

# **LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY**

The Impact and Implications of Three (I)NGO Women Empowerment Programs on Displaced Syrian Women in Lebanon: Hidden Pathways, Empowerment Journeys and the Surpassing of Reductionist Notions and Practices in the Humanitarian and Development Sector

By

Manar Fleifel

A thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Migration Studies

School of Arts and Sciences  
December 2020

© 2020

Manar Fleifel

All Rights Reserved

## THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Student Name: Manar Fleifel I.D. #: 200900761

Thesis Title: The Impact and Implications of Three (I)NGO Women Empowerment Programs on Displa

Program: Migration Studies

Department: Arts and Sciences

School: School of Arts and Sciences

The undersigned certify that they have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis and approved it in Partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:

Manar Fleifel in the major of Migration Studies

Thesis Advisor's Name: Paul Tabar

Signature:  Date: 19 / 12 / 2020  
Day Month Year

Committee Member's Name: Sami Baroudi

Signature:  Date: 19 / 12 / 2020  
Day Month Year

Committee Member's Name: Tamirae Fakhoury

Signature:  Date: 19 / 12 / 2020  
Day Month Year



## THESIS COPYRIGHT RELEASE FORM

### LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY NON-EXCLUSIVE DISTRIBUTION LICENSE

By signing and submitting this license, you (the author(s) or copyright owner) grants the Lebanese American University (LAU) the non-exclusive right to reproduce, translate (as defined below), and/or distribute your submission (including the abstract) worldwide in print and electronic formats and in any medium, including but not limited to audio or video. You agree that LAU may, without changing the content, translate the submission to any medium or format for the purpose of preservation. You also agree that LAU may keep more than one copy of this submission for purposes of security, backup and preservation. You represent that the submission is your original work, and that you have the right to grant the rights contained in this license. You also represent that your submission does not, to the best of your knowledge, infringe upon anyone's copyright. If the submission contains material for which you do not hold copyright, you represent that you have obtained the unrestricted permission of the copyright owner to grant LAU the rights required by this license, and that such third-party owned material is clearly identified and acknowledged within the text or content of the submission. IF THE SUBMISSION IS BASED UPON WORK THAT HAS BEEN SPONSORED OR SUPPORTED BY AN AGENCY OR ORGANIZATION OTHER THAN LAU, YOU REPRESENT THAT YOU HAVE FULFILLED ANY RIGHT OF REVIEW OR OTHER OBLIGATIONS REQUIRED BY SUCH CONTRACT OR AGREEMENT. LAU will clearly identify your name(s) as the author(s) or owner(s) of the submission, and will not make any alteration, other than as allowed by this license, to your submission.

Name: Manar Fleifel

Signature:  Date: 7 / 12 / 2020  
Day Month Year



## PLAGIARISM POLICY COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

### I certify that:

1. I have read and understood LAU's Plagiarism Policy.
2. I understand that failure to comply with this Policy can lead to academic and disciplinary actions against me.
3. This work is substantially my own, and to the extent that any part of this work is not my own I have indicated that by acknowledging its sources.

Name: Manar Fleifel

Signature:  Date: 7 / 12 / 2020  
Day Month Year

*To my mother, brother, and every powerful woman who is unlearning and deconstructing patriarchal values, standing up for herself and her canons when her society and the whole world continues to fail her. To the women who helped me in my study, you are the real manifestation of power.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This thesis would not have been possible without the support and assistance of many persons.

First, I would like to thank my research participants; the Syrian women and (I)NGO workers who trusted me with their experiences and gave me their time, when I had nothing to give them.

Second, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Paul Tabar, for his valuable insights and guidance throughout my MA studies. Dr. Paul's lightness and seriousness both encouraged me to finalise my thesis.

I would also like to thank my professors, especially those who invited me to think critically about different notions and practices within the scope of migration studies. I am particularly grateful for Dr. Dalia Abdelhady and Dr. Connie Carøe Christiansen who have always pushed me to delve deeper into critical feminist thought.

I want to thank my friends and family for their love, support, and belief in me. I cannot name you all here; it is enough that you know yourselves.

I want to specifically thank my mother Mona, for her strength, patience, and guidance, and my brother, Mohammad, for the continued subtle pride that he takes in me. Last but not least, I am grateful for the support of my fiancé, Khoudor who has provided valuable observations to my thesis, despite being a mechanical engineer.

# The Impact and Implications of Three (I)NGO Women Empowerment Programs on Displaced Syrian Women in Lebanon: Hidden Pathways, Empowerment Journeys and the Surpassing of Reductionist Notions and Practices in the Humanitarian and Development Sector

Manar Fleifel

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores, through a critical post-colonial feminist lens, the impact and implications of three humanitarian and development organizations women empowerment programs on Syrian women's lives in displacement. The study draws on the discourses of empowerment (or disempowerment) and humanitarianism from the literature, explores discourses of empowerment as perceived and practiced by the interviewed humanitarian and development practitioners, and narrates displaced Syrian women's experiences with humanitarianism and development and their own empowerment journeys. In this course, the dissertation addresses the varied perceptions of refugee-ness, vulnerability, and gender roles. The thesis also draws attention to the "unintended consequences" of empowerment projects, whereby displaced Syrian women practice "hidden pathways" towards empowerment in their daily lives, without such pathways being an outcome on the agenda of aid organizations, agencies and their donors. The study proposes that there is tangible evidence on the formation of alternative frameworks of empowerment practiced amongst displaced Syrian women through informal and grassroots women to women initiatives and support groups.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Humanitarianism, Development, Displaced persons, Displacement, Refugees, Syrian refugees, Syrian displacement, Syrian refugee crisis, Lebanon, Women refugees, Displaced women, Aid, Refugees, Refugee women.

# Table of Contents

<b>Chapter.....</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>List of Figures.....</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>Glossary of Terms.....</b>	<b>xii</b>
<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Lebanon and the Syrian Crisis (2011-ongoing).....	1
1.2 Significance of the Study.....	4
1.2.1 Billion of dollars in Aid.....	4
1.2.1 Researcher’s Positionality.....	6
<b>II. Literature Review.....</b>	<b>12</b>
1.1 Overview of the literature on the Syrian Crisis and Syrian Refugee Women in Lebanon: Major Gaps in Understanding Women’s Experiences with Aid in Lebanon.....	12
1.1.1 The Predominant Discourse on Lebanon and the Syrian Crisis.....	12
1.1.2 Syrian Women’s Experiences in Displacement: Importance of Transcending notions of Vulnerability and Victimhood.....	15
1.1.3 Syrian Women’s Empowerment and Aid Reception; A Critical Reading of the Literature and Major Gaps in the Lebanese Context.....	18
1.3.1.1 Jordan.....	19
1.3.1.2 Jordan and Syria.....	21
1.3.1.3 Turkey.....	22
1.3.1.4 Syria.....	22
1.3.1.5 Lebanon.....	23
<b>III. Theoretical Framework.....</b>	<b>25</b>
1.1 A Critical Approach to Humanitarianism and Development.....	25
1.1.1 Why a Critical Lens in Approaching Humanitarianism and Development?.....	27
1.1.2 Theoretical Framework on Women Empowerment in Development.....	30
<b>IV. Methodology.....</b>	<b>35</b>

1.1 The Importance of Qualitative Research in understanding Women’s Diversified Experiences	35
1.2 Focused Ethnography: A Deeper Understanding of Syrian Women’s Experiences with Empowerment Projects.....	37
1.3 Sampling.....	38
1.3.1 NGOs.....	38
1.3.1.1 Local NGO.....	40
1.3.1.2 International NGO.....	41
1.3.1.3 Syrian Feminist Organization.....	41
1.3.2 Displaced Syrian Women.....	42
1.4 Feminist Objectivity, Reflexivity, and Ethical Considerations.....	42
<b>V. Findings and Discussion.....</b>	<b>45</b>
1.1 Empirical Findings.....	45
1.1.1. Findings of the Interviews with NGOs.....	45
1.1.1.1 Being a Humanitarian Worker: Negative and Positive Aspects.....	45
1.1.1.2 Project Implementation and Impact on Women.....	47
1.1.1.3 Reasons for Women’s Participation in Empowerment Projects.....	50
1.1.1.4 Reflections on Donor Demands.....	51
1.1.1.5 Perceptions of Women Empowerment.....	55
1.1.2. Findings of the Interviews with Displaced Syrian Women.....	57
1.1.2.1 Drive to Participate.....	57
1.1.2.2 Women Empowerment Projects and Changing Gender Roles in Displacement.....	59
1.1.2.3 Solidarity groups.....	62
1.2. Analysis.....	63
1.2.1 Impact and Implications of Women Empowerment Programs: Key differences in different projects and organizations.....	63
1.2.1.1 Representations of Displaced Syrian Women: Vulnerability, Negative Resilience and Positive Resilience.....	63
1.2.1.2 Donor Agendas land in Parachutes.....	66
1.2.1.3 The Commodification of NGOs and their Services.....	69
1.2.3.4 Displacement and Women Empowerment Projects: Between Empowerment and Disempowerment.....	70

1.2.1.5. Problems with Empowerment, Hidden Pathways of Empowerment and The Unintended Consequences of Women Empowerment Projects.....	73
<b>VI. Conclusions and Recommendations.....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>VII. Bibliography .....</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Appendix I.....</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Appendix II.....</b>	<b>93</b>

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Yazan al-Saudi: An INGO worker walks into a Syrian Refugee Camp.....	27
Figure 2 Features of Empowerment summarized in Mosedale (2005).....	32
Figure 3 Kabeer’s Three dimensions of Empowerment (2005).....	34
Figure 4 Hierarchy of Donors and Implementing Organizations for the Early Marriage, GBV and SRH Projects in NGO X and INGO Y .....	39
Figure 5 Components of the Early Marriage and SRH projects in partnership with a UN organization.....	40

# Glossary of Terms

GBV Gender-Based Violence

INGO International Non-Governmental Organization

(I)NGO International and National Non-Governmental Organizations

ITS Informal Tented Settlement

LCRP Lebanese Crisis Response Plan

M&E Monitoring and Evaluation

NGO Non-Governmental Organization

SRH Sexual and Reproductive Health

WSS Women's Safe Spaces

WSG Women Support Groups

UN United Nations

UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

VASyr Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

3 RP Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis

# Chapter One

## Introduction

### 1.1 Lebanon and the Syrian Crisis (2011-ongoing)

Globally, the Syrian refugee crisis is one of the worst humanitarian “disasters” of our time. In 2018, it was estimated that over 13 million Syrians have been forced to flee their homes due to the war in Syria (Vignal, 2018)<sup>1</sup>. This figure does not only mean that more than half of the originally 21 million Syrians who resided in Syria before the war have sought sanctuary outside their place of origin, as a matter of fact, it is an indication that the war in has dispossessed millions, rendered them without property and assets, led to the loss of the lives of family members and loved ones and transformed the lives of thousands of families (Fleifel, 2020). Children lost their right to education and many had to stop studying to support their families. Many women who were once home makers, having lost their family income, had to now adopt new roles and work outside their home to help their families survive the consequences of displacement. A lot has changed for Syrians since 2011. The Syrian war and its resultant refugee crisis have gained hypervisibility as one of the worst humanitarian crises of our contemporary times (Fleifel, 2020).

---

<sup>1</sup> This figure includes the internally displaced and Syrians who sought refuge outside Syria, meaning more than half of the Syrian population before the war. See reference for more.

The Syrian crisis gained the great attention of the Global North that portrayed the events of displacement in a “hyper visible” manner in the public sphere and media (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016). Today, hosting countries of the Global South are still highly dependent on humanitarian aid and assistance coming from the Global North, especially when these countries continue to suffer from socio-economic burdens and political turmoil. Aid, however, never came without costs and consequences (Rieff, 1995). The international community regarded Syrian refugees as “ideal refugees”<sup>2</sup> seeking asylum and thus very eligible for aid (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016). Syrians were, as Sahrawi refugees and as refugees in the “sea of misery”, a means to secure both, necessary humanitarian assistance and political support (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016, p. 3) (Malkki, 1996). According to Malkki, refugees are often considered as “objects of knowledge, management and assistance” by states and humanitarian and development organizations (Malkki, 1996, p. 377); the same applied to Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The Lebanese government and its partners, the international agencies and non-governmental organizations often perceive Syrians as passive recipients of aid, and very rarely involve them in the decision-making processes related to their own needs and future.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data showed that countries of the global south such as Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan have hosted the highest numbers of refugees per capita, Lebanon hosting around 1 million and Jordan more than 670 thousand refugees (UNHCR, UN Situations: Syria, 2019). In Lebanon, there are currently no definite figures on the actual number of Syrian refugees, and no reliable data resources tell us how many Syrians have returned to their villages and cities of origin or resettled elsewhere. It was, however, estimated by 2019 that Lebanon had hosted 1.5 million displaced Syrians, rendering the country a host for the highest number of refugees

---

<sup>2</sup> As compared to other nationalities as Palestinians for instance who are not ideal refugees. See reference for more.

per capita in the world (Government of Lebanon and UNHCR, 2019). Whereas the Lebanese government estimated this number, the UNHCR indicated that it had registered 948,8493 refugees (Government of Lebanon and UNHCR, 2019). The marked difference in numbers goes beyond statistics; it is a manifestation of this hypervisibility and a larger issue beyond figures, and one that is directly related to the politics behind the Syrian refugee crisis and the policies of the Lebanese government. A brief overview of these policies is worthwhile as it sets the stage to understanding the context of this thesis.

Before October 2014, the Lebanese government had not adopted any tangible policies to respond to the crisis. This phenomenon has been widely labelled as “the policy of no-policy” (Mufti, 2014). However, the situation was altered between October and December 2014 when the Lebanese government had started adopting a “policy” towards Syrian refugees in Lebanon by its introduction of a set of regulations to limit the entry of Syrians to Lebanon. UNHCR, due to pressure from the Lebanese government, halted its registration of Syrians in Lebanon as of May 6, 2015 (Janmyr M. , 2016) (UNHCR, 2019). This approach towards Syrian refugees has been explained by some as being the outcome of the thirty years of Syrian military presence in Lebanon and the country’s long-term Palestinian refugee presence (Janmyr M. , 2016, p. 59). As such, the Lebanese government does not acknowledge Syrians are refugees but as displaced people (Government of Lebanon and UNHCR, 2019, p. 5), thus depriving them of many rights and mostly depending on aid and development organizations to lead their “management” and “governance” (Fleifel, 2020).

Resultantly, the Lebanese Government, in partnership with international agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGO)s, adopted several plans to respond to the crisis, the Lebanese Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) being the most comprehensive one. The aim of this plan is to respond to the “challenges” Lebanon is facing due to the refugee crisis

---

and to expand investments, delivery models and partnerships to ensure longer-term development strategies are met (UN, 2017). The plan reiterates the crisis' effects on Lebanon and calls for a response targeted to both, Lebanese and Syrian communities affected by the crisis.

Even though today, due to the deepening of the economic crisis in Lebanon and the spread of COVID-19, less aid has been channeling towards Syrians in Lebanon, the implications and motives behind humanitarian aid and assistance remain extremely important topics as they have impacted the lives of many Syrians and will continue to do so, even if repatriation occurs.

## **1.2 Significance of the Study**

### **1.2.1 Billion of dollars in Aid**

Each year, the United Nations (UN) and the international community spends over 1 billion dollars on humanitarian and development programs. As per one UN report, international funding for the Syrian Crisis in Lebanon amounted to USD 1.68 billion in 2017. Since 2011, around 1.5 million Syrians have entered Lebanon, and with them, billions of dollars have been injected in the country. More than 250 partners have worked under the LCRP in around 10 sectors. With more than 50% females making up the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon (UNHCR, UN Situations: Syria, 2019), there are numerous initiatives that specifically target the empowerment of women and girls through different sectors of the LCRP plan such as family planning programs in the health sector, awareness on gender-based violence in the protection sector and literacy and vocational training in the livelihoods sector. In many cases, these sectors intersect in one project or program. In particular, one of the response plan's objective is stated as follows: "*Address social and economic risks faced by Lebanese, displaced Syrians and Palestinian adolescents and youth with a particular focus on empowering young women and girls, including through TVET and decent work opportunities*" (Government of Lebanon and UNHCR, 2019).

Despite the generous efforts of the international community to thrust a large amount of money to “target” and empower women and girls in different programs, a lot of problems arise in these initiatives. Until very recently, as the literature review will show, this topic has not been extensively discussed. However, in the past years, it seems like scholars, activists and organizations have started to notice that there are major failures in the programming of women empowerment projects in the region. Moreover, there exists a lot of shortcomings in the ways in which humanitarian assistance is governed and in the discourse of many humanitarian and development agencies and their workers’ perceptions of Syrian women. That is not to say that a lot of women have not benefitted from such programs, on the contrary, many have, but most of them have done so with their own efforts and differentiated experiences that intersect with their displacement stories.

It is important to mention that this study does not attempt to generalize and claim that all (I)NGO workers share distorted perceptions on women’s experiences or empowerment. Some are very aware of the limitations of such programs and have been working towards their improvement. The analysis of the findings of the fieldwork will delve deeper into these issues.

The significance of the research is situated in understanding how displaced women<sup>4</sup> experience women empowerment programs and what do they really think about these programs and in doing so, the study aims at transcending the categorization of Syrian women as voiceless and vulnerable victims that need empowerment to be saved. The research also aims at understanding the different approaches to empowerment programming as provided by a Lebanese NGO, an International NGO and a Syrian Feminist Organization, working with different donors and agencies. Further, the goal is to

---

<sup>4</sup> In this thesis, I use the word displaced for many reasons. The Lebanese government does not use the term refugee in its political discourse and does not treat Syrians in Lebanon as refugees (see more in introduction). Secondly, not all the women who I interviewed considers herself a refugee, but all of them have been displaced from their homes.

draw out possible recommendations for NGO and International Agencies work and research on women empowerment based on the literature review and the findings of the interviews that have been conducted with Syrian women and humanitarian and development workers. Finally, the research will attempt to explore the “hidden pathways” of empowerment that Syrian women have pursued in their lives in displacement and the friendships and support networks they have developed throughout.

