6. Displaced Syrian Women at Work: Everyday Resilience and the Neoliberal Subject

6.1 Introduction

There is no doubt that the Syrian conflict has changed the women's role in the workforce. After years of violent conflict, many family male members have been killed and injured, others have joined the military, or gone missing. As a result, women are taking on more responsibilities and are the "breadwinners in almost one in three Syrian households" (Hilton, 2019). In fact, many Syrian women are starting to take jobs that were predominantly reserved for men. The number of female-led Syrian households has drastically increased both inside and outside of Syria. While many Syrian women have become more financially independent, this does not necessarily imply that they have acquired equal opportunity (Hilton, 2019), nor that they live in healthy and fair conditions.

In pre-conflict Syria, Syrian women were marginalized in the workforce. Although the civil and commercial codes adopted in Syria in 1949 gave women the right to have full control over their own assets and property, as well as manage their own businesses, there remain contradictory laws that permit men in Syria to forbid women from these entitlements. For instance, there is a penal code that allows the male spouse to prohibit his wife from working outside the household. This penal code heightens the social barriers imposed on women, confining them to their domestic spheres and their household and childcare duties and limiting their participation in many job sectors or their chances to seek work outside home in a broader sense. Nonetheless, there are many job sectors that are dominated by women in Syria. For example, women prform90 percent of the jobs in agriculture, but rarely receive ownership of land and machines. The education and health care sectors also have a large number of female participants, but this does not necessarily imply that there

is equal pay in these sectors. Syrian men generally earn higher salaries than women (Hilton, 2019), while female coded jobs are rarely valued.

After the outbreak of the conflict, 80 percent of the Syrian population started living below the poverty line. The low employment rate left 78 percent of the young Syrian population jobless. As a result, the work opportunities for Syrian women became restricted and expanded at the same time. With the widespread of gender-based violence and the patriarchal social norms, the Syrian women's mobility became restricted. This caused a drop in their economic participation. However, a study done by the Global Gender Gap (2015) revealed that Syrian women's work did not entirely disappear, as many displaced Syrian women started taking up informal jobs that did not require a long commute. Nonetheless, the number of working women from the displaced Syrian communities remains very low. The female-led households in these communities earn less than the male-led households (Khalaf, Asad, & Tawil, 2016). For instance, in Lebanon, "Syrian women earn on average roughly half of what their male counterparts do and only a quarter of the Lebanese minimum wage" (Hilton, 2019). Hence, many Syrian families in Lebanon are not able to secure their most fundamental human needs. This has led many Syrian children to leave school and enter the child labor force, whilst many Syrian women have become targets of sexual harassment perpetrated by landlords and aid workers (Hilton, 2019).

Furthermore, the Syrian displaced communities continue to face challenges policy implications. An article by *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy* (2017) revealed that:

> "Syrian refugees have experienced significant barriers to working in host countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey due to legislations that restricts their right to work. To gain a one-year work permit in Jordan, refugees must be sponsored by an employer, and there are quotas for Syrian workers that prevent them from crowding out Jordanian laborers […] Turkey uses similar employer-sponsored work permits, but they can only be issued after six months of residence, leaving refugees vulnerable in those first pivotal months and, as of April 2017, only four percent of refugee work permits had been issued to Syrian women."

A more recent report from *Humans Right Watch* (2019) asserted that:

> "[In Lebanon] only 1,733 Syrians have valid work permits out of the nearly one million Syrians registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for

> Refugees. Even the number of refugees is now unknown, since the government has not allowed UNHCR to register new arrivals from Syria since 2015. Few of the refugees […] had valid legal residency, and some had not registered with UNHCR. The high cost of getting a Lebanese sponsor for legal residency [is] a barrier to renewing their legal residency, along with General Security's annual $200 renewal fee, which is still often required even though the government has officially waived the fee."

Therefore, many Syrian women continue to face challenges because of gender inequality, patriarchal norms, and employment discrimination based on national origin and sex. The financial burdens they face to qualify as "legal" residents in the host countries leaves them more vulnerable than ever.

After contextualizing the history and current state of Syrian women in the workforce, I explore how Arab television news represented displaced Syrian women at work during the Syrian conflict. Before I start the analysis, I provide a brief description of how I obtained the news report samples for this chapter.

6.2 Research Data

I surveyed nine news stories that depict internally and externally displaced Syrian women in (post)war adjustment settings. I obtained the samples of the news reports by using the search engine of the television stations' YouTube channels. I typed in the following keywords: *Syrian women, Syrian conflict, resilience, work, cash-for-work, humanitarian aid, vocational programs, survival techniques, coping mechanisms, protection,* and *refugee camps.* During the early stages of the sample collection, I found 22 stories that included the notion of resilience: one report by *SANA*, six reports by *Al Aan*, ten reports by *Al Jazeera*, and five reports by *Al Arabiya*. Twenty of the 22 news reports showed externally displaced Syrian women participating in vocational and cash-for-work programs. Seven of the news reports displayed the participants cooking, nine of the news reports showed the participants sewing and knitting, two of the news reports displayed the participants making soap, one of the news reports presented a Syrian woman working in the hairdressing profession, and another news report showed Syrian refugee women participating in a greenhouse project.

Throughout the analysis process, I decided to re-sample the 22 news reports that I had previously collected. Nine news reports out of the 22 were se-

lected non-randomly by using purposive sampling: one news report by *SANA*, five news reports by *Al Aan*, one news report by *Al Jazeera*, and two by *Al Arabiya*. The chosen news reports included speech acts by the participants (displaced Syrian women), the organizers of the programs (the humanitarian workers), and other social workers. Among the original number of reports, I found only one news report published by *SANA*, an Arab television station that is controlled by the Syrian regime. This news story is examined in *Section 6.5.1* and depicts an internally displaced Syrian woman working as a tailor in Syria. *Section 6.5.2* focuses on the news reports published by *Al Aan*, *Al Jazeera*, and *Al Arabiya*, which are Arab television stations with a political agenda critical of the Syrian regime.

