better way, which made her less stressed and increased her self-confidence. The case said after attending the WSS: " it's like I wasn't even alive before, and now that I have a good job and able to support my children, I know my worth and I believe in my abilities to do a lot of things. Now, I am able to work on improving my skills and nothing will stand in my way".

E. A Successful Story: The Good Daughter In-Law

This story, informally referred to as "Reham", was one I heard from two employees, both of whom heard it from other colleagues, and it was a popular story among the employees generally. One employee mentioned it to me when we were

discussing the inspiring [*kasas molehema*] and touching stories of WSS participants. Yet this story was not reported to the funding and managing organizations as a success story or included in any report, which I found interesting considering its noticeable impact it had on those working at the WSS and the pride they had in how the participant achieved her goal without jeopardizing her marriage.

Reham's husband did not allow her to leave the house without his permission. She was only allowed to go visit his mother. Reham's neighbor told her about a sewing class she had started attending in a Women's Safe Space in their area. Reham wanted to attend this class, but she knew that her husband would not allow her to. When she told her mother-in-law about this class, her mother-in-law said that she would help her attend the class if she agreed to make a dress for her daughter's engagement party. So, whenever Reham needed to attend the class, she used to tell her husband that she was going to visit his mother. The mother-in-law covered for her for three months. When she began the class, Reham told the other participants about her story, and they offered to help make the dress, and, at the end of the course, they were able to make a beautiful engagement dress. They even taught Reham some tricks on how to not to be caught by her husband. For example, they taught her to always keep some vegetables in her purse, so if her husband caught her outside his mother's house, she could tell him that she was buying some vegetables for his mother.

The WSS employees did not report this story to the funding organization, because it did not fit the requirements of a success story. However, for them it was a successful story with a positive ending, where a participant learned a new skill, made new friends, and kept a good relationship with her husband and his family. In the first three stories, all of the women achieved economic independence, which, according to

the pre-conceived template or expectations for success stories, is the ultimate solution, along with improving communication skills, and attending psychosocial support. Reham did not find a job, nor was she freed from her “controlling husband”, and her suffering was not addressed through the language of psychology like the other success stories. The WSS employees did not mention that she was depressed or anxious because of her husband. They also did not discuss how their WSS helped Reham to overcome her psychological crisis or achieve independency. In the other stories, the participants suffered from depression, and/or anxiety, and through psychological support they improved their communication skills and increased their self-confidence, which enabled them to overcome their suffering. In the next section, I explore how the WSS employees use the language of psychology in success stories to address the suffering of participants. I also explore how this impacts the way the WSS employees understand and represent the lives of WSS participants.

F. Success Stories and the Language of Psychology

Fassin (2008) states that the language of psychology is now used to address suffering in the world, whereas up until the 1960s the language of revolution was the language used to defend the oppressed (532). Fassin highlights the use of a new language and an approach to advocate for causes and rights, which he argues produces new modalities that “express violence in terms of trauma” (532). This language of trauma is not only used to address the aftermath of wars and violence, it introduces a new framework to understand contemporary conflicts, and, through doing this, becomes “a political expression of a state of the world” (Fassin 2008, 533). Through this approach emerges what Fassin (2008, 533) calls “political subjectification”, where

subjects and subjectivities come into existence in the political arena. The issue with this approach, however, is that the lived experiences of those who are experiencing violence, or have experienced violence, become mediated and expressed through the modalities of the humanitarian organizations they fall under the umbrella of (Fassin 2008, 533). In the case of the WSS, the women's lived experience become expressed through the funding organizations' standards that are based on, what WSS employees refer to as, "universal standards of Gender Based Violence programming". More problematically, the focus becomes proving that the managing organization is worthy of funding, and the funding organization is worthy of the donors' money. The success stories therefore become testimonies to the work of the WSS rather than the women's lived experience and their social world.

Furthermore, this approach that addresses suffering through the language of psychology corresponds to the emergence of the "witness" figure – who is not the one who experienced oppression or violence, but rather, the one who assisted those who did (Fassin 2008, 537). Here, the power of testimony emerges, in which humanitarian employees speak on behalf of those that experienced tragedy and violence. The WSS employees often write the stories of the participants in the third person ("she said", "she did"), which makes it hard to tell if it is the participant who is speaking, or the employee. When WSS employees speak on behalf of the participants, the identities of the participants are reduced to the construction of victims who need to be saved. In such an approach, several issues emerge. The first issue, which Fassin (2008) highlights, is that trauma does not bear witness to the violence of war, which is what it is intended to do (544). WSS employees mention that "the cases" in the first success and second success stories were displaced. However, the success stories did not bear witness to the

war in Syria and the women's forced displacement, rather they were testimonies to the work of the WSS and the psychological crises that the women went through.

