The Gendered Journey of Return
The Case of Syrian Women in Lebanon

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Executive Summary

This research adopts an intersectional feminist framework to explore how Syrian refugee women understand return to Syria and make decisions concerning it. The report follows from the experiences of 70 Syrian refugee women in Lebanon; their understanding of material reality and the push-pull factors at play which govern the question of return to Syria. Utilising quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, the research adopts a feminist approach to data analysis through unpacking and understanding the concepts at hand from the perspective of the refugee women themselves. The research demonstrated that the question of return is not straightforward, and that refugee women understand the complexities of embarking on a journey of return. Through data collection and analysis, it became clear that structures of oppression intersect in shaping the lives of Syrian women refugees in Lebanon, and may pull and/or push refugees, and particularly women, in navigating questions of return. This research shows that attitudes towards return are also governed by a host of factors; including gender, class, state policies, work, discrimination, racism, marital status and familial bonds. It highlights how women's agency is exercised, and the various ways it manifests in relation to return.

The findings of the research were divided into two main sections: (1) Reasons to remain in Lebanon, and (2) reasons to return to Syria. These reasons can be summarised as follows:

Reasons to Remain:

1.1 Security conditions in Syria: The situation in Syria, as relates to safety and basic security, is an important factor that pushes women to consider remaining in Lebanon as opposed to return. The uncertainty in Syria, and the constantly shifting military realities — including bombardment, shelling and hard violence, have been quoted by research participants as a factor hindering their return to Syria.

1.2 Economic conditions: Poverty and the poor economic conditions in Syria have also been quoted by women as reasons deterring them from considering return. Refugee women are particularly concerned with these factors, as their prospects of being part of the labour force in Syria are lower than in Lebanon. Despite the fact that economic conditions for refugee women in Lebanon are extremely harsh, it became apparent that, in case of return, they anticipate more social restrictions over their economic activity in Syria.

1.3 Social stigma: This concern, which is directly linked to economic conditions and restrictions over women's economic activity, has been voiced by refugee women as one of the reasons pushing them to remain in Lebanon. Unlike their male counterparts, processes of refugeehood, the experience of crossing of borders and forced migration, allowed some refugee women the

space to become more economically active. This factor is considered gendered, as it operates differently across genders. As with their economic activity, women felt the restrictions over their freedom of choice and movement in Lebanon receding, after being displaced from extended families and local communities.

1.4 Capital and ownership: Many refugee women expressed hesitation towards return due to the fact that they would not have access to financial and material assets in Syria where their property rights are undermined. This factor has been identified as deterring women, directly and indirectly, from considering return to Syria.

1.5 Relationality and patriarchal connectivity: It became apparent in the course of this research that the decision of return is governed by family ties, relationality and patriarchal connectivity. Women participants have discussed 'split return' — meaning that in certain cases, families negotiate that some members stay in Lebanon and while others return to Syria. Split return is determined by economic and political regimes, one example being forced military conscription in Syria. The prospect of 'split-return' is considered a deterrent for some women, and hinders their return to Syria.

Reasons to Return:

2.1 Discrimination: The research revealed that Syrian women's experiences of discrimination in Lebanon are greatly influenced by their gender, as the form of discrimination they face is different to that faced by men. Discrimination manifesting in the form of sexual and verbal harassment was cited by women as one of the factors leading them to make a decision to return to Syria.

2.2 Living conditions: For Syrian refugees, life in Lebanon is extremely harsh; economically, politically and socially, whether in the camps and informal settlements or outside. Women participants mentioned the sense of insecurity resulting from the repeated raids of refugee camps by the Lebanese army, which constituted a factor pushing them towards return to Syria.

2.3 Gender (dis)order: It became evident through this research that the traditional gender order is disturbed due to refugeehood and displacement. This demonstrated that shifts in gender roles and in the gender order can play a role in women's considerations on return.

2.4 Belonging and familial ties: This research has demonstrated that nostalgia to the homeland is a major factor pulling participants to consider return to Syria. This nostalgia cannot be separated from feelings of loneliness and isolation in Lebanon, being away from family and loved ones in Syria.

2.5 Whereas the main finding of this research is that Syrian refugee women in Lebanon do not have a unanimous answer and/or perspective regarding return, it nonetheless highlights the need for further research to move beyond the material conditions constituting push/pull factors relating to the decision of return. Affect, sentiments and feelings are often overlooked in research on refugees, and this study demonstrated their significance in shaping women's perceptions of return to Syria or remaining in Lebanon.

1. Introduction

Since 2017, the return of Syrian refugees has been on the agenda of state actors neighbouring Syria (Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan) as well as global powers (Russia, European states, United States), with increasing discrimination through legislation, access to basic services and within host societies. Over the past year, Lebanon has gained considerable international media attention for its cruel treatment of Syrian refugees; including deportation, eviction, labour exploitation, legal exclusion and lac of provision of basic services (Human Rights Watch, 2019; McKernan, 2019; Vohra, 2019; el Houri, 2019; Dowling, 2019). Despite persistent concerns from international agencies around the safety of return to Syria: Norwegian Refugee Council, Care International, Save the Children, the International Rescue Committee and Amnesty International, Syrian refugees continue to return from many host countries (Norwegian Refugee Council et al., 2018; Amnesty International, 2019). This research is concerned with the way women conceptualise return as a complex decision and journey to embark on. Whereas the majority of research on the topic of return has focused on the material assessment of its dynamics, and the safety and dangers influencing the journey, this research explores the factors refugee women consider when contemplating or discussing return. In other words, this study critically examines different political, social and economic structures of oppression as identified through the perspectives of women refugees in Lebanon, and the associated push/pull factors for return. It demonstrates that the concept of return is multi-layered and that there is not one straightforward all-encompassing answer, as push and pull factors are often simultaneously present in conversations around return.

This research focuses on return from the perspective of refugee women in Lebanon. Return is defined by the UNHCR as the act of returning to their country of origin after a limited period of time —usually two years. It also includes internally displaced persons who return to their prior place of residence (UNHCR, 2005). International agencies such as the UNHCR, NRC and Save the Children have urged against returns which are not voluntary, safe and dignified (UNHCR, 2018; NRC et al., 2018). In the case of Syria, there still are no guarantees for voluntary, safe and dignified return, and therefore most reports focus on how and why Syrian refugees return, including: deportation, host state sponsored return, illegal return, repatriation, in addition to voluntary return. In this research, however, we define 'return' from the perspective of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon, in reference to voluntary and/or semi-voluntary return. Their perspectives reflect that Syrian refugee women in Lebanon do not share the same motivations and/or deterrents in relation to return to Syria. In line with intersectional feminist theory (explored in the methodology section), the data demonstrated that there is not a single unifying discourse representing all Syrian refugee women, and that several variables come into play to shape women's differential perspectives of return (explored in section 3).

1.1 On Return

There is little information about navigating return, or the gendered challenges therein. However, there exists more, but still lacking, information on the pull factors leading Syrian refugees to return. Much of the research on the return of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries — with the exception of reports by International Alert, Sawa and UN Women, fails to differentiate the experiences of Syrians in relation to their gender, class, age, marital status, size of family or disability, thus falling short of accurate and reflective recommendations that are representative of the diversity of Syrians' lived experiences (Khattab and Myrttinen, 2017; Mhaissen and Hodges, 2019; IPSOS Group SA., 2018).
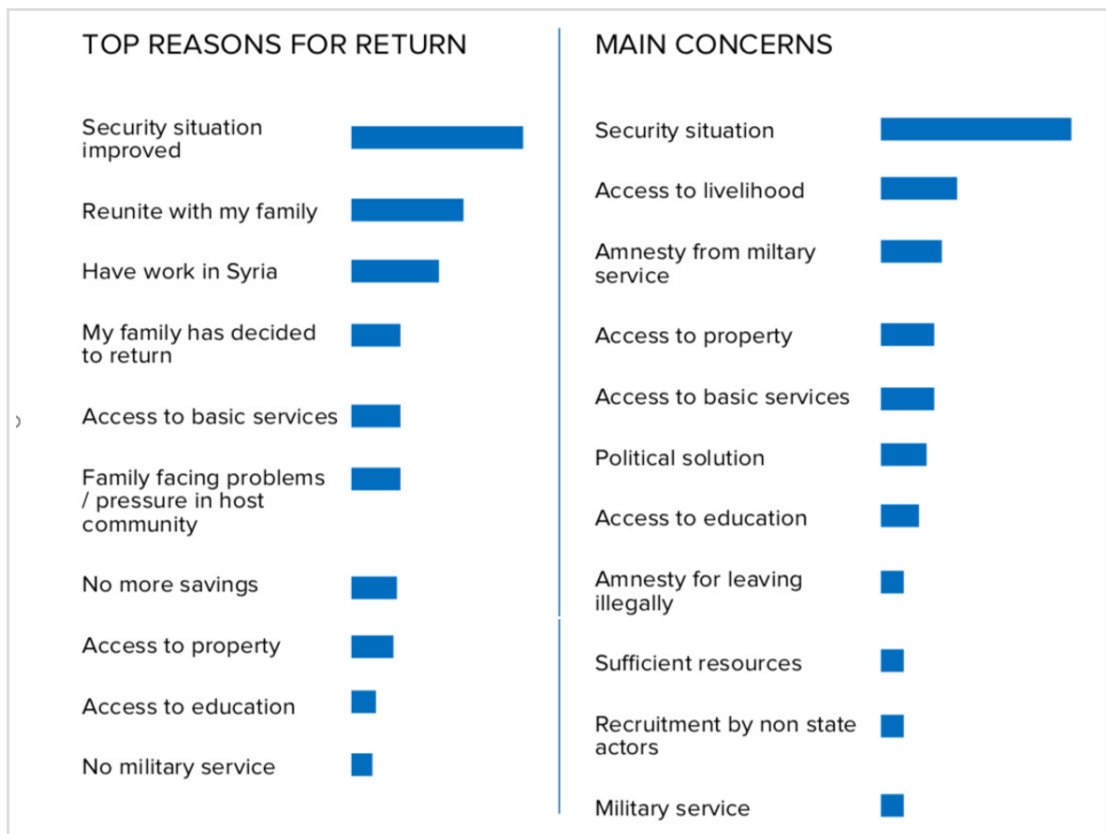
Figure 1