In the selected news reports, the Arab television news mainly depicted externally displaced Syrian women working in Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey. These groups of women were shown participating in vocational and cash-for-work programs funded by the UN and other NGOs. Another group of displaced Syrian women are depicted participating in other types of blue-collar jobs such as sewing, plumbing, and housecleaning. The table below lists the news reports in more detail.

In the television reporting, the notion of resilience appears as part of the representations. Therefore, my analysis in this chapter focuses on the symbolic function of resilience among different groups of Syrian women, who, I argue, have been rendered as *good resilient subjects* by the Arab television news. The good resilient subject is a term I borrow from Sara Bracke (2016). It describes how resilience in neoliberal societies is perceived a desired good or a prize the subalterns seeks in their daily lives in order to recover from crises. By examining how the Arab television news depicted displaced Syrian women practicing daily forms of resilience, I explore whether the dominant discourse has reinforced this particular understanding of the notion. The questions I explore in this chapter are:

1. What is the symbolic function of resilience in the Arab television news, and what does it tell us about the representations of displaced Syrian women throughout Syrian conflict?
2. Are there any patterns of speech practiced by the displaced Syrian women that challenge the dominant media narratives?

Table 7. The news reports in the context of resilience

Report	Television Station	Title of the News Report	Duration	Date Published	Chapter Section
1	SANA	Zeinab,a Syrian Woman who mastered the art of life	2:57	April 7, 2018	6.5.1
2	Al Jazeera	Syrian Refugee Women Participate in an Agricultural Project in Sulaimaniya	2:10	December 22, 2015	6.5.2
3	Al Arabiya	The Craft of Sewing Comforts Syrian Refugee Women in Zaatari Camp	2:55	December 25, 2013	6.5.2
4	Al Aan	Syrian Refugee Women in Jordan Create Handmade Products to Support Their Families	4:37	July 8, 2014	6.5.2
5	Al Aan	Syrian Women Make and Sell Wool Clothes to Earn a Living in Turkey	3:55	May 2, 2014	6.5.2
6	Al Aan	Syrian Women Work in a Sewing Workshop in Deir Ezzor	2:53	November 13, 2013	6.5.2
7	Al Arabiya	A Syrian Refugee Lost her Husband in the War and is Now Supporting her Family	2:39	June 12, 2016	6.5.2
8	Al Aan	Syrian Refugee Women Defy Society and Work as Plumbers in Jordan	2:50	May 1, 2017	6.5.2
9	Al Aan	Syrian Women During Times of Asylum	15:24	June 9, 2015	6.5.1 & 6.5.2

6.3 Analysis

6.3.1 Talking to Good Resilient Subjects: Displaced Syrian Women Erasing the Past or Painting it through their Work

On April 7, 2018, *SANA (The Syrian Arab News Agency)* reported on Zeinab, a Syrian woman who lived through the war and siege in Eastern Ghouta. The news reporter described Zeinab:

> *"Zeinab is a war victim who refuses to surrender to the prevailing circumstances. A woman who has protected her family and prevented her family members from engaging with terrorist groups. These terrorist groups have forced Zeinab and her family to live under siege for almost 7 years."*

The news reporter did not mention the violent measures and attacks the Syrian regime has committed in Syria and no differentiation was made between ISIS members and the members of the opposition or the rebel groups. Instead, he painted these fighting groups with a single brush – insinuating that whoever opposes the Syrian regime's authority was perceived as a terrorist.

Zeinab was interviewed by the news reporter. She said:

> *"We never left the apartment; we always tried to avoid any contact with them. We lived inside a tunnel; it was all muddy. We had nothing, no food. Today we came out of the tunnel. It is as if we came out of our grave. It was as if we were living in a cave for such a long time! All we wanted was to get out! When we came out, we saw the Syrian army by our side, I could not describe this moment. Most of us started crying."*

Zeinab's speech indicates that the arrival of the Syrian army came as a shocking, yet liberating moment that somehow took away all the suffering she and her family had experienced. Her speech implied that the men of the Syrian Arab Army were the saviors of the people, who fought the terrorists that have started the war in their homeland. This indicates that Zeinab perceives the Syrian Arab Army as the warriors who saved the people from all the suffering the terrorists had inflicted on them. The news report only disclosed speech acts that depict the Syrian Arab Army as the liberator of the Syrian people and from the brutality and violence of the so-called 'terrorists.' The news reporter did not interview displaced women in areas held under the Syrian Opposition. These groups of women most likely perceived the Syrian Arab Army as the oppressor rather than the liberator.

The reporter continued to describe Zeinab's resilience throughout the war:

> *"Zeinab arrived 20 days ago to the temporary settlements in Herjallah, in Darayyah, Riwaaq. It was a great surprise that she has become an owner of a small business. This helped her excel in her career as a tailor. This makes her a role model to others, because of how quickly she adapted to the new living circumstances."*

Zeinab said:

> *"I want to secure a living so I can live differently than the way I lived during the war. Sometimes I do services for free. My life is not just about securing food and drinks. My life is to also be able to work for my husband and children. Hamdellah, everything is available, and being offered. But at the end of the day, as human beings, we want to have our fingerprint, which means we want to have a purpose in life. The children are the ones who suffered the most. The children have been deprived of their right to an education. A girl must get an education. An education is the strongest weapon a girl can possess. [The terrorists] have ruined our lives. Everything could be lost, but as long as the person comes out of the situation safely, this is what matters the most."*

While showing the image of a man with a missing leg, the news reporter said:

> *"No matter how difficult the circumstances are, the most important thing is how the person can come up with innovative ways to keep on living, to continue leading her life and developing it further. This is the current status of the Syrian woman in Syria."*

The news report ends with a very intriguing statement by Zeinab, who said:

> *"I do not want to remember anything about the war. I want to forget everything, as if I have an eraser, and I want to erase all the bad memories of it."*

It is important to point out that the news story only interviewed one person to reflect on the daily forms of resilience among Syrian women in postwar Syria. Zeinab was used as an example for how a good Syrian citizen/woman should strive to adjust to the new living circumstances. The reporter described her as a role model, connotating that whoever does not push to forget the past by putting the bad memories of the war behind them and or who does not endeavor to adjust as quickly as possible, is simply not doing things correctly. But how can war survivors rebuild what the war has taken away from them or heal the mental, emotional, and physical wounds they suffer without bring-

ing up what actually happened, what they have been through, or what they were forced to do in order to survive? Perhaps, Zeinab's longing to erase the past demonstrates her desire to live a normal life. In other words, her desire to erase the painful memories of the past can be seen as wishful thinking. She wishes to move past the dire circumstances of the temporary settlements in Herjallah and the traumatic circumstances she experienced when she was under siege in Eastern Ghouta.