The second issue is that these humanitarian testimonies inform us more about the moral judgments of the witness (humanitarian employees) rather than the lived experience of the people in question. These WSS success stories also tell us about the moral judgments of the funding organizations that are translated into standards and guidelines, rather than the lived experience of the participants. A key issue for foreign aid donors and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) is that they are often unable to directly reach their targeted beneficiaries in areas controlled by the Syrian regime. As a result, they have to operate through the "aid chain". This practice is not limited to Syria, as INGOs often rely on this strategy when they operate in hard-to-reach areas (See Bebbington 2005). Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan (2012) argue that this practice creates uncertainties, as aid organizations relay on intermediaries to implement their programs and ask these same intermediaries for updates about these programs (288). The employees at the WSS are therefore often unable to show the relationship between their work and the outcome they achieved in the lives of the participants. For instance, in the second success story, one of the achievements that a WSS employee mentioned was that the participant began working as a teacher. They cited this as a solution to her issue, as being financially independent helped her to support her children. However, it is unclear how the WSS helped her to become a teacher. Similarly, in the first story, the employees mentioned that the participant was able to purchase a sewing kit from a job she already had before she attended the WSS. Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan (2012) state that the uncertainties NGOs face make them function in a way that resemble the work of culture-producing organizations such as

women's fashion companies (289). Meaning that they cannot provide a clear cause-and-effect relationship between the methods they use and the results they achieve (289). The WSS employees cannot show how increasing self-confidence, improving communication skills, and getting a job, can solve structural causes that shape the participants lives. This not only impacts how employees represent women in these testimonies, it impacts the employees and the funding organization's abilities to understand the structural causes that shapes the lives of participants. As I have argued, the identities of WSS participants are reduced to victims subjected to individual suffering. In the next section, I argue that the WSS success stories overlook the collective suffering of women and contribute to the de-politicization of the war in Syria.

G. Success Stories and the De-Politicization of the War in Syria

In the previous section, I argued the WSS employees use the language of psychology in success stories to address the suffering of women, in which the WSS participants are reduced to victims. I also argued that success stories become testimonies for the work of the WSS, rather than drawing attention to the lived experience of the participants. In this section, I will argue that this approach does not only impact WSS employees and the funding organization's abilities to understand and represent the lives of WSS participants, but also contributes to the de-politicization of the war in Syria.

Hickel (2014) has explored the "girl effect" – the concept that the investment in the capacities of women and girls is the key to ending poverty and achieving economic growth in the global south. The author explains that, in this approach, NGO employees shift the blame from structural causes to "local forms of personhood and kinship"

(1356). As a result, NGO employees illustrate women and girls as the ones who are responsible for saving themselves from issues that are often caused by external causes. This logic is evident in the models for WSS success stories, where participants are expected to change their own situations. They are expected to help themselves through attending skill-based classes and psychosocial support sessions, getting a job, gaining self-confidence, and/or improving their communication skills. Women's success is portrayed as a linear process, where women are both the cause of, and the solution to, their situations. Kloster writes:

Today's heightened focus on targets and indicators, measurability and effectiveness, that dominates the development landscape has affected NGO practices. Such managerial demands shift the focus of NGOs from social transformation and power relations to success stories and strategies that can bolster their brand. This has also led NGOs to approach gender in a de-politicised way, moving from the relational and political approach of the 1970s and 1980s towards a more technical and economics-centred approach (2020, 9).

The WSS employees reduce women's rights and gender issues in success stories to "the case", detached from her social, political, and economic contexts. They drop out any structural causes outside of the scope of their services', and focus instead on the lives of the individual women. For instance, in the second success story, the WSS employees mentioned that "the case" suffered from a psychological crisis after her husband took her children away from her. The story was framed around the psychological crisis that the participant went through, and how the WSS helped her overcome it, rather than highlighting the legal context that contributed to her suffering. Women in Syria have the same constitutional and civil rights as men, however, three particular laws (family law, citizenship law, and criminal law) have gender biases that subordinate women (Maktabi

2010, 599).⁹ Maktabi notes that “[f]or the majority population of Muslim Syrians, family law grants the husband the right to have four wives, unilateral divorce and allows the practice of repudiation” (2010, 599). WSS employees do not mention these laws or the impact they have on the lives of participants, as they are beyond the scope of their services. Instead, employees focus on micro-level analysis to explain the participant situation. Similarly, in the third success story, it was mentioned that the participant was displaced several times, but the story is framed around how her husband forced her to move with him, rather than around the collective violence that contributed to her displacement. Likewise, the WSS employees used the participants body – mentioning that she became very thin and weak – to showcase her suffering. Fassin (2008) explains, “[i]n the case of humanitarian testimony, the defense of victims combined with the appeal to emotion have long resulted in the body being used as the preeminent site of manifestation of violence and the object best placed to demonstrate suffering” (553). In chapter one, I have shown how women’s bodies are disciplined and reformed to produce good citizens. Here, I would add that success stories also rely on the bodies of women to show their suffering, which contribute to the de-politicization of war. Violence and suffering become associated to the individual woman, in which women are shown as the one responsible for eliminating their suffering through the help of WSSs. This not to argue that the participants do not have any agency, however, my point is that this approach contributes to the de-politicization of war, because it

