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Research Master Thesis

Syrian Women with Refugee Status in Lebanon: Combating Structural Exclusion by Mediating a Space through Civil Society as a Form of Politics

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It is of great honor for me to dedicate this thesis to the Syrian women who have had the courage to speak to me about political, personal and traumatic issues. Beyond that with this thesis, I amplify and advocate for women's voices in political settings especially those of Arab women in Middle Eastern context or abroad. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Doctor Christian Henderson, and thank him for his patience, guidance and constant feedback, allowing me to improve and reflect throughout the process of fieldwork and writing. I would also like to pay tribute to Syrian civil society in Lebanon and civil society in Syria fighting impunity and injustice. The material in this study is for academic purposes, which I aim to use with dignity and a humanitarian conscience.

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Abstract

This study investigates how Syrian women constitute themselves as political actors through participation and action in Syrian grassroots civil society in Lebanon as a way to combat structural exclusion. To be exact, this study examines women's action through the lens of civil society and Hannah Arendt's political thought. The women's collected testimonies show that they lack access to the public realm in Lebanon. Legally they have little to no economic rights or resources, experience social discrimination and stigma and lack political participation and political recognition. I argue that Arendt's thought on political action is compatible with civil society and most importantly, the way in which the women actually practice it. Civil society's partial autonomy from state bodies and institutional settings allows peripheral action to occur in the public realm. Formal and informal structures such as gender, policies, and stigma trace the socio-political and economic exclusion Syrian women potentially face in Lebanon. In turn, civil society allows these women to partly reclaim access, contribute to society, and increase their livelihoods on a personal and material level. Although the testimonies show that women feel largely excluded from Lebanese society, they also visualize that these women do gain an increase sense of belonging, recognition, purpose, economic stability, and develop and increase political subjectivities and social mobility. I consider their acts to be so-called acts of citizenship in light of Engin Isin's thought as they partly surmount legal constrictions and are political actors through civil society. This is how Syrian women mediate a space for themselves in Lebanon and combat some of the formal and informal exclusion stipulated by their political status.

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1. Introduction

Syrian women live in displacement in many different countries, spread over many different continents since almost ten years, due to political conflict driven by a violent regime. Displacement is a rough and harsh reality, especially in countries where weak economy and political instability prevail. Depending on the country, refugees experience less exposure to access and protection and can subsequently hardly sustain a basic livelihood, well-being or rely on basic rights. Civil society has been a major resource for civilians as well as refugees to work with communities on all kinds of fronts such as political, economic, social and educational fronts for example. Syrian grassroots civil society in Lebanon partly finds ways to increase access for Syrians to contribute to their community, contribute to the society they reside in, and promote advocacy in different ways. However, there is a gap in sufficient and adequate policies for refugees, which creates a giant void when it comes to Syrians' participation in Lebanese society and their recognition as potential contributors in any efficient way. In that sense, I ask how particularly Syrian women mediate a space for themselves in such a deficient environment. I problematize the exclusion women experience, promoted by disenfranchising policies and a deeply rooted stigma towards refugees. That investigation also aims to tackle one-sided understandings of (female) refugee's experiences and the frequently ascribed victimization and vulnerability in scholarship and humanitarian discourse.

The study consists of eight chapters and has the following structure. The introduction presents the research problem, research design with methodology, positionality, and other major points of departure. This gives a clear overview of what kind of tools I use throughout the study to bring forth arguments and findings. In the second chapter, the literature review presents a comprehensive outline of literature and scholarly work on relevant frameworks and topics such as civil society, political action and refugee women in Lebanon with a focus on Syrian women. This chapter lays out some major theoretical frameworks and maps out the academic landscape, that the later analytical discussion takes place in. In the third chapter, the historical overview outlines relevant historical events concerning Lebanon and Syria and examines current relational dynamics. It also explores political and economic instability in both Lebanon and Syria leading up to the 2011 conflict in Syria as well as the current economic crisis and political situation in Lebanon. The events and dynamics that become especially relevant to the later discussion can therefore be comprehensively related back to, and offer contextualization of some past and current socio-political and economic realities. I then discuss the results in four different empirical chapters, concluding with a major and crucial analytical

discussion in chapter seven. The empirical chapters examine different topics in three main parts, categorized into sub-sections of participation, plurality and action. This particular categorization has the purpose of aligning the data and results with the theoretical framework. The analytical discussion brings together the previous elements and closely and cohesively unpacks some major arguments in light of the evidence. Much of the evidence brings forth economic, social and political change that the women experience through Syrian grassroots civil society and in that way offer opportunity. The three preceding empirical chapters follow a similar schematic structure, which primarily presents (according to subject of matter) constrictions the women face and secondly emphasize strategies through which the women succeed to partially and individually overcome them. The empirical chapters lead to a conclusion repeating crucial arguments, addressing suggestions and limitations as well as contributions to the field. This study specifically addresses Syrian grassroots civil society in Lebanon. That means, in this study when I refer to civil society, I always refer to Syrian grassroots civil society in Lebanon. The term grassroots implies that it is non-corporal or non-governmental and that locals initiate and sustain it working mainly on humanitarian, social, political and educational fronts. The term Syrian implies that it is founded and initiated by Syrians, however has some Lebanese and foreign members as well.

1.1 Research Problem

This study amplifies women's roles as (political) actors, who combat exclusion that they face due to different factors – on formal (economic and political) and informal grounds (social). I argue that Syrian women with refugee status mediate a space for themselves in Lebanon through (political) action in civil society. This allows for participation in the public realm and gives access to social, economic and political resources, regardless of the fact that their refugee status demarcates participation on all three fronts. The elements of participation, plurality and action lead me to make two main arguments. First, I apply Hannah Arendt's theory of political action to civil society, which allows me to trace the political and make the claim that civil society is a form of politics to a certain extent. This renders its participants in this case to become political actors. Second, through Engin Isin's concept of "acts of citizenship" I am able to unfold an alternative understanding of citizenship and hence map out how these women constitute themselves as citizens in a way.

This study also problematizes the humanitarian and academic narrative of refugee women having a homogenous experience, which essentially consists of victimhood or vulnerability. Dina Kiwan (2016: 149) stresses that predetermined humanitarian narratives

overshadow what women actually contribute to and do "on the ground". Seeing refugees primarily as victims constructs a perspective that does not do justice to political and historical dynamics and is dehumanizing (Malkki, 1995 in Kiwan 2016, 165). I aim to deconstruct that depoliticized narrative through insight into women's experiences and the political elements of their experiences. Through such dominating discourses or the general lack of Arab women's roles in such discourses, it creates a kind of perpetual exclusion as Kiwan (2019: 3) calls it. On another note, Rosemary Sayigh (1998: 42) claims that Arab women in general do not receive much attention when it comes to different roles that they can take on or play in Arab spaces. In that sense, my contribution to scholarship expands on three levels. First, to combat the depoliticized ways in which scholarship presents refugee women. Second, to counter the victimization and vulnerability the humanitarian context projects on the women. Third, to bring forth lacking roles of Arab women in Arab environments with a research approach that generates discourses by the women themselves about their experiences. In turn, I highlight the importance of listening to women's experiences in the realm of political conflict and displacement and its impositions to allow and amplify women's voices in its diverse, multilateral and authentic form.

The study considers what these women do a remarkable act, as Syrian women with refugee status (or unregistered women) face harsh policies in an economically and politically weak system in Lebanon in addition to the hardships of exile and stigma. The women create narratives out of their experiences and partly make sense of them. Their action and participation in civil society exposes them to social and political matters, which generates awareness amongst the women through discussions and exchange. That manifests a space for social relations to grow and expand without stigma or legality posing a contingent issue. Because these women carry a certain stigma, they become bodies in the public space that are in constant potential to experience harm with the partial inability to access public services due to their status. This study highlights how these women mobilize against the systemic injustice they face in Lebanon in their own ways. I starkly underline that the study aims to utilize civil society as a lens to capture actions by women, rather than expanding on how civil society works or comprehend its technicalities. Recently, research directs more attention towards action especially in the case of underrepresented groups such as refugee women (Goodkind and Deacon, 2004: 721, 722). I aim to attend to that particular gap of research on refugee women in correlation with politics and action. Moreover, more often than not, scholarship visualizes Syrian women through dimensions of vulnerability, violence, healthcare, and demographics but rarely do they map out political action (see Gissi, 2019, 2020 and Kiwan, 2016, 2017, 2019) or even action. This in

turn, maintains for several discussions to stay on the surface with a clear agenda, which shows the Syrian women in a certain light – receivers of aid. On top of that, the existent literature on Syrian civil societies in Lebanon lacks women's inclusion. Nevertheless, I highlight that the study in no way aims to generalize Syrian women or aims to offer an insight into the experiences of all Syrian women in Lebanon (in civil society). Nor does it make the claim that there are only women in civil society, but rather puts sole focus on women in civil society.

1.2 Hypothesis

This study investigates how Syrian women constitute themselves as political actors through participation and action in Syrian grassroots civil society in Lebanon as a way to combat structural exclusion. To be exact, this study examines women's action through the lens of civil society and Arendt's political thought. The women's collected testimonies show that they lack access to the public realm in Lebanon. Legally they have little to no economic rights or resources, experience social discrimination and stigma and lack political participation and political recognition. I argue that Arendt's thought on political action is compatible with civil society and most importantly, the way in which the women actually practice it. Civil society's partial autonomy from state bodies and institutional settings allows peripheral action to occur in the public realm. Formal and informal structures such as gender, policies, and stigma trace the socio-political and economic exclusion Syrian women potentially face in Lebanon. In turn, civil society allows these women to partly reclaim access, contribute to society, and increase their livelihoods on a personal and material level. Although the testimonies show that women feel largely excluded from Lebanese society, they also visualize that these women do gain an increase sense of belonging, recognition, purpose, economic stability, and develop and increase political subjectivities and social mobility. I consider their acts to be so-called acts of citizenship in light of Engin Isin's thought as they partly surmount legal constrictions and are political actors through civil society. This is how Syrian women mediate a space for themselves in Lebanon and combat some of the formal and informal exclusion stipulated by their political status.

1.3 Research Questions

The research questions are the following, with the first one as the focal research question:

> ***How do Syrian women with refugee status mediate a space for themselves in Lebanon through civil society?***

How does political action generate access to socio-political and economic opportunities?

How do Syrian women in Lebanon partly emancipate themselves from their constricting refugee status?

How does political action unfold in civil society?

1.4 Positionality

Positionality is an important factor in regards to how the research operates analytically. Analytical tools are crucial for the researcher and aid in proliferating the results through the methodology. Another factor is how my relation or positionality towards the interviewees is in the space in which the research and fieldwork occur. The positionality in this study is rooted in a post-positive approach. Research that operates through post-positivism, supposes that everything is subjective and in order to grasp certain realities, actors need to be examined (Wildemuth, 1993: 450, 451). Conducting research with a post-positivist approach also means that research needs to be cohesive and in line with according research questions and a coherent methodology (Wildemuth, 1993: 450, 451). In the case of this study, the research aims to perceive the multilateral reality different women experience in a certain context. Their subjectivities come forth by relating them to each other and to the theoretical framework. In that way, the results have space to unfold in its original form and subsequently fall under a theoretical lens and become evidence for the analytical discussion to serve as a way to work towards the research question.

Since the beginning of the fieldwork, I wanted to make sure that my research lets the testimonies and the women speak for themselves. For that reason, I present all passages of the testimonies that I discuss as they are instead of paraphrasing much. That strategy allows me to reasonably pull information from the testimonies as well as present them in their authentic form. As I mainly focus on women's strengths, their potential to act, their participation, and their ability to combat systemic exclusion, I needed to remind myself much throughout the research that the injustice and hardship that these women constantly face should not be underestimated or forgotten. As I have been to Lebanon and other Middle Eastern contexts before, I have worked over the last years with Syrians on different occasions. I was very emotionally involved but continuously tried to stay bias and not share any personal or political opinions of mine with interviewees. As I interviewed several women I worked with, I benefitted from the trust that I was able to build with them beforehand. Evidently, I am aware that my positionality as a person

coming from a Western space can influence what kind of information the women decide to disclose me. My geographical background can potentially cause or excruciate lack of trust, negativity, and power relations due to difference in political, social, legal and economic freedom including freedom of movement. Especially one interview became very emotional for the translator I was working with and me. This challenged us to appreciate the pain of the interviewee but at the same time remain distant. The fieldwork went very well in the sense that I was able to connect to members of civil societies easily and find interviewees without problems. The political and economic situation in Lebanon as well as in Sabra and Shatila where I resided was not always stable. However, the time spent there was a positive experience personally as well as for the fieldwork. Unfortunately, the fieldwork on site came short due to Covid-19 that started approximately in March 2020 in Lebanon. This only allowed me to stay in Lebanon for ten weeks instead of at least sixteen to twenty weeks.

1.5 Methodology

1.5.1 Sites of Study

I collected data throughout January 2020 and March 2020 in and around Beirut as well as over the phone. My initial period of fieldwork was set out to be at least until May or June, however due to Covid-19 I had to return quickly to Germany. However, I was able to make connections with influential members of according civil society, so that I could later interview women over the phone. Additionally, I was involved myself in a Syrian civil society in Beirut, Lebanon which allowed for access to several women who were willing to be interviewed. The nineteen interviews mainly come from three different Syrian civil societies, operated and founded by Syrians with most of its staff Syrian, some Lebanese and some foreigners. Two out of the three civil societies operate within both Syria and Lebanon with special focus on women's rights, education and community empowerment. Some of the women I interviewed live in Shatila camp and others in housing in or around Beirut.