(UNHCR Amman, 2019:6)

In order to understand the reasons that Syrian refugees return, it is necessary to look at both push factors: current realities of refugee livelihoods, as well pull factors drawing refugees to Syria: improved security conditions, reuniting with family, employment in Syria, exception from military service and access to property (UNHCR Amman, 2019). Pull factors reflect Syrians' hopes and motivations to return, but inevitably intersect with their daily lived experiences and are therefore difficult to dissociate. Keith and Shawaf (2018) in Forced Migration Review, explain how voluntary return cannot be based on push factors, only pull factors, arguing that in the current context, host states place physical, psychological and material pressures on Syrian refugees which informs so-called voluntary return. For example, interviewees in the Bekaa Valley in 2017

indicated that, if the Lebanese state were to grant residency permits to all Syrians regardless of their UNHCR registration status, their lives would be significantly improved and they would feel both safe and dignified (ibid). The difficulty surrounding return is a gap in the literature, particularly concerning Syrians returning without the involvement of either the Lebanese state or the Syrian government (Keith and Shawaf, 2018; Mhaissen and Hodges, 2019). There is demand for more information about return, as the European Council on Foreign Relations released in March 2019 a policy brief asking if Europe should help Syrians to return, while international organisations such as the UNHCR have informally overseen some returns of Syrians from Lebanon (El-Gamal, 2019; Mhaissen and Hodges, 2019).

Furthermore, there exists very little information about the gendered aspects of return, or the contradictory attitudes and perspectives towards return that exist among Syrian refugees themselves. Research demonstrates that there is no one answer to this issue, and nor is there evidence to support either refugees' desire to stay or to return. This surely reflects that the question of return among refugees themselves is complex, and often loaded with contradictory sentiments pushing for return or pulling towards remaining in Lebanon. However, it is important to understand the living conditions and material realities of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, in order to understand how they are closely associated with refugees' considerations on return.

1.2 Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

Since the crisis in Syria in began, Lebanon has hosted 16.5% of the 5.6 million Syrian refugees registered by UNHCR. Today, it is estimated that Syrians comprise 30% of total population residing in Lebanon, 81% of whom are women (Yassin, 2018). Against the global backdrop of discrimination against refugees, international funding flows are low as the Lebanese government reported only receiving 43% of the $2.62 billion needed in 2019 to address the 'crisis' (IPSOS Group SA., 2018). Between July and November 2018, Lebanese Security forces estimate that 90,000 Syrians have returned, while UNHCR estimate only 17,000 returnees for the same period (Mhaissen and Hodges, 2019). The difference in these estimates of Syrian return indicates the need for research which documents who is returning and why they choose to return. Existing analysis on push factors for return cite: lack of economic prospects, legal vulnerability, and harassment and discrimination in Lebanon (IPSOS Group SA., 2018; Mhaissen and Hodges, 2019). Reports in recent years have documented the precarious social and legal conditions of Syrian refugees, which has steadily worsened since 2015, when the Lebanese government suspended UNHCR registration processes for Syrian refugees (Janmyr and Mourad, 2018).

1.2.1 Legal Status

Syrians face legal barriers in Lebanon, and upon their return in Syria, many of which disproportionately affect women. According to a Sawa report, Syrian women in Lebanon are ten times less likely to have legal documentation than their male counterparts (Mhaissen and Hodges, 2019). In 2015, the Lebanese government ended their open-door policy to Syrians by introducing border entry regulations and restrictive residency permit guidelines, both of which sought to deter Syrian refugees from staying in Lebanon. The new regulations for residency permits divided refugees between those registered with the UNHCR and those who are not, requiring the latter category to have a Lebanese sponsor to legally stay in the country. Both groups are required to pay $200 in annual fees for the renewal of their residency permits (IPSOS Group SA, 2018).

These restrictions on legal refugees have had consequences for Syrians in terms of their access to education, employment and shelter. They also heightened the risks of detention and eviction, in addition to putting more financial burdens on refugees. According to a report by the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (2018), 75% of Syrian refugees are not legally registered in Lebanon, and this segment of the population cannot access basic services or work legally in Lebanon. Furthermore, 76% of Syrian children were born in Lebanon, of which only 21% are estimated to be registered as refugees (UNHCR et al., 2018).

1.2.2 Economic Vulnerability

Economic vulnerability was cited as one of the most important push factors for Syrian return, with estimates that 70% of Syrians in Lebanon live on less than $3.68 per day (UNHCR, 2019). Factors contributing to Syrians economic vulnerability include exclusion from the Lebanese labour market, poor service provision, limited access to housing, and xenophobia. More than 79% women reported that they were unable to meet their own or their households' basic needs (IPSOS Office SA, 2018). Furthermore, 97% of women in the Bekaa Valley live in households with an income below $500 a month, compared to 52% in Beirut and Mount Lebanon region (IPSOS Office SA, 2018). Human Rights Watch estimates that 90% of Syrians in Lebanon are in debt due to insufficient aid, and according to UN Women, negative coping mechanisms such as debt disproportionately affect female-headed households (HRW, 2016; IPSOS Group SA, 2018). The bar chart below outlines the sources of income of Syrian households according to each region.
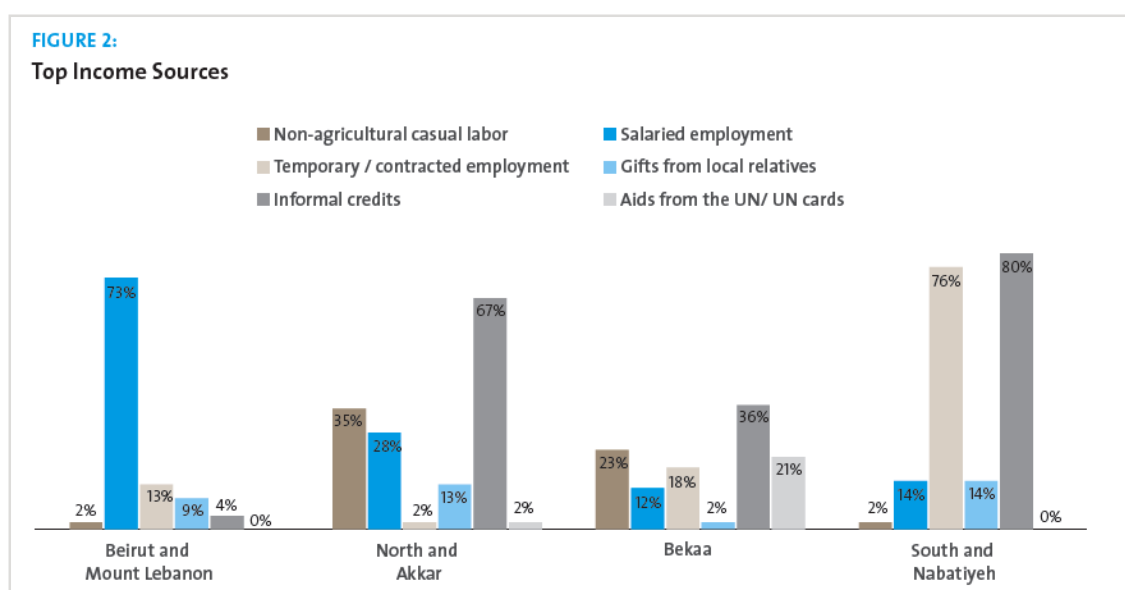

Figure 2
(IPSOS Office SA, 2018: 12)

As shown above, in the Bekaa Valley where there are fewer work opportunities, Syrian households rely on UN aid, with female-headed households being more likely to access aid than male-headed households, according to the UN Women report (IPSOS Office SA, 2018).

