THE FORGOTTEN VOICES OF FEMALE REFUGEES: AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER ROLES IN THE REFUGEE SOCIETY

A thesis presented

by

Michelle Theresa Wiggett

to

The Department of Political Science

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in the field of

Political Science

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
December, 2013
THE FORGOTTEN VOICES OF FEMALE REFUGEES: AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER ROLES IN THE REFUGEE SOCIETY

by

Michelle Theresa Wiggett

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Political Science in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities of Northeastern University December, 2013
Abstract

This thesis focuses on using Christine Sylvester’s framework of human experiences to critically analyze the lives of female refugees. This framework will be carefully considered in order to answer the following two questions. First, what factors help to contribute to the deplorable circumstances women face in a refugee society? Second, are these factors as a result of the refugee camp society itself, or are they an extension of preexisting conditions in society? Rather than considering the circumstances surrounding the lives of refugee women as a unique event, this study will put forth the idea of drawing parallels between life within and outside the refugee society. To further narrow the scope of this argument, this framework will be used to analyze the current Syrian refugee crisis unfolding in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. With Zaatari being located in the Middle East, societal conditions pertaining to this region, such as patriarchy and the idea of the public versus private sphere, will be discussed. Using Zaatari as a case study, it will be argued that these societal conditions permeate the bounds of a refugee camp to exacerbate gender roles. This exacerbation leads to women being excluded from decision making processes and employment while simultaneously facing increased vulnerabilities in the form of gender based violence and exploitation.
Acknowledgements

I owe an endless amount of gratitude to those who helped make this thesis come to fruition. First, to Dr. Denis Sullivan who presented me with the opportunity to travel to Jordan; it was this trip that acted as the catalyst for the ideas in the pages to come. Second, to Dr. Natalie Bormann; without her weekly meetings I would have been lost in an endless sea of research and writing. Third, to my political science professors at the undergraduate level who sparked my curiosity in the Middle East. Finally, to my family and friends, who continuously supported me every step of the way in this endeavor.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract 2

Acknowledgements 4

Table of Contents 5

Introduction 6

Chapter 1: The Ongoing Battle between Women and War 9

Chapter 2: The Here and Now: A New Methodology 19

Chapter 3: The Syrian Refugee Crisis 31

Chapter 4: Looking at the Bigger Picture: How Did We End Up Here 42

Conclusion 52

References 55
The way in which war is carried out is continuously evolving, yet those who are impacted remain largely the same. Women in particular are consistently victimized during times of war; by 1992, it was estimated that over 36 million women and girls had been uprooted by war (Turpin, 1998). This number does not take into account those who have been displaced by the more recent wars in the Middle East, including the current conflict unfolding in Syria.

In addition to the challenges women face in zones of conflict, there are numerous obstacles that come about in the refugee camps they flee to. Rather than finding solace in a refugee camp, many women face continued victimization both within the community and amongst their family. Their experiences however remain overshadowed by the more salient issues of the conflict itself, the lack of humanitarian aid needed to efficiently run the refugee camp, and the relationship between the camp and the country in which it resides. These issues are currently the top stories concerning the Syrian refugee crisis, making it so the plight of Syrian women remains largely unknown.

The motivation for this research comes from the work done by Christine Sylvester. Sylvester’s work places a strong emphasis on the importance of considering human experiences in the context of the war narrative. In her book *Experiencing War*, Sylvester argues that nobody is immune from war’s touch (Sylvester, 2011). Sylvester’s belief is that because war has a universal impact, those who study conflict must incorporate individuals and their experiences into their analysis. Overlooking human experiences and how they relate to the war narrative is problematic. This is especially the case for women who are most often forgotten during times of conflict because they are viewed as victims rather than actors of war. Sylvester and other
feminist theorists argue the exclusion of female experiences is leading to a gap in what we know about war’s impact on the individual.

This research aims to challenge the current trends in analyzing war by providing insight into the experiences of women during war, particularly as it currently relates to the Syrian refugee crisis. Female refugees in the Zaatari Refugee Camp, located in Jordan, are currently facing numerous types of violence and turning to prostitution in order to create a stable life for themselves and their families. In order to fully understand the female refugee experience two important questions need to be considered. First, what factors help to contribute to the deplorable circumstances women face in a refugee society? Second, are these factors as a result of the refugee camp society itself, or are they an extension of preexisting conditions in society?

In the chapters that follow, these questions will be answered by considering the existing literature in the realm of refugee camps; determining which factors pertaining to the status of women in society are salient to the discussion involving the Syrian crisis; and finally, looking to the current events unfolding in Zaatari as a case study for testing whether or not preexisting societal conditions are in fact present.

Overall, this analysis will focus on the experiences of female refugees to determine if preexisting societal conditions play a role in the circumstances they face upon entering into a refugee society. In the chapter that follows, the arguments surrounding the importance of human experiences will be introduced in more detail and the existing research pertaining to women and war will be critically analyzed. The second chapter will discuss the importance of acknowledging societal traditions that play a role in the formation of strict gender roles. The
prevalence of these roles will be demonstrated through a number of relevant examples currently unfolding in the Middle East. The conclusion of chapter two will return to the refugee camp to highlight the consequences that come about as a result of gender roles permeating the bounds of the refugee society and call into question what must be done to better the livelihoods of female refugees. Chapter three will utilize the current Syrian refugee crisis as a case study to determine if preexisting societal conditions do in fact exacerbate gender roles amongst the refugee society. Finally, chapter four will consider everything discussed in the previous pages to highlight societal patterns and put forth ideas for combating the issue of amplified gender roles in the refugee society.
Chapter one – The Ongoing Battle between Women and War

The Current International Relations Lens on War

The experience of war has long been a topic of study in the scholarly community. Whether analyzing historical trends, catalysts for why countries go to war, or benefits of such acts of aggression, those interested in international relations are quick to focus in on the questions surrounding war. Yet, for all that has been and continues to be studied, feminist scholars in particular are increasingly pushing for a shift in focus. In her book *War As Experience*, Christine Sylvester (2013) speaks to a static trend of international relations theory (IR) being concerned with the abstractness of war, i.e. states, organizations, laws, and norms. Devoid of people, the more orthodox theories of IR fail to account for the physical, emotional, and social experiences of the people who make up war, instead they focus all of their efforts on the abstract actors who are bloodless and lack human characteristics (Sylvester, 2013).

Carol Cohn’s (1987) research on the power of language in the realm of nuclear warfare demonstrates the dangers of not including humans in the war narrative. Through the use of euphemisms and abstraction those in the defense industry can justify the use of nuclear warheads (Cohn, 1987). Rather than acknowledging the deaths of thousands, people are dehumanized by receiving the title of collateral damage. The fact that humans are being affected by war is swept under the carpet. To Sylvester, Cohn, and other feminist scholars this way of thinking is unacceptable if people are to fully understand war and its impact on those involved.

The foundation of the feminist argument is that without people war simply cannot come to fruition. Nations may go to war to preserve their interests and maintain their own security, but regardless of the reason, war is carried out by people and subsequently affects people. In her
opening statement in *Experiencing War*, Sylvester (2011) speaks to the importance of using people and their experiences as the starting point for the analysis of war. The point of Sylvester’s (2011) book is the following:

> It draws our attention away from strategic and national interest politics of war to the prospect of theorizing war from a starting point in individuals, the ones who experience war in a myriad of ways possible – as combatants, casualties, voyeurs, opponents, artists, healers, grave diggers, and so many other identities. What unites them all is the human body, a sensing physical entity that can touch war, and an emotional and thinking body that is touched by it in innumerable ways. (p. 1)

Sylvester (2011) goes further by saying, “this multi-faceted view of experience is long overdue” (p. 3). The current way of analyzing war does not tell the whole story. If academics are to continue to look at war as a result of the broader topics of anarchy, national security, self-interest, and the like, they are going to find themselves missing the smaller details. Only focusing on the broader levels leaves a more salient and relevant piece of the puzzle lingering in the shadows; this factor being the human component, which as Sylvester points out is where war begins. When war breaks out there are very few who do not feel the effect of the conflict. Whether being an agent of war or the one war is being carried out on, the body and mind experience war at its most basic level. Take away the states, organizations, and ideas of anarchy and all you have left are the individuals who are experiencing the tumultuous event that is war. Including the human component in the study of war is essential to drawing out a bigger and more complete picture of who war affects and how.
To understand why the consideration of the human experience during war is important one can look at the experience refugees have while in refugee camps. On a broad level there is an assumption that refugee camps are a place of sanctuary for those displaced during war. The term refuge literally means protection or shelter. Yet the individual experiences of refugees paint a much different picture of what it means to live within a refugee camp. Refugees are made to feel unimportant and childish. As one refugee put it, “…The reason why it is so often difficult to assist refugees is that they are not recognized as having any responsibility for their affairs at the beginning” (Harrell-Bond, 1999, p. 158). Furthermore, in regards to women, sexual abuse and exploitation runs rampant throughout the camps. So while the idea of the refugee camp is to create a place of peace for those escaping the dangers of war, many refugees find they have escaped one form of victimization only to endure another.