1.5.2 Demographic of Study

The ages of the women are between 19 years old and 37 years old. The women come from Damascus, provinces of Damascus (such as Eastern and Western Ghouta and Daraya), Aleppo, Raqqa, Tartus, Latakia and Idlib. The women have different educational backgrounds reaching from elementary school education to Master Degrees. However, many of the women had to interrupt their education or careers starting in the beginning of 2011 in Syria. For some women the work with civil society in Lebanon is their first general working experience - some

women have been involved in civil society before in Syria. One of the women has a scholarship at a University in Beirut and others have studied or currently study in Lebanon. The time of residence of the women reaches from four to eight years and all conducted interviews happened in Arabic except for one interview, with a fluent English speaker. Half of the interviews happened with the aid of an Arabic translator (in person) and I conducted the ones on the phone in Arabic through WhatsApp. The names that appear in the study are changed code names instead of their real names, as I keep the information of the interviewees anonymous and protect their identities throughout the study.

1.5.3 Practicalities and Ethics

All interviews started by myself asking for verbal consent for recording the interviews. All women gave their consent except for one woman, were I then transcribed with the help of my translator during the interview. I recorded all but one interview on a recording device and then transferred them to a USB stick, which I kept securely separate from the laptop. Before every interview, I underlined that they could stop the interview at any time, or skip questions and only answer if they feel comfortable. Interviewing individuals with a certain vulnerability level, can become emotionally distressing (Daley, 2015: 133), which is why I lay priority on protection rather than on information. Some of the more political questions were sometimes met with confusion other times were discussed passionately without much inhibition. Politics can be a triggered or negatively associated topic for some of the women, due to their life in an authoritarian regime in Syria and their currently unclear political situation in Lebanon (Gissi, 2020: 9). The fact that my translator is a Syrian woman from Aleppo sometimes made the communication easier and more familiar. On a more critical note, her presence as a Syrian can have both a positive or negative effect in the sense of what women feel like they can disclose in the presence of another Syrian, that they do not know. The interviews on the phone went well in the way that through the anonymity perhaps some women felt like they could verbalize much of their thoughts openly. However, a hurdle of online communication was that I could not introduce the research or myself properly.

1.5.4 Research Design

The research design influences both the conception and discussion of the data. The analytical approach in this study relies on content analysis. This is relevant, as the most effective way to bring forth, address and discuss the data is to present it the way that it is, without interpretative methods. Within the realm of a post-positivist approach, the research aims to first map out different and individual experiences and perspectives of Syrian refugee women and

later understand how they relate to each other and to the theoretical framework. Generally, qualitative research methods aid to capture constructions of multilateral meanings (Suzuki et al., 1992 in Goodkind and Deacon, 2004: 722). Moreover, content analysis enables a "flexible" and "pragmatic" way to fathom experiences (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1286). The way that content analysis works is through a coding process, which categorizes data into subjects or themes that appear in the text (data) with a proceeding discussion on the cohesions between the categories (Weber, 1990 in Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1285). In the case of this study, according to the content, I organize the data into contextual and systematic categories (participation, plurality, and action) and later discuss their connections in the analytical discussion. Through that categorization, the insight into the data can become rich and comprehensible (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1286). This research design has methodological implications and serves as a medium for the opinions of the women to come forth and thereby enhance a kind of participatory element in the study by participants, who in this case are Syrian women (Goodkind and Deacon, 2004: 728).

1.5.5 Method

I collected the data with the method of semi-structured interviews. I conducted semi-structured interviews with almost twenty women; each interview took about twenty to sixty minutes. I asked about thirty questions, however it varied from interviewee to interviewee if I would ask the prepared questions, change questions or have more of a conversation. The prepared questions approached to comprehend the women's relationship to politics, motivations and understandings of civil society as well as life in Lebanon. The quantity of twenty interviewees and therewith the data from almost twenty testimonies, gives me the ability to collect a variety of data and make claims that are based on perspectives that derive from many different individuals with different backgrounds and perspectives. Semi-structured interviews leave space and flexibility for the interviewees to answer open questions and can offer the researcher capacity to follow up with questions. Sayigh (1998: 43) claims that oral testimony is a rich resource, as it can manifest experiences of marginal groups and utilizes speech to capture it. Refugee women tell stories and testimonies as political actors, which moves away from male-based narratives and offers a way to gain insight into a complete reality, where women from different backgrounds can contribute and participate in potential social or political change (Sayigh, 1998: 43). Although semi-structured interviews present an appropriate method in conversation with refugee women who experience marginalization on a daily basis, the method is not flawless or perfect. Self-perception of the interviewees might change due to how

they want others to perceive them (Hunt, 2010 in Gissi, 2020: 9). In addition, the format of prepared questions can be rigid, entail certain answers, or become preparatory for certain topics of interest.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Debates and discourses in academia and the literary sphere concerning civil society and political action encompass the theoretical and conceptual frameworks in the coming chapters. Additionally, I examine potential actors, in this case Syrian women in Lebanon in their given socio-political and economic environment. The chapter's structure has two major parts. The first part examines theoretical and conceptual frameworks of civil society and political action. The second part addresses more specifically Isin's acts of citizenship and the participants of civil societies and its politics, by delving into existent literature on Syrian refugee women in Lebanon. The aim is to present a clear and diverse overview of relevant literature on the relevant themes and subjects. This chapter is especially relevant to bring forth the argument, that civil society, as a concept and political action as a theoretical framework presents comprehensive ways to unpack the women's actions further. The most crucial part here is the element of autonomy and decentralization. In other words, civil society and political action allow for a proliferation of peripheral political action, which happens separately from institutionalized spaces. For the case of Syrian women in Lebanon, who have little to no political rights in Lebanon, civil society and the political action creates two outcomes. First, it presents a medium for them to establish themselves in a public. Second, it offers a comprehensive medium, to examine these actions. These arguments in turn, help to approach the question of how Syrian women deal with exclusion and how they mediate a space for themselves in the public, where there is virtually none. Lastly, this chapter additionally helps me to highlight a vast gap in scholarship when it comes to active refugee women, female refugees in Lebanon and particularly Syrian women in Lebanon.

2.2 Part I - Civil Society and Political Action

2.2.1 Conceptualizing Civil Society

There are various different schools of civil society, as it is a broad concept with various approaches such as Eurocentric, non-Eurocentric, social, political, and economic ones for example. Due to the sake of relevance and quantity, I aim to specify the discussion of the term and underline specifically the political debate and according perspectives. That means the focus is on discussions that address political elements in civil society, without implying that that is the overarching understanding of the term in scholarship. Additionally, most debates on civil society address the sphere, in which civil society occurs, underlining either the public

dimensions, autonomous (from state and economy) dimensions or both. This is a crucial part of the debate, as civil society's partial autonomy and simultaneously public presence, becomes relevant to the later discussion. Civil society is an extremely broad concept - however the coming passages aim at narrowing down the perspective and put focus on relevant and critical remarks. The following passages critically engage in different debates and discourses on the matter, to find a positionality the study takes. The following passages should be able to position the study in regards to the concept of civil society, which has its point of departure in the political narrative in this study.

One of the most prominent works of literature published in the format of a book *Civil Society and Political Theory,* by Cohen and Arato (1994:30), addresses civil society with its diverse and different theoretical conceptualizations rooted in political thought by linking political theory to civil society. Cohen and Arato (1994: 117, 118) as well as many other scholars since the 20th century (Magatti, 2005 in Laratta, 2012: 3), base much of their conceptualizations of civil society on Hegel's understanding, which argues that civil society appears in a kind of independent sphere that is separated from the state and market economy. In fact, Hegel is one of the first theorists of civil society, who claims that it embodies different forms and pieces of society that have the ability to pose dissidence to the state to a certain extent (Hegel, 1820 in Cohen and Arato, 1994: 219). What Cohen and Arato (1994: 92) and Laratta (2012: 22) underline is that civil society in turn can generate some kind of "moral freedom" or "freedom" and partly counter social exclusion, functions in that partly autonomous or independent sphere. Throughout their extensive work of literature, the authors argue that civil society has a political culture and is in turn present in the public sphere (Cohen and Arato 1994: 83, 87). This approach to civil society is most concurrent with the conceptualization of civil society in this study. The major factors are that civil society has a certain autonomy to the state, civil society has a political culture, and civil society hence appears in the public. These three points are relevant throughout the study and help capture political action in civil society further. These lay a fundament through which in the later discussion Arendt's political action can unfold in and build on.

Many scholars praise that particular autonomous sphere, in which civil society appears (Habermas, 1992; Cohen and Arato, 1994). Building on that, scholars argue that the autonomous characteristics is not entire but only partial and that in fact civil society is present in the public realm (Cohen and Arato, 1994; Calhoun, 1993; Lang, 2013; Reitzes, 1994; Habermas 1992). On the same note, Susanne Rudolph (2000: 1762) claims that civil society

then creates a way for citizens to enhance their presence in the public and profit from that ability. Relatedly, Simone Chambers argues in her book *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society,* civil society operates as a medium that provides a way to battle inequality in the public realm (Chambers and Kymlicka, 2002: 8). On a more critical note, Rudolph (2000: 1762) emphasizes that there exists a large gap between Western and non-Western conceptions and realizations of the term, as civil society is rooted in European and Eastern European history of populations rising up against oppressive regimes in the 80s. This is relatable to the study in the way that it captures both the empowering capacity of civil, but also understands the Western origin of the concept and its potential limitations when discussing a non-Western space. Furthermore, a major argument that is relevant and crucial throughout the study, is the fact that civil society is set in the public and hence enables its actors to interact in the public and hence profit from that interaction.

In her critical approach, Neera Chandhoke (2010) addresses in her article some critique both on a westernized use of the term and the frequent romanticizing or glorification of the term civil society. In turn, this can lead to an assumption that civil society takes place within the space of a democracy and blur existent power relations within civil societies (Chandhoke, 2010: 13; Hann and Dunn, 1996). She does not claim that civil society is not suitable for a non-Western space, however underlines the importance of contextualization of the space, in which civil society appears. Other authors such as Alexander and Fine (1993; 1997 in Laratta, 2012) repeat this argument by underlining potential inequalities due to internal dynamics that can prevail in civil society and the necessity of a diversified perspective on the matter. Evidently, when conducting this study, it is important to be aware of power relations within civil society as well as the system in which it operates. In other words, referring to Chandhoke throughout this study can help to be more critical of the mainly positive image civil society has in this study and be thoroughly critical and reflective of some dominant discourses. This is a crucial fact, as the argument of this study is not that civil society is an ideal concept and is the solution to the suffering of Syrian women. Rather, it is a concept that surely has flaws but, in this instance, presents a way for the women to become active and engage.

The following passages include some of the literary works that specifically address and emphasize the subject of politics of civil society (Reitzes, 1994; Lang, 2013; Ranson, 2012; Hann and Dunn, 1996; Edwards and Foley, 2001). Sabine Lang (2013: 49) criticizes the idea of separating the political from civil society. She implies that if the political is bound to happen solely in institutional settings, it leaves little space for individuals outside of institutions to be

political actors. Stewart Ranson (2012: 2) additionally claims that participation is what makes acts political, referring to the participation of individuals in the public through the medium of civil society. Hann and Dunn (1996: 22) state that as people share certain values in civil societies, they are active in; it is that shared ideology so to speak that makes it political. These different authors, approach the political in civil society through different arguments, however come to the same conclusion that civil society has a political component. Some scholars on the other hand call for a strict separation of politics and civil society (Putman, 1993) or claim that they simply do not correlate (Fischer, 1997). Putman (1993) suggests that civil society can potentially pose a threat to a state when it becomes political referring to possible conflict or war. Some of the major points in this passage are the decentralized political action that can occur through civil society. Participation becomes a vital analytical and theoretical theme, in the discussion on the partial political nature of civil society as well as the women's political action. The focus of politics in civil society should not lead to the argument that civil society is solely political. The aim is to move away from institutionalized politics and rather understand how people that (forcibly) chose to act outside of institutions can participate and hence be political.

To expand on the political in civil society further, the book by Glasius et al. (2004: 3) *Exploring Civil Society: Political and Cultural Contexts* offers different perspectives on the political in civil society by moving through different geographical and socio-political spaces. Here, one of the main arguments is that in order to understand how civil society appears in different spaces, it is essential to understand the landscape and the context it functions in (Glasius et al., 2004: 3, 4). This argument is relatable to the study in the way that it emphasizes local and contextual understanding. This means that external factors can play a vital role for the participants of civil society and the civil society itself. Many of the authors argue that political participation is a part of civil society, which in turn makes the individuals who partake political agents (Glasius et al., 2004: 4). Although the authors aim to underline the political in civil society and reiterate similar approaches throughout the book, they ultimately state that civil society has a paradoxical nature, as it can have different appearance and outcomes in different spaces and therefore is not congruent with one certain definition (Glasius et al., 2004: 9). This literary work is relevant as it underlines both the political as well as the paradoxical or fluid nature of civil society, which is concurrent with the diverse and versatile experiences different individuals can have in civil society. In later chapters, I discuss how women can make sense differently of their experiences in civil society, which becomes a strong suit of civil society as

an analytical tool. Its fluidity and rather undefinable nature offers a flexible lens, under which action proliferates and unfolds in this study.