### **1.2.1 Researcher’s Positionality**

*“The closer the project is to the donors’ needs, the further it is to the needs of the community”*. – Head of a Unions of Municipalities in Lebanon

Besides the importance of this topic in academia, and the scarcity of scholarly work on Syrian women’s empowerment in the context of Lebanon as the literature review will reveal, another reason drove me to undertake such a study. My intersectional identity as a researcher adopting a feminist approach in her studies, a former NGO worker and a woman have all amplified the importance of addressing this topic all while employing feminist objectivity and refusing conventional notions of “scientific objectivity” (Haraway, 1988) (Harding, 1993). As Donna Haraway has coined it; “[...] the science question in feminism is about objectivity as positioned rationality.” (Haraway, 1988, p. 590). In this section I aim to reveal my experience and situated biases, two important themes that will allow me to position myself in this study. The events I share in the following paragraphs are reflective of my own experience at a certain time and place, and under certain conditions. They are not necessarily reflective of the viewpoints of my participants. Some of what I will reveal will resonate in the findings, whereas a lot will not. Nevertheless, a lot of the experiences as told by my participants will still affirm the very essence of this thesis, reflected in its theoretical framework. Further, the approach, including its limitations and biases in the fieldwork will be discussed in the methodology section. It is still as important to reveal some of my experience, irrespective of my participants experiences at this point, as it also shaped the significance, method, and topics of the research.

As a former Programme Manager at a local NGO, I encountered good and bad stories when it comes to the implementation of different humanitarian and development projects in Lebanon. During that time in 2017, I was still taking courses about refugee experiences, humanitarianism, gender and development, and these topics, addressed very critically, allowed me to approach my work in a critical manner. Unfortunately, the bad experiences outweighed the good experiences when it comes to the implementation of projects. A lot of other researchers' experiences, reflected in their scholarly work, has resonated with my own personal experience and study<sup>5</sup>. This study could have relied on secondary data, but I found it necessary to reveal facts from primary sources too. As such, and throughout the course of my study, from the pilot interview process to the writing process, I have been aware of these biases and have been studying them in order to avoid slipping into generalizations and falling into the circle I am critical about as a researcher. By that I mean that I have been constantly avoiding falling into using reductionist perceptions and tools to understand women's experiences in displacement and aid. The last thing I want to do in this thesis is homogenize women's experiences, nevertheless, I will be discussing major trends, regardless of diversified individual experiences. A few incidents from my previous work in the development sector are still worthwhile including here as a general reference to the significance of the study.

The quote used at the beginning of this section is a good example of what development and humanitarian projects meant for local communities. This and other issues I had witnessed and statements I had heard were what galvanized the topic of this thesis. During "field" visits, activists, "beneficiaries"<sup>6</sup>, and (I)NGO staff would often complain

---

<sup>5</sup> The literature review will explain this in more detail.

<sup>6</sup> The term beneficiary is problematic, and very widely used by many INGO and international agency workers since it reduces the person receiving aid into a mere receptor of aid, without understanding the complexity behind her experience as a woman in displacement and the reasons behind this "aid-seeking" activity. More on this will be explained in the theoretical framework of the thesis. The findings will also show how some humanitarian and development workers refuse this term (along with other terms and practices) as a political, and ultimately feminist act.

about the inefficiency, absurdity, and out-of-context implementation of the many programs of development and humanitarian agencies and organizations responding to the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon. During meetings, international agencies and donors would forcibly urge their implementing partners that act as local brokers to implement projects as detailed in contracts and memorandums of understanding, no matter how absurd they were for the “beneficiaries” or even the implementers themselves (Neubert, 2007). Unfortunately, through my work, I grew to realize how the demands of the donors<sup>7</sup>, were not in line with the needs of the community and in the few times they came close to the needs, it would only be indicative that these “beneficiaries” and local communities have found ways to accept the implementation, mending it to fit their needs somehow. I could also see that many of these organizations and agencies were implementing their projects in a way that shows no factual, on the ground or sustainable impact, regardless of their use of development jargons or buzzwords and fuzzwords as termed by such; sustainable development, decent work, women empowerment, community engagement, etc. (Cornwall & Eade, 2010). More importantly, I realized that this frustration and disappointment was crystalized in the experience of the many women “receiving” these programs. In some incidents, women stood dumbfounded and expressed cynicism towards the fast-paced trainings delivered as PowerPoint presentations flashing in foreign languages “tailored” to be delivered to them but in unfamiliar rhetoric. Some women told me about their houses being stocked with excess working material (e.g., yarn) that they did not have room for at home, arriving months after they have taken their vocational training. Many claimed these materials took up so much space in their houses and they could not even work with them due to the lack of demand in the market. Others have admitted to me that they did not care about the “psychosocial support” services, but rather needed the transportation incentives provided in every session to get to the center providing this service in order to “feed their children” or buy the elementary needs for their households. In many NGOs, that same

---

<sup>7</sup> What was meant were the EU, the US and the international agencies who pre-dominated aid and development projects.

transport incentive was introduced by donors and partner agencies when organizations could not reach their “target”. By target, I do not mean the goals of the projects based on women’s needs, but the “number of women targeted”.

I have experienced rather shocking events that have disempowered women rather than empowered them in displacement. Another of the many incidents I recall is when a group of NGOs, operating like local brokers<sup>8</sup> for a UN agency, organized a “Christmas Bazaar”<sup>9</sup> in an underground church, spending money on a venue worth thousands of dollars of rent per hour, only since the NGO had to spend the donor money to organize an event that reached around 10 people, before the end of year. In this particular event, a lot was spent on decorating the venue, the catering services for attendees of the organizations attending (and then, the women). When the women could not sell the products, they worked on for weeks, the NGOs silenced them by granting them a small amount of money. Organizations and partner agencies, treating initiatives as business ventures, often employ “win-win situations”; women would win by being granted a temporary incentive to participate in the program, and organizations would win by ensuring their “target”. Such incidents and many others are examples of the inherent corruption in the international development and humanitarian enterprise, major players in the neo-liberal post-colonial system. Such initiatives, in the name of empowerment, development and humanitarianism often result in a lot of disappointments for Syrian women in Lebanon.

According to feminist author Marilyn Porter, in the introduction of the edited book, *Feminists Doing Development*, “Development projects often end in frustration and

---

<sup>8</sup> See Dieter Neubert, The role of local brokers in the development system. Experiences with "self-help projects" in East Africa.

<sup>9</sup> The event was actually organized for an EU ambassador to see what women have learned with money donated by the EU and show case the skills the women have they learned with EU money (skills which they had already known before). This deal, made between the Country Director of a local NGO and a Project Manager in the International Agency to spend the excess money the NGO had asked for initially and the International Agency approved. The donor of the project was an EU government whose ambassador was sent to attend the event. This event was a closing event and a demonstration of a number of “Quick-Impact Initiatives” used for a Gender Based Violence Project.

recriminations “ (Porter, 1999, p. 2). Out of the different projects that we were implementing, it was true, disappointments topped success stories, and projects ended with a lot of corruption and unfulfilled goals. These tendencies will resonate in the course of the thesis, from its literature review and theoretical framework to its findings.

In essence, this thesis explores, through a critical post-colonial feminist lens, the impact and implications of humanitarian and development organizations’ women empowerment programs on displaced Syrian women’s lives in displacement. The study uses examples from various services including awareness programs on issues related to women’s rights as well as vocational and literacy training provided by three different development and humanitarian organizations. While assessing the impact of these programs on Syrian refugee women, the study draws on; i. the discourses of empowerment (or disempowerment) and humanitarianism from the literature, ii. empowerment as perceived and practiced by the interviewed humanitarian and development practitioners in different organizations, and iii. Syrian women’s experiences with humanitarian efforts driven to empower women. In this course, the dissertation will subsequently address the varied perceptions of refugee-ness, vulnerability, and gender roles. The study finally proposes that there is tangible evidence on alternative frameworks of empowerment practiced amongst Syrian women through informal and grassroots women to women initiatives that may and may not have directly resulted from the initiatives of empowerment as implemented by development and humanitarian interventions.

The main research questions this study attempts to answer is: What are the impact and implications of three different (I)NGO women empowerment programs on displaced Syrian women in Lebanon? In this course, the study explores the following complimentary questions by comparing the data extracted from three different organizations: What are the major shortcomings of the three women empowerment programs explored in this thesis? How have women programs contributed to Syrian women’s displacement journeys? What are the implications of these programs on the women, meaning, how do these projects

speak to the neo-liberal and post-colonial discourse through “representation”, “empowerment” and “humanitarianism? What are the ways in which displaced Syrian women practice agency within the humanitarian system and the existing patriarchal system?

The thesis is structured as follows. The next chapter goes over the literature pertaining to the study. It critically explores the predominant discourse on Lebanon and the Syrian crisis, Syrian women’s experiences in displacement in relation to the displacement-development nexus in Lebanon, and the studies on women empowerment projects and their approaches in the region. Most importantly, the literature highlights the major gaps in exploring women empowerment projects specifically in Lebanon. After presenting the major bodies of work and gaps, the critical post-colonial feminist theoretical framework is presented. Following this, the methodological tools and approaches are presented. The chapter after the methodology presents the findings of the fieldwork on aid practices in empowerment projects and the impact and implications of women empowerment projects on Syrian women in the three organizations under study. This chapter ends with a discussion of the findings under the different explored themes. Finally, the thesis is concluded with a summary of findings and a number of recommendations for the scholarship on and implementation of women empowerment projects for displaced Syrian women in Lebanon.

# Chapter Two

## Literature Review

### 1.1 Overview of the literature on the Syrian Crisis and Syrian Refugee Women in Lebanon: Major Gaps in Understanding Women's Experiences with Aid in Lebanon

#### 1.1.1 The Predominant Discourse on Lebanon and the Syrian Crisis

It would be an impossible task to go over all the literature written on the Syrian crisis in Lebanon, especially since this topic has received a lot of attention throughout the past nine years. International agencies, organizations, independent scholars and research centers from different disciplines and subjects have published extensively about this subject. This section will only highlight the main body of work and address the most dominant rhetoric on “studying” the crisis.

According to Malkki, very often, studies on refugees' view refugees as “domains of knowledge” (1995). Similarly, Fawaz et al use the term “refugee talk” to describe the dominant rhetoric addressing Syrian refugees in Lebanon (Fawaz, Salamé, & Gharbieh, 2018)<sup>10</sup>. The prevalent kind of refugee talk as employed by development and humanitarian organizations renders refugees to powerless individuals, and passive aid recipients (Fawaz,

---

<sup>10</sup> Fawaz et al uses the term “refugee talk” employed by different stakeholders; the development and humanitarian sector to unpack how refugees as victims of war, powerless and passive recipients of aid, the Lebanese politicians and media that perceive refugees as threats to security and livelihoods, the international community, the literature, especially if sponsored by development organizations) in Lebanon (Fawaz, Salamé, & Gharbieh, 2018)

Salamé, & Gharbieh, 2018, p. 4). This has been the case of the predominant literature on Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, numerous studies focused on the suffering of Syrians and their lived tragedies in Lebanon. In the first few years of the war, humanitarian and development organizations published numerous reports assessing the needs of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon and gathered their findings in vulnerability assessments reports like the VASyR<sup>11</sup> and the 3RP<sup>12</sup>. Unified information management systems are still extensively used to produce data on the response to the crisis and on refugees themselves. Systems such as ActivityInfo<sup>13</sup> gather data that is shared between all partners and organizations responding to the Syrian crisis and produce various reports on interventions all over Lebanon.

Several scholarly articles addressed the negative repercussions of war and displacement on Syrian refugees (Denman & Charles, 2013), including health issues (Blanchet, Fouad, & Pherali, 2016) and the politics of access (Parkinson & Behrouzan, 2015). Child labor, early marriage, and social cohesion (Guay, 2015) (Harb & Saab, 2014) all became “trendy issues” that received a lot of research and project funding. Multiple articles undertook the topics on refugee education, and access to livelihoods. The role of

---

<sup>11</sup> VASyR stands for Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon. VASyR reports are written as a collaborative effort between three international organizations; the UNHCR, UNICEF, and the WFP. This report is a result of an extensive survey done by these three agencies, assessing the vulnerability of Syrians in Lebanon while looking at the different situations of Syrian households including but not limited to the following; shelter, WASH, Protection, Education, Health, etc. See Latest VaSyR report for more details.

<sup>12</sup> 3RP is the Regional Refugee Resilience Plan is a platform developed by UN agencies to identify gaps in funding and access to services to respond to the Syrian crisis. The 3RP is also a programming platform containing a comprehensive amount of data on the Syria crisis response in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt.

<sup>13</sup> ActivityInfo is an online information management system platform employed by the UN and partner organizations in Lebanon to track interventions and assess the crisis response. In addition, all the UN and its partners have access to the data on this system to allow organizations to coordinate and refer “beneficiaries” to different cross-sectoral services such as psycho-social support, vocational training, short-term job opportunities, etc.

the government (Janmyr M. , 2016), governance strategies (Fakhoury, 2017) and politicization of aid management (Mitri, 2014) (Carpi, 2014) have also been prominent subjects.

A significant body of literature on the crisis addressed the Lebanese government's response. At the beginning of the crisis, the Lebanese government was praised for its hospitality of Syrian refugees (Mitri, 2014) due to its open-door policy (Janmyr M. , 2016). Towards the middle of the crisis, there was a shift in the literature; several reports and studies started exhibiting more censure towards the Lebanese government's policies (or the lack, thereof) in managing the Syrian crisis and in dealing with Syrians themselves. For instance, Mufti criticized the Lebanese policy of "no policy", characterized by confusion and contradictory state measures (Mufti, 2014). Moreover, Fakhoury critically addressed how the Lebanese sectarian state negotiated its politics of reception and apparatuses in managing this crisis amid already fragmented institutions and political disagreements ( (Fakhoury, 2017, p. 681).

Auspiciously, the past years, there have been several scholarly works that studied the crisis through a critical lens, challenging assumptions of refugees being "domains of knowledge"<sup>14</sup>, victims of war, and passive recipients of aid. Scholars like Janmyr published numerous articles exploring the legal status of Syrian refugee (2016). Some of her articles focused on the discriminatory policies against Syrians in Lebanon and delved into the modes of ordering practiced by different actors such as the state and the humanitarian and development sector in Lebanon (Janmyr M. , 2016) (Janmyr & Mourad, 2018). Fawaz, Salamé, & Gharbieh, in their book *Refugees as City Makers* (2018) employed an alternative approach to addressing different topics concerning Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and surmounted the predominant rhetoric of "*refugee talk*". This work showed how Syrian refugees practiced competence in negotiating spaces in the city, navigating it and claiming

---

<sup>14</sup> See (Malkki, 1995)

its spaces (2018). Further, Carpi explored accounts of experiencing humanitarianism in Akkar through the eyes of Syrian refugees residing in an already impoverished area. Her research found that people were frustrated with the humanitarian sector's response, that she stated only aims at lightening the suffering of refugees in displacement, without being active in stopping the war in Syria (2014).

This section presented the trends in the literature on Syrian refugees in Lebanon and revealed that there are shortages in the evaluation of aid projects and humanitarianism through a critical lens. The following section surveys the literature on Syrian women's empowerment programs and experiences with aid by focusing on hosting countries such as Jordan and Turkey, rather than Lebanon, given the major gap in exploring the topic in the latter.

### **1.1.2 Syrian Women's Experiences in Displacement: Importance of Transcending notions of Vulnerability and Victimhood**

Including an overview of studies that explored women's experiences in displacement is essential in the literature review since Syrian women's experiences in displacement often intersect with *notions in* or *practices of* development and humanitarianism.

Undoubtedly, women and men have dissimilar experiences in war and displacement, and wars and conflicts are gendered (Asaf, 2017) (Hassan, 2017). The nexus between women and displacement has been widely dominated by the idea that women become vulnerable in contexts of displacement (Asaf, 2017) (Wells & Kuttiparambil, 2016). In Lebanon, Syrian women too are framed by the cadre of vulnerability (Wells & Kuttiparambil, 2016) (Christiansen, 2017). As such, the response towards the Syrian crisis has been largely dominated by neo-liberal humanitarian and development initiatives targeted at "saving" women and "investing" in their "empowerment". On one hand, a large body of literature on Syrian women's experiences in Lebanon, springing out of or funded

by the development and humanitarian sector, resonated with discourses of victimhood and vulnerability. On another hand, a smaller body in the scholarly literature has dealt with this issue in a more critical manner, transcending the neo-liberal and post-colonial discourses, predominantly employed by the international organizations.

According to Rieff, one of the issues developments does is that it” [...] presupposes that societies can be made to work” (Rieff, p. 2). As such, we understand that humanitarianism starts with a postulation that something has failed, a disaster has happened, people have started to flee their countries and become displaced, and that organizations must do what it can for them (Rieff, 1995, p. 2). In the same line and as applied to the case of Syrian women, development comes in to empower women, with an assumption that displacement has disempowered women, and thus intervention becomes necessary. Moreover, humanitarian strategies tend to categorize women and girls as ‘vulnerable’, without clearly formulating the definitions of vulnerability (Asaf, 2017) (Christiansen, 2017) (Wells & Kuttiparambil, 2016). Very often, development agendas come with imported conceptions of empowerment and freedom, and preach different cultural norms that do not go in line with the one’s of those who are “targeted” in these programs. Despite assumptions pertaining to women being solely disempowered in displacement, their experiences can be both, empowering and disempowering.

