

‘What Does the Term Refugee Mean to You?’: Perspectives from Syrian Refugee Women in Lebanon

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In this article, I address the issue of ‘refugee’ denomination from the perspective of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon and argue that traditional representations of refugees shape negative interpretations of their own conditions, affect their wellbeing and constrain their abilities to move forward and build a dignified existence in exile. I identified four major areas in my respondents’ perceptions of the term refugee: loss, balancing past life and present reality, humanitarianism and host communities. Apart from voicing the views of one of the most marginalized groups in society, this article highlights the connections between refugee representations, policy making and empowerment.

Keywords: Refugee definition, refugee women, refugee representation, Syria, Lebanon

Introduction

Among the most popular buzzwords of our time, ‘refugee’ is certainly one that does not need much explanation or introduction. Images of people fleeing conflicts, usually empty-handed women and children immortalized on their way to safety, have been flooding news reports and TV programmes throughout the twentieth century. Scholars have analysed that humanitarian representations of refugee communities and individuals often work to depoliticize the ontologically political nature of their status of refugees and to silence their histories, identities and voices (Malkki 1996; Rajaram 2002). These practices continue to be widespread even in the face of exceptional demonstrations of resilience and personal initiative by individual refugees and displaced communities. Recently, the experience of Syrian refugees has given the lie to such misleading humanitarian dehistoricizations and victimizations of people who escape conflicts. Indeed, Syrian refugees have embarked on perilous journeys across seas and securitized borders, walking long

distances along the Balkan route towards Western European countries and pushing the humanitarian issue into the global agenda. In so doing, they have also defied frequent instrumentalizations of their vulnerability by various actors worldwide and contributed to increasing our familiarity with refugee crises.

While these facts have enabled novel approaches to make inroads into traditional understandings of the refugee issue, there is still limited knowledge as to how the meanings that the term ‘refugee’ has assumed within certain circles may affect refugees’ lives. Most importantly, thus far, the perspective refugees hold of this term has been unexplored in scholarship. In ordinary parlance, the word ‘refugee’ is so imbued with derogatory meanings that, I argue, it has become a form of stigma. Any word can hold either positive or negative connotations, depending on the context within which it is used. This article demonstrates that refugee is one of those words that constitutes a heavy burden for those who have been labelled as such. It is so because many refugees not only experience the negative feelings of the labellers towards them, but have also interiorized the victimization and derision to which they are subject. My study reveals that this situation can be disempowering for refugees and may reinforce stereotypes that cut across gendered readings of crisis situations.

Because refugee women are all too often both stigmatized and silenced actors of humanitarian crises, the argument of this article will be supported by evidence collected through interviews with a group of Syrian female refugees in Lebanon. By utilizing a bottom-up approach that puts forward their voices, this article seeks to deconstruct top-down stigmatizations of Syrian refugee women and let their own narratives prevail over those imposed by the outside. In a broader sense, such an attempt is aimed at enabling refugee women in general to regain a dignified sense of identity in spite of restrictive and detrimental meanings conveyed by the term ‘refugee’.

Debating the Term ‘Refugee’

The concept of ‘refugee’ is not universally understood in the same terms. Among dozens of meanings that have been affixed to it, the most commonly accepted is the definition of the UN Convention (and its 1967 Protocol), which stipulates that a refugee is a person who

owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country (UNHCR 2010: 14).

At the core of this definition is the protection of the individual from persecution—a view that has been subject to study and criticism by scholars from a large spectrum of disciplines. Departing from, and in defiance of, a mere

understanding of refugeehood as dependent upon persecution, Shacknove argues that

refugees are, in essence, persons whose basic needs are unprotected by their country of origin, who have no remaining recourse other than to seek international restitution of their needs, and who are so situated that international assistance is possible (Shacknove 1985: 277).

Shacknove's interpretation of the term 'refugee' expands the legal basis on which individuals applying for refugee status may be granted protection, and stresses the centrality of recognizing a state's failure in the fulfilment of citizens' needs as a basic principle in the determination of refugee status.

Zetter (1991: 44) highlights how the categorization of refugees in public policy activates a process of politicization of the refugee identity that responds to a definite political agenda and determines how people will be conveniently conceived. Categorization is directly related to processes of labelling that 'involve relationships of power' where 'more powerful actors ... use frames and labels to influence how particular issues and categories of people are regarded and treated' (Moncrieffe and Eyben 2007: 2). From this, it follows that labels can have an impact on the 'social experiences' of vulnerable subjects (Green *et al.* 2005: 212). Although a branch of the literature on refugees tends to emphasize the resilience of forcibly displaced people, the insecurity caused by forced displacement to a foreign country is associated with conditions of vulnerability. In this study, vulnerability is viewed as encompassing

several interrelated dimensions: individual capacities and actions; the availability or lack of intimate and instrumental support; and neighborhood and community resources that may facilitate or hinder personal coping and interpersonal relationships (Mechanic and Tanner 2007: 1222).

Due to its gendered nature, the concept of vulnerability has also been used to investigate how crisis contexts impact women (Ni Aolain 2011). In the domain of forced displacement, Nusair (2013: 68) notes that 'refugee women constitute an extreme form of the "other" that is both vulnerable and an object of domination'. Within the broad framework of the 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) doctrine, Wilcox (2015) discusses how the objectification of bodies presupposes a differentiation between vulnerable bodies in need of protection and powerful bodies who can offer protection, provided that those in need are worth it. The dualism counterposing vulnerable bodies to powerful bodies is at odds with Fineman's (2008) argument that vulnerability is an intrinsic condition of humanity and, therefore, unavoidable to any subject. While Fineman has the merit of having spotlighted flaws in the ways liberal states conceive their roles in society and perform their duties to reduce social inequalities, her conceptualization of vulnerability has been criticized for devoting 'insufficient attention to the different sources and

kinds of vulnerability' (Mackenzie 2014: 34). This criticism acquires more relevance when analysing women's vulnerability in situations of crisis whose understanding necessitates an inquiry into both new and 'pre-existing conditions' (Ni Aolain 2011: 5) in order to provide responses that can fully address women's needs and difficulties.

