

8. The Construction of Syrian Women in the Arab Television News

This chapter provides a deeper analysis of the main findings from the previous chapters. In *Section 8.1*, I explain how violence against women was normalized in Arab television reporting. In *Section 8.2*, I discuss the role of the expert in the television news by referring to two Latin terminologies on the act of witnessing; *testis* and *superstes*. I then explain how the humanitarian and personal testimonies in the television reporting were constructed with consideration to the aesthetic dimension of the camera. In *Section 8.3*, I juxtapose the notion of agency with the theoretical concept of performativity. I use Saba Mahmoud's ethnographic study on the women's piety movement in the mosques of Cairo as an analogy, and draw meanings from the power dynamics of shame, dignity, and fear that were constructed the television news. In this chapter, I distance myself from the television representations in order to provide a deeper understanding of how agency, in the context of the Syrian conflict, could be read beyond liberal and post-structuralist perspectives.

8.1 Normalizing Violence and Reaffirming Victimhood in the Television News

Meltem Ahiska (2016) addresses a significant problem: "Why does violence against women continue unimpeded despite the seemingly high awareness of it, and why is it normalized in society?" (p. 212). In a case study on violence against women in Turkey, Ahiska reflects on Butler's (2004) notions in *Precarious Life* to discuss the notion of victimhood in media representations. According to Butler (2004) there are two distinct forms of normative power:

“...one operates through producing a symbolic identification of the face with the inhuman, foreclosing our apprehension of the human in the scene; the other works through radical effacement, so that there never was a human, there never was a life, and no murder has, therefore, even taken place” (p. 147).

Butler’s first distinct form of normative power refers to the violence against women that gets very little, if any, media attention.¹ Butler’s second distinct form of normative power exemplifies how mainstream media cover death during conflict by only reporting *statistically* on the number of people killed. By framing the killing of someone as just another number, the viewer is usually presented with a faceless image of the victim. This hinders the possibility of sympathizing with the killed or injured individual, as the media narrative leaves no possibility for mourning.

Though the second distinct form of normative power could not be traced in the news reports, the research found that a third distinct form of normative power is established in the Arab television news. This form appears when “the faces of women are neither rendered as *inhuman* [...] nor completely effaced; in fact, they are highly mediatized in sentimental ways” (Ahiska, 2016, p. 213). The news reports surveyed in Chapter 4 constantly represented images of Syrian women who had been exposed to regime violence and gender-based violence. These representations emphasized, reproduced and confirmed the Syrian women’s victimhood. Furthermore, the television reporting embraced sentimentalism as a way to appeal to the viewer’s emotions. Subsequently the Syrian women’s victimhood became associated with gender difference and their suffering became naturalized in the news. Ahiska (2016) explains how,

“the representations that evoke the victimhood of women cancel the multiple temporalities of vulnerability—that is, how women, as subjects, have lived, desired, and struggled differently through the experience of violence. When no desire for ...living differently is allowed for women in these representations, victimhood is petrified and fixed in time, and hence normalized” (p. 213).

1 For instance, in this research project, I found that the television news reports from *Al Jazeera*, *Al Arabiya* and *Al Aan* did not report on the groups of Syrian women that fell victim to honor killings during the Syrian conflict.

The news reports from the Arab television stations implied that, in times of conflict, Syrian women are destined to be victims of violence. These discursive constructions in the news not only reproduce and normalize violence against women in society; they also enable the media narrative to establish the representations of the instances of violence to a certain time period (during the Syrian conflict), without any context and reference to the past (pre-conflict Syria), nor the future (after the violence has taken place).

Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that representations of Syrian child brides, desperate mothers, and the economically struggling displaced Syrian families usually lacked contextualization to both the internal and external factors that shape and heighten their states of vulnerability and impoverishment. Another finding demonstrated that men, as actual and potential perpetrators in the child marriage cases, were rendered invisible in the news. The lack of contextualization and the absence of the men, as “sovereign norm setters,” in the media narrative reduced the likelihood of generating a sense of “dissonance” among the viewers. Although the images of the child brides were personified in the news, the images of personification did not necessarily translate into humanization.

