Cleavage and *Hijab* Among Women from the Syrian Conflict in Brazil

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This chapter aims to contribute to an anthropological production on refugees, offering a critical analysis of certain speeches by humanitarian agents. It is relevant to present a critical point of view, because "the world of humanitarianism tends to elude critical analysis" (Fassin 2011, 35). This text is based on research on Syrians refugees in Brazil, focusing on the management of organizations involved in the process of refugee protection and asylum. Here I seek to present narratives that challenge the image of refugee women as eternally vulnerable or oppressed by "culture", recognizing their agency and describing other intersectional power dynamics.

The purpose of this text is to contribute to research on refugees and Middle Eastern women. There are few studies that focus on women refugees from Syria in Brazil addressing their relations with humanitarian work. This chapter engages in a dialogue with and contributes to the literature that seeks to break with the homogeneous narrative about refugees as bodies that need to be saved, problematizes certain humanitarian discourses. This chapter explores the importance of an analysis recognizing the agency of women, defying the dichotomies of tradition and modernity as well as humanitarian rhetoric about female victim refugees. The victim of this rhetoric is a helpless forced migrant who is also seen as a "conservative" woman without freedom of choice and strength. This sort of discourse reinforces reductionist images ignoring that women wearing hijabs often do so out of a conscious choice. Saba Mahmood's (2005) perspective plays an important role in this analysis, because her agency concept is built from women who do not conform to liberal and secular projects and who exhibit a high level of reflexion about their religion experience. Mahmood problematizes the universal desire to be free, situating the agency not only in terms of resistance but in terms of capacities for action, fed by concrete and specific subordination relations.

Scholars in the field of refugee studies have produced critical works seeking to describe and analyse the refuge and displacement experience in consideration of the conflict that produced forced migration and the historical and social contexts of origin, transit and destination of people, as well as their different cultural belongings (for example, Malkki 1995; Harrell-Bond 1986; 2002; Fassin 2010; 2011; Agier 2011; Schiocchet 2017; Hamid 2012; 2019; Navia 2014; Lokot 2018).

Based on research in Southern Sudan, Barbara Harrell-Bond (1986; 2002) challenges the homogeneous narrative about refugees, showing that her interlocutors were different in many ways (age, education, gender, social class and so on). In the context of a refugee camp, she articulated her research with refugees around humanitarianism, questioning humanitarian aid rationality and validity. Harrell-Bond argues that Ugandans entering Sudan required different types of humanitarian assistance, including provision of food and medicines. But she brought to the work of humanitarian agencies the same type of scrutiny that was already used for development projects. Harrell-Bond (1986) studied how good intentions gave way to irritation and even hostility when humanitarian workers experienced discomfort, failure and betrayal by people they thought were grateful. "Harrell-Bond argued that those working in such conditions were victims along with the refugees and that agencies needed to be aware of their likely responses when setting up relief programs" (Colson 2011, 160-61).

Harrell-Bond considered humanitarian agencies, their international supporters, local governments and host persons at a time when humanitarian work was seldom subjected to ethnographic assessments. Elizabeth Colson (2011, 161) thinks that *Imposing Aid* (Harrell-Bond 1986) made many people hostile to the idea of seeing their work exposed to public scrutiny. Currently, *Imposing Aid* remains relevant and reaffirms the importance of looking critically at certain humanitarian practice (for example, Agier 2011; Hamid 2012; Schiocchet 2017). As Colson considers "ethnographers who study the system of humanitarian assistance continue to corroborate Harrell-Bond's critique and further illuminate the overall deleterious impact of refugee camps" (2011, 161).

The works by Sonia Hamid (2012, 2019) are based on this critical perspective. Researching an "integration" program for resettled Palestinian refugees in the city of Mogi das Cruzes, in São Paulo State, Hamid discusses the use of the "culture" category, often mobilized by those working in program management. Hamid (2019, 115) argues that the concept of culture was treated in a

totalizing way to explain assisted subjects' behaviour. It was used, in general, almost as an accusation, insofar as it pointed out undesirable elements that needed to be transformed, in spite of the difficulties. Despite the diversity of practices and behaviours among refugees, Hamid described humanitarian workers mobilizing a predefined concept of culture, ignoring cases that defied their predetermined vision and seeing those cases as exceptions (2019, 129).

Empirical research (Lokot 2018; Hamid 2019) questions emphasis on "tradition" and "culture" categories triggered by humanitarian agents that do not describe or explain the meaning of "culture" or "tradition". Michelle Lokot argues that, in humanitarian narratives, Syrian refugee families in Jordan are classified as "traditional", even though the meaning of "traditional" is not explained beyond the seemingly typical division of roles between women and men (Lokot 2018, 02). The binary – liberal or conservative, traditional or modern – framework hides many more complex nuances. Statements about refugee women must be contextualized considering historical, social, cultural and political elements that shape their identities. There is not a pre-determined visual image of the refugee, nor of the "refugee woman".

