Beyond Trauma, What Kept them Going? An Analysis of the Lives and Narratives of Five Syrian Women in Lebanon

Kholoud Saber Barakat, Pierre Philippot

Using interpretive phenomenological analysis, this paper analyzes the narratives of five women who fled from Syria to Lebanon, with the objective of understanding how they continue to lead their lives beyond trauma. Results showed that these women's ability to create meaning of their traumatic experiences and link it to their current lives is a determining factor in understanding their ability to move on. Finding a reason to keep going, creating a way to cope with loss, and perceiving an evolving sense of agency were significant aspects of getting over the traumatic event or enduring pain. Finally, changes in gender roles were identified by all five women, but their evaluation of these changes differed.

Keywords: Trauma, Agency, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, Meaning-making, Gender roles, Syrian women

Introduction and Background

The topic of psychological consequences of armed conflict is not new to psychology. Since WWI, several waves of studies have investigated the possible psycho-pathology associated with experiencing severely violent events. For decades, research efforts primarily adopted a neurological approach in explaining psychological responses of soldiers in war situations. In the early 1970s, towards and after the end of the Vietnam War, the term "psychological trauma" began to be widely used to refer to pathological responses to severe adversity, including violent events, mostly in the context of armed conflict (Jones and Wessely 217). Soon after, the notion of trauma was expanded to refer to a pathological response to various life-threatening events. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines trauma as "an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and physical symptoms like headaches or nausea." These symptoms of trauma were soon collated under the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which appeared for the first time in 1980 in the third edition of the APA's Diagnostic and Statistical

Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) (McHugh and Treisman 212). PTSD now serves as a key diagnostic criterion, heavily relied upon by clinical psychology practitioners and academics alike.

Trauma and PTSD are useful indicators in the context of therapeutic practices, as they could be used to take stock of improvement for individuals who suffer from psychological symptoms after a life-threatening event. They are, however, problematic analytical tools in the context of research. Not only do they remain conceptually affected by their military roots (Andreasen 70), but they have also become loaded with political and economic implications, as they are used to grant recognition of victimization, and consequently economic benefits and/or political acknowledgement (Humphrey 40).

These shortcomings of using PTSD and trauma as analytical tools are aggravated by solely relying on quantitative research methods, and when focusing on an area of research such as refugees, which is already dominated by oversimplified preconceptions and victimization paradigms, and severely influenced by the politics of Western academia.

Moreover, the medical approach to applying the concepts of trauma and PTSD is built on the assumption that people who have witnessed life-threatening experiences "described as traumatic events" are expected to show responses that fall under previously defined categories (McHugh and Treisman 210). This restricts our ability to understand personalized interpretations of, and responses to, such events.

Most research conducted in the context of the Syrian conflict has employed this traditional medical approach, positing Syrians, and especially Syrian refugees, as passive victims in pursuit of universal recognition of their suffering. This becomes more problematic in the case of Syrian women, who suffer from structured gender-based societal, economic, and sexual violence, along with sharing the traumatic experiences of war and displacement with men (ABAAD and OXFAM 9). Consequently, the voices of the survivors, in terms of the unique meanings they give to their traumatic experiences and how they deal with them, have so far remained largely unheard.

Context and Concepts

This paper is based on doctoral research in the field of clinical psychology, conducted by the first author and supervised by the second author. Originally, the research was aimed at examining depressive symptoms and PTSD among Syrian women in Lebanon in the aftermath of traumatic events in the contexts of war and displacement.