The following work is especially relevant for the study, as it not only states civil society is political, but also offers a theoretical lens through which this statement can be further understood. Yildirim (2014: 875) claims innovatively in his article that Arendt's theory of political action is applicable to civil society with specific focus on the element of active participation of members in civil society. First, Yildirim (2014: 871) underlines Arendt's understanding that civil society belongs to the private realm and is therefore purely social and nonpolitical. However, by putting forth Arendt's definition of the political, he then uses this understanding and applies it to civil society. Specifically, the author highlights that the characteristics of politics that Arendt suggest which are plurality, action and participation appear and concur in civil society (Yildirim, 2014: 875). Ultimately, the author claims that although the motives and goals of the civil society might not be political in itself, it constitutes a political experience in light of Arendt's applied thought (Yildirim, 2014: 879). This literary work is especially important to accentuate in this chapter as it has a similar approach that the study takes. It simply exemplifies fundamental proprieties of what political is to Arendt, applies it to civil society and thereby traces its political features. This can come across as counterintuitive, as Arendt claims civil society to be social and nonpolitical; nonetheless, it legitimately argues its point cohesively and reasonably. Throughout this study, I use Yildirim's direct connection of political action to civil society as a pretext to build and develop a number of my arguments on.

2.2.2 Theorizing Political Action

There are different approaches to what politics is, what a political experience is and what defines political action. As hinted earlier, this study aims to draw and investigate the political element civil society has and how it is potentially experienced. To narrow down an approach towards political action, I use Arendt's political thought as a theoretical fundament. In the following passages, I explore some perspectives on political action with a focus on Arendt and according debates and critique.

Political action is a term that Arendt and numerous other scholars extensively discuss, who examine, criticize, and admire her political thought. James Knauer examines in his article Arendt's political action and interrogates some of the depths of her political thought. The author outlines some of the origins of Arendt's thought on politics and addresses her thoughts on

human activity as a breaking point for her political action (Knauer, 2014: 722). Arendt divides human activity into three categories, which consist of "work", "labor" and "speech and action" (Knauer, 2014: 722). Building on this, part of the argument is that speech is what renders an individual political, which enables their actions to become political action (Arendt 1958: 3). Another political incentive is the condition of plurality – meaning performing speech and action in the presence of others or in an "association" (Knauer, 2014: 722, 726). Plurality and speech are two of the most basic ingredients, which leads the activity to become a political activity or a political experience. Moreover, according to Arendt, to act means to be in a public space, which in turn becomes "the space of appearance" (Knauer, 2014: 723, 727). Knauer makes a clear case of the structure Arendt's theoretical framework of political action and underlines some of the major cornerstones of her idea namely plurality, action and speech, which occurs in the public spaces. This understanding can later contribute to the argument that these themes also occur in civil society, which makes political action visible in civil society. In other words, civil society is a form of political action according to Arendt's theoretical framework of political action. Again, the element of the public is vital as political action sets its actors into the public.

Trevor Tchir extensively explores in his book *Hannah Arendt's Theory of Political Action,* Arendt's theory of political action. Arendt (in Tchir, 2018: 2-4) claims that political action is especially valuable as it creates the possibility for people to experience and share a kind of freedom. Arendt (in Tchir, 2018: 4, 16) bases this claim on her statement that individuals are not intrinsically free or autonomous beings, only through participation and plurality in the public space, can they attain a kind of freedom. Furthermore, plurality generates this action to become established and meaningful through recognition on an internal level and on a public level (Tchir, 2018: 5). That means the group setting in civil society partly allows mutual recognition to occur and civil society's action gains public recognition as it works within the structures of the public space. In other words, political action is both a way of exchanging opinions as well as a way to keep the public space lively (Tchir, 2018: 15). The action that these individuals do, does not necessarily have its focus on purpose or meaning, but rather has its motivation in *doing* action and speech (Arendt, 1958 in Tchir, 2018: 15). To repeat, her understanding of what is political and more specifically political action constitutes the combination of action and speech under a public and plural circumstance (Tchir, 2018: 16). As brought forth by both Knauer, Yildirim and Tchir, Arendt's thought on political action brings together action, plurality and participation that hence sets its actors into the public space. This

is the basic theoretical framework, through which I discuss the data later and through which the discussion finds its cohesion to civil society. The recognition that happens through plurality later becomes a vital analytical element in regards to group settings and collectivity in civil society.

Political action is not a unilateral term, but rather one that has different approaches and applications in academia. In his article, Thompson Kirk (1969) examines the link between constitutional theory and political action and concludes that they are not compatible. The focal point however is his threefold critique of some of Arendt's theoretical arguments on political action. First, he claims that the priority of political action is meaning and intention rather than just "doing" in terms of action (Kirk, 1969: 659). Second, he underlines that this activity is not so much politics itself but rather a form of political activity, almost a separated subcategory of politics (Kirk, 1969: 659). Lastly, the author states that political action is not bound to happen in public, but can also happen in private spaces (Kirk, 1969: 660). These three major points that the author basis his idea of political action on, help to be more alert to some points that Arendt makes in her outline of political action. Nevertheless, the study stands by the thought that the major priority in political action is not so much the political goal, but rather the act itself and the positive reinforcement that comes with being able to act. The study echoes the approach that civil society happens in the public, which is in fact one of its positive assets.

The Middle East is a vivid space where historical events and turbulent politics often give way to singular political leaders or parties to have power and rule, which can take away claim of the "ordinary people". Asef Bayat (2013) writes in his book, *Life as Politics*, about change and transformation in the Middle East by focusing on citizens, which he calls the ordinary people. He calls political action in his work a "quiet enchroachment", which more specifically describes the acts of ordinary people, motivated by engaging in the public and hence creating change (Bayat, 2013: 56). These ordinary people, who practice political action do so unknowingly of the politics of their action, and rather do it out of both desires of survival and autonomy from the state and institutions (Bayat, 2013: 58, 59). This work of literature brings forth both some conceptualization of political action, as well as the context of the Middle East. Essentially, the author underlines "the art of presence" of ordinary people through the active participation in the public and their "ordinary" everyday life, render their actions to become political acts (Bayat, 2013: 249). What is crucial here is that the political in action is not always clear to the ones that participate in such action. In addition, Bayat aims to understand meaningful acts and participation of "ordinary" individuals and their engagements outside of

institutions. As previous authors have, Bayat underlines themes of public presence and active participation. Bayat's approach are major points of departure when it comes to some of the themes that appear in women's testimonies such as change and peripheral action.

2.3 Part II: Acts of Citizenship and Refugee Women in Lebanon

2.3.1 Acts of Citizenship

The following passages serve to gain an insight into some of the debates and discourses surrounding alternative conceptions of citizenship. This focuses on groups of people that do not enjoy citizen rights in the country they reside in, as it is largely the case for Syrian and Syrian Palestinians in Lebanon. Without delving into the field of citizenship studies, the following passages are to map out an understanding of how individuals and groups deal with their acclaimed status and its ramifications on their livelihoods and socio-economic and political mobility. This should not encourage an all-encompassing outline of all Syrians in Lebanon or all of their activity, as they are not a monolithic group. It should rather offer an insight specifically on how individuals mediate constrictions and hence understand these actions from an "unconventional" and critical point of view on a more analytical level.

Isin delivers a reconceptualization of some notions of citizenship and its' indoctrination in the modern era. Isin's (2008, 2009) major work challenges how citizenship manifests itself in legal dimensions and how accordingly that influences a person's mobility or life on a greater scheme. The author explores how the term citizenship is structured and encourages in that sense moving away from the constructions of legality and institutionalization (Isin, 2008: 18). In turn, he argues that if individuals or groups who face social and legal exclusion "act politically", it makes them act as if they were citizens (Isin, 2008; 37, 38). This does not mean that individuals necessarily are aware of the political in their action (see Bayat, 2013), but through the mere act it becomes political action - this renders them "actors of citizenship" (Isin, 2009). He calls these acts "ruptures", as systemic dynamics are interrupted and nonmembers of citizen rights so to speak claim rights that are not naturally ascribed to them (Isin, 2008: 27). What he emphasizes in his work is not the notion of membership when it comes to citizenship, but rather participation (Isin, 2008). With these main arguments, the author offers a reconceptualization of citizenship that occurs outside of institutions or legal boundaries and can capture acts outside of these structures. This is a crucial argument as it brings together two major conceptions. First, anyone can do political action regardless of her status. Second, the emphasis on participation and on the political character of action is crucial. Participation is a vital element that is both a

cornerstone of civil society and political action and additionally underscores how actors can virtually manifest themselves as citizens through it.

Scholars such as John Williams (see also Christina Beltrán, 2009) write about Arendt's thoughts on immigrant action, which she claims happens in the "space in-between" or "space of appearance". Just as Isin, Arendt focuses less on legality or institutions when making her argument, but more on political action driven through engagement (Williams, 2005: 199). The debates by Isin, Beltrán, Arendt and Williams link together in their claims and move away from institutionalized definitions of citizenship. They additionally move away from participation in traditional politics and call for a perspective that engages the capacity to rethink some of the dominant conceptions and look at any kind of individual and her abilities to participate and be present in the public. Williams particularly addresses the "space in-between" in light of Arendt, which is the space where anyone regardless of citizenship can actively participate politically (Williams, 2005: 199). He repeatedly underlines his and Arendt's inclination to move away from liberal thinking to broaden the horizons especially in regards to acts of citizenship (Williams, 2005: 199). In a similar instance, Beltrán echoes Arendt's conceptual idea that being present in the space of appearance can promote for the particular individual to experiences fragments of citizenship (Beltrán, 2009: 598). Both authors address the space that Arendt marks to be the space where the political happens and where they can experience a sort of instance of citizenship despite the individual's status. This is a crucial argument as it offers new understandings on how such political experiences can empower the individual and partly break out of constrictions of legal status. The space in-between later becomes a vital analytical lens, in which different parameters occur and unfold.

Another category appears within the discourse of citizenship and immigrant action, which is the so-called "noncitizenship" debate. This terminology refers to a category of people who find themselves without citizenship in a certain environment. Paulina Tambakaki (2015: 927) states in her article that a noncitizen is someone who is starkly outsources from citizenship and its political benefits, and is hence limited in her actions. Although many Syrians (however not many Palestinian Syrians) have Syrian citizenship, the text by Tambakaki can be cohesively tied to the discussion at hand. The author offers an interesting alterative to the category of noncitizenship as in her view it is too constrictive, and sticks to the conventional idea of citizenship. She calls for a more fitting concept that she calls "politicization", which envisions how effected subjects (who do not have citizenship) become more aware of their situation and the exclusion they experience (Tambakaki, 2015: 930). Moreover, they react to that exclusion

through public action to tackle some of these inequalities (Tambakiki, 2015: 930). In that way, Tambakiki (2015: 925) criticizes the entire category of citizenship (and noncitzenship) as it reasons in membership and status and therefore operates within a rigid and exclusive system (see also Benhabib, 2005). Ultimately, Tambakiki (2015: 932) states that citizenship is a category that is rooted in binary dynamics between members and nonmembers. The suggestions by Tambakiki underline the static category of citizenship and offer a different paradigm to understand actions by individuals who move outside of this category. The dynamic of binaries becomes more relevant in the later discussion both in regards to citizenship as well as in regards to refugee image and women. With her work, Tambakaki visualizes the political dimension in action of marginal members of a society.

2.3.2 Refugee Women in Lebanon

The following passages examine some debates on women with refugee status in Lebanon and some according narratives, with particular focus on active Syrian refugee women in Lebanon. In this way, the chapter can offer an insight into the academic landscapes and some socio-political realities refugee women face in Lebanon. As there is an abundance of literature on Syrian women as victims, beneficiaries and vulnerable persons, these passages aim to counter this narrative by putting focus on women's action and active participation. Nevertheless, the interrogation takes into account the vulnerability of women with refugee status and the hardship that comes with it.

Palestinian refugees have existed in Lebanon since over 70 years. Originally, with two major influxes in 1948 and 1967 and with an increased number of refugees due to Syrian and Syrian Palestinians coming to Lebanon since 2011. Rosemary Sayigh is a writer that has dedicated most of her work to unpack experiences of Palestinians in Lebanon, women's experiences and diaspora. By looking at narratives of Palestinian women from Shatila refugee camp from 1990 to 1992, she suggests in her article that stories by "nonelite" or ordinary women are essential in shaping history (Sayigh, 1998: 42). She underlines the importance of oral history and its power and ability to capture social realities through the medium of "direct speech" (Sayigh, 1998: 43). She also claims that through women's participation in their new environment (caused by displacement), they can engage in personal or socio-political development or transformation through time (Sayigh, 1998: 43, 53). Sayigh makes note of the historical trajectory of women's experiences as refugees in Lebanon and their legacies, which have little space in general refugee narratives. In that way, the work by Sayigh shows both the importance of exploring and amplifying displaced women's stories to understand their reality

as a part of a greater narrative and their capacity to act (politically). This is an important work to mention, as it is valid for later arguments and discussions, which address the ability for women to go through change, due to exposure to new and challenging dynamics. Additionally, Shatila camp carries much history with it and is a site where many Syrian refugees and Palestinian Syrian refugees reside today.

El Asmar et al., (2019) explores the meaning and situation for Syrian women in Lebanon when it comes to making decisions and the relevance of being able to make them. Through large-scale ethnographic research, one of the main findings shows that there is a strong and gendered gap in women and men's experiences in the realm of conflict (El Asmar et al., 2019: 4). The study maps out the policies that Syrian women face in Lebanon, which are both harmful to them on a human scale as well as on a gendered scale, as much of the systemic exclusion and discrimination is rooted in patriarchy (El Asmar et al., 2019). However, the study ultimately underlines the importance of everyday decisions and women's abilities to decide and as such increase their sense of authority and responsibility. The study particularly finds that the experience of displacement is what confronts women with new responsibilities (El Asmar et al., 2019: 11). Although the study is critical of much of the women having a decreased decision-making power in their lives, they also underline the importance of it. Here, again as above in Bayat (2013), the power and importance in ordinary acts is crucial. Again, as in Sayigh (1998), new challenges and new responsibilities can promote transitions and change. This becomes especially visible in the later testimonies that provides an insight into how women have new appreciation for responsibility, autonomy and decisions.