Several studies undertaken by international agencies and scholars discover that numerous interviewed Syrian refugee women in Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt express fears related to harassment, exploitation and gender-based violence. Usta et al find that the extreme living conditions in displacement contribute to intimate partner violence and community violence as well as harassment towards Syrian refugee women (Usta, Farver, & Reese Masterson, 2016).

Moreover, Syrian women have not only assumed new roles, but have become sole providers in big families, run out of money and were forced to encourage their children to work or their underage daughters to get married (Asaf, 2017) (UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF,

2018) . By losing the sole male providers and being exposed to the possibilities of exploitation and harassment, a lot of Syrian families had to marry off their daughters at a very early age. In the same line, several studies have also found that losing sole main providers also is a contributing factor to Syrian women's "vulnerability" (Jabbar & Zaza, Evaluating a vocational training programme for women refugees at the Zaatari camp in Jordan: women empowerment: a journey and not an output, 2015) (Asaf, 2017) (UNHCR, 2019). To top it off, due to the work and visa restrictions on Syrians, a lot of Syrian women remain unregistered in Lebanon, and are unable to work in a formal manner, thus subjecting them to added exploitation and poverty. The VASyr report of 2018 found that the unemployment rate for displaced Syrian women was 61% as compared to 35% in men (UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF, 2018). Likewise, the changes women undergo from transcending traditional gender roles such as the need for women to work outside of the household, contribute to amplifying these risks (IPSOS Group SA, 2018).

Alternatively, in some cases, displacement maybe empowering. Janmyr attests that mobility can be factor for Syrian women's empowerment, especially since Syrian men's mobility is often restricted in Lebanon (2016). Though more burdened by responsibilities inside outside their homes, some Syrian women have gained more control of their lives due to their freedom of movement. When it became common for men to stay at home to avoid arrest and harassment by the police, Syrian women could move around to work or to do necessary chores (2016, p. 79). Moreover, a study conducted by UN women showed that a majority of women interlocutors reported that they occupied larger roles in their households and within their society. The study also found that this has been a contributing factor to some acceptance of women's leadership and engagement in public life (IPSOS Group SA, 2018).

Until today, Syrian women still face a lot of difficulties and are expected to face more challenges in the return phase due to numerous factors, including the fact that they

may be subject to return related violations and gaps in accessing legal documentation and property in light of the pre-existing legislations and social norms that define women's status in relation to male relatives (Mhaissen & Hodges, 2019, p. 45) .

Despite the facts that indicate women are generally more vulnerable in displacement as shown in the literature and in women's told experiences (and due to a number of different reasons), the employment of reductionist understandings of refugee and refugee women's experience must not be limited to generalized assumptions. The context of displacement is very much related to how women experience "vulnerability" or empowerment, and that context, related to women's entitlement to certain rights, political participation, and the recognition of their needs must be taken into deep consideration (Asaf, 2017, p. 1). Syrian women's experience in displacement must not solely be understood through the adoption of a generalized perception of vulnerability and victimhood. Women's experiences must not be understood in a limited framework, perceiving Syrian women as "oppressed" and men as their "oppressors" (Christiansen, 2017)<sup>15</sup>.

### **1.1.3 Syrian Women's Empowerment and Aid Reception; A Critical Reading of the Literature and Major Gaps in the Lebanese Context**

An increasing number of studies in the region has been exploring the ways in which Syrian refugees experience aid and their perceptions towards aid agencies and aid providers, however; there is still a gap in the approach and the literature on women's experiences with aid and the impacts and implications on women empowerment programs, especially in Lebanon. The major findings suggest that some empowerment projects have contributed to women's genuine "empowerment", but a lot of literature tackled the

---

<sup>15</sup> This notion is especially present in international and development agencies in Gender-Based Violence Programming. See (Christiansen, 2017) for more.

problems of neo-liberal and post-colonial discourses in humanitarianism and development, depoliticization of refugees and their misrepresentations. I divided the literature review into sections focusing on specific countries since the context of each country is extremely important in understanding the implementation of projects and women's lived experiences.

#### *1.3.1.1 Jordan*

In Jordan, I noticed that several studies focused on the Women's Oasis Center, run by UN Women in Jordan's Zaatari Camp. In their exploration of the impact of the Oasis Center for Resilience and Empowerment of Women and Girls' 16 on Syrian refugee women in Jordan, several scholars agree that the project, initiated by program by UN women , had an overall positive impact on the empowerment of participants (Wells & Kuttiparambil, 2016) , (Hassan, 2017), and (Jabbar & Zaza, 2015). As opposed to other empowerment initiatives in humanitarian scenarios which they claim often put gender equality aside as a development issue, this program proved beneficial for the empowerment of women as they were key factors in the building and transformation of this program and their lives (Wells & Kuttiparambil, 2016). Another positive aspect contributing to the effectiveness of this program is the authors claim that the people in charge of the program were aware of the importance of this proactive approach that came from the women themselves as opposed to what they claim other programs are limited to<sup>17</sup>. As such, the Oasis has allowed for narratives that transcend the mainstream stories of vulnerability as portrayed by many development agencies and humanitarian organizations. Instead, vulnerability narratives were replaced by an exploration of capacity and reinforcing coping strategies through the establishment of a physical and social architecture of space for these displaced women

---

<sup>17</sup> What was meant by that is short-lived programs: access to reproductive health, and short-term responses to GBV.

(Wells & Kuttiparambil, 2016, pp. 20-21). Jabbar and Zaza locate positive findings, claiming that the project empowered women by equipping women with skills (through vocational training classes), diminishing their poverty, transforming them to breadwinners and changing their gender roles (p. 312). Nevertheless, the idea of increasing women's skills leading to an increase in income and thus an expansion of women's choices does not always work on its own, but there are several hindrances including normative, structural and institutional obstacles (Golla, Mehra, Malhotra, & Nanda, 2011) (Kaya & Luchtenberg, 2018). The methodology adopted in Jabbar and Zaza's study does raise certain concerns. Firstly, though the authors suggest that empowerment is a journey and not a goal, yet they do not draw on feminist literature to explain these findings, instead, the authors rely on development and international humanitarian organizations' discourses on empowerment and development. Specifically, the authors write: "*the study shows that with modest funds much can be done to alleviate the harsh circumstances of the refugees and to give them hope and opportunities for a better life*" (Jabbar & Zaza, 2015, p. 312) Secondly, the surveying method (a self-administered questionnaire) raises some flags, especially since a lot of data is missing; most importantly, women refrained from answering certain questions on the efficacy of the program. The use of questionnaires is limiting in this situation since women are constrained in their answers and it does not allow space for expression of the ways in which this project positively contributed to their lives and "empowerment". Such a reliance on quantitative data by some scholars studying women in displacement and women empowerment projects often end up in impetuous judgments resulting from the generalization of women's experiences and the treatment of women empowerment as an end and not as a process.

Similarly, a study on the scale and impacts of livelihoods development on women empowerment in the solid waste sector in Jordan showed that projects implemented by international organizations have contributed to women's empowerment by granting them access to livelihoods and expertise and strengthening their roles in these projects (Saidan,

Abu Drais, AL-Manaseer, Alshishani, & Linton, 2020). This study is also problematic as it only interviewed experts and NGO workers, without asking the women about their experiences. Additionally, other markers of empowerment and disempowerment, including women's relationships, family roles, and others have not been critically addressed. White's critical study of women empowerment projects (vocational training and family planning) by international development institutions suggests that the latter's practices are problematic since they overlook women's subjective experiences and prioritize economic empowerment (within their neoliberal system) over social and political empowerment in project implementation (White, 2020).

Another critical study by Lokot found that by focusing on the generation of evidence and data through the practices of monitoring and evaluation processes, INGOs tend to neglect recognizing power hierarchies in their system. This insistence on generating evidence, the author explained, has resulted in a more transactional rather than a relational engagement between INGOs and refugees (Lokot, 2019). Very importantly, the author suggests that feminist values can inform more engaged research with refugees and better practices in engaging with displaced populations (2019, p. 467)

#### *1.3.1.2. Jordan and Syria*

An article written by Assad critically explored the vocational training offered by non-governmental organizations and humanitarian agencies in Idlib by claiming that these organizations, with their investment in the skills that Syrian women already had (sewing, embroidery, nursing and cooking) have reinforced the stereotyping of women and has led to the feminization of labor in certain sectors (2019). This is a way by which these agencies think they are "empowering" women while they are limiting their roles to specific sectors of society, thus reinforcing gender roles (Asaad, 2019). Moreover, the article states how these programs are short term and do not ensure or guarantee long-term empowerment. In the same thread, Abou-Raad's research on vocational programs for refugee women in

Jordan finds that such programs perpetuate gender roles in building on the gender division of labor and fail to challenge normative conceptions of “appropriate” work for women in the long-term (2018). The author suggests that programs must take into account women’s expertise to empower women, address patriarchal structures and help their self-identification process (Abou Raad, 2018, p. 22).

#### *1.3.1.3 Turkey*

Karłowska, studying women’s security and empowerment in the context of forced migration, reveals that while the humanitarian and development sector in Turkey claims to empower women by providing them with human security services, they fail to do so since they adopt Western modernist perspectives on human security and development instead of postmodern feminist notions of empowerment (Karłowska, 2019, p. 2). In the same line, a study by Keysan and Şentürk, very close in its approach to this thesis, attests that different women empowerment projects and NGOs (rights based professional/ feminist vs. needs-based) have dissimilar influences on the lives of women and their empowerment (2020).

From a different perspective, Erden, exploring the activities of a local women’s organizations (with Syrian refugee women) in the central Anatolian region, challenged the dominant narrative of refugees as victims and showed that both, refugees and local women can empower one another and build networks of assistance (2017).

#### *1.3.1.4 Syria*

An interesting study by Naif on women’s safe spaces (WSS) in Syria concluded several important matters on how women empowerment projects affect women’s conception of gender and personhood (2020). The author’s ethnographic approach proved very valuable in the study as the author was able to dig deeper and understand women’s experiences in a more comprehensive manner. Naif found that while WSS presented a lot of success stories for the women she worked with; a lot of work is yet to be done to make humanitarian

interventions more considerate of the different particularities affecting women's lives. This can be achieved by surmounting neo-liberal policies and genuinely understanding of women's lives and interests (Naif, 2020).

#### *1.3.1.5 Lebanon*

In Lebanon, there have not been any comprehensive studies that looked at women's experiences in empowerment projects in specific. Instead, some articles hinted at women's experiences with aid and humanitarianism.

Usta et al focusing on violence against displaced Syrian women in Lebanon, found that most interviewed women often expressed critical views towards NGOs who some said had discriminatory and preferential distribution policies (Usta, Farver, & Reese Masterson, 2016). Carpi, in her exploration of the everyday experiences of humanitarianism in the villages of Akkar in Northern Lebanon, interviewed Syrians who also displayed frustration with the neutrality and depoliticization of humanitarian assistance that only aims at their "alleviation -of-suffering" (Carpi, 2014). Further, the study emphasized the way in which refugees are placed in certain categories, having their needs calculated to be eligible for aid.

This section has presented an overview of the scholarship on the predominant discourses in studying the Syrian crisis in Lebanon. Furthermore, the literature review presented the major rhetoric regarding the relationship between women's experiences in displacement and development. Finally, the last section showed a number of studies that have addressed Syrian women's experiences in empowerment projects in the region, revealing a major gap in understanding Syrian women's experiences with women empowerment projects in Lebanon. The literature thus showed that though some women empowerment projects may have contributed to positive changes in women's lives, there are still inherent problems with the approach of these programs (neo-liberal and post-colonial ideals and practices) and their lack of genuine consideration towards women's true

needs and differentiated experiences in displacement. Therefore, this study, through its qualitative approach, and critical feminist eye, is a significant addition to the literature on women empowerment projects targeted towards Syrian women in Lebanon since it critically explores this subject, presenting its findings through the experiences of the women themselves and the NGO workers implementing these projects. The next chapter will highlight the theoretical framework adopted in this study.

# **Chapter Three**

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **1.1 A Critical Approach to Humanitarianism and Development**

The previous chapters revealed the predominant discourse on the Syrian crisis and the major gap in studying the practices of development and humanitarianism towards Syrian refugees, with a particular focus on Syrian women's empowerment projects implemented in Lebanon. In order to better understand these practices and dynamics, the study uses a critical post-colonial feminist approach to humanitarianism and development. The theoretical framework will present how I will link the works of various scholars to develop and analyze the main themes of my thesis; development projects as a one-size fits all neo-liberal tool, structure and agency, feminist notions of empowerment vs. the international enterprise's practices and notions of empowerment, and liberal vs. liberating empowerment.



An INGO worker walks into a Syrian refugee camp, of around 250 destitute souls, in the Beka'a valley.



*Figure 1. Yazan al-Saudi: An INGO worker walks into a Syrian Refugee Camp*

### **1.1.1 Why a Critical Lens in Approaching Humanitarianism and Development?**

In the past decades, aid has become a big business, and there is a lot of evidence that supports the fact that humanitarianism has witnessed a shift from volunteerism and philanthropy to explicit money making and investments within the neo-liberal economic system. This shift is a result of the growth of the humanitarian sector in the 1950s which was characterized by the emergence of NGOs, international governance mechanisms, and specialized agencies for different disasters and conflicts, including refugee crises. During that time, a new global spirit emerged and it was termed as ‘development’ (Davey , Borton , & Foley, 2013). Furthermore, with the UN General Assembly passing Resolution 198 (III) in 1948, there has been a call for extra exertion on ‘economic development of under-developed countries’ and in 1961, the UN declared its first Decade of Development (p. 10).

Historically, organizations used “to go where the need was the greatest”, but now, organizations implement “based on the needs” of the recipient populations (Rieff, 1995). Is it really true though that those are the people’s needs? The above comic by Yazan al-Saudi, a Syrian-Canadian comic artist is an exemplification of the reality of many NGOs in Lebanon. These organizations do not really implement “based on the needs” of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, but based on their own agendas and investments. Very often, it is not only that thousands of dollars are spent on initiatives that do not go hand with the needs of refugees, but also disempower them. International agencies and organizations, or even local ones who act as brokers implement a lot of projects that do not address the urgent and relevant needs of these populations as shown above in the comic; self-determination, right to safe and legal passages, clean water, free education, and food.

In the same way as government-to-government aid is not restricted to being an instrument for economic and political interests, by it being a big business, so is aid in the era of NGOs (Rieff, 1995). Furthermore, the comic displays how the aid industry has been

using “disaster pornography” to secure aid which is branded by the commodification of NGOs, their services and even logos (Rieff, 1995, p. 7). Photos of Syrian women and girls displaced as vulnerable and victims are often employed in the humanitarian and development sectors to attract donor money (Nawakil, 2015).

Drawing on Hazibar et al’s general framework on studying migration, the study uses a gender-critical, post-colonial and interdisciplinary perspective in order to understand the way in which donors and organizations perceive Syrian women (2016). Through the implementation of programs that claim to save women, empower them and educate them, a lot of organizations still employ a western hegemonic discourse; “. [...] the west or the global north to have an exclusive, absolute monopoly on “civilization” and “emancipation” and to therefore serve as a model” (Hazibar, Sauermann, Preglau, & Ralser, 2016, p. 3). In the same line, and when trying to explain how Lebanese aid workers might sometimes assume superiority (or responsibility) towards (saving, aiding, raising awareness among) Syrian refugee women, the paper will draw on Christiansen’s work to explain how Lebanese aid worker becomes the European or American white man in assuming these positions towards refugee women and men (Christiansen, 2017) (Hazibar, Sauermann, Preglau, & Ralser, 2016).

In particular the emphasis will be placed on Syrian women as agents of change and political subjects rather than objects of “reception” as they may be widely perceived in the international development and humanitarian enterprise. According to several scholars, many international agencies and NGOs perceive Syrian refugees passive recipients of aid, and vulnerable victims that need to be saved rather than political agents who engage in practices of citizenship and political participation (Christiansen, 2017) (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016) (Carpi, 2014). In the same line, using Agamben’s concept of *homo sacer* reduced to bare life, I will describe how several humanitarian agencies reduce Syrian women to objects or beneficiaries receiving services and even their “rights” or victims rather than

agents of change or political human beings with choices. It is as if some of these agencies, by “empowering women”, act and speak on their behalf and give them “qualified lives”- bios after they have become “a particular mode of life” - zoe as refugees (Agamben G. , 1998). Agamben’s frameworks will be used to describe how human rights are not compatible with human beings and how NGOs and international agencies have become “the state of exception”. Syrian refugees in general are subject to control mechanisms by NGOs and international agencies (vulnerability assessments, criteria for aid distribution, awareness sessions, language tests and trainings, etc.) as explained in the previous chapters. Further, I use Agamben’s notion of the “state of exception” to demonstrate how the politics of NGOs and international agencies work, replacing the “inactive” Lebanese State- policy of no policy<sup>18</sup>.

Fassin’s core theories on humanitarianism are used in trying to explore the ways in which humanitarianism legitimizes itself and how it is rarely exposed to criticism because its intervention carries within it a moral value (Fassin & Rechtman , 2009). <sup>19</sup>This notion is used to understand how humanitarian workers may defend programs that reduce women to objects of analysis, recipients of their products or beneficiaries, or claim to empower women through certain programs while some of their practices could be dis-empowering<sup>20</sup>. In a similar vein, I also use Carpi’s notion of “humanitarian orientalism” that she adopts in her study of humanitarian workers’ approach to aid provision in Akkar to analyze how interviewed humanitarian staff can claim their work is necessary since it is neutral, impartial and thus fair (Carpi, 2014, p. 12). Using Carpi’s notion of “opportunistic partnerships” between the local and international NGOs I explain how perceptions of development and aid workers and their practices are shaped (p. 12),. In this light, I will

---

<sup>18</sup> See Mufti and Janmyr as cited in introduction

<sup>20</sup> See Carpi 2017 on NGO workers in Lebanon.

also explain how Lebanese and Syrian NGOs become “local brokers”, situated between beneficiaries and international agencies, acting between the international system of humanitarian aid and the system of local communities (Neubert, 2007).

