5. Rethinking the Relationship between Child Marriage and Failed Infrastructure during the Syrian Conflict

5.1 Introduction

Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees per capita in the world; a small country with a population of about 4 million in addition to1.5 million Syrian displaced persons. The presence of a large number of refugees is perceived as an unjustifiable burden due to the Lebanese government's failure to provide the most basic services to its citizens. The Lebanese population has suffered for years from contaminated water, constant electrical blackouts, air pollution, an amplified garbage crisis, high unemployment, a lack of healthcare services, a lack of public transportation, a lack of funding and resources for education, a poor infrastructure, and corruption. The fragile infrastructure was barely able to serve the Lebanese population, and now faces an even greater burden in its efforts a larger number of people amid a deteriorating infrastructure (Sanyal, 2018). In 2019, the Lebanese cabinet announced that the country was on the verge of economic collapse because of its currency and debt crisis (Fanack, 2019) and this continues to be the case.

All these factors have led to a growing antagonism between the country's host and displaced communities. Aside from the fact that there is a "disproportionate attention being paid by NGOs to refugees over the host population, who [is] equally vulnerable" (Sanyal, 2018, p. 71), the Lebanese government labels the presence of Syrian refugees a security issue. The major media outlets owned by political elites continue to blame the displaced Syrian communities for the deteriorating socio-economic conditions in the country, and for disturbing the country's sectarian balance that underpins Lebanon's power-sharing system (The Economist, 2019). The narratives behind the lack of devel-

opment and the threat to the delicate sectarian balance pre-dates the Syrian conflict and the arrival of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. This pattern of scapegoating 'foreign elements' initially occurred after the arrival of the Palestinian refugees to Lebanon in 1948, the year the State of Israel was created, and many Palestinians were forced to flee their homes. Subsequently, the Palestinians "were unfairly blamed for Lebanon's 15-year-long civil war, from 1975to 1990, [and were] treated as demographic threats" (Jaoude & Ayyoub, 2018).

Parallel to propagating this racist rhetoric, which fuels tensions between the two communities, the Lebanese government continues to apply different policing strategies to control the mobility of the displaced population, similar to the strategy applied to the Palestinian communities in the past. As it is not possible to deport the Syrian refugees, the state applies "ad-hoc measures to create unwelcome spaces" (Sanyal, 2018). For instance, a recent report by Human Rights Watch (2019) revealed how the Lebanese Armed Forces uses forcible measures against the displaced Syrian population as a way to pressure them to leave the country. The report showed that:

> "The Lebanese Armed Forces demolished about 20 Syrian refugee shelters on July 1, 2019, contending they did not comply with long-existing, but largely unenforced housing codes, Human Rights Watch said. The armed forces also have been forcing refugees living in semi-permanent shelters on agricultural land to dismantle their own shelters' concrete walls and roofs and replace them with less protective materials, or face army demolition of their homes. The forced shelter dismantlement under an order by the Higher Defense Council significantly reduces the adequacy of refugee housing to withstand harsh weather conditions, particularly in the Arsal region, where winters are severe."

Furthermore, another major issue the displaced communities face is the renewal of residency permits. The Lebanese General security requires each displaced person to annually pay 200 U.S dollars as a residency validation fee (Human Rights Watch, 2019). This fee increases the financial burden on families, leaving many displaced Syrians with an illegal status in the country and placing them at risk of detention should they be caught by the police.

While the displaced and host communities compete for job opportunities, scarce resources, and living space (Sanyal, 2018), the increased restrictions placed on the Syrian communities, the harassment they experience as a result of the government's policing strategies, as well as the production of chronic forms of waiting remain unjustifiable.

In Jordan, similar restrictions have been imposed on Syrian refugees as a way preventing their permanent settlement (Dorai & Piraud-Fournet, 2018). Jordan hosts the second highest share of Syrian refugees per capita after Lebanon (Reliefweb, 2019). In the recent years, the Zaatari refugee camp on the Jordanian-Syrian border has grown into a city with its own informal economy and its many different neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the standard of living remains very low, as families continue to live in tents, where very little space is available to accommodate all family members. Additionally, the birth rates in informal refugee settlements increase every year, both in Lebanon and Jordan. Syrian women and girls have limited access to sexual health and healthcare in general. They face a high risk of sexual harassment and many end up in unwanted (early) marriages as a result of harsh patriarchal norms and the families' financial hardship.