1.2.3 Labour Exclusion

The Lebanese labour market has long been defined by informality in low-skilled sectors, relying on migrant labour from Asia and Africa under the sponsorship system (*kafala*). With the influx of Syrian refugees, this informal sector has significantly expanded: UNHCR Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR) report estimates that 50% of Syrian refugees have paid work in Lebanon (DRC et al., 2019; UNHCR et al., 2018). The table below breaks down the statistic:

	Men	Women
Syrians working in Lebanon	73%	16%
Syrians Working more than one job in Lebanon	18%	11%

(DRC et al., 2019; UNHCR, et al. 2018).

Almost half of Syrian women in paid work reported insufficient living wages. Of the 503 interviews conducted for the UN Women study, the majority are the primary breadwinner in their household (IPSOS Group SA, 2018). Furthermore, Syrians without legal papers are disproportionately women, only 1% hold work permits, and are more at risk of discrimination due to their illegal status, thus limited negotiating power (ibid). Even Syrian refugees with residency permits risk arrest and deportation if they violate work restrictions (HRW, 2019). By law, Syrians are excluded from all but three sectors: construction, agriculture and sanitation, the latter two are unregulated by labour laws, and their workers are disproportionately comprised of those most vulnerable to exploitation, including Syrian women (UNHCR et al., 2018). Three quarters of Syrians working in Lebanon earn less than the minimum wage, in contrast to 39% of their Lebanese counterparts. This is further exacerbated in terms of gender, where women systematically earn less than their male counterparts, as shown in studies into the agro-industry and food services sectors (DRC et al., 2019). Moreover, according to UN Women, 42% of Syrian women in female-headed households and 16% of Syrian women in male-headed households want more work but face barriers in accessing the labour market, due to: (1) lack of previous work experience and (2) perceived 'weakness' in terms of physical ability; in addition to their unpaid reproductive labour in their households (IPSOS Group SA, 2018). Estimates in the VASyR reported Syrian refugee child (5-17 years old) labour at 2.2%, differing between 3.4% boys and 0.9% girls, the highest of which is in El Nabatieh region at 3.9%, and the lowest in the Bekaa Valley at 1.8% (UNHCR et al., 2018). Around 21% of children work instead of schooling, 78% of which are boys between 5-17 years old (ibid). Boys taking on 'adult' responsibilities are often left aside in contexts of vulnerability. Moreover, the pressure on males in male-headed households to provide as chief breadwinners is relatively understated in reports and policies, and yet has a sizeable impact on boys' and men's access to basic services provided by international aid agencies (Janmyr and Mourad, 2018).

1.2.4 Access to Basic Services

Basic service provision for Syrian refugees is dependent on funding flows which have declined in recent years. In 2018, funding flows covered less than 50% of the required budget by the Lebanese government for Syrian refugees service provision (IPSOS Group SA, 2018; Mhaissen and Hodges, 2019). Aid dependency is highest amongst female-headed households, and according

to a UN Women report, 15% of the women interviewed said aid was their main source of income, a figure which doubled in rural areas such as Bekaa at 34% (IPSOS Group SA, 2018). Likewise, over half of Syrians in rural areas rely on food aid, in contrast to those living in urban areas. Cuts to food, water, shelter, health and education have impacted Syrian refugees across Lebanon, pushing Syrians into exploitative work environments, substandard shelter, debt, and in some cases return to Syria (Yassin, 2018). Around 93% of Syrian households in Lebanon were severely food insecure in 2017, compared to 68% in 2013, with female-headed households being 3% more likely to be food insecure (IPSOS Group SA, 2018). Syrian refugee access to aid and basic services varies drastically according to region, in addition to multiple identity barriers such as gender and age put in place by aid organisations. For example, the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR) divides Syrian refugee population into those who can access humanitarian assistance and those who cannot, based on perceived vulnerability, principally gender (Janmyr and Mourad, 2018). There are clear limitations to this framework; for example, in Lebanon, more Syrian boys work and miss school than Syrian girls, yet aid provisions continue to focus on girls' access to education (Janmyr and Mourad, 2018).

1.2.5 Shelter

Syrian refugees have routine difficulties with access to property rights, which is linked to the legal restrictions placed on refugee movement. Human Rights Watch reported that 3,664 Syrian refugees had been evicted by 13 different Lebanese municipalities between the years 2016-2018 (HRW, 2018). Mass evictions have increasingly occurred between February and March 2019, and 220 refugees were evicted in Southern Tyre by the Litani River Authority on the grounds of polluting the river (Vohra, 2019). A month later, in April, the Lebanese Higher Defence Council ruled to take down any refugee shelter composed of materials other than wood and plastic – which applies to over 3,500 homes in Aarsal and the Bekaa Valley (Chehayeb, 2019; HRW, 2019). This policy shift by the Lebanese authorities is reflective of xenophobia and discrimination against Syrian refugees, who, in interviews with Human Rights Watch, identify through these mass evictions the wish on part of the Lebanese state for them to return to Syria (HRW, 2019). Evictions cause further displacement, impacting access to education and work. Moreover, HRW reported a lack of provision of materials to build alternative refugee shelters, and mass evictions leading to arrests and deportations (ibid).

1.2.6 Safety and Security

Xenophobia towards refugees in Lebanon has been cited as one of the reasons for Syrian return to Syria. According to the VASyR report, 47% of Syrian households in 2018 experienced verbal abuse, disproportionately affecting male-headed households (UNHCR et al., 2018). Whilst media reports emphasise societal abuse of Syrian refugees, Syrians interviewed pointed to the authorities as the main source of security and safety concerns, followed by neighbours and the host community (Hamou and Al Maleh, 2019; Cornish, 2019; UNHCR et al., 2018). Moreover, displacement is shown to increase the risk of sexual and gender-based violence, where female-headed households, unaccompanied children, the disabled and socially marginalised groups are most at risk (Yassin, 2019). The most common instance of reported forms of violence involved physical, sexual and emotional violence, mostly linked within the family or at home (ibid).

1.3 Gender and Return

Much of the research on refugeehood focuses on the effect of conflict on gender dynamics. Whereas gender relations often change with refugeehood, as women, men, girls and boys are often forced to take on different roles to survive, this can be very much linked to the experience of forced migration rather than being considered a direct effect of conflict. Surface level changes include the fact that 18% of Syrian households in Lebanon are female-headed households, and the increase in women's participation in the labour force. However, root differences persist through legislation and wider societal attitudes (Khattab and Myritten, 2017; UNHCR et al., 2018). Existing research by UN Women, Sawa and International Alert suggests that women, children and older men are more likely to return to Syria than younger men (IPSOS Group SA, 2018, Mhaissen and Hodges, 2019; Khattab and Myritten, 2017). However, this research, which adopts a qualitative approach, does not necessarily echo this finding. This is due to the fact that the research took on an intersectional feminist approach which focused directly on the gendered experiences of return, and how women's perceptions of return are very different and influenced by different political, economic and social factors. This research shows that the majority of women were more reluctant to consider return than their male counterparts. This has been explained through different factors explored in section 3.

The importance of this research derives above all from our need, as researchers, academics, practitioners and policy makers, to understand return, while recognising how gender dynamics influence the decision-making processes around it within different households, through an intersectional feminist lens. This does not only demonstrate how men and women experience return differently, but also how experiences, perspectives and feelings among women themselves are also different and vary. This analytical approach enables us to explore all variables influencing women's attitudes towards return such as class, age, marital status, legal status, educational background, etc. This research allows us to understand that the factors determining people's attitudes towards, and experiences of, return are contextual, and that a feminist reading brings out the complications of the topic and demonstrates how women have been exercising their agency through negotiating the potential of return differently. The following section lays out the methodology and theoretical framework utilised in the course of this research, explores the methods, and highlights limitations and challenges.

2. Methodology

The research methodology was developed through conversations and consultations between the co-authors. We felt that qualitative explorations of women's experiences and conceptions of return would be most suitable to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Syrian women refugees in Lebanon conceptualise return? And how do they feel about the possibility of return?

2. What factors influence these perceptions? And what makes their experiences of these views gendered?

3. What push and pull factors in relation to return can be identified through women's perspectives?

To answer these questions, the research utilised data collected through focus groups, and semi-structured survey-based interviews, with around 70 female participants. Following the data collection, and a thorough literature review, the analysis adopted an intersectional feminist framework. Based on the premise that there is not one representative perception of return among Syrian refugees, the analysis explored the different factors and reasons that shape differently women's perceptions and experiences of return, from the perspective of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon. Through this approach, we interrogated the shared structures and systems of oppression that lead women to favour either return to Syria or remaining in Lebanon. This approach allowed us to interrogate patriarchy, migration, refugeehood, culture and traditions as well as state laws, through the perception of women participants who construct their own their realities and social world. Through this approach, we were able to take into consideration women's agency in shaping their own lives. In other words, we acknowledge that the experiences of women participants are a valid form of knowledge, and that their voices are the force and engine behind this research (Stanley and Wise, 1983b, Stanley and Wise, 1983a, Stanley and Wise, 1990, Stanley and Wise, 1993). On this basis, the research is greatly influenced by the perceptions and assumptions of the Syrian refugee women in Lebanon who participated in the data collection stage. The data reflects that Syrian refugee women simultaneously held and expressed views that support both return to Syria and remaining in Lebanon. We consider this a major research finding, as participants at the time this research took place had conflicted feelings about return, and this is very much influenced by the fact that they were engaged in the research based on the assumption and possibility of their return, rather than a physical experience of return. In other words, these views are not based on an actual return journey but are rather based on the perceived potentialities associated with it.