As mentioned before, much of the academic debate on Syrian refugees and Syrian women with refugee status revolves around needs, vulnerability and victimhood. Dina Kiwan is a scholar who actively moves away from this narrative and works to highlight active engagement instead. Kiwan (2016: 150) criticizes in her article both the residual conceptualization of citizenship and gender and underlines acts and projects of Syrian Palestinian and Syrian women with refugee status in Lebanon. Her work is especially relevant to the study, as it combines both the subject of Syrian women with refugee status in Lebanon and underlines critical perspectives on the category of citizenship. In fact, the author links much of her work to Isin's concept of "acts of citizenship". She states that active engagement and participation by Syrian and Palestinian Syrian women in Lebanon is possible, despite their restrictive status, and lets these women surmounts some of the set parameters such as social, political and economic constrictions (Kiwan, 2016: 163-165). She specifically underlines the

action of a Palestinian Syrian woman who initiated a project in Shatila refugee camp called "Basmeh and Zeitoun" (Kiwan, 2016: 163). By discussing this, Kiwan (2016: 164) critically highlights the pushbacks the Syrian Palestinian woman faced legally from the state as well as on a gender level from her own community. Kiwan (2016: 165, 166) addresses the fact that these actions by these women happen in extremely constrictive environments however they do happen. This enables the ability to contribute to their own community and offers a way to take part in public life. The work by Kiwan is essential, as it demonstrates how active engagement and participation is possible by women who face political (legal) and personal (gender) stratifications from external bodies as well as potentially from community members.

Angela Gissi (2019, 2020) is an active advocate for Syrian women within the academic sphere. Several of her articles address Syrian women in Lebanon with focus on Syrian women's perspectives and narratives. One of her works discusses the term refugee and addresses the subsequent stigmatization by conducting bottom-up research that brings forth women's perspectives on the issue (Gissi, 2019: 539; Gissi, 2020). She addresses how Syrian women with refugee status in Lebanon experience disenfranchisement due to the negativity ascribed to refugees (Gissi, 2019: 540). The meaning that the term refugee carries for the affected community or community members themselves is a partly unexplored topic in academia, which emphasizes her efforts to present narratives that come from within that affected community (Gissi, 2019: 540). Additionally, Gissi captures the women's experiences rather than letting the already established narratives of "refugee experiences" lead the conversation. As mentioned before, she unpacks how this stigma affects the way women experience and live in Lebanon, which can increasingly influence their activity and political activity as a potential motivator or de-motivator (Gissi, 2019: 539). Gissi utilizes a bottom-up research without indulging in narratives of victimization that describes socio-political and economic mobility and hence psychological wellbeing of women in Lebanon and lack. These dynamics amplify the diverse and versatile experiences of women in Lebanon, while underlining some demarcations their political status, stigma and gender entail. Stigma is a component of the structure of exclusion that Syrian women experience in many instances in Lebanon. In turn, the topic of stigma captures both that component of exclusion but also asks how women can partly overcome it.

Barakat and Philippot (2018: 53) conduct research on how Syrian women in Lebanon deal with trauma and their current living conditions in the realm of a clinical psychology project. Although clinical psychology is a different discipline, some of the findings are relevant to the study. The study puts major focus on the positive dimensions of experiences and less focus on

victimhood. Some of the main findings are that women make sense of their trauma and make narratives out of them, which in some cases contributes to changes in gender ideas and an increased sense of responsibility (Barakt and Philippot, 2018: 53). Another major finding is that for most of the women, the drive to continue life during hardship is both motherhood and social and political activism (Barakt and Philippot, 2018: 55). These two findings are essential to the study. In later discussions in light of the data, a change in perspective (especially towards gender) and an increased sense of responsibility are reoccurring themes. Additionally, it opens up a conversation about how political activism and action can give a sense of meaning and belonging and perhaps increase personal wellbeing. This becomes a major theme in the empirical chapters as many women express relatable evidence.

Much of the work on refugees focuses disproportionally little on women or on women's activism or (unconventional) participation in a given society. This study aims to explore women's experiences from a perspective that recognizes according challenges however does not engage in the challenges becoming a dominating factor. This part of the chapter has shown some insight into literature on active Syrian women in Lebanon. The study latches on to scholars like Gissi and Kiwan by contributing to the narrative that brings forth experiences of women that combat the restrictions of their status. By mapping out women's perspectives, they can become visible in a wider spectrum that encompasses different cornerstones of their action. The space, in which these women move and in which civil society moves, is not unilateral. The aim is to understand how these women mediate a space for themselves in an environment, where they experience a kind of structural exclusion through their status as refugees. Drawing on these points, the study advances the argument that political action enables participation, which in turn offers a way to mediate a space in the public realm. Civil society functions as a lens through which women's activity increases in visibility. In that way, the focus is not per se the civil society, but rather the women in it and their engagements, thoughts and actions.

2.4 Conclusion

The literature review has offered some main insights, which separates into seven main arguments. First, participation through speech and action makes an experience political. Second, politics and political activity can occur outside of institutions. Third, there is a certain separation of civil society from the state and the market economy and hence happens in a third sphere or the so-called autonomous sphere, embedded in the public. Fourth, civil society is not a clearly definable or a flawless term and needs critical contextualization within its historical heritage and mostly western usage. Fifth, people's individuality and their everyday life through

actions and decisions makes their political action visible. The conceptualization of civil society and a theoretical framework of political action bases its' argument on the understanding that civil society is a form of politics. Sixth, Isin's "acts of citizenship" visualizes the measures in which these people operate and thereby engages in expanding the theoretical framework through alternative notions of citizenship. That means to comprehend how people move outside of established structures and how they mediate a space for themselves in the periphery of exclusion and stigmatization. Seventh, the presentation of Syrian women in academia follows a certain scheme that underscores vulnerability, while the presented literature shows that women can find strength through their experiences and evolve accordingly.

3. Historical Overview

3.1 Introduction

Syrian women with refugee status in Lebanon find themselves in a politically complex and economically instable environment, and come from conflict, rooted in decades of rule of violence and political control in Syria. Some of the historical and current events in both Lebanon and Syria offer an understanding of contemporary, social, political and economic standards. The structure of the chapter is as follows. First, I examine pre-war Syria with major focus on the Assad regime. Then, I explore the conflict that broke out in 2011, leading up to current socio-political and economic realities. Proceeding these passages, I discuss Lebanon's civil war, the Cedar Revolution, the Israeli and Syrian occupation, the 2006 war and the protests that started in 2019 in Beirut. After that, the discussion turns to Palestinian refugees with a focus on Shatila camp and a link to current situations for refugee populations in Lebanon (Palestinian, Syrian Palestinian and Syrians). Historical factors can be mediums through which current and reoccurring events polarize. The social, political and economic landscape of Syria and Lebanon can partly situate opinions, actions and perspectives of Syrian women with refugee status in Lebanon and their experiences. All these passages boil down to three major factors that are relevant here. First, the relationship between Syrians and Lebanese has tense history and thereby creates feelings of threat and negativity excruciated through the current economic crisis and political instability. Second, a large group of refugees has existed in Lebanon since over 70 years and accordingly Lebanon maintains strategies of marginalization, keeps refugees almost exclusively in refugee camps, and prohibits access to citizenship. Third, Syrians experienced a violent political regime in Syria and thereby partly created a negative and fearful relationship towards politics, dismantling political subjectivities. All these factors support the main argument of this chapter, which is that Syrian women do face both deeply engrained structural (political and economic) and informal (social) exclusion. The main themes are forms of exclusion, with a focus on where they partly originate from and how they maintain themselves. In that way, I can situate the women in their constricting environment and comprehend their given circumstances. The goal is then in turn to understand how the women partly emancipate themselves from those restrictions in light of the evidence under an analytical lens.

3.2 Pre-war Syria and Syria 2011

With time, individuals develop subjectivities, shaped through life experiences originating from life under the Assad regime and with it the rule of the Ba'th party. Syria has been ruled by the same family clan since 1970, starting with Hafiz al Assad and his current predecessor and son Bashar al Assad since 2000 (Ismail, 2018: 189). Ismail calls these ruling forces to be operating under a so-called "civil war regime", implying the binary structures that the regime creates and permeates with (Ismail, 2018: 189). This means, that divisions occur on dimensions levels such as sectarian, class, and ethnic levels, in other words meaning between supporters and oppositionists of the regime, rooted in a dynamic of ruler vs. ruled (Ismail, 2018: 189). In terms of sectarianizing the political body, Hafiz al Assad inaugurated the institutionalization of the Alawite community, which means dominating security sectors, military and governmental position, and leads to highlighting sectarian division, elitism and systemic contingency of the judiciary under his control (Ismail, 2018: 191). The regime in its sovereignty focuses on diminishing citizen's potential political identity or affiliation other than towards the regime itself and hence indoctrinates its citizens, rendering dissidents to become casualties, traitors and marking them as political oppositionists (Ismail, 2018: 190).

Another striking way to discourage political activity amongst citizens is the prison system in Syria that includes a jail for political prisoners such as "Tadmur" and "Sadnaya", which operate with harsh punishment measures to make their prisoners docile and concur (Ismail, 2018: 195). Violence is one of the most essential tools used by the regime to visualize their power, and make citizens comply by pushing people to dissociate politically and live under everyday surveillance in fear (Ismail, 2018: 130). When the Muslim Brotherhood tried to topple the empire of the Alawite regime, the ramifications of this attempt engaged a violent trajectory and a massacre in Hama in 1982 (Khalaf et al., 2014: 3). The massacre that the regime led in Hama was a way to impose their sovereignty on their citizens and use death in reaction to opposition (Khalaf et al., 2014: 3). The experience and the memory that lives on in generations of Syrians, continues to induce shame and a sense of deep discrimination (Khalaf et al., 2014: 157). Events in 2011 have mirrored some of the divisions and inequalities that have existed for over forty years and show how the regime uses collective punishment, sovereignty and violence to silence its citizens. The context of Syria before and leading up to the events of 2011 suggest some of the hardships of everyday life in Syria. These structures help to put into perspective, the relation some women might have towards politics or political subjectivities, including talking about rights, justice and equality. This elaboration might help to be more sensitive

towards the topic of politics in the conversation with Syrian women in Lebanon all together. It also aids to comprehend the complex theme of political subjectivities and trace new perspective towards political issues that the women voice in the testimonies.

In March 2011, protests started to spread throughout the country originating in Daraa, a province of Damascus, demanding for freedom and for the government to change. Evidently, Bashar al Assad did not keep his promise when he claimed in the beginning of his rule that he will end political repression (Economic Freedom, 2020), which only increased. While non-violent protests occurred in many places at the same time, security forces arbitrarily attacked, arrested and followed protesters (Hallisso, 2014). In 2012, the protests changed in brutal ways as the regime aggravated an animosity between Sunni Muslim and Alawite Shia (Economic Freedom, 2020). Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah quickly backed the regime, which was able to combat several armed groups of opposition - civilians had to experience punishment, siege, and death during what came to be a proxy war (Economic Freedom, 2020). The casualties during the war added up to 500, 000 deaths (registered apart from disappearances), and led 5.5 million people (who had the chances and resources to flee) to forcibly become refugees and live in exile (Economic Freedom, 2020). The conflict did not just appear out of thin air, it was the result of civilians living under a violent and surveilling system for so long that asking for freedom resulted in punishment with utter violence. The superiority and sovereignty of the regime during this time was maintained through a mixture of judiciary control of the Ba'th party and violent punishment of opposition - an imposition of fear and horror (Economic Freedom, 2020). The war in Syria caused many injustices and additionally increased the opportunity for extremist groups to operate on unsafeguarded ground. In turn, the regime uses the blood of their own people to show power and impunity, while the international community watches in fatigue and looks away in ignorance. There has been little to no accountability or justice for the ones who have suffered and still suffer under the conditions of the war and the regime today (Hallisso, 2014). The conflict that Syrians have experienced causes enormous psychological ramifications, destroying entire livelihoods and reducing social and economic capital. In Lebanon, Syrians consequently arrive with unfinished education, psychological scars, and material loss. This partly shows the vast setbacks Syrian women can experience, which makes their active participation in Lebanon and civil society more remarkable and meaningful. Understanding some dynamics during the 2011 conflict in Syria up until today, can help mediate some of the realities refugees face, reaching from prior experiences to current hardship.

