

Syrian Women-led Peacebuilding in Lebanon: Between Delusion & Possibilities

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When I was asked to write about the role of Syrian women in peacebuilding education in the context of Lebanon, I instantly tried to reflect on the prompt by deconstructing the question in an attempt to understand it better. I started asking myself: What is really meant by “peacebuilding” when referring to the actions undertaken by Syrian women residing in Lebanon when the conflict itself is in Syria? Which women are we specifically talking about: Syrian refugee mothers, Syrian teachers, active women within the Syrian civil society, or women in the Syrian Diaspora? Who is implicated when it comes to educating children on peacebuilding in the context of crisis and conflict? Moreover, how can we address the notion of peacebuilding when peace itself is not reached in the country of origin of Syrian women? More importantly, how can we even initiate a discussion about peacebuilding if we do not start by addressing the root causes that have engendered the conflict in question? Maybe the question carries additionally an underlying message that peace in Lebanon is subject to debate as well?

For the sake of being concise, this piece will address specifically the Syrian refugee women who, according to UN Women, represent 52% of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon.⁽¹⁾ 80.9% of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon are women and children as of December 2017 (Yassin, 2018)⁽²⁾.

With regards to the notion of «peacebuilding», it is former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali who introduced in his 1992 report «An Agenda for Peace», the concept of ‘peacebuilding’ to the UN as an «action which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict».⁽³⁾ The Brahimi Report of 2000 elaborated further on peacebuilding activities to ensure that peacebuilding is more than just the absence of war. According to International Alert, peacebuilding comprises two phases of peace: ‘positive’ and ‘negative’: «The challenge is to use periods of stability, ‘negative peace’, to build the longer-term ‘positive’ peace which is measured by achieving improvements in governance, and in fair access to economic opportunities, justice, safety and other aspects of wellbeing, such as health, education and a decent environment in which to live.»⁽⁴⁾

Peacebuilding, therefore, is a highly intricate endeavor that does not end with reaching «stability», a pre-condition to establishing lasting peace. Moreover, peace education requires a holistic approach when it comes to education provision in the context of conflict and in host countries of refugees. Yet, from experience in this field, peace education is not a criterion in the Education Response adopted by UN agencies and international organizations who mostly dedicate their support towards the enrollment of Syrian refugee children in the Lebanese public schools as part of the RACE I & II launched by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education⁽⁵⁾. More importantly, Syrian teachers who carry a natural empathy and a common anguish with Syrian children, are not allowed to teach in Lebanon due to employment regulations. Having said that, what could be then the role of Syrian refugee women in peacebuilding education in the strikingly complex socio-political context of Lebanon?

According to positive psychologist⁽⁶⁾, Dr. Zelana Montminy, the pursuit of any wishful thinking such as happiness or peace is elusive. The only path to true self-fulfillment requires being able to confront challenges as



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opportunities, and building emotional strength at difficult times which requires resilience.⁽⁷⁾ «Being resilient is more than just bouncing back» says Montminy, it is about a shift in mindset, leading to self-growth and making change. In other words, resilience is not about accepting the status quo which would become in this case a state of subordination as per Paulo Freire’s terms.

However, when safety and livelihood are primary concerns for Syrian refugee women, whether mothers, teachers or activists, contributions to peacebuilding and development become an afterthought.⁽⁸⁾ And what mostly contributes in increasing the chance for durable peace and development, is supporting Syrian refugee women in Lebanon, who - according to UN Women, 83% of them have a larger decision-making role than before displacement. This support entails helping them become more resilient and more prominent actors for peacebuilding by developing their educational skills and offering them appropriate livelihood opportunities. A study on «Refugees and the Regional Dynamics of Peacebuilding» elucidates that regional dynamics of peacebuilding and refugee situations carry much room for improvement and remain an untapped opportunity for host countries:

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As a Syrian refugee woman living in a harsh informal settlement in the Bekaa Valley said to me: «We know what we need, but it is THEY who need to be convinced». By «they», she meant the international community, the donor and host governments. In fact, she was right. Those key players need to be convinced to shift to a development approach by working on a comprehensive Pedagogy for Peace rather than a mere Education Response, and on «minding the gap» which relates to linking humanitarian assistance to longer-term development in order to prepare for the effective reintegration of refugees into their country of origin.⁽¹⁰⁾ Otherwise, peacebuilding remains a self-deceiving endeavor if all stakeholders do not take effective part in it. It takes a whole village to make peace a reality.

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(1) https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/2019-01/the_status_of_syrian_refugee_women_in_lebanon.pdf

(2) Yassin, Nasser. 101 Facts & Figures on the Syrian Refugee Crisis. 2018

(3) <https://www.globalpolicy.org/un-reform/un-reform-initiatives/secretary-general-boutros-boutrosghalis-reform-agenda-1992-to-1996/48077.html>

(4) <https://www.international-alert.org/what-we-do/what-is-peacebuilding>

(5) <https://gemreportunesco.wordpress.com/2016/05/25/reaching-all-children-with-education-lebanons-national-education-response-strategy-to-the-syria-crisis/>

(6) Positive Psychology is the scientific study of human flourishing, and an applied approach to optimal functioning. It has also been defined as the study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals, communities and organisations to thrive (Gable & Haidt, 2005, Sheldon & King, 2001).

(7) Montminy, Zelana. 21 Days to Resilience. HarperOne. 2016

(8) <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/15423166.2016.1239404>

(9) https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/ipi_e_rpt_refugees.pdf

(10) Ibis