

Syrian Refugee Women in Lebanon: Gendering Violence through Johan Galtung

Written by Ellie Swingewood

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/11/10/syrian-refugee-women-in-lebanon-gendering-violence-through-johan-galtung/>

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The ongoing conflict in Syria threatens to turn into the largest refugee crisis of this century. The fierce violence ensuing between government forces, rebels, and paramilitary groups across Syria has forced over 2 million men, women and children to seek safety outside its borders; since its outbreak in early 2011, close to a million Syrians have fled to Lebanon, with hundreds more crossing its porous borders each day.[1] While the plight of these refugees continues to be documented, the impact of the Syrian conflict on displaced populations adopts different dimensions when examined via a gendered lens. By examining the situation of Syrian women in Lebanon,[2] this study hopes to initiate a conversation about the various forms of violence refugee women face, by utilising gender as its key conceptual tool of analysis.

This paper – divided into three parts – attempts to analyse experiences of refugee women, in the context of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, to demonstrate the extraordinary difficulties they are met with in all aspects of life. Firstly, this study draws from the works of Johan Galtung, whose theory surrounding direct, structural, and cultural violence helps demonstrate the omnipresence of violence within all spheres of society. It also engages with feminist political theorist Cynthia Cockburn and her concept of the “continuum of violence”, in order to apply Galtung’s ideas through a gendered lens. The second part turns to the case of Syrian refugee women and girls in Lebanon, working within Galtung’s distinct theoretical paradigms of violence to observe the multitude of challenges confronting refugee women. This paper concludes with closing remarks on the position of refugee women in Lebanon, while offering recommendations on the subject of violence towards women – in all its forms – in the Lebanese context overall.

Employing a qualitative methodology to address this topic is most appropriate. While there is widespread literature on refugee women as a whole,[3] there has not yet been academic emphasis on the multifaceted challenges confronting Syrian refugee women. In that sense, this study is rather preliminary. To make up for this gap in the literature, the research conducted for this paper draws from information published by non-governmental organisations working in the region, as well from local and international media agencies. While support from quantitative sources is used when relevant, the complex societal and human dimensions involved restrict the degree of quantitative research applicable and available. Of course, variations among the Syrian refugee population, such as location, age and class, *inter alia*, circumscribe the extent to which broader analysis can be made. Moreover, when examining any topic from a gendered perspective, it is important to stress that gender does not solely consider the socially constructed roles of women and femininity, but also that of men and masculinity;[4] therefore, an evaluation of the experiences of refugee men in Lebanon would allow for a more detailed investigation. Unfortunately, a micro-level analysis of these disparate factors is too complex for the scope of this paper. The aim of this study is not to generalise the situation for refugees in Lebanon as a whole, nor to argue that women suffer more than men, but instead to highlight and raise awareness of some of the most prominent issues facing women in the hope that they can be overcome.

The Danish scholar Johan Galtung, the principal founder of the peace and conflict studies discipline, acknowledged the confines of traditional conceptualisations of violence. He introduced a theory to argue that direct, visible violence – the most widely understood form of violence – is only one of three forms of violence present in society, and that there are also two invisible forms of violence that exist in a more understated manner; “the violence frozen into structures, and the culture that legitimises violence”.[5] These models of direct, structural and cultural violence

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coexist to form a multidimensional image of violence. While direct violence can take many forms, it is classically recognised as involving the use of physical force, such as torture or rape, but can also appear in a psychological or emotional state, for example as verbal threats. Galtung's two other categories often exist alongside direct violence more inconspicuously, despite their impacts being no less detrimental. Structural violence, which can present itself in many forms, such as within the economy or politics, is said to occur when some groups in society are denied, or are perceived to be denied, "important rights, such as economic well-being; social, political, and sexual equality; a sense of personal fulfilment and self-worth".[6] Galtung theorised cultural violence to be the final category, represented by concepts such as religion, ideology, and language, which comprise the prevailing beliefs and attitudes within society, and can be used to justify existing direct or structural violence.[7]

Unfortunately for this study, Galtung did not work within a gender framework. Moreover, data on war and conflict-ridden countries tends to neglect ways in which violence impacts different constituencies, in particular to conceal gender-specific forms of hardship.[8] However, as argued by the prominent feminist scholar Cynthia Cockburn, a gendered analysis allows one to consider violence as a continuum affecting all aspects of life, "from the home to the backstreet to the manoeuvres of the tank column and the sortie of the stealth bomber".[9] Thus, viewing Galtung's three paradigms of violence through the prism of gender allows this study to go beyond orthodox analyses of violence, to produce a more insightful examination of women's experiences as Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Syrian refugee women and girls in Lebanon are subject to Galtung's conceptualisation of *direct violence* in several ways. Of course, the spiralling violence which is breaking out across Lebanon, mainly in the form of car bombs and small arms attacks, is generally indiscriminate in its targets.[10] Nonetheless, many refugees experience xenophobia and hostility, primarily as a result of already present economic difficulties in Lebanon, such as a saturation of public services and competition for jobs[11] – such sentiment is particularly prominent for Syrian women. In areas densely populated by refugees, Syrian women and girls accused of "stealing [the] men",[12] or being "cheap wives",[13] due to their lower dowry, and are much more subjected to harassment and bullying from locals, and being ostracised within the community.[14] Outside of the public sphere, women also risk additional physical violence within the private sphere of the home: many married Syrian women have reported increases in levels of domestic violence by their husbands since their arrival in Lebanon.[15]