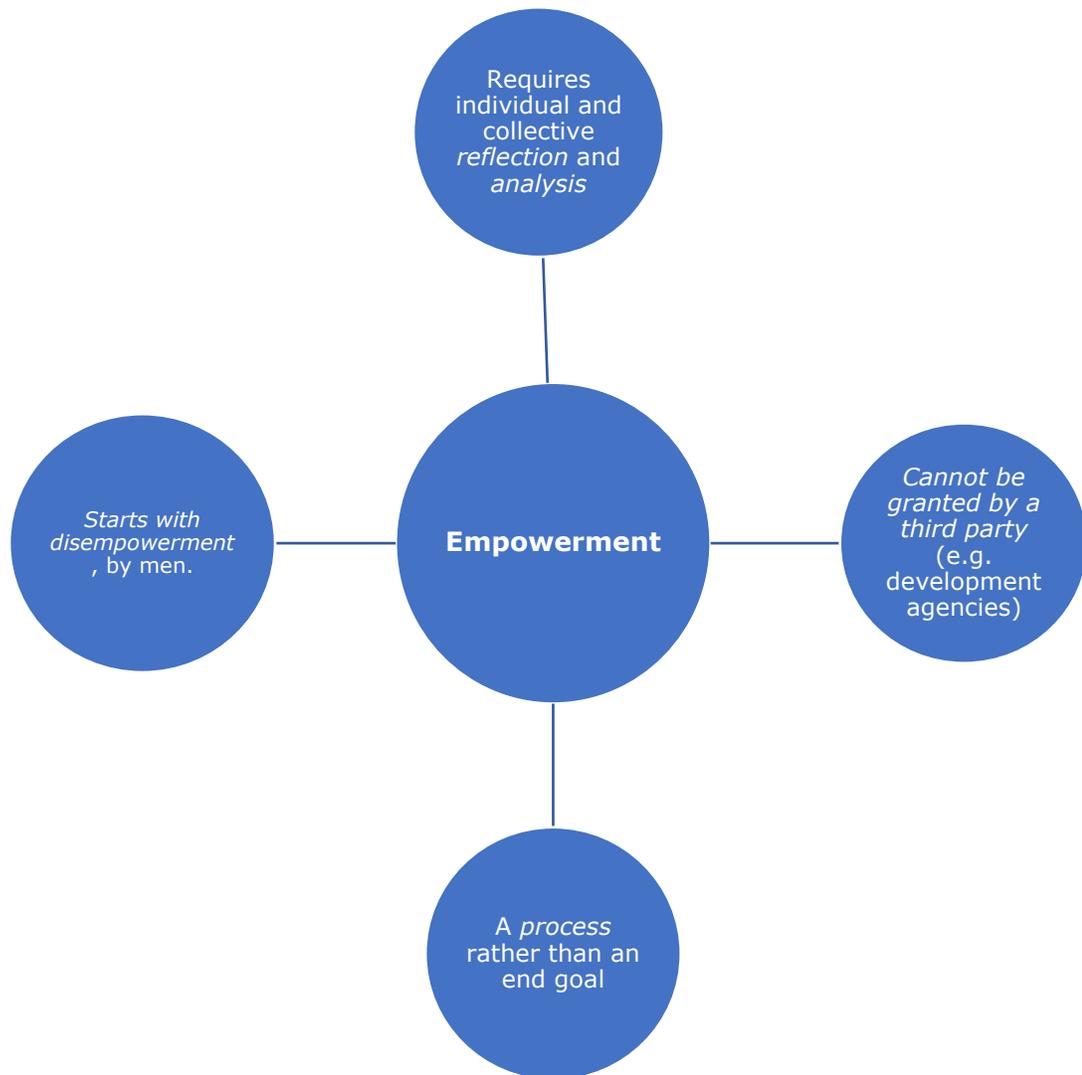
Fiddian-Qasmiyeh’s framework on refugee-refugee led humanitarianism and hospitality will be used to compare north-south led humanitarian logic and practices (International NGOs and Donors) and practice as opposed to the south-south led ones (Syrian Feminist Organizations, Lebanese Organization) (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016).

In my exploration of emerging support networks amongst Syrian women, I will place an emphasis on how (I)NGOs have undermined the power and role of women’s movements in bringing and making change to gender justice and equality (empowerment) (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014, p. ix).

### **1.1.2 Theoretical Framework on Women Empowerment in Development**

Feminist scholars have claimed that the investment in women empowerment and gender equality has become a kind of smart economics (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014, p. 1) (Mosedale, 2005). These scholars emphasize the use of women empowerment as a social strategy for social transformation, supported by corporate CEOs, western governments, international NGOs and financial institutions to fit into the global development apparatus (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014) (Mosedale, 2005) (Ferguson, 2011). Many feminist scholars are often critical towards the definitions (and practices) of empowerment adopted by development and humanitarian organizations, primarily since those fail to identify what empowerment is, and tend to disregard the power dynamics involved in understanding empowerment. This study adopts feminist definitions on empowerment as; a change, a choice, not a deliverable, but a journey and a process (Kabeer, 2005) (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014, p. x) (Carr, 2003) (Rowlands, 1997) (Ferguson, 2011) (Kieffer, 1984). Mosedale’s defines empowerment “[...] as a process by which women redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and do in situations where they have been restricted, compared to

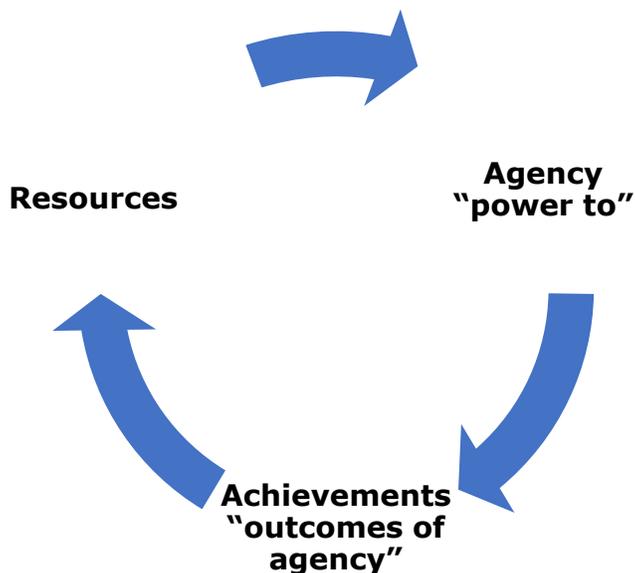
men, from being and doing” (Mosedale, 2005, p. 252). This definition will be used to analyze the findings on the implications of women empowerment projects on the participants. Mosedale also adds that women empowerment is related to women’s redefinition of gender roles and women’s possibilities for “being and doing” (Mosedale, 2005, p. 252) This conception is reflective of the gendered nature of women empowerment, whereby women can be disempowered by their gendered identities at home and in public roles (especially within a patriarchal system such as the one we live in). In the case of several Syrian women I interviewed, these women have been challenging gender roles “as part of [their] collective struggle” (Mosedale, 2005, p. 252) The figure below covers Mosedale’s review of the literature on empowerment. This framework will be used as a reference point in the discussion as well.



*Figure 2 Features of Empowerment summarized in Mosedale (2005)*

Furthermore, when analyzing donor's and organizations perceptions and practices empowerment, I see it as necessary to engage with notions of Liberal vs. Liberating empowerment. Sardenberg's exploration of these notions in a Latin American Feminist perspective argues that liberal empowerment considers empowerment as a tool for development (Sardenberg, 2016). On the other hand, liberating empowerment approaches

power relations as a core issue to investigate empowerment (Sardenberg, 2016, p. 18). Sardenberg's notion of Liberating empowerment resonates with Mosedale's notion of the term. In the next chapter, I employ these discourses of empowerment to understand the notions and practices of liberal and liberating empowerment in the different organizations under study. I would add that Kabeer's notion of empowerment, similar to the rest of the feminist scholars' notions I laid out in this section, focuses on the importance of process, a key aspect of true empowerment in the lives of the participants. The three dimensions of empowerment as defined by Kabeer will also be explored in the analysis. Agency, Resources and Achievements are key to the continuous achievement of genuine empowerment. First, agency is represented by the process of making choices and implementing them, second, resources are the medium of the exercise of agency and third, achievement is realized by putting together resources and agency and employing them to their maximum potential through a process, and not taking each factor as an end in itself towards the finish line of empowerment (Kabeer, 2005, pp. 13-15)



*Figure 3 Kabeer's Three dimensions of Empowerment (2005)*

To conclude, this chapter drew out the most relevant theories that will help frame my findings. By drawing on the relevant theories on humanitarianism, development and women empowerment, I explained how different notions will be employed in understanding the themes of this study.

The next chapter will present the findings of the fieldwork and analyze them by employing a thematic comparative analysis to answer the main question of the study; What are the impacts and implications of women empowerment projects on Syrian women?

# Chapter Four

## Methodology

### 1.1 The Importance of Qualitative Research in understanding Women's Diversified Experiences

Apart from the collection of secondary data, the study used a qualitative research methodology and brought together various tools and approaches under its scope. Over the course of a year, between 2018 and 2019, I conducted twenty interviews; six with NGO workers and thirteen with Syrian women who have participated in various empowerment projects. The interviews took place in the Southern suburbs of Beirut and the Beqaa region. Whereas most interviews were recorded, I informed my participants that they can refuse this at any time during the interview. When granted approval, I took fieldnotes instead. Since the (I)NGOs had “assigned” the women who participated in my study, I made it a point that the doors remained closed during interviews so that the women in particular do not feel monitored by the (I)NGO. My previous experience as an interpreter in fieldwork taught me that women felt more comfortable this way. Furthermore, I reminded the participants several times that they did not have to take part in the interviews and that I was an independent researcher working on my own studies. I made sure they knew that I had nothing to offer them, and that they were the ones who would be helping with my studies. One participant withdrew from the study<sup>21</sup>. The NGO staff I interviewed were interviewed inside and outside centers and none of them had their managers present during the interview or in the centers. Interviewees were promised privacy and confidentiality. The

---

<sup>21</sup> She was pressured by the NGO to participate and the NGO worker got irritated at her because she thought she had to look for a replacement.

thesis uses pseudonyms and is careful in concealing the identity of the (I)NGOs workers and Syrian women.

Although Syrian women talked about their specific experiences with empowerment projects set in the Beqaa and Beirut, NGO workers addressed different empowerment projects and talked more broadly about former and current projects as well and focused on the specific empowerment projects the interviewed women participated in. The use of the qualitative method was both, a necessary and appropriate scientific tool in this social investigation, and an intended act against the reduction of refugee experiences, and more specifically, Syrian women's experiences in displacement. The fieldwork also consisted of several pilot interviews and field visits to the centers where activities were being implemented.

With the widespread use of reductionist quantitative surveys and questionnaires in the development and humanitarian sectors to understand complex phenomena such as the impact of different projects on the lives of refugees, it becomes very necessary to adopt a different, more in-depth and qualitative approach to understanding such matters. The employment of semi-structured and in-depth interviews is very helpful in understanding such intricate topics. Displaced Syrian women's experiences with empowerment projects are not simple and empowerment is not just an end in itself. As the theoretical framework suggested, this study employs a post-colonial feminist approach to understanding the topics at hand. According to feminist scholars, empowerment must be studied and treated as a process and a as a tool rather than an indication. (Carr, 2003) (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014) (Kabeer, 2005) (Ferguson, 2011) (Mosedale, 2005). As such, my research tools did not only fixate on the empowerment projects; interview questions included women's past experiences pre-joining the projects, the experiences in the projects, their lives in displacement and their future plans. Furthermore, displaced Syrian women's experiences in empowerment programs are complex and intersect with women's experiences in displacement, their relationship with other women, the NGO workers, their families, and

newly adopted gender roles. Women's experiences are differentiated and deserve an in-depth analysis. Quantitative analysis by itself does not allow us to understand such complexities, and that is why the study adopts the focused ethnography model. Further, the case study method is adopted to provide an in-depth and comparative analysis of the impact and implications of women empowerment programs as implemented three (I)NGOs whose members and women participants I interviewed.

## **1.2 Focused Ethnography: A Deeper Understanding of Syrian Women's Experiences with Empowerment Projects**

The main approach used in this study is focused ethnography, a field that is not very common in social science research, but one that deserves more attention (Wall, 2015). According to Knoblauch, focused ethnography is characterized by short-term field visits that are often compensated for by the intensity of data-analysis and coding (Knoblauch, 2005, p. 7)<sup>22</sup>. Additionally, what differentiates this type of ethnographic approach from traditional ethnography is that the latter does not often start with a certain focus or idea that the researcher attempts to validate or refute, as opposed to the case of focused ethnography where the researcher already has an extensive knowledge (and often, direct experience) with the subject under study (Wall, 2015) (Knoblauch, 2005). Further, it is very rare to find that sociological ethnographers have the knowledge about the place and culture they are studying. In focused ethnography, the approach requires that the person undertaking the study<sup>23</sup> already be part of the culture or phenomena (Knoblauch, 2005) (Wall, 2015). Focused ethnography has also helped me stay true to my feminist approach, as it has saved the time of the women and NGO workers whose very precious time I am indebted for.

---

<sup>23</sup> The introduction has introduced my involvement in the subject under study, and the sections below will reveal further research biases.

In the course of this study, the data analysis was done on different levels; in the course of interview itself, the transcription process, the coding progression and in the process of writing. Further, the field visits and interviews lasted for an average of thirty mins, however, the analysis of findings and the work done before the conduction of interviews occupied long hours of study.

## **1.3 Sampling**

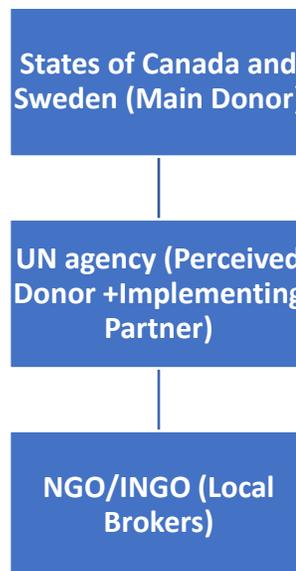
### **1.3.1 NGOs**

Six people from three (I)NGOs were interviewed for this study; at the time of the interview, three were working in an international NGO (one who had recently left his position), two in a Syrian feminist NGO and one was in a local Lebanese NGO. I approached the field myself, through personal contacts and official emails written to several NGOs and agencies. Before introducing the NGOs and their scope of work<sup>24</sup>, it is important to note three necessary matters. Firstly, the local Lebanese NGO and the International NGO I interviewed were implementing the same project along with an implementing partner; a UN agency (in addition to other empowerment programs). The Syrian NGO had different donors and projects. Secondly, my initial intention was to interview the international agency which acted as an implementing partner with the local and international NGOs, but despite efforts, promises and a pilot interview, I was not granted access to an official interview. The figures below detail some aspects of the women empowerment project on Early Marriage and SRH in the Local and International NGOs I interviewed. Finally, the reason why I ended up limiting my choices to these three organizations is because I wanted to understand how a local, an international, and a Syrian feminist NGO undertook their empowerment projects differently. There are, of course, other types of NGOs that could have been interviewed for this, but I chose these three

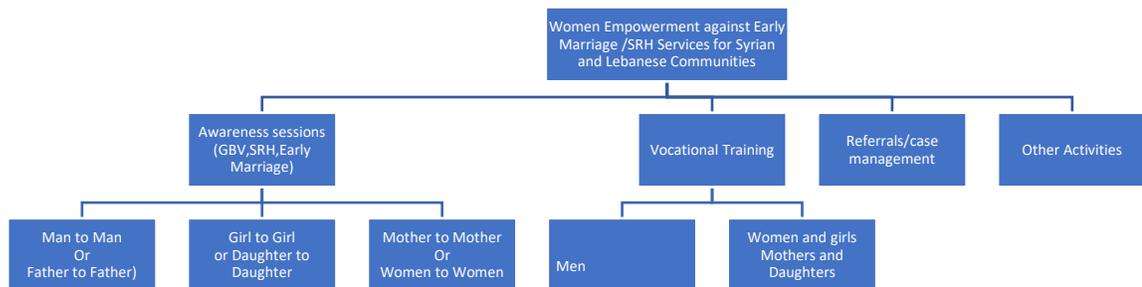
---

<sup>24</sup> Note that since this is a study that maintains privacy and confidentiality, the information about the NGOs will be concise and will be retrieved from (I)NGOs online platforms and some information will be paraphrased from the interviews.

particular ones since the first two were implementing the same project, with the same donor, and the third was a more “independent” NGO, with feminist principles. Due to the qualitative nature of this project, I chose to inquire into these organizations’ practices in an in-depth manner as opposed to surveying more organizations, in a random manner. Furthermore, the local and international NGOs interviewed for this study are two of the largest NGOs operating in Lebanon, implementing several empowerment projects. I also tried contacting at least two other (I)NGOs, but those were reluctant to give me interviews.



*Figure 4 Hierarchy of Donors and Implementing Organizations for the Early Marriage, GBV and SRH Projects in NGO X and INGO Y*



*Figure 5 Components of the Early Marriage and SRH projects in partnership with a UN organization*

### *1.3.1.1 Local NGO*

Established in the late 1970s, the goal of this organization was to help those affected by the civil war in Lebanon. The main areas of work include the establishment of different hospitals, educational and development centers. The NGO is currently involved with local and international partners in the implementation of programs on education, women empowerment, sexual and reproductive health, human rights, and child protection. Their donors include individual donors, governments, independent organizations, and international agencies. They implement various empowerment programs for women

including literacy and vocational training, protection services, psychosocial support, awareness raising on issues related to women's rights and sexual and reproductive health services.