In fact, child marriage during the Syrian crisis has significantly increased since the outbreak of the war (El Arab & Sagbakken, 2018). So far, most academic and journalistic articles have approached the topic of child marriage during the Syrian conflict by recognizing it as a negative coping mechanism or as a protection measure. For instance, a study on Syrian refugee girls in Lebanon showed the various factors that contribute to forced and early marriages, including "poverty, a lack of educational opportunities, and gender-based-violence" (Bartels, 2018). Alsaba and Kapilashrami (2016) argue that the displaced Syrian women's and girls' experience of gender-based-violence are highly tied to the region's political economy. Another study by Asaf (2017) draws attention to the way mainstream news articles approach their narratives of the war with a focus on the victimization and vulnerabilities of the Syrian women. The author limits her approach by examining only the effects of governmental policies on Syrian women's vulnerabilities and does not analyze other factors that constitute their state of vulnerability.

While the studies above provide great insight into the plight of Syrian women and girls living in refugee camps, none of them has based its analysis on how the state of vulnerability is tied to a failed infrastructure. Hence, this chapter posits a lack of deeper engagement with critical theory in studying the gendered media discourses around on Syrian women and girls living in vulnerable conditions. Aiming to fill this gap, the chapter compares news reports from three leading Arab television stations and follows a critical discourse analysis in order to engage with the subjects as mediation between the concept of vulnerability and failed infrastructure.

5.2   Research Data

To discover the most frequent news headlines in the Arab television reporting that portrayed the extent of the vulnerability among the displaced Syrian communities, specifically focused on women and girls during the Syrian conflict, I referred to the YouTube channels of three Arab television stations: *Al Aan*, *Al Jazeera*, and *Al Arabiya*. I obtained a sample of the news reports by using the search engine of the television stations' YouTube channels. I typed in keywords such as: Syrian women, Syrian girls, Syrian conflict, vulnerability, child marriage, early marriage, poverty, domestic abuse, suffering, humanitarian crisis, impoverishment, infrastructure, gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and refugee camps. The two main themes that regularly occurred in the search process were: the increase in child marriage cases in the Lebanon and Jordan's informal settlements, and the deterioration of refugee makeshift shelters in Lebanon's Beqaa valley during snowstorms.

Eight news reports were collected in total. Three news reports from Dubai-based *Al Aan*, two news reports from Qatari-owned *Al Jazeera*, and three news reports from Saudi Arabia-owned *Al Arabiya*. The news reports were published between January 4, 2014 and August 8, 2017. They revolved around specific groups of Syrian women and girls: Syrian child brides living in the Zaatari refugee camp on the Jordanian-Syrian border, in the overcrowded informal settlements near Beirut and the Beqaa valley, which include uncontrolled and unguided urban sites of exclusion and marginalization, as well as displaced Syrian women and girls living in storerooms, empty garages, and one-room apartments with their families across Lebanon. The table below provides a detailed description of each news report analyzed.

Table 6. News reports in the context of vulnerability

Re-port	Tele-vision Station	Title of the News Report	Dura-tion	Date Published	Chap-ter Section
1	Al Aan	Marriage of Syrian Minors in Jordan	4:35	August 8, 2017	5.3.1
2	Al Arabiya	Early Marriage Causes Psychological Problems in Syrian Refugee Girls	2:28	May 29, 2014	5.3.1
3	Al Jazeera	Syrian Refugee Girl Gets Married to Pay the Rent	2:26	January 14, 2014	5.3.1
4	Al Arabiya	Child Marriage Has Doubled Among Syrian Refugees in Jordan	2:31	July 24, 2014	5.3.1
5	Al Arabiya	Marriage of 750 Syrian Girls in Jordan	2:19	September 2, 2016	5.3.1
6	Al Jazeera	Syrian Refugee Women Are Being Exploited in Lebanon	2:26	April 23. 2016	5.3.1
7	Al Aan	A Tragic Scene of a Syrian Mother that Cannot Find Food to Feed her Children	0.47	January 9, 2014	5.3.2
8	Al Aan	Displaced Syrian women in Lebanon Complain About the Absence of the Family's Breadwinner During of the Strong Snowstorm in Lebanon	2:50	January 13, 2015	5.3.2

To explore these news reports, I address the following questions:

1. How did the Arab television reporting represent child marriage cases in relationship to states of impoverishment that shape the daily experiences of the displaced Syrian communities living in informal refugee settlements?
2. Did Arab television reporting perceive child marriage as a standalone issue that remains decontextualized from the general widespread socio-economic injustice?