The main objective of this chapter is to contribute to gender studies and scrutinize the ambiguous images of refugee women. It seeks to exhibit how organizations working with Syrian refugees in Brazil deploy divergent images of "culture". The expectations within and the entanglement with cultural conceptions or perceptions of traditional versus modern, re-echo in the humanitarian aid work agents, fostering or impeding refugee agency. The goal is to scrutinize the humanitarians' workers expectations with regard to their clients' agency and to serve their specific imagery. In a devising agency, refugees have to muddle through various rhetoric and struggle with contradicting images and ideology-laden representations to engage with the host society which affects almost all aspects of life.

Liisa Malkki (1995, 8), based on her research with Hutu refugees in Tanzania, is very critical of narratives on refugees that ignore the conflict and persecution and oppression context that gives rise to displacement. They ignore a central dimension of refuge to privilege the refugee's body and culture. "It is striking how often the abundant literature claiming refugees as its object of study locates 'the problem' not first in the political oppression or violence that produces massive territorial displacements of people, but within the bodies and minds of people classified as refugees".

The centrality of women's bodies in academic and humanitarian discourses has been discussed from the perspective of gender studies in the Middle East (Abu-Lughod 1996; Mahmood 2005; Rabo 1996; 2008). Women and/or families were and are still used to symbolically represent the progress and cultural tradition of societies across the region (Rabo 1996, 156). Contemporary anthropological production has expanded this perspective to offer a more nuanced approach to Middle Eastern women, questioning reductionist discourses (Mahmood 2005; Chagas 2011).

Considerations on women's agency have contributed to this discussion. Saba Mahmood's (2005) ethnography in Cairo's mosques with a conservative women's movement gave way to a new concept of agency. Mahmood developed a concept of devoted agency that expands women's capacity to understand their sense of self, their aspirations, projects and desires, including the desire to submit to a recognized authority. These were configured in the context of non-liberal traditions. Mahmood defends that separation between the notion of agency and that of resistance is a fundamental step for considering will and politics' forms that do not conform to secular and liberal feminist norms, including "state feminism".

Syrian Conflict and the Brazilian response

Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, an estimated 6,7 million people have been internally displaced, 5,6 million have left the country, and 13,5 million need humanitarian aid. The Syrian civil war is an ongoing armed conflict waged mainly between the Syrian regime, led by President Bashar al-Assad, and many opponents' groups, as well as between these opponents' groups. Before the conflict, Syria's population was estimated at 22 million people. Currently, half of that population is displaced from their homes. Syria is the country producing the most refugees in the world (UNHCR 2018). About the war in Syria, Pinto (2017) exposes the complexities of the conflict – often approached from a sectarian perspective, and criticizes this view – showing how President Bashar al-Assad's regime used violence to forge a sectarian conflict, stemming from pre-existing tensions.

Most refugees from the conflict are in neighbouring, bordering countries, which are home to 90% of the total displaced people. Countries that received the most Syrian refugees are Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan (UNHCR 2018). In Brazil, from 2011 to 2018, 3,326 Syrian citizens were recognized as

refugees, according to official data from the National Committee for Refugees (CONARE 2019), which administers refugees in Brazil. Entry of people affected by the Syrian conflict in Brazil was facilitated, for "humanitarian reasons", by easing visa requirements in Brazilian embassies and consulates. Guidance from the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Foreign Affairs was to recognize the Syrian conflict as a civil war and a generalized framework of human rights violations. Syria was home to approximately 500,000 Palestinian refugees, of which 149,822 lived in one of nine official camps (Castellino and Cavanaugh 2013, 157). Through Normative Resolution 17 of 2013, valid for two years and renewed in 2015 and 2017, CONARE guided the issuance of visas for people affected by the Syrian conflict considering Palestinians and citizens of other nationalities residing in Syria. The inclusion of nationals from other countries in the Brazilian refugee policy enabled individuals – which, although affected by the war, are usually excluded from protection programs – to access protection.

During 2011 and 2012, at the onset of the conflict in Syria, the Syrian communities in Brazil tried to reunite with their relatives in Syria to enable them to flee violence and persecutions. At that time, the Brazilian government adopted a flexible policy as borders were opened to Syrians who were able to obtain tourist visas. This was a request advanced especially by the Christian Syrian component of Brazilian society, which has a longstanding presence in the country. Representatives of the Brazilian Arab community, with the support and intermediation of sectors of the Catholic Church, contributed to putting in place a governmental resolution to facilitate the entry of persons affected by the Syrian conflict to Brazil. Historical linkages and relationships between Syria and Brazil are fundamental, as they are meaningful about the sort of relationship between these people who arrived after the war broke out in Syria and the pre-existing communities in Brazil (Souza and Manfrinato 2020, 115).