3.3 Lebanon: Pre, Post-Civil War and Today

Lebanon's civil war marks a time of nation-wide conflict and seventeen years of war between the years of 1975 and 1992 (Ma, 2020:29). The onset of the civil war is historically complex, but to summarize, it began when allegedly PLO affiliated Palestinians came into violent contact with Lebanese Christians, which ended in deaths on both sides (Ma, 2020: 29). This spurred more violence between the already tense relationship of Lebanese Christians and Palestinians (with some support of Muslim Lebanese) and hence rapidly spread (O'Ballance, 1998). During this conflict, Israel and Syria were partly involved. Syria was an occupational force present in Lebanon since 1976 (Hudson, 1997: 110). Israel invaded Lebanon from 1982 until 1986 with the goal of diminishing Palestinian fighters and their political presence in Lebanon (Hudson, 1997: 110). After much conflict partly led by ethnic, religious and sectarian motivations intensified, the so-called Taif Accords officially put an end to the war (Hudson, 1997: 113). Although the Taif Accords clearly underlined the prohibition of sectarian dynamics within politics, after the civil war a so-called "consociational" democracy was formed, which manifests the president to be Christian, the prime minister Sunni Muslim and the speaker ("the office of president of the chamber deputies") Shia Muslim (Hudson, 1997: 113). There are eighteen politically recognized sects structured mainly into Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims and Maronite Christians (Kiwan, 2016: 152). Instead of tackling sectarian issues that partly initiated and maintained the civil war, the political system institutionalized sectarian identity and belonging, which exists until today. On the same note, the majority of Syrian refugees are Sunni-Muslims, which poses an additional threat in terms of (sectarian) demography to Lebanon (Frost and Shteiwi, 2018: 315). Ma (2020: 29) underlines how the events during the civil war and Syria's longstanding occupation can help understand the negative and preconceived stance of Lebanese towards Syrians as a threat and as invaders. Additionally, much conflict involved Palestinians in Lebanon, which might clarify the overall negative stance towards refugee populations in Lebanon built on historical, sectarian and political events.

During the civil war in Lebanon, a group called Hezbollah came into existence in an act of Islamization that spurred over from Iran (Hudson, 1997: 110). This militant organization actively contributed to secure Lebanon's southern borders against Israel and carried very strong anti-Israel sentiments in its objective (Hudson, 1997: 110). In 2006, a war broke out between Israel and Hezbollah, which evidently effected entire Lebanon and lasted 34 days (Sutton, 2014: 101). Anger against Israel existed and fed off previous events such as the occupation in 1982 and the brief invasion in 1978 as well as reoccurring military encounters and other political

strikes (Sutton, 2014: 101). Syria also played a vital role in shaping political events and political structures in Lebanon since 1976, when in 2005 numerous people protested in the street and demanded for Syrian forces to leave Lebanon after Rafiq Hariri's (president at the time) assassination (Sutton, 2014: 97, 106-107). These events were the starting point for the so-called Cedar Revolution where citizens called for a transparent government, free elections and led to the withdrawal of Syrian forces (Sutton, 2014: 97). The Cedar Revolution increased economic struggle, as there was almost no more tourism and consequently drove the country to operate in polarized ways – divided into elite and non-elite (Sutton, 2014: 109). The history of Syrian and Israeli presence shows how much threat and damage Lebanon has experienced through invasions, wars, protests, assassinations and political and economic instability. Some of the violence from Syria since 2011 spurred over to some parts of Lebanon, which might explain the continued negative association Lebanese partly have of Syrians, supposing that Syrians bring the conflict or ideology with them.

Lebanon's economy has been going through many recessions since the civil war in 1975, with additional strains such as political tension and conflict, large refugee populations and corruption. In 2019, first protests against the situation in Lebanon due to the economic crisis and corruption happened in September at the Martyr Square in Beirut (Al Jazeera, 2019). The protests increased in intensity and became violent in some instances, resulting in roadblocks, military presence and the destruction of banks and other capitalist establishments (Majzoub, 2020). As the US dollar is very common in Lebanon as a form of payment and in high demand, protesters also addressed currency devaluation as a crucial issue (Al Jazeera, 2019). The economic crisis continues to exist partly due to the increasing disassociation of the political elite from the rest of the basic political structure (Al Jazeera, 2019). An additional factor is the debt that Lebanon owes, which is at 86 billion US dollars and therefore one of the highest debts in the world (Al Jazeera, 2019). Because of these different factors, the quality of life of many Lebanese and other residents has sunken drastically. By 2020, 70-75% of Lebanese are in need of financial support with people living beneath the poverty line rising exponentially from 30% up to expectedly to 50% (Majzoub, 2020). The current health situation (Covid-19) has exacerbated the economic situation and has driven more people into economic trouble and little opportunity or capacity to sustain themselves. In 2020 protests continue, as protesters are repeatedly calling for an end to corruption and a better tax system (Majzoub, 2020). This shows that Lebanon is currently an unstable space, which has little capacity to offer its residents (or refugees) stability or a financially stable and politically transparent system. Do to the large-

scale shortcomings, Lebanon's residents are less likely to have access or profit from services or rely on judiciary or legislative forces in the public sector.

3.4 Refugees in Lebanon

Palestinians have existed in high numbers in Lebanon (500,000 currently) since the creation of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent diaspora to Arab countries and other parts of the world (Kiwan, 2016: 152). Shatila (located in Sabra), was one of the first camps in Beirut mainly created for refugees from the 1948 diaspora (Nuwayhed al-Hout, 2006: 1). Then in 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon after which a so-called Habib Agreement was supposed to end the conflict where Israelis, Lebanese and Palestinians were involved in, with the condition that Palestinian fighters in Lebanon needed to evacuate and leave (Nouwayhed al-Hout, 2006: 2, 3). At the same time, the assassination of the newly elected president Bashir el Gemayel happened a few days after his election, after which Israel immediately entered Beirut and encircled Shatila and Sabra (Nowayhed al-Hout, 2006: 2, 3). With the pretext that there were still fighters in Shatila, the Israelis sieged Shatila and operated a massacre. Consequently, the killing of around 430 Palestinians by Lebanese militia and other supporters under the operation of two Israeli commanders happened (Nouwayhed al-Hout, 2006: 251). Today, many Syrians live in Shatila as Lebanon actively does not allow building new refugee camps (Frost and Shteiwi, 2018: 314). That means the already existing camps become more overfilled, and less safe in regards to health situations and overpopulation. Additionally, third generation Palestinians have almost no possibility to gain citizenship and continue to be in camps, stateless, and marginalized (Chatty, 2005 in Kiwan, 2016: 153). These conceptions of refugees can be an enormous trigger for stigmatization, further exclusion and limited social mobility, which applies to Syrian, Syrian Palestinian and Palestinian refugees. Refugees face immense legal and political restrictions, as Lebanon is not willing to offer political rights to refugees (Frost and Shteiwi, 2018: 313). This promotes a lack of opportunity to participate in Lebanese society as a refugee and diminishes potential economic access and access to political representation.

Syrian refugees have existed in Lebanon since 2011 and continue to be the highest number of refugees in the country with approximately 1.5 million at the end of 2014 (and 100, 000 Syrian Palestinians) in a country with four million residents (UNHCR in Kiwan, 2016: 153). These proportions diminish the quality of life for Syrians who live in exile and aggravate the already dire economic system (Kiwan, 2016: 153). Furthermore, many children and adults are not registered and thus often enter the labor market "illegally" and can become "cheaper" options for the employer (Ma, 2020: 31). This encourages both labor market competition

between Syrians and Lebanese and potential of exploitation due to the "illegal" activity. (Ma, 2020: 31). However, Syrian refugees can work with a Lebanese sponsorship, which means they need to find a Lebanese employee and comply with the strict structures this sponsorship implies (Janmyr, 2017: 407). Attaining a sponsorship is extremely difficult and often comes with working relations dominated by power relations and can lead to a lack of protection and the potential for exploitation as it often happens in closed settings (Janmyr, 2017: 407). If Syrians work without a permit they risk deportation, however according to Frost and Shteiwi (2018: 314) informal work is possible to a certain extent due to lack of policing. That means that even Syrian women who volunteers in civil society and receive payment privately risk severe repercussions.

Lebanon officially has not ratified the 1951 convention and 1967 protocol, which are conventions for refugees, outlining structures of protection and other essential factors (Janmyr, 2017: 393). As the state of Lebanon has been vehemently providing Syrians with access to healthcare, housing and registration, the UNHCR is the major body that provides access and information for refugees (Janmyr, 2017: 393, 394). In April of 2011, first refugees from Syria arrived to Lebanon. Accordingly, Lebanon responded primarily with a policy that maintained the borders to be open (Janmyr, 2017: 395). When the numbers of refugees kept rising, the Lebanese government decided to take action with the approach of encouraging Syrians to return, which meant little access to housing and no more political status as refugees (Janmyr, 2017: 394, 396). Through the later suspension of the UNHCR, the registration of refugees stopped, accompanied by new and increasingly constricting policies for already registered refugees (Janmyr, 2017: 396). Through these different policies, Lebanon makes the lives for refugees in Lebanon economically and politically difficult and unstable, which can increase vulnerability amongst communities and individuals. This can potentially lead to refugees feeling threated in public spaces and having an increased sense of instability and self-doubt when it comes to economic livelihood and security.

Research claims that from the Syrian refugee population, 26 % percent are women (Amnesty International, 2016: 5). The UN reported that 61 % percent of Syrian households in Lebanon are not registered and thereby do not have an official permit (Amnesty International, 2016: 5). According to UNRWA, 13% of Palestinian women who are refugees are engaged in the labor market in comparison to 65% percent of men (Kiwan, 2016: 154). Estimations show that Syrian women earn up to 165 US dollars per month in a country where the average minimum wage lies at 450 US dollars per month (Amnesty International, 2016: 34). These

factors show the hardship especially women face as they have little access to economic earn, partly rooted in gender norms and legal barriers. To give an example of how these norms are established and sustained, family law in both Syria and Lebanon claims that the woman becomes the "custodian" of the child and the father the "guardian", the latter being of higher power (Amnesty International, 2016: 14). When there is no male figure such as the husband due to various reasons, the "guardian" role needs to be any other male figure - however, it does not go to the woman (Amnesty International, 2016: 14). Social norms affect the way women live as well as their capacity to make their own decision both in the household as well as outside it (El Asmar et. al., 2019: 4, 5). The reality for Syrian refugees on the ground is harsh and unfolds the immense restrictions they face that extend exclusion on a variety of levels, reaching from legalities to social rights, dismantling any formal action or participation. Gender norms can also contribute to diminishing women's potential to participate in public spaces, take responsibility, or even be aware of their political rights.

3.5 Conclusion

All of these historic events are closely linked. For example, the Cedar Revolution in 2005 could be considered as a foundation for the protests that started in 2019, which called for regime change and an end to corruption. This shows the systemic instability that exists in Lebanon's economy exacerbated through a separated, elitist and sectarian political system. Negative attitudes towards Palestinians and Syrians can increase through the economic and political insecurity that Lebanese citizens have been experiencing for decades. The economic situation and the non-transparent political system evidently influence Syrians who as refugees have little political and economic resources and thereby become less able to act or participate and more likely to become passive in Lebanese society. Additionally, the Syrian occupation and the conflict that has spurred over to Lebanon in southern parts since 2011, potentially encourage more and continuous negative feelings of Lebanese towards Syrians. The stigmatization of refugees living in overcrowded camps and an inadequate quality of life establishes a preconceived idea of Syrian refugees as uneducated, poor and monolithic. However, Syrian women in Lebanon have the capacity to break through some major boundaries and manage to participate and engage in a system and gain autonomy, and increase livelihood and access. Despite all these hurdles, some women find a way to overcome certain restrictions through their actions. The previous passages serve as a way to capture some of the exclusionary dynamics Syrian women face, through contextualization and a cohesive understanding of current and past realities in Lebanon. Despite the vast amount of dismantling policies, the

women make sense of their situation and find relief through a certain vessel that allows them to act and participate: civil society.

4 -7. Empirical Chapters

The following chapters primarily present the empirical data, categorized in systematic sections. Ultimately, the aim is to show that the women's engagement in civil society is congruent with the definition of Arendt's political action. This contributes to the argument that Syrian women in Lebanon mediate a space for themselves through civil society, which becomes a form of politics. The data contributes to the argument in the way, that it shows how women combat informal and formal structures of exclusion and go from being depoliticized subjects to public and political actors. Overall, the data helps to bring attention to peripheral voices and to marginal political action that often lacks visibility in discourses on female refugees in general and Syrian women in Lebanon particularly in this case. Moreover, Arendt's political action helps to shed light on decentralized action carried out by disenfranchised individuals that expectedly become receivers of humanitarian aid and maintain their ascribed inactivity and vulnerability. To repeat, the definition of civil society in this study implies a collective space, in which mainly Syrians act and participate on a grassroots level that occurs separate from an institution, yet in the public.

Participation, plurality and action are the three major cornerstones of Arendt's theory on political action. The coming empirical chapters present the major results the data offers through dividing it into three major categories to examine them accordingly. Specifically, the categories are in accordance with the three major structures in Arendt' political thought. In the first chapter, participation is the leading theme, presenting and discussing some of the testimonies of the women that relate to engagement, contribution, and focuses on participation both in the public space, Lebanon, and in the space of civil society. In the second chapter, plurality is the leading theme, addressing some of the testimonies of the women that relate to collectivity and reinforcing group settings in civil society. In the third chapter, action is the major element that brings forth the value of meaningful action and dialogue, which generates increased awareness towards socio-political issues. Lastly, the analytical discussion then directly applies the theoretical framework to the evidence that originates from the data. The idea is to present the results in categorizations in line with content analysis. The results then should perform as a kind of evidence to make analytical claims and bring the discussion to its highest level. All the chapters examine both restrictions the particular theme implies as well as how the women partly overcome them or deal with them in light of the their testimonies.

Although Syrian grassroots civil society creates an exclusive space within the context of Lebanese society, it allows women to engage through political action. Through this political action, the women are able to engage in social, political and economic structures, which benefit them as they increase access to vital resources. Economically speaking, Syrian women are unable (except under a sponsorship) to take part in the labor market due to their status or non-existent status (in the case of unregistered refugees). However, through civil society the women volunteer, which is legitimate, and receive money unofficially for their work, which is not legitimate from a legal perspective. All interviewees face these two given factors. Furthermore, these women lack access to social spaces and lack adequate political representation and political participation in Lebanon. The results and the women in this study evidently do not represents all Syrian women, neither does it speaks for a general monolithic experience, or make broad generalizations about refugees. It merely offers an insight into some Syrian women who have the capacity to engage in civil society. Additionally, the study handles every interviewee with dignity, respect and appreciation as the women were willing to expose their experiences and perspectives to this study during ongoing political conflict in Syria and perhaps legal or political issues they might currently face in Lebanon.