2.1 Research Methods

2.1.1 Focus Groups

For this research, researchers carried out four focus groups with 30 women, each including between six and eight women in addition to the facilitator. Female participants belonged to different age groups ranging between the ages of 18 and 50, and residing in four camps in Lebanon: Abu Yassin Camp, Maarouf Camp, Aramel Camp and 020 Camp. They also included women who are married, single, divorced, widowed, and wives with absent husbands. The focus group sessions took place at Sawa for Development and Aid premises in the Beqaa Valley, Lebanon, and facilitated by a woman who is a Syrian refugee herself, and then transcribed. (See appendix for sample and questions).

2.1.2 Semi-Structured Survey-Based Interviews

Semi-structured survey-based interviews were carried out with 40 women between the ages of 18 and 50 in camps in Lebanon.

- Al Rahmeh camp,
- Rameh Ayash camp,
- George Saqir camp,
- Al Abrar camp,
- Musa Al Hindi camp,
- Abu Zakkreyh camp,
- Aramel camp,
- Abu Samer camp,
- Sheehan camp.

Female participants were asked questions about their demographics (age, marital status, educational attainment, place of origin and place of residence). Questions also include the reasons behind their decision to return to Syria, the challenges they are facing in Lebanon as well as the challenges they could face upon their return. Questions were filled with the help of a field researcher working with Sawa for Development and Aid.

The use of mixed methods, also known as triangulation, has been employed in this research. By combining focus groups with semi- structured survey-based interviews, triangulation proved very useful as the data findings from one method can validate the data from the other. This also means that mixed methods strategy can offer the researcher more depth and insight into the area of study, and it can also offer more accurate data and achieve a balance (Axinn and Pearce, 2006). This utilisation of triangulation meant that qualitative data was collected in order to add depth to the quantitative data, through stories, concerns, hopes, expectations, fears, and priorities. Through this approach, we were able to capture individual and group-level diversity, and unpack more in-depth portrayals of motivations and attitudes, and understandings of return, livelihoods, and gender-specific challenges, vulnerabilities, solutions, and opportunities.

2.2 Sampling

The sampling depended heavily on Sawa's outreach and their work in Lebanon, as Sawa's operations are based in refugee camps in Lebanon; in Bar Elias and Saadnayel. For this research, Sawa utilised opportunity sampling. Participant selection was based on different variables, including age, marital status and its changes, location, geographic provenance, family size and employment. The number of female participants in this research is 70, ranging between the ages of 18 and 50. 30 female participants were included in the focus group sessions, and 40 participants took part in the semi-structured survey-based interviews. Female participants have different marital status (divorced, widowed, single, detainees' wives and women in polygamous marriages). Initial considerations and hypotheses sufficiently depend on the background and experiences of research participants in the localities where they reside. Refugee communities are sometimes defined as a clandestine gathering, whose divisions are difficult to represent through research. This also requires familiarity with cultural customs, and traditions adopted in participants' areas of origin in Syria.
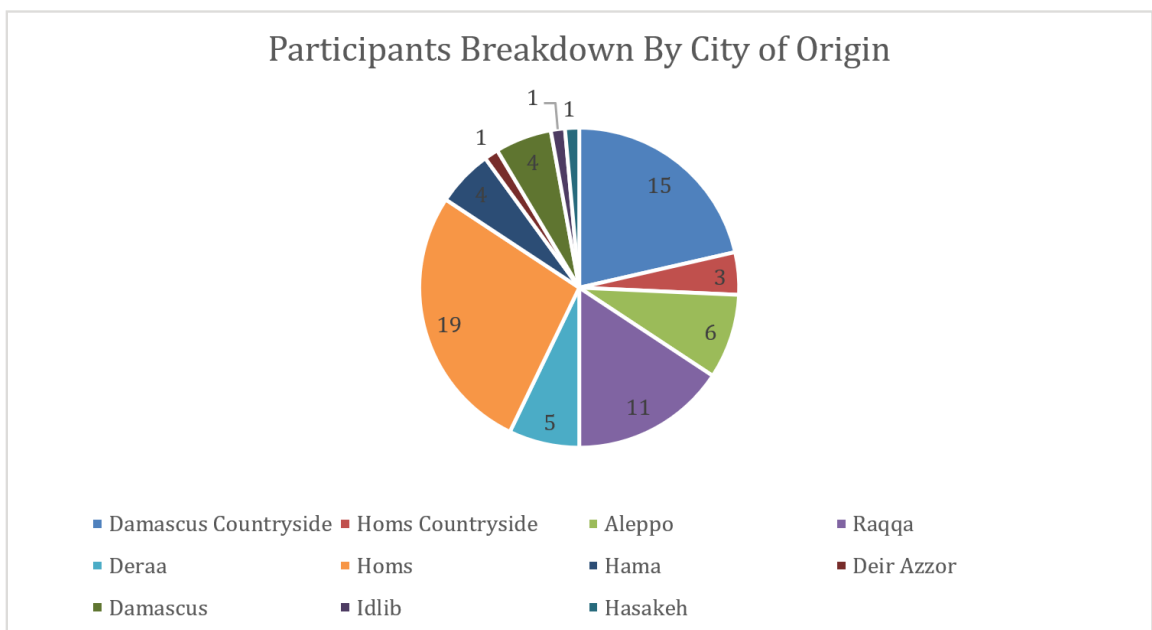

Participants Breakdown By City of Origin

Legend: Damascus Countryside, Homs Countryside, Aleppo, Raqqa, Deraa, Homs, Hama, Deir Azzor, Damascus, Idlib, Hasakeh

Figure 3

Participants by Marital Status

- Married: 40
- Married (Absent Husband): 8
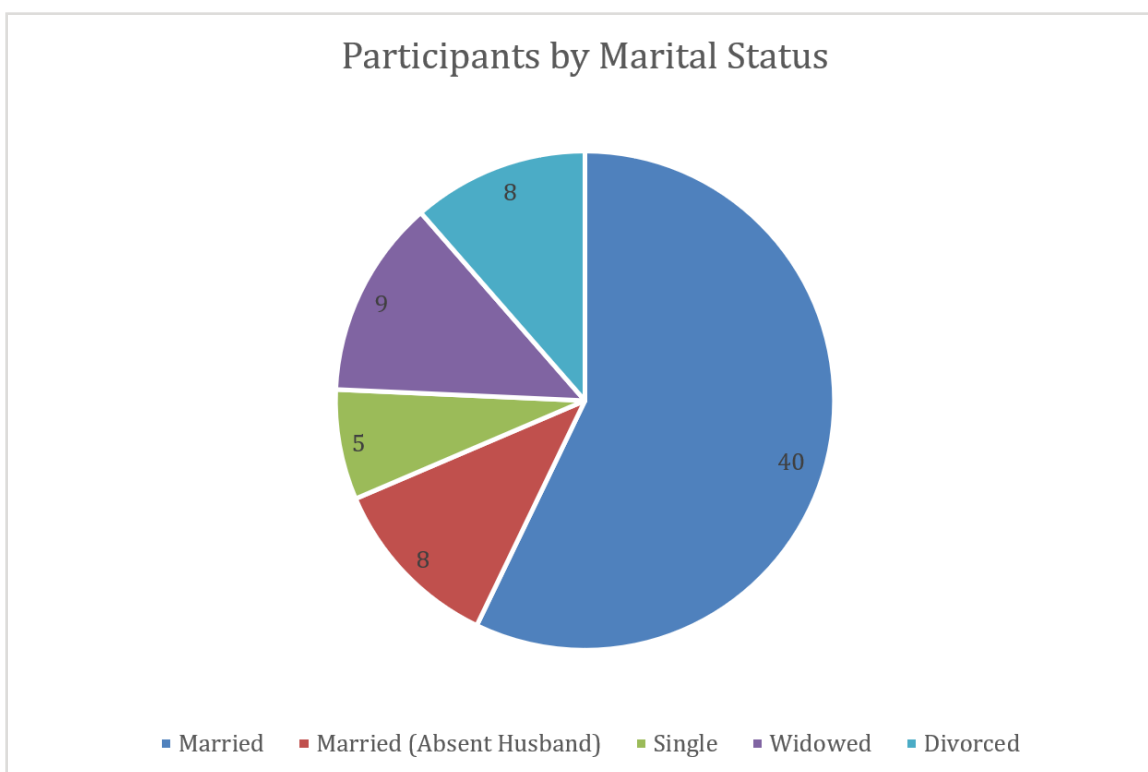- Single: 5
- Widowed: 9
- Divorced: 8

Figure 4

2.3 Research Limitations

This research spanned a period of five months with field research taking place between July and September 2019 in Lebanon prior to the eruption of the demonstrations/insurrection/revolution in October 2019, while analysis took place between October and November of the same year. For this reason, it is important to recognise that this data is also time-bound, not generalisable and is only reflective of participants' views of return based on their experience of refugeehood in Lebanon at the time of the interviews, rather than an actual experience of return. Therefore, and in line with feminist research ethics, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research and acknowledge potential biases in the data. Biases in relation to sampling also have implications on the perceptions women have expressed. Despite the fact that these were different, and varied between favouring and disfavouring return, all participants had no valid legal status in Lebanon, and all come from similar economic, cultural and educational backgrounds, which might have added some bias to the data sample, rendering it unrepresentative of the voices of Syrian women refugees in Lebanon more generally. The fact that the data collection was carried out by Sawa staff as a time-bound project, further research over longer periods of time is needed to detect how people's perceptions are governed by social, political and economic factors that are constantly in flux, and how space and time come into play in shaping these perceptions as well.