In the following section, I focus on a different set of findings, specifically the news reports that perpetuated a media narrative that was heavily influenced by a humanitarian discourse. As I survey the findings, I ask the following question: Does the personification of the television media images translate to humanization?

8.2 Humanitarian Reasoning and Personal Testimonies in the Television News

Georgiou (2012) asserted that news production, media content, and the consumption of the media message need to be examined in the context of gender as well as migration. These factors reflect on “pre-existing socio-political realities” and “contribute to framing meanings of the self, the *Other*, the society we live in” (Georgiou 2012, p. 791-792). She claimed that:

“The institutional basis of the media informs the ways representations are framed, while regulation of the media and of everyday life shape the context and limits of their consumption [...]. Media power does not just trickle down from the producers through media representations to consumers. It is

a social process 'reproduced in the details of what social actors do and say' (Couldry 2000, p. 4) and is more complex than a lineal model of media transmission implies" (Georgiou 2012, 792).

A more recent study by Georgiou (2018) found that digital "media systematically spoke about refugees and migrants, but they rarely appeared themselves as narrators of their stories" (p. 45). Meyer, Sanger, and Michaels (2017) showed that mainstream television stations reporting on the Syrian conflict mainly referred to humanitarian workers, as they are able to provide immediate information as well as their own expertise on the situation.

The findings in this research project showed that the news reports, which included themes on everyday resilience among displaced Syrian women, interviewed humanitarian personnel working in the refugee camps. This indicates that the partisan entity of the television news station was not only influenced by the media ownership of the station, but also by the experts that were interviewed in the news reports. In this case, the humanitarian workers served as a reputable expert and significantly participated in the social process of framing the television representations of displaced Syrian women.

In these news reports, the humanitarian workers served as witnesses to the scenes depicted in the news, by providing their testimony on the subjects observed, that are the displaced Syrian communities. Didier Fassin (2012) asserted that in Latin, there are two terms used for the word "witness;" *testis* and *superstes*. The former is a "third-party" or an external witness who is qualified to provide a neutral observation "that forms the grounds for hearing and believing him, including in legal proceedings" (p. 204). For instance, in Chapter 5 the lawyer Nour Al Immam appeared as a *testis*; she gave her legal testimony on the cases of child marriage in Jordan. As for the latter, Fassin (2012) asserted that *superstes* is the witness "who lived through the ordeal" and represents the "the victims of the event," and thus are the survivors (p. 204). The *superstes* in this case embody the displaced Syrian women who survived the war and are now striving to make ends meet. Fassin (2012) stated that the *superstes* "has become a figure of our time" (p. 205). Having experienced the war and having experienced living in exile, the *superstes* is able to tell their story and their experiences with "the highest guarantee of the objectivity of the testimony" (Fassin 2012, p. 205).

In the context of these two terms, the humanitarian workers in the news reports fall under neither of these two categories. Their role as witnesses, rather, lies somewhere between *testis* and *superstes*. The humanitarian workers

were part of the events presented in the news reports. They engaged with the people in the refugee camps where the humanitarian work was taking place. Hence, their testimony on the plight of displaced Syrian women did not really come from a third-party position, namely the external position of the *testis*. They were not a *superstes* either, because the statements and testimonies they made were not about their own survival but, rather, about the survival of the people with whom they worked and interacted on a daily basis. Fassin (2012) explains the role of the humanitarian worker. He writes:

“Through a sort of reversal of the traditional roles, they occupy the structural place of the *testis* but employ the reasoning of the *superstes*. In other words, they privilege experience over observation, but this experience is the experience of others” (Fassin 2012, p. 206).

Therefore, the humanitarian workers’ testimony is based on what they have seen first-hand, while being on site with the *superstes*.

Having differentiated between the three parties, what can these notions and comparisons tell us about the humanitarian discourse present in the television news? Fassin (2012) asks: “What political work of subjectivation does humanitarian testimony produce?” (p. 202). In this framework, the term subjectivation refers to the way the subjects are described by the humanitarian worker in the news reports.