In crisis contexts where 'ordinary' levels of human vulnerability are heightened, labels can operate in conjunction with other factors and generate stigma. Goffman (1963: 3) suggests that stigma refers 'to an attribute that is deeply discrediting'. Drawing from Goffman's definition, Link and Phelan (2001) conceive stigma in terms of a coalescence of five elements: (i) labelling, (ii) stereotyping, (iii) separation, (iv) status loss and (v) discrimination. In the views of these authors, the creation of stigma is a result of social, economic and political power that allows us to take distance from them based on specific differences that we have identified as important characteristics of ourselves or our communities and that other individuals or groups do not possess. Visible differences include physical elements, as bodies are 'sites in which socially constructed differences are mapped onto human beings' (Brown and Gershon 2017: 1). By virtue of these differences, Link and Phelan argue that people are set apart and excluded.

This illustration of the process that leads to the creation of stigma follows a linear path in which each component is connected with the other in a consequential relationship. If we abstract Link and Phelan's components from this chronologically rigid structure and consider, for example, 'status loss' as an initial step rather than a consequence of the previous three occurrences, then we can intend the term 'refugee' as a form of stigmatization. There is a direct correlation between a negative change in the financial assets available to someone and stigma. In Link and Phelan's interpretation, people experience stigmatization as a consequence of status loss and discrimination caused by labelling, stereotyping and separation.

Allsopp *et al.* (2014: 19) have shown that 'asylum seekers and refugees experience [stigma] as a result of their poverty'. When poverty affects large groups and communities that have previously been victims of stereotyping, separation and discrimination are likely outcomes. This dynamic becomes clearer when looking at, for instance, the experience of Syrian men who have been swelling the ranks of cheap labour in Lebanon over the past 40 years. Chalcraft (2005) explains how, throughout and after the Lebanese civil war, Syrian workers in Lebanon were exploited, employed at lower wages than Lebanese people and mostly without formal contracts. At the same time, they were stereotyped as uneducated invaders and perceived by some local residents 'as a threat to the civilized culture and identity of Lebanon itself' (Chalcraft 2005: 29).

Stereotypical ideas of Syrian workers in Lebanon were strongly gendered, generally being used to describe only men. Such stereotypes have been reinforced by the stigmatizing attributes assigned to the term 'refugee'—a condition that marks the experience of millions of Syrians in Lebanon today.

Contrary to the masculine character of the Syrian worker cliché, the term 'refugee' conveys all-encompassing pejorative meanings that affect the subject regardless of their gender identity, individual characteristics or personal ideologies. Despite this, women have become the face of refugeehood to a larger degree than men. In light of the particular feminine features that distinguish the term 'refugee', it is important to ask what effect can stigmatization have on Syrian refugee women? Although gender has long been overlooked in the assessment of the impact of displacement, women's experiences of war, flight and resettlement differ strongly from those of men (Deacon and Sullivan 2009). This new awareness highlights the need to redefine language and practices of the refugee domain in a way that is not harmful or stigmatizing for refugees, but, rather, helps their voices to be heard. A change in this direction can begin through an exploration of the meanings that the term 'refugee' and its stigmatizations have assumed among Syrian women. While the academic debate on an appropriate definition of 'refugee' is still ongoing, the meanings and implications of this term for the individuals who are primarily concerned with it remain underexplored.

The accounts of survivors may reveal truths that can be puzzling and at odds with mainstream perceptions of their experiences and needs. Therefore, their willingness and right to talk about their feelings and suffering have often been dismissed out of hand, by attaching to their testimonies attributes such as 'unimaginable' and 'unspeakable', which 'served as an excuse for neither imagining it nor speaking about it' (Edkins 2003: 2). In attempting to rectify such a tendency, in the next sections, I will discuss the findings of this study and demonstrate how the adoption of a bottom-up perspective that uses the narratives of displaced people to define refugeehood is instrumental to the implementation of empowerment programmes that prioritize the needs of those implicated in these processes. Before engaging in this analysis, I will provide some background information to the Syrian humanitarian crisis in order to contextualize the study.

Research Context

The bedrock of this study is the Syrian war, which developed in 2011 from peaceful grassroots mobilization against the long-standing dictatorship of the Assad regime. Although these events must be situated within the broader framework of the revolutions that had dislodged deep-rooted rulers in Tunisia and Egypt between late 2010 and early 2011, the reasons that led the Syrian people to defy the regime's authority and demand freedom and justice in the streets must be sought in the sectarian fragmentation of the social fabric, the economic malaise of the vast majority of the Syrian population and the dynamics of the regime's oppression (Hinnebusch and Imady 2018). The response of the regime to these demonstrations took the form of brutal crackdowns that generated further outrage among protesters and determined the transformation of the uprising into an armed conflict.

In order to escape the violence and save their lives, 6.1 million people have relocated within Syria since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, while 5.5 million people have left Syria for other countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq (OCHA 2018). With a population of 4.4 million inhabitants,

Lebanon has taken in 1.5 million Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria, accounting for 30 per cent of Lebanon's population — the highest concentration per capita of refugees in the world (European Commission 2018: 1).