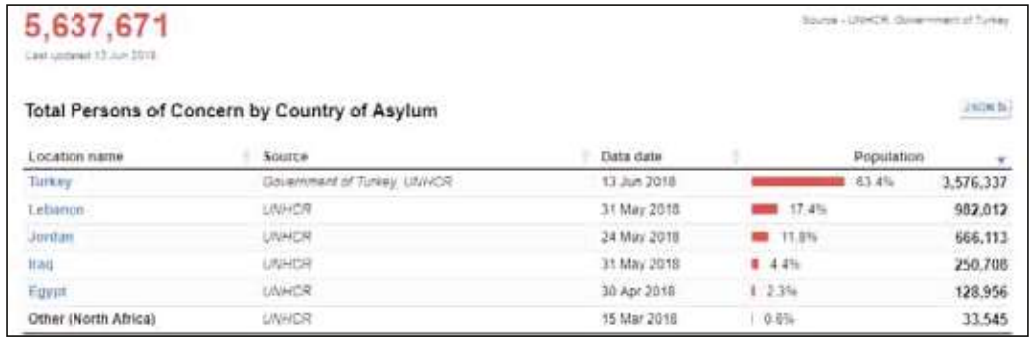
Shortly after starting interviews, it became clear that the war had further consequences for women that had not received much attention. In fact, early fieldwork insights were far from expected, as we were struck by the evolving strength, agency, and resilience of the interviewees. We therefore moved to the research question of this paper, i.e. "what kept them going?", focusing on the narratives constructed by these women, and how they shed a different light on their unique modes of surviving and coping.

The intention is not to deny the persistence of depression and PTSD, but rather to focus on the fact that the interviewees themselves centered their stories around how they were capable of going on, managing their everyday lives along with the feelings of pain, anger, and loss, as well as symptoms of depression and PTSD. To that end, four main concepts are employed

events, resilience, agency, and coping.

A traumatic event refers to a serious threat, whether directly, where the threat affected one's own life, safety, or physical integrity, or indirectly, where one has witnessed such a threat affecting someone else or family member. In this paper, any reference to a traumatic event refers to a war or displacement related event experienced and mentioned by an interviewee, apart from any subsequent meaning or response to that event. This separation is key, as the objective is to discuss and understand how each woman interpreted and life in her unique, personalized way. This is also the reason why the term "traumatic event" is employed rather than simply "trauma," which is associated with the event, its meaning, and the response to it.

Resilience is one of the most commonly used notions in modern psychological studies of trauma, refugees, and post-conflict situations. However, the way in which it should be defined and investigated remains a subject of much disagreement. For a long time, it was seen as synonymous with invulnerability, i.e. the ability to successfully cope with adversity (Rutter


5,637,671

Total Persons of Concern by Country of Asylum

Location name	Source	Data date	Population	
Turkey	Government of Turkey, UNHCR	13 Jun 2018	63.4%	3,576,337
Lebanon	UNHCR	31 May 2018	17.4%	982,012
Jordan	UNHCR	24 May 2018	11.8%	666,113
Iraq	UNHCR	31 May 2018	4.4%	250,708
Egypt	UNHCR	30 Apr 2018	2.3%	128,956
Other (North Africa)	UNHCR	15 Mar 2018	0.6%	33,545

Fig. 1. Total number of Syrians by country of Asylum; UNHCR; 13 June 2018; https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71.

599). This definition is constrained by predefined expected patterns of responses, where "successful" coping refers to responding to adversity in an "adaptive" way. More recently, resilience has been defined as "positive patterns of functioning or development during or following exposure to adversity" (Masten 4), posited pre-existing ability (Luthar, Cicchetti and Becker 543). Most importantly, recent approaches have highlighted that resilfactors, which define, in the first place, what constitutes risk, and protection factors in a specific time and space (Zraly and Nyirazinyoye 1657). (Rousseau, Said and Gagne 634).

Agency traditionally refers to the ability to act or control one's environment. As such, agency is considered the exception rather than the rule for marginalized groups such as women refugees (Davies 42). In this paper, however, agency is employed to refer to the sense of agency, i.e. ability to act and control one's environment as perceived by oneself, regardless of whether others share that perception. Finally, coping refers to the acts and thoughts used with the aim of reducing the stress associated with a traumatic experience.

Method

This paper is based on research conducted in Lebanon between June and September 2017. Lebanon was selected for several reasons. First, Lebanon is the country which has received the second highest number of Syrians since the outbreak of conflict in 2011 (see Fig. 1).

Second, the Syrian population in Lebanon

come from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds and currently live under tough social and economic conditions. As Lebanon did not sign the 1951 Refugee Convention, Syrians in Lebanon are not afforded legal refugee status. Consequently, they lack adequate and sustainable services, including food aid, medical care, housing, and education.