To reflect on Fassin’s question, I first refer to Judith Butler’s notions about *ambivalence* and *subjection*. In her book “*Psychic Life of Power*,” Judith Butler (1997) draws from Louis Althusser’s (1971) notion of interpellation to describe the site in which the subject emerges. ‘The site’ refers to the power relation between language or discourse. This appears in the dominant media narrative that *interpellates* the individual (e.g., the displaced Syrian women), hence bringing them into subjectivation. Butler (1997) asserts that the subject is hailed into existence by language or discourse bringing them to an ambivalent site in which the subjectivation takes place. In other words, the subject is formed in this ambivalent site, thus revealing “the very condition of [the subject’s] existence and the trajectory of its desire.” (Butler 1997, p.2). On this basis, Butler claims that the discursive production of the social subject “consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse that [the subjects] never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains [their] agency” (Butler 1997, p. 2).

Having explained the relationship between subject and discourse, how can we further interpret the humanitarian testimony in the television media narratives and the work it produces on the subject (e.g., displaced Syrian

women)? Granted, the person providing the humanitarian testimony – who is neither a *testis* nor a *superstes* – serves as a witness and contributes to the production of the news story. This research project demonstrated that the humanitarian worker's testimonies described the displaced Syrian women as victims of war, who are in need humanitarian assistance in order to survive. The news reports also represented the vocational and cash-for-work programs as the only solution to the displaced Syrian women's plight². Furthermore, resilience was constructed as a 'skill' that displaced Syrian women have gained through their participation in the vocational trainings and are now employing in their daily life in exile. Thus, in those representations, the act of resilience is nuanced. The nuance appears when the humanitarian discourse in the news disassociates the Syrian women's acts of resilience from their states of vulnerability. Furthermore, these representations reflected on the idea of how the state of crisis lived by these groups of Syrian women has become the norm. The television reporting showed that many displaced Syrian women found themselves depending on their own self-resilience in order to survive this state of crisis. Thus, their resilience became framed as their only source of security.

In her study on *resilience humanitarianism*, Dorothea Hillhorst (2018) found that:

“The resilience paradigm is as much based on selective understandings, foregrounding particular properties of social realities, while ignoring others. Equally, it consists of a set of ill-tested assumptions that seem to reduce the multiplicity of social reality to a singular discourse” (p. 10).

In the context this research, the humanitarian testimony in the Arab television news provided a “highly selective views of reality.” Because parts of the representations were based on the stories the humanitarian experts *chose* to tell, their selectiveness in the humanitarian workers' testimonies has led to decontextualization of the displaced Syrian women's states of vulnerability. Furthermore, the findings showed a number of news reports depicting displaced Syrian women talking about their own living conditions and experiences in exile. In other words, the *superstes* was interviewed as the witnesses to their own situation, providing their own testimony. By telling their own

2 A common approach used by *resilience humanitarianism* that trains people affected by disaster or crisis on 'how to be self-resilient'.

stories on screen, did the Syrian women's testimonies better contextualize their states of vulnerability?

Drawing on Louis Althusser's doctrine of interpellation, Butler (1997) asserts that the subject is hailed into existence and subjectivation through the act of interpellation, an act that occurs through the matrices of power and discourse. In this framework, Butler (1997) asks the following: "Why does this subject turn toward the voice of law, and what is the effect of such a turn in inaugurating a social subject?" (p. 5). I want to rephrase Butler's question and, instead of why, ask *how* the subject turn towards the voice of law? In other words what stories (or parts of a story) does the subject tell, not tell, or choose (or not choose) to talk about? Moreover, does "the subject lose [her]self by telling the story about [her]self" (Butler 1997, p.11)? Fassin (2012) asked a slightly different question: "What [part of the] truth are they trying to make [her] tell, or to tell through [her]?"³ (p. 202).