⁹ In February 2019, the Syrian People’s Assembly passed amendments to more than 60 articles concerned with the personal status law of 1953, that regulate issues related to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody (Sadek 2019). The Syrian People’s Assembly claimed that these amendments will benefit women. However, concerned lawyers and jurists have argued that these amendments are insufficient to achieve any fundamental changes to improve women’s situations and rights in Syria (Sadek 2019). See <https://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/syria-womens-rights-in-light-of-new-amendments-to-syrian-personal-status-law/>

overlooks the structural causes that caused the women's suffering. It also takes away the blame from those that are responsible for the collective suffering of women, placing it instead on "local forms of personhood and kinship" (Hickel 2014, 1356).

H. Final Word

Success stories as forms of humanitarian testimonies "do not reflect the social world but rather transform it" (Fassin 2008, 555). The representation of women as traumatized victims has material power on how WSS participants think about themselves, as well as on their context. Hansen (2013) in *Constructing Identities in UN Refugee Camps: The Politics of Language, Culture and Humanitarian Assistance* explains:

Identity is constructed through discursive practices that are mediated by sociopolitical contexts. From this view, D/discourses that characterize refugee culture as patriarchal, refugee men as idle, or refugee women as over-worked produce particular identities for the refugees. Since D/discourses have the power to create, legitimate, and naturalize knowledge, identities, and realities (see, e.g., Weedon, 1997), the portrayal of refugee culture as patriarchal and oppressive to women has material power (103).

The way the WSS employees represent the WSS participants in their narratives has the power and ability to shape identities and realities of WSS participants. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to how NGOs and humanitarian agents represent their subjects, and how this representation shapes their social world. In her article on women's rights, Ferguson (2015) argues that the language of rights that upper-middle-class feminists used in pre-2011 feminism discourses in Syria "is more than just a collection of words, to be easily invoked or set aside — rather, it produces subjects who are deeply committed to its claims" (2015, 572). Similarly, I argue that the language of psychology that the WSS employees use to address the suffering of WSS participants

should be critically viewed. My aim was to show how the use of the language of psychology to address the suffering of participants impacts the abilities of the employees and the funding organizations to understand and represent the lives of the participants. I have showed that the WSS employees reduce the identities of the WSS participants to victims, without citing structural political, economic, and social causes that shapes the participants lives. I have also argued that the use of the language of psychology, and the focus on individual bodies of women to address suffering, contribute to the de-politicization of the war in Syria.

CONCLUSION

Throughout my thesis, I pointed out issues that can help WSSs better understand and represent the lives of the women who attend these spaces. I aimed to show how women's identities and conception of gender are changing along with the social meanings that humanitarian institutions attach to gendered interventions. I also aimed to contribute to "more inclusive political imaginaries" that take into consideration the everyday struggle of Syrian women,¹⁰ starting with Syrian official discourses regarding women, to women's experiences of displacement. In my thesis, I argued that the power relations the WSS has with other institutions impacts what gender conceptions they articulate through their services and trainings, and on how they represent their participants. In chapter one, I explored the gender conceptions that the WSS in Halbouni deploys through their services, and the role it plays in shaping participants' conception of gender. I showed how the ideas this WSS articulates are conflicting gender conceptions, which are shaped by WSS power relations internally, and with other institutions, such as their funding organizations. I explored women's empowerment approaches, comparing it with the official discourse that the WSS reflects in their services and trainings. I showed that the gender conceptions the WSS articulates are the product of a historical moment, where gender roles are changing as a result of the war that followed the Syrian uprising. In chapter two, I presented some models of WSS success stories to argue that the WSS employees reduce the identities of

¹⁰ Ferguson in her article about pre-2011 feminist discourses in Syria wrote, "[a]nd for Syrians, who will someday have to embark on a vast remaking of the fabric of politics and social life, thinking closely about how to foster broader solidarities and more inclusive political imaginaries may prove to be more important than ever" (2011, 572). My aim was to do exactly this.

the participants to victims, detached from their social, political, and economic contexts. I have shown that representing women as traumatized victims has material power on how the WSS participants think about themselves, and on the overall context in which they live. I argued that the way the WSS represents its participants not only shapes the women's conception of themselves and their social worlds, but contributes to the de-politicization of the Syrian war.