The current trend of international relations theory does a lot to explain the larger aspects of war. Consideration of the broader factors of anarchy, state security, and self-preservation are important. However, human experiences cannot and should not be forgotten. Analyzing human experiences will add to our understanding of war because it will bring into focus not only why war is carried out, but who it affects on an individual level as well.

The Relationship between Women and War – Why Gender Matters

If one is to consider the human component, the experiences of women need to be considered as they are a group that continues to be victimized by war. The idea of war being gendered in nature has long been an issue, dating back to the time of Hobbes, Rousseau, and Machiavelli. Each of these theorists discussed the dynamic of gender in their works, creating the
long standing traditional perception of men being the ones who “did war” while women were continuously subjected to the suffering as a result of war (Sylvester, 2013). There are two important takeaways from this way of understanding war. First, by defining men as those who “do war”, scholars are automatically deeming women to be the opposite of war. Men are the soldiers who carry out violent acts of war, while women are the ones who either suffer at the hands of men or promote peace. Men are masculine while women are soft and vulnerable; at its most basic level this is a gendered perspective on war. This leads into the second takeaway. By only considering men in the narrative that is war, the experiences of females are continuously left out of the conversation. There is this perception that women are vulnerable during times of war and as a result are victimized. However, this is where the story ends. Women as a whole are grouped into this idea and as a result their own individual experiences are left unsaid. Since women are not the ones who “do war”, their experiences are viewed as less relevant; in other words, “…international organizations like the UN have simplified or standardized women’s and girl’s activities in war” (Sylvester, 2011, p. 5). Large generalizations concerning women and war are drawn rather than considering women’s experiences on a case by case basis. Feminist scholars have chosen to look past this simplified narrative of gendered warfare and hone in on the specific use of gender based violence and exploitation that many women face during times of war.

The scholarly research focused on the relationship between women and war is far from lacking. Violence against women begins amidst the ensuing conflict. Rape has long been used as a strategic weapon of war, with the conflicts in Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Sudan being prime examples of the extreme lengths soldiers will go to, to victimize women (MacKinnon, 1994;
Mertus, 2000); while the case of Japan’s 80,000 – 200,000 Comfort Women became one of the largest human trafficking rings in the world (Amnesty International, n.d.). In her work on the rape of women during war, Sondra Hale (2010) pointed to a woman’s connection to the culture of a society as an incentive for members of the opposition to carry out mass rape in order to ethnically cleanse the enemy and cause the breakdown of society through the undermining of morality. Women are thought to be “the site of culture”; therefore, by violating them, those using rape as a war tactic bring dishonor to the enemy leading them into a position of submission (Bannon, Bouta, & Frerks, 2005; Hale, 2010).

The threat of rape has caused many women to flee places of conflict in hopes of finding safety once they reach a place of refuge. However, as the Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2000) has pointed out, “Women who flee their homes in search of sanctuary from violence too often find that there is no meaningful refuge- they have simply escaped violence in conflict to face a different type of violence in the refugee camps” (p. 1). Bannon et al. (2005) and Mertus (2000) echo this statement in their beliefs that women face vulnerabilities during all stages of conflict, including the time they spend within a refugee camp.

One argument for why women face continuing violence within refugee camps is the breakdown of society and social norms. Megan Gerecke (2010) put forth the idea that the breakdown of society leads to a reduction of safeguards for women while simultaneously lessening the constraints placed upon men. Long before being uprooted and placed into the confines of a refugee camp women face subordination in their daily lives. Refugee camps lack regulation; therefore the vulnerabilities women face due to their position in society are exacerbated. This very point is presented by the HRW (2000) in their analysis of the refugee
camps in Tanzania where they observed one of the causes of sexual violence was, “…the collapse of traditional societal support mechanisms…in particular communal support systems for the protection of vulnerable individuals may no longer be present” (p. 93). Add to this the fact that the males of the camp are simultaneously dealing with their own change in status. In her work, Susan Forbes Martin (2004) pointed out that, “Refugee men may have a difficult time in accepting either the new role of women or their own inability to support fully their families” (p.15). This identity crisis of sorts may lead men to exert their dominance over the female refugees so they feel more masculine, thus fulfilling their defined role in society.

Additionally, Mertus (2000) argues as a result of women being in a subordinate role, they are easy targets for violence and abuse. This is compounded by the fact that they are blocked from receiving access to resources that could help them overcome their circumstances. Then there are the cases of Palestinian families trying to overcompensate for the loss of societal norms by using tradition to circumvent any chances of sexual abuse; these traditions can include limiting a woman’s mobility within the camp and early marriages (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2009).

Finally, other refugees are not the only ones women need to be wary of. In many conflict situations it has come to light that aid workers and other government officials are complicit in acts of rape and forced prostitution within refugee camps to the point that it has become a major problem of concern (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2000). The HRW (2000) in particular has brought to light the collaboration between camp officials and local prostitution rings in the case of women refugees in Tanzania.
The gamut of experiences that women face during war calls for a continuing dialogue amongst government officials and academics in order to further the understanding of this relationship. The next step needs to involve recognizing the patterns that lead to women continuously finding themselves in a position of submission and exploitation.

**Where are the Faults?**

Women, like all others who seek refuge outside zones of conflict, are looking for a place of safety for both their families and themselves. Yet as Alice Edwards (2010) points out the initial legal definition of a refugee drew a blind eye to gender and women, citing only race, religion, and country of origin as rights that needed to be protected from discrimination. Furthermore, the drawing up of the 1951 convention saw no input from female voices. While legal definitions have come a long way and many states have begun to recognize sexual and gender based violence, other issues have remained prevalent within the refugee camps themselves. Upon arriving in a refugee camp, displaced persons are looking to maintain their identity. Away from the center of conflict, refugees want to do nothing more than attempt to rebuild their lives by remaining committed to their cultural and traditional beliefs. It is this strong sense of commitment that has caused women to be continuously left out of the conversation in refugee camps.

Doreen Indra (1987) spoke of the public and private sphere dynamic that carries over from traditional societies to the refugee experience. Men move around in the public sphere and deal with issues and decisions concerning the refugee camp, while women are removed to the private sphere where their main concerns involve serving the family unit. Having been relegated
to the private sphere, women are viewed as lacking both the class and culture to have their concerns heard, including those that directly link to their own personal safety (Indra, 1987). Even so, the openness of refugee camps causes women to be closer to the public sphere than ever before. However, as a result of being kept in the private sphere for so long, they do not have the necessary tools to successfully move around in the public sphere of the refugee camp. Their experiences outside of the camp hurt their chances of being active participants in the refugee society.

It is important to remain cognizant of the fact that female refugees are not only vulnerable to subjection because of their gender, but because they are refugees as well. The perception of refugees has become a stereotype that both host governments and the international community buy into on a regular basis. Roger Zetter (1999) has described the perception of refugees to consist of picturing these groups of people as both dependent and problematic. According to Zetter (1999) “The concept of sanctuary coupled with the loss of familiar economic and social support systems and individual autonomy combine to construct a powerful image of dependency and the need for assistance” (p. 74). As was spoken to at the beginning of this chapter, the idea of the refugee camp is one of protection from the chaos of war; however the overriding feelings of loss, coupled with the questioning of one’s identity, tends to cause people to be portrayed as helpless victims continuing to feel the ripple effects of war. Even though a vast amount of refugees survive without dependence from formal assistance programs, the perception is that refugees are dependent and will continue to be so until they are no longer refugees (Zetter, 1999). Around the same time as Zetter, Barbara Harrell-Bond (1999) was also discussing the perception of refugees. Harrell-Bond’s (1999) work focused on the idea of
refugees being “packaged” as a group of helpless and starving people who depended on continuous relief in order to remain alive. She pointed out the crux of the problem; refugees were in need of help. However, due to stereotypes, they ended up assuming a role of helplessness that was more extreme than their actual circumstances (Harrell-Bond, 1999).