From 2013, however, the migrant demography from Syria changed: many Syrians who are living in Brazil have no previous connections with pre-existent Arab networks. Predominantly are male and they started acquiring the young men icon who fled the military conscription in Syria. Throughout the Syrian crisis, the perspective of hosting the 2016 Olympic games and the 2014 World Cup had also created an idea of an economically thriving Brazil, where a workforce would have been needed. That counted as well as a pull factor for Syrians who came to relocate here. Syrians in Brazil can instead only access an eligibility system. That means they are self-settled refugees.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted from October 2015 to September 2018, in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo States, Brazil. In Rio de Janeiro, my research, which focused on the management of organizations involved in the process of refugee protection and asylum, adopted the methodology of participant observation by which I became a regular consumer of "Arab food" and studied Arabic which was taught by the language teachers who are refugees. In São Paulo, I conducted semi-structured interviews, which had more specific objectives. However, even in this context, in which I had little contact with interlocutors, the presence of small children, interviews in parks, cafes, museums and gardens created a more informal and empathic atmosphere. The notion of reciprocity, "giving something back" (Liamputtong 2007, 60), guided the research, so fieldwork included my assistance with opening a bank account, access to public health and education services, and assistance to humanitarian organizations.

I was interested in the relations of the interlocutors with the humanitarian agencies involved in their bureaucratic process of refuge and migration. The interlocutors were Syrian citizens and other nationals, such as Palestinians and Lebanese. These refugees lived in urban areas of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo cities and presented great socioeconomic diversity. They were between 18 and 65 years old and were mostly from Damascus, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, Daraa, Raqqah and Homs in Syria. The Brazilian state did not provide assistance for refugees to come to Brazil and they were not welcomed by any special refugee program.

I conducted 15 interviews. Arabic classes with my interlocutors were very important because they configured regular activities. Interviews and private lessons were conducted at my home, in some interlocutors' residences, in cafes, restaurants and Casa de Rui Barbosa Foundation (FCRB). Research conducted in FCRB facilities allowed access to humanitarian workers and other relevant players in refuge management, especially those who participated in FCRB Summer Courses on Refuge editions. The narratives of two interlocutors are central to this article, which aims to give visibility to women who challenge an image of vulnerability and passivity present in certain humanitarian discourses.

Randa's cleavage

In the 1st Summer Course on Refuge of Casa de Rui Barbosa Foundation, in December 2015, there was a visit to *Caritas*, in Rio de Janeiro, in which participants met Randa. She was young and, although only having been in Brazil for a few months, spoke Portuguese, using English just for more complex discursive formulations. She introduced herself to the audience as a Syrian citizen seeking asylum in Brazil and addressed some aspects of her life. She said that she worked as a telemarketing agent in Turkey to pay for her air ticket to Brazil. She also explored her interest in studying at a Brazilian university, her curiosity for new cultures and the Portuguese language.

Randa had lived in Damascus with her mother, where she was born in the 1990s. Her family was Syrian from Damascus, and Sunni Muslim, but, like her parents, she was not a practising Muslim. Randa's parents divorced when she was a child and, although she lived with her father for some years, she spent most of her life with her mother. Randa studied at a bilingual school in Damascus, which explained her fluent English. She used to go to painting classes at the Russian Cultural Center and attended other upper-middle-class social spaces in Syria. In the last decade, however, her family experienced a sharp economic decline, aggravated by the outbreak of the conflict in 2011. When Randa arrived in Brazil in 2015, she did not receive any financial support from relatives. With the money earned through working as a bartender in Beirut and a telemarketing agent in Istanbul, she was able to sustain herself and her mother for the first few months.

At the end of the visit to the *Caritas* office, participants formed small groups to leave the premises. In one of these groups, Maria, who had a leading and senior job position in an international humanitarian organization, openly questioned Randa's nationality, saying: "I am sure she is a Palestinian pretending to be a Syrian in order to get refuge. Now everyone is Syrian. With this cleavage, she is not Syrian" (Fieldwork, December 2015). Maria's speech has dimensions discussed by anthropological literature on the theme of refugees, such as distrust of the refugee and particular visual construction of the "victim" as bodies that need to be saved (Harrell-Bond 1986; 2002; Fassin 2010; Lokot 2018; Hamid 2019).

At the time of visit to *Caritas,* the Syrian conflict had attained high public visibility. In September 2015, photographs of a Syrian child drowned on a beach near the city of Bodrum, Turkey, reverberated globally. Turkish photojournalist Nilüfer Demir took a series of photos of the boy Alan Kurdi, who

had died while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea towards Europe with his family. Only the father survived and photographs of little Alan, dressed in a red T-shirt and blue pants, drew attention to the conflict. In a photograph, the child was lying on the beach, exactly where the water met the coast; face down, body facing the ocean. In another photograph, an adult in uniform and green beret, captured from behind, was beside the child. In a third photograph, the adult, half-turned to the camera and identifiable as a man, took the child and started to move away from the water (Adler-Nissen et al. 2019, 75).