Third, through her previous work on psychological support to Arab women activists, the first author had built a network of Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian NGOs that are in direct contact with Syrian women in Lebanon, and that were willing to facilitate the research. In total, seven NGOs working in three different regions in Lebanon (North Lebanon, Beirut, and Bekaa) provided support to the research (See Fig. 2).[1]

Each contact NGO arranged a meeting with a group of their female Syrian staff or beneficiaries, who were then given a choice to participate in answering a set of questionnaires (as part of a different quantitative study under the same doctoral project), as well as a choice to be also

one-to-one one-hour interview.



Fig. 2: Registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon by region; Hall, R.; 30 June 2016; https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-08-11/when-bomb-goes-lebanon-syrians-suffer.

Participants were briefed about the objective of the study prior to interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were warranted. It was explained that participation was voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw at any point. Most importantly, it was made clear that no data would be shared with the contact NGO, and that participation or withdrawal would have no effect on the participant's relation with them. The option of receiving psychological support after the interview was offered to participants in case they wanted to talk further about their experiences or to deal with possible distress evoked during the interview.

One of the main concerns when starting the fieldwork was how to earn the trust and cooperation of participants. Contrary to expectations, very high levels of motivation and cooperation were observed, to the extent that more women than initially planned were included upon their request. The interviewees provided two main common reasons for why they wanted to participate. The first was the fact that the researcher is an outsider. These women

where they are very concerned about their privacy and security. A researcher who does not live in the same community, who would not share their stories with others from the community, and who would not be part of their everyday realties, was a suitable person to open up to, and provided a chance for disclosure. Second, many of the interviewees were receiving services, including psychosocial support, from Lebanese practitioners. The political and social tensions between the Lebanese

ceived sense of being unwelcome, create a barrier that hinders cooperation. In some specific cases, participants mentioned incidents of racism, including sexual harassment and physical assault, which they were not willing to share with Lebanese practitioners. The fact that the researcher is Egyptian made them willing to participate and open up.

In-depth interviews were conducted primarily with a prospective sample of 30 women. All were above 18 years of age, fled from Syria after 2011 from areas directly affected by the conflict, and experienced one or more marked traumatic events related to the conflict and/or the displacement experience. Nine were volunteers or worked for the NGOs, thirteen were direct beneficiaries of contact NGO services, and eight were from the larger population who attended a one-time awareness event.

All interviews were conducted in Arabic by the first author and were audio-recorded after obtaining the participant's consent. They took place in a private room at the office of one of the contact NGOs. Each lasted around one hour using a semi-structured interview guide that covered several themes, including: background information about pre-2011 life in Syria, displacement experience, and the overall current living context; gender role and possible influences of conflict and displacement; war- or displacement-related traumatic experiences; responses to traumatic events; and personal techniques of coping.

Out of the thirty women interviewed, the five who are the most relevant to the current research question were selected for this paper. They were chosen to reflect a variation in education, current family context, type of main traumatic event, current occupation and previous employment, contact NGO, and location in Lebanon (See table 1).

Results

See Table 1 on next page.

Data Analysis

The five interviews were transcribed by the first author. The parts deemed directly related to the research question were translated into English to validate the analysis with the second author. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was applied to transcripts to identify prominent themes in each case, and subsequently common themes across cases.

IPA is a qualitative research approach, used mostly in psychology, concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience in a way that enables that experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 32). Inspired by the ideas of Edmund Husserl, IPA aims to examine how people make sense of their major life experiences, especially when the everyday is interrupted by a particular significant experience or major transition (1). The analysis started with initial comments on the transcript, through initial clustering and thematic development, into the final structure of themes (80). Each of the themes presented below was identified in at least four of the five narratives. Quotes under each theme (taken from one or more participants), were chosen as examples for illustration (See Fig. 3)