Before even adding the variable of gender into the equation, women are already branded as dependent due to their status as a refugee. Additionally, there is the belief that women are always at risk in a place of refuge due to males needing to be present to provide both safety and stability. The perception is that women are inferior and without a male counterpart they will be unable to survive (Edwards, 2010). Therefore, women have a double vulnerability in refugee camps; not only are they dependent because of their status as a refugee, but because they are female as well.

**What is at Stake?**

As one can see, women have faced and continue to face numerous obstacles in refugee camps. Legal definitions and institutional directives have been put forth, but as Dale Buscher (2010) pointed out, “…achievements in practice lag behind the achievements in policy development” (p.19). The first policy on women was not released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) until 1990, while the *Sexual and Gender Based Violence Guidelines* and *The Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls* were not released until 2003 and 2008 respectively. Policy for women has been a long time coming and follow through on such policy implementations remains an uphill battle. Policy initiatives are left unread and women largely remain outside the realm of the decision making process, while continuing to face
violence (Buscher, 2010). Furthermore, even with the construction of new policies, cultural beliefs and traditional ways of life remain salient in the refugee community, both of which block women from breaking free of dependency.

The larger institutions involved in refugee situations, such as the United Nations, humanitarian organizations, and host governments continue to look at the plight of women from the top down. Recently, there has been a move towards gender mainstreaming; whereby the experiences of both men and women are grouped together in order to ensure the needs of all are addressed. This idea of gender mainstreaming perpetuates the generalizations concerning women because it works to create a solution that is one size fits all. Rather than going directly to the source and speaking to women about their individual experiences, broad initiatives are being put forth with the idea that they are going to have an impact on camp life. Therefore, it is time those analyzing refugee situations look to a new playbook. Christine Sylvester’s idea of human experiences making a valuable contribution to the study of war is a necessary tool in determining the next steps in refugee policy, especially where women are concerned. Buscher (2010) highlighted the importance of needing to go above and beyond education and policy in order to create behavioral changes throughout refugee camps. By considering human experiences, those working to improve lives may garner a more in depth picture of the circumstances surrounding refugee women as they try to break free of their dependency and enduring cycle of exploitation. In the chapters that follow, the Syrian refugee crisis and the impacts Middle Eastern culture have on women refugees will be analyzed through the framework of human experiences. This case study will help to demonstrate the importance of linking human experiences in order to better understand the narrative of refugee women.
Chapter Two – The Here and Now: A New Methodology

The Human Experience of War

Fleeing conflict is only half the battle for the female refugee. Once they find refuge in a camp, they face a new set of obstacles including sexual abuse and exploitation, lack of access to health care, housing, and education, as well as the added stress of shifting roles in the family. Many refugee women find themselves either widowed or separated from their spouses which push them to take on the role of economic caretaker for their family. However, this economic power does not extend past the private sphere as they are still blocked from making decisions within the refugee society as a whole (Turpin, 1998). Women end up in a vicious cycle because this lack of access to the public sphere ends up negatively impacting what they can achieve in their own private sphere. This perpetuating cycle leads to dependency while simultaneously extinguishing any possibility of the female refugee being able to create a life for her and her family.

Analyzing the lives of female refugees, through the framework of human experience, is long overdue. To reiterate from the introduction, by 1992 over 36 million women and girls had been uprooted by war (Turpin, 1998). Place this within the context of there being 46 million people in total being uprooted by war by 1992 and this number becomes that much more significant (Turpin, 1998). In previous decades, the experiences of women have been generalized and addressed through the writing of policy that has resulted in little impact. Rather than assuming the experiences of all women can be grouped into the same category, there needs to be a greater emphasis placed on studying the individual. According to Jennifer Turpin (1998) there needs to be a greater emphasis placed on examining the “many faces” of women who are
impacted by war. Furthermore, it needs to be recognized that there is a, “…distinct impact that war has on women due to their gender” (Turpin, 1998, p. 3).

The current cycle highlights two key issues where women and war are concerned. First, there is a lack of taking the experiences of women seriously. The female voice is pushed to the side in favor of more simplified narratives that group all experiences into one category. This one category is then used to create blanket policies as opposed to more narrow initiatives that can account for variances across gender lines. These simplified narratives lead to the second issue. If people continue to forgo taking women’s experiences into account, generalizations will continue to be made; thus leading to a further perpetuation of the vicious circle that has been created.

A new playbook to follow. Rather than assuming the worst possible outcome for all female refugees, scholars and government officials must begin to change their ways of analyzing the refugee experience by thinking of refugees, females included, as individuals who are more than just victims, but people looking to carve out their own identity within the refugee camp. In order for this to be successful, women must be brought into the conversations concerning camp affairs. This idea is not new. Many UNHRC initiatives speak to this idea of including the women. To understand this, one needs to accept that the circumstances of the female refugee are not an exception to the daily lives of women, but a systemic problem that transcends the boundaries of refugee camps themselves and comes from a general template of thinking. Women are not subjected to this kind of treatment because they find themselves in a refugee camp, but because this treatment is due to societal traditions that form long before conflict sets
in. War exacerbates the vulnerable nature of women’s perceived roles in society leading to further exploitation in refugee camps.

This chapter will introduce the salient factors that contribute to long standing gender roles in society, particularly where the Middle East is concerned. These factors will be discussed in detail and their level of influence will be demonstrated through a number of relevant examples. Subsequently, the refugee camp will be revisited in order to show that societal traditions permeate the bounds of refugee camps, leading to the amplification of gender roles and increased levels of exploitation and vulnerabilities. Finally, the importance of considering human experiences, in the context of refugee camps, will be discussed. It will be argued that the exclusion of human experience will lead to an incomplete viewpoint concerning the obstacles female refugees face.

The Case of the Middle East

As with any analysis, it is important to define the parameters of what is being studied. In this study, the lives of female refugees will be looked at through the lens of Christine Sylvester’s idea of human experience. Links between the lives of women before and during the refugee experience will be discussed; while the current Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan will be used as a case study to demonstrate the salient nature of highlighting these parallels. The parallels discussed will focus on common societal conditions pertaining to the Middle East, each of which works together to reinforce and reproduce gender roles in the region. Issues that fall outside the scope of this analysis include gender equality on a large scale and laws concerning the rights of women. These issues are of course salient to the discussion of women, but remain outside the relevancy of this particular analysis.
Societal traditions are a cultural way of life in the Middle East, especially when it comes to the role of women. This particular region of the world is very relevant in the context of analyzing the refugee experience due to the Syrian conflict causing many to flee the country and seek refuge in the surrounding countries of Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon. Before analyzing the refugee experience in this case, there needs to be discussion of the traditions that have long kept women in a place of submission throughout the Middle East as a whole.

**Patriarchy as an institution.** According to Elhum Haghighat (2013) patriarchy should be thought of as a form of inequality towards women that is systemic throughout all of society. This way of thinking is multigenerational and is taught to both males and females. Men are taught to be the dominate gender, while women are socialized to accept their unequal position in society. These two forms of socialization lead to the all-encompassing idea that because women have such a low status in society they require protection and maintenance (Haghighat, 2013). As soon as both males and females are old enough to understand their roles in society they are made to embody them to their fullest extent leaving little room for deviation from the hierarchy. As a result, patriarchy develops into a social institution leading to the perpetuation of gender inequalities and the continued reinforcement of cultural norms.