Recognition of the Syrian conflict as a humanitarian crisis, given the repercussion of Alan Kurdi's photographs, relates to Didier Fassin's idea that the exposure of a suffering body is what remains as the last audible symbolic resource in situations of extreme social or legal exclusion (Fassin 2016, 46). Photographs of the little boy, Alan Kurdi, helped the Syrian conflict to be recognized by a large number of people in Brazil as a humanitarian crisis and not as a distant war. These photographs contributed to making the Syrian conflict and the humanitarian crisis it created widely known in Brazil, although the number of refugees at that time was already four million. In her research with Palestinian refugees from the Syrian conflict in São Paulo, Helena Manfrinato analysed mobilization and support received from civil society by refugees in face of the public commotion produced by the boy's photographs: "His lifeless body confronted against an inhospitable immensity of water, completely vulnerable, ignited people's commotion and indignation, making them wish to repair it and reverse the feeling that help was too late" (Manfrinato 2016, 428).

This comment by the humanitarian agency evokes the Syrian conflict's visibility, which is related to the public commotion produced by photographs. In this context, the transit of Syrian nationals was classified as humanitarian, allowing Syrians to be categorized as refugees. In saying that "now, everyone is Syrian", Maria assumed that Randa falsely associated herself with an identity widely recognized as that of a victim. Arguably, the boy Alan was a victim. Randa, however, with her cleavage, did not fit the image of victim, common to certain humanitarian workers. Harrell-Bond argues that external justification for financing institutional and administrative structures, which were created to distribute aid, depends on specific ways of portraying refugees as helpless and desperately in need of international assistance. This image strengthens the view that outsiders are needed to help them. It also conditions the behaviour of those who help, which are also interested in pathologizing, medi-

calizing and labelling refugees as helpless and vulnerable (Harrell-Bond 2002, 57). As Randa did not correspond to a certain image of victim, she was not recognized as a Syrian national. The concept of "vulnerability" is often important in defining who receives services and who does not (Agier 2011, 213) and this is particularly true in the case of Syria.

Randa became my interlocutor. When I met her, she gave interviews and spoke openly about her experience as a refugee, but, after one year in Brazil, she began to refuse successive requests for interviews from researchers and journalists. Randa said she was especially tired of the same interview dynamic, with questions that focused on the problems and sufferings of the Syrian war. She said she felt her interviewers' disappointment with the absence of certain images in her narrative:

> I almost apologized for not seeing a dead relative. The only two bodies I have seen in my life were in Malaysia and Brazil. In Malaysia, I was in the car with a friend and I saw the body of a motorcycle driver on the road and, in Brazil, I saw the body of someone who was run over in the BRT [Bus Rapid Transit and System]. I'm sorry, but no one in my family died in the conflict and I didn't cross the desert to leave Syria (Interview in June 2016).

Randa did not have a narrative of suffering that showed her as a vulnerable victim. She lost the most important source of family income due to the conflict, the rental of a property in Damascus. The area where the property was had been closed and she did not know if the building had been destroyed. Family and friends were dispersed in several countries or in Syria, facing daily problems, such as fear of violence by the Assad regime and armed groups, lack of basic items such as energy, drinking water, telephone and internet, but she did not have the story and visual image that people seem to expect from a refugee.

Representation of Syrian women, conveyed by humanitarian speeches and the media, was strongly criticized by Randa and other Syrian women, such as journalist Milia Aidamouni. Milia left Damascus for Jordan in 2013 due to political pressure. Together with her colleague Rula Asad, she founded the Syrian Female Journalists Network. Milia's work promotes a better understanding of Syrian women's role in the uprising and breaks stereotypes surrounding female journalists in the region. The network sought to expand representation of Syrian refugees and present them in more plural images and to sensitise foreign media that insisted on portraying Syrian women in a one-dimensional way:

> Foreign media tries to portray Syrian women as one dimensional – she's a victim, a mother of a detainee, a wife of a prisoner, a hostage in a hostile country waiting for humanitarian aid. But from Day One, women were part of the uprising. They took to the streets, they helped in the field hospitals, they created community centers to support each other in their local communities. Syrian women as refugees are also breaking stereotypes and changing the image of Syrian women. No one talks about the challenges they are facing [in Jordan] after four or five years of being a refugee (Nobel Women's initiative 2016).

Randa challenged the refugee woman's one-dimensional image criticized above. The view of Palestinian women as dressing in an exposing way was also questioned. For Randa, "she [Maria] has a very limited vision, everything is relative. There are the liberals and there are the conservatives, both on the Syrian and Palestinian side. But there is no such thing as a woman being liberal because she is Palestinian and traditional because she is Syrian. Or conservative because she is Palestinian and liberal because she is Syrian" (Interview in June 2017).

The binary framework – liberal or conservative and traditional or modern – hides much more complex nuances. Statements about Syrian or Palestinian women require contextualization of the historical, social, cultural and political elements that shape their identities.