Findings

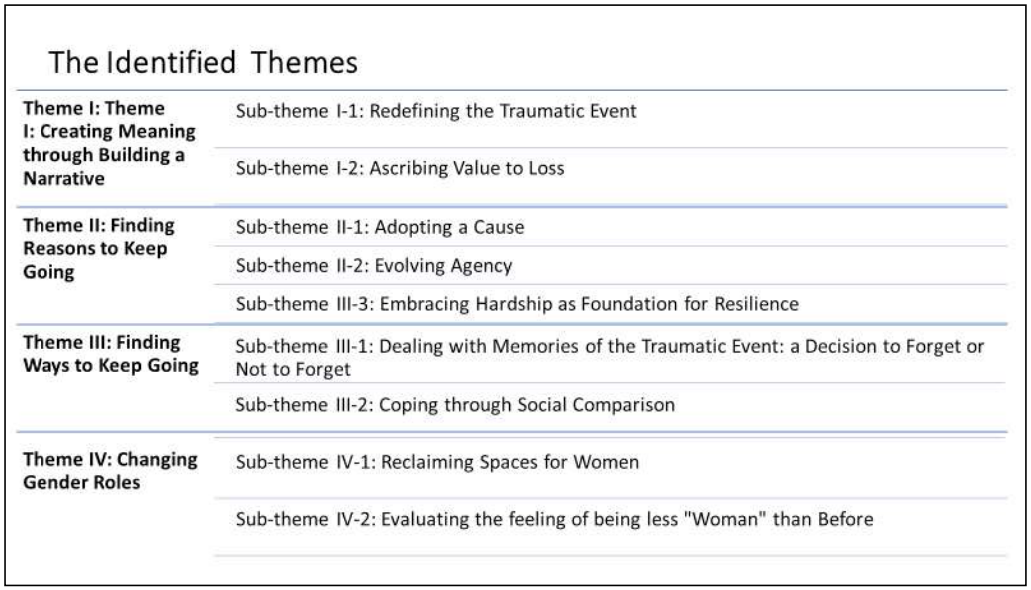
Theme I: Creating Meaning through Building a Narrative

A major theme identified throughout the interviews was the importance of the meaning that participants ascribed to their traumatic experiences. Through building their own narratives about what had happened, they gave it a meaning and linked it to their current realities.

This is in line with Janoff-Bulman's thesis, which highlights appraisal as a key process when experiencing a traumatic event. Appraisal refers to the interpretation each person gives to his/her trauma. Appraisal of a particular traumatic event differs based on characteristics both of the event itself and of the person undertaking the appraisal. In the case of several potentially traumatic events, the appraisal includes

PSEUDONYM	AGE	NATIONALITY/ CITIZENSHIP	SOCIAL STATUS & FAMILIAL SITUATION	HOUSEHOLD SITUATION	EDUCATION	OCCUPATION/ WORK HISTORY	REGION OF ORIGIN & YEAR OF DISPLACE-MENT	MAIN TRAUMATIC EVENT/S
Eman	27	Syrian	Married at 19, currently separated as husband forcibly disappeared since 2012. Started a legal proceeding for divorce	lives alone with 8 year-old son	University degree in psychology	Never worked in Syria, worked as a journalist in Jordan Now psycholo-gist at a Syrian NGO in Beqaa	Daria – Damascus / left Syria in 2013 to Jordan then to Beqaa	Three attempts of arrest in Syria
Shyma'	21	Syrian	Married at 15, has two children	Abandoned by husband, lives alone with her children, depends on financial aid and loans	Primary school	worked for one month for a tailor at Shatela for 3$ a week. Currently unemployed	Aleppo suburbs / fled in 2016 to Shatela, Beirut	Intimate partner violence + death of her three cousins in bombing
Om-Belal	43	Syrian	Married at 18, has 3 children, divorced	Lives with daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren	Secondary school	Housewife in Syria. Currently teacher at a Syrian NGO	Daria – Damascus/ Fled in 2013 to Beqaa	Son's death (he was a fighter at the free Syrian army)
Majda	48	Palestinian from Syria	First marriage at 18, has 3 children, divorced and remarried a year later.	Provider for her family (second husband and children from first marriage)	Secondary school	Hairdresser for 25 years Has a hair salon at North Lebanon	Yarmouk Camp - Damascus / fled to North Lebanon in 2013	Former Intimate partner violence + Cancer survivor + several war-related traumatic events
Rana	37	Syrian	Married at 16, has 5 children, her husband forcibly disappeared in 2012	Lives with elderly parents, 5 children, sister and sister-in-law and their 5 children	Preparatory school	Admin assistant at Syrian NGO	Daria-Damascus. Fled from her hometown in 2013, to other areas in Syria, Fled to Beqaa on 2014	Arrest and forced disappearance of husband and brother-in-law, death of brother + several war-related traumatic events