The news report from *SANA* ends with a glimpse of a man with a missing leg. The man is not interviewed in the news story, and, ironically, one significant part of Zeinab speech includes the following statement: '*Everything can be lost, but as long as the person comes out of the situation safely, this is what matters the most*.' Clearly, this man is one of many who survived the war. He is still alive, flesh and bones; yet the viewer does not see what shapes this man's daily life. How did his life change after he lost part of his body? From what emotional distress and trauma does he suffer, and how does this affect him and his loved ones, if any are left?

On a similar note, I was not able to find any news reports that spoke about the injured civilians during the war. It is as if *SANA*, the state-owned television station, is pushing Syrian society to go into a state of amnesia. It is asking the people of Syria to praise and applaud the Syrian Arab Army for getting rid of all the 'terrorists,' with the motive to censor any discussions about the aftermath and the human causalities of the war. [1] Lastly, it is important to point out how the news report conveniently chose Zeinab, a female tailor who appears to be healthy.

A news report by Al Aan published on June 7, 2015 interviewed Fida Al-Waer, a displaced Syria woman who started painting images of the Syrian war while in exile in Lebanon. She explained in the interview how she resorted to painting as a coping mechanism. Most of her paintings depict the struggles she and her family underwent during the war, her personal experience throughout the war in Syria, and finding exile in Tripoli, Lebanon, together with her mother and sisters.

In the interview, Fida said:

> "*I decided to resort to painting because I love painting, and it is also a way for me to express myself and remember my two brothers, who both were killed by the Syrian*

1 The severely (physically as well as psychologically) injured Syrians, and their struggles or abilities to adjust to postwar adjustment settings

regime, and became martyrs. I also want to present a different picture of the circumstances of the asylum we are living in. In my paintings, I paint different people and about the events that I experienced during the Syrian uprising. For instance, the image of the Syrian woman working on farms. I believe when the displaced Syrian woman works on the fields in Lebanon, she acquires a source of security for her, her family, especially since many husbands went missing or have a hard time finding a source of income while in exile."

She continued by talking about her own journey of refuge: how she became internally displaced in Syria, how her home in Homs was burned by the Syrian regime forces, and how her family members were burned alive and killed in front of her eyes by the Syrian Arab Army. She explained how the main subject she illustrates in her art is the Syrian woman:

"I believe that women are made to create men. Women are able to face any struggles in life. Even if she lost everything, she could start again from zero and rebuild her life again and again. As long as she believes in herself and her dreams, a woman can do anything."

Fida then described the main themes she depicts in her paintings. She said:

"My paintings usually depict the great war crimes that are committed in Syria and outside of Syria against the Syrian people. My main subjects are Syrian women and children, and the martyrs.[2] The working Syrian women, the Syrian women in exile, and the children who became orphans, who became homeless, and who lost their chances to pursue an education. Most of my art is non-fiction, it depicts the plight of the Syrian people."

Afterwards, she explained why she dislikes the term 'refugee.' She said:

"I hate the word refugee. We are only refugees to our God and not to society. The word exile or refuge is being exploited by many people in order to give Syrian women a bad reputation. Others use this word to sympathize with the Syrian people. But I dislike this word. When the Syrian woman left her home and her country, many tried to take advantage her. The Syrian woman has suffered a lot, and she is still suffering. The Syrian woman is in pain. Many Syrian women continue to suffer psychologically. This pain comes from all the incidents and events they witnessed throughout the war and all the experiences they lived through. Nevertheless, I believe the

2 In this context, Martyrs refer to anyone who died fighting against the Syrian regime during the war.

> *Syrian woman is majestic and strong, and she will continue to be strong no matter what. However, we cannot deny how many people tried to exploit the vulnerable Syrian woman. And at some point, the Syrian woman was standing alone, and no one was supporting her."*

In contrast to Zeinab, Fida wants to illustrate and paint the past instead of erase it. Evidently, the content chosen for this news report was highly dependent on the media ownership of the television station. *Al Aan*, a pan-Arab television station known for its content on women's empowerment–including programs that highlight aspects of Arab women's lives–gave Fida visibility and enabled her show Arab audiences her own way of depicting war memories through painting; painting was a way for Fida to glance back at the painful past.

It is also important to acknowledge how Fida's speech resembles the story of the defeated opposition in Syria; how they fell as victims of the regime brutality. The story of the defeated opposition was widely adopted by *Al Aan* throughout its reporting on the Syrian conflict. Therefore, if we try to compare the representations of Zeinab and Fida, one may see their visibility as opposite sides of the same coin – their visibilities were framed in accordance with the partisan inclinations of the television stations that interviewed them. For instance, when Zeinab, a tailer living in regime-controlled areas, articulated her longing to forget the past, her speech became part of an ambiguous public sphere "where the truth that is trumpeted cannot be publicly questioned but only mimicked or tolerated" (Wedeen 1999; Haugbolle 2008, p. 263), it becomes clear how Zeinab's articulated desire also intrinsically aligns with regime's dominant narrative.