This is in addition to 450,000 registered Palestinian refugees, most of whom were relocated to concrete shelter camps soon after their displacement to Lebanon in 1948 (UNRWA 2014).

The Lebanese state has refused to build official camps for Syrian refugees, similar to those in place for Palestinian refugees. This decision bespeaks the attempt by the political class to avoid a replication of the Palestinian refugee experience that may involve permanent settlement of Syrian refugees, and the polarization of sectarian divisions within Lebanon's multi-confessional social fabric (Rainey 2015). In fact, refugees are not welcomed in Lebanon by sections of the host communities who still consider Palestinian refugees as the principal culprit responsible for the Lebanese civil war (1975–90) due to their deep entanglement in the conflict (see Sayigh 1994).

Syrian refugees in Lebanon reside in different types of accommodations: (i) collective centres or multi-storey apartment blocks managed and funded by international or local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) where each flat hosts many families; (ii) Informal Tented Settlements (ITS); (iii) small rooms in shared apartments or apartments in Palestinian camps; and (iv) garage, apartment and house rentals. An assessment of the conditions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon found that, since the beginning of the crisis, their 'economic vulnerability has worsened, with more than half of refugees living in extreme poverty' (UNHCR *et al.* 2017).

The Syrian humanitarian crisis has put further strain on the weak Lebanese economy and has severely tested Lebanese hospitality (Thorleifsson 2016). Evictions of refugees from various municipalities and threats of repatriations by some political leaders have become more frequent since 2017 (Human Rights Watch 2018). There is also a vast array of gender-specific issues facing Syrian refugees in Lebanon. It has been reported that Syrian refugee women in Lebanon are subject to gender-based violence and deal with extreme economic, social and psychological pressure (Amnesty International 2016). Notwithstanding these findings, but breaking with a widespread tendency to overemphasize the victimization of women in contexts of war and displacement while downplaying their agency, Asaf (2017: 2) has demonstrated how 'Syrian refugee women are braving all the challenges and making endeavors to come out as survivors'. With this premise in mind, I turn now to discuss the methodology and findings of this study.

Research Methodology and Design

The research design of this study draws upon narrative analysis practices apt to gather, probe and represent phenomena through the examination of how they are experienced and perceived by those involved in, or affected by, them (Riessman 1993). Following such a rationale, this study entails a more empowerment-orientated research framed in the context of ‘theory-building versus theoretical imposition’ (Lather 1991: 72).

Findings emerged from the analysis of data collected in Lebanon through semi-structured interviews with 68 Syrian refugee women between April and September 2014, as part of my PhD fieldwork. The sample consisted of women aged between 18 and 60 years old and with different educational levels, marital and refugee statuses, religious affiliations, places of origin in Syria and arrival times in Lebanon, as detailed in Table 1. Most of the respondents for the interviews were recruited among beneficiaries and workshops attendants of three main NGOs that facilitated my fieldwork. Prospective respondents were collectively introduced to the research in the workshop room and asked whether they were interested in partaking in the project without coercion and/or prejudice. The interview time and venue were then arranged with those who were agreeable. Other respondents were invited to participate in the research through snowball methods, whereby interview respondents pointed me in the direction of their friends and/or relatives creating useful research networks that produced ‘interactional’ knowledge (Noy 2008).

The study was conducted in parts of the Northern Governorate of Tripoli and the Akkar region, the city of Zahle and its environs in the Bekaa Valley, and some quarters of Beirut, including the Christian district of Dekwaneh and the Palestinian camp of Shatila. The selection of the study sites depended upon considerations of the security, religious and political dimensions of these areas whose multifaceted composition made them ideal spaces to explore the interactions between refugees and host communities. To ensure that high ethical standards were maintained during the recruitment phase and throughout the project, prior to my trip to Lebanon, I sought, and successfully obtained, ethical approval to conduct this research from University College Dublin. The interviews were audio-recorded upon approval of participants. To protect the participants’ identities, the recordings were anonymized using alias names, encrypted and saved in my cloud account.

Sixty-seven interviews were run in Arabic and one in English; the latter was conducted with respondent Lana, who had a strong command of the English language. Only in Tripoli were the interviews facilitated by language assistants who helped me to formulate questions in Arabic and to become more familiar with the most appropriate language devices to continue the interviews in the other sites of study on my own. The support of language assistants was essential to overcome my initial fear of not being able to simplify

Table 1

Characteristics of the study population		
	Description	Number of respondents
Age	20 and under	2
	21–30	27
	31–40	21
	41–50	15
	51–60	3
Provenance	Aleppo	20
	Damascus	12
	Hasake	7
	Homs	19
	Hama	1
	Idlib	8
	Latakia	1
Arrival in Lebanon	2011	1
	2012	23
	2013	34
	2014	10
Marital status	Married	53
	Widow/missing husband	7
	Separated	2
	Divorced	1
	Single	5
Children	0	7
	1	5
	2–3	31
	4–5	12
	> 5	13
Educational level	Illiterate	6
	Primary	23
	Intermediate	22
	Secondary	11
	University	6
Employment status in pre-war Syria	Housewife	51
	Employed	6
	Self-employed	5
	Student	3
	Agricultural worker	3
Religion	Sunni	52
	Shi'a	1
	Alawite	1
	Christian	14
Dwelling in Lebanon	Houses/apartments	40
	Garages	6
	Collective centre	5
	ITS	10
	Palestinian camps	7

academic language effectively in Arabic with respondents who may not have been familiar with such jargon.