Table 1: Descriptive Data of five Interviewed Participants



The Identified Themes

Theme I: Theme I: Creating Meaning through Building a Narrative	Sub-theme I-1: Redefining the Traumatic Event
	Sub-theme I-2: Ascribing Value to Loss
Theme II: Finding Reasons to Keep Going	Sub-theme II-1: Adopting a Cause
	Sub-theme II-2: Evolving Agency
	Sub-theme III-3: Embracing Hardship as Foundation for Resilience
Theme III: Finding Ways to Keep Going	Sub-theme III-1: Dealing with Memories of the Traumatic Event: a Decision to Forget or Not to Forget
	Sub-theme III-2: Coping through Social Comparison
Theme IV: Changing Gender Roles	Sub-theme IV-1: Reclaiming Spaces for Women
	Sub-theme IV-2: Evaluating the feeling of being less "Woman" than Before

Fig. 3: Themes and sub-themes of data analysis as identified by the authors

also determining what is traumatic and what is not, or what is the most traumatic and most significant to the person. Moreover, the appraisal process includes assessing the possible gains of the traumatic experience, reflected in "meaning-making" (Janoff-Bulman 118).

Sub-theme I-1: Redefining the Traumatic Event

Although all participants went through several war- and displacement-related traumatic experiences, the event that they considered as the main traumatic event and center of their narrative varied markedly.

Shyma', for example, fled from Syria after the house of her parents-in-law, where she used to live, was destroyed by airstrikes. She spent nights in horror with her two children. She lost three cousins in the war. However, Shyma' only told war-related stories when asked direct questions about them. When asked if she thought those events were still affecting her, she spoke of nightmares and terror she still feels "all the time." (Shyma' 6)

Obviously, Shyma' suffered from psychological symptoms, including symptoms of depression and PTSD. Nonetheless, the story that remarkably dominated the interview with Shyma' was that of her husband abandoning her, which she described as the turning point of her life. "After we joined him in Lebanon, he started to feel the responsibility is heavy on him. He asked me to go back to Syria, or else he would not be responsible for me anymore." She recounted, "he threatened me: 'I won't pay anything, and you manage yourself and the children,' and then he left." It was then that she started to feel lost. "It was scary, being alone in a strange country, where I do not know anyone" (Shyma' 3) she said. It was also the point at which she decided to be stronger, however, and her fears and worries remain primarily centered around being solely responsible for feeding and protecting her two children.

Sub-theme I-2: Ascribing Value to Loss

The narrative created by each participant about her main traumatic event, and how it relates to her current life, played a crucial role in how she was enduring both. That was obvious in Om-Belal's story about her 19-year-old son who was killed in 2013 by Assad regime forces while fighting for the Free Syrian Army. She had ini-

tially been totally against her son joining the combat, not only for the obvious reason of worrying about losing him, but also because she was ideologically opposed to the cause he was pursuing. After his death, to deal with feelings of loss and pain, she needed to create a narrative in which her son's choice was not only accepted, but also depicted as an act of courage and heroism.

> You know what was a consolation for me? His reputation was really good, before his martyrdom and after […] I feel he died with honor. He refused to retreat until the last moment. Syrians were his people and he died fighting for them," she said. „He was not like others who promised to protect them and then left them facing death. (Om-Belal 6).

Ascribing value to loss emerged, for example in the interview of Om-Belal, as a key approach to meaning-making as described by Janoff-Bulman.

Theme II: Finding a Reason to Keep Going

Each of the five women was able to find a reason to keep going, handle the hassles of everyday life, and gain agency and resilience. Identifying with the needs of one's children or pursuing a political struggle were the two main reasons given during interviews. The perception of the growing agency and relicense were supporting factors.