3. Reasons to Remain

Placing women's voices at the centre, the data reflected that return is a controversial issue, sometimes even within the same household, and on other occasions women themselves expressed contradictory attitudes towards it. In fact, the majority of participants discussed the pros and cons for return, and they based their views on the assumption that *return* is not the only solution for their refugeehood. In fact, many expressed reasons that would inform their decision to stay in Lebanon. For some, remaining in Lebanon was in fact considered the better option for the time being, given that the factors that led to their flight from Syria have persisted. Several factors come into play influencing Syrian refugee women's perceptions of return, and these include: (1) the political situation, (2) economic reasons, (3) stigma and restrictions on women in Syria, (4) inheritance and property rights, and (5) military conscription. The following sections explore these aspects in more detail, highlighting women's voices and demonstrating how women's perception of the prospects of return is very much informed by their gendered experiences.

3.1 Security Situation in Syria: Contested Safety

Women often cited the security situation as one of the reasons they would favour remaining in Lebanon. Despite expressing feelings of unsafety in Lebanon, as explored in section 4, the majority of participants were referring to lack of safety as repercussion of war in Syria. It is, therefore, important to problematise the concept of safety in the context of refugeehood and displacement. For example, when talking about safety and security in Syria, it was mainly in reference to physical safety from explosions, bombardment and destruction of homes, etc. Nisreen stated: "How are we going to renovate our houses again? How are we going to live in stability?" Maha expressed, "my house was destroyed. If I contemplate return, it will certainly be to another area, as our area is not safe yet. However, we might clash with the locals there due to sectarianism, social problems, and over [access to] services."

Abductions targeting women, as well as minefields, were also cited by women as reasons to prefer remaining in Lebanon. Some participants expressed fear of returning due to abduction targeting women. Some expressed concerns over their daughters potentially being exposed to kidnapping. These fears also constitute a particular gendered challenge on women, as they often result in further familial restrictions over women's movement. For instance, Nour expressed her reluctance in relation to returning to Syria because as she said:

> "I am scared that our relatives would not allow my daughters to carry on with their studies in schools and universities. They will use the excuse that something might happen to them. And, if something happens, they will be stigmatised and it will become a scandal. For my family, a girl's place is her husbands' house. But I want my daughters to carry on with their studies and have a better life than mine."

This example demonstrates how the security situation in Syria is experienced differently by women due to their gender. In other words, women are much more likely to be stigmatised and controlled by their families because of their gender, and this is due to the fact that women are socially perceived as 'weaker' and in need of 'protection'. It also demonstrates that the instability in the country directly affect women's mobility, and place more restrictions over other aspects of women's lives such as education and freedom of movement.

3.2 Economic Conditions

The economic conditions in Syria were one of the main factors that pushed people to flee towards Lebanon, and data demonstrated that these remain some of the reasons deterring people from returning to Syria. Many participants have expressed that poverty levels are on the rise in Syria, with the lack of economic activities necessary for their livelihoods. Many have also explained that it would be difficult for them to rebuild their homes, and that, if return is in sight, they would have nothing in Syria to which they can return. Concerns over access to income-generating activities in Syria reflected a gendered experience and perception of return. For example, some women expressed concern that they might not be allowed to engage in income-generating activities due to social restrictions because of their gender. Fatima expressed:

> "I imagine return to be difficult specifically at the beginning. We will need to renovate our homes and maybe rebuild them. My husband might have to stay in Lebanon to carry on with his work to provide for us. This will probably mean that if I go back to Syria I will be living with in-laws and my husband's second wife in the same house. In this situation I would want to work to help my husband (financially) to have our separate home, but because of traditions and culture, my in-laws would not allow me to work because I am a woman."

In addition to concerns over economic conditions, other participants also expressed concern over the potential of not being able to access education due to poverty, and some were concerned that their families would not let them and/or their daughter carry on with their studies. These restrictions over women often draw their legitimacy from societal stigmas, which were identified as a factor on its own affecting women's lives in Syria.

Finally, as the situation within Syria remains precarious, with some areas having lost over 80% of their infrastructure, industrial complexes, and agricultural lands, the majority of livelihoods opportunities available in Syria today are not the types of labour usually taken up by women. Such work opportunities include infrastructure rehabilitation and maintenance, retail and sales jobs in generally unsafe conditions, and construction. Moreover, in certain areas, available jobs relate mainly to working with militias. This puts women who opt for return to Syria at a further disadvantage than staying in Lebanon.

3.3 Societal Stigma

It became clear through data collection that societal stigmas over women were not perceived as prominent in women's lives in Lebanon, making Lebanon a favourable place in some cases, where women expressed that they have the freedom to work and move freely without familial restriction. This makes perceptions of return to Syria gendered, as women experience gendered expectations

differently. This also leads us to re-think conflict as the major cause for changes in gender roles, and shifts the focus from conflict to border-crossing and displacement. It places the move to Lebanon itself as a major factor influencing women's experiences of refugeehood, migration and displacement. In other words, migration, refugeehood and displacement cause changes in the power dynamics and the way agency is exercised. Women who experience uprooted-ness find themselves in contexts in which they negotiate different structures of power and oppression differently following their flight, and depending on their spatial configuration.

Societal restrictions and constraints imposed on women in Syria included denying them education and engagement in income-generating activities, or prohibiting them from leaving the home unaccompanied. It has become evident through the data that single and widowed women, as well as married women without their husbands, are the most marginalised and stigmatised group of women in Syria and Lebanon.

Women "without" men are considered "weak" due to the lack of a male guardianship who could perform a "protective" role. A guardian in this case does not necessarily only mean a financial provider, but also the man fulfilling the role of "protecting" and "preserving" family honour through controlling women's sexuality through restricting their movement. Widad said:

> "In Syria, I cannot move as freely as I wish, even if I want to go visit my family. It is considered shameful if I go to places as I wish in my husband's absence. People would also start critiquing my sleeping arrangement, saying I should not sleep alone in the house".

Furthermore, women participants have indicated that they envision return to Syria placing them in vulnerable positions there. This has been clarified by some who explained that they will have to live with their husbands' families if they go back to Syria, which could result in them being controlled by in-laws. As Laila said:

> "My deceased husband's family would not allow me to live in my husband's house if I decide to go back. I am concerned that I will be stigmatised, especially that I am a widow without my husband. I worry that people might view me as a 'cheap' and an 'easy' target, and would assume that I would do anything for money."

Marital status is one of the main variables influencing women's experiences of societal stigmas. Divorced, widowed women and women without male partners are most stigmatised even when engaged in work for their survival. This factor also seems to be more significant in Syria than it is in Lebanon, because migration has led to families being torn apart, and have undermined the closely-knit social structures of family units. Women's work is also stigmatised by standards on which work is considered to be 'respectable' and 'acceptable' and which is not. For instance, Abeer said:

> "I am scared that people and my husband's family will judge me because I need to work. I might even have to clean houses, and I know that work is not shameful, but people talk and judge".

Societal stigmas, expectations, judgments, and standards of respectability influence women's reluctance from returning to Syria. These expectations and stigmas often lead to restrictions over freedom of movement, education and the right to work. Fears of the implications of such stigmas make Lebanon a more tolerable space for these women, as many are away from direct family

members, have more freedom of movement and access to informal types of work. These factors make attitudes to return a gendered issue, as men do not share the same concerns over their freedom of movement. Additionally, as women's experiences varied due to marital status, social stigma also affects women differently. However, stigma and societal expectations were reasons pushing women to favour remaining in Lebanon over return to Syria.