Ethnography and fieldwork have played a central role in this thesis. I tried to understand what matters to the women I worked with through experiencing what it is like to learn through the classes at the WSS in Halbouni, and through hearing stories about the marriages, displacements, divorces, and life stories, of the participants. While I had expected to hear these kinds of stories during my fieldwork, I still found myself often overwhelmed by the experiences participants had of displacement, death, and loss. One particular story brought me to tears. It was the story of Rabah, a grandmother of 16 grandchildren. She has not seen most of her children and grandchildren in over five years. Two of her children were arrested by the Syrian military intelligence in their hometown in Deir ez-Zor and she had not heard anything about them since. One of her daughters now lives as a refugee with her husband and children in Turkey. Her house, where all her children were born and raised, was destroyed in a bombing. She was displaced and, at the time of my fieldwork, was living with her sister, and her sister's family, in Damascus. On a personal note, Rabah is one of the most strong and resilient women I have had the pleasure of meeting. During an interview with her, I asked her about a major news event that has greatly affected her life. I was expecting to hear about her displacement, the bombing of her house, or about the detention of her children. However, the event she told me was not what I expected. Rabah said:

It was when my husband married a second wife. After we went through a very hard time with the detention of our two sons, my husband was diagnosed with cancer. After two years he was healed. When he got better, he decided to marry a widow that lost her husband two years ago. When he first came to ask for my hand for marriage, my dad refused. I was very young, but I loved him. He fought for me and in the end my father had to accept our marriage, because he knew that I would run away with him if he didn't accept to let me marry him. We were married for more than 40 years. When we first got married he had nothing, but we built a house and a family together. We managed to send all our children to school and buy our own house. I even stayed with him when he was diagnosed with cancer. But he broke my heart after he married a second wife. After everything we went through I could not believe he just married another woman.

Stories such as this were emotionally overwhelming for me, but during my fieldwork I also had the chance to experience firsthand a space where women built friendships, supported each other, and learned new skills. I was touched by the resilience, friendship, and determination of these women. While Rabah's story brought me to tears, Alia's story was one that showed me the determination and resilience of the WSS participants. Alia, a woman in her 60s, was illiterate. She never got married, instead she took care of her mother and father for her entire life, and, after her parents passed away, she continued to live in their house. During the Syrian war, her only brother decided to sell everything he owned in Syria to travel abroad. She could not write or read but she trusted her brother. He asked her to sign a paper. He claimed that it was something he needed to do some official paperwork at the municipality, but it turned out that the document enabled him to take legal action on her behalf. He sold their family house and took the money. She promised herself since that day that she will never let anyone deceive her again. She joined an adult literacy class at a different WSS than the one I conducted my fieldwork in. She was able to learn how to read and write and she passed the official test for the primary education stage.

I was very careful not to think about women such as Rabah and Alia as victims. It may be surprising to some that the war is not always part of the women's conversations, or that one of the hardest things Rabah went through was her husband's second marriage. While the Syrian war has greatly shaped these women lives, we need to think about these women as more than just victims of war and conflict, and we need to think about Syrian women's identities as more than just a product of traditions, customs, and religion. The work of Lila Abu-Lughod and Saba Mahmood are very important to remind us that liberal approaches are not always enough to understand women whose lives have been shaped by non-liberal discourses. However, we also must remember that love, marriage, paid labor, and freedom, still matter in these women's lives, but in other ways. If we really aim to "empower" these women, we must, as scholars and humanitarian employees, take the time to understand what matters to these women, understand the broader contexts in which they live, reflect on how our academic and humanitarian practices shape their social world, and how the assumptions and pre-determined expectations undermine the positive contribution that can be made. Anthropologists, as Clifford Geertz (1973) notes, use the microscopic knowledge they gain through their fieldwork to understand and think about macroscopic issues, and this what I aimed to achieve through this thesis. Although the experience of the women I worked with is embodied in gender relations, they share many everyday experiences of political oppression, and other forms of violence that children, men, adolescents, and members of LGBTQ+ communities in Syria also experience. Good intentions are not enough in humanitarian interventions. Thus, it is critical for humanitarian interventions to pay attention to how they represent and understand the lives of those they seek to help, because their representation has material power that, as the case of the WSS in

Halbouni shows, can contribute to the de-politicization of Syrians. The stories shared by the WSS employees of the participants take away the blame from those who cause the collective suffering of these women. And, if humanitarian interventions truly want to help women in meaningful, lasting ways, they need to address the economic, social, political systems, and cultural power relations, that shape women's lives.

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