The analysis of the interviews was carried out through the qualitative method of coding, which allowed me to extrapolate the information relevant to the research case from the raw data and translate the patterns identified into theoretical narrative (Saldaña 2013). First, I translated and transcribed the audio-recorded data from Arabic into English. Using review tools available in Microsoft Office Word, I then assigned names to recurring language, ideas and themes observed throughout the English transcripts and clustered together the items that presented commonalities. After this, I created umbrella categories where some concepts coexisted in relational terms under a broader descriptive idea. Finally, I developed a comprehensive theoretical structure in which all concepts harmoniously linked to each other.

‘In Their Shoes’: Understanding the Term ‘Refugee’ and Its Meanings

Participants’ responses to the question ‘What does the word “refugee” mean to you?’ show that their understandings of the term ‘refugee’ were constructed in relation to four aspects of their experiences of displacement: (i) an overwhelming sense of loss, (ii) memories of the past and the difficulties of the present in exile, (iii) the relationships with the host communities in Lebanon and (iv) the role of civil society organizations and governmental agencies in the Syrian humanitarian crisis. In the following sections, I discuss all of these four aspects, highlighting the meanings and implications of being refugees for Syrian women.

‘Refugee’ as a Metonymy of Loss

This is a broad category that combines several forms of ‘losses’ for respondents, ranging from the loss of their loved ones to the loss of their properties and family bond. Some women shared stories of loss that included memories of siblings, husbands, mothers, fathers and friends who had disappeared or had been tortured and killed by different parties involved in the conflict. Respondent Najma described in full detail the circumstances in which her husband was murdered by regime forces and added:

They threw his body into the street in front of a school, to set an example for others. The students were shocked at the sight of his disfigured corpse. We carried his body and gave him a proper funeral. May his soul rest in peace. ... He participated in some of the early demonstrations but never held a weapon.

For Najma and many other respondents, the term ‘refugee’ did not define only their present experiences of exile. Rather, it was also a reminder of the tragic events that had been responsible for creating a climate of fear for their own safety during the uprising, and that had determined their decisions to

escape to Lebanon. In the accounts of some women, ‘refugee’ evoked another painful loss—that of their homes as a result of ‘destruction’ (Dana), ‘being thrown out from [it]’ (Sobieh) or ‘having abandoned [it]’ (Najma). Respondents’ narratives highlighted how their flights to Lebanon marked the passage from ownership to dispossession, from settlement to nomadism and from the status of citizens to one of refugees.

The new reality of refugeehood was often described in relation to impermanence, precariousness, solitude and a lack of care on behalf of relatives and society at large. Respondent Bint Philip, who lived in a rented house in Zahle, subsumed all these ideas by saying ‘we are similar to homeless people in Lebanon’. In Arab societies where family and community support play a central role in the lives of individuals, the concept of homelessness is particularly charged with references to the dissolution of family and social bonds by which women were seemingly more affected than their male relatives. Various interviewees explained that, in line with local traditions, upon their marriages, they had relocated to their husbands’ houses, which were often found in districts that were different from the areas where their families lived. When the conflict began, these women followed their husbands or travelled on their own to reach the closest sanctuary to their habitual location in Syria.

The search for safety activated a process of family dismemberment that was also aggravated by a lack of financial and technological means to communicate with their relatives. International phone calls from Lebanon to Syria or to other countries were too expensive for many refugees who could barely afford to buy food. Moreover, phone networks were often shut down as part of strategies of war adopted by one party or another. This accentuated a sense of emotional disarray that dotted their reality of refugeehood. Nusair’s (2013: 72) study of Iraqi refugee women reveals how ‘the rupture of the social fabric at the family and neighbourhood levels has produced the sensation of being adrift’. Similarly, in response to the fragmentation of their families and a deepening sense of guilt for securing their safety in Lebanon while other relatives had remained behind in Syria for various reasons, some respondents tended towards social withdrawal and alienation in exile.

Other interviewees felt that becoming a refugee went hand in hand with the loss of their social and economic status. Through her reiterated sentence ‘I belonged to the upper middle class of Syrian society’, uttered in perfect English, respondent Lana ensured that I understood the manifold ways in which she was ‘different’ from the majority of ‘desperate’ Syrian refugees in Lebanon. In so doing, she distanced herself from them and provided a rationale for her refusal to be associated with the refugee label that underscored how discrimination against refugees stemmed also from inside their national community:

I consider myself as a displaced person. Displacement has happened many times throughout history. For example, a lot of German people were forcibly

displaced during the Second World War. They were forced to leave their country and go, for example, to the United States of America and start a new life there. So, I regard myself as a displaced person. A person who fled because I wanted a better life [far] away from the chaos and the harm of the war. That's a right of any person in the world. . . . In my country the word refugee has very humiliating connotations, especially when you belong to the upper middle class like me. However, a lot of people are applying for refugee status even if they belong to the same social class as me.

While Lana had not internalized the refugee label and preferred to be considered as a displaced person, the separation from her family who was still living in Syria along with her sense of insecurity and her suffering for what was lost took a high emotional toll on her. These sentiments were also pervading other respondents, being particularly prominent among those who were directly exposed to dehumanizing practices operated by wider society.

'Refugee' as Dealing with the Past and Facing Present Challenges

The moral and physical scars that the war had imprinted on respondents were only part of a large set of experiences that the term 'refugee' subsumed. As they attempted to 'reconstruct their identities to encompass their losses, embrace new environments and position themselves between home and host cultures' (Puvimanasinghe *et al.* 2014: 70), respondents had to come to terms with the radical changes that their lives had undergone since they had become refugees in Lebanon. One of these changes pertained to their endeavours to reproduce their past social habits in the context of exile. Some women remembered with nostalgia their pre-war practices of taking daily breaks from their domestic activities to visit female relatives and neighbours with whom they enjoyed chatting about various personal matters while sipping coffee and/or playing cards.