Ni'maa Al-Ahmad, a Syrian mother from the countryside surrounding a Syrian city of Hama and who now lives in Lebanon, was interviewed in a news report published by *Al Aan* on June 7, 2015 (in Chapter 6, Section 6.5.2). In this interview, Ni'maa narrated her own story as a single mother, who sought refuge in Lebanon for herself and her children. In the interview, she explained how she resorted to cleaning homes to make ends meet. Throughout the news report analysis, I found that Ni'maa's visibility was not influenced by a humanitarian discourse. Her state of vulnerability was not overshadowed by a narrative that focused on the victimization of the subject – as a way to promote the NGO's humanitarian initiatives in place to help the displaced persons. Ni'maa's visibility resembled that of the groups of displaced Syrian women working alongside people from the host community and other jobs require long commutes. Hilhorst (2018) explained that the displaced peoples who live outside the refugee camps, become indistinguishable from other, including local, members of the urban poor. Hence, they are not directly approached by the humanitarian organizations, who cannot easily locate or distinguish them.

In her interview, Ni'maa described the socioeconomic aspects that shape her daily life as a single mother living in exile. Her role as a *superstes* allowed her to contextualize her state of vulnerability. For instance, she talked about how she was exposed to sexual harassment at the work place and about

3 In the context of this research, the pronoun "they" refers to the journalists that have interviewed displaced Syrian women, as a source of testimony for their news story.

her financial struggles to make ends meet. The representations underscored Ni'maa's suffering.

Fida also gave her personal testimony in the same news report. Unlike Ni'maa, Fida provided little 'evaluative content' on the events that shape her experience as a displaced Syrian. The news report did not directly ask her about the cause of her vulnerability, specifically as a displaced Syrian woman living in Tripoli, Lebanon. In other words, her personal testimony did include little information about the actual and current external (and internal) world she inhabits. Nonetheless, like Ni'maa's, Fida's suffering was at the center of her visibility.

Chouliaraki (2013) explains how news production uses "a ritual of dramatic action" involving "those who act at the scene of suffering and those who watch from a distance" (p. 149). In this setting, the *suffering* (as a form affect or emotion) communicated by the *superstes* (e.g., Fida) on screen, becomes the only source of authenticity in the news story. This reveals the aesthetic choice that was made during the news production. The passionate "I" in the personal testimonies becomes part of "specific combinations of language, image and sound that do not simply reflect on an external world but render this world a sensible and meaningful reality for those who engage with it" (Chouliaraki 2013, p. 152).

By looking at the 'constructed' nature of the personal testimony in the television news, we can question the forms of reflexivity that the subject experiences when encountered by the camera and approached by the interviewer. Butler (2005) writes: "Telling the truth about oneself comes at a price, and the price of that telling is the suspension of a critical relation to the truth regime in which one lives" (p. 74). When approached by an interviewer, I am asked to give a "narrative account of myself because I am spoken to, because someone insists that I address myself to whoever addresses me, and thus form myself as a reflexive being before the Other" (Ong-Van-Cung 2011, p. 149).

Thus, the questions I would like to raise here are: What is the *superstes* aware of when she is being interviewed? Is she aware that she is experiencing subjectivation, that she is being framed by the aesthetic dimension of the camera, that she is being interpellated by the gaze of the interviewer and vice versa?⁴ What is she feeling – moment to moment – during the interview, and how do these moments affect, disturb, or influence the personal narrative she is telling? What happens when she reflects on her own emotions or senses?

4 Subjectivation is the process by which one becomes a subject of discourse.

Does her speech change? Does she change? Donovan O. Schaefer (2019) asks: “What happens when someone asks you how you’re doing – do you change?”

I reflect more on these notions and insights in the following section by posing questions on agency, resistance, and power.