Because this chapter invites us to rethink the relationship between child marriage and failed infrastructure during the recent Syrian conflict, Judith Butler's conceptualization is taken as a starting point for my analysis. With consideration to each television station's sociopolitical views, I analyze how Arab television reporting discursively generates and naturalizes images of vulnerability among Syrian women girls. Although the phenomenon of child marriage and the deterioration of shelter during the snowstorm are analyzed in separate parts, the chapter argues that these two *supposedly* separate dimensions of vulnerability during the Syrian conflict are indeed interconnected.

5.3   Analysis

In several of the news stories examined, those concerning the vulnerability of the displaced female Syrians incorporated the opinion of the expert. By attempting to appear objective, the news report supposedly used the expert's opinion to provide a "rational" coverage on the topic. In the context of this research, the experts use their status in order to make their argument credible. The expert is conceived as a third party: not a displaced Syrian woman/girl, nor a person that has a direct influence on the vulnerability of female Syrians during their daily life. Throughout the news reports, the experts allegedly gave unbiased insights into the vulnerability of different Syrian women and girls. I examine those insights in the news report analysis below.

5.3.1   Child Marriage

On August 8, 2017, a news report by *Al Aan* television featured an interview with an administrator from the Jordanian Jurists Association, the lawyer Nour Al Immam. In the interview, they discussed the issue of child marriage among Syrian refugees in Jordan. Al Immam, the expert in this news report, began the interview by stating that —according to the Jurist Association —18 was the legal minimum age of marriage for girls and boys in Jordan, a law which had existed prior to the outbreak of Syrian conflict. However, the law was modified after the arrival of Syrian refugees into the country. She asserted:

"A waiver can be granted for underage marriages, but this waiver is only authorized under the following conditions: (1) the male spouse should not be older than the wife in not more than 15 years; (2) the female spouse should agree to this marriage;

(3) the female spouse is not allowed to abandon her education; (4) the male spouse must provide an initial mahr[1] payment before the marriage takes place."

The expert then continued to describe the laws of child marriage, by appealing to the idea that they were made for "the Syrian girls' benefit." She emphasized how the *mahr* should supposedly lessen the girl's vulnerability. Afterwards, she explained how the law guarantees the *mahr* payment, and how this mandatory payment provided by the groom to the bride is a pre-marital condition that can protect or provide support to child brides. As a response, the reporter emphasized how the child brides are living in dire conditions, as if trying to justify the family's decision to marry off their underage daughters. Although the reporter labelled these dire economic conditions as a problem which need to addressed, no mention was made to the deficiency of health care, education, food, and shelter at the Zaatari refugee camp.

Both the expert and the reporter agreed that the subjugation of women and girls is due to child marriage. Nonetheless, they perceived it as a phenomenon solely stemmed from the circumstances of war. They did not identify the states of vulnerability and impoverishment as symptoms of an unjust economic model, thus leaving the issue of class inequality unmentioned.

On May 29, 2014, a news story from *Al Arabiya* also focused on the issue of child marriage and its physiological impact on child brides. The report started with an opening statement affirming that the state of refuge is what forced Umm[2] Wael, a widowed mother, to marry off her 14-year-old daughter, who now suffers from serious physical and psychological problems. During the news report, the reporter briefly interviewed a social worker at a local NGO in the district of Akkar, Lebanon. The NGO worker said:

"Child marriage among Syrian refugees in Lebanon is partially an educational problem, especially among those coming from rural areas; and the other part of the problem is related to the material and economical needs of these refugees. In fact, child marriage did not exist in Sham (the region of Syria located east of the Mediterranean Sea) before the Syrian conflict, but it was very common in the Syrian provinces of Idlib and Dar'a."

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1   *Mahr* means dowry in Arabic. It is ancient custom in Islamic societies that obliges the male spouse—prior to the marriage ceremony—to provide property, money, or any sort of gift to the bride.

2   *Umm* is the Arabic word for "Mother of".

Here, the NGO administrator does not mention how Lebanon has no consti-tutional law forbidding child marriages. Although Lebanese civil society has submitted a draft law in early 2017 that aims to ban marriage for anyone un-der 18, the Lebanese parliament has yet to deliberate about changing the law yet (Abirafeh & Nassif, 2018). The NGO worker made it seem as if the Syrian refugees coming from the rural areas in Syria have brought the phenomenon of child marriage with them to Lebanon. Granted, "outside of the refugee communities, nearly 6 percent of women in Lebanon between 20 to 24 years old were married before the age of 18" (Abirafeh & Nassif, 2018).