On the other hand, Fida, a Syrian woman in exile who is clearly politically aligned with the Syrian opposition, attempts to use her paintings "to appropriate the violence, to which [the opposition] was subjected, and to turn it against their oppressors and, in so doing, to challenge the state narrative" (Haugbolle, 2008, p. 262). Her speech is clearly aligned with *Al Aan*'s sociopolitical views on the Syrian conflict. While *SANA* remains a local television station that strictly serves as a mouthpiece to the Syrian regime, *Al Aan* here appears as a pan-Arab television station that produces content "to exemplify a new politics of truth-telling, which has emerged across the Middle East in conjunction with the expansion of national and transnational public spheres since the 1990s" (Makdisi & Silverstein, 2006; from Haugbolle, 2008, p. 262). Both *SANA* and *Al Aan*, two stations with opposing political views, similarly

tried to represent Zeinab and Fida respectively as *the good resilient subject*. For instance, *SANA* showed how Zeinab tried to make her daily life as normal as possible by longing to erase the past. Meanwhile, *Al Aan* exposed how Fida copes in exile by painting and retelling the opposition's story through her art.

In the upcoming section, I expand the discussion on *the good resilient subject* by analyzing news reports that represented displaced Syrian women taking part of vocational and cash-for-work programs,[3] and other displaced Syrian women who started their own initiatives to secure an income or are working in the informal labor market in Syria's neighboring countries.

6.3.2 Training the Good Resilient Subject: A Survey of News Reports on Displaced Syrian Women Participating in Vocational and Cash-for-Work Programs and other blue-collar Jobs

Nearly half of Syria's population has been displaced externally during the recent conflict. Many displaced Syrian communities in Syria's neighboring countries are living in informal settlements, known as refugee camps or in other urban settings. Many displaced families do not have a reliable source of income to provide food and shelter or other basic needs (UNHCR, 2018). In Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Lebanon, many local and international NGOs have set up programs that help displaced Syrians build a "skill, which allows them to generate income by providing a service or by creating a product" (Abou-Raad, 2018). These programs are usually called vocational programs, cash-for-work programs, skill-building programs, or income-generating programs. Most of these programs usually target women and are tailored to create opportunities for their economic and personal development.

In the context of Syria, the normative gender division of labor includes occupations such as sewing, knitting, cooking, soapmaking, etc. The Arab television news reported regularly on displaced Syrian women working in these occupations. Most of these occupations are promoted by the vocational and cash-for-work programs funded and organized by UNHCR and other NGOs. Only one news report reported on an agricultural project funded by the UN-

3 These are programs organized and funded by humanitarian organizations for the purpose of providing financial support to externally displaced Syrian women during the conflict.

HCR that is tailored to displaced Syrian women in Iraq. I survey the news reports below.

On December 22, 2015, *Al Jazeera* published a news report on 30 or more Syrian refugee women who participated in a greenhouse project created by the UNHCR in the Sulaimaniyah Camp, part of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The news report began with an opening statement:

> *"Just like they take care of their children and nurture them, Umm Abed does the same with her seedlings. Um Abed is Syrian-Kurdish refugee women, and she is a widow and a mother of four."*

Umm Abed is interviewed. She said:

> *"My husband has been dead for many years now. I have young children. We have no one to support us. This is the reason why I decided to participate in this project. At first, we grew cucumbers, and it was a success. I earned almost 1,000 U.S dollars. And now we are planting for the winter, and we are waiting for the results."*

In the news report, an unnamed UNHCR social worker stated that the aim of the project was to enable Syrian women to become financially independent and empower them while living in exile. During the interview, the social worker said:

> *"This program is made especially for widows, for women who have no income or provider, or for those who have special conditions such as an ill (unemployed) husband. This program is tailored for women in order to strengthen their integration in the host country, to help them engage with the community, and to be help them become more financially independent so they can support their families."*

The news reporter ended the report with the following statement:

> *"This program has great significance; it will help enhance the social and psychological conditions of these Syrian refugee women."*

Agriculture is a (non)domestic occupation, where men and women work alongside each other in farming and raising livestock. In fact, 22% of Syria's economy was made up of the agriculture sector, and Syrian women actively participated in such work before the outbreak of the conflict (Mahamid, 2013). Therefore, if these groups of Syrian women were able to return to their previous occupation while in exile, this could eliminate or lessen the problem of *liminality* that many displaced persons face when they try to acquire jobs in the host countries.

I was only able to find one news report on displaced Syrian women in agricultural sector; the remaining seven news reports in this subsection portray displaced Syrian women participating in more traditional occupations such as sewing, knitting, etc.

On December 25, 2013, *Al Arabiyah* reported on a program organized by the UNHCR that aims at promoting gender equality among Syrian refugees in the Zaatari camp in Jordan. The opening statement in the news story declared the following:

> "*The program supports more than 700 Syrian female refugees in the Zaatari camp to overcome their state of exile. After these women have lost all their rights and properties in their home country, the program helps them support themselves financially through the craft of sewing.*"

A woman is shown sewing a white dress while the reporter remarks:

> "*She is sewing the dress of freedom.*"

The reporter hints that sewing might bring this woman some form of emancipation. Afterwards, the woman described her experience:

> "*This occupation gave me serenity and inner peace.*"

On July 8, 2014, *Al Aan* published a news report that addressed the reason why there is an urgent need for displaced Syrian women in Jordan to seek work and generate income. The news report starts by criticizing the UNHCR aid programs that help displaced Syrian families living in dire conditions with their household expenses. The reporter claimed that the UNHCR does not provide enough financial support to refugees; therefore, many displaced Syrian women need to find a different source of income. Rima Flayhani, a female Syrian writer and activist is interviewed as an expert on the subject. Flayhani said:

> "*During this war, the men of the family went missing; therefore, women are now pushed to work. Of course, we are in favor of seeing women in the workforce; I am not saying it is a bad thing to see women seek jobs outside their homes. However, the job the Syrian women seeks should be an efficient type of work, that will bring her enough income to support her family. The workforce here in Jordan is not very open or available for Syrian refugees. Most of the Syrian women who work here are underpaid.*"

The reporter interrupted Flayhani to ask the following:

> *"Can we solve the plight of displaced Syrian women by creating small projects, such as family-based projects that will help Syrian women to support themselves, without relying on any other sources of aid?"*

Flayhani responded:

> *"The UNHCR and other NGOs do not provide such programs; however, they provide basic courses for women to learn skills such as sewing, knitting, soap-making etc. We need such programs that support the small family projects which women create after they take the classes with the UNHCR. The first important step is to create governmental laws that grant displaced Syrian women the right to lead such projects, as well as receive aid for financing the projects."*

The narrative exposed how certain governmental laws in Jordan prohibit refugees and displaced communities from independently leading their own projects for economic and personal development. Flayhani asserted that a step needs to be taken in order to achieve the possibility of family-based projects.