8.3 Questions on Agency and the Dynamics of Shame, Fear, and Dignity in the Arab Television News

Butler (1997) looks at subjectivation by posing a very insightful question. She asks: “If power works not merely to dominate or oppress existing subjects, but also forms subjects, what is this formation?” (Butler 1997, p. 18). This question proposes, from a Foucauldian perspective on power, that the body is both productive and subjective. The dominant media discourse in the television news is a form of power that hailed different groups of Syrian women into their role as ‘mothers of the nation.’ The subjects are subject to the process of subjectivation under this form of power. Foucault (1982) suggests that “power is a situation we are always invested in, even when we resist it” (from Schaefer 2019, p. 31). Thus, the (displaced) Syrian women can resist this very subjectivation, but she is most definitely invested in it.

Building on these notions of Foucauldian power, I draw parallels between this research’s case study and Saba Mahmoud’s (2005) ideas on the pious subject. I use this analogy to contest a common approach to the understanding of agency, which is the idea “that the only valid thing women can do with conservative power formations is resist them” (Schaefer 2019, p. 59), an approach initially embraced by liberal and post-structural feminist perspectives.

Based on her fieldwork in Cairo on the female mosque movement in the mid-1990’s, Saba Mahmoud (2005) presented a case study on groups of women who were prompting an Islamic revival from their local mosques across the city. Her analysis on Islamist cultural politics provided insights on the notion of agency, as well as a critique to certain structures of western feminism that failed to recognize Muslim women’s own formation of agency within conservative movements; e.g., the revival of Islam in the female mosque movement. What I found particularly valuable in Mahmoud’s study was her approach to reading agency through the capacity of action. Her rejection of reading agency “as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination” (Mahmoud 2005, p. 18) pointed out certain shortcomings in the repertoire of Enlightenment liberalism, with which many liberal feminists align themselves, particularly

in the context of Islam and Islamic practices such as the hijab. The limits of this approach arises when “the liberal feminist position could only affirm that women who revived conservative forms of Islam were mindlessly amplifying their own oppression” (Mahmoud 2005, from Schaefer 2019, p. 56).

Mahmoud (2005) asserted that the colonial political project is replicated in feminist thought when western values are perceived as universal, dismissing any perspective that falls outside of these values or does not conform to this project. In Chapter 7, I developed my analysis by referring to Mahmoud’s ideas. I suggested reconsidering the role of motherhood, and proposed exploring what this role could achieve beyond its national, patriarchal, and stereotypical gender function. Looking at agency as a “capacity for action” rather than a “resistance to relations of domination,” I took Mahmoud’s case study as an analogy of my work. While Mahmoud (2006) built her ideas on “pious subjects of the women’s mosque movement” (p. 36), I built my argument on the social and political position of matriarchy as an institution that is inhabited and cherished by displaced Syrian women.⁵

I approached the notion of agency by looking at the ways displaced Syrian women may “devise their own formations of agency within the circumstances of their own situation” (Schaefer 2019, p. 57). I used the role of motherhood as an example. Although the role of motherhood may reinforce oppressive social and patriarchal norms, matriarchy – as an institution – nevertheless can provide women with the opportunity to acquire maternal control in their domestic spheres. In transnational contexts, in which Syrian families have been or are being ravaged by war, many Syrian women may pave their way through life by acquiring security and dominance through their matriarchal roles. Therefore, one should be aware that “what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressive point of view, may actually be a form of agency” (Mahmoud 2005, p. 15). Building on Mahmoud’s thoughts, Schaefer (2019) suggested that, in order to avoid “pluralizing agency,” we ought to resist “focusing on individual agency as good in itself” (p. 57). But what does that really imply?

To reflect on these ideas formulated above, I refer back to Mahmoud’s case study. The mosque movement in Cairo developed as “a response to the perception that religious knowledge – as a means of structuring daily conduct –

5 In her ethnographic case study, she looked at the act of Islamic veiling and the forms of piety and Islamic revival women practiced in the “historically male-centered character of mosques and Islamic pedagogy” (Mahmoud 2006, p. 34).

had become increasingly marginalized under modern structures of secular governance” (Mahmoud, 2005, p. 4). When Egypt was being ruled by the military regime of Husni Mubarak – a U.S. backed government with secularist policy – the country witnessed a growth in a popular secular opposition. The rivalry between the Islamic and the secular was more than religious entities resisting a secular way of life. This tension was primarily political, as the elite ruling class of Mubarak was enforcing liberal secular values on economically oppressed Egyptians, the same demographic group of Egyptians who participated in the mosque movement – namely, the female preachers at the mosque as religious bodies. Here, “the return to Islamism is, in part, an expression of defiance, an embodied gesture in a global affective economy that develops the dignity of the religious bodies involved” (Schaefer 2019, p. 60).