A news report by *Al Jazeera* published on January 14, 2014, reported on Han-ifa, a 14-year-old girl that "agreed" to marry a 44-year-old Lebanese landlord. Hanifa's family could no longer pay the $250 monthly rent for their one-room apartment; in response, the landlord demanded Hanifa become his second wife. Hanifa and her mother were both interviewed in this news report:

> Hanifa: "*I am not obliged to marry a 44-year-old man just to survive, but I have to do it so that my family can survive. I feel that my whole life has been destroyed, because I do not want to marry him. But if I do, my family can stay in this house.*"

> The News Reporter: "*This young girl says she feels exploited, but it is a sacrifice she and her family say she must make.*"

> The Mother of Hanifa: "*Every mother wants to see her daughter secure and mar-ried to the man she loves. No mother wants to hurt her child, but we have no choice. If we move out of this one-room apartment, we will then need to live in a tent. My husband, who suffers from heart problems, as well my asthmatic son, wouldn't be able to survive in the cold, and my 12-year-old son, who has a job helping a mechanic, can barely make enough money to provide food for us.*"

Although this news report interviewed the child bride and her mother, most of the other news reports analyzed in this chapter included no such interviews. As a result, the precariousness of Hanifa and her family remained decontex-tualized. The Lebanese landlord, who used his marriage proposal to a 14-year-old girl as commodity exchange between him and his tenants (Hanifa's fam-ily), was not presented as an active participant in this child marriage case. On the other hand, the mother of Hanifa was depicted as a parent who allowed the daughter to become a tradable good in times of economic hardship. In other words, she was willing to sacrifice her own daughter and "harm her," in order to keep other members of the family safe from cold and disease. No

mention was made to how the Lebanese landlord—the person who holds the family's destiny in the palm of his hands—is one of the main protagonists in this oppressive phenomenon. The news report only used the word "demanded" to describe how the 44-year-old landlord chose the 14-year-old girl to become his wife. Here, the innocence of Hanifa was contrasted with the behavior of her mother and her family, who allowed such a sacrifice to take place.

The news reporter ended the report by attempting to contextualize Hanifa's story in the issue of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The news reporter said:

> "Hanifa's story is an example of how desperate many Syrian refugees have now become. The majority cannot survive without help, and humanitarian organizations cannot reach all those who need assistance. Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees from Syria. Over one million have come here. But not all have been registered with the United Nations, which means they are not eligible for aid. Aid agencies are calling the Syrian refugee crisis a humanitarian tragedy. For Hanifa, it has been one tragedy after another. She manages to smile when she remembers the man with whom she was supposed to spend her life . But her 22-year-old cousin died fighting in Syria last year. She now feels helpless."

Although the reporter attempted to contextualize the plight of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, significant social, economic and political factors were not addressed. For instance, the absence of a law that protects girls in Lebanon from child marriage was not mentioned. The ad-hoc measures the Lebanese State applies to refugee-inhabited shelters (in order to keep these shelters with a 'temporary' status, thereby creating unwelcome living space) was also entirely ignored. The bureaucratic laws that oblige every displaced Syrian refugee to pay a large annual fee to maintain their legal status in the country to avoid imprisonment was also disregarded.

Instead, we only learn that Hanifa and her family are obliged to pay an exorbitant rent fort their one-room apartment. In the news report, the apartment appears to be in an unfinished building. The news report also failed to mention how Hanifa's marriage to the landlord will be advantageous for her, as it will grant her a 'legal' status in the country, freeing her of the obligation to pay the aforementioned annual fees. The reporter also emphasized that, because of the many Syrian refugees, the humanitarian aid agencies are not able to help everyone in the displaced community. This situation was described as a humanitarian tragedy and as a tragedy of social exclusion and misfortune. This is what Didier Fassin (2012) described as 'a drift towards sentimentalism.' The reporter used the language of compassion to the describe the social real-

ity of the displaced community. The reporter's speech appeals to the viewer's emotions while also naturalizing the suffering of the displaced community, which he presents as a burden on the humanitarian agencies and on Lebanon.