**Lack of Empowerment.** The idea of patriarchy as an institution leads to women having severely limited access to positions that would allow them to make decisions in the public sphere. This is the case even if women gain access to resources that could help propel them into positions of influence. The reason for this lies in the fact that access to resources does not automatically mean one gains control of the situation. For this to happen, women need to have both the choice and the authority to make decisions. Haghighat (2013) outlines three criteria for
empowerment. The first is resources, with education being a good example. The second is agency; a woman must have the ability to define her own goals and outline how she will reach these goals. Finally, there needs to be achievement. The goals set out at the beginning of the process must actually come to fruition. If these three criteria are not met, a woman has not achieved empowerment in the public sphere; instead she has only gained access to resources that lack the ability to generate influence.

**The role of Islam.** In addition to societal expectations, women are also expected to conform to the norms prescribed by Islam. In Islam, everything a woman does and embodies is based on honor and purity. Odeh (2010) argues females in Islamic society are culturally trained from a very young age and due to the heavy emphasis placed on virginity, all that a woman does is, “…as a result of the construct of being female and virginal” (Odeh, 2010). She goes a step further by saying the hymen itself comes to signify not only virginity but the respectability of the female; an intact hymen comes to represent the ideal model of being female (Odeh, 2010). Abdessamad Dialmy (2005) also states, “Virginity is the basis of family honor and interference with it constitutes interference with the family honor” (p. 19 ). Therefore, an intact hymen not only represents the honor of the female, but the honor of the entire family as well.

The female role, as prescribed by Islam, is very much in line with the foundations of patriarchy. The gender roles defined in both Islam and the patriarchal culture reinforce one another to create an atmosphere that encourages the constant protection of women from life’s vulnerabilities and the maintenance of their purity. As a result of this, women are relegated to
the private sphere in order to keep them from experiencing anything that would not only risk their honor, but empower them to shift the idea of the gender dynamic.¹

**Examples of role reinforcement**

One does not have to look very hard to find examples of gender role reinforcement throughout the Middle East. The following two examples demonstrate how, even in the 21st century, the idea of strict gender roles are still alive and well in this particular region of the world.

**The prevalence of honor killings.** In June of 2013, researchers from Cambridge University’s Institute of Criminology conducted a study that looked at the relationship between cultural indicators and beliefs concerning honor killings in Amman, Jordan. Of the 856 ninth grade students interviewed, 40% of boys and 20% of girls believed killing a female family member was justified on the basis of family honor (Eisner & Ghuneim, 2013). Although female students were amongst those who deemed honor killings justifiable, the results of the survey showed boys were more than twice as likely to support honor killings. Additionally, males from lower educational backgrounds were also more prone to believe honor killings were the answer for dishonoring the family (Eisner & Ghuneim, 2013).

Although the results of this study demonstrate Jordan’s recent advancements in legislation concerning honor killings, including the establishment of a special court in 2009 for

---

¹ Islam and Middle Eastern culture are heavily intertwined with one another. As such, the point of bringing up Islam in this paper is not to untangle the role of religion in Middle Eastern culture, but to indicate that the religious underpinnings of the Middle East are salient to the discussion of gender roles in the region. The teachings of Islam and how they directly relate to the rights of women is beyond the scope of this paper; this relationship however, is one that should be considered in the context of gender roles nonetheless.
the prosecution of honor crimes, the perception concerning honor killings remains deeply entrenched in society (Eisner & Ghuneim, 2013). Furthermore, honor killings remain prevalent in the country. As recently as 2010, there was a reoccurring pattern of approximately 20 honor killings per year being recorded with the belief that many more were either unreported or disguised as accidents or suicides (Eisner & Ghuneim, 2013).

This study pairs nicely with the idea of patriarchy as an institution having a large influence over gender roles, as it is believed, “That honor killings are an extreme form of gender violence that occurs in the context of societies with strong tribal traditions and a pronounced patriarchal social structure” (Eisner & Ghuneim, 2013, p. 2). Women are viewed as literally holding the key to family honor and any indication that the female has tarnished this honor is grounds for a justifiable death at the hands of a male family member. In the simplest terms, the male family members can play judge, jury, and executioner if honor is at stake; the female has no say in her fate if her honor is questioned, she is literally a pawn of the male-centric society.

The females of Jordan are not the only ones to be worried about honor killings. In October 2013, it was documented that a 15 year old Yemeni girl was burned to death by her father as a result of her, “communicating with her fiancé” ( Abedine, Almasmari, & Jamjoom, 2013, p. 1). As with Jordan, it is believe that Yemen faces the same deeply rooted cultural beliefs as a result of tribes and conservative viewpoints (Abedine et al., 2013).

**The twisted fate of those whose are raped.** It is important to remember that rape is not only a tactic of war, but a common occurrence throughout all regions of the world. Unfortunately, for those who are raped in the Middle East, the blame for the act occurring is
more often than not placed on the female. The most recent example of this is the rape of 24 year old Marte Deborah Dalelv, a citizen of Norway, who was raped by a colleague during a business trip to Dubai (Goulding & O’Sullivan, 2013). After bringing charges against her attacker, Dalelv found herself being arrested. Authorities in Dubai cited her for complicity in the crimes of unlawful sex and the illegal consumption of alcohol (Goulding & O’Sullivan, 2013). The situation was eventually resolved when the Norwegian government took action, subsequently leading to Dalelv receiving a pardon (Deaton, Goulding, & Smith-Spark, 2013).

This event is just one example of how females are viewed as perpetrators as opposed to victims in cases of rape in the Middle East. Fortunately, Dalelv spoke out and made her experience known to the world. Those who grow up in the patriarchal society of the Middle East may not be as apt to make their voices heard. This further helps reinforce the idea of women being second to men. Therefore, they are not in a position to have their opinions considered in the public sphere, even in the case of rape.

The Consequences: The Refugee Camp Revisited

The previous discussion is not merely a group of examples, but a small sample of the existing institutionalized gender roles throughout society. Existing gender roles permeate all levels of society and create barriers hindering females from gaining access to the public sphere. What is important to remember is while this sample may concern gender roles in the Middle East, the idea of patriarchy as an institution is a universal concept and is essential to one’s understanding of what all women face when entering into a refugee camp. Before conflict even breaks out and a female receives the brand of refugee, they have to deal with strictly enforced gender roles on a daily basis. The institution of patriarchy all women face outside the refugee
camp experience does not cease to exist when conflict erupts, but instead becomes exacerbated. As Susan Forbes Martin (2004) pointed out in her book *Refugee Women*, the most common issues for women to face in refugee camps include remaining responsible for most domestic activities while simultaneously dealing with changes in family structures and roles. At the same time women are also given the responsibility of being the “preservers of culture” (Martín, 2004). Yet, this newfound responsibility does not equate to new opportunities to become a part of the public sphere. As will be discussed in the case of the Syrian refugees, this lack of opportunity pertains to both employment and positions within camp organizations dealing directly with decisions and aid distribution. Refugee camp officials have noticed a pattern of women being hindered from gaining access to resources or being privy to decision making processes due to cultural constraints (Martin, 2004). The patriarchal system ensures women remain firmly in the private sphere even within the refugee society.

The consequences of being blocked from the public sphere, while simultaneously gaining more responsibility, are unpleasant and unfortunate. As a result of being blocked from garnering income in more traditional ways, many female refugees turn to prostitution in order to financially support their families. Research of Serbian and Ethiopian refugees shows, when faced with deplorable economic situations, women feel the only way to make economic gains is to turn to prostitution (Kebbede, 1991; Nikolic-Ristanovic, 2003). The research done by Rehn & Sirleaf (2002) also points to refugee women holding the belief they must resort to sex work in order to survive economically. Sexual favors turn into opportunities to bargain for food, shelter, and other life necessities (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002).
There are also circumstances in which family members become complicit in the selling of their female relatives in order to make money. Females can either be exploited as prostitutes or sold into early marriages. In Syria, Iraqi refugees experienced situations involving family members exploiting them, going as far as bringing clients into their own homes or taking them to nightclubs (Biermann, Burnham, Doocy, & Tileva, 2012). A UNHCR assessment of the Iraqi situation in Syria revealed that although it is very hard to obtain information regarding sexual practices, girls as young as 12 are involved in sex work (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2006). This assessment broke down sexual exploitation into three levels: the individual, the family, and the organized network which involved girls being exploited throughout the local community and being provided to tourists (UNHCR, 2006). Regardless of who is complicit in the carrying out of sex work, research has shown prostitution has become common practice in order to fulfill economic needs.