3.4 Capital and Property

The lack of capital and property rights were identified as some of the reasons deterring women participants from considering return to Syria. Despite the fact that this has been identified as indirectly affecting women's decisions, the fact that women do not own properties themselves, and cannot claim their husbands' or family members' properties, adds to their hesitation towards the possibility of return. Syrian women in Lebanon, namely research participants, have communicated grave difficulty in relation to access to their inheritance in Syria as well, due to class, patriarchy, culture and tradition, as well as the state system itself in the country. For example, some women have expressed that they had not received their inheritance because they come from impoverished families and do not have capital. Others have said that, according to culture and tradition, women should not ask for their share of the inheritance, as it is frowned upon and is not considered the 'norm'. Others added that even when inheritance is divided, it is most often distributed unequally because of culture and tradition. The women participants also added that men are given larger shares of inheritance, generally, because the women are expected to marry. This is also the case to prevent capital from falling in the hands of her husband, who could possibly come from another family. This inequality in terms of the distribution of inheritance and property is due to the patrilineal nature governing gender and property relations in the country. This has already placed women in a worse situation in relation to capital and property compared to their male counterparts, even before displacement to Lebanon.

It is important to highlight women's agency in relation to inheritance, as some women have expressed their contentment with their brothers taking larger shares of inheritance. For example, Shereen said "the brother deserves it much more". In other cases, access to inheritance is determined through women's marital status and whether or not they have children. For example, Niveen said:

> "I do not expect to be granted my inheritance; men deserve it more. Having said that, it does not mean that I do not want it, but I do not have kids. God has not granted me kids, so my nephews deserve the inheritance much more than me."

The data also show that a very small number of women participants have been granted their inheritance. However, the data reflects that properties in Syria are predominantly owned by men; husbands, fathers, and/or brothers.

Another challenge facing women returning to Syria is their inability to reclaim their family homes due to legal challenges, and also due to some of these properties having been occupied by others upon the family's displacement. For example, women told stories they had heard of other women attempting to return to their homes, and being denied access by the state, as the properties were registered in the names of male family members.

Moreover, most properties in Syria are owned by men, either a husband, a father or a brother, leaving the women with very minimal property rights. Data showed that many women who wished

to return to Syria could not reclaim their properties because they were not registered under their own names, so the state would not allow them to recover properties. Rula said:

> "I wanted to get back our house in Darayya, but I have been told by the police that I cannot because it is not in my name and it is registered as my husband's property. My husband cannot go back to Syria, and no one would listen to me because I am a woman after all, and I cannot do anything about it. The Syrian state is controlling it and we can no longer prove that it is our home."

And Oula said:

> "We cannot go to Syria to prove that we have properties as we are all 'illegal' in Lebanon. We do not have Lebanese residency permits that would allow us to go to Syria to prove our properties and then come back."

Oula's response highlights that her decision is based on misinformation about what documents or legal status are required in order to access property. Most Syrian refugees in Lebanon are having to make choices of return, in the absence of any clear information regarding their properties, their area of origin or the legal documents required to reclaim their homes. The lack of correct information thus means women making misinformed decisions about return.

Demographic changes and internal displacement in Syria have also meant that homes previously inhabited by refugees are now either inhabited by internally displaced families or have been occupied by political factions. Rana explained that her husband's family used to own two houses in Syria, however as these homes have been occupied by other families, they could no longer access them. Capital and property play a major role in determining women's attitudes towards return to Syria. Many women have expressed that they have nothing to go back to, whether in terms of inheritance and property, or in relation to family members, as those are no longer in Syria (as explored in section (4.4).

3.5 Relationality and 'Patriarchal Connectivity'

It has become apparent through this research that the decision to return is governed by family ties, relationality and patriarchal connectivity, which is a term coined with Suad Joseph. Joseph (1993) describes familial relations in the Arabic-speaking region in relation to patriarchal connectivity. She defines connectivity as, 'the relationships in which a person's boundaries are relatively fluid so that persons feel a part of significant others…. I use connectivity to mean an activity or intention, not a state of being' (Joseph, 1993: 467). Joseph also explores the term relationality as associated with familial relations, and how family relationships are formed differently depending on various 'political economy regimes' (Joseph, 1993: 467). The research shows that this notion applies to the Syrian context in relation to return. Women participants have discussed 'split returns', particularly because some families negotiate their split between Lebanon and Syria. Split return is determined by economic and political regimes, one example being military conscription. The prospect of military conscription in Syria appeared to be one of the gendered factors deterring people from return to Syria. Despite the fact that obligatory military conscription only applies to male members of the family, women participants have cited it as one of the reasons pushing them to either stay in Lebanon, or at least not to consider return to Syria as a whole family. Rania expressed:

"My sons are at the age where they will have to undergo for military conscription, and this worries me a lot. That is why they will stay in Lebanon and I will go back with my other children who need to go to school. My sons who will stay in Lebanon and will also provide us with money".

In this case, military conscription could lead to the separation of a family, pushing some members to consider return and others to remain in Lebanon. The need for the children's education led this particular family to make this decision, reflecting the grave reality of refugee education in Lebanon. In other cases, the decision to remain as a whole family was prioritised over splitting it. As Reem said:

"My brothers who have to undergo military conscription won't be able to return with us. However, the whole idea of return is put on hold at the moment for the whole family".

Here, it is also very important to mention that there are some gendered implications on women in case of 'split return'. Women participants have talked about their concern over some of the challenges that they might face in case they return on their own to Syria. Women have discussed how they fear their familial control over their freedom of movement in case they return alone without their husbands, which is related to familial relationality and 'patriarchal connectivity'. Joseph (1993: 467) states that family members are 'neither expected, valued nor supported autonomy, separateness, boundedness. They signalled partly by the successful engagement in a multiplicity of connective relationships across gender and age groups, with kin and nonkin. This conceptualisation resonates with the way women participants talk about their experience of 'split return', as they fear family control. Maysoun said: "My mother and brother-in-law will control me, they won't allow me to live on my own because they fear people's gossip. I do not want to live with them because I do not want to be turned into a housemaid."

It is very important to highlight that perceptions of return, as well as the return experiences themselves, are gendered and governed by contextual factors including military conscription and societal stigma. Whereas men are expected to serve in the military, women do not face the same challenge, and some families prefer to split while others decide to remain together in Lebanon. For this reason, this factor is considered from the perspective of women as a motivation to remain in Lebanon. This also reflects people's contradictory feelings towards returning to Syria. Whereas some are worried about military conscription, they also acknowledge the need to provide their children with education. This section aims to identify the factors research participants have cited as motivating them to remain in Lebanon. One may notice that these return deterrents are often in reference to how bad the situation in Syria would and could look like, rather than an actual pull factor into Lebanon. The next section explores the reasons participants have cited as encouraging them to return to Syria.

4. Reasons for Return

Through exploring the themes women cited as reasons to remain in Lebanon, it has become apparent that there is no straightforward answer in relation to people's attitudes towards return. There are, however, factors that can be identified as pushing some to return and/or others to remain. In addition to this, it became clear that the experiences and perceptions of return are gendered, and that these factors do not only influence men and women differently, but also influence women differently, depending particularly on marital status among other variables. In this section, we explore the factors identified by Syrian refugee women participants as reasons that could potentially lead them to return. These factors include (1) discrimination, (2) living conditions in Lebanon, (3) gender (dis)order, and (4) symbolic nationalist and familial sentiments and ties.

4.1 Discrimination

Syrian women's experiences of discrimination in Lebanon are very much influenced by their gender, as the form of discrimination they face is of a different nature to their male counterparts. Discrimination manifesting itself in sexual and verbal harassment is cited by women as one of the factors leading them to make a decision to return to Syria. Women participants expressed that the host society views them as 'cheap' and 'easy to get'. As such, Syrian women occupy a particularly vulnerable position in the Lebanese context. Participants have cited experiencing humiliation by the host society due to the "Lebanese stereotypes and assumptions that Syrian women do not have morals". A number of participants also expressed that they are exposed to bullying and racist remarks because they are seen as temporary 'guests', and that they do not feel welcome in Lebanon. Salma said:

> "I am treated badly here in Lebanon because I am a refugee woman. I am sometimes exploited in my work and I earn very little money. Also, there is no freedom of movement because we entered Syria through illegitimate routes, and that places further restrictions on our movement."

Syrian women face intersecting systems of oppressions, which makes their experiences markedly different from their male counterparts and influences their perception of return differently due to their gender and legal status in Lebanon. When asked about their status in Lebanon, Syrian refugee women said they do not like to be called 'refugees' and prefer the label 'guests' because, according to them, they feel like they are guests and that they will eventually go back to their home country of Syria. Ruba said:

> "Things here in Lebanon are hard. [They] make things harder on us, and consider us 'temporary guests' here. No one is really happy here. For me, if my house was not destroyed, I would have returned, but how would I return without anything."

Hanadi said:

> "We are all guests here. I consider myself a guest and I want to go back to my country. All I want is to go back to my country. When things get better and are safer, we will all go back."