On July 24, 2014, another news report by *Al Arabiya* reported on a thirteen-year-old girl in Jordan who was forced into an early marriage. The reporter mentioned that the child bride is now suffering from health problems due to her early pregnancy. In the news report, the child bride is interviewed for a few seconds. The unnamed child bride said:

> "I never wanted this marriage, I am still young, and I wanted to continue my education. But my father didn't let me continue my education."

Afterwards, the husband of the bride is interviewed. The husband said:

> "The doctor said that she might lose the baby due to her fragile body. Her medicine is so expensive to buy. She is not capable of carrying on with the pregnancy. Hopefully, she will lose the baby. We cannot afford to raise a baby."

The notion of "one less mouth to feed" occurs as rhetoric. In this circumstance, the married couple is hoping for a miscarriage because they are financially unable to raise a baby. The reporter then ends by stating that, before the outbreak of the conflict, early marriages existed in Syria.

Another news report on September 2, 2016 from *Al Arabiya* reported on 750 cases of child marriage in Jordan, asserting that many other child marriage cases are left unreported. The news reporter appears as an expert and claims that child brides try to escape the unsuitable living conditions in the refugee camps by marrying older men. Lastly, on Apr 23. 2016, a news report by *Al Jazeera* (*Arabic*) briefly declares that child marriage is becoming a protection measure among Syrian families in response to sexual harassment Syrian girls face in informal settlements across Lebanon.

Most of the experts interviewed in the news reports agreed that Syrian girls are forced into (early) marriage as a way to escape the drastic living conditions and by becoming "one less mouth to feed" in the family. Granted, poverty-stricken families living in informal settlements are the biggest demographic among the displaced Syrian populations that resort to child marriage as a coping mechanism (Halldorsson, 2017). A study conducted by UNICEF (2017) on early marriage among displaced Syrians disclosed the following:

> "Among the so-called negative coping mechanisms are child marriages and child labor. Some [children] are forced to work for their family, while others

are forced into early marriage for their own protection and to save money. [Early marriage] can also be a protection measure, considering the vulnerability and risk of sexual harassment girls can face in informal settlements".

The expert's justification of child marriage as a protection measure recalls Timothy Mitchell's (2002) critique of colonial expertise. The experts' speech incorporated a fixated understanding on the complexity and nature of a certain environment; the environment in this case study is the refugee camp, the slum, or any urban settlement the displaced Syrian people inhabit as shelter. Mitchell (2002) referred to these spaces as "projects," arguing that these projects have no autonomous scientific status, however "the projects themselves formed the science" (p. 37) — the science refers to the expert's knowledge.

Accordingly, Mitchell (2002) argues that human agency is acknowledged only in relationship to this "science." Mitchell's notion of human agency speaks to the words of, for example, the expert from *Al Aan*. Al Immam argued for the obligatory presence of *maher* during child marriages, as a way to protect child brides and/or lessen their state of vulnerability. Here, a technocratic and human centric perspective was applied. The expert used her scientific expertise as a lawyer to praise the efficiency of the child marriage laws implemented by Jordanian Jurists Association. She reaffirmed that the laws have a positive impact on the human power structures in child marriages. The expert did not acknowledge the subjectivity of the child brides in her "science." Furthermore, she did not acknowledge the external and internal factors that directly influence the child brides' wellbeing. She spoke on behalf of the child brides through an *objective* scientific method based on a previously conceived belief: the "correct" way child marriage should be implemented and the "suitable" socio-economic structures that should exist within this reality.

Moreover, the expert from *Al Arabiya* spoke about the early marriages among girls who come from families that have lost their breadwinner in to the context of "anxiety." In his speech, the expert mentioned an early marriage *only* becomes problematic when it is used as a tactic to overcome states of exile, insecurity, and economic hardship. In another news report by *Al Arabiya*, the expert highlighted which living conditions in the refugee settlements are considered "unsuitable" for young, unmarried girls. This indicates that the expert understands what a refugee settlement should be like or at least what makes conditions in the settlements "suitable" for an

unmarried Syrian girl/woman. Nevertheless, no description was given to *in what way* the living conditions were unsuitable, and more importantly, *why* they were. The only unsuitable condition that was stated was in the reporting by *Al Jazeera*, when the news reporter mentioned the high risk of sexual harassment present in the informal settlements. However, even this reference was only directly tied to the justification of child marriages as a protection measure.

In general, the state of destitution among the displaced Syrians was never depicted as a form of injustice or economic inequality, but merely as a *tragedy* or as justification to the breadwinner's "failure" or "inability" to provide basic socio-economic necessities to the family. In other words, most of the news reports focused on the unsuitable living conditions, which are directly tied to the concept of failed infrastructure. However, none of them tackled these conditions as a serious problem that needs to be solved.