On May 2, 2014**,** another news report from *Al Aan* was published with the following headline: *Displaced Syrian women are now forced to find work, due to the high living expenses in Turkey.* The news reporter said:

> *"In the small town of Rihaniyah, on the Turkish-Syrian border, a number of displaced Syrian women spend their time knitting as a way to secure income for their families. Although they spend a lot of time working, they are not able to forget the times of war they have experienced in their home country, Syria."*

The reporter alluded to the fact that many women are finding it difficult to put the painful past behind them. The news report showed a group of Syrian women sewing together, and the reporter commented:

> *"In the factory where they work, they produce a lot of different clothing items made from wool. Ninety displaced Syrian women work in this factory. They earn around 50 or 60 U.S dollars per month. It is a very small amount of money, but it is covers small expenses such as the electricity bill or buys them bread and other basic groceries for the household and satisfies their hunger."*

Marwa Al Sayed, the manager of the women's knitting workshop, was also interviewed. Al Sayed said:

> *"The amount of money they receive monthly is not a big amount; it is as valuable as one or two of the food-supply boxes they receive from the NGOs. But the advantage of this work is that the Syrian woman is working in her own household, and she is keeping her dignity, and at the same time she is helping her family."*

The manager of the women's knitting workshop stressed on the concept of dignity, particularly the dignity of Syrian women. Dignity, particularly the dignity of a displaced women, is a frequently cited by humanitarian workers and initiatives. "Aid programs and policies rarely identify exactly what [dignity] is, or how they are trying to support" (Grandi, Mansour & Holloway, 2018, p.1). However, on a general note, maintaining the dignity of displaced communities is usually invoked through providing food and required non-food items. As for the dignity of women and girls, this issue is usually tied to protecting them from incidents of sexual and gender-based violence (Makki, 2014).

On November 13, 2013, another news story by *Al Aan* reported on a workspace used to teach sewing and other similar skills in the eastern Syrian town, Deir Ez-Zor, which is under the Free Syrian Army control. The story showed Syrian women attending sewing and hairdressing classes. The news reporter said:

> *"These women hope to take those skills and turn them into a source of income. The classes are funded and organized by a local NGO, called Hayat… In Syria everyone fights their battle, the way it is applicable or suitable for them."*

Similarly, on June 12, 2016, *Al Arabiya* showed Umm Ahmad, a single Syrian mother fighting her own battle. A displaced Syrian mother, who lost her husband at the beginning of the war, Umm Ahmad fled with her 3 children to Hatay, Turkey. While she was being interviewed, she spoke about how her husband was burnt to death in one of the Syrian regime prisons. Afterwards, she described her daily life as a displaced single mother in Turkey and how the war led her daughter to abandon her education and work alongside her mother in order to make a living. The reporter mentioned that most of the displaced Syrians children and young adults have lost their right to an education during the war. Umm Ahmad was interviewed. She said:

> *"At first, my daughter cried a lot because she left school. But then she convinced herself it is okay because she wanted to help me with the expenses. And she came and she started working with me here. This is where I knit and sew for living. She*

> *used to be one of the most successful students in class, and now she came here, and she is serving tea and coffee to the customers.*"

Fatin, the daughter of Umm Ahmad was also interviewed. Fatin said:

> "*I wish to could go back to school, but we are forced to work in order to pay for the expenses in our new home here in Turkey. I need to help my mother pay the rent, buy food, etc. I used to be at the top of my class, but I had to leave school in order to help my mother with the expenses.*"

The news reporter ended the story by mentioning how Umm Ahmad and her children feel orphaned and lonely in Hatay, Turkey, especially after they lost their father and husband. The news reporter said:

> "*This is why Umm Ahmad insists on staying in Hatay. She and her family will be the first people to return to Syria once the war is over.*"

The news reporter indicated that going back to Syria was the only solution for Umm Ahmad and her family. Another important aspect that appears in the news report is how her daughter, Fatin, was deprived of her right for an education.

Granted, continuing one's education in Turkey as a displaced Syrian is especially difficult because of the language barrier and the financial expenses displaced Syrians have to keep their children in school. Education in Turkey is provided in the Turkish language; in other neighboring countries, such as Lebanon and Jordan, the official language is Arabic, the official language of Syria. Nonetheless, even in countries where Arabic is the official language, 75% of Syrian children do not attend school (Succar, 2014). A study by a local NGO in Lebanon, *Jusoor,* claimed that "if the Syrian refugee population were a country, that country would have the lowest school enrollment rate in the world" (Succar, 2014).

On a similar note, NGO-based projects have founded schools– such as *Kayany* Schools in Lebanon– for Syrian refugee children. However, many children and young girls do not attend school because of harsh patriarchal norms as well as financial struggles. Some are pushed into child marriage (as discussed in Chapter 5), and others are pushed into blue-collar jobs (Succar, 2014). These jobs are usually gender normative types of work, which are considered socially 'appropriate' for women, such as serving tea and coffee, cleaning homes, hairdressing, embroidery, knitting, sewing, cooking, soap-making, etc.