For as prevalent as prostitution has become amongst refugee women, the role of Islam in Middle Eastern society leads to complications for the female refugee; she must not only meet societal expectations, but must also conform to the norms prescribed by Islam. Due to the heavy emphasis placed on the hymen being the heart of a female’s honor, those who turn to prostitution go to great lengths to ensure the hymen is not damaged. This is done by adopting different types of sexual practices including sodomy and oral sex. If the hymen does happen to break, women seek out corrective surgery in order to ensure their honor remains unblemished (Dialmy, 2005 & 2010).

The female refugee experiences numerous obstacles. As a result of deeply rooted gender roles and the need to meet societal expectations, prostitution becomes one of the only options for
survival. However, in the Middle East, female refugees still go to great lengths to ensure their purity and honor is maintained. The patriarchal nature of the Middle East, combined with the saliency of Islam, make it so females adhere to their prescribed gender roles even during times of great hardship.

**So What Does This All Mean?**

Constructing a link between the experiences of women both inside and outside of the refugee society is essential if one wants to understand the female refugee narrative. Female refugees are excluded from decisions, blocked from resources, and forced into prostitution not only because of their status as a female refugee, but because of deeply rooted societal traditions that carry over into refugee camps. The traditional methods of IR look to initiatives such as gender mainstreaming as the answer to dealing with the plight of refugee women. However, this is clearly not enough. By considering the experiences of refugee women as an extension of society in general, one can begin to see the importance of considering the individual in the refugee narrative. The beliefs of many individuals determine how society as a whole functions. You cannot bring about change at the societal level unless you first start to change the minds of those who make up society. If one hopes to successfully help refugee women, ways of dealing with the root causes of gender roles must be addressed. Before broad initiatives can even be discussed, one must first understand why women meet with discrimination in refugee camps. This understanding can only come from connecting with women on an individual basis. Female refugees have been treated unequally due to prescribed gender roles. To make a real impact on changing the refugee experience for women, they must be able to gain access to the public sphere of the refugee society. This starts with critically reflecting on the experiences of women
as opposed to creating policy based on assumptions as to what it really means to be a female refugee.

This chapter highlighted the importance of considering human experiences when analyzing what it means to be a female refugee. The obstacles faced by female refugees are a result of long standing traditions practiced throughout all of society that permeate the bounds of the refugee camp. Noting the parallels between the refugee society and society as a whole is necessary if one is to fully understand the female experience. In the next chapter, the current Syrian refugee crisis will be utilized as a case study to test whether or not preexisting societal conditions do in fact play a role in the female refugee experience.
Chapter Three – The Syrian Refugee Crisis

The ongoing conflict in Syria and the subsequent refugee crisis that has ensued is no exception to how war can impact the lives of thousands, women included. On July 25, 2013, the death toll from the civil war in Syria reached 100,000 (Lederer, 2013), while the United Nations declared the Syrian refugee crisis to be the worst since the Rwanda genocide (Hunter, 2013). With the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan marking their one year anniversary on July 29, 2013, the plight of refugees does not appear to be settling down anytime soon. Zaatari, now the fourth largest “city” in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, is home to some 120,000 refugees, a number which greatly exceeds the 10,000 person capacity set for the camp (Malkawi, 2013). With humanitarian aid dwindling and Jordanian resources coming to the brink of collapse, many refugees are facing uncertainty in the coming months. However, for all that has been discussed in regards to Zaatari, such as education for children, the capacity of Jordan’s resources, and the role of the international community, the ongoing challenge facing the women of Zaatari has received very little recognition.

The prevailing issue, which continues to be highlighted, is the strain the refugee crisis is putting on Jordan’s resources and citizens. With Jordan being one of the poorest countries in the world with regards to water, the constant influx of people into the country is of great concern. Additionally, it has been noted that Syrians looking for work and living arrangements outside the refugee camp has drastically impacted Jordan’s unemployment rate and housing market (Hall, 2013). With so much attention going towards the need for international aid for the well-being of all refugees as well as the stability of Jordan, the plight of women is not receiving the necessary attention that it deserves.
The following sections will demonstrate how the current experiences of Syrian refugee women unfortunately mimic the experiences of the many thousands of refugee women that have come before them. The traditions of patriarchy, lack of empowerment, and the role of Islam, presented in chapter two, will be reintroduced to demonstrate the parallels between Zaatari and society as a whole. These parallels will be highlighted by discussing the obstacles and vulnerabilities female refugees currently face in Zaatari, as well as the steps being taken in an attempt to reduce these issues.

**Life inside the Camp for Female Refugees**

According to statistical data from the UNHCR, female refugees account for 53.8% of all refugees in Zaatari, with 23.4% of them being between the ages of 18 and 59 (UNHCR, 2013). These statistics do not remain stagnant for long due to fluctuations in camp population on a daily basis (UNHCR, 2013). Of those women who are accounted for, many are either widowed or have left behind their husbands who continue to fight against the Assad regime. Regardless of their situation, many Syrian women have found themselves to be the sole caretakers of their households. This newfound responsibility brings a constant struggle of attempting to gain access to resources and job opportunities, an all too familiar story for the female refugee.

**Lack of access to resources.** One survey assessment of the Zaatari refugee camp, done in December of 2012 by the Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Sub-Working Group in Jordan (CP and GBV Sub-Working Group in Jordan), provides evidence of female refugees having a lack of access to resources. The reason for this hindrance is due to three factors. First, 34% of survey respondents noted when both males and females were recipients of the same
services females were continuously blocked from gaining access. Second, 39% of survey respondents called into question the lack of female staff involved in resource distribution. Finally, 19% of respondents believed female refugees were hindered from resources because their families restricted them from accessing services (Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Sub-Working Group in Jordan [CP and GBV Sub-Working Group in Jordan], 2013). Additionally, 42% of respondents felt younger girls were also blocked from resources as a result of family interference (CP and GBV Sub-Working Group in Jordan, 2013). While this survey only contains the opinions of those selected to partake in the assessment, the results allude to female refugees being continuously hindered from resources as a result of their gender and the social and cultural norms of the patriarchal Middle East.

An example of the troubles women face is the story of Ibtisam, a Syrian housewife who has never been employed in her life. Having no previous work experience, she has been unable to find employment in the refugee camp (Abouzeid, 2013). Even if women are able to find work it is usually very limited in scope, with 64% of women being employed as cleaners, while only 14% of women gain the opportunity to work with organizations within the camp (CP and GBV Sub-Working Group in Jordan, 2013). These statistics are disconcerting because they demonstrate that although over half of the camp’s residents are female, only a small portion of them are able to gain employment in the organizations helping to oversee the day to day operations and decisions of resource distribution.

**Violence against women.** The same assessment of Zaatari also revealed a common occurrence of violence against women, most often in the form of domestic violence. Of the people surveyed, 39% identified domestic violence as being the number one form of violence to
plague the refugee camp (CP and GBV Sub-Working Group in Jordan, 2013). This statistic is in line with the information gained through the safety audit portion of the assessment in which many women stated they felt their own tents were the most dangerous because there was no way to get away from those wishing to do them harm (CP and GBV Sub-Working Group in Jordan, 2013). The prevalence of domestic violence in the camp is hard to combat because in the context of the Middle East and the patriarchal society many believe what happens in the home is private and should not be brought to the public sphere. So, while many women face violence in their own homes they do not have the ability to seek help because they fear reprisals if they decide to come forward. Furthermore, it seems they are made to feel what happens to them is inevitable due to the stress of their husbands lacking both money and employment (CP and GBV Sub-Working Group in Jordan, 2013). This complacency perpetuates the idea of women having to submit to male family members even if violence is involved.

The prominence of domestic violence does not mean that other, more public spaces of the camp are not devoid of violence. It is believed mafia type groups have sprung up throughout Zaatari. These organizations are not only acting as power-brokers for resources and jobs, but potentially running brothels throughout the camp as well (Abouzeid, 2013).