The women interviewed were very wary of their new environment and displayed a deep sense of distrust towards local residents, often as a result of the poor treatment that they had received by a portion of the host population in their sporadic interactions. Security concerns took a toll on some respondents' willingness and ability to interact with people outside of their dwellings. This was particularly true of those women from ITS who spent most of their time inside their tents where it was felt things were safer. ITS were located in the countryside, far away from urban centres, where street lights were rare and camp dwellers were more exposed to attacks conducted by ill-intentioned people. Many respondents regarded themselves as 'prisoners' of the camp and these feelings impinged even more negatively upon their perceptions of their condition as refugees.

All of my interviewees agreed that, in Syria, things were different before the conflict. Um Hassan from Khan Shaykhun, a town in the Idlib Governorate, emphasized how 'the government in Syria was strong and

used to safeguard [Syrians'] right [to security]'. Sana, the only Shi'a respondent in this study, elaborated on the actual implications that the Assad's top-down system of control and securitization had on women's lives:

As a woman, you could go out whenever and wherever you wanted. No one would attack or harass you. You could sleep alone in your house [without your husband] and no one would break in. You were safe everywhere in Syria, whether in a car or walking [in the street]. No one would intervene in your privacy.

This was echoed by Leila, a mother of 11 children, who recalled how 'women used to sit on [their] front porches until one or two in the morning without anybody ever blinking at [them]'. If any impairment existed to women's freedom to navigate public spaces autonomously, it would likely be attributed to the conservative traditions of some families or, in general, to narrow conceptions of women's place in society which might have worked to restrict women's rights. As Houda, a Sunni Muslim woman in her early forties, expounded

[i]t was very safe for a woman to travel alone but our cultural norms didn't allow that. So, I was always accompanied by a family member, such as my mother-in-law, my brother, my husband.

The war in Syria has curtailed national security, destroyed public infrastructures and caused the suspension of state services in many areas, severe food shortages and the rise in basic commodity prices (World Bank 2017). As Jilan, an ITS dweller from Homs, pointed out: 'we left Syria because of the financial crisis that didn't allow us and our children to have a normal life.' 'Normal' is an adjective that many interviewees used to describe their pre-war lives and to stress the fact that refugeehood in Lebanon represented a deviation from their ideas of 'normality', which respondent Kausar from the collective centre in Beddawe camp defined in relation to having 'a house and a car like we used to and like everyone else here'.

Despite the 'abnormality' of their refugee conditions, a section of my respondents tried to establish some sort of 'normality' in their disrupted lives in exile and feel 'less refugee-like' by recreating a *modus vivendi* that had some resemblance to their pre-war lives. An example of this is the fact that all the mothers interviewed sought to ensure education for their little children, even outside of the camps, in order to minimize the impact of war and displacement upon them, while accomplishing their pre-war duties of care as mothers. In the same spirit, some women endeavoured to find a job to either supplement their husbands' meagre incomes or support their families by themselves. This was often in contradiction with customary gender roles that they had upheld in Syria, where the majority of the women interviewed had either never had an employment or quit their jobs when they got married.

On various occasions, respondents' attempts to access the job market in Lebanon were met with injustice, severe exploitation and harassment for the simple fact that they were Syrian refugee women. Men's abusive behaviour towards these women in the workplace was a strong obstacle to their attempts to translate efforts for survival into positive outcomes, while being simultaneously confronted with multiple social, political and economic challenges in their everyday lives. The experience of respondent Rafif is emblematic in helping to illustrate this issue. Rafif was an attractive woman in her early thirties who found a job in a sweetshop where she was assigned to packaging. During the first three days on the job, everything went well but, on the fourth day, '[her] boss' behaviour changed as he began to give [her] mischievous looks'. Feeling offended and in danger, she quit her job straight away without even demanding her wages for the three days. A similar issue affected Amina, who protested that, in Lebanon, she 'couldn't keep a job for more than two or three days because [the employers] always humiliated [her], made [her] feel like a slave, or approached [her] for sexual purposes'. She insisted that her 'dignity is much more important than money'.

In these and other interviews, personal integrity and moral stature emerged as two aspects of respondents' identities that were not negotiable. This means that, while participants in this study saw in their engagements in paid jobs an opportunity to contribute to their family finances, they were not disposed to compromise key features of their own self that had already been strongly penalized by the negative meanings that both themselves and others attach to the refugee label. Yet, while attempting to maintain their cultural identity, respondents recognized the importance of adaptation to local customs as a form of integration into, and a show of respect for, the host communities. Houda explained how some of her family's habits had changed to become more compliant with the Lebanese lifestyle:

[Back in Syria, our] children [used to] wake up early during the summer, when they [weren't] at school, and play[ed] outside. [Here] the locals are annoyed by the noise that our children make. . . . Syrian children have adapted to Lebanon's lifestyle and have become much calmer When we first got here, my husband used to tell me to lower my voice at night because both men and women work and go to bed early [in Lebanon], unlike in Syria where all of us stayed up until late at night. Now, we are all accustomed to the way of life in Lebanon and we go to sleep early.

Integration was not regarded as solely dependent upon the personal inclination of refugees towards the host population. Instead, respondents conceived integration into Lebanese society as a process that also required local communities to show empathy with refugees in light of the ordeal of their displacement and hardship in exile.