Samia's *hijab*

Samia was born in Damascus in the 1980s, in an unofficial Palestinian refugee camp. Her grandparents left Palestine in 1948 and became refugees in Golan, Syria. With the Israeli occupation of the territory in 1982, they went to Homs and then to Damascus. Samia grew up in the suburbs of the city and studied at the University of Damascus, where she met her husband. After a few years of marriage, Samia left Syria with Khaled and the couple's small son. In 2015, they arrived in Brazil, after living in Jordan and having their visa applications denied by several countries. Samia learned that members of her family and friends, who were in Lebanon, had obtained visas for Brazil. She called a cousin who lived in São Paulo. He informed her about the refuge process, local Arab communities, mosques and job opportunities offered by the city. In view of the couple's high qualifications, however, they decided to stay in Rio

de Janeiro where, given the visibility of the World Cup (2014) and the Olympic Games (2016), they would have better employment opportunities. However, they only stayed for eight months in Rio de Janeiro. Through family contacts, Khaled got a job in the city of São Paulo, to where they moved.

I met Samia and her family in 2016 in Rio de Janeiro and, in 2017, we met again in São Paulo. Samia suggested that we participate in an event for refugees, promoted by several humanitarian agencies in partnership with public agencies of the city of São Paulo, private sectors, and confessional institutions. Samia attended the event in response to an invitation from friends who worked as volunteers in an Islamic association linked to the mosque. Samia said she only frequented the mosque in Damascus episodically. When she left Syria after the conflict, she and her husband began to go regularly to the mosque in Amman and, later, in São Paulo. Samia said that, unlike Khaled, she was not used to going to the mosque or praying at home daily. However, with the start of the Syrian conflict, and outside Syria, she started to feel connected to religion: "going through what the prophet Muhammad went through, connected me to Islam" (Samia, interview, June 2017). The experience of forced migration due to the Syrian conflict brought Samia closer to religion and Muslim communities in Amman and São Paulo. Samia compared her experience of forced migration with the *hijra* which can be literally translated as "departure", "emigration", "flight", "abandon" and refers primarily to Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 A.D. (Masud 1990, 30).

This event in São Paulo was held in a large public space and provided information on the theme of refuge and human rights. The event had volunteers and humanitarian workers from UNHCR, Caritas of São Paulo, and NGO's: *I Know My Rights* (IKMR) and Refugee Reintegration Institute (*Instituto de Reintegração de Refugiados*) ADUS, among other organizations. Humanitarian workers, placed in several tents distributed throughout the space of the event, gave information about refugees, women and children's rights. These organisations' volunteers distributed pamphlets and other informative materials. In one of these tents, I met Joana, who was formally working with one of the organizations present in the event, and two volunteers. Joana held a leadership position in her organization, had international experience in a humanitarian agency, a college degree and a postgraduate degree. Volunteers were attending the last period of their undergraduate courses and had already had previous experience in volunteering with other organisations. They all spoke English and lived-in middle-class neighbourhoods in the city of São Paulo.

In one of the event's food tents, I interviewed Joana and the volunteers. Joana started the interview explaining to me about her work and her organisation's role in the event. Then, she started talking about "Syrian women" in a more specific way, based on Samia's experience. Joana and one of the volunteers had met Samia at another event held by their organizations, which was specifically intended for refugee women and children. Joana described Samia as a "traditional" woman and stated that her "traditional culture" was a "problem" for her "integration" into Brazilian society. She repeated this several times, while the volunteers nodded in approval. Given the question, "what does 'traditional' mean?", Joana replied: "Samia looks like she is from my grandmother's time, not like my grandmother, because my grandmother worked. […] She is very traditional" (Interview in June 2017).

Volunteers stressed that Samia was even more "conservative" and "religious" than other Muslim women attending the event, as these women wore skinny jeans and colourful *hijabs*. Unlike Samia who wore a long, loose skirt, long-sleeved turtleneck shirt, long waistcoat, cap and *hijab* in a monochromatic combination with different shades of black and grey. Joana went on to explain that "Muslim culture" and "Arab culture" would not allow women "to have freedom […]. They are very traditional" (Interview in June 2017).

Although Joana did not know Khaled, she interpreted that it was Samia's husband who was the reason why Samia was not interested in the job opportunity that had been offered to her. When they met, Joana offered to help Samia to find a job position in the context of an employment program. They chatted in person and then exchanged messages through WhatsApp. Joana argued that, at first, Samia was interested in the job offer, as she had sent her resume. A few days later, however, she did not respond to the messages sent by the volunteer of the organization in which Joana worked and, finally, she replied that she was not interested at all. For Joana and the volunteer, Samia's husband had led her to give up running for a job. This assumption was based on the idea that Samia's family was "very traditional". Joana continued to speak, always with the gestural agreement of the volunteers, reaffirming the "traditional culture" of Samia and "Muslim women" who "wore veil and stayed at home". Joana seemed very annoyed by the fact that Samia missed the opportunity – not only of a job, which was not easy to find, but also of a way to get closer to São Paulo society.