Structural violence also has an immediate and detrimental impact on Syrian women in Lebanon. As income-generating activities are very limited[16] and the cost of living is much higher in Lebanon, Syrian refugee women are resorting to desperate measures to help their families survive. While early marriage is not an uncommon practice in Syria, it is increasingly being used as a financial coping strategy, as young girls are married off to wealthy Syrian or Lebanese men in exchange for cash or rent.[17] The dangerous practice of 'survival sex', where women and girls exchange sexual favours for food, cash or rent, is also growing rapidly, and is often carried out with support (or pressure) from male family members.[18] Overwhelmingly, women – especially those who did not enter Lebanon through official channels – do not report domestic violence or sexual abuse to authorities, as they cannot easily seek redress for such crimes through official channels without fear of retribution.[19] Their situation is often made more dire due to faults in the humanitarian aid system; refugee women frequently have restricted awareness of services available to them, for example therapy or some forms of financial support.[20] In addition, widows, single women and other female-headed households face obstacles when it comes to registering for aid, as the androcentric registration system finds it difficult to cope with households not headed by males.[21]

Cultural violence, as conceived by Galtung, is also rampant against refugee women in Lebanon, and serves to support many aforementioned aspects of structural and direct violence. As previously mentioned, women and girls who suffer direct violence are frequently reluctant to either report it or seek support, but another major factor in this decision is the fear of shame or 'dishonour' to their families.[22] This can be tied to increasing rates of early marriage, which is frequently being "framed as efforts by families to 'protect' girls from being raped or to ensure that they are 'under the protection of a man'".[23] Within the sphere of education, the myriad constraints to refugee children accessing education – for example high costs, and the sudden change in language and curriculum[24] – are compounded significantly for Syrian girls; Lebanese schools are predominantly co-educational, and many families, used to the single-sex nature of the Syrian education system, are disinclined to let their daughters attend.[25] In addition, female-headed households cope with further complications when it comes to receiving aid, as patriarchal

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cultural norms around mobility can prevent them going to collect aid by themselves.[26]

Through gendering experiences of violence through Galtung's framework, this paper was able to expand beyond conventional analyses of violence: it is clear that for Syrian women and girls refugees in Lebanon, violence extends to virtually all spheres of life, and "runs through the social, the economic, and the political, with gender relations penetrating all these forms of relations".[27] One could draw from the above analysis that hetero-normative gender constructions have been reinforced among the refugee population in Lebanon; however this period of conflict may also create opportunities for the repositioning and redefining of gender roles. As noted in other periods of conflict, the absence of male relatives can lead to women assuming larger roles, such as becoming heads of households, community leaders and political activists.[28] While this study did not note any such drastic changes in Lebanon, some Syrian women have certainly extended their role by taking on more responsibility for the household, becoming key decision-makers in family life, running errands, and generating income.[29] Even so, this conclusion offers just a snapshot of the experiences and situation for Syrian refugee women and girls, and only the future will tell whether these roles will continue to expand with time, or detract in the post-conflict period both in Syria and in Lebanon, as is oftentimes the case.[30]

While this paper focused on the situation for Syrian women in Lebanon, examining that of women in the host community would also paint an interesting picture. A dangerous possibility for the future exists, that the line may become blurred between cultural norms and violence, leading to violence – in its many forms – affecting all women in Lebanon. Following the Geneva II, which were largely unsuccessful in terms of humanitarian issues,[31] it does not seem like a large-scale exodus of Syrians will be occurring in the near future. Thus, perhaps it is timely to evaluate the situation of women in Lebanon as a whole, and address the direct and indirect sources of violence in a collective manner to prevent any detrimental long-term effects, and preclude Lebanon sliding towards a more patriarchal and gender-biased society.

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[1] UNHCR (2014): "Syrian Regional Refugee Response: Regional Overview".

[2] While the experiences of Iraqi, Palestinian and other refugees' experiences are equally valuable; Syrians constitute the overwhelming majority of refugees in Lebanon, and thus form the basis for this study.

[3] For arguably the most comprehensive works on the topic, see: Martin, S. F. (2004): *Refugee Women*. Langham: Lexington Books; or Lammers, E. (1999): *Refugees, Gender and Human Security*. Utrecht: International Books.

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[25] Charles and Denman, op. cit., pp. 98-99.

[26] Harvey et al, op. cit., p.5.

[27] Cockburn, op. cit., p.43.

^[28] Al-Ali, N. and Pratt, N. (2009): *Women and War in the Middle East: Transnational Perspectives*. London: Zed Books, *passim*.

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[30] Al-Ali, op. cit., p.756.

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Date written: April 2014