Sexual and gender based violence is also thought to be taking place in the camp. Unfortunately, because the cultural norms of the Middle East deem sexual acts outside of marriage to be dishonorable, many cases of sexual violence go unreported. Only 44% of survey respondents had heard of sexual violence occurring within the camp; while none of the respondents believed sexual abuse was happening at the hands of aid workers and camp officials (CP and GBV Sub-Working Group in Jordan, 2013). For all of the emphasis placed on the
vulnerabilities of women, it is important to remain cognizant of the fact that males can also fall victim to sexual and gender based violence. Camp life exacerbates risks and vulnerabilities for all those involved.

**Prostitution.** For all that is being done to assess the current situation in Zaatari, the information surrounding prostitution is lacking. The existing literature on the lives of female refugees highlights reoccurring situations of prostitution in order to survive economically; the situation in Zaatari is no different. Husbands have admitted to selling their wives for as little as $70 a day, while some females have taken it upon themselves to sell their own bodies to make a living (Halaby, 2013). Syrian women outside of Zaatari have also turned to prostitution in the border towns of Jordan, causing many home-grown brothels to face competition (Halaby, 2013). When asked why they sell their bodies they admit to doing it because there is no other way to make money (Halaby, 2013). Finally, family members are selling their daughters outright, in order to gain large sums of money instantly. One man sold his daughter for $2,000, while another family sold their daughter for $1,000 and subsequently left her to return to Syria (Halaby, 2013). Regardless of how they become prostitutes, female refugees are ensuring their purity is maintained by offering their services in the form of oral, anal, and any other act that does not involve penetration (R. Qawass, personal communication, June 5, 2013).

The extent of prostitution may be unknown, but the stories of these individuals indicate it is a problem nonetheless. Whether female refugees turn to prostitution of their own volition, are exploited by their families, or pimped out by the mafia run brothels, they are facing unimaginable circumstances that must be addressed. Recognizing access to resources is lacking and violence is prevalent is a step in the right direction, but coming to terms with the fact women
are selling themselves hoping they will make enough money to survive is imperative. Women should not have to turn to prostitution to support themselves and their family. Moving towards an organizational structure in which females have greater access to resources and spheres of influence will help to take the burden off these female refugees. It cannot be said that this is the ultimate answer to addressing the prostitution of Syrian women, but creating other opportunities for cultivating a stable livelihood is the logical next step.

What is being done?

The assessment done by the CP and GBV Sub-Working Group in Jordan brought to light numerous issues that need addressing. The list of recommendations that has come about as a result of the information gained is extensive. Ones to highlight include: consulting women for improvements concerning camp security, ensuring both males and females are equally represented in community-based security committees, encouraging women to feel empowered when it comes to identifying security concerns, increasing the availability of resources to female refugees, and including men and boys in the dialogue concerning violence (CP and GBV Sub-Working Group in Jordan, 2013). These initiatives are a great first step for addressing the issues plaguing the Zaatari refugee camp. However, there remains a glaring oversight in the area of violence, abuse, and exploitation. Of the 16 bullet points identified in this section none of them deemed turning to female refugees themselves as an important piece of the puzzle in combating such issues. Training camp personnel and informing the population as a whole of the risks that come with getting bailed out of the refugee camp are key steps in the process towards addressing issues of violence and exploitation, but it is simply not enough. Women are the ones who fall victim to numerous forms of violence and exploitation in Zaatari on a daily basis. Refusing to
include them in this conversation is doing a disservice to both the officials who are trying to combat these issues as well as the female refugees themselves.

Furthermore, the track record of implementing policy initiatives to address the issues female refugees face is far from promising. This assessment provides recommendations yet does not give guidance on how these recommendations should be instituted and subsequently maintained. The stories of the few female refugees interviewed by various news outlets provide compelling evidence that there are those who are willing to come forward and talk. Camp officials should take advantage of this and garner first-hand information from female refugees concerning their circumstances and what they feel needs to be done to rectify their situations. The circumstances surrounding the lives of female refugees cannot be fixed overnight, but it cannot even begin to be fixed if female refugees remain voiceless in this enduring cycle of violence.

**What enables gender roles in the camp?**

In chapter two the idea of considering the circumstances surrounding refugee women in the larger context of society was put forth. The three factors discussed were patriarchy as an institution, lack of empowerment, and the role of Islam. Each of these cultural factors is essential in understanding the experiences of women in the Middle East. The information garnered from the CP and GBV Sub-Working Group in Jordan assessment provides documented evidence of the issues women are facing in Zaatari. These issues connect directly back to each of the above mentioned factors.
**Patriarchy as an Institution.** There are several factors that show patriarchy is still at play in the refugee camp. First, women and girls are continuously hindered from gaining access to resources by family members who wish to keep them in the private sphere. By keeping female refugees from gaining access to resources, male family members can ensure their continued dominance of the family unit. Female-headed households are also routinely marginalized from accessing services making it so the presence of male family members is not even needed to create an obstacle to aid. Second, the level of domestic violence and the belief that men turn to such acts of aggression as a result of stress from lack of employment connects back to the idea that males may overcompensate if they feel their positions in society are slipping as a result of them being branded a refugee. Domestic violence is a way for them to exert their dominance and regain some of their power. Third, Ibtisam’s story of not being able to find work demonstrates that experiences outside of the refugee camp can influence what unfolds in the refugee society. Her lack of experience in the public sphere negatively impacted her ability to find work as a refugee. Women, who have only known the private sphere all their lives, are at a disadvantage when trying to support themselves as refugees. Entrenched norms of patriarchy prevent chances of employment and access to resources, both of which would greatly increase the opportunities for female refugees. Being blocked from the public sphere only further perpetuates the idea of patriarchy and reinforces cultural norms throughout the refugee society.

**Lack of empowerment.** The institution of patriarchy leads to women being hindered from gaining empowerment in the public sphere. Access to resources is only the first step. In order for females to truly feel empowered, they must be in a position to make decisions and also be in a position of authority. With many female refugees being blocked from gaining access to
resources their chances of becoming empowered are severely limited. Additionally, the lack of female staff members throughout the camp indicates opportunities for being in positions of influence are nonexistent. In order for the refugee society to be equally represented and cared for, both males and females need to have access to spheres of influence. Susan Forbes Martin (2004) pointed this out when she put forth the idea that a lack of female representation in decision making efforts is directly linked to the unequal distribution of aid.

**The role of Islam.** Female refugees who turn to prostitution, but limit the ways in which their body is used, are going to great lengths to make sure their purity is maintained. Prostitution is turned to not out of want, but because of need. Ensuring the hymen remains unbroken allows females to preserve their virginity and honor. The refugee society may be a place of instability and turmoil, but adhering to the norms of Islam remains salient for all.

The cases of prostitution in Zaatari are a result of dire economic circumstances. Although the extent of cases is unknown, it is believed dozens of Syrian women are selling their bodies. For what little is known concerning prostitution, there is even less known about sexual assault and sexual based violence. It is assumed acts of violent sexual assaults are occurring in Zaatari, but because of the stigmatism surrounding rape in the Middle East, many women are afraid to come forward for fear of dishonoring themselves and their family. Islam places such a heavy emphasis on honor that confronting instances of sexually based violence is simply not an option for female refugees.
What it all means

The information presented above demonstrates the cultural markers of patriarchy as an institution, lack of female empowerment, and the role of Islam are just as salient in determining life within the refugee society as they are in society as a whole. This is clear evidence the refugee experience is not an unusual event only happening as a result of a lack of aid, oversight, and the refugee being stereotyped as a helpless human being. These are all factors contributing to the circumstances surrounding the lives of refugees. However, in the case of female refugees larger factors of influence are at play. Traditions of strict gender roles transcend the boundaries of refugee camps making it so female refugees continuously face an uphill battle. Creating stability as a refugee is hard in and of itself due to the perceptions of what it means to be a refugee. Women have it much harder because they not only face the battle that comes with being a refugee, but the battle of what it means to be a female in a male dominated society.

Additionally, the recommendations put forth as a result of the assessment of Zaatari are evidence that those in charge of refugee camps are still unaware of the importance of noting human experiences in their analysis of refugee situations. Steps towards including refugees, both male and female, in day to day operations are recommended, but using individual stories and experiences to shape policy has yet to be put on the table as an option. The women and men of Zaatari have numerous stories to tell. They are the ones who live the refugee experience every day; therefore, there really is no one better to utilize for information which can then be used to shape policy initiatives.
The Syrian refugee crisis may be a year old, but there is still time to bring individual experiences into the conversation concerning the maintenance of Zaatari. Acknowledging the physical, emotional, and mental toll being taken on all refugees is needed to fully understand what is going on. Until then, policy will be based on the assumption that what works on paper will end up having a meaningful impact on life, which previous refugee experiences demonstrate is never actually the case.