I asked Samia about Joana's job proposal. The job as an administrative assistant involved 44 work hours per week and which paid the minimum salary for the professional category. In addition to that, she would have had to go

through a selection process involving curriculum vitae analysis and an interview. Samia did not participate in the application procedure and justified her disinterest. She mentioned several elements for her decision, but the most significant one from her perspective had to do with her three-year-old son. One argument was that she would have to be long hours away from him. She explained that, accepting that job offer, she would be absent from home for almost 13 hours per day, considering workday time, nine hours, and daily commute (home-work-home) of two hours and thirty minutes. Another argument is that the salary, considering her family budget, would not allow her to pay a pre-school monthly fee. Samia already knew that she would not be able to obtain a place in a public kindergarten. As soon as she arrived in São Paulo, she was informed about that.

Samia did not find information when seeking assistance on access to kindergarten, bilingual schools and diploma revalidation. She argued that problems related to gender inequality and power relations in the family appeared to be the focus of humanitarian workers. One of the volunteers mentioned above sent to Samia, through WhatsApp, material from campaigns to combat gender violence. In a complaining tone, she showed me the history of communication with the volunteer on her cellphone, and commented:

> I already blacked out, but you can still see what she always sends me. Maybe she thinks that I suffer violence because I wear *hijab*, I don't know [...]. I had teachers in Syria and classmates who thought that my father made me wear *hijab* [...]. Now they think it's [...] [Khaled]? [...] But she [the volunteer] didn't answer me if her university could validate my diploma (Interview in October 2017).

The first messages were received without problems, such as the UN campaign "Orange Day for the end of sexual violence against women and girls". However, Samia became uncomfortable with the messages that addressed gender violence exclusively and with the absence of consistent responses to her requests. For Samia, her clothing, cultivated as a way of reaching *al-haya* – a feeling described as modesty and shyness among Muslims – could not be seen as a "problem". Samia did not relate modernity to secularization (*almana*) and questioned the modernizing project of feminism by humanitarian agents and the Syrian regime.

Samia questioned the standard of modernity in the Syrian regime, in which modern women were defined by their secular clothing. For her, the modernity of the Syrian regime was expressed through the First Lady's look-

ing glass. Samia argued that Asma Al-Assad, the president's wife, adopted remarkably secular dress and was an international reference in style and elegance not only in Syria. In 2008, Asma Al-Assad was elected by the French magazine Elle "the best dressed first lady in the world", ahead of Carla Bruni and Michelle Obama. Ironically, Samia observed that,

> While the regime tortured and murdered children in the country's South, Vogue magazine wrote a flattering article on Asma. Is Asma an example of modernity? [...] She wears clothes from international brands, shows her legs, arms [...] and murders her own people (Interview in October 2017).

The First Lady is an educated, Sunni and secular Muslim woman whose image reinforces the modernizing principles of the Syrian regime. According to Samia, there was strong publicity surrounding the modernity of Asma, because she expressed global values of modernity. Women and/or families were and are still used to symbolically represent progress and cultural tradition of societies across the Middle East (Rabo 1996, 156). The image of Asma is used by the Ba'ath party's modernizing project, in which gender conceptions considered "traditional" (such as the use of *hijab*) are condemned as remnants of a patriarchal order that the party strives to eliminate.

Agency and "women who wear *hijab* and stay at home"

The image of Syrian women with no cleavage, wearing *hijab* and oppressed by her "traditional culture" corresponds to a stereotype that, as this text shows, was reproduced by humanitarian workers occupying senior positions in their organizations' bureaucratic structure. As Michael Herzfeld argues, "stereotypes are produced at the top" (1992, 71). Although the use and diffusion of stereotypes are often attributed to popular discourse, Herzfeld (1992) shows how they are mobilized by states and bureaucratic actors.

The Ba'ath party's modernizing project mobilized the stereotype of Syrian women in *hijab* and oppressed by their patriarchal culture. According to Annika Rabo, initiatives such as study groups for adult women – organized by the Women's Union, organization controlled by the Ba'ath – is used as an important instrument to train women to "rid themselves of traditional attitudes" (Rabo 1996, 160). In the official speech of the Ba'ath party, society must be "modernized" and women have an important role in this process. The party promoted equality between men and women through suffrage, educational

policies and employment opportunities. Official rhetoric holds that men and women, side by side, must build a new and developed nation for the good of all (Rabo 1996, 157). However, as Deniz Kandiyoti argues, nationalists in the Middle East, which created state feminism, say that women's seclusion had to be abolished because female at home were "a wasted national resource" and not because they had equal rights:

> A nationalist/feminist alliance of progressive men and women produced a new discourse on women and the family which was predominantly instrumental in tone. Women's illiteracy, seclusion and the practice of polygyny were not denounced merely because they so blatantly curtailed the individual human rights of one half of the population, but because they created ignorant mothers, shallow and scheming partners, unstable marital unions, and lazy and unproductive members of society (Kandiyoti 1991, 10).

In the speeches of state feminism and humanitarian workers, the Islamic veil is a symbol of female oppression while work, in turn, is a symbol of modernity and an indicator of women's freedom. Both speeches do not recognize the agency (Mahmood 2005; Chagas 2011) of women who "wear a veil and stay at home", to use Joana's phrase to refer to Samia.