Social, Economic and Legal Constraints for Refugees in Host Communities

A significant segment of the respondent population voiced their perceptions that Syrian refugees had become a new scapegoat for Lebanese people who were frustrated at the government's failure to reduce social inequalities, create opportunities and provide efficient services to the lower classes. On various occasions, respondents reported a general attitude of some Lebanese people to blame Syrian refugees for any 'bad thing' that happened in Lebanon. These behaviours made my respondents feel unwelcomed in the new environment of exile and contributed to their articulations of negative perceptions of the term 'refugee'. In this regard, Ra'af narrated a powerful example of local residents' provocations:

If we walk in the streets or if we are in a taxi, we hear 100 insults directed at us, like 'you are suffocating us'. If we go to a pharmacy to buy an allergy medicine, a Lebanese person will enter and say 'you brought us diseases and you're asking for an allergy medicine? You're all full of diseases!' This happened to me a few days ago, in the pharmacy nearby. Wherever you walk, everything is the Syrian refugees' fault. Every disease that exists, it's the Syrians who brought it. And here is the country of rubbish! I've never seen so much rubbish. Sometimes I want to speak up but if I respond, I'll end up in a verbal fight with them.

When Ra'af calls Lebanon 'the country of rubbish', she refers to the waste crisis that has been plaguing the country for a long time and that became more acute in 2015 (Abu-Rish 2015; Stel and El-Husseini 2015). Continuous tensions among sectarian political groups brought the Lebanese parliament to a standstill,¹ making the government unable to implement effective solutions to solve deeply rooted economic issues (CANVAS 2015). While the Syrian crisis has created new avenues for some Lebanese retailers and property owners to generate income, the arrival of more than 1 million Syrian refugees has also generated inflation, increased poverty and strained public services, with the Lebanese lower classes particularly bearing the brunt of this situation (ILO 2014). These people were already neglected by the state before the crisis and have been competing with the newcomers for access to resources and job opportunities (ILO 2014).

Özatesler posits that

people employ historical categories and stigmas in nationalistic and exclusive discourses in order to attack certain other people that they perceive as threatening their self-interests, in particular in socioeconomic contexts (Özatesler 2014: 182).

The hardships experienced by some indigenous people can be considered as one of the catalysts of their unfriendly reactions to Syrian refugees and their tendency to differentiate between 'them' and 'us', as emerged in Haya's description of the insults that were directed to Syrian refugees by members of the host communities:

Here, everything is totally different from our lives in Syria before the war, and we're obviously hated by local people. ... They dislike us. ... We always hear people cursing at Syrians by saying things like 'Syrians are as popular as garbage bags' or 'Syrians are dogs' or even 'Let them go and die in their country with their president'. Before the war, Lebanon's electricity was provided by our president for free! So, why do they hate us? I don't know! ... They believe that we came here and overtook their lives and jobs but it's not true. Since the arrival of Syrian refugees, rents have increased and so has food production and locals' income. The economy of the country is growing more rapidly. All of this is because of us, but they still hate us.

The stigma from which Syrian refugees suffer in Lebanon often translates into marginalization, which is a mechanism that affects the body and the spaces in which life is performed by means of exclusion from rights, resources and privileges that are available to other segments of society. The use of the 'exclusion' framework to explain marginalization requires the acceptance that inclusion is *a conditio sine qua non* for the construction of diversity and for the exclusion of who is 'different' from a community (Hansen 2012).

Finally, the term 'refugee' reminded respondents of their vulnerability to rigid migration laws, the vagaries of Lebanese authorities and their lack of civil rights in the host country. Some respondents who resided in the collective centre at Beddawi camp spoke of police raids in their apartments that exposed those who did not have permits to stay in the country to the risk of being deported, as they had entered Lebanon illegally from unofficial crossing points. Similar feelings of precarity and vulnerability were expressed by respondents from the Jdita camp. Their stories were punctuated by references to a fire that, on 31 May 2014, destroyed their dwellings almost entirely and that was branded by the media as an act of political violence perpetrated by Lebanese people. The fire was a watershed event in the lives of these women in exile. After the fire, they received an eviction order issued by the local police, with a very close deadline, accompanied by the threat that, if the deadline was not met, the camp would be forcibly dismantled. For the women of the Jdita camp and those in the collective centre in Beddawi, the term 'refugee' was, therefore, unequivocally synonymous with suffering, rejection by the host community and continuous displacement.

Refugeehood and Humanitarianism: A Complicated Relationship

Another way in which respondents understood the word 'refugee' was in relation to the role, mission and practices of humanitarian organizations vis-à-vis the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon. This should come as no surprise when considering the conditions of poverty in which many informants lived and their reliance upon the support provided by NGOs. Although many respondents expressed their gratitude and respect for the work of some charity organizations, strong criticism was hurled at the behaviour of individual social workers and the criteria determining aid distribution. Policies and

programmes of the NGOs working in Northern Lebanon were particularly subject to condemnation, as most of them were believed to be profiteers and speculators who were only interested in obtaining funding for themselves and did not really care about refugees. Many respondents discussed how they felt humiliated in being addressed with abusive language as they waited their turn in long queues to collect food boxes. On this point, respondent Um Ziad said:

they used to call us ‘gypsies’, gypsies [‘nawar’ in Arabic] are the nomads who live in tents, they are not civilized, they are very primitive. Not to mention the swearing [yelled at Syrian refugees].