A news report published by *Al Aan* on May 1, 2017 exposed how Syrian women in Jordan have taken up a less traditional gender normative occupation such as plumbing. The headline read "Syrian Refugee Women in Jordan Defy Society and Work as Plumbers." The news reporter said:

> *"Plumbing is no longer an occupation only for makes. Syrian refugee women are starting to enter this occupation. They have established an entire women's center where plumbing services are provided to households by Syrian refugee women. This has broken a long-standing social taboo in a conservative society."*

The news report showed the woman behind this project. The news reporter said:

> *"This is the woman who broke all the social taboos and has established a craftsman center specializing in plumbing. This is considered the first career center for women who want to pursue plumbing as an occupation. Plumbing is the only source of income these women have, especially that they are female refugees who have fled the war in Syria, and as a result they found themselves [in Jordan] without any income or provider."*

Safaa Sukariyah, the Syrian woman behind the creation of the Women's Plumbing Center is interviewed. Sukariyah said:

> *"All the responsibilities fell on my head. It has been five years since we fled the war. We are still facing the same difficulties. I have many responsibilities. I am responsible for my children. I also have responsibilities to take care of my husband. These are not easy responsibilities. I do not consider this occupation as something Ayyb.*[4] *I really love this occupation, it comes natural to me, and I have an emotional connection to it."*

The news reporter continued describing the female plumber, while the camera showed Sukariyah working. The reporter said:

> *"These soft hands have created a firm relationship with these harsh tools. A very contradictory relationship between the two. This has created a skillful type of work. Previously, the ones who used to disassemble and assemble the pipes were only men, and now these women have taken up those jobs."*

4 *Ayyb* / عيب is an Arabic word that refers to something viewed as a social taboo in Arab Muslim societies.

It is clear how the reporter's speech tried to emphasize the femininity of the female plumber. He used the adjective 'soft' to describe their hands, while emphasizing how plumbing is a strictly 'masculine' occupation in the Arab world.

Afterwards, the news reporter interviewed a man named Kassem Al Mansouri, who is one of the Safaa Sukariyah's customers. Al Mansouri said:

> *"In any wise society, the man should believe that a woman is a life partner. These women are challenging social taboos (Thakafat Al Ayyb). This occupation was traditionally and strictly reserved for men. These women challenged themselves, they challenged society, and turned this occupation to a source of income, and they proved their existence and eligibility. They are indeed very special."*

The news reporter ended the story by saying:

> *"The revolution in Syria has forced them to flee and leave their home. They are now leading another revolution; they are challenging the image of a traditional Syrian woman. They are now setting a new example with a different image, the image of a Syrian woman who is a partner and a participant in building a better society and new cultures."*

The news report portrayed groups of displaced Syrian women as if they were defying traditional general norms by taking matters into their own hands. However, the reporting lacked context. Since 2014, Jordan has faced a grave water shortage crisis. Duromg the period covered here, most households in Jordan suffered from pipe leakages. Thus, plumbers were in high demand in the country. To target the problem, the Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development (JOHUD), the Jordan's Ministry of Water and Irrigation, the Germany Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) cooperated to develop the *Water Wise Women* program in 2014. As part of the program, more than 600 Syrian women were trained to enter this profession, one that was traditionally preserved for men (Al Hayari, 2017).

For instance, an article from *apolitico.co* on the *Water Wise Woman* program mentions that a main reason program focused on training female plumbers was because of traditional cultural norms. In traditional Arab society, a male plumber can enter a household only when a male family member is present. This may delay the repair of leaks, as female-led households might find it challenging to find a male family member to be present (Al Hayari, 2017). Therefore, the need for female plumbers in female-led households also stemmed

from the societal norm of not allowing a male stranger into a household without a male family member present. This specific norm is sometimes related to security. There is a common societal understanding in Arab Muslim cultures that a male stranger entering a household might pose a threat to widows, single women, girls, and single in general if a male figure is not present. In other instances, this practice of not allowing a male stranger into one's home is related to concepts of honor and shaming. In the Arab world, these two concepts traditionally forbid women from having contact with male strangers in private spaces. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the female plumbers usually were from female-led households, rather than male-led households. The project description of the *Water Wise Women* project reads: "After training, the women are then able to fix leaks in their own homes as well as in [those of] their female neighbors' houses" (Al Hayari, 2017).

Therefore, the need for more female plumbers to work in w female-led households may infer that even though there are women entering the plumbing sector, gender segregation in the work place still takes place. Many displaced Syrian women may prefer women-only working environments because of issues related to sexual harassment, taboos, and norms. Therefore, I disagree with the news reporter regarding his claim that the group of female plumbers are defying society and breaking social taboos. I do, however, believe that their initiative to enter predominantly male occupation in order to become the family's breadwinner is a form of everyday resilience. Moreover, their perseverance to prevail and find a source of income by learning a new skill in a foreign country may perhaps also be perceived as a way to resistance socioeconomic oppression and inequality.

The news report's speech somehow idealized their plumbing work and labelled it as challenge to social norms and taboos. Granted, the issue of sexual harassment remains an issue displaced Syrian women face in the workforce. Entering the plumbing sector surely does not solve this problem; rather, it avoids it, especially when the female plumbers are only working in female-led households.

The issue of sexual harassment among Syrian refugee women in the informal labor market was addressed in the new report surveyed in *Section 6.5.1*, in which the painter Fida was interviewed. In the same news report (published by *Al Aan* on June 7, 2015**),** Ni'maa Al-Ahmad, a Syrian mother in Lebanon living in the countryside outside the Syrian city of Hama was interviewed. Ni'maa sought refuge in Lebanon with her children after her husband was killed by the Syrian regime. The news reporter stated that the regime threw

his body in front of his home's doorstep, as a kind of revenge. Ni'maa now cleans homes for living in order to support her children. She spoke about her experience as a single mother in Lebanon. Ni'maa said:

> *"I am not ashamed that I clean homes for living. I am not shy to admit that I clean people's homes. I do not see 'Ayyb[5] in working as a housecleaner, because I am working and exhausting myself for the sake of my children, and not for some stranger. I prefer to have little money for my children instead of begging people for help. I work all day every day, and I only come back home late at night, but at least I come back home with money that I earned with honor and dignity, and I use it to feed my children. And one day, when my children are all grown up, they will be proud of their mother and that she worked hard and earned her living as a housecleaner. I will never be ashamed about it."*

Ni'maa continued to address a sexual harassment incident she experienced at work, claiming that sometimes her employers take advantage of the fact that she is a single mother with a refugee status, thereby abusing her state of vulnerability. Ni'maa said:

> *"I will work day and night, and it does not matter how much money I earn. I have been exposed to it many times.[6] And when I do not give them what they want, they yell at me, and sometimes beat me up. I have escaped the house many times while cleaning. I jump from the balcony or the window or run away. One time, they grabbed my things and my documents, and wanted to confiscate them because I did not give them what they wanted. And afterwards, they accused me of theft. But thank God, I never thought of doing anything Haram.[7] I even went to the police and reported the incident. And the police backed me up Hamdillah.[8] And I was able to get my documents back without letting him touch one hair on my body."*

She also mentioned that she was not ashamed to appear on TV to tell her story, asserting that she was proud to be able to withstand the difficult conditions she lived in while in exile in Lebanon.