The speeches of Maria, who does not see Randa as a refugee from Syria because of her cleavage, and that of Joana, according to which a woman wearing a *hijab* is submissive to her husband, do not recognize the agency capacity of female refugee. These speeches assume the culture as a problem and do not consider the very existence of women whose image defies a certain discursive construction about the "Syrian refugee woman". In an attempt to explain the main problems faced by refugees, reports from humanitarian organizations also treat Syrian women as a unified whole, without reference to class, education or other relevant factors. Reports (Oxfam and Abaad 2013, 14; Women's refugee commission 2014, 01; Buecherand Aniyamuzaala 2016, 04) should be questioned, for example, for emphasizing that only men are family providers. This narrative does not apply to all Syrian women and must be contextualized based on different social and cultural belonging criteria (Lokot 2018).

Social class, as well as value attributed to work (Salamandra 2004; Hijab 1988), has an important role regarding the exercising of paid activity. Randa worked as bartender, telemarketing agent, and as an English and Arabic teacher as well. With the money from her work, she supported her family in Brazil. Randa's mother, however, never worked. She was born into a wealthy family and, even in the face of family economic decline, refused to do so. For

Randa, her mother did not accept the need to work because she had an "elite mentality". Randa's mother also wore a plunging neckline, so the fact that she did not work could not be easily attributed to her "traditional culture".

Nadia Hijab (1988; 2001) shows that social class and working conditions must be considered, before attributing the reason for the low participation of Syrian women in the labour market exclusively to culture. Hijab (1988, 88-89) argues that women of very middle socioeconomic levels were privileged. They worked in the public sector, which in the Arab world is seen as offering the most valued and respectable careers for women, both in terms of job security and because the nature of the work is non-manual. In this case, women were eager to avail themselves of the opportunity to work to satisfy economic needs. This was not necessarily the case for women from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

According to Hijab, all the single respondents planned to leave their jobs when they married. However, "many women who left the factory on marriage found they had to return because of economic pressure. The married women were determined that their children would have an education so as not to end up like them. They had been forced into tiring, poorly paid jobs because of severe economic need." (Hijab 1988, 88-89).

Samia did not want to participate in the job selection process due to some factors, including low payment and lack of a nursery school for her son. The "blame Islam" approach for the situation that women are out of the labour market ignores the fact that many of the problems faced by these workers are, in general, shared around the world. In this sense, it is not possible to attribute the weight of tradition to Samia's failure to enter São Paulo's labour market.

Hijab challenges the common assumption that women in the Arab world do not work (2001, 41). She argues that the work is strongly located in areas where it is "invisible", mainly in agriculture, family businesses, domestic economy and elsewhere in the informal economy. Business concerns in the Arab world are managed by families and it is taken for granted that bosses will nominate, or help to nominate, family members into paid positions, just as civil servants will seek to advance the appointment of family members in their own departments or other departments. In rural areas, a family's livelihood depends on the work of all its members – husband, wife and children – in the field or in food processing and other activities related to agriculture. The same is true of small family businesses in urban areas (Hijab 1988, 12; Quataert 1991, 163).

The invisibility of the women's workforce also appears in family discourses. Mary Chamie observed – when quoting a survey on participation of women in Syria's workforce – that when she initially asked men about whether their wives worked, a large proportion answered that they did not. When the question was rephrased to "If your wife did not help you with your work, would you be forced to hire a replacement for her?", the overwhelming majority answered yes (Chamie 1985, 99). This is the case of Samia, who worked as an assistant to her husband, dividing her time between that work and caring for her family.

Samia had professional plans and complained that, in Damascus, there was no prospect of work. She wanted to migrate to a country in the global north, like Canada, where she could find the conditions to build a career. Samia said she was different from women in her husband's family, which was part of the Damascus elite, because if they went to university or worked, it was just for "attracting husbands". Christa Salamandra (2004) argues that most jobs open to women in Damascus, no matter how prestigious, do not pay enough to allow women to become economically self-sufficient. Jobs are seen as temporary measures on the way to marriage or, later, as a supplementary income. "For young single women, they are primarily a venue for display, the ultimate aim of which is to secure a successful future in the private, rather than public, sphere" (2004, 52).

In her family of Palestinian refugees, Samia mentioned a different framework. Most women wished to spend more time with their children, to develop a deeper feeling of care and "connectivity" (Joseph 1994, 55) with their families. However, even though prioritizing family and domestic life, they felt obliged to work out of their homes for long hours, as they played a key role in family economy. For her cousin, who intended to get married very soon, formal work was conceived of as a hindrance. She was anxious to quit her low-paid job as a kitchen assistant in a restaurant, after the wedding. This work was also very heavy and, from her family history, she knew how exhausting it would be to take care of the house, the family and still have a formal job. The desire to stay at home, then, should not be ignored nor reduced to a women's segregation issue.