The derogatory way in which the word ‘gypsy’ is used in the accounts of Um Ziad and other interviewees offers a glimpse into the extent of discrimination against this community embedded in Syrian and Lebanese cultures. A study conducted by Al-Absi and Al-Absiová (2014) shows that gypsy communities in the Middle East live in a state of exclusion due to their condition of being non-citizens that disqualified them from any rights, including the right to political participation and cultural preservation. In his exploration of stigma and marginalization affecting gypsy communities in Turkey, Özatesler (2014: 7) defines ‘gypsiness’ as ‘an instrument that is used to constitute and order relations between people’. The condition of refugeehood had transformed Syrians into ‘gypsies’—a social category that evoked in Um Ziad ideas of instability, permanent mobility, scorn and underdevelopment. Aside from being deeply offensive to her, the ‘gypsy’ label gave Um Ziad a sense of the disdain with which the host community regarded Syrian refugees, the low place that they occupied in Lebanon’s social hierarchy and the difficulties in integrating into a society where even NGO workers disliked them.

Um Ziad was also distraught by the fact that some NGOs put a stamp on the personal identification documents of Syrian refugees who received food parcels, as per their internal policy. For her, these acts were highly disrespectful to Syrian refugees’ right to privacy and personal pride, as such stamps marked the recipients as being aid-dependent. Respondent Ra’af reported that disrespectful behaviour was also occurring in some mosques where sheikhs ‘hit and pushed some women’ who were waiting to collect their food parcels, while other women were addressed with insults and offensive sentences such as ‘You don’t understand, may God curse you!’ and ‘Sit down and shut up!’. Ra’af also revealed that, on several occasions during food collections, refugees were threatened with guns if they dared to question the system and mode of aid distribution.

To minimize the possibility of causing any inconvenience to local people and to control tensions, food distributions were often organized in countryside areas that many refugees could only reach by taxi, using borrowed or saved money. Many respondents highlighted that, frequently, the value of food parcels was worth neither the humiliation that they underwent nor the time or money that they had to spend to obtain these basic foodstuffs.

Fayza argued that the media coverage on distribution days was disproportionate to the actual benefit brought to refugees:

Once, we found an organization whose headquarters is in 'Meena'. We paid the transportation fee of 3000 LBP and went there. . . . They told us we had to go to 'Ebbe' on a specific day to receive our parcel. We headed there to the designated mosque and all they gave us was a small food-box including a bag of lentils, two packets of spaghetti, a bottle of oil, and two small cans of sardines.

What Fayza describes echoes the claims made by various critics who have dubbed humanitarian actions as 'spectacles of suffering' in which the transformation of refugees into objects in need of aid and intervention requires a de-historicization of their bodies and the creation of bare lives (Kennedy 2009; Fassin 2011; Pruce 2012). The spectacle is televised and alimanted through media promotion but also questioned and defied by refugees like Fayza, who commented: '[w]ith all the media coverage that was at the mosque, you'd think they're handing out thousands of dollars.' Fayza's belittlement of NGOs' operations is one of many manifestations of agency and empowerment in the context of the Syrian humanitarian crisis.

Respondents' agency also emerged from their criticism of local and international outreach programmes that involved the provision of garments and shoes for Syrian refugees. Ammounh was not very impressed by the quality of clothes that she received from a Lebanese organization that she wished to keep anonymous. She affirmed that they were the 'ugliest and worse clothing items' that she had ever seen in her life and alleged that the organization kept the good clothes for themselves and gave refugees only the bad ones. This event was very distressing for Ammounh. As she reflected upon the level of misery to which Syrian people had sunk in Lebanon, Ammounh explained how, in her opinion, the host communities considered Syrian refugees similar to beasts and, therefore, not deserving of the same respect as they would pay to humans:

The fact that we've become refugees and that we had to leave our country have transformed us into 'prey' for the Lebanese 'predators'. The way they treat and look at us is very degrading and different than the way they treat each other. . . . I still can't believe the quality of wardrobe the only 'helpful' organization gave to us; they think we're animals, but they don't know that we wore the best clothes available in Syria.

These sentiments were shared by nearly all of the respondents, who felt that women were the most exposed to mistreatment by NGOs and struggled to cope with the sense of frustration that resulted from it. El-Masri *et al.*'s (2013) report expounds how the responsibility to deal with humanitarian organizations and secure assistance to the family is totally or partially on Syrian refugee women because a large section of Syrian refugee men are ashamed to ask for aid or to discuss their family situation with NGO workers. While their new role as 'family aid-broker' had strengthened them,

respondents who engaged in these new tasks did not hide their physical and mental exhaustion for being under the constant pressure of ensuring humanitarian support for their children.

In light of an unbalanced division of responsibilities and rights between refugee men and women, gender equality has become a new target for the aid industry. However, the underlying idea on which aid workers' intervention rests in this domain is that refugee women are 'victims of "backward" cultures in need of protection' and men are 'perpetrators of "uncivilized" masculinities in need of reform' (Olivius 2015: 3). Through these mechanisms, Olivius asserts that humanitarian organizations may further stigmatize and marginalize refugees. Hence, rather than working to empower women and provide them with better socio-economic opportunities, the term 'refugee' can be open to stereotyping processes that operate to the detriment of the individual.

Discussion

Drawing from existing literature in migration that has explored how displacement and the resettlement process may affect the wellbeing of refugees, this study reveals that the very term 'refugee' can be a source of distress for people who are labelled as such, due to the degrading traits and defamatory stereotyping the term has assumed among different social groups and communities (Zetter 1991). The findings show that the stigmatization of 'refugees' is a mechanism that operates in two directions—both from inside and from outside the refugee communities. Here, the inside refers to the personal experiences of loss and trauma of the refugees themselves and their daily challenges. Conversely, the outside represents the environment of resettlement, including the host community, the local authorities and the aid sector (Kennedy 2009; Ni Aolain, 2011; Olivius 2015; Thorleifsson 2016).