This chapter presented a relevant case study with regard to the analysis of life as a female refugee. The current obstacles that Syrian women face in Zaatari indicate the relevancy of considering societal conditions when analyzing the experiences of refugee women. These societal conditions preclude amplified gender roles in the refugee society. Subsequently, women must deal with a lack of access to resources, sexual and gender based violence, and turning to prostitution as a form of income. The following chapter will build upon all that has been learned in the preceding three chapters by constructing a picture of how exactly women ended up in this vulnerable position. Finally, suggestions for policy change will be introduced and discussed.
Chapter Four – Looking at the Bigger Picture: How Did We End Up Here?

The current events unfolding in Zaatari indicate the experiences of refugee women remain one of inequality and turmoil. In addition to being blocked from resources on a continuous basis, female refugees face the threat of violence and exploitation from both strangers and their own family members. These already unfortunate circumstances are further exacerbated by the fact that many female refugees resort to prostitution in order to fulfill their role as caretaker of the family unit. With more conventional opportunities for economic stability out of reach, women feel selling their bodies is the only way they will be able to make ends meet in the refugee society.

Time and time again female refugees face discrimination. What is important to remember, is their experiences in the refugee society stem from preexisting gender roles. All refugees are exposed to deplorable circumstances, but female refugees face additional consequences and vulnerabilities due to their gender. This fact begs the question, how do women end up in this position? The following pages will answer this question by considering societal patterns and the factors helping to perpetuate them. Suggested changes, for all actors involved in refugee affairs, will also be put forth and discussed.

Observable Patterns

Based on all that has been discussed in this paper, there are three patterns to note, each assisting in the perpetuation of the plight of women. These patterns are gender inequality, continued practice of exclusion, and continued reproduction of gender roles and identities.
These patterns are not mutually exclusive, but instead feed off of one another to create deep rooted gender roles in society.

The situation involving women starts with gender inequality. Throughout all of society, females experience varying levels of inequality. The one discussed most in this paper is the distinction between the private and public sphere. Women must remain in the private sphere, while men are free to move throughout the public sphere. This dichotomy leads to the practice of exclusion. The public sphere is where decisions are made and empowerment is gained. By being hindered from entering this sphere, women are hindered from gaining access to economic aid and decision making processes. By lacking decision making abilities, women cannot join in the conversation of breaking free of gender inequality. Thus, gender inequality persists.

The practice of exclusion and the persistence of gender inequality lead to a vicious cycle of women being restrained from rising up in the public sphere of society. This cycle is exacerbated by conflict when men literally begin to carry out acts of war on the female body. Rape becomes not only a weapon, but another way for men to exert their dominance over women. Unfortunately, many women lack the capability of getting justice for such acts of violence because they do not have the skills or the access to both resources and power sources due to their subordinate position in society (Mertus, 2000). This insufficient knowledge also puts females at a disadvantage upon their arrival at a refugee camp. Armed with only what they know of the private sphere, women lack the necessary skills to successfully provide for both themselves and their family. Rather than having the ability to bolster this skill set, females continue to be relegated to the private sphere. Being removed from one society and placed into
another does not help them make any gains in life. On the contrary, female refugees face increased vulnerabilities and challenges.

All the while, because of the cycle women find themselves in, gender roles and identities continue to be reproduced and reinforced. As was noted earlier, as soon as a child can comprehend gender roles, they are trained to conform. Males are taught to dominate, while females are taught to listen and serve. This reinforcement of prescribed gender roles results in a pattern of specific behaviors and social identities (Biddle, 1986). This pattern is known as role theory and is described by Biddle (1986) as being the embodiment of prescribed roles as a result of societal expectations. Based on societal viewpoints, women will act in a particular way because they believe that is what is expected of them. Before conflict even sets in, females have been programed to act and think in a certain way. This way of acting and thinking does not cease to exist in the refugee society. From day one, women are taught their role as family caretaker is most important, as this is the expectation in the private sphere. In the refugee society, many females fail to adequately provide for their children because they are blocked from the public sphere. As a result, they turn to prostitution in order to make money to support their families. Prostitution may not be ideal, but it is one of the few ways women can successfully fulfill their roles; thus becoming a justifiable option. As Karen Jacobsen (2005) pointed out, prostitution becomes a strategy for survival because other methods of garnering money are unavailable.

In the simplest of terms, due to the gender they were dealt, females face a continuous uphill battle from the very beginning. Gender inequalities, persistent practices of exclusion, and the reinforcement of gender roles all work together to inhibit women from making societal gains
in the public sphere. Once conflict erupts and refugee camps are set up, females face further
discrimination due to their gender. Inequalities and identities become amplified making it so
female refugees cannot escape their roles in society even when they reach a supposed place of
solace.

**Aggravating Factors**

Humanitarian organizations and the UNHCR are in a position to help women break free
of the cycle they are caught up in, yet no impactful gains have been made. Rather than realizing
women are their own unique group in society, the UNHCR and other large organizations,
through the use of gender mainstreaming and guidebooks, have attempted to standardize the way
issues surrounding women are dealt with. As Edwards (2010) pointed out, gender
mainstreaming only attempts to align female issues with the male oriented framework that
already exists. Rather than working to create a new framework, people try to create a solution
which fails to take differences into account. In order to effectively assist with issues facing both
males and females, the existing male oriented frameworks must be reconstructed to take into
account both identities (Peterson, 2004).

Humanitarian organizations and host governments are also contributing to the prevailing
beliefs concerning women by not focusing their attention on the problems that arise in the
refugee society. Zetter (1999) pointed out many host governments and international
organizations view refugee camps as entities needing to be contained and restricted. Due to the
stereotypes surrounding refugees and the possibility of refugee camps destabilizing the country
they reside in, refugees are viewed as a threat. Rather than treating refugees as a group of
individuals who need help stabilizing their lives, they are treated as a disease that must be continuously watched (Zetter, 2999). This way of thinking is detrimental to women because they are the ones who find their lives to be the most unstable in the refugee society.

Additionally, even when there are those who are willing to fight for the voices of women to be heard, there are those who wish to keep them quiet. Moaisser Al Sardia, a member of the Jordanian Parliament has been advocating for the acknowledgement of gender based violence and prostitution in Zaatari. She says many women are facing rape, exploitation, and temporary marriages, all of which can have a negative impact on a woman’s honor. The price for Al Sardia speaking out, is receiving death threats from the Free Syrian Army (M. Al Sardia, personal communication, May 22, 2013). In contrast to Al Sardia’s opinions, members of the Free Syrian Army believe those who turn to prostitution do so out of want rather than need (Halaby, 2013). There are many differing opinions concerning what is going on in Zaatari. As a result, issues are not being addressed, leaving many female refugees in vulnerable positions.

Finally, refusing to take the human component of the refugee experience into account is another disservice to women. In her work, Edwards (2010) noted the research into the refugee experience usually takes the form of a male paradigm. With females excluded from decision making processes, their opinions, concerns, and suggestions are not heard. Having only males provide insight causes the female viewpoint to be completely ignored. In order to create effective change women must be included. Until women’s opinions are considered, the initiatives regarding refugee camps will be made on the sole basis of an incomplete viewpoint.
What needs to be done?

Based on all of the information put forth in the previous pages, it can be said that key changes need to take place in order to help female refugees. First, Christine Sylvester’s idea of appreciating human experiences must be taken more seriously. Top down initiatives are clearly not making enough of an impact on the experiences of refugee women. For initiatives to be more beneficial, the experiences of women must be added to the scope of analysis. Furthermore, by allowing the opinions of women to be heard and taken into consideration, female refugees will gain empowerment in the public sphere; thereby leading to a further breakdown of gender roles. Including women in the conversation is not only beneficial to camp officials, but to the women as well. Looking at war, and the ripple effects it creates, has been done utilizing overarching ideas for so long that accepting the importance of experience and how it relates to policy will take some time. Nonetheless, the battle to have experience recognized as a relevant aspect of the war narrative is imperative because it will give women the recognition they so justly deserve.