Thus, “the need to assert dignity or to repudiate shame” becomes the driving factor and a motivational force behind the affective self-labor of the female preachers in the mosque movement. Mahmoud (2005) examined the participants’ emotional states and how they were cultivating the virtues of shyness and modesty. She found that:

“Among the mosque participants, individual efforts towards self-realization are aimed not so much at discovering one’s ‘true’ desires and feelings, or at establishing a personal relationship with God, but at honing one’s rational and emotional capacities so as to approximate the exemplary model of the pious self” (Mahmoud 2005, p. 31).

For instance, Mahmoud described one of her participants, Amal, as *not* naturally shy, but someone who put affective self-labor in cultivating shyness and modesty, as a way to practice *al-hayā* in the mosque movement.⁶ Amal said:

“I realized that *al-hayā* was among the good deeds..., and given my natural lack of shyness... I had to make or create it first. I realized that making... it yourself is not hypocrisy, and that eventually your inside learns to have *al-hayā* too” (Mahmoud 2005, p. 156)

This is how Mahmoud observed those repeated bodily acts as emotional capacities practiced by the participants to model the pious self.

Furthermore, Mahmoud affirmed that there is no universal model for agency and that feminist scholarship needs to provide the analytics to read

6 “To practice *al-hayā* means to be diffident, modest, and able to feel and enact shyness” (Mahmoud 2006, p. 51).

agency in multiple forms. Schaefer (2019) built his ideas about Mahmoud's approach by giving a further suggestion that "it is not the individual body that has agency, but the affects moving through the body" (p. 60). In other words, Mahmoud's participants became religious bodies – in the same sense that I may become a secular body – through the affects, emotions, and sensibilities that are cultivated and self-labored in their bodily performances. In other words, "they did not coolly select affects in order to become religious" (Schaefer 2019, p. 61), just like I do not casually choose to feel certain emotions and sensibilities in order to become secular. My secular self (as with the pious self) is shaped through repeated bodily acts that produce affective self-labor. Here, the repeated bodily acts with affective self-labor are a form of performativity. In this context, performativity does not exactly refer to Butler's understanding of doing or undoing gender through performance; rather, it is more closely related to Deleuzian understanding of *becoming*. It refers to the "individual and collective struggles to come to terms with events and intolerable conditions and to shake loose, to whatever degree possible, from determinants and definitions" (Deleuze 1995, Biehl and Locke 2010, p. 317). Hence, performativity is driven by struggle in this context.

Granted, the Syrian woman's experiences during the conflict are directly tied to her struggle. The news report analysis showed that the Syrian woman's visibility in the Arab television news was constructed through the dynamics of shame, dignity, and fear. In the reporting, their experiences during the conflict were shaped by her suffering and hardships. Building on these findings and theoretical approaches, how does the Syrian woman's struggle appear as instances or attempts to overthrow fear, reassert dignity, and negate shame?⁷

I reflect on this question by referring to the issue of high birth rates among the Syrian displaced communities and the notion of "sexual pleasure as a luxury."⁸ A number of Lebanese newspaper articles discussed the soaring birth rates among the displaced Syrian population in Lebanon (Asharq Al-Awsat 2019; Lebanon 24 2019), and almost entirely linked these high birth rates to

7 Here I look at the experience of deposing fear, reasserting dignity, and negating shame as a performance that takes place in a plural form rather than a singular form, the same way Schaefer perceived Deleuze's *becoming* through a collective struggle rather than an individual struggle.