#### *1.3.1.2 International NGO*

Established in the 1990s, this international humanitarian organization works on the front-line of emergencies in different conflict zones. It is involved in water and hygiene, distribution and emergency shelters, migration, protection, education in emergency, food safety and health and nutrition. In 2013, the organization started implementing programs in Lebanon, with the Syrian crisis. Their main scope of work is protection; however, they implement different programs across the country. Their partners include international agencies and governments. Their women empowerment programs include protection services, vocational and literacy training within programs advocating for women's rights and sexual and reproductive health services.

#### *1.3.1.3 Syrian Feminist Organization*

Established in 2012, this organization started helping a limited number of families in need and grew to incorporate more persons through its inside Syria and in the diaspora. Its main areas of focus include economic empowerment, protection (including psychological support), advocacy and research (including feminist knowledge production), and political participation (women in leadership). Under the empowerment program, they provide several educational courses (English, IT, vocational). They also provide women with education pathways to complete their diplomas and facilitate their applications for scholarships. Their donors include independent feminist organizations, individual donors, international governments, and organizations.

### **1.3.2 Displaced Syrian Women**

Since my study investigates the effect of women empowerment programs on displaced women, I had to go through (I)NGOs to reach the women who participated in such programs. The limitations and possible biases emerging out of this issue will be discussed in the sections below.

I conducted thirteen interviews with women participating in empowerment projects in three (I)NGOs (five women from the local NGO, four from the Syrian feminist organization and four from the international NGO). The women came from different backgrounds and originated from different cities and villages in Syria. They expressed a variety of political backgrounds and talked about different social and economic upbringings. Different women occupied different statuses within their households and had differentiated experiences with displacement. Their ages ranged between 20 years of age and 50 years of age.

### **1.4 Feminist Objectivity, Reflexivity, and Ethical Considerations**

Before revealing what could be read as biases and exploring the limitations of the study, it is important to consider the overarching theme through which I try to explain and embrace these matters, feminist objectivity. According to Haraway, feminist objectivity means understanding that knowledge is situated (1988, p. 581). All knowledge production is situated, and pure objectivity is a myth, especially in social research. As Sultana suggests, practices of reflexivity and negotiated spaces that are critical about power relations and positionality are necessary components for ethical research (Sultana, 2007)

The introduction has highlighted the researcher's experience in the development and humanitarian sector. To reiterate, my experiences do not validate or refute the findings of this thesis, nonetheless they give a background of the research itself and reveal my own positionality. Feminist scholars have argued for reflexivity and positionality as very important pillars in ethical research as practices that go beyond conventional and robust

institutional perceptions of research ethics (Sultana, 2007). The point is a commitment to truth and “[...] respectful research that minimizes harm” (Sultana, 2007, pp. 376-377)

When it comes to my own commitment to truth in this study, several issues deserve attention in this respect. The humanitarian and development sector has been the entry point to “studying” refugees, being at the core of the “management” of the crisis<sup>25</sup>. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, most of the knowledge produced (in the academia and by International agencies and INGOs) was concerned with the health of Syrian refugees, education, early marriage, gender-based violence, social stability the spread of epidemics inside camps, hygiene issues in camps, and different issues related to access to other services. Due to all this, Syrian women would often take part in a lot of focus group discussions, evaluation interviews or procedures, and meet a lot of external consultants who evaluate projects. Researchers, consultants, donors and institutions would often approach NGOs to interview displaced Syrian women. As a researcher whose participants were “picked” by NGOs themselves, I am obliged to reflect on certain points given the context above. Firstly, NGOs might have chosen certain women to participate in this research and may have pressured them to speak positively about their experiences. Secondly, since a lot of these women are used to affiliated scholars, consultants and donors, they may or may not have twisted their own narratives to fit into the narrative they are used to taking part in. This, if it may be true, reveals a lot in itself. Furthermore, some women might have seen me in a position of power, and this might have influenced the research itself. My only reservation is not having adopted a longer ethnographic research method that would have allowed me to delve deeper in the lives of the women I have met, and to understand how the programs I have looked into shaped their experiences in displacement. Given all the above, this is not where I start questioning the validity of my research, on the contrary, I am quite confident that revealing my positionality, reflexivity and my adoption

---

<sup>25</sup> The reasons and dynamics have been covered in the first three chapters of this study.

of feminist objectivity, have all reiterated that knowledge, is indeed situated, and never ultimate. Furthermore, my in-depth analysis of the interviews within my focused ethnography method, my experience in the field (as a researcher and as a previous development / humanitarian worker), and my keen review of the literature have all helped me remain truthful to my study. The next chapter will reveal the main findings of the study and critically analyze its main themes.

# Chapter Five

## Findings and Discussion

### 1.1 Empirical Findings

In the following sections, I highlight the significant findings of the interviews I conducted with (I)NGO workers<sup>26</sup> and displaced Syrian women<sup>27</sup> who participated in women empowerment projects. The themes I chose to focus led me to understand the impact and implications of women empowerment projects on displaced Syrian women in these organizations. I tackled the different subjects in a way that looks at different time frames in the lives of the women whom I interviewed. Moreover, I looked into the experiences of the (I)NGO workers to compare perspectives towards a more holistic understanding of the research topic.

#### 1.1.1 Findings of the Interviews with NGOs:

##### *1.1.1.1 Being a Humanitarian Worker: Negative and Positive Aspects*

It was noted, among all the interviewees, from three different organizations, that the most unfavorable aspect of being a humanitarian worker is the psychological pressure at work. The participants noted that this pressure was either external; from the interaction with the field, or internal; related to dealing with co-workers and the demands of the upper management and donors. Masses of paperwork, the desire to improve oneself at work, and keeping up with the pace of requests by the donors and management all occupied the participants minds and contributed to stress. Two participants, one working for a local

---

<sup>26</sup>Three INGO workers, one local NGO worker and two workers working in a Syrian feminist organization.

<sup>27</sup>Thirteen women, four participants in INGO's projects, four participants in a Syrian Feminist NGO's projects, and four participants in a Local NGO's projects.

organization and another for an international organization noted that they preferred working on the field, rather than the office. One project manager in an INGO noted;

*“It was a very special time when I was a case worker, because you would really feel happy in that sort of work. Yes, you would be subject to psychological pressures while working on the field but at the same time you witness certain accomplishments”* (Interview with Walid, July 2019)

Another worker also working in the same INGO complained about the pressure at work to get things done in a way that the donors require of it, but not necessarily as the women need it;

*“What I do not like about my work is that you reach a point where you feel you are asked to do something that you are incapable of doing. What I mean by this is that you might face budgetary restrictions or lack capacity for certain issues which need to be taken into consideration by international agencies and organizations. Most international organizations work on specific topics and not others, and nowadays, the displaced community living amongst us have other needs than what is provided to them by these agencies; the refreshments that we distribute or the hygiene awareness sessions that we deliver[...]*” (Interview with Rayan, September 2019).

When it comes to the positive aspects of their work, three workers working in an INGO said that what they love most about their work is being able to help those in need, and do good. The local NGO worker said she loved being on the field and interacting with women.

As opposed to the working environment in the local and international NGOs as told by the four participants working there, two participants working at the Syrian feminist organization told me that they felt that the center they work in was more like home. One of these participants told me that she had suffered psychological problems from the stress

at work, especially since everyone's issues were getting to her, knowing that she could not help everyone. However, she said that due to the good working environment, and the availability of free psychotherapy for the staff who needed, she has been able to work on her stressors. She noted;

*“So yeah, this is my experience with [Organization X], I love them so much, I like the way they work. I like how enlightened they are in implementing their programs because you know I have a lot of friends in feminist NGOs, or who are supposed to be feminist. [...] the difference between [ Organization X] and other organizations I know in Beqaa is that [Organization X] have [a] specific vision and all the staff are aware of this vision and they know very well this vision. This is a very important thing. And also, they practice the feminist values with the team. So, it is not just slogans.”* (Interview with Dalia, July 2019)

The feminist organization workers both said that their organization's environment and feminist approach helped them love their work and find it impactful. They both claimed that they noticed a huge difference between their former work and interaction with other NGOs and their current work.

#### *1.1.1.2 Project Implementation and Impact on Women*

When I asked my participants to reflect on the implementation of the women empowerment projects and their real impact on displaced Syrian women, opinions and practices varied across organizations and projects.

I found that the workers in the international organizations were very critical about the implementation in of one of the women empowerment projects that they were implementing with an international agency, funded by two international governments. All three of them told me, each in their own way, that the awareness sessions on early marriage in particular were not that impactful for those receiving them, as opposed to the peer educators who give them. The latter were receiving incentives and have been properly trained over a long course of time. Moreover, they all agreed that the protection work done

at the organization, also aimed at empowering women by providing psychosocial support and a safe space for women, despite its shortcomings, was more impactful than the awareness sessions on early marriage and sexual and reproductive health. One participant noted:

*“I mean there is a lot of work to be done to realize women empowerment rather than awareness sessions.”* (Interview with Sami, July 2019)

Sami did not claim that these sessions were unimportant, but said that the project’s main objective; “[...]to change the attitude and the behaviors of people” could not only be fulfilled by conducting awareness sessions. In his opinion, early marriage was a negative coping mechanism that communities resort to when the conditions of displacement and the harsh economic conditions in Lebanon leave them with no other choice. He also claimed that these communities were ignorant about the consequences of early marriage, but factors such as the lack of livelihoods, the fear of persecution at home, the lack of legality, and other factors in the hosting country contribute to that.

Two INGO workers praised the community-based approach adopted in the women empowerment project combatting early marriage, gender-based violence and advocating for sexual and reproductive health rights. They told me that it could be easier having people from the same community narrate their experiences about early marriage and educate their peers about Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) instead of having someone foreign come to “educate them” about these matters. Furthermore, they found that the involvement of men as peer educators in the early marriage awareness project was important for several reasons; i. the men would be comfortable knowing which activities their wives and daughters are participating in when they leave the house, ii. the project provides incentives for peer educators, a good source of income for families, and iii. the men would educate their peers on the matter instead of

getting someone else to do that since they are more aware of the culture and traditions of their own community.

Additionally, it was noted by the INGO workers that the Early Marriage and SRH project were benefitting the peer educators more than benefitting those who receive the condensed awareness sessions. The peer educators go through a selection process. They are given points for displaying leadership skills, understanding of the negative effects of early marriage and displaying a sense of community and volunteerism. These peer educators are mothers, fathers, and daughters. An INGO worker noted that the project benefits them psychologically and financially by contributing to their sense of confidence, self-esteem and gaining them income. Peer educators were paid for the sessions they conduct, and the targets and referrals they achieve. Targets include the number of people trained, and referrals include the cases referred to SRH clinics or psycho-social support or GBV. The monitoring occurred through paper work distributed by peer-educators and the NGO to these communities (referral forms, attendance sheets, etc.). Sami gave an example how the donors and implementing partners use the monitoring and evaluation tools to twist narratives of empowerment. He said:

*“[F]or instance, they set a target like an increase of 80% of wellbeing, and [...] in the mid of the project they hire a consultant to organize a mid-term review to see where they stand exactly from this 80%. And it was obvious that in their opinion there was a certain change. [In] my opinion there was a minimal, minimal change and I can send you the report of the consultant herself.”* (Interview with Sami, July 2019)

Despite being more impactful than the early marriage project, a former caseworker, promoted to a project manager for the early marriage project told me that when he was working in protection projects, he noticed that the INGO has contributed to a lot of families’ dismemberments. In these empowerment projects, women are often provided

with a “safe shelter” for a limited time frame. After that, they are left out, and many lose their families in the process. For him, such practices can be disempowering for women.

Findings in the local organization that had multiple projects, including the same Early Marriage and SRH project implemented in the INGO, with an international agency, suggested that women were generally benefitting from the projects, especially the SRH services and the vocational and literacy training projects. Regarding the former, the local organization had a long history and experience with providing health services. This project allowed the local organization to upgrade its SRH services and target more women. Furthermore, during a field visit I saw the shop the NGO established to encourage women to sell their products. All the profits went to the women who produced the artisanal products from different projects and trainings.

In the Syrian feminist NGO, the services provided included English literacy, computer literacy, vocational skills, first aid skills and at-home emergency trainings. Additionally, the organization also provided psycho-social support and health services for those who needed it. The two workers in this organization told me that the goal of their centers is to provide a safe space for women and girls. The safe space concept and the feminist values adopted by the organization infiltrated all the center’s activities. Dalia told me;

*“Our mission is to create a space for women and help them be resilient [...] resilient enough to help them participate in public life, through four points, or four programs: the first one is economic empowerment, [the second is] protection which means psychological support, the third is advocacy and research[..] and the fourth is political participation, or building [a women] community [...].”* (Interview with Dalia, July 2019)

### *1.1.1.3 Reasons for Women’s Participation in Empowerment Projects*

When (I)NGO workers were asked about the reasons that drive women to participate in their empowerment projects, most answered that they needed the incentives or hoped for

finding jobs later on. All the (I)NGO workers who were implementing the Early Marriage and SRH project with the UN agency said that the incentives are one of the biggest drivers for the peers' participation in these projects. They also said that this incentive helped change some of their attitudes or their family's attitude towards early marriage. For some, this incentive helped "delay" early marriage in some families. Hania, a local NGO worker said:

*"[...] Some girls do not want to get married. So, they consider this [as a] chance to learn more and to have a financial income [in] the house so this will make it least possible for them to get married. So, they want to grow on their own terms, which is very good. So, the main motivation is that they want to change, their lives to change."* (Interview with Hania, July 2019)

On the other hand, the workers in the feminist organization told me that the number one motive behind women joining their program, besides their love of learning and their hope in finding a job based on the skills they were attaining, is that they are comfortable in the center. Women were happy to meet other women; it took their minds of things, and they saw the center as a space to breathe. Aya noted:

*"[Women come here] to increase their knowledge. They know each other and gather together over reunions. They see this center as a second home. It is not just any center."* (Interview with Aya, October 2018)

#### *1.1.1.4 Reflections on Donor Demands*

All the interviewees claimed that very often, donors had very illogical demands, however. Consequently, these organizations-initiated negotiations with their donors to make sure the project implementation is more realistic and closer to the needs of the women.

In the feminist organization, the two women I interviewed claimed that the organization has its ways with the donors. They chose specific donors and made sure they set boundaries and limits in order to avoid forsaking the organization's feminist values. Dalia said:

*“[Donors] do not interfere. They are like strategic donors because they have been working with [the organization] since 2012.”* (Interview with Dalia, July 2019)

Furthermore, with the rising obsession in monitoring and evaluation, the employees of the INGO and the local NGO implementing the Early Marriage project with a UN agency claimed that they often struggle with tedious paperwork when reporting on project activities. Rayan, an INGO worker complained about this;

*“At a certain time, you are obliged by the donor to send reports in a certain format. This is a very tiring process. You reach a level where you have so many forms that you are supposed to fill, and especially when there is a very high number of volunteers working on different sessions and in different activities. Naturally, the reporting will be very hard, but it passes, since I think we reached a point where we got used to so much pressure in our work. It passes. It passes.”* (Interview with Rayan, September 2019)

Hania from a local Lebanese NGO explained how the organization she works for deals with donors;

*“The donor does not give money and decide on the project. When we go to the donor, we would have a specific proposal in mind which we present to them, they either accept it or they request modifications. But naturally, every donor has their specific areas of work and interests [...]”* (Interview with Hania, July 2019).

The workers in all the organizations complained about the targets requested by donors. Very often, they had a high number of people they wanted to reach. Some workers complained that donors do not understand the field, reduce the project impact to percentages or numbers. By this, the donors focus on quantity before quality until they are

faced by the organizations. Sami, an INGO worker told me that donor requests often come in parachutes, meaning they suddenly expect one to do things in a certain way without actually knowing what the field requires. Furthermore, another INGO worker working for the same organization describes donor demands as unattainable (in terms of targets), and unfitting towards the community:

*“I sometimes feel like the designer of the project was a bit high, like while designing. [...] Trust me I have good experience concerning the fieldwork because I started working as a monitor, I used to fulfill surveys on a daily basis. Whenever a hopeless, vulnerable refugee sees an expat, or sees a UN vest or sees a person that he perceived [as] working for[...] a certain NGO and [...] can provide to him or to her, a certain kind of assistance, trust me the answers will directly change because he will have certain expectations. I would say that meetings taking place concerning the monitoring and evaluation itself or concerning the approach, the family approach [...], and all the literature that [X UN agency] has, and the perception and the impact reaching the people are completely separate. Meaning, each of the communities live in a planet. The designers of the project live in a certain planet, the beneficiaries live in a completely different planet, to be honest.” (Interview with Sami, July 2019)*

He also explained how many refugee communities pretend to listen to UN agencies and donors *in order to get their needs met:*

*“They will tell you that, yes sir, we will not marry [off] our children, they will tell you yes sir [...]. You would like to hear this answer and they would like to obey you because they perceive that they might get a certain assistance, even if you explain hundreds of times that this is not about assistance. These people are hopeless and they can have high expectations from [...] any insignificant detail that they might observe. [...] There is no communication, actually, between both communities because people, they perceive that these UN bodies are trying to implement and change our culture [...] and they want us to*

*acclimatize and to adapt to the thoughts coming from the Wild Wild West, this is what they call, the Wild Wild west. [T]he opinion of the international communities is that these people come from a harmful culture, harmful. Nobody is willing to listen to the other.” (Interview with Sami, July 2019)*

Furthermore, (I)NGO workers found ways to deal with this. One person told me that it is very easy for them to lie about targets and impact by filling false M&E forms, and he guaranteed that no one will monitor this.