For four of the five women interviewed, the first motive to keep going was based on identification with the mother role. Motherhood as a motive for survival is rooted in psychoanalytical literature. A main drive for a mother to survive is to protect her child and to offer ground for nonpathological development (Baraitser and Noack 117). Moreover, the prototypical feminine gender role in Syrian culture is centered around motherhood. Women are socialized to be good mothers, and a good mother in adversity will stand for her children. In this sense, motherhood was a drive to survive and gain agency and resilience.

Identifying with a social or political cause was also mentioned as a protecting factor in the context of adversity. Recent studies have suggested that political activity should be classified as a resilient response, especially to political violence (Afana, et al. 2). The literature on political trauma among Palestinians has indicated that civic and political engagement are protecting variables that lead to better psychological outcomes (Sousa 507).

Sub-theme II-1: Adopting a Cause

Ola, a single mother living with her elderly parents and female relatives after her husband forcibly disappeared and her brother died, explained how as a mother responsible for five children she does not have the choice to collapse. "I have children," she said, "you must appear strong in front of them not to weaken them," and that is why she kept struggling (Rana 3).

In contrast, Eman, who is a psychologist and political and civil rights activists, fled from Syria after her husband was arrested and she faced several attempted arrests. She is also a single mother responsible for an 8-year-old son, yet she finds in political activism a reason to overcome her pain. "After I was forcibly displaced, and my friends were detained, I felt work is the way not to think about the hardships I am living in," she said, "I was working day and night at the (Anti-Assad) newspaper" (Eman 3). Eman works now as a psychologist with Syrian women. Meanwhile, she collects women's stories for an oral history project. She clearly sees her role in supporting Syrian women and the Syrian revolution as a reason to keep going.

Om-Belal combined the two reasons together. She decided to deal with losing her son through keeping his name alive.

She is trying to achieve that through civic engagement as a teacher for Syrian children whom she described as the future of Syria. "I was struggling with myself to keep myself alive and to go on," she said. "It is the memory of my son that made me do that, after his death I lost hope in life, for some time I stopped eating, […] then I told myself I should be strong to continue his journey as far as I can." (Om-Belal 4)

Sub-theme II-2: Evolving Agency

Gaining agency was a marked consequence among the five women, as they all described how they feel that they became stronger after what they went through. It was obvious that they came to this perception through a process of comparing their current and old selves. "I feel I am strong, my husband used to make me feel like a weak person," Om-Belal said, "but after all that happened, I find myself remembering everything and I tell myself, no, not at all. They wanted me to be weak, both my husband and my family." (Om-Belal 4)

Majda, who survived cancer and two abusive relationships as well as war and displacement, described how she restarted her career as a hairdresser since she fled to Lebanon without having anything but a hair dryer. She eventually found success and brought her children to live with her. "The feeling that I can work, I am financially independent, I am capable of supporting my children […] I thank God, all I went through, I was able to stand it, to bear, and to get over it." She added, "there is no woman like me, I am not conceited, but I have self-confidence." (Majda 6)

Sub-theme II-3: Embracing Hardship as Foundation for Resilience

Some participants made a clear link between facing hardships and being able to keep going. Shyma', explaining how she was forced to be stronger, said: "the things I went through, my husband's abandonment, being alone in a foreign country, where I do not know anyone, […] I should be able to defend myself" (Shyma' 5).

In other cases, the interviewee mentioned that she made a conscious decision to be stronger to face a specific traumatic event. Majda, describing her feeling when she was first diagnosed with cancer, said: "I decided to be stronger than cancer, I struggled. This period affected me a lot, […] but I do not want to be weak, I want to be stronger than any circumstances." (Majda 5)

Theme III: Finding Ways to Keep Going

Dealing with pain related to a traumatic event, and managing the associated psychological symptoms, is a common challenge in the aftermath of severe adversity. The dominant approach in psychology is based on a pre-defined categorization of coping strategies, divided mainly into active/internal or passive/external strategies that aim at adaptive emotional regulation (Erdener 62). As this paper focuses on understanding the unique personalized techniques each woman developed to deal with the psychological aftermath of her traumatic experiences, two main themes emerged, one related to dealing with memories of traumatic events and the other to emotions related to them.