There are two significant aspects that appear in this news report: the recognition of Nimaa's state of vulnerability and her performative resistance. Firstly, as opposed to the groups of displaced Syrian women depicted taking

5 'Ayyb, is an Arabic word that refers to an act that is considered a social taboo.

6 *It*, in this context, refers to sexual harassment.

7 *Haram* is an Arabic term for 'forbidden'.

8 Hamdillah, is the Arabic term for 'Thank you, God'.

part of vocational and cash-for-work programs, Ni'maa's visibility was not framed in a humanitarian discourse. The absence of the humanitarian discourse in the reporting made her vulnerability more evident. Secondly, Ni'maa practiced *performative resistance* (Butler, 1997) through her speech. She spoke openly about how vulnerable she was a single mother living in exile alongside her children. Moreover, Ni'maa called out the issue of sexual harassment by speaking about her very own personal experience with it. Although she uses the word *it* to refer to the sexual harassment or "Al Taharrush Al Jinsi التحرش الجنسي" in Arabic, it is still clear to what she was referring. In the book *Excitable Speech*, Butler (1997) explains how "the subject can protest her situation and "talk back" to socially constructed authorities." This appears to be the case with Ni'maa: When society interpellated her and situated her in a subordinate position, she attempted to talk back and resist her employer's attempt to abuse her. Thus, the act of calling out sexual harassment is a form of resistance, particularly when Ni'maa expresses her refusal to being abused and being called into a subordinate position.

6.4 The Notion of Resilience in a Humanitarian Discourse

In this section, I continue to reflect on the news reports surveyed above. I contextualize the findings from the news stories that adopted a humanitarian discourse; namely the news reports on the vocational and cash-for-work programs.

The news reports analyzed in this chapter described the skills taught and promoted by the UNHCR and other NGOs in the vocational and cash-for-work programs and how they are used as tools that empower women and girls in exile. The findings showed that most of these programs offered gender normative types of occupations that teach the participants quick solutions for securing an income. Throughout the reporting, only one displaced Syrian woman was able to articulate her state of vulnerability in her own words: Ni'maa, the single mother who cleans houses to make ends meet. The rest of the news reports either reinforced the Syrian regimes' sociopolitical agenda, or the Syrian opposition's political narrative[9].The displaced Syrian women's state of vulnerability was highlighted under the umbrella of humanitarian

9 For example, Zeinab, the internally displaced Syrian woman, wanted to erase the past and get one with her daily life. Fida, the externally displaced Syrian women in Tripo-

discourse, as the news reports aimed at promoting the desirable outcomes of the programs and the benefits the participants receive.

The television reporting also proposed that programs help the participants become more self-reliant, as a temporary solution to make ends meet while living in exile. In this context, these 'temporary solutions' exemplify a form of self-resilience as a way "to develop strategies in order to adjust to difficulties" or to find "a way to 'get on' with daily life without acquiescing to the political, economic or social situation that you are in" (Bourbeau and Ryan, 2017, p. 9). This makes those vocational and cash-for-work programs resilience-building programs as well. In this setting, the idea of training displaced Syrian women to acquire and practice everyday resilience becomes quite arresting, because resilience is something people naturally do to survive. Resilience is a trait that the impoverished already acquired when they realized that resilience was the only way to survive. Thus, when the humanitarian aid programs claim to teach the impoverished the practice of resilience, aren't these aid programs borrowing the traits of the poor, as they provide a 'platform' to train and materialize the hitherto inherited skill among the participants?

Bracke (2016) explains how resilience is becoming 'a desired good' in today's neoliberal economies. She writes:

> "I understand this power to operate in complex manners, not merely as programs imposed on unsuspecting individuals, although that is surely one of the ways in which the impact of resilience in our world is felt, but also as a desired good, or the prize that many of us have come to set our eyes on as we seek to navigate the constraints and possibilities of our daily lives. The way in which resilience permeates popular culture is truly striking, finding a notable expression in the popularization of psychological theories that revolve around the notion of the "resilient self :" *Build Your Resilience: Teach Yourself How to Survive and Thrive in any Situation; Resilience: Bounce Back from Whatever Life Throws at You, or The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life* are just a few titles of literally thousands of recent books that offer visions on becoming resilient as well as exercises and techniques to do so" (p. 53).

Granted, this prize or desired good is being resonated beyond popular culture and has become the main goal for most of the humanitarian projects target-

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li, Lebanon, spoke about her experiences during the conflict and conveyed the Syrian Opposition's dominant narrative in her art.

ing displaced Syrian women. These programs individualize solutions to displaced persons' problem that have social and political origins. These projects are usually called 'resilience-building programs in response to crisis.' For instance, one of the many integrated UNDP projects in the Middle East region is called *Building Resilience*. The slogan for the project is "Empowered Lives, Resilient Nations" (UNDP, 2019). This project is a regional refugee and resilience plan for Syria, Lebanon, Iraq Turkey, Jordan, and Egypt, and it aims to robustly invest in the resilience of people, communities, and institutional systems affected by crisis. Another example of a resilience-building program is PRESERVE, a project aimed to "develop localized solutions to a lack of participation of women in local economic governance" (UN Career, 2019). The ultimate outcome of this project is to enhance resilience among displaced and conflict-affected women in Syria (UN Career, 2019).