Additionally, three people from two different organizations, the local and the international organization implementing the same empowerment projects (Early Marriage and SRH) complained about the lack of proper management of resources in the projects. According to them, resources were often unwisely spent on activities or products the communities do not need. In particular, three people working in these organizations complained about the “dignity kits” or hygiene kits provided by their UN partner agency to the women under the SRH and Early Marriage Project. They said that at one point, the kits were better, though not perfect. Strangely enough, their UN agency partner had hired a consultant to assess the quality of dignity kits before sending out even worse kits. They were particularly critical about the quality of the products provided, their nearing expiry dates, and the donor logos on almost everything inside the bag, including the bag itself. Walid said:

*“May you never get to see what is inside the kits this year. The dignity kits that I saw this year were horrible! Sanitary pads for women and some magnets for the fridge, I guess this is it. It might have contained something extra here and there, but nothing important really” (Interview with Walid, July 2019)*

Another Local NGO worker expressed her anger towards these dignity kits and the commodification that is reflected in this service;

*“If it [was up] to me, I am not going to give them coffee cups with the name of the donor on it. [...] The visibility is a huge issue for all the donors; all of them international... no matter what. And I understand this because they are also being funded by someone, so they need these people need to see the logo to get money. But like I do not know if you have ever seen the kids with a backpack, the school backpack with a huge logo. [...] This is not dignity, this is not dignity, it is not called dignity kit because it is depriving them from dignity. Because you do not give people and then [say] I gave you this, I gave you this, especially if you are talking about kids. It is very annoying going to school and seeing some people have little backpacks and the other have way huger ones. [...] That is not good, I really hate this. And then, [there are] kits [ that contain] mugs with their [ name of donor on it] and where? In the ITS!“(Interview with Hania, August 2019).*

Hania also told me that she always stands up against donor demands and she is not sure if the donors like to “support her” anymore.

#### *1.1.1.5 Perceptions of Women Empowerment*

Every humanitarian or development worker I interviewed had her own definition of empowerment. Some viewed it as a tool, granted by the organization itself, whereas others saw it as something that comes from within women and is transmitted to their communities. Thus, it would be unfair to make generalizations on the definitions of empowerment across organizations. Despite this, there were certain trends worth mentioning.

Three people working in an INGO and one working in a local NGO said that empowerment is something that is done to women.

For instance, Sami, an INGO worker said:

*“In principle, [empowerment] is when you give, and when you support the community from its own community. So, today, when I enter an ITS and see that early marriage is predominant. I go with the minority of people who are against it and work with them so that they can support their own communities and directly interfere in their own*

*community, even if they work on this issue daily. This is empowerment for me*". (Interview with Sami, July 2019)

The women who worked for the feminist organization had different definitions of empowerment but concluded that it is not something to be done to women, and that is something that transcends Syrian women, to reach other women too. Aya and Dalia clarified their perceptions of empowerment as follows:

*"Every woman has to have the ability to be independent. Every woman is subject to losing her husband or loved ones. She has to be independent, to be able to rely on herself. It is not only about Syrian women. It is about other women too. To be empowered is to acquire knowledge and skills in order to develop oneself"*. (Interview with Aya, October 2019)

*"For me is to have the tools and options and alternatives and being able to transmit it to other women, to share it with others, to have the chance to share it with other women. So, it is to move the power from you to another."* (Interview with Dalia, July 2019)

Only one INGO worker described empowerment as a process, claiming that it comes from the communities rather than the organizations. Almost all the interviewees correlated empowerment with financial independence and self-reliance.

Moreover, the INGO workers and the local NGO worker talked about how donors and agencies can contribute to disempowerment in the interviews, however they did not attest to this when I asked them to define empowerment. They did however mention donor and UN definitions of empowerment and practices of disempowerment when we discussed donor requests. Some of the findings are listed in the above section. Linkages between the goals and demands of the development and humanitarian sector to empowerment and disempowerment will be discussed further in the analysis.

## 1.1.2 Findings of the Interviews with Displaced Syrian Women

### 1.1.2.1 Drive to Participate

Several reasons drove the women I interviewed to participate in empowerment projects. Most of the women who participated in the early marriage and SRH projects in the international and local organizations told me that they did so in order to empower themselves and help educate the community on the importance of SRH and the harms of GBV and early marriage. Most of these women had experienced early marriage themselves, and did not want their daughters or other people's daughters to go through it.

Usually, these women were strategically “chosen” by the (I)NGOs to be peer educators due to their backgrounds and characteristics. (I)NGOs have specific criteria that they look for in women and girls who give the training. These criteria are part of the M&E system where women and girls are often given points on the extent to which they show leadership, communication skills, past experiences with early marriage or GBV, etc. Samira told me;

*“They outreached me and they offered me [this work]. Initially, I did not know the whole idea behind the project. They just told us that a project will open and you will be trained and then you will start working on the field. At the beginning I refused the idea. I did not have time. I love this work, but I did not have time, I had a crisis to deal with. My husband broke (inkasar<sup>28</sup>), and all. So, my mind was blurry, but when I attended the first session here about empowerment, I liked the idea. Principally, I liked the idea [because the project was about] early marriage, society,*

---

<sup>28</sup> Several women used the Arabic term إنكسر , that literally translates to “broke”. At least two women used this term to describe something that goes beyond the physical aspect of breaking one's leg and hip as in the case of Samira's husband, and denote the greater mental and social “breaking” that men go through during displacement.

*violence against society, violence against women, or gender based violence between sexes, I liked this idea, because I am not the kind who likes to be controlled, and I am an [living] case of early marriage and this is why I had a strong desire to enter this program , because I felt that I wanted turn my lack of knowledge to knowledge that I can teach to my daughter, other girls, and other women so that they do not venture into the same risky dilemma that has become a big problem in our society. Really, really a big problem.” (Interview with Samira, August, 2019)*

The women participating in skills training in all three organizations wanted to get out of the house and learn new skills or languages. All the women participating in the Syrian feminist organization’s empowerment projects told me that they wanted to educate themselves, get scholarships through the NGO, or help their children with school. Nour said;

*“I honestly wanted to improve myself in English. I am going to pursue my studies in an institute [learning center] and English is a primary language there... [...] Of course I want to empower myself. I want to teach my children later on. I have a five-year-old boy.” (Interview with Nour, October 12, 2019).*

More than half of the women I interviewed told me that getting out of the house was a big motive for them to participate in these projects. For Layan, displacement took a heavy toll on her and made her depressed, so her daughter learned from the neighbors about the project at a local NGO and urged her to try attending the skills trainings. She told me that was participating in at the local NGO helped her cope;

*“As long as I am in this country, I want to get out and learn. I would not find anything better than this.” (Interview with Layan, August 2019).*

Several peer educators told me that the displaced Syrian women attending their awareness sessions do so to learn about new things and get out of the house, however, aid reception remains a big part of the reason behind attending the awareness sessions conducted in ITSs.

*“They say, we will attend, we will attend, but what aid can you give us in exchange? What will you give us? It is like that. This is the most important point. They might sit with you for 10 times if you repeat the session 10 times...Yes, this is the most important point.”* (Interview with Majida, September 2019).

#### *1.1.2.2 Women Empowerment Projects and Changing Gender Roles in Displacement*

In general, most of the findings suggest that the women in all three organizations were satisfied with the projects they participated in. A lot of them told me they felt the projects contributed to their empowerment, whereas others told me displacement made them who they are today and forced them to be stronger.

The ones who took part in the Early Marriage, GBV and SRH project as peer educators were particularly satisfied since they felt they gained a lot of knowledge about women’s rights, the harmful effects on early marriage and have claimed that they benefitted some people who attended their trainings on these matters. Furthermore, these women were the ones who benefitted the most financially. This, in turn, gained them access to different roles and horizons. Asia said:

*I have benefitted greatly, greatly, from [Organization Y] and all the projects they implement. I gained a lot of awareness and I strengthened my personality. I was a shy person in the past; I did not have any strong communication skills in society as a whole, but it made a big difference [being part of these projects].”* (Interview with Asia, October 2019)

Those same peer educators from the local and international NGO said that awareness sessions on early marriage and SRH do not necessarily contribute to women's empowerment as the projects are short, the sessions are condensed, and the values and traditions in the societies are entrenched. Samira narrated one of the many examples of this in the interviews;

*“I was disappointed by some people. I would give the awareness sessions for the first time, and then when I would come back, I would see pregnant women [...]. But why? I mean we worked together regarding this and you were convinced. She would tell me: My husband. I would say: Ok, your husband, but you have a tongue, you have a tongue, you have a mind, face your husband! [...] What would force [to come back to the sessions...] is their love for knowledge. They really want to learn. The disappointment happens when the woman wants to face her husband and tell him no, she wants to [tell him no]. She is with me and she is convinced by my words, otherwise she would not have come back to my session. One session was not enough to strengthen her personality. She needs more than one session (for that), or more than one follow-up so [...]. Same thing happened with me. When I had some weak aspects, I developed my personality (with practice and follow up) until no one could face me. [...] She needed more time.”* (Interview with Samira, August 2019)

Those who took vocational training at the Lebanese and international NGOs were happy to gain new skills and develop knowledge about different subjects. In all the organizations I interviewed, the women told me the teachers' treatment was good and that they were happy that their participation led them to form new friends and learn new hobbies. Samira, a woman who was taking sewing classes at one of the women's centers operated by the Local NGO in Beirut said:

*“During your day, you see people, you talk to someone. Sometimes you meet someone that you can talk to and share your burdens and problems with. You get the*

*burdens off your back [that way]. Sometimes, you are annoyed from your son or daughter, and they [ teachers and social workers] guide you [...] The teachers are great. Thank God.” (Interview with Samira, August, 2019)*

When I asked the women if these projects were a direct contributing factor to their empowerment, most answered that displacement empowered them, or actually forced them to be strong. For them, projects only provided temporary solutions. They explained how they had to depend on themselves, assume new roles, especially when most of them lost their husbands or became the sole providers in their families. Raneem’s story is one of the many I came across during the fieldwork

*“My husband was an employee. When we came here, there was no work for him. We did not want to wait for aid; aid will not sustain our living. You get me? My husband went out looking for jobs, but no one would employ him since he did not have any experience with the professions that were available here. So, I started (thinking), if my husband was not working, and if I also sit (at home). How? A house! Children! They do not understand when you tell them I do not have (money). A child does not understand this. He does understand when you tell him I do not have (money) when he cries and he wants his pocket money, to buy (something), or if he buys something, he wants to buy it. So, from that, I decided that if my husband cannot find finding work, then I will look for work. I want to be strong and look for work and not have my kids need anything.” (Interview with Raneem, October 2019)*

On the other hand, several women told me that displacement disempowered them, as in the case of Layan who I quoted above or Kamila, a woman who lost her husband during the war:

*“Honestly, it [displacement] did not make me stronger [...] If I had not been displaced, I could have graduated a long time ago and finished my studies.” (Interview with Kamila, August 2019).*

Aside from the shortcomings of the project itself, in terms of direct empowerment goals as narrated above, very few women complained about the projects they participated in. It seemed like most of them made the best out of their experiences in the projects, despite the difficulties they faced in finding jobs after spending a lot of time on learning new skills and languages or even spending their own money on transportation to reach the centers.

Another significant finding is that the transportation incentive was very necessary for women to participate in the projects. Three women participating in different projects in the feminist organization told me that everything was great except for the transportation. Since a lot of these women do not live close to the center and cannot easily access transportation (especially in a place like the Beqaa), they found it difficult to get to the center. Despite the fact that transportation was a heavy financial burden, many women still wanted to participate in the center's activities because of their many positive aspects:

*“It is excellent, only if you can give us some money for transportation since I am taking food from my daughters’ mouth to pay for the transportation”* (Interview with Riham, October 2019).

The projects might not have directly benefited the women in donor terms and measures, especially since the problems of displacement were larger than the temporary solutions provided. However, most of these projects benefitted the women in their own way and on their own terms. The analysis will tackle these particular issues. All the women understood, as opposed to most of the (I)NGOs, that empowerment does not happen overnight.

### *1.1.2.3 Solidarity groups*

One of the most important findings of this study is that women got to form new friendships and build networks. Almost all the women I interviewed told me that they

formed new friendships and solidarity networks as a result of their participation in the empowerment projects in all the organizations. A lot of them would attend the classes and go to the sessions to catch up with their friends. Most of the women I interviewed told me that their participation in the projects helped them connect with other women and share information about various opportunities such as scholarships, part-time job opportunities, or daily lifestyle tips. Even after the project activities end, many women stay in touch and continue to visit each other and support one another. Some testimonies from different organizations include:

*“We started texting each other and forming groups where we help each other to find trainings, to get food boxes, and other things. So, we started communicating and connecting. Most of them are widows or women in need.”* (Interview with May, October 2019).

*“I have a lot of friends (from this program). [...] We have a WhatsApp group and we share information there. They helped me get the scholarship for the Sharq Institute. I registered in this institute and I got a scholarship”* (Interview with Nour, October 2019).

## **1.2. Analysis**

In this section, I analyze the findings of the study, and put it them in the context of the theoretical framework I adopt.

### **1.2.1 Impact and Implications of Women Empowerment Programs: Key differences in different projects and organizations**

#### *1.2.1.1 Representations of Displaced Syrian Women: Vulnerability, Negative Resilience and Positive Resilience*

The findings of the interviews echoed the literature on the representations of displaced Syrian women as disempowered, vulnerable, and thus need to be saved (Carpi,

2014) (Nawakil, 2015) (Agamben G. , 1998) (Christiansen, 2017) . All the workers I interviewed were aware of the different factors affecting women’s lives in displacement, such as living in a country with a problematic economic and political context like Lebanon, changing gender roles, issues of legality and the lack of access to different services, however, most of them, with the exception of the Syrian feminist organization workers, viewed the women and communities as vulnerable victims that need to be saved. When they spoke about resilience, they perceived it in the same way as the development and humanitarian sector does; something that (I)NGOs have contributed to, often disregarding the role of the woman herself (Fassin & Rechtman , 2009) (Rieff, 1995). Below is an example of how one INGO worker used development fuzzwords and buzzwords such as; vulnerable, interventions, (Cornwall & Eade, 2010) and employed frameworks that reduce women’s experiences and categorize women as vulnerable, and even ignorant:

*“The aware person is less vulnerable than a person who is ignorant. This is important to mention. Someone who is aware is less vulnerable than someone who is not aware about the services, [...] the consequences of early marriage, [...] and] access[ing] reproductive health services, but awareness, again, should not be a standalone intervention. Case management and the access to reproductive health were a bit more rewarding.”* (Interview with Sami, July 2019)

The word “beneficiary” is also one that deserves some attention here when discussing representations of displaced Syrian women, especially when the development and humanitarian sector employs this term in excess. According to Malkki, humanitarian interventions often focus on refugees as “objects of knowledge, management and assistance” (Malkki, 1996, p. 377). This is another way women are reduced to being passive aid recipients, deprived of their other roles and meanings (Agamben G. , 1998) (Carpi, 2014) (Christiansen, 2017). INGO workers used this term multiple times during the interviews, while the Syrian Feminist NGO workers and the Lebanese NGO worker

intentionally refrained from using it. Dalia, a Syrian Feminist NGO worker corrected herself after accidentally using this term;

*“By the way, we do not use “beneficiaries” I misused this word in the last question because maybe we [are] used to it. But we do not use this word; we call them participants and we do not look at them like victims. They are not like this; they are survivors and they have specific capacities. If they come to participate in the [0 level] IT courses, it does not mean [...] they are 0 in everything. They have other experiences and other qualifications. So, we respect this very well.”* (Interview with Dalia, July 2019)

Moreover, the women working in the feminist organization were constantly reflecting on their own position in the organization. As mentioned in the findings, Dalia suffered from extreme stress and was referred to the in-house psychologist due to her multifaceted positionalities and perceived duties she held as a feminist woman, a humanitarian worker and a refugee. As a feminist, she was constantly involved in activities and trainings on women’s participation in the political process, advocacy and leadership alongside her tiring job, something that overwhelmed her. Furthermore, she was keen on making sure that the projects implemented at the center remain true to feminism and the true meaning of empowerment. As a humanitarian worker, she wanted to help all the women and was constantly involved in their private and public life, often forgetting her own struggles and limited capacity. As a refugee, she also had her own struggles related to her legal status, the uncertainty of keeping her job, and her participation in the political arena. Aya, through her understanding of empowerment, and by remaining true to the feminist values in the organization, constantly battled donors over targets and projects that do not suit the women’s needs. Carr discusses this kind of positioning that feminist social workers should keep in mind to be constantly involved in the process of empowerment in their organizations. Aya and Dalal were constantly reflecting on their own positions and identities in the empowerment process and they were aware of their positions of power (Carr, 2003).

### *1.2.1.2 Donor Agendas land in Parachutes*

*“The designers of the project live in a certain planet, the beneficiaries live in a completely different planet, to be honest.” (Interview with Sami, July 2019)*

One of the most significant issues highlighted in the interviews is that donor demands, regardless of the type of organization, are often hard to attain. (I)NGO workers stressed on the idea that donors do not understand the field’s needs and their demands are often hard to attain, whether it was the multiple paperwork for M&E purposes, the illogical demand for targets, or the nonsensical requests that do not apply to the field. Since (I)NGOs often partner up with UN agencies to implement projects, they act as local brokers and find themselves in a situation between the community itself and the organization and donor (Neubert, 2007). A lot of problems arise there.

The findings have highlighted some examples where donor requests contributed to the disempowerment of women and the (I)NGO workers themselves. For instance, when Rayan was working as a caseworker, he explained how the INGO’s lack of understanding of the community needs and lack of provision of proper solution led to dismembering families and to some women’s disempowerment women.