5.3.2   Failed Infrastructure

This part examines the Arab television reporting on the annual snowstorms in Lebanon. The television stations reported on the decay of the refugee set-tlements due to harsh weather conditions of one such storm. Mitchell (2002) argues that sometimes naturally occurring environmental events may support the construction of a widely recognized concept: human expertise and nature are separable elements. Drawing on Mitchell's ideas, I argue that *nature* (e.g., the high winds, blizzards, flooding, and freezing temperatures, snowstorms) was not responsible for the deterioration of shelters in this refugee settlement in Lebanon. I regard these snowstorms as unfortunate events that contribute to the demise of the failed infrastructure in these ad hoc settlements, and I relate it to Judith Butler's (2016) understanding of the state of vulnerability.

In the context of this case study, the naturally occurring event here is the "destructive" snowstorm. The television stations reported on it as the only cause for the collapse of the tents and makeshift shelters in the refugee camps. Moreover, the television reports showed how many displaced women and children had lost their lives or were afflicted by serious respiratory diseases caused by famine and the cold and bitter temperatures. Therefore, in this section, *changes* will refer to the collapse of shelters, as well as the spread of death and sickness, whereas *human expertise* will refer to the governmental laws on the legal status of displaced persons.

On January 9, 2014, *Al Aan* streamed a news report with the following headline: "A tragic scene of a Syrian mother who cannot find food to feed her children." The news report showed the Syrian woman standing in front of a disused garage that she and her three children used as their home in Lebanon. The reports mentioned that the mother paid $200 for rent per month. The mother, while weeping, spoke into the camera. She said:

> *"We don't have any food! And if we don't pay the $200 rent, the landlord will kick us out and lock our belongings inside. We ran away from war, violence, and bombs, and we came here [Lebanon] to become homeless. We are dying from hunger, from the expensive living conditions, and poverty."*

The reporter tried to arouse pity among the viewers, but did not comment on what this tragic scene really portrays by showing images of destitution without any societal contextualization. In most of the news reports, the family's destitution was portrayed as an individual problem, not as a societal one. Similar to other news reports, it dealt with the state of destitution as a circumstance of war. Moreover, the reporting was not class conscious but, rather, class illiterate by portraying poverty as a personal state.

On January 13, 2015, *Al Aan* reported on a snowstorm in Lebanon. The headline read "Displaced Syrian women in Lebanon complain about the absence of the family's breadwinner during the strong snowstorm in Lebanon."

The news report directly tied the woman's suffering to the absence of the family's breadwinner and the harsh weather conditions. The reporter said:

> *"The snowstorm that hit Lebanon brought very difficult weather conditions, which have added yet another burden on these women. These women do not have a source of income because the breadwinner of the family went missing. In the Beqaa Valley, the tents have been destroyed from the storm. Many Syrian families are living in tents, and their situation became worse during the storm. Hunger became more severe. Help only comes from people who want to do good deeds."*

The news reporter then interviewed the mother. She said:

> *"My oldest son has missing fingers; they are chopped off. My husband is detained. I don't have one human being in my life that can get me one Lebanese Lira so I can survive with my family."*

Afterwards, the reporter interviewed a displaced Syrian woman who lives close to the family's tent, and the woman described the family's situation further. The displaced Syrian woman said:

> *"The tent fell onto their heads because of the snowstorm. The tent was not supported properly in the first place!"*

The displaced Syrian woman makes an important remark that the reporter does not stress or even mention, which is that the tent was *initially* poorly built. The infrastructure of these settlements was built to fail or built as a temporary solution. This phenomenon of erecting poorly built shelters to accommodate displaced people is not new in Lebanon. Doraï (2010) examined the urbanization of the Palestinian settlements in Lebanon "as temporary spaces that are always subject to destruction or unilateral state intervention" (p. 7). This notion is tied to the fact that both the displaced Syrian and Palestinian populations in Lebanon were never entitled to a refugee status by the Lebanese authorities.

The Ministry of Social Affairs in Lebanon has and still considers Palestinians and Syrians in refuge as mere "visitors" in the country. The government uses the word *naziheen* (the Arabic word for displaced) to describe the legal status of the Palestinian and Syrian people (Cornish, 2018). In this context, the term "displaced" demonstrates the "transient"" quality theses visitors have in the eyes of the Lebanese authorities, who believe they are destined to leave the country and go back to their homeland once the conflict is over.