The stigmatization from the inside can also be conceived as 'self-stigma' (Quinn 2014: 67), which is influenced by the cultural beliefs of individual refugees and their personal circumstances. At the core of respondents' understandings of the term 'refugee' was a traumatic event, or a series of events, that had completely revolutionized their lives through the experience of loss. Primarily, the cessation of the provision of state security generated the 'negation of society' (Shacknove 1985: 277) and nourished sentiments of disconnection that the word 'refugee' encapsulated. Then, the loss of economic status due to either dispossession or abandonment of one's properties proved to be a scorn-inducing and pity-triggering event in the perceptions of the women who participated in this study, which also caused new negative labels to be applied to these subjects.

Despite several efforts to rebuild an existence that can mitigate their painful memories, the women interviewed are reabsorbed in the very thoughts that they seek to push back each time they are stigmatized and rejected due their status as refugees. In this way, they live again and again their tragedies

as a daily challenge, yet not without reacting to them. The simple act of substituting the word 'refugee' with the term 'displaced', as shown in Lana's comment, is an act of agency denoting an attempt to attenuate the ontological suffering derived from traumatic situations that can operate to stigmatize and downgrade the social and economic status of the individual (Link and Phelan 2001).

A catalyst to the stigmatization from the outside is certainly the perception that survivors of armed conflict may blight the territories where they seek refuge and deplete the resources available to the host community. In an effort to provide support to the refugees and to lessen the pressure on the host communities, humanitarian organizations have been providing various services to Syrian refugees. However, humanitarian aid practices can often lead to the perpetuation of stigmatizing depictions of refugees and their petrification in disempowering narratives that ignore their identities and contextual needs (Rajaram 2002).

Refugees can also be stigmatized from the outside through the category of 'warriors' that Nyers (2006) describes as political actors who are generally considered as threats because they have resorted to organized violence to pursue national and territorial objectives. Nevertheless, refugees do not need to embrace violence to be regarded as a source of instability and insecurity to host communities. In Lebanon, growing prejudice towards and suspicion of Syrian refugees is due to, among other factors, Syria's historically controversial presence in Lebanon during the civil war period and afterwards, until its military withdrawal in 2005 (Salloukh 2005). For many decades, the control exerted by the Syrian government on Lebanon was unwelcomed by sections of the Lebanese population, particularly among the Christians (Hinnebusch 1998). During various random conversations that I held with Lebanese Christians, what frequently emerged was their fear that a sizable presence of Syrian refugees in their country might become an excuse for the Assad regime to regain its hold on Lebanon, either directly or indirectly through its Lebanese proxies.

This study, of course, has some important limitations. First, it does not aim to represent all the Syrian refugee women in Lebanon. Second, it does not account for a comparative analysis of men's experiences. It follows that the study provides only a partial snapshot of the whole picture. Third, as the interviews were conducted in Arabic and translated into English, it is possible that the original message may have lost its pregnancy and/or full meaning in the language of arrival. Despite its limitations, this work has the merit of having inverted the mechanisms through which we tend to define the 'refugee' concept by enabling refugee women to express their own feelings and opinions regarding the moral, mental and physical damages inflicted upon them by the 'refugee' label.

Conclusion

The word 'refugee' has legal implications for people escaping armed conflicts and represents the only most broadly recognized formal status that allows

individuals to receive protection in a foreign country (Shacknove 1985). At the same time, ‘refugee’ is also conceived as an intrinsically ‘limit-concept’, a term coined by Nyers (2006: 3) meaning ‘a concept that expresses the limits of a certain logic of intelligibility’, and in which mutually excluding terms coexist and underpin epistemic violence in processes of identification and othering. In this article, I have shown how the term is imbued with demeaning overtones that may prevent the recovery of the labelled from the trauma of loss and, ultimately, delay or prevent altogether the integration of the subject into the host community.

The experience of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon reveals that the stigmatization caused by the term ‘refugee’ works to further their vulnerability to precarious living conditions and ill treatment in exile. Empowering practices that wish to avoid alienation among label-prone refugee women must primarily seek to overcome the vulnerability entrenched in the term ‘refugee’ ‘by creating the space for a rejection of the negative associations’ (Ni Aolain 2011: 5) underlying predominant framings of vulnerability in critical situations. A first step in this direction is the recognition of refugee agency. The resilience demonstrated by Syrian refugee women in Lebanon through their continuous attempts to lead meaningful lives in spite of the adversity of exile transcends ideas of refugees as ‘passive objects of humanitarian intervention’ (Malkki 1996: 390). In Lebanon, where the difficulties experienced by the newcomers overlap with the predicament of pre-existing displaced people and exacerbate protracted precariousness, Syrian refugee women are not merely relying on the support of the host community and international actors to survive. Rather, they are exhibiting an extraordinary ability to ‘bounce forward’ in the face of hardship, security risks and trauma.

Yet, recognizing refugee agency should not relieve the international community from its duties to attend to the needs, and uphold the rights, of displaced people and refugees. Further research should take into account the impact that humanitarian programmes may have on the subjects, including considerations of their potential to inflict more pain on already traumatized individuals and to feed into pre-existing prejudice and fear. To enable such research, it is fundamental that we start to listen to the refugees’ stories and formulate long-term responses to displacement that are informed by their past grievances, present challenges and future aspirations.

1. In May 2018, Lebanon held its first parliamentary elections in nine years.

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