Sub-theme III-1: Dealing with Memories of the Traumatic Event: A Decision to Forget or Not to Forget

When the first author apologized to Om-Belal for making her revisit tragic memories of her son's death, she responded: "It is true I still get emotional when I tell his story, but it could not be compared with what I was feeling the first and second years […] I like telling the story of his martyrdom, I even wrote two blog posts about him." (Om-Belal 5) She emphasized how she does not want to forget. Despite the pain she feels when talking about her son, sharing his story and keeping his memory alive are her coping strategies. She also stressed how she

stopped using her given name after his death, and she asks people to call her after his name (The mother of Belal).

Other participants stated that they deal with war-related memories by trying to forget them or distracting themselves by keeping busy. Majda presented this strategy when responding to the question about what she does when she recalls war-related events. "I try to get busy with something," she said. "I tell myself it has ended, may God have mercy on those who died. We should take care of ourselves, life should go on, it should not stop at that point, we should go on." (Majda 7)

Sub-theme III-2: Coping through Social Comparison

A key coping mechanism employed to evaluate one's overall situation and regulate associated feelings relies on social comparison, i.e. comparison of one's tragedy with that of others. "Coping happens when I see what other people went through, much more than what I went through," Eman said, "I have a job and income […], my situation is better than others." (Eman 7)

It should be noted that social comparison as expressed here is in line with Janoff-Bulman's description of a major strategy in the appraisal processes using comparisons with experiences of other survivors (Janoff-Bulman 118)

Theme IV: Changing Gender Roles

The five participants underlined pre-2011 restrictions on women's mobility, education, and work. They agreed that marked changes have been happening with respect to gender roles. Some attributed these changes to concrete new aspects of life in Syria or asylum countries (i.e. men being less present due to mass killings or arrests, financial hardships, and work regulations in asylum counties). Others also explained how these new conditions led to a realization of the unfairness of gender relations and norms, which contributed to re-evaluation of past and present situations as part of the post-traumatic appraisal process.

Sub-theme IV-1: Reclaiming Spaces for Women

All five participants agreed that women's employment and freedom of movement significantly increased after 2011. They all reported obvious changes in gender roles in terms of access to public space, decision making, and employment.

Eman explained how the war forced women to enter the job market. "Because of the financial need, women were given an additional role, besides the old traditional role which they still do," she said. "Women now generally have more chances to find jobs." She also pointed out how this influenced gender relations: "A woman now knows she has the right to confront her husband" (Eman 3) she asserted.

During the interview with Om-Belal, she expressed much anger at the situation before 2011, in which she believes women were suppressed and controlled. "Honestly, despite all disasters, the changes that happened are very positive," she said. "I always wanted to participate in building society, at least to continue my education. That was not allowed." Om-Belal emphasized how she realized that men used to manipulate women. "Men did not allow us to work or to go out alone, they used to claim they worried about us facing the outside world," she said, "but during the revolution, they were sending us out to protect them. In the checkpoint if a man was accompanied by a woman they would let him go. What a contradiction." She concluded: "I am sorry, but they were liars." (Om-Belal 7)

Om-Belal›s narrative is a clear example of realization of the previous unbalanced gender relation, and the potential for - less

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restricted - new roles. This is consistent with the feminist approach in dealing with trauma, where severe adversity could be a driver of feminist consciousness.

Sub-theme IV-2: Evaluating the Feeling of Being Less "Woman" than Before

Although all five participants agreed that Syrian women in general gained agency and strength, two of them, contrary to the other three, expressed their preference for the pervious situation.

When asked how she perceives the changes in women's position, Shyma' answered: "Before was better. Women originally were not used to having a say, they were like a piece of furniture. But they were safe […] Now there are a lot of women who are alone after losing their husbands." (Shyma' 4). Shyma's dissatisfaction about the changing gender roles is clearly linked to being threatened and overwhelmed, and the challenges she is facing to provide food and shelter to her children after her husband abandoned her.