The parallels drawn between society and refugee life indicate gender roles are a factor of great relevance when analyzing the experiences of female refugees. The examples of role reinforcement, presented in chapter two, highlight the level of influence patriarchy has on the perception of women and their role in society. The current circumstances being faced by Syrian refugee women demonstrate this influence does not cease to exist within a refugee camp; instead the patriarchal underpinnings of society exacerbate vulnerabilities and cut women off from the public sphere. This lack of access leads to deteriorating circumstances and continuous hardship. The broader idea of gender mainstreaming fails to account for experiences and cannot highlight
these links between society as a whole and life within the refugee camp. Discovering these links is essential to one’s understanding of what females endure in refugee camps. The female refugee experience is not a unique case, but one that comes about as a result of pre-existing conditions deeply rooted in society long before conflict erupts. Failing to recognize the relevancy of these societal traditions is negatively impacting the successfulness of broad initiatives aimed at increasing the livelihoods and safety of female refugees. For policy initiatives to become effective, the experiences of women must be incorporated into the planning process of new programs.

For the experiences of women to be heard, they must be included in key decision making processes and have opportunities to pursue jobs in the public sphere. This of course can only be done if A) camp officials welcome them into the fold and B) patriarchal barriers are broken down. The second part of this process cannot be done overnight. In order to combat the patriarchal nature of society, viewpoints concerning women must shift. The study of honor killings in Amman, Jordan brought to light that many adolescents view honor killings as justifiable because of the patriarchal influences in their lives (Eisner & Ghuneim, 2013). In order to change individual opinions societal viewpoints must be addressed first. To do this education concerning the negative impact gender roles have on women must be increased. Furthermore, the roles of males must also be addressed, because they are as much a part of the gender role dichotomy as females. Buscher (2010) stated that in order to work towards behavioral change concerning gender roles, “It requires that men not only understand the benefits to them and their children that women’s equality can bring but also that these men then go on to work towards that as contributors and change agents” (p. 17). Having men, who believe in the
equality of women, be in positions of influence will theoretically help to perpetuate shifts in attitude. Discussing what it would take to shift the perspectives of society is beyond the scope of this thesis, but one that must be addressed in order to ensure a brighter future for the female refugee.

Recognizing changes must be made to the way in which analysis and policy development is carried out is only the first step. The next step is determining who will play a role in these changes. There are numerous actors involved in refugee situations including the UN, UNHCR, humanitarian organizations, host governments, and most importantly the refugees themselves. In order to better meet the needs of female refugees, these actors must work together to include human experience into their action plans. All new courses of action cannot be developed overnight. Immediate change involves the UNHCR and humanitarian organizations including females in their activities and decision making processes. The analysis done on Zaatari resulted in this recommendation and it is one that must be adhered to if women are to gain access to aid distribution and employment. However, to increase the possibility of success, women must not only be included, but must also be looked to as sources of insight. Drawing on their experiences, camp officials can gain a better understanding of exactly what women are facing.

Long term changes must also be considered. To reiterate, educating male refugees on the importance of including women in the public sphere is important. The analysis of Zaatari suggested educational training via camp organizations. Looking to camp organizations as vehicles for change is important, but training must include not only camp officials but refugees as well. Finally, host governments, the UNHCR, and the entire international community must begin to view refugees as individuals looking to rebuild their lives as opposed to being
dependent, helpless victims of war. Stereotypes concerning refugees make this shift in viewpoint challenging. Breaking long standing perceptions of what it means to be a refugee is a lofty challenge and beyond the analysis of this paper. Nonetheless, remaining cognizant of how stereotypes impact the experiences of refugees is important and an issue that must be addressed in future refugee research.

All hope is not lost. Opportunities for female refugees gaining employment are possible as can be seen by the recent project in the Adiyaman refugee camp. Located in Turkey, this project aims to help women learn and make a living through the creation of a carpet-making workshop; approximately 10,000 refugees have benefited from the project. These female refugees are benefitting both socially and economically. Those who sell their rugs retain a percentage of the money earned; while the atmosphere these women work in provides a place where they can forget their troubles and form bonds (Murray, 2013). Women are being allowed to participate in the public sphere. Equality, even if to only a certain extent, is being achieved via equal participation in the economy. Adopting these types of projects in Zaatari would provide female refugees the opportunity to pursue better livelihoods.

This chapter addressed the impact gender inequality, continued practice of exclusion, and continued reproduction of gender roles and identities has on the lives of refugee women. The exclusion women face in refugee camps is largely determined by these three factors. The patriarchal nature of society becomes amplified, leading to increased exploitation and vulnerabilities. In order to successfully combat these issues, all actors involved in refugee circumstances must recognize the importance of including human experiences in their analysis and policy development. On the road to achievement, organizations must break free of their
perceptions and allow women to be part of the decision making process. In the conclusion that follows, Sylvester’s argument will be identified once again to demonstrate the saliency of taking the physical, emotional, mental, and social aspects of war into account during analysis.
Conclusion

From this thesis, we can conclude that in order to better understand the lives of refugee women we must look at their experiences in the broader context of society in general. The circumstances leading to a lack of resources, reoccurring violence, sexual exploitation, and prostitution within the confines of a refugee camp come about due to societal traditions constructed long before conflict sets in. Women face inequality and exclusion on a daily basis; both are a result of gender identities that are continuously reproduced and reinforced in all facets of society.

The current trend in international relations theory is to analyze all components of war through a lens that fails to account for human experiences. Utilizing the ideas of polarity, self-preservation, and state security, researchers of war refuse to consider the individual experiences of those who are impacted. Experiences are subjective and irrelevant when considering the war narrative. Christine Sylvester and other feminist theorists argue by failing to take human experiences into account, those analyzing war are drawing conclusions based on an incomplete framework.

War impacts the individual physically, mentally, and emotionally; the experiences of women, during times of conflict, provide evidence of this very fact. Physically, women are raped and beaten in zones of conflict. This physical threat does not cease to exist upon arrival at a refugee camp as many continue to be sexually assaulted or face domestic violence amongst their own families. Furthermore, with no way to financially support themselves and their family, many women turn to prostitution to make a livelihood, yet another physical toll on their bodies.
Mentally, women must cope with being the preservers of culture, always making sure to retain their honor, even during the most deplorable of circumstances. When sexually assaulted, women must find the strength to deal with their pain alone because cultural norms insist women remain in the private sphere at all times. Finally, women face overwhelming emotional experiences, from losing their loved ones to being uprooted by conflict to a location that is completely unknown.

More importantly, Sylvester (2013) believes war must be considered as a social institution. Societal traditions and cultural norms are fluid. The ideas of patriarchy as an institution, lack of empowerment for women in the public sphere, and the role of Islam in the context of the Middle East, are all contributing factors to the experiences women face before, during, and after war. Each of these factors influences the experiences of women who become refugees. Their experiences in society become amplified, causing them to remain firmly positioned at the bottom level of the refugee society due to their perceived gender roles and identities.

The current challenges Syrian women are facing in Zaatari provide evidence that societal traditions permeate the boundaries of the refugee society. Syrian women currently lack access to resources and spheres of influence, while simultaneously facing various forms of violence. Their inability to move into the public sphere is a result of patriarchal norms. This subsequently leads to women being unable to become empowered in the public sphere, which would allow them to further break free from their gender roles. Finally, Islam remains a salient factor, as those turning to prostitution are continuing to go to great lengths to preserve their purity.
The war narrative has been gendered in nature for far too long. Men are the ones who carry out war, while women continue to be those who are impacted in a myriad of ways. Only through the study of individual experiences and the recognition that refugee societies come about as a result of already existing constructs, will those researching war gain a more complete framework of what it truly means to be a female during times of conflict. The war narrative will be around for a long time to come; it is about time the female voice had the opportunity to join in the discussion. Only when their voices are heard, will women be able to find the solace that refugee camps are supposed to provide.
References


Haghighat, E. (2013). Social status and change: The questions of access to resources and women’s empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa. *Journal of International Women’s Studies, 14*(1), 273-299.