Women 'without' husbands, or male 'guardians', whether divorced, single or widowed, also feel targeted in Lebanon because they are perceived as 'weak' and 'cheap' at the same time. Female-headed households reported racism and harassment by the host community in Lebanon. As such, women's marital status is a major determinant of their experiences in Lebanon, as well as their perception of the possibility of return. This reflects how different factors, such as racism and gender, make women's attitudes towards return different from each other and from their male-counterparts. In addition to this, households without male 'guardians' are not only prone to harassment by the hosting community, but also by the Syrian refugee community itself. For instance, Lubna explained:

> "Honestly speaking, so many people talk behind my back because I am a widow, whether they are Syrian or Lebanese, and they interfere in my life and harass me. They ask for my phone number, all of the taxi drivers and supermarket owners. They look down on Syrian women and consider us 'cheap', and believe that a Syrian women would do any type of work for money."

Such experiences in Lebanon make the prospect of return more appealing to some women, while to others who fear being controlled by family members back home, this was not the case. This demonstrates that the question of return is not straightforward for women, as often the pull/push factors at play are in conflict.

4.2 Living Conditions

For Syrian refugees, life in Lebanon is extremely harsh economically, politically and socially, whether in the camps or outside. Women participants indicated feelings of insecurity and lack of safety due to the repeated Lebanese army raids of refugee camps. This expressed sense of instability places refugees under extreme psychological and mental pressure. In addition to this lack of safety in relation to housing, the harsh economic and financial situation of refugees is another cause for feelings of instability, as Syrian refugees are not allowed to legally work in Lebanon, expect in three low-paying professions which Syrian workers used to occupy in Lebanon even before 2011. The majority, who do not have work permits, find themselves engaged in low-paying informal activities to generate income. Women have also explained that work opportunities are available to them within the agricultural sector and in tailoring. Tailoring seemed to be a favoured economic activity for women, as it provides better pay and is less exploitative than agricultural labour. The data indicates that work within the agriculture sector is exceptionally difficult and exploitative, as landowners, and the work brokers (the camps shawishs) mistreat their refugee workers, underpay them, and in some instances become violent with them. Some participants also expressed that even minimal living standards in Lebanon are very costly, and that given the load of responsibilities on their shoulders, such as rent, schooling for children, and food for their families, they often find themselves in financially difficult and exploitative situations. This is especially true for women involved in agricultural, often shawish-brokered, forms of livelihoods. The power dynamic between the authoritative, self-selected male leader of the camp, the shawish, and the women in question leads them to receive only portions of the income they earned, which

is first handed to him, and at his own discretion.

This exploitation was further explained by the participants as resulting from their legal status in the country, as refugees with expired refugee registration certificates. The legal status of refugees has thus emerged as a major determinant of their living conditions, as it impacts their access to regulated labour markets. However, many have expressed that they would be satisfied if they generate a minimal income which would guarantee their survival. Mallak explained:

> "We came to Lebanon when the war started, but we are getting exploited here in Lebanon. My husband's boss would not pay him his salary in full or on time. Sometimes he would pay half or a quarter of it, and sometimes he does not pay us at all. When the boss offers half of the money, my husband accepts it because we have no other option. I have offered my jewellery for a mortgage and also received some money from the United Nations to live."

Many participants also explained the difficulty they encounter to find regular work in Lebanon. Due to the high cost of living, some participants cited the 'free education' system in Syria as one of the reasons they would potentially consider returning. Lack of access to basic needs key to their survival and livelihoods makes the material reality of refugees in Lebanon a factor pushing them out of the country.

Furthermore, living conditions in Lebanon have also influenced gender dynamics within refugee households and among family members. Many women explained that, since their flight to Lebanon, problems and clashes within families increased due to their harsh living conditions. Many refugees live in overcrowded tents, in camps and with minimal resources. Over-crowdedness pushed different families to live together in confined spaces, and as participants expressed, this has also affected family dynamics. These demographic changes within families themselves have also caused more clashes within and between families. Ghadeer said:

> "Things have worsened since we arrived in Lebanon. So many families are living together, and this creates many clashes."

And Souad said:

> "Things have changed a lot since our arrival because of boredom. Men are always at home because they cannot work. Men become much more violent and this places more mental pressure on us."

Such pressures, resulting from the living conditions in Lebanon, push some to consider return to Syria. However, the most significant factor associated living conditions, which could constitute a pull factor towards Syria, is the 'free education' system, as many women expressed their concerns over their children not being able to carry on with their education in Lebanon.

4.3 Gender (Dis)Order

Gender dynamics are an 'order' that is not stagnant and can change and take different forms. Refugeehood and migration influence patriarchal gender performances and make women's experiences different from each other's, and those of men, depending on different factors. The

traditional patriarchal gender (dis)order implies that men are expected to be the providers for their families, while women are expected to attend to their roles as home carers. This traditional (dis) order could be challenged, undermined and/or reinforced in different ways during refugeehood and forced migration. "For instance, there is evidence that, in times of conflict and refugeehood, women are very likely to become head of the household, especially in cases where men go missing, are killed or become unable to provide for their families and thus "fail" to perform their traditional gender roles" (Lindsey, 2001; Justino, 2012; Nasser-Eddin, 2014, 2017: 144). Refugee men in Lebanon are seen as a 'threat' to Lebanese society, while women are seen as 'vulnerable'. This, in some instance, makes it easier for women to seek income-generating activities outside of the home.

The majority of research participants said that, after fleeing Syria, they had to work to ensure their families' survival. Many of the women engaged in income-generating activities were pushed to pursue work due to the absence of men in their households. The same women explained that, whereas prior to their flight they were not engaged in income-generating activities and were restricted to housework, their engagement in income-generating activities in Lebanon made them feel more 'independent' and 'respected'. Participants have also added that their engagement in income-generating activities has improved their self-esteem and confidence. Others added that the flight itself and the crossing of borders have also given them a feeling of independence. For example, Iman said:

> "I feel much more aware now, I used to get scared but now I feel much more at ease as I can take my own decisions now".

Women participants talked about the confidence they gained through the journey of refugeehood. They implied that their social roles have become very significant and strong during these difficult times. Nadeera explained:

> "I have gained so much confidence, and my self-esteem has improved tremendously. Before, I could not talk freely and could not express myself. I used to think twice before I said and did anything. Now, I feel very confident, I say whatever I want with all confidence."

In addition to this, the women also expressed that, with their displacement, they gained the opportunity to learn new skills offered by different organisations. Skills, such as tailoring, made them feel independent, productive and active agents within their communities.

This gender (dis)order, however, has created a gendered perception of the possibility of return. For instance, with the loss of their roles as providers, some men are pressuring their wives towards return to Syria. In other words, men who are not performing their traditional gender roles are socially considered as 'failing' to provide for their families. This inability to provide for their families in Lebanon pushes them to consider return to Syria, where they would be more able to become economically active and thus fulfil their expected gender roles. However, some women feel that they would prefer to remain economically active, as the potential for their work in Syria is limited. The majority of women also explained that they were not engaged in income-generating activities prior to their flight to Lebanon. Wafa' expressed:

> "In Damascus, because of culture and traditions, women could not work, women leave their [familial] homes to their husbands' homes. Since we arrived here, we have been put under a lot of pressure, and my husband could not find a job and we

were in debt, and that's why I felt that I need to work and help out."

It is important to highlight, here, that many women follow their husbands' wishes for them to return, particularly because of issues around child custody. For women, who do not have legal custodial rights over children, returning with the family is the choice they make to avoid losing their children. Some women expressed that even when they return, they would insist on continuing engaging in economic activities, as it has given them a sense of 'respect', 'independence', and 'confidence'. Dina said:

> "When I go back, I will carry on working. I will open my own tailoring workshop even if my children are working. I will work so that I feel I exist, and to feel like an independent and productive human being that offers something to the world."

It has become apparent through the data collected that, for women, engagement in income-generating activities and breaking the gendered public-private divide has a great influence on their lives in Lebanon and on their perceptions of themselves. Whereas women feared losing access to economic activities and feared being restricted to a home-caring role upon their return, the fear of losing their children equally affected their perceptions of, and attitudes towards, return. In addition to material factors, sentimental factors and feelings of longing to a homeland are often missing from conversations, although they play a major role in shaping the way women envision return.

4.4 Al-Watan and Familial Ties

Little has been said in the literature about the way refugees in Lebanon experience longing to Syria, the homeland, referred to in Arabic as *al-Watan*. In fact, through data collected for this research, nostalgia to the homeland is a major factor pulling participants to consider return to Syria. This, nostalgia to the homeland, cannot be separated from feelings of loneliness and isolation in Lebanon, and estrangement from families and loved ones in Syria. Most participants expressed that Syria will always be their homeland, their *watan*, and that they are not opposed to returning to it. However, other factors influence their decisions. For some, *al-watan* symbolises 'security', 'safety', 'warmth' and 'freedom'. Others have expressed their longing for certain memories and daily activities they enjoyed in Syria. For instance, Manal said:

> "I miss my home, the cup of coffee with my neighbours in the morning."