This leads us to question the clear distinction made by the UNHCR and UNRWA between "refugees in camps" and "refugees outside camps." Not all displaced Syrian families are situated in camps funded by the UNHCR. Many are settled in preexisting, informal urban and rural settlements. Not only do Palestinians live in them, but also migrant workers and their families, as well as Lebanese Shia families, who were pushed out of their towns in South Lebanon because of the Israeli-occupied southern border zone. These host communities have also built informal neighborhoods next to the settlements inhabited by the "visitors" or "migrants" (Doraï, 2010, p. 18). These realities blur the distinction between the camp and the rest of the informal urban or rural neighborhoods. While the news reports did not differentiate between women who are "camp dwellers," and women who are "urban refugees," no mention was made to how the infrastructure of the camp settlements is maintained or *not maintained.* Doraï (2010) asserts that a clear resemblance appears between a camp that survives on supposedly humanitarian assistance and the poor urban and rural areas around Lebanon that were *once a camp* and have become permanent labyrinthine slums.

For instance, a recent article by the Financial Times (2018) describes the infrastructure of Shatila camp as one of many overcrowded camp settlements in Lebanon, in which displaced Syrians have become the latest to seek shelter. Initially made for displaced Palestinians who fled to Lebanon nearly 70 years ago, Shatila was built by the displaced persons themselves during conflict. Like many of the other "camps turned slums," the Lebanese government does not exercise any power in these spaces. Consequently, basic sewage, electricity, and water system were never installed, and it is not uncommon to have leaking roofs and tangled electric wires everywhere, increasing the risk off electrocution. As there is no planning or enforcement of building regulations, the residents tend to build upwards, transforming their tents into one, two, or even up to six-storey buildings. Most of "the concrete [used for building] is made using briny [sea] water, causing the structures to corrode from the inside" (Cornish, 2018).

Moreover, while many of the residents do not exercise their legal right to get a job, many tend to work illegally. This increases their chances of being detained by the Lebanese police; hence, many take under-paid or illegal jobs inside or close to the slums in order to limit their daily commute, by working in or close to the slums, or very near the borders. This makes Shatila and other labyrinthine slums in Lebanon resemble a heterotopia (Foucault, 1984); a space that is inaccessible to the Lebanese general security forces and police and with an independently run economy, i.e., a black market, infrastructure system that was built unofficially and run by the inhabitants themselves. Lefebvre (1970) described it as a space "excluded from the political city and those who inhabit these spaces are also excluded from politics and denied a voice" (p. 17). Heterotopia is also described as a space of otherness, where the concept of time ceases to exist until a more permanent solution is found (Ramadan, 2012) — in that case the permanent solution is to go back to Syria or Palestine or to become resettled elsewhere. In a heterotopia, the temporary "visitors," who have been waiting for a long time, eventually become permanent dwellers that rely heavily on charity and aid agencies to maintain their homes. For instance, in Shatila and other slums around Lebanon, the charity organizations provide up to 1,500 U.S. dollars in aid for every household. They either pay the family to conduct the infrastructural improvements themselves or provide them with a budget to buy material goods such as doors, windows, and pipes, in order to repair the leaking rooftops, and plumb the pipes (Cornish, 2018).

Therefore, the deterioration of settlements after the snowstorm was the result of problems caused by earlier "projects," or, more specifically,

the Lebanese government's project to deprive displaced populations from a permanent status in the country. This significantly affected many aspects of the refugees' lives, such as health, opportunity, infrastructure, and basic human rights. According to Mitchell (2002), social problems, including child marriage, poor living conditions, the spread of disease and sickness, and the deterioration of shelters, were deemed by government institutions to be problems of *public health* and *economic inclusion*, or what the humanitarian organizations label as "humanitarian crisis." Mitchell's (2002) writes:

> "These projects began to arrange the world as one in which science was opposed to nature and technical expertise claimed to overcome the obstacles to social improvement" (p. 51).

Indeed, programs implemented by the UNHCR and other NGOs made us perceive a world that appears as such: the snowstorm versus infrastructure, bodies versus cold and sickness, and vulnerable displaced persons versus displaced persons that oppress the vulnerable ones (e.g., child brides versus desperate mothers, or child brides versus oppressive fathers).