8 Rola Yasmine's talk during a panel discussion on "Sexual Rights and Human Rights: What is Sexual Pleasure?" held at the American University of Beirut in December 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASx9Xs21LYQ&t=32775>

unemployment and poverty (Jalkh 2016). Most of these media narratives neglected the fact that sexual intercourse is a basic human need and an accessible “form of free entertainment” available to all humans (Seghaier 2018). The reoccurring question among NGOs, government institutions, and the Lebanese media outlets is: Why are the Syrian refugees conceiving so many children while living in such precarious circumstances?

In 2016, the French-speaking Lebanese newspaper *L'Orient-Le Jour* revealed that the annual number of births among the displaced Syrians in Lebanon was 40,000, with a population of over a million and a half in the host country. In comparison, the number of births among Lebanese citizens in Lebanon stood at around 70,000 per year, with a total Lebanese population of just 4 million. The newspaper article linked these high birth rates among the displaced population to the lack of education, ignorance about contraception, early/child marriage, and polygamy in Islam.⁹ The article ended with a closing statement on how the high number of births among the displaced population could perhaps be a sort of adverse reaction to war and death. It featured a statement by a displaced Syrian woman in Lebanon who was asked by a social worker about why she engages in sexual intercourse during her marriage when she and her family live in such dire economic conditions. The Syrian woman's response was: “Life already has abused us enough with its share of injustice and suffering. Why do they want to deprive us of our only remaining pleasure?”

In fact, this common media narrative, which criticizes the high birth rates among marginalized social groups in Lebanon, did not start with the onset of the Syrian conflict. It can be traced back to the outbreak of the Israeli-Lebanese conflict, which lasted from 1970 until 2006. The narrative referred to the high birth rates among the marginalized Lebanese Shia Muslims, who had settled in Beirut after being displaced from their hometowns in South Lebanon. This exodus was prompted by the ongoing massacres, such as the shelling of Qana d by the Israeli Forces in April 1996 and other violent conflicts, such as the July War in 2006 between Hezbollah and Israel. In the context of the 2006 war in Lebanon, I have a poignant memory of my grandmother saying: “They are always killing us, and they almost took away my son, and here I am, (...) other mothers like me will conceive ten more children for every son the Israelis take from them!” My grandmother was a Lebanese woman from

9 The Islamic marital jurisprudence allows Muslim men to practice polygamy; it grants them the right to have up to four wives simultaneously.

South Lebanon who fled to Beirut with her family because of the ongoing conflict on the Israeli-Lebanese border. Her words somehow embodied a death-defying struggle stemming from the experience of violence, troubles, hardships, shame, and fear.

In this setting, many questions come to mind: How is sex among the poor and displaced populations portrayed? Does the media coverage of the high birth rate among displaced Syrian families imply that pleasure is not an entitlement of these communities because of their social status or economic class? Should sexual pleasure not exist among the impoverished? Is sexual intercourse among poor populations seen as something repulsive and immoral, as opposed to a natural form of human pleasure? Is sexual intercourse seen as a luxury of those who can afford to have children? Do the media sufficiently address how women do not have access to contraception, healthcare, as well as access to safe and affordable abortions in countries like Lebanon? Is the sexual intercourse of a displaced Syrian woman with her husband, which results in her pregnancy, seen as a submissive act of marital duty or as a technical act within a marriage, rather than a moment of embracing desire and intimacy?

But a more significant question in the context of this case study is: Is not the idea of building a family based on the idea of restoring dignity in the face of an oppressive power that has destroyed your family? Is it not a way of expelling shame and nurturing and sustaining dignity? In this context, shame is the result “of relatively high toxicity... it strikes deepest into the heart of man... it is felt as a sickness of the soul which leaves man naked, defeated, alienated, and lacking dignity” (Tomkins 1995, p. 148). On the other hand, dignity serves as ‘psychological oxygen.’ In this context, has dignity not become crucial to one’s survival, a strong form of affect that functions as an emotional investment in the face of despair, overthrowing fear (the fear of death) and expelling shame?

In the following chapter, I summarize the main findings of this research project and contextualize them with older and recent literature on the topics.