4. Participation – Perspectives on Engagement and Contribution

Cohen and Arato (1994, in Lang, 2013: 33) understand civil society as an enabler for participation. According to Arendt (1958, in Yildirim, 2014: 872), participation is a major fragment of a political experience, in this case political action. This chapter aims to trace participation in civil society and as a fundament for political action to occur in civil society. The results show that the importance of participation is a vital element for many of the women in regards to their engagement in civil society. The following passages emphasize what participation means for the women and unpacks different perceptions of it. Moreover, the results show that civil society allows the women to participate both in the space of civil society, as well as it allows them to participate in the wider space - the public space. The following testimonies examine how participation is an essential element of civil society and how this participation realizes different potential for the women to engage and contribute to their community and the society they live in. Thus, civil society becomes a medium through which the women can participate, which is otherwise heavily restricted for them. The main themes that proliferate from the testimonies and show the extent to which participation happens are the following: economic gain, social relations and a sense of belonging and meaning. The main themes that hinder the access to that participation are policies, stigma and gender.

During the interviews, the women discuss some of their motivations to participate in civil society and some of the challenges they face, which impede them from participating in Lebanese society. That means they face a lack of access to social, political, and economic participation to a certain extent constituted by formal or informal structures. Economic participation is nearly impossible due to unregistered status or harsh policies concerning Syrians working in Lebanon. Political participation is in most cases not given, as the refugee status does not allow for political participation, exacerbated by lack of capacity that the UNHCR has in Lebanon. This decreases political representation and protection in addition to a lack of political participatory rights as so often unregistered individual. Social participation is mainly restricted through informal structures such as social exclusion rooted in stigma towards Syrian nationals and Syrian refugees.

These forms of exclusion are substantial and make it virtually impossible for Syrian refugees to participate in Lebanese public life. Several women discuss the difficulty of not being able to work and the financial difficulty these restrictions bring with it. The following two testimonies capture the difficulty of not being able to participate officially in the Lebanese system mainly on an economic level, rooted in policies and stigma. In the first testimony, Nawal

describes both the lack of support the UNHCR offers her and her inability to work. She also goes on to speak about the psychological stress that she feels when it comes to providing for herself and the need to survive. Additionally, she claims that on top of all the stress, the constant politically tense situation in Syria negatively influences her well-being, as she worries and is scared. She claims that many other Syrian women do not find ways to overcome the constrictions and difficulties they face. In the second testimony, Amina addresses the difficulty of finding work in regards to stigma aside from the harsh policies that permeate her situation in that case. She talks about increased responsibility and that she changed to adapt to the situation. In these two testimonies, it becomes clear that both formal dynamics such as policies as well as informal dynamics such as stigma excruciate the lack of access and granted participation. At the same time, these testimonies show some ways that Nawal and Amina deal with these challenges:

> "*Some years ago, the general security decided that we are not allowed to work and that we should rather sit at home. And this is something very wrong. Here, the Lebanese have this preconceived idea that we all get support from the UNHCR, but that is not right the UN helps around 40 percent of 100 (…). We are under a lot of stress and psychological challenges (…). And here to rent a house that is furnished and with electricity and water and everything these worries really affect us and our psychological well-being. And the things that happen in Syria that we hear also affect our psychological well-being and when we hear about sieges and checkpoints and the circumstances under which people continue to live there. The last five years I don't feel like I lived like a young woman, more like continuously worried about work and stress and that affects me and my social relations (…). I am telling you my story but this is the story of most Syrian women here. I work and that is great but there are so many girls who just have to stay at home and experience basic and sometimes bad circumstances (…)." Nawal*

> *"Before working was allowed and I was working normally with a Lebanese license with Lebanese official institution but then since last year it was either get a new permit and work or stop working (…). Before when I was in Syria, I did have some responsibility, I was in a hard situation but when I came here it increased much. The situation I was in forced me to change my personality and my perspectives very much in a way of 180 degrees because when I came here first, I didn't know how to continue my education or*

what I want to work or how I want to secure my life. So, the first time I applied for work I remember them saying to me, we are not taking you because you are wearing a hijab, that was the problem. But I kept looking because I thought I can find something else that fits me without having to change my way and I kept on. Until now there are difficulties, there is much pressure and many problems but I try to get out of them (…). When I came here, I was not able to work because I talk like a Syrian so I learned how to speak in a Lebanese way to be able to work. Even when I apply to work somewhere and they hear me speak without asking where I am from, it's over and they reject me. So, I adapted to the circumstances in the place I live, so I could live". Amina

Although participating in society might seem self-explanatory, economic participation is not a norm for many of the women. Additionally, the change that women experience with exile and displacement forces many of them to take on new roles, become active themselves, and challenge gender roles. Amal stresses that her family does not allow for her to work, however she decides to do it anyway. Nura expresses her opinion especially on gender equality when it comes to participation in the labor market. Here, the theme of gender identifies an additional hurdle some of the women face in regards to participation. However, both Amal and Nura identify the issue with the focus on how to overcome it to a certain extent. Like in many of the other testimonies, problems are identified and elaborated on as well as dealt with:

"I still work even though my family does not accept that I work. But I still work (…). Where I come from women do not work". Amal

"Justice means to me that work opportunities and circumstances should be the same for men and women. Just because he is a man, his job should not have a higher position that the woman's. He can go into the parliament and the woman no. He can be the manager and the woman no. There needs to be equality". Nura

These gender roles manifest themselves socially and culturally, as Amal describes as well as policy wise when looking back at family law in Lebanon and Syria or women's labor market participation (see chapter three). The theme of gender formally and informally poses restrictions and shows that the women's extent of participation in the public is limited as they are encouraged to be passive and stay in domestic environments.

Some of the women forcibly take on new roles, due to the changes in structure they have experienced since they came to Lebanon. That means some women develop new attitudes towards participation in a given society, especially economic participation. Nawal underlines

the importance of responsibility and independence when talking about her engagement in civil society:

> *"So that she can learn how to be responsible in the house if the husband is not there anymore for example. So that she can make a living, support her family and be independent economically. So that she does not need anyone". Nawal*

The next testimony puts into perspective the more social aspect of participation and specifically participation in civil society. Amina discusses how participation encourages a kind of sense of safety and belonging. Here, the theme of belonging is a major factor, which brings forth how participation partly happens on social fronts and increases a sense of belonging. Amina underlines that especially when someone finds herself in a dire situation as exile, the kind of ease that the participation in civil society brings with it is essential. Lastly, she picks up the topic of discrimination that she experiences as well as the theme of personal change that she sees in a positive light:

> *"(...) some kind of basic feeling of belonging because when you feel participated and a kind of feeling of safety you feel a little bit like you belong to that place and belonging to those people. It gives you some kind of ease because you are in exile. But here in Lebanon not even one percent of feeling of belonging, they speak Arabic but no (...). Life in exile has affected me positively and negatively. Negatively because everything is new and also because the country that we came to was discriminating and racist, they don't treat the foreigner well. Positively, because it strengthened my character and personality and changed me completely". Amina*

Through the particular participation in civil society, some of the women are able to participate on a wider or public scale in society and achieve some social and economic benefits. What also becomes clear is that for some women this participation becomes something meaningful and matters personally and community wise. Amal brings forth themes such as meaning and support. This shows the extent, to which women can realize something meaningful through their participation through the medium of civil society:

> *"I am trying to make something that matters. Me as a human being, if there is anything that I can support I will do it to benefit from it and have my children benefit from it. Not like I left my country and I forgot everything, even if they are simple things you make an imprint". Amal*

The testimonies show that one of the most prominent themes in light of participation remains to both social and economic access. The next four testimonies emphasize the will and need to work. In that way, work is a form of participation. What is striking is that in all four testimonies it is not only the will to work and make economic gain, but also the social (or humanitarian) factor of collaboration and helping is important. Zahra explains that she appreciates both the "idea" of civil society as well as economic gain. Nura addresses her appreciation for being able to work in collaboration with her colleagues and beneficiaries (the women). Naima underlines her will and need to work and make a living as well as the "humane" and "humanitarian" aspect of the work. Amal describes her initially difficult situation when she came to Lebanon from Syria especially because of her ascribed refugee identity. She then describes her participation or involvement as an opportunity both on an economic level as well as on a social level:

> *"I liked the idea of the work that the civil society does and also because of the financial situation. So, there are more than one reason why I am involved". Zahra*

> *"Leaving Syria against my will was hard. But the fact that I was able to study here and work here with women it made me feel better". Nura*

> *"I am involved in civil society because first it helped my children and second it is humane. And kids benefit from the work. It is both financially motivated as well as humanitarian". Naima*

> *"In the beginning when I came here my situation was very bad because I was a refugee, of course I couldn't take with me many clothes and also with my children it was bad, we got an empty house, there was nothing and the living was very expensive. So, I tried to see what can I do, and I started with myself. So, I started working to help them (the kids) and the women I was working with. And thank God I was able to get involved and I am still involved today". Amal*

In accordance with the data, civil society provides a way for women to become both economically active, socially active, and humanitarian work. Working is a form of participation and functions as a way for the women both to enhance their economic situation, as well as to participate in Lebanese society as a competent potential force of labor. The will and the need to work becomes a common denominator in many of the women's testimonies. However, there

are hurdles that meet the will to work through harsh policies, gender roles, stigma, psychological pressure to survive, and lack of political representation and protection. Civil society in this case is able to provide a space for women to have social access and experience positive social exposure in comparison to much of their negative experience in Lebanon as Syrians and refugees. Change and with that new perspectives are vital elements that several women express in regards to their involvement in civil society. The results show that the participation in civil society additionally creates a sense of purpose and belonging for several of the women interviewed. This sense of purpose is in many cases tied to the idea of being able to help others or in other words contribute to society – do something meaningful. Overall, the results show that women actively participate in civil society. That means participation happens in civil society and is a stagnant element. On a wider scale, through the participation in civil society the women gain access to participation in a public space. These findings speak both for the fact that participation is important for many of the women and that it is a vital element of civil society and as it becomes evident later functions as an enabler of political action. The discussion of that element returns (see chapter seven) in the analytical discussion.

5. Plurality – Perspectives on Collectivity and Group Structure

Ranson (2012: 6) emphasizes that plurality occurs in civil society due to the group setting and the according (verbal) interaction that occurs. Arendt (1958, in Yildirim, 2014: 872) on the other hand claims that plurality is one of the fundamental components of political action. By means of the testimonies and the result, the aim is to emphasize the structure of plurality in civil society. The chapter covers difficulties Syrian women in Lebanon might face in terms of group settings as well as the value in access to group settings. The aim is to trace plurality in civil society, its' meaning to the women and how it creates opportunity in many cases. The most concise dynamic reflected in plurality found in civil society, is the social one. This is comprehensive, as group settings create a space for social interactions. It seems that many of the women reiterate that social access to Lebanese society or Lebanese people is out of their reach, which some women exemplify through their negative encounters with Lebanese. That does not mean that every interaction between the two entails negativity; however, there appears to be negative connotations Lebanese have towards Syrians and vice versa. This can partly be due to ascribed narratives and exacerbated by negative experiences with each other in an already economically and politically unstable environment. Some of the main themes that proliferate from the data and enables plurality are social ties, acceptance, diversity, belonging and awareness. The main themes that hinder Syrians being part of group settings in Lebanon or in public settings other than civil society are stigma, discrimination, exile, and lack of social mobility.