I detect a sense of betrayal when the news reports fail to place impoverishment in a social context. What constitutes poverty, and why has the notion of "one less mouth to feed" prevailed among numerous Syrian families, leading to the increase and dissemination of many problems such as child marriage? Why are the socio-economic necessities (elements of basic human rights) so difficult to obtain, and why are the drastic living conditions so pervasive among the displaced communities and among the certain host communities living alongside the displaced communities?

Perhaps the media images of poverty and the role of exploitation among the disadvantaged displaced Syrian community renders forms of systematic violence as the "normal" state of affairs. Žižek (2008) writes:

"When the media bombard us with those 'humanitarian crises,' which seem constantly to pop up all over the world, one should always bear in mind that a particular crisis only explodes into media visibility as the result of a complex struggle" (p.2).

Conceivably, this might reflect on how the consequences of the snowstorm on the refugee shelters are 'socially mediated,' because shelters were forcibly built to be semi-permanent and often dismantled by the Lebanese authorities in a forcible manner. In this context, it was "as if the natural [event] was repeating itself as a social catastrophe" (Žižek, 2008, p. 81). The vortex of the snowstorm disrupted the vortex of a social reality that has long been shaped

by forms of systematic violence. In the context of the Syrian conflict, the systematic violence appears through the exploitation of the impoverished and the forcible measures and policing strategies applied by the Lebanese Armed Forces.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated that the rise of child marriage cases and the deterioration of shelters were inseparable aspects that have contributed to the vulnerability of the displaced Syrian communities. Judith Butler (2015) writes:

> "I've suggested that we rethink the relationship between the human body and infrastructure so that we might call into question … a way of thinking about the human body as a certain kind of dependency on infrastructure, understood complexity as environment, social relations, and networks of support and sustenance that cross the human and animal, and technical divides" (p. 105).

It is important to understand where the deficiency of the urbanized camps' infrastructure is rooted. Without contextualizing the social, economic, and political composition of these spaces, the viewer is left to consume mere images of dispersed tragedies: oppressed child brides and desperate mothers living vulnerably in damaged tents. Their voices became merely depictions that were created and framed by the television reporting.

The news reports were more interested in interviewing experts; as they engaged very little with the child brides. Moreover, the notion of the desperate mother sacrificing her daughter to ease the family's financial hardship was portrayed from an elitist perspective. This particular representation recalls Gayatri Spivak's (2010) essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in which the female subaltern embodies a battleground for the dispute between two ideological discourses. In the context of this research, the visibility of child brides became a battlefield between patriarchal norms and an elitist media discourse. While child marriage is represented as a barbaric practice of the poor, the reporting hampered the child brides' as well as the mothers' freedom to speak.

Blame for the spread of famine, sickness, and cold was placed solely on the snowstorm and the bad weather conditions. Similarly, early marriages were blamed on the poverty-stricken families. Viewers were left wondering if it was the snowstorm that left the mother and her five children living in a broken

tent, starving and suffering from the cold; was it the family's own fault for not being able to feed every one of its members; was it simply a tragedy of life; and is it even worth discussing the plight of social injustice?

Perhaps, the news reports disseminated a reflection of neo-liberal ideals that are based on the harsh idea of personal responsibility. In today's hierarchal society, who is to blame for the state of impoverishment but the impoverished themselves? We cannot be objective in our assessment of the norms that create child brides and vulnerable mothers (because of absent breadwinners) without understanding the social, political, and economical factors that reinforce these norms in the first place.

In conclusion, most of the news reports seemed sympathetic but emotionally removed, aware but uninvolved in the state of impoverishment. Without recognizing what constitutes the families' states of destitution and vulnerability, the reporting somehow produced a problematic and flawed representation of them. Poverty is not merely a tragedy. When the reporting does not tackle the issue of poverty as a prevailing political phenomenon, which stems from inequality, this results in removing poverty from politics and producing harmful implications on the subjects. Poverty appears as a socio-economic requisite in today's disparate economic model in which society necessarily produces winners and losers. In other words, the blame is never placed on the system that values the concept of the "survival of the fittest" (House 2009); rather, the poor are blamed for not being able to make ends meet.

As a final note, whether or not the Arab television reporting perceived child marriage as a destructive or hurtful measure to ensure protection and gain secure shelter, it is important to bear in mind how "the failure of infrastructure brings out the most valuable of neoliberal character traits, [which is] resilience" (Butler, 2015). In the upcoming chapter, I survey the news reports in the context of resilience.