What I find problematic here is not the direct product the UN and other humanitarian projects try to offer–they are offering a job opportunity– but the function they perform in a societal system governed by neoliberal ideals. As previously mentioned, the indirect product these programs are tailored to promote is self-resilience. I do not perceive self-resilience as something negative per se, especially given the fact that, in precarious times, resilience becomes the most direct source of strength to cope with stress and hardship. The issue I wish to raise, rather, is how self-resilience is perceived as the only long-lasting solution to the plight of the displaced Syrian women or the subaltern subject in general. In the context of this case study, the subaltern is the displaced Syrian communities that have lost all their belongings and their sense of belonging and are currently living in poverty. In other contexts, the subaltern subject is today's overworked employee who juggles "several insecure and part-time jobs" and has to "overcome life's hurdles, such as facing retirement without a pension and bounce back from whatever life throws at them, whether it is cuts to benefits, wage freezes, or global economic meltdown" (Bracke 2016, p.61); the neoliberal subject here is an entrepreneurial self.

Within this frame of reference, the question of security becomes an obvious one, as security is a significant part of the problem, particularly when discussing the plight of the displaced Syrian women. Is their plight not related to economic security rather than economic aid? Is it not a question of protection from gender-based violence or safety from harsh weather conditions (as discussed in Chapter 5)? And when we try to observe the humanitarian response to such so-called 'emergencies' or 'disasters,' do the humanitarian

organizations and media reportages on the crises (often) not slap us with the term resilience?

Bracke (2016) stated that self-resilience alludes to a specific bio-political power at work, where the act of resilience "produces a new regime of subjectivity, that is to say, new resilient subjects" (p. 63). When adding the word 'self' to the term resilience, the term starts acquiring a meaning beyond the dictionary definition of "rebounding; recoiling; returning to the original position" (The Oxford English Dictionary 2019). The term self-resilience becomes part of wider neoliberal discourse, in which the good subjects are represented. The good subjects, according to Neocleous (2007), are individuals who constantly respond to any situation in resilient ways. Their ability to bounce back, hence, becomes the norm, and their attempt to exercise their agency becomes highly tied to their everyday forms of resilience. In this context, self-resilience starts branding the displaced Syrian women's survival, "making it an object of fascination for" the television viewers (Mourad, 2020). Bracke (2016) writes:

> "In a neoliberal political economy, resilience has become part of the moral code: the good subjects of neoliberal times are the ones who are able to act, to exercise their agency, in resilient ways. Good subjects […] will survive and thrive in any situation, they will achieve balance" (p. 61).

Perhaps Bracke's words echo the manner *SANA*'s news report represented Zeinab as the good resilient subject, the role model every Syrian citizen and every Syrian woman should look to when striving to adjust to any new (difficult) circumstances. It is a role model for all resilient subjects that pushes them to forget the past, puts the bad memories of the war behind them, and to adjust as quickly as possible. A broader example is how neoliberal ideals are reestablished through the training of *the self*: "a training to withstand whatever crisis capital undergoes and whatever political measures the state carries out to save it" (Bracke, 2016, p. 61).

When these so-called cash-for-work and vocational programs train their participants on 'how to be self-resilient,' is resilience here not being turned away from vulnerability? Don't these projects somehow represent the process of transforming resilience to a property of the neoliberal system, one that relies on the subject's resilience to remain 'operable'? In this setting, resilience becomes the only source of security inhabited by the subjects, as it starts operating as "a new security apparatus" (Bracke, 2016). Sara Mourad (2020) writes:

> "Resilience is a marketing stunt for a political and economic system that runs on crises, that manufactures crises in order to sustain itself. Resilience celebrates survival at the expense of justice. It is the rhetorical and symbolic symptom of the normalization of injustice."

6.5 Conclusion

Most of the news reports surveyed in this chapter included a humanitarian discourse that promoted the advantages of the vocational and cash-for-work programs, such as giving displaced Syrian women the opportunity to work and secure an income. At the same time, these news reports idealized the participation of the displaced Syrian women in these humanitarian programs, without highlighting the factors that shape their state of vulnerability.

Although the humanitarian programs may enable many displaced Syrian women to become the family's breadwinner, it is important to point out that none of the news reports mentioned how some of these programs require the female participants to provide–because of traditional patriarchal norms–their husbands' approval to participate (Abou-Raad, 2018). Moreover, the reality on the ground seems to show that nothing is being done to support the husbands who remain unemployed at home. Syrian refugee men may feel left out because there are very few, if any, programs tailored to them and their need to find a job. In the meantime, Syrian women participating in the programs are learning about their rights and are provided with vocational trainings to generate an income. This might change the family structures of the displaced Syrian communities. The roles of women may be transformed from solely a housewife to a housewife who generates income to her family. This has advantages and disadvantages: women participants are gaining the ability to financially support their families; at the same time, however, the husbands may feel helpless or unable to contribute. Thus, this may lead to tension between husband and wife, as a double burden is being placed on the women (Abou Raad, 2018).

Undoubtedly, the programs provide a platform for Syrian women to generate an income from their place of residence. In this setting, the problem of sexual harassment at workspaces can simply be avoided. However, this turns a blind eye to the problem of harassment many Syrian women face on a daily basis. Moreover, many displaced Syrian women, who do not have access to these programs, may revert or have reverted to other occupations to secure

an income. Many are working alongside people from the host communities and are taking up other jobs that require long commutes. As a result, many of them do leave their refugee social circle on a daily basis. While we could argue that this lifestyle could make the female workers more vulnerable and less protected, the pressing questions here are: How does this source of vulnerability function: can it be productively mobilized; or can it do more harm than good, and how?

As a final note, the news reports individualized the societal problems the displaced Syrian women face in their daily lives, thereby ignoring how these problems are both political and global in origin. This resulted in decontextualizing them and making the transcultural nature of the plight of displaced Syrian women invisible in the television news.

In the upcoming chapter, I survey the news reports related to the concept of resistance.