In the following testimony, Qamar speaks about how her involvement in civil society helps her in different ways and how she is benefitting from that involvement. Here, previous themes such as participation through work and doing something meaningful and contributing on a public scale unfold. Most importantly to the relevance of plurality, is how Qamar speaks about the organization being like a family. Her comment brings up the general theme of group settings happening in civil society and the positive connotation Qamar has towards that. Amina talks about exposure to contact, and the responsibility in a group setting and in society that she has taken on. She explains that becoming involved like that changed her in a way. The major themes that come forth here are group settings and the positive connotation to it. Two other major themes here are contact, an increased sense of responsibility, and change that Amina says she has gone through:

> *"Because I found work and something that I love doing it changed something. It helps me for my character and mentally and in all ways. I feel like we from the organization are like family. I feel like I am adding something to the community and to the country that I am residing in". Qamar*

> *"When I was back in my country at a young age and I was working but in a completely different work. I was not exposed to contact with people like that. But here I can come together with people. I can be responsible in a society and in a group setting. Here I became involved in society and became responsible. And I changed a lot". Amina*

Salma and Amal emphasize in a similar manner the exposure to social relationships and to group settings. Amal underlines friendship and exposure to different cultures. Salma addresses the positive affiliation she has with making social ties and helping each other. Here, the themes of social relationships become relevant as well as the positive and comforting effect the access to that space can have on the members. Furthermore, Amal explains her appreciation for exposure to different cultures through civil society:

> *"I don't like getting into his politics and his religion so that's why I stay with civil society because it makes me more exposed to social relationships allows me to have more friends and I get to know people from different cultures". Amal*

> *"In civil society, there is a kind of ease and comfort and also there a strong social tie. It is not only that we learn English, we also have social relations and help each other out. We listen to the girls that come in we don't just teach them English in that way, these are strong social ties". Salma*

Amina illuminates the issue of stigma, which she experiences and the weight that the term refugee carries with it. She claims that being a refugee is difficult and interrupts the normality of life. This brings forth the terminology of "refugee" and the ascribed stigma and negative connotation. Amal describes how she feels that she can combat bullying and racism through the group setting she enters in civil society. In the case of civil society, stigma or exclusion does not dominate that space of plurality as it so often does for refugees in the public. Here, women who potentially face discrimination or different forms of exclusion in other collective spaces (representing the refugee), find access to a collective non-exclusive space:

> *"Through the difficulties we have experienced since living here and we don't just come here and live normally, we are refugees. And just because I moved, I hear the word refugee, immigrant. And this is the most difficult thing to be a refugee in another country". Amina*

> *"Something I am thankful for from civil society relieves me from the racism and bullying". Amal*

Naima describes how through civil society she finds a way to gain access. This shows both that civil society for her is a valuable space and that it is meaningful to be able to have access to a group space. The following testimony shows, also echoed by other participants, the importance of access and access to social spaces and social exchange. Additionally, Naima claims that that particular access helps her to understand "how people think" and gain an understanding of the "positive" and the "negative". This testimony shows that Naima has learned and changed her understanding in some matters. In other words, spaces of plurality make it possible for people to exchange opinions and get to know other cultures or identities. In a similar manner, Sahar underlines that the exposure to a space where different people come together has opened her way of thinking:

> *"If there is money or not from the work I do, I would not leave it because I benefit very much from it. Financially, positive energy, everything I benefit from it. Every two or three months there are new people and everybody has their own and different way. That gives us something to benefit from. Before I was just in Sabra and I had no access, but the organization helped me gain access and see how people think and how people live, how life goes, what is positive and what is negative (…). Freedom means to me that you feel at ease psychologically and that you are treated like a human being. Not like are you a woman or a man. Before it was like the most important thing is the man and then comes the woman, she has her role with the children and work and that is it. But I have changed my mind and have learned not like before (…). It is true that I am a girl, and that we do not have rights but I changed my understanding of that we needed to be treated like any human being". Naima*

> *"I have learned to respect different perspectives from different people and their differences and to accept people who are different (…). People need to understand that*

the word Syrian is not a shameful word or wrong. They are people like any other people. Everybody has their rights, the right to feel safe and the right to live to live not like we are living now". Sahar

The next two testimonies bring forth again the need for a social space and access to a space where social interaction can occur. Building on that, in that collective space, women have the ability to meet new people from different spaces and interact. This has according to Sada the ability to foster experience. Amal touches upon another compelling aspect, when she explains that she feels part of a particular group. Social relationships and social ties are reoccurring themes in many of the testimonies of the women. Approximately half of the women mention that they either have increased their social ties through their participation in civil society or have mentioned that social relationships are a major attribute of civil society. Amal and Salma describe how civil society provides access to social relationships and how these relationships are meaningful to them. What creates new and "strong" social bonds is not per se civil society in this scenario but rather the social space that Syrian civil society offers to the women. This social space, as Salma describes, encourages a kind of "ease and comfort", which provides a safe space for social interaction to potentially occur and for people to listen to each other. Social ties are potential outcomes of group settings or plurality. Salma underlines how social relations present a kind of relief for a person who faces the difficulties of exile. Exile is a heavy burden for most of the women in this case and becomes a vital theme when understanding the value of access to a space where these women are members of a collective group, rather than an exiled individual:

"The sense of belonging comes from the social part and from the social relations with the women and the team. It feels like we have a special atmosphere, like a strong social bond. In exile, people need social relations". Salma

"In civil society you get to know more people and their experience and I didn't know that there are so many distinct people from Syria who this work and have even done this work before in Syria. It gave me a lot of experience". Sada

"I get a feeling of belonging to the oppressed people. I am one of them and I can be with them. And I will try to take their hands like someone took my hand and helped me out me too I will go back to the same thing. Give back the favor that was given to me". Amal

Another theme that is extremely vital when looking at civil society is autonomy. Zahra underlines that civil society is able to raise people's voices because it is independent of the state. One of the most fundamental basics of civil society is the partial autonomy it has towards the state. This is why it is able to let that group of people come together and collaborate freely (to a certain extent). The element of autonomy reappears later in chapter seven in light of the analytical discussion. Zahra puts it shorty in her own words:

"Civil society is independent of the state. It raises the voices of people". Zahra

On another note, Salam highlights a crucial point in her testimony that captures some critical thoughts on group's settings and collective spaces. She claims that because most of the Syrians in civil society have no other option to work and earn money, it can make them more vulnerable to exploitation. It is important to remember that these women do not have official working rights and act outside an institutionalized space, which can be liberating (legally speaking) on one hand, but also can become a burden. In other words, not being officially employed guarantees no stable contract or stability. However, it provides a way to earn money, which would be extremely difficult under the harsh policies of the Lebanese sponsorship. Just like in any other collective space, power relations or exploitation can potentially occur. Salam puts this paradox into her own words:

"(...) no matter how bad you are treated you can't leave because this is the best you will ever get. And that also makes people that run these kinds of societies take advantage of people because they know the people like they are bound for this". Salam

The idea of this chapter is to clearly present evidence on the fundamental understanding that plurality occurs in civil society and hence is a meaningful element of it. This then presents the results in line with the theoretical framework and helps to view the results in alliance with plurality being a defining element of civil society. Plurality allows for positive implications on a wider scale for the women, as it generates feelings of belonging, educative experience and exposure to different cultures and opinions. With these dynamics in alliance with the basic group setting comes a kind of reinforcing mutual recognition (see chapter seven). Most of the women do face stigma and difficulties of exile, which make it hard to enter collective spaces in the Lebanese public space without negative experiences. As the results show, the element of plurality lays the fundament for a social setting. Many women see great meaning in making social relations and having access to a space where potential social ties can grow or develop.

Social relationships and ties are essential for building a social network and gaining access to social life. In the case of Syrian women in Lebanon, social mobility decreases through different factors such as discrimination and exclusion, which have extensive ramifications on well-being. In the case of the women who are involved in Syrian civil society in Lebanon, social immobility compensates to a certain extent as the civil society itself creates a collective space for the women to engage in. Through the exposure to a diverse space with Syrian, Lebanese and foreigners, women can potentially evolve their knowledge and awareness on social issues and different perspectives. In light of the results, the chapter maps out both the exclusion that the women face on a social level and then moves on to present some of the ways that this exclusion is experienced, combatted and dealt with. By contributing to society through their engagement in civil society, the women find a way to mediate a space for themselves where they experience membership, stability and social acceptance despite the constrictions they face. Due to the social exposure and contact the women experience in civil society, it becomes partly educational and contributes to social change and transformation on a personal and community level. This lack of social mobility can increase the inability to naturally be part of groups or enter a social space in which they are accepted. This is where plurality becomes a major factor. Plurality renders a space a public space due to the collectivity and interaction that occurs (see chapter seven). This group setting and collectivity created through plurality additionally creates the ability for mutual recognition between the members to happen. Some of these more analytical elements occur in the discussion in chapter seven.

6. Action – Perspectives on Speech and Action

Yildirim (2014: 875) stresses that action occurs as an elementary structure in civil society. Arendt (1958, in Yildirim, 2014: 872) states that action is a major fragment of political action. The aim of this chapter is in turn to trace action in civil society with the data from the testimonies. Being able to act in a given society is normally for a large portion of people and partly protected by rights in that given society. However, for refugees or unregistered people in a certain space, the ability to act or do action decreases due to exclusion through lack of rights or criminalization. The following results show evidence for the fact that Syrian women in Lebanon face challenges in their ability to act freely. Most importantly, the results give evidence for understanding that the women find ways to do action despite the constrictions they face on a legal or informal level. The major themes that appear in the results are justice, dialogue, education and access to rights. The results in turn become evidence for the fact that women do action. Second, they do it through civil society. Third, action happens in civil society. The structure of the chapter divides mainly two parts that first bring forth testimonies that discuss action and second testimonies that address dialogue or speech. The reason for this division applies Arendt's definition of action, categorized into action and speech. In regards to the testimonies, the hurdles for Syrian women to do action in Lebanon mainly consist of legal constrictions and lack of access to political awareness.

Some of the interviewees have no registration in Lebanon during the time of their interview. In all such cases, they were not able to renew their refugee status with the UNHCR, due to the heavily increased restrictions in the bureaucratic process. That means some of the refugees are virtually non-existent in the system, have no political representation or protection and face criminalization. The women, who do have refugee status, claim that they lack rights on many different levels and lack representation. In the following testimony, Amal describes the lack of support she receives from the UN and her needs for rights, which should allow her to act in society. Here the theme of the need to act freely ("eat, drink, and rent a house") becomes relevant:

> *"When we come here, we are registered with the UN as refugees and it does not help us in any way or benefit us in any way, only paperwork. Everything is forbidden for us. They claim our rights we want our rights we want to work we want to eat we want to drink we want to rent a house". Amal*

The policies that dictate much of the abilities of the women to act in a public space are harsh and certainly have restricting functions. Additionally, the lack of rights that comes with the refugee status in Lebanon restricts their abilities to act freely in Lebanese society. Fear of arrest is a reality that permeates much of the lives of the women in a negative way. It additionally limits the ways, in which these women can potentially act in the public and thereby degenerates the option for action in any public space. First, Nawal explains her "scared" relationship to politics coming from Syria. Nawal also describes how her ability to publicly or politically act, depends on her legal status. She also addresses the danger that comes with not being legal or with potential criminalization:

> *"In Syria, we have a scared relationship towards these two words (justice and equality) because also they didn't really exist and we were not able to express them freely. Here, in Lebanon the problem is that if I want to go out on a protest for example, I have to make sure that I am here legally. Because I am scared if there would be any clashes and I get involved (…)". Nawal*

It is imperative to understand some specific perspectives by the women that capture how they envision and experience some of the restrictions. Specifically, when it comes to their ability to act in society, or in other words in public spaces as either refugees or not registered individuals. With this understanding of these dynamics, the next testimonies address the ways in which these women ask for rights. More specifically, they address the importance of being an actor in the society that they live in and underline how the increased action through civil society effects their livelihoods.

The next three testimonies address action and becoming actors. Nawal explains that by becoming an activist she becomes a benefit for both the state and the society. Apart from that, she also underlines justice and equality as two major and important elements of civil society. Salma addresses how she benefits from civil society as this gives her the way to becoming an actor. Amal describes that women should be active in working with their communities. She also underlines the importance of both empowerment and claiming her rights. In these three testimonies, the theme of action is the focal point. All three women ascribe a positive and necessary meaning to it in close alliance with access to rights and justice. The results show that through the women's action in civil society, they become more aware of political and social issues such as justice, equality, and women's empowerment. Although the constrictions are exorbitant, most women find ways to see opportunity and access knowledge through their action in civil society:

> *"Civil society for me is a society that holds the values of justice and equality because they have these two basics. The women play an important role with men as well, of course we will not forget men. She becomes an activist, she becomes a benefit for the state, she becomes a benefit for the society and she becomes an actor". Nawal*

> *"We benefit because we feel like we are creators and we are actors." Salma*

> *"In my opinion, the woman has to exist in rebuilding communities that have experienced exile or war. They consider that men, they know everything and they are always right. But me no, this kind of talk is from long ago but now no, because I became a stronger personality. And all women should think like this. Not that we just empower her but that we ask where are her rights, what is given and what is not given (...). Empowerment is important because I can achieve my goals, I can help stop someone who is hurting, women and girls can learn how to count on themselves, that means it is my turn to act in that society". Amal*

Qadira expresses her positive experience in civil society and her appreciation for it because it offers her a way to become aware of her rights and access valuable information. She calls that space a space without a certain agenda, which gives the members more ability to act without judgement based on their heritage. Naima calls civil society a space that offers rights and justice to people. These two testimonies bring forward the more political note of civil society especially when addressing rights and topics like justice:

> *"People need to have access to their rights and live in dignity and have access to education and to a good health (...). The awareness towards these things increased because I took part in lessons and these things we do not talk about in Syria (...). Because I have been involved with civil society it makes us stronger. We become aware of our rights in this country. I have information now that we never talked about (...). First, I went there to have lectures myself and it resonated with me what they were talking about to promote the woman to have trust in herself and know her rights. In civil society we speak together, there is not one specific agenda or opinion (...). The nice thing is we can talk together without asking who are you, the second thing is raising awareness, especially for women and become aware of our rights. These are three things that I consider great about civil society". Qadira*

> *"We give the people in civil society some kind of justice and rights and offer them some memories and something from what they had before. It teaches me what is right and what is wrong and how to treat people". Naima*

The following three passages from three different testimonies show the importance of contact and communication such as discussing, listening, expressing and talking. These passages bring forth the themes of dialogue and exchange. According to the testimonies, exchange of opinion and expression is valuable. Sahar mentions the importance of women knowing how to express themselves. Expressing themselves seems to be especially valuable in terms of coming from a space in Syria where opinion is a politicized topic. Sada speaks about the fact that civil society is a space where people discuss and listen. Sahar addresses the value of contact and exchange and the ability to talk about political topics such as freedom and peace. Lastly, Qadira expresses that talking to each other is vital when it comes to combatting discrimination. Speech or dialogue is a tool for communication and even resolution and a major element of action, which evidently brings with it many benefits for the women:

> *"Civil society is somewhere where we discuss and listen to each other's opinions. It also means that I help anyone without exception". Sada*

> *"The main goal of civil society is stability (...). It gives them the utensils to express themselves (...). It gives a way to talk about things. In 2005 for example we could only talk in the family and maybe to our neighbors but in this way, we can talk to each other about values for example. Social exchange and contact and communication. Usually we watch the television that has one voice and one opinion (..). Now we can come together and discuss. Before we didn't talk about things like the regime or freedom or peace, but now we talk about it and we know in which context we are when we are talking about it". Sahar*