This research indicates that it is a mistake to consider that women from lower classes are more segregated than urban and elite women. For Samia, single women were very controlled in their family, but after marriage, and especially after children's birth, this control was almost non-existent. Her husband's elite and secular family had a much more restricted conception

of social spaces in which women could move. Annika Rabo argues that rules on interaction between men and women may be less stringent in rural areas (2008, 134). Elite women in Damascus, however, find opportunities for interaction, albeit more limited, in semi-public spaces such as gyms (Salamandra 2006, 154-55). This literature, as well as gathered data, contrasts with the discourse stating that the biggest challenge faced by Syrian women and girls to access basic resources and specialized services is "due to their limited ability to leave home without a male family member" (Oxfam and Abaad 2013, 03). When addressing the issue of segregation, mobility and social interaction among Syrian refugee women in Jordan, Oxfam and Abaad's report makes no reference to local and global political and economic forces and their unequal impact on women's lives.

The assumption that the main challenge for refugee women relates to their own culture appears in above-mentioned humanitarian discourses. The search for cultural explanations about the behaviour of Muslim or Arab people is addressed in the research by Abu-Lughod (1996), Lokot (2018) and Hamid (2019). This way of thinking about Arab / Muslim alterity, far from being configured as something recent, refers to the very idea of Orientalism (Said 1978), produced since the 18th century. In Orientalist discourses, the condition of women, symbolized by the use of the veil, occupied a central place, being used to determine the degree of evolution / modernity of a society, justifying colonization practices. The way "women have become powerful symbols of identity and visions of society and nation" (Abu-Lughod 1996, 3) in the/a postcolonial world has been widely questioned in anthropology. Some criticisms of Orientalist views, however, refer to the idea that wearing the veil means liberating the hegemony of Western cultural codes and a way of opposing the oppressive secular state that promotes, as in the Syrian case, state feminism. Mahmood (2005) offers a remarkably different perspective to think the use of the veil.

Mahmood's ethnography in Cairo's mosques, within a conservative women's movement, showed the strength of a new conception of agency, a devout agency that escapes the dichotomy of subordination and resistance. Mahmood defends separation between the notion of agency and that of resistance as a fundamental step to think about the forms of will and politics that do not fit feminist secular and liberal norms (Mahmood 2005, 14). Mahmood's perspective expands our capacity of understanding and interrogating women whose sense of self, aspirations, projects and desires – including that

of submission to a recognized authority – were configured in the context of non-liberal traditions.

The use of the veil by Samia and other interlocutors cannot be understood, as in the above-mentioned speech of the humanitarian worker, as an expression of her husband and traditional family's imposition. This view of Muslim and Arab women as passive and submissive, attached to the structures of male authority, has already been widely questioned (Mahmood 2005, 6). I do not consider it equally appropriate to think of the veil in terms of freedom of choice or as a response to Syrian state's secularization process (Rabo 1996, 167). Mahmood's perspective is constructed based on theoretical questions and, above all, on conservative religious women daily practices. They are not trying to escape tradition nor to reform the religious concept of gender. Mahmood values the point of view of her interlocutors, for whom the use of the veil (as for Samia) is an exercise in modesty and shyness (*al-haya*), one of the religious virtues for devout Muslims in general, and for women in particular. For Samia, the use of the veil, as well as the adoption of a more Islamic clothing and regular praying (*salat*), relates to a disciplinary process for the composition of a virtuous self. This process shows that religious values and practices are also of different importance in different phases of one's life.

Considering the influence of the Aristotelian conception of habitus in Islamic thought by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111) and Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), Mahmood describes how habitus refers to a conscious effort to reorient will through an agreement between internal motivations, external actions and emotional states, obtained through repeated practice of virtuous acts. Mahmood conceives the veil as a disciplinary practice that constitutes devout subjectivities, recognizing the agency of women whose action is aimed at building a virtuous habitus.

Conclusion

This chapter engages in a dialogue with and contributes to the literature that seeks to break with the homogeneous narrative about refugees as bodies that need to be saved, and problematizes certain humanitarian discourses. Samia rejects the expectations (being a suffering *hijab*-wearing victim) and instead insists on real support. Her narrative highlights the female and refugee agencies and becomes visible to the similarities between the humanitarian workers' speeches and the Syrian Baath regime discourse of secularism and rejec-

tion of Islamic clothing. Mahmood's (2005) concept of agency is important here because it was built from women who do not conform to liberal and secular projects and it criticizes the dichotomies of tradition and modernity as well as the humanitarian rhetoric about the "real" Syrian refugee.

This chapter also offers an ethnographic contribution to academic production on refugees from the Syrian conflict in Brazil, challenging the image of refugee women as eternally vulnerable or oppressed by their "traditional culture". Refugee women's narratives defy the humanitarian workers discourses that reproduce stereotypes and reduce the complexity of the refugee experience to a "cultural problem" by treating women as a unified whole with no reference to class, education, devotion or other relevant factors. The main goal is to expose and problematize tensions between the agency and "refugee regimes" based on the refugee's experiences with the humanitarian workers. This chapter sought to confront culturalist explanations, often mobilized by "refugee regimes", with the Syrian social and political context, women's social class, their desires and distinct modernity projects.

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