Rana also clarified why she believes women's position to have been better before: "I used to be happier and more relaxed, I was not running around […]. Now, you do not think of yourself as a woman anymore, you are a mother responsible for children, and a father as well […] Now we have to go out among the men […] I see this affecting our womanhood." (Rana 5)

Two factors could explain why the five women differ in how they evaluate overall changes in their personal strength in relation to gender roles: first, the perception and evaluation of gender relations and norms before 2011, which is shaped by the personal history and constructed narratives of each woman (i.e. history of gender relations and gender role satisfaction), and second, the extent to which current challenges are compromising basic needs or safety. However, despite differences in levels of satisfaction of current role responsibilities, growing agency and perceived strength were obvious in all interviews.

General Discussion and Conclusion

Traumatic events generally have a profound impact on the fundamental assumptions of individuals, as one's core assumptions about oneself and the world are shattered (Janoff-Bulman 56).The processes of reappraisal that lead to possible positive changes after the traumatic event/s include examining assumptions about oneself, others, and the world, and rebuilding them in a constructive way (Triplett, Tedeschi and Cann 400). One of the processes used when rebuilding assumptions focuses on re-evaluation of the traumatic experience, considering possible benefits and purpose, which contributes to meaning-making (Janoff-Bulman 118). Another process is comparative evaluation of life before and after the traumatic experience.

In the context of Syrian women, one area of shattered assumptions is that surrounding gender roles. Experiences of war and displacement unveiled how unbalanced gender relations and norms were, leading to the questioning of previous cultural beliefs and assumptions and the evaluation of ongoing changes in gender roles, which generally contributed to increased sense of agency.

Syrian women were forced to undertake new responsibilities, particularly to find means of survival for themselves and their families. For some, this was a perceived opportunity of empowerment through which they broke the restraints of patriarchy and made the most of the current fluidity of gender norms. In contrast, others saw it as an overwhelming burden that threatened their established notions about their womanhood (ABAAD and OXFAM 13-14). However, in all cases, changes in gender roles markedly contributed to their sense of agency.

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Through the process of rebuilding assumptions, each of the five women created a narrative about her most significant traumatic experience. That narrative, influenced by current living conditions and giving meaning to what had happened, is reflected in the value of the new life or in the reason to keep going.

All interviewees gained increased agency as a result of the adversity they went through; however, their overall appreciation of this gained agency varied based on current living conditions. Meanwhile, all five women were able to find an adequate reason to live for, despite the persistent pain of traumatic experiences in the past and tough living conditions in the present. Motherhood was a key driver for most interviewees, while social and political activism was also a clear motive to keep going, as an independent factor or, in one case of a mother pursuing the political cause of a son killed in battle, in conjunction with motherhood.

Each woman used unique modes of coping to deal with the memories of their traumatic experience and manage the emotions associated with it. Those who succeeded in creating a continuity of narrative between their traumatic experience and the meaning ascribed thereto on the one hand, and the reasons and values of their current life on the other, showed better coping with their pain and higher appreciation of their growing agency.

As a final note, by choosing in-depth interviews as a method to collect stories of Syrian women and IPA to analyze them, we have been operating under the assumption that each one of those stories is unique. Nevertheless, this does not preclude that there are patterns that could be extrapolated. The five women shared stories of war, structured gender-based violence, and hardships in the country of asylum, yet each developed her unique narrative as well as reasons and tools to survive. These women definitely are not representative of all Syrian women, or even all Syrian women in Lebanon, but their stories open the way for understanding the suffering, and hope, of all these women.

Notes

[1] The cooperating NGOs included The Syrian League for Citizenship, Women Now for Development, Restart Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture, Al Najdeh Association, Basma & Zaytouna, Basamat for Development, and Abaad Resource Center for Gender Equality. They work in various locations in Lebanon covering the main areas that have the highest density of Syrians, including Beirut (Shatila Refugee Camp, Bourj el Barajneh), Beqaa (Chatura, El Ain, and Arsal), and Tripoli (Al Badawi and Nahr al Bared refugee camps).

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