*“As a caseworker, things come to you in a parachute: Do 1, 2, 3 and it is done! [...] For example, a woman is referred to the shelter, and she stays there for three months, doing nothing. Ok, she might have received psychological support and other issues, but she was not given any trainings, she did not learn any profession, she got out with nothing in her hands: no money, no profession, no skills, and maybe, her easiest resort would be survival sex. If she takes this path, her whole life would be ruined, and if she returns to her husband, she might be subject to more domestic violence. So, this is a major problem. This is ruining people’s homes instead of opening homes. This is affecting women in a negative way and is not really benefitting them. It is not ending up in something positive for them. This is something we have been encountering as case workers since we are working*

*directly with people. It is not like we “throw women in safe shelters and say: hey, look we achieved something you guys, we protected her. We did not actually protect her, we ruined her. she lost her family, she lost her children, she lost the whole world.” (Interview with Walid, October 2019)*

Furthermore, (I)NGO workers claimed that empowerment and change in societies does not happen overnight. Very often, when donors and agencies force it, it fails. One INGO worker said that donor targets could be attained but the impact and change in attitudes cannot happen overnight and is far from tangible;

*“I am sorry to say that but this is what I feel [...when it comes to realizing] gender equality, women empowerment, addressing early marriage as much as possible, and promoting access to reproductive health in the most remote and undeserved areas. For the number of people trained, for instance, it is very tangible. You can know the number of people trained, the number of peers and these people will go spread the word, convey what they have learned. This is very tangible [...] but if these people change their attitude, this is not tangible. [...]” (Interview with Sami, July 2019)*

Asia, a displaced Syrian woman who participated in the Early Marriage, GBV and SRH project as a peer educator insisted that: *“A man does not change through magic! Through magic!”* She also said that due to the gap between the donor demands, and the demands of the community, she and other peer educators faced threats, including an incident where some men threatened them with guns since they thought they were providing women with birth control pills in one of the ITSs.

Despite employing “community-based approaches” to empowerment and negotiating project activities and targets with their donors, the local and international agencies I interviewed still acted like local brokers, and persisted in the same limbo of applying a western and neo-liberal hegemonic discourse in approaching projects (Hazibar, Sauermann, Preglau, & Ralser, 2016). The Lebanese aid workers I interviewed, regardless

of their genuine intentions to help Syrian women, did assume superiority and responsibility towards saving, aiding, and raising awareness among Syrian refugee women. Christiansen's work with aid workers in Lebanon resonates with the findings where the local and international Lebanese aid workers I interviewed became the European or American white man in assuming these positions towards refugee women and men (Christiansen, 2017) (Hazibar, Sauermann, Preglau, & Ralser, 2016). I also noticed that some of the displaced Syrian women who participated in the Early Marriage and SRH projects as peer educators in the local and international organization, shared some of these sentiments towards other Syrian women, particularly those living in ITSs (as per their claims). For instance, Samira was narrating her anger at the women who would come back pregnant to the awareness sessions, despite her efforts in trying to convince women to use contraceptives:

*“Ok but look, you are unable to sustain your whole family, but we hear you, we see you, the first time you take a class with us, you have a child on your lap, and the next time we come for another session, we will find you pregnant. But you are unable to sustain the child on your lap, so on what basis would you get pregnant? What is the issue? Where is your brain, where is your mind? “It happened”, how did it happen? These days, there is something called: contraceptive. We are in the 20th century; we are no longer in the Jahiliya (era of ignorance). We are no longer living in societies that do not have clinics. We are now living in the 20th century, we have access to clinics, medical centers, hospitals, a lot of things. We now have contraceptive pills, we use condoms, loops, [etc....].” (Interview with Samira, September 2019)*

Some reasons why some of these women started developing these sentiments could be related to their newly assumed positions of power within the community, having been affiliated and backed up by the organization, not to mention being aid distributors. The two

organizations that were implementing the Early Marriage, GBV and SRH projects gave the peer educators food and aid to encourage people to attend the session, and to gain a *laissez passer* entry to the camp, granted by its leader, the all-powerful *Shawish*. Furthermore, they have been “trained” to think like the (I)NGOs that hired them.

### *1.2.1.3 The Commodification of NGOs and their Services*

As the introduction and literature review showed, there is still an immense issue in the commodification of NGOs and their services, most notably tackled by (Rieff, 1995) in the literature. In the context of Lebanon, as Yazan al-Saadi’s caricature showed, it is very common for (I)NGOs to show up with a big statement to the field; it is hard to miss their large logos printed almost everywhere, from staff shirts and gilets, to buildings, cars and dignity kits.

In this study, the most notable example of commodification at its worst is the example of the “dignity” kits. In the findings, I mentioned the sentiments the (I)NGO workers expressed towards the “dignity” kits. They criticized the content of these “dignity” kits, and mocked the UN Agency and donor logos present everywhere on different components of the kits, especially on items that the communities might never use (such as fridge magnets with messages on them). With the practice of such commodification of services, these agencies and organizations restate the fact that the development and humanitarian sector has turned to a big business. Furthermore, as some of the workers put it, these dignity kits could contribute to the disempowerment of these communities.

Fortunately, some refugees have found ways to mock back at the aid industry and decided to sell the contents of the kits, or even other types of aid they are receiving.

#### *1.2.3.4 Displacement and Women Empowerment Projects: Between Empowerment and Disempowerment*

There are several factors that are at interplay when we try to understand women's experiences with empowerment projects in displacement. On the macro levels, the cultural, social, economic and political conditions of displacement are important indicators. On the meso level, the different forms of organization as well as the interaction with the host and communities of origin and the interplay between families and households are also vital factors. On the micro level, it is always important to remember that each woman has a unique experience in displacement. These factors are often discarded by the development and humanitarian sector that views empowerment as a goal rather than a journey (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014, p. 2). On the macro level, when these factors are applied to Lebanon, a very complex context, it is very likely that women's empowerment journeys are hindered by the daunting economic situation and the lack of basic rights granted to Syrian refugees, not to mention a legal refugee status. On the meso level, Syrian women's families and the patriarchal structure also plays a big role in women's lives in displacement and their empowerment journeys. Further, and on the micro level, as the findings have shown, different factors contribute to women's empowerment and disempowerment in displacement. Some women felt empowered by their newly acquired gender roles and new ways of living, whereas others felt the heavy load of displacement wear them down.

On another note, and when it comes to economic empowerment, as the theoretical framework has shown, feminist scholars have claimed that the investment in women empowerment and gender equality has become a kind of smart economics (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014, p. 1) (Mosedale, 2005). The humanitarian and development sector has been using empowerment and gender equality as a social strategy for social transformation, supported by corporate CEOs, western governments, international NGOs and financial institutions to fit into the global development apparatus (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014) (Mosedale, 2005) (Ferguson, 2011). These views echoed in the practices of the (I)NGOs I interviewed. On the one hand, the INGO, and to a lesser extent, the Lebanese NGO I

interviewed inherited these notions of empowerment from the international humanitarian and development sector. Even though their staff tried to negotiate these notions and practices with their donors and UN partner agencies, they still found themselves in the same limbo that assumes women's empowerment is a goal, a quantifiable measurement, and something that is finite and that stands alone. Not to mention, these organizations put economics at the core of their understanding of empowerment. Even when the workers went against some practices and projects, the solutions they provided were "an increase in vocational trainings". On the other hand, the Syrian feminist organization was trying to surmount these definitions and practices of empowerment in its activities. The focus was to provide a safe space for women to get together, acquire new skills, help their children with their homework, and learn about the importance of women's political participation. Dalal, whose testimonies I went over in the findings, insisted on the importance of Syrian women's political participation instead of limiting their role of being passive recipients of aid. In its core values and through the activities provided in its centers, the Syrian feminist organization understood empowerment as a process and critically assessed the power dynamics involved in the practices and definition of empowerment in development through the its core values. As mentioned in the findings, Dalal also reflected on her own position; another important pathway to the genuine understanding and practice of empowerment.

Moreover, the literature review has discussed how displacement can be both, empowering and disempowering for women. The findings also revealed many differences amongst women. Some women's displacement experiences disempowered them whereas others believed that when they were left with no other choice than self-reliance. As such, their experiences strengthened them. When I asked women about their empowerment journeys, a few told me that their participation in the projects contributed to their feelings of empowerment, whereas many others said that displacement was a key contributing factor to their empowerment.

Some projects can help women get out of the house, assume new roles as breadwinners (through incentives or, less likely by selling the products they produce), and thus help women acquire new gender roles. Despite the differences in experiences, the interviews showed, as the literature did, that Syrian women found themselves at new crossroads in Lebanon

As per the interviewees in these organizations, the donors and partner UN agencies quantified empowerment and reduced it into specific outcomes, targets and percentages. Their notions and practices of empowerment were also imported and often inapplicable to the Syrian community. Both, the INGO workers and the women confirmed this. (I)NGO workers complained about donors and their requests by saying that donor requirements come “in parachutes” and “donors living on a different planet than the Syrian refugee communities” or were “high” when they designed the projects. Sardenberg’s exploration of liberal vs. liberating empowerment notions is fit to describe how these agencies and donors used liberal empowerment as a tool for development (Sardenberg, 2016). Alternatively, the Syrian NGO and very often, the women used liberating empowerment and centered power relations at the core issue to investigate and practice empowerment (Sardenberg, 2016, p. 18).

Mosedale and Kabeer’s conception of empowerment is reflected in almost all the interviewed women’s experiences. Most of the women I interviewed understood empowerment in feminist terms, without solely receiving these notions and practices from the (I)NGOs, but rather by also drawing out from their own experiences in displacement. A lot of them were actively challenging gender roles “as part of [their] collective struggle” (Mosedale, 2005, p. 252), and understood that their empowerment could not be granted by a third party, and that it is a constant struggle (process) that their empowerment started with disempowerment (Mosedale, 2005) .

Agency, resources and achievements are key to the continuous achievement of genuine empowerment (Kabeer, 2005). In the case of the interviewed women, agency is represented

as they start making their own choices and implementing them. Examples of this include; challenging gender norms, getting out of the house (even when their husbands did not like it), assuming jobs outside the house, and forming new friendships. Second, several women started using resources to exercise of agency. For instance, many women would go to the training to acquire aid and transportation incentives to use in their households and for themselves (without always necessarily being interested in the content of the training or awareness sessions). Moreover, their love of learning has led them to mobilize resources (through acquiring new skills in training) that they could use later on. Lastly, their empowerment journeys included constant achievement, by them putting together resources and agency and employing them to their maximum potential through a process, and not taking each factor as an end in itself towards the finish line of empowerment (Kabeer, 2005)

#### *1.2.1.5 Problems with Empowerment, Hidden Pathways of Empowerment and The Unintended Consequences of Women Empowerment Projects*

The findings showed that a lot of women did actually benefit from the empowerment projects, but not necessarily in the sense that the donor perceives or “calculates” it. Many (INGOs and their workers perceive empowerment as something that is done to people. Importantly, the humanitarian and development sectors often perceive empowerment as an end goal, rather than a tool for societies. The biggest proofs are the tedious M&E reports required by the donor to monitor the number of women targeted and the quantifiable degrees of empowerment (which can be easily manipulated by the women and the (INGO workers). Such indicators and outcomes are often reflected in quantitative manners, without focusing on each women’s empowerment journey (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002). Additionally, as the findings have showed, these frameworks were one of the biggest setbacks in the advancement of the work of (INGO workers and their and mental wellbeing. At least two people told me that they can easily lie about targets, number of referrals for GBV cases, or even exaggerate progress in donor reports. Besides,

participants told me that (I)NGOs monitor the impact of their projects on women using pre-tests and post-tests, focus-group discussions and questionnaires. These tools are not necessarily representative or comprehensive. Firstly, they do not target all the women attending these projects; they often choose a small group of women to briefly talk about their experiences with the trainings, the “dignity kits” or other services provided. Secondly, the tools used to evaluate the impact of the project only address the topics on a short-term basis. For instance, pre and post-tests would often include multiple choice or elimination questions on definitions of empowerment, gender-based violence, and other “course material”. This cannot determine whether or not a woman “has been empowered”. A high number of referrals to case management does not mean women have been empowered. The number of women targeted in awareness sessions on early marriage, GBV, and SRH does not determine the degree of women’s empowerment and their shift in consciousness on issues related to her sexual and reproductive health, GBV or Early Marriage. Furthermore, vocational trainings cannot guarantee that women will keep their possible newly acquired gender roles if they were lucky enough to get a job in Lebanon. More importantly, very often, when a UN agency is involved in the programming, such as in the case of the (I)NGO and Local NGO programs on Early Marriage, SRH, and GBV, an external consultant is hired. By hiring an external consultant that only shows up during the project evaluation period, without actually being involved in the project or in the lives of the women, these organizations tend to stick to their own evaluation frameworks, instead of asking the women about their complex journeys. So how can we really know more about women’s genuine empowerment?

There exist alternative frameworks that can be used to analyze development goals and empowerment projects, and those can actually better inform policies that can contribute to true empowerment in programming and reveal women’s true empowerment journeys. Despite the donor and UN agency’s perceptions of empowerment, a lot of women reformulated meanings of empowerment and these meanings were reflected in each and every women’s journey. Cornwall and Edward’s “Hidden Pathways” theory is a

description of the invisible routes that women travel on journeys of empowerment (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014). These hidden pathways include the pathways women are employing in “[...] television, religious practice, everyday domesticity, pleasure in leisure and sexual relationships (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014, p. 2) often left out in the development enterprise. Furthermore, Kabeer speaks of active and passive agency. Active agency is when little choice is involved in agency, whereas active agency occurs as a purposeful behavior (Kabeer, 2005). Active agency and hidden pathways can be closely linked in the case of Syrian women. First, the formation of women support networks is one unintended consequences of empowerment projects. The projects accidentally offered women a space to get together and help one another. NGO trainers and peer educators would often form WhatsApp groups to communicate changes in class schedules, homework, and other updates. The women formed their own WhatsApp groups to help each other by sending each other updates on aid and scholarship opportunities. Women also formed groups to support each other with family lifestyle tips. For instance, Samira describes how the program made the women closer and stronger together:

*“We became stronger together. We go out to do subhiyyat (morning visits), siran (picnics); we come together. We used to know each other in a shallow manner, but this program Lamna (brought us together)”* (Interview with Samira, October 2019)

Such a form of agency is active and purposeful. It comes from the women themselves and it is not forced upon them. It also proved to be transformative, as opposed to effective. Effectiveness of agency comes from within the (I)NGO and donor frameworks and is often short term. Transformative agency comes from the women themselves and other women.

Kabeer’s critical analysis of one of the most widely employed development goals of the millennium; the third Development Goal; gender equality and women’s empowerment is one example. Using such a framework to “assess” empowerment is more

powerful than the employment of the normative framework that is currently in place. (Kabeer, 2005).

Cornwall and Edwards mention that the international development enterprise has undermined the power and role of women's movements in bringing and making change to gender justice and equality (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014, p. xi). Findings in other studies that explored women's movements and solidarity networks in the region revealed the importance of these movements in women's empowerment journeys (Erden, 2017) (Keysan & Şentürk, 2020) (Asaf, 2017). Women's movements and solidarity networks are important indicators for genuine empowerment journeys, and should in no way be ignored.

# Chapter Six

## Conclusions and Recommendations

While studying the experience of Third World women with empowerment programs, a lot of literature found that there is a problem with the concept and practice of empowerment (Carr, 2003) (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014) (Golla, Mehra, Malhotra, & Nanda, 2011) (Kabeer, 2005) (Mosedale 2005) (Sardenberg 2008). This study found that the women empowerment projects targeted towards Syrian refugee women in Lebanon as implemented by the interviewed local and international agencies proved to be very problematic. Firstly, these empowerment projects tended to focus on the indicators, numbers, and outputs rather than the sustainable tools they might provide for women in their “empowerment journeys”. In doing so, these projects did not pave way for understanding Syrian women’s hidden pathways; the routes that they travel without the need of these programs, or their transformative agency. Women’s actual needs were not addressed and their opinions were very often not taken into deep consideration. “Needs assessments” and “post-evaluation” reports often fail at providing long term sustainable tools for the women. It is not enough to ask women about their preferred vocational training classes, test their knowledge on the content of awareness sessions, or count the number of referrals collected in SRH clinics and protection shelters as an indicator to their extent of empowerment. Secondly, the projects under study were short term projects, and while they focused on neo-liberal notions of “economic empowerment”, they could not even fulfill that goal, especially in a context like Lebanon. Failure to recognize the various structural factors affecting women’s empowerment in Lebanon has contributed to more issues with

these projects. Syrian women's access to work, legal papers, and other rights in a country that fails to grant them such basic rights are important for the programming of women empowerment projects in Lebanon. Moreover, even though such projects claim to empower women, they could not do so on their own terms, and especially not by their adoption of a western post-colonial agenda. As the findings have shown, some projects even contributed to women's disempowerment. Very often, when women reported their positive experiences with empowerment, most claimed that it was not a direct result of the project; even when projects provided short term empowerment, it was many women's displacement journeys that really forced them to become "empowered".

This study has also shown how Western governments, through the international development enterprise often invest in unrealistic expectations and agendas when it comes to empowering women in displacement, overlooking empowerment as a process and focusing on it as an end goal, or a project deliverable. In comparing different approaches to empowerment projects, the study highlighted the main differences between empowerment as practiced and perceived by the local and international NGO as opposed to the Syrian feminist NGO where the latter perceived and practiced empowerment in a genuine feminist sense. The Syrian feminist organization's empowerment projects and approaches proved more genuine to women's empowerment journeys as they focused on women's leadership, transformative agency, and vision rather than targets, percentages and short-term goals.