Through the data collected, it became clear that nostalgia towards *al-watan* as an abstract concept is manifested in longing to loved ones present on 'the soil of the *watan*', and feelings of 'safety and security'. It was also evident that the participants' relationship to the homeland has changed following the crises, whereas the '*watan*' symbolised safety and security, and is considered a place of longing, this longing is to what the homeland was before rather than what it is now. Some participants, for example, highlighted the fact that their families are now dispersed around the world, and with that they realise that Syria no longer represents what it used to represent to them. For instance, one participant said: "*Al-watan* is the people". For others, al-*watan* now symbolises concern and fear due to the unrest in the country. Whereas the homeland symbolises yearning and longing, which is often associated with ties to family members in Syria, this yearning is mixed with fear over their safety if they decide to return. Amani said:

> "I do think of going back, but where would I go back, and to what? My husband is

gone, and my house is destroyed. I long for *al-watan* but what can we do?"

Conversations around *al-watan* demonstrated that this concept is often associated with memories, family members, communities, rather than attachment to 'land'. While this demonstrated a factor influencing women's decisions to return, it was only the case for women who still have family members or homes to which they can return. This also signifies another gendered dimension of understanding and experiencing return, as explored in section 3.4 on capital and property. As women were less likely to own land or property in Syria, their attachment to the concept of the homeland is more sentimental, and refers to the safety and security provided by a sense of community, rather than property or inheritance rights. This demonstrates how perceptions of, and attitudes towards, return are gendered, and that women participants did not have a definitive or singular answer about their perceptions of return. To them, the decision to return is not straightforward, and requires a thorough consideration of the pros and cons of both staying in Lebanon and/or returning to Syria.

4.5 Re-Defining 'Protection', (In)security and 'Safety'

With the majority of the research focusing on push and pull factors in relation to Syrian refugees returning home, this research has also highlighted the need to reconceptualise concepts such as 'protection', '(in)security' and 'safety'. Despite materialist analyses of push and pull factors influencing return decisions, women's interpretation of 'protection', '(in)security' and 'safety' demonstrates that there are factors, beyond material conditions, that also shape their decisions to return. As demonstrated throughout this research, people's desire to return, or to remain, is complex and multi-layered, and people often find themselves caught between conflicting push and pull factors. The research demonstrated that decisions are influenced by a number of intersecting factors, including patriarchy, state laws, material conditions, refugeehood and migration. It has become apparent through this research that women's expressions of fear of insecurity are not always directly shaped by their material conditions, as sentiments, feelings and affect also intersect with the material conditions of their flight.

In other words, women participants often referred to the power of sentiments and feelings in relation to shaping their decisions on whether to return to Syria. For instance, some women referred to experiencing feelings of 'inferiority' and 'subordination' due to their gender, and marital and legal status. This, however, is rarely addressed in terms of affect or its ability to shape people's experiences. For instance, women participants demonstrated that their understanding of these concepts was not always in relation to material securities, but was also in reference to sentimental value and fear of discrimination on the bases of gender, sex, sect, age, legal status, class, etc. This research highlights that there is a gap in the existing literature in relation to how protection, safety and security are conceptualised, and prompts us to shift attention from descriptions of material conditions to how the affect structures of oppression create and influence people's experiences differently. For instance, fear of exposure to xenophobia is often understood only in relation to xenophobic events, incidents and practices, and is rarely addressed from the perspective of refugee women and their feelings. Fear of xenophobia and other discriminatory practices leads many to decide to return, despite the materialist uncertainties that await them in Syria.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This research has demonstrated that the question of return is not straightforward for Syrian refugee women, and a deeper examination into their position towards return shows that push and pull factors that reflect material conditions do not always account for the complex realities associated with the question of return. The process of making a decision about return to Syria is multi-layered, and among these complex layers is affect, sentimentality and feelings. Further research into these layers beyond material conditions is important and necessary to adequately respond to the needs of Syrian refugee women on the ground. In addition to the need for further research, research conclusions prompt action related to improving the conditions of Syrian refugee women and to improving our understanding of return.

Here we list a number of recommendations, which may and could be expanded:

1. Increase Refugees' Access to Information: The research has demonstrated that Syrian refugee women in Lebanon are misinformed about their legal status in Lebanon and about the reality of their return to Syria, particularly in relation to capital, property rights and ownership. Stakeholders are encouraged to make such information available and open access to the whole of the Syrian refugee populations. This misinformation places Syrian refugee women in a particularly vulnerable positions, and may lead them to make misinformed decisions in relation to their return.

2. Understand Return from Below: Return has often been understood by policy makers and practitioners in terms of push and pull factors, and this needs to be addressed in policy and in practice. This means that our understanding must build on the perspectives of refugees, taking affect, sentimentality and feelings into account when framing policies and implementing them in practice.

3. Increase Livelihoods Opportunities: Livelihood opportunities, economic activities and income-generating activities are major factors influencing women's decision to return. They have proven influential in pushing women to want to stay in Lebanon and not return to Syria, where they would have less opportunities and face more social restrictions. Financial stability and access to work in Syria and Lebanon would enable to make decisions in relation to return without having to deal with financial pressures.

4. Develop Protection Mechanisms: Discrimination and mistreatment were often cited as reasons pushing refugees away from Lebanon. Stakeholders are encouraged to develop protection mechanisms for refugee communities, in order to protect them from such discrimination, xenophobia and abuse in Lebanon.

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Appendices

Annex One: Focus Group Themes

1. What are the problems that you faced in your area prior to your flight? Problems that pushed People to flee

2. Do you have access to your inheritance? Were you granted your inheritance? Inheritance and Properties

3. What are your thoughts on Polygamy, and has polygamy changed after the crisis?

4. Are you facing any marriage problems?

5. Empowerment, work opportunities and household responsibilities: Since your flight to Lebanon, do you feel more empowered?

6. What do you think about returning to Syria? Planning and return negotiations

7. Syrian women Identity in Lebanon (How are they perceived in Lebanon? And how would they like to be perceived?

8. What does Al Wattan mean to you? The Symbol of Al Wattan (Homeland)

Annex Two: Focus Groups Sample

# FGD	Index	Age	Origin Place in Syria	Marital Status	No. of Children	Married at	Entry formality/ legal or illegal means	Year of Entry to Lebanon
1st FGD	1	48	Damascus Rural	Married	7	18	legally	2014
	2	44	Homs Rural	Detainee's wife	6	20	illegally	2016
	3	40	Aleppo	Single	0	0	legally	2014
	4	35	Aleppo	Detainee's wife	5	18	illegally	2014
	5	56	Damascus Rural	Widowed	0	14	illegally	2013
	6	37	Raqqa	Married	4	21	legally	2012
	7	36	Damascus Rural	Divorced	0	30	legally	2013
	8	27	Damascus Rural	Married	1	17	legally	2014
2nd FGD	9	46	Damascus Rural	Married	3	15	legally	2013
	10	40	Daraa	Widowed	3	27	legally	2014
	11	44	Homs	Married	5	17	legally	2013
	12	44	Homs	Married	0	38	illegally	2012
	13	43	Daraa	Married	7	14	legally	2013
	14	39	Hammah	Married	5	18	illegally	2017
	15	19	Damascus Rural	Married	1	17	legally	2012
	16	39	Damascus	Divorced	0	34	legally	2012
3rd FGD	17	29	Raqqa	Single	0	0	illegally	2013
	18	30	Raqqa	Divorced	2	21	illegally	2014
	19	27	Hasakeh	Married	5	16	illegally	2019
	20	56	Raqqa	Widowed	3	20	illegally	2015
	21	51	Raqqa	Divorced	7	16	illegally	2014
	22	41	Aleppo	Married (Poly)	8	17	illegally	2015
	23	46	Damascus Rural	Widowed	4	24	illegally	2016
	24	39	Raqqa	Married	5	16	legally	2014

	25	46	Homs Rural	Detainee's wife	7	17	legally	2013
4th FGD	26	31	Homs	Widowed	3	14	illegally	2013
	27	48	Homs Rural	Widowed	9	18	illegally	2013
	28	63	Homs	Married	11	17	legally	2012
	29	29	Daraa	Married	2	17	legally	2013
	30	30	Damascus Rural	Married	6	15	legally	2012

Annex Three: Semi-Structured Survey Based Interview Questions/Themes

1. Name of Camp

2. Age

3. Area of Residence

4. Place of Origin

5. Educational Attainment

6. Marital Status

7. Household Composition

8. How did you enter Lebanon?

9. Do you have a valid residence permit in Lebanon?

10. How did you get your residence permit?

11. The effect of crisis on family dynamics and partners dynamics

12. Did family problems increased after fleeing Syria?

13. Inheritance and property (Do you own any property? Have you inherited?)

14. Are you engaged in any income generating activity?

15. Do you feel that engaging in an income generating activity has empowered you?

16. In case you return to Syria, do you think you will engage in an income generating activity?

17. What are the problems you face here in the camps or in other places in Lebanon?

18. What are the challenges that you might face in case you return?

19. What is the danger that you might face in case you return?

20. What are the Motivations behind your decision of return?

21. What are the reasons behind returning to Syria?

22. What are the reasons behind staying in Lebanon?

23. What are your thoughts in relation to returning to Syria?

24. Do you have custody over your children?