This thesis suggests a number of recommendations that could inform better programming for empowerment projects, and it also invites scholars and consultants in this field to critically assess this matter in order to understand Syrian women's experiences with aid in displacement and their active agency, and diversified pathways to empowerment;

1. Syrian women's pathways to empowerment should not be restricted and evaluated through specific time-limited projects. Focus should be on women's lived experiences before and during displacement, as well as their vision for the future.
2. With an existing predominance of international criteria to target "vulnerable" women in displacement and a present obsession in evaluating the extent to which women are empowered, a critical approach to empowerment programming is significant since it aims at de-constructing the limits of women's' experiences and agency within the humanitarian and development enterprises. Researchers, NGO workers and consultants must remove themselves out of the robust molds of humanitarianism and development and expand their knowledge on subjects such as; the harmful effects of the misrepresentation of Syrian women, the homogenization of the "refugee" experience, and the limitation of women's abilities and capacities. This should be done through the surmounting of western and neo-liberal notions of empowerment. (I)NGO workers must be educated on these matters prior to working with them as they are educated and trained on program management, monitoring and evaluation, etc.
3. Empowerment policies and practices must be deconstructed in a way that surmounts mere economic empowerment and neo-liberal and western notions of development. Understanding empowerment as a process, and a shift in consciousness are key. The focus should be placed on sustainable empowerment that provides long term tools for women, not just during the program, but after it. This change in consciousness implies a shift in the structures of a culture or society. Donors and agencies must, therefore, consider projects that aim to involve women in programming and focus on women's leadership positions and their role in public life, instead of only focusing on projects that give women income for a short period of time. Syrian women must be involved in the stages and process of planning the activities in these projects and implementing them. They should also be involved in the evaluation of these projects.
4. Donors and agencies must look at south- south humanitarianism, diaspora organizations' aid models and study third world experiences in empowerment and aid

in order to inform better policies and implement more transformative projects that are ultimately less harmful for targeted societies.

Finally, further studies are needed to delve deeper into the gendered nature of women empowerment projects, in particular, the provision of vocational trainings in feminized sectors (Abou Raad, 2018) (Asaad, 2019). Furthermore, the study did not look at Syrian women's participation in the political arena, another subject that requires further research since it is directly linked to women's empowerment journeys.

## Bibliography

About Raad, M. (2018, March). Vocational programs for Refugee Women: More than Sewing Classes? *Occasional Papers Series*. Retrieved from [http://iwsaw.lau.edu.lb/publications/documents/OPS%203\\_About-Raad\\_FINAL%202018%20.pdf](http://iwsaw.lau.edu.lb/publications/documents/OPS%203_About-Raad_FINAL%202018%20.pdf)

Agamben. (2008). Beyond Human Rights. *Social Engineering*, 90-95. Retrieved from <https://novact.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Beyond-Human-Rights-by-Giorgio-Agamben.pdf>

Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. (R. Heller, Trans.) Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Asaad, R. a. (2019, 3 17). *Vocational Qualification of Women: Empowering or Stereotyping the Syrian Women's Role?* Retrieved from Enab Baladi: <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2019/03/vocational-qualification-of-women-empowering-or-stereotyping-the-syrian-womens-role/>

Asaf, Y. (2017, 6, 110.). Syrian Women and the Refugee Crisis: Surviving the Conflict, Building Peace, and Taking New Gender Roles. *Social Sciences*, 6(110), 1-18.

Baines, E. K. (2001, June). UNHCR Good practices on Gender Equality Mainstreaming ; A Practical Guide to Empowerment. (E. Francisco, Ed.) Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR .

- Barakat, S., Jones, R., & Chard, M. (2005). Attributing Value: evaluating success and failure in post-war reconstruction. *Third World Quarterly*, 26(4), 831-852. doi:DOI: 10.1080/01436590500128063
- Blanchet, K., Fouad, F., & Pherali, T. (2016). Syrian refugees in Lebanon: the search for universal health coverage . *Conflict and Health*, 10(12). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-016-0079-4>
- Carpi, E. (2014, 3 1). The Everyday Experience of Humanitarianism in the Akkar Villages. *Civil Society Knowledge Centre* . Retrieved from civilsociety-center: <https://civilsociety-centre.org/paper/everyday-experience-humanitarianism-akkar-villages> Copyright
- Carr, E. S. (2003). Rethinking Empowerment Theory Using a Feminist Lens: The Importance of Process. *SAGE Journals*, 18(1), 8-20.
- Christiansen, C. C. (2017). *Gender Relations among Neighbors - a Study of Humanitarian Practices Addressing Syrian Refugees in Lebanon*. Beirut: Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World.
- Cornwall, A., & Edwards, J. (2014). Introduction: Negotiating Empowerment. In A. Cornwall, J. Edwards, A. Cornwall, & J. Edwards (Eds.), *Feminisms, Empowerment and Development: Changing Women's Lives*. London, UK: Zed Books.

Cornwall, E., & Eade, D. (2010). *Deconstructing Development Discourse: Buzzwords and Fuzzwords*. Warwickshire: Practical Action Publishing.

Davey , E., Borton , J., & Foley, M. (2013, June). *A history of the humanitarian system Western origins and foundation*. London, United Kingdom: Humanitarian Policy Group Overseas Development Institute.

Denman, K., & Charles, L. (2013, January). Syrian and palestinian syrian refugees in lebanon: The plight of women and children. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 14(5), 96-111.

Erden, O. (2017). Building Bridges for Refugee Empowerment. *International Migration & Integration* 18: 249. , 18(1), 249–265.

Fakhoury, T. (2017). GOVERNANCE STRATEGIES AND REFUGEE RESPONSE: LEBANON IN THE FACE OF SYRIAN DISPLACEMENT. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 49(4), 681-700.  
doi:10.1017/S0020743817000654

Farhana, S. (2007). Reflexivity, positionality and participatory ethics: Negotiating fieldwork dilemmas in international research. *ACME: An international e-journal for critical geographies*, 6(3), 374–385.

Fassin, D., & Rechtman , R. (2009). *the Empire of Trauma, An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Fawaz, M., Salamé, D., & Gharbieh, A. (2018). *Refugees as City Makers*. Beirut: Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut.

Ferguson, A. (2011). Can Development Create Empowerment and Women's Liberation ?

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, I. (2016, September 1 ). Representations of Displacement from the Middle East and North Africa. ((. (80));, Ed.) *Public Culture*, 28(3), 457–473.

Fleifel, M. (2020, April). The Diversity of Experiences of Syrian Displaced Persons in Lebanon: Everyday Exclusion, Informality, and Adjustment Tactics. Beirut, Lebanon: Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship.

Golla, A. M., Mehra, R., Malhotra, A., & Nanda, P. (2011). *Understanding and Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment: De nition, Framework and Indicators*. International Center for Research on Women.

Government of Lebanon and UNHCR. (2019). *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017 - 2020 : 2019 Update*. Government of Lebanon and the United Nations. UNHCR. Retrieved from Data2UNHCR:  
<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/67780>

Guay, J. (2015). *Social cohesion between Syrian Refugees and Urban Host Communities in Lebanon and Jordan*. World Vision.

Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. . *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575-599.  
doi:10.2307/3178066

Harb, C., & Saab, R. (2014). *Social Cohesion and Intergroup Relations: Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Nationals in the Bekaa and Akkar*. Beirut: Save the Children.

Harding, S. (1993). Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: 'What is Strong Objectivity?' In L. Alcoff, & E. Potter, *Feminist Epistemologies* (pp. 49-82). New York: Routledge.

Hassan, W. (2017, June 2). Beyond Vulnerability: Refugee Women's Leadership in Jordan. *CUNY Academic Works*. doi:10.13140/RG.2.2.25123.86568

Hazibar, K., Sauermann, V., Preglau, M., & Ralser, M. (2016). Migration from a gender-critical, postcolonial and interdisciplinary perspective. *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 41(Suppliment 3), 1-12. doi:https://doi.org/10.1007/s11614-016-0236-4

IPSOS Group SA. (2018). *Unpacking Gendered Realities in Displacement : The Status of Syrian Refugee Women in Lebanon*. UN Women.

Jabbar, S., & Zaza, H. I. (2015, September). Evaluating a vocational training programme for women refugees at the Zaatari camp in Jordan: women empowerment: a journey and not an output. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 21(3), 304-319. doi:10.1080/02673843.2015.1077716

Janmyr, M. (2016). Precarity in Exile: The Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 35 (4), 58-78.

Janmyr, M. (2016). *The Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon*. Beirut.

Janmyr, M., & Mourad, L. (2018). Modes of Ordering: Labelling, Classification and Categorization in Lebanon's Refugee Response. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 1-22.

Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal. *Gender & Development*, 13(1), 13-24.  
doi:10.1080/13552070512331332273v

Karlowska, K. H. (2019). Women's Security and Empowerment in the Context of Forced Displacement: A Case Study of Humanitarian Policies for Syrian Refugee Women in Turkey. *Scholar Works University of Massachusetts*. Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.umb.edu/masters\\_theses/](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/masters_theses/)

Kaya, Z. N., & Luchtenberg, K. N. (2018). *Displacement and Women's Economic Empowerment: Voices of Displaced Women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*. Women for Women International. London: Women for Women International .

Keysan, A. Ö., & Şentürk, B. (2020, July 28). Philanthropists, Professionals and Feminists: Refugee NGOs and the Empowerment of Syrian Women in Gaziantep,

Turkey. *International Migration IOM*, 1-22.  
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12728>

Kieffer, C. H. (1984). Citizen empowerment: A developmental perspective. *Prevention in Human Services*, 3(2-3), 9–36. doi:[https://doi.org/10.1300/J293v03n02\\_03](https://doi.org/10.1300/J293v03n02_03)

Knoblauch, H. (2005). Focused ethnography. *Qualitative Social Research Forum*, 6(3). Retrieved from Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lau.edu.lb:2443/docview/869228430?accountid=27870>

Lokot, M. (2019). The space between us: feminist values and humanitarian power dynamics in research with refugees. *Gender & Development*, 27(3), 467-484. doi:10.1080/13552074.2019.1664046

Malhotra, A., Boender, C., & Schuler, S. R. (2002). *Measuring Women's Empowerment as a Variable in International Development*.

Malkki, L. H. (1995). REFUGEES AND EXILE: From "Refugee Studies" to the National Order of Things. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 495-523.

Malkki, L. H. (1996, August). Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization. *Cultural Anthropology*, 11(3), 377-404 .

- Mhaissen, R., & Hodges, E. (2019). *Sawa for Aid and Development : Unpacking Return, Syrian Refugees' Conditions and Concerns*. Beirut: Sawa For Aid and Development.
- Mitri, D. (2014, May 23). Challenges of aid coordination in a complex crisis: An overview of funding policies and conditions regarding aid provision to Syrian refugees in Lebanon. *Civil Society Knowledge Center*.
- Mosedale, S. (2005). Assessing women's empowerment: Towards a conceptual framework. *Journal of International Development*. *Journal of International Development* , 17(2), 243-257. Retrieved from <https://search-proquest.com.ezproxy.lau.edu.lb:2443/docview/214895289?accountid=27870>
- Mufti, K. E. (2014, 1 1). Official response to the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon, the disastrous policy of no-policy . *Civil Society Knowledge Centre*.
- Naif, R. H. (2020, September). Gender conceptions, women's empowerment, and humanitarian testimonies: an ethnography of a women's safe space in Damascus, Syria. Beirut: Americana University of Beirut Scholarworks .
- Nawakil, M. a. (2015). *Victims' representation in humanitarian campaigns. The case of the Syrian crisis*. Geneva Center for Education and Research in Humanitarian Action. CERAH and Universite de Geneve.
- Neubert, D. (2007). The role of local brokers in the development system. Experiences with "self-help projects" in East Africa . *Bulletin de l'APAD [En ligne]*, 1-13.

Parkinson, S., & Behrouzan, O. (2015). Negotiating health and life: Syrian refugees and the politics of access in Lebanon. *Social Science & Medicine*, 146, 324-331. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.10.008>

Porter, M. (1999). Introduction Caught in the Web? In E. Judd, & M. Porter, *Feminists Doing Development*. ZED books.

Rieff, D. (1995). The Humanitarian Trap. *World Policy Journal*, 12(4), 1-11. .

Rowlands, J. (1997). Preface. In J. Rowlands, *Questioning Empowerment, Working with women in Honduras*. Oxford: Oxfam.

Saidan, M., Abu Drais, A., AL-Manaseer, I., Alshishani, M., & Linton, C. (2020). Scale and impacts of livelihoods development on women empowerment in the solid waste sector of Jordan. *Detritus*. doi:10.31025/2611-4135/2020.13943

Sardenberg, C. M. (2016). Liberal vs. liberating empowerment: A latin american feminist perspective on conceptualising women's empowerment. *IDS bulletin*, 39(6), pp. 18-27. doi:doi:10.19088/1968-2016.115

UN. (2017). *UN for Lebanon*. Retrieved from United Nations: <http://un.org.lb/lcrp2017-2020>

- UNDP. (n.d.). *UNDP Arab States*. Retrieved from [www.arabstates.undp.org](http://www.arabstates.undp.org):  
<http://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/ourwork/SyriaCrisis/projects/3rp.html>
- UNHCR. (2019, March 31). *Syria Regional Refugee Response*. Retrieved from Operational Portal Refugee Situations - UNHCR Data:  
<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>
- UNHCR. (2019, January). *UN Situations: Syria*. Retrieved December 25, 2018, from data2.unhcr: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>
- UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF. (2018). *Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon*. United Nations.
- Usta, J., Farver, J. M., & Reese Masterson, A. R. (2016). Violence Against Displaced Syrian Women in Lebanon. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.  
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516670881>
- Vignal, L. (2018, February). Perspectives on the return of Syrian refugees. (M. Couldrey, & J. Peebles, Eds.) *Syrians in Displacement*(57). Retrieved from  
<https://www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/FMRdownloads/en/syria2018/vignal.pdf>
- Wall, S. (2015). Focused ethnography: A methodological adaptation for social research in emerging contexts. *Qualitative Social Research Forum*, 16(1). Retrieved from  
<https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lau.edu.lb:2443/docview/1674925038?accountid=278700>

Wells, M., & Kuttiparambil, G. (2016, May). Humanitarian action and the transformation of gender relations. *Thinking ahead: displacement, transition, solutions*(52).

White, B. (2020). Women's Empowerment or Exploitation of Women? Examining the Implications of Economic Empowerment Programming,. *Butler Journal of Undergraduate Research*, 6(11), 177-196. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/bjur/vol6/iss1/23/>

# Appendix I.

## Interview Guide: Syrian Women

Annex II. Interview Guide for Women

*Semi-structured Interviews for the women who have received/ are receiving these programs*

### **I. The Women Empowerment Program**

1. How did you end up in this program? (Did you apply or were you outreached?)
2. Why did you apply to this program?
3. Where the objectives of the program properly explained to you?
4. What do you think about this program?
5. What are some of its positive aspects? (what do you like most about it)-  
Strong Points
6. What are some of its negative aspects? (what do you like least about it?)-  
Disappointments
7. Do you feel empowered after having taken it?
8. How is the treatment in the class?
9. Do you like the content of the courses you are taking? Do you find them appropriate and beneficial?
10. Do you receive dignity kits? If so, what do you think about the kits?
11. Do you receive other incentives? How do you use them?

### **II. Future Aspirations**

1. Do you feel you will use the skills of the program in your life in the future?
2. What are your future plans?
3. Do you have anything else to add to our conversation today?

### **III. General Information about the Interlocutor** (*Only if the interlocutor is comfortable in the end*)

1. Age
2. Family Status (Married, Widowed, Single, Divorced.)
3. Current Occupation
4. Area of Residence

# Appendix II.

## Interview Guide: NGO Workers

Annex I. Interview Guide- (I)NGO Staff

*Semi-structured interviews with (I)NGO Project /Programme Manager/ Field workers/  
Coordinators/ Monitoring and Evaluation Staff*

### I. About the Person and their Work

1. In brief, tell me about yourself and the background of your work
2. When did you start working for this organization and what drove you to work there?
3. Tell me about your organization  
(questions referring to areas of work, establishment goals, and mission)
4. Tell me about the nature of your work as (a Programme Manager, a Project Manager, a Project Coordinator)
5. What do you like most about your work? Why?
6. What do you like least about your work? Why?

### II. General; About the Women Empowerment Program

1. Tell me about your programs that are directed primarily to women and women empowerment? (Number of staff, genders, areas of intervention, training)
2. Could you define women empowerment for me?
3. Would you describe the way in which the organization chooses to implement this program?
4. Did the organization undertake a “needs assessment” prior to the implementation of the project? What about the donor?
5. Before the implementation starts, are the women consulted on their needs?
6. What are your applied methods in approaching these women? How does the outreach process go? (Syrian focal points?)
7. What are the main goals of the women empowerment program?
8. What about the demands of the donors?

**III. Assessment and Impact of the Women Empowerment Program from the Organization's Point of View**

1. Please describe the monitoring and evaluation process in this program?
2. Where is most of the program's budget allocated? (Can I access the budget?)
3. How is the interaction between the I(NGO) staff with the field?
4. How do you make sure that the program is being properly implemented?
5. How do you make sure these women are satisfied with the program?
6. Does your organization assess the project at the end? From who's viewpoint?
7. After the implementation of the projects, does your organization stay in touch with these women? Do they provide links to the market? Is there any kind of follow-up?
8. Do you provide any kind of remuneration for the women? (Dignity kits, money incentives, transportation incentives, etc.).
9. If so, what do you personally think about these incentives?

**IV. Assessment of the Impact of the Women Empowerment Program from the Personal Point of View of the Respondent**

1. In your personal viewpoint do you feel the work you are doing is genuinely and positively affecting women? How?
2. Where the women you are working with, or the community of displaced Syrian women's needs assessed?
3. How do you evaluate the monitoring and evaluation system?
  - Needs assessment
  - Outreach Process (recruitment of Syrians or Syrian women)?
  - Required documentation (attendance sheets, assessment/evaluation forms, pre/post-tests...)
4. What do you think about the donor demands?
5. Have you noticed the formation of women groups or solidarity movements due to women empowerment programs?
6. For you, what is the real motivation for women to register in these programs?
7. Do you think these programs need improvement? If so, how?

**V. Anything else you would like to add regarding our conversation today?**