> *"We need to talk more to each other and find an alternative to how the situation is for Syrians in Lebanon. And I am not talking about all Lebanese, no it comes from the state. But sometimes there is a lot of discrimination and racism towards us, but not from all Lebanese. The people here that we work with are wonderful". Qadira*

Lastly, Layla's comment summarizes the presence of the political element in civil society. She also claims that civil society is effective in a way when it comes to political change and perhaps policy change when she refers to "legal situations". Here, Layla unpacks the theme

of politics and change and confronts that with civil society. She also critically underlines how civil society can easily be taken advantage of in regards to political or religious ideology:

> *"I don't think we can separate politics from civil society because civil society plays an important role in political change and legal situations so I can't say it should be separated but the important thing is that they don't use politics and religion to their advantage". Layla*

Nawal underlines a crucial point in her testimony when she critically examines civil society and its capacity. She claims that civil society is limited in its abilities and calls for increased access when it comes to working rights and legal residency for Syrians in Lebanon. In that sense, this testimony addresses the fact that civil society is not per se a durable situation for Syrians in Lebanon or can equally substitute access to official labor and the rights that come with it. This again underlines the fact that only a certain number of women in this case have the possibility of engaging in civil society. Here, the major theme is access, especially in regards to adequate participation in a given society:

> *"I feel like there is a limited effect of civil society. Still so many people are not getting their rights. Still women can't go out and work. Our work on the ground is limited so not everybody is getting the rights they should have and still live here illegally. So, with the years to come I feel like there will be more action. And women are going to play an important role". Nawal*

According to the results, it becomes evident that action happens in civil society. In other words, through civil society women enable action and become actors in a space where they have the capacity to act. The ability to act or do action is drastically restricted for refugees in Lebanon. Nevertheless, the testimonies show that they indulge in dialogue and do action that explores topics such as rights, justice, and gender. In that way, action enables both doing action and becoming an actor as well as doing meaningful action that addresses political and crucial issues.

The last three chapters have shown that in many cases women experience a certain change or development in perspective due to exposure to a diverse, educational and inclusive space. Additionally, there seems to be an increased sense of responsibility that originates from new roles women take on in civil society such as making economic gain, increasing socio-political awareness and being active. As for many women, the work that they do through civil

society matters to them, increases their sense of purpose, and increases a sense of belonging due to the group setting. Circumstances such as exile, displacement, stigma, discrimination, and restrictive gender roles partly decompose the abilities for the women to integrate outside of the civil society they are involved in. In turn, through political action the women partly mobilize against such exclusive structures and collaborate with each other, contribute to their community, and profit from the knowledge that they gain.

7. Analytical Discussion – Political Action in Civil Society

The results in the last three chapters give an insight into some of the women's perspectives, categorized by elements of participation, plurality and action. This categorization operates in line with the definition of political action, to draw evidence from the results that make claim to the theoretical framework. As the fundamental theoretical analysis serves to understand the political in civil society, the following passages of the discussion build on relevant commonalities between Arendt's political thought and civil society. The themes that were already touched upon in the previous chapters have space to unfold further in the analytical discussion. Additionally, the chapter presents a critical note on discourses in scholarship and the humanitarian context and contributes to the debate with some of the major findings and arguments. The arrangement of the chapter divides into seven subsections. The first section addresses the space in-between, which underlines the political in the women's action and their public presence through civil society. The second section emphasizes the autonomous characteristic of civil society and its subsequently positive implications for the women. The third section stresses political subjectivities where I trace some of the increased political understandings the women develop especially in light of their mostly negative and traumatic relation towards political topics and opinions. The fourth section underlines the element of meaningful action and how that is a major enabler of a sense of purpose and recognition. The fifth section comes back to acts of citizenships, particularly in light of the evidence that implies that the women positively experience fragments of "citizenship" through their actions. Lastly, critical remarks and the conclusion make some final comments in regards to the findings and the methodology of the study.

As stated previously, a political experience composes of participation, plurality and action (Arendt, 1958 in Yildirim, 2014: 872). According to the testimonies, the women find themselves in a space where these characteristics indeed occur. Plurality happens through the collectivity and group setting in civil society. Action happens through the women doing different activities through which they act, do action, and verbally interact. Lastly, participation happens through the action, which enables their participation both in civil society and in the public space. These three themes are closely intertwined, depend, and build on each other. What is remarkable here is that civil society provides a space, in which women can act and become actors despite their constricting status. Arendt's political thought emphasizes the fact that a kind of political freedom occurs in this case, reinforced by her thought focusing less on law and institutions and more on active participation and involvement (Williams, 2005: 199). With the

next passages, I aim to explore that positive implication or that fragmented experience of an increased sense of freedom through the political element. In the end, civil society becomes a form of politics and a space for women to establish themselves in a way.

7.1 The Space In-Between

The space in-between is where the political happens and where individuals can feel fragments of freedom and engage as active citizens (Williams, 2005: 203; Knauer, 2014). In that way, the space in-between is a comprehensive concept that can capture what the women experience through political action in civil society. In terms of the theme of participation, the results show that mainly increased economic gain and increased social contact occur in the given space in-between. In other words, participation is a vital part of civil society and is additionally a vital part for the women to sustain themselves economically and to foster social interaction. Arendt (in Ranson, 2012: 3) states that the desire to work is part of a basic human need, which builds on the circumstance that an individual is able to freely decide if she wants to work or not. That point leads me to the argument that by being able to participate economically, the women increase their partial sense of freedom and capacity to make a choice to work. The women's access to a social space holds much meaning for most of them, as it provides a space to build new and well-needed social ties. Apart from that, Habermas (1992: 330, 453) underlines that civil society happens in the public realm and thereby renders participants of civil society public actors and brings forth their voices. This is remarkable as refugees have little space in the public realm, due to the formal and informal structures of exclusion they potentially face. Plus, (refugee) women have it even more difficult as conservative norms in the Arab world decrease their access to public spaces even further (Corstange, 2019: 190). The space in-between allows women to establish themselves (socially and economically) and thereby counter some structures that restrict them otherwise. In that way, civil society becomes a medium, through which individuals can partly fight such unequal structures in a public space (Chambers & Kymlicka, 2002: 8). Again, just like civil society, the space in-between is not a rigid definition of a specific phenomenon, but rather captures some of the structures that enable the women to make sense of that space in their own way.

Plurality is another major element of both civil society and political action. The results give evidence that plurality does occur in civil society. This additionally creates a space where groups operate together and where a diverse space offers exposure to different opinions and voices. When groups of people come together, share opinions, and discuss values, plurality happens and with that enters a public space (Ranson, 2012: 6). In light of Arendt's (1963: 175)

thought, mutual recognition is another major political factor that occurs through the exchange of opinions and the development of new viewpoints in a public space. Williams (2005: 204) relatedly states that the members of the civil society recognize their colleagues as equals of the community and thereby engage in recognition and encourage a sense of belonging and membership as an active citizen. Instead of delving into the backsets of exile, several women make sense of their trauma or exile and call for justice and rights instead. That shows the need for political recognition and highlights the political dimension in asking for that essential recognition. In that way, it can be argued that civil society offers a collective space, in which members do not feel dominated by their refugee status and can rather make sense of their identity themselves (see Isin, 2008: 37, 38), reinforced through the experience of equal recognition.

Aside participation and plurality playing an important part in civil society, many of the women also underline a major cornerstone of Arendt's political thought – action. Having the ability to act is what makes something political (Arendt, 1969 in Tchir, 2018: 27). That action in turn happens collectively through recognition and interaction (Yildirim, 2014: 5). Moreover, these women do action through workshops, teaching or engaging otherwise as a collective, and thereby generate a political dynamic and a public presence according to Arendt. Although almost none of the women call their action political, many of the testimonies show how these women are asking for rights. Asking for rights, claiming the importance of them, and calling for inclusion is political (Saunders, 2008: 292). In turn, political recognition is a fundamental cornerstone of justice (Taylor, 1992 in Tchir, 2018: 41). Kiwan (2016: 165) states that as soon as these demands for recognition happen, they become political. This is remarkable as there is little to no allowed public space, in which Syrians can appear without constrictions. Through their action, engagement and collectivity in civil society, they create a space for themselves that functions as the space in-between. In many cases, scholars use Arendt's thought on statelessness to comprehend refugees in their environments, however Beltrán (2009: 599, 600) underlines that Arendt's thought on action is able to make refugees more visible in the space in-between. As mentioned before, Bayat (2013: 58) claims that these actors do not necessarily realize that their acts are political, but rather they act out of motivation to survive and provide for themselves. On another note, Yildirim (2014: 29) claims that action has a way of creating new relationships for people. In this case then, the action itself is not of crucial importance but rather, that action happens and thereby accumulates individuals in one space. Overall, the space in-between comprehensively highlights political elements in the space of civil society where

political action occurs. In light of the evidence, that space has the reinforcing ability to foster women's presence in the public, allows economic gain, encourages social ties, enables mutual recognition, and combat unequal structures.

7.2 Autonomy

Another major factor that is both present in civil society and Arendt's political action is the element of autonomy. One of the most fundamental reasons why Syrian women are able to do political action through civil society is because it happens outside of an institutionalized space and hence allows for decentered action (Lang, 2013). Autonomy is a crucial component of civil society, as it provides an economic alternative and creates a way for the women to constitute and organize themselves, which could not occur in an institutional setting (Cohen and Arato, 1994: 30). Although all of the women volunteer, they access the right to work inside the scenario of the civil society (Cohen and Arato, 1994: 32, 33). Civil society does not aim to become an alternative to the state, however aims to bring forth the ability for a space to become civil and in that way offer access to rights in the microcosms of civil society (Reitzes, 1994: 110). On a more critical note, Chandhoke (2010: 13) accentuates, the state does have some say and determination of how civil society can operate, as it is not entirely autonomous. Nevertheless, through civil society's partial independence of the state, it is able to guarantee some rights and political access and thereby limit its institutionalization (Chandhoke, 2010: 2). This a vital aspect as this has the potential to politically mobilize individuals who have no space in institutional settings (Foley and Edwards, 1996: 39).

Relatedly, Bayat (2013: 59) emphasizes that particularly actors in civil society aim for political autonomy from institutions and the state that limit access on a wider scale (Bayat 2013: 59). To repeat, Arendt's political thought is rooted in the basic understanding that political action can occur outside of institutions and make political action visible in other forms. Several women address in their testimonies increased senses of responsibility, empowerment and certain appreciation of increased independence. Additionally, none of the women have the official right to work the way that they do. Through its partial autonomy from institutions, women can partly emancipate themselves from their dependent and inactive status and gain some autonomy themselves from their legalities. Syrian grassroots civil society as any civil society is not flawless and is evidently not automatically free from power relations per se. However, on the level of providing Syrian women with access to an economic income, participation and (political) action, it certainly offers a well-needed alternative.

7.3 Political Subjectivities

Having no proper way to participate officially in society as well as facing possible arrest due to unregistered status, exacerbates psychological health among refugees (Human Rights Watch, 2016b in Kiwan, 2019: 6). In that way, women experience informal restriction of movement and criminalization, which Kiwan (2019: 6, 7) calls "legal limbo", as this can have perpetual ramifications on following generations of refugees who continue to be unregistered. In other words, the fact that refugees or unregistered Syrians have virtually no political rights is both a momentary and a longstanding issue and has effects on the individual's well-being. In fact, the way that individuals can take part in public life and live under certain policies, has defining effects on the overall experience of the person in that situation (Kiwan, 2019: 13). Furthermore, in many cases especially participation and commitment gain in importance for women who feel ostracized and weakened due to exile. Malkki (1995: 514) describes that the sense of belonging is associated with community and feelings of not belonging is associated with exile. Exile can imply losing a sense of identity with the habits that were once normal becoming abnormal (Malkki, 1995:508). What is remarkable here is that even though these women describe the multilayered difficulties of exile, they learn partly even benefit from it. In fact, lived experiences contribute to gaining knowledge and transforming and changing understandings (Kiwan, 2017: 127).

Another factor that can enormously increase hardship and minimize the well-being of an individual is stigma. Individuals usually experience stigmatization after losing a certain status, which creates exclusion and discrimination (Gissi, 2019: 542). Many of the women address discrimination, bullying, and racism due to their refugee status that seems to dominate their identity in the new context in Lebanon. This ascribed stigma can also decrease the potential of participating in society as stigma partly manifests and maintains exclusion. In fact, the term "refugee" is itself stigmatizing as it has a negative connotation and hence has disenfranchising ramifications on the individual experiencing the stigma (Gissi, 2019: 540). The perception of refugees is dominantly negative and accordingly worsens current and future conditions for Syrian women in Lebanon (Gissi, 2019: 539). Kiwan (2019: 2) claims that being a refugee brings with it a kind of vulnerability, which she calls an "out of place" status. That out of place status captures the lack of access to stability and the lack of access to a space for refugees in a given context. These claims bring me to the argument that being Syrian and a refugee brings with it negative experiences, stipulated through both increased vulnerability and discrimination rooted in stigma and exile. In turn, refugee women are able to mitigate that out of place status

and the according vulnerability entering an environment that provides and mediates a space: civil society.

In light of political awareness, Ismail (2018: 130) states that living under the regime in Syria can lead to suppressed political subjectivities and increased feelings of disengagement. Many of the women describe how their previous relation to political topics in Syria induced fear and silence. However, several of the testimonies show that many of the women change their perspectives on political matters or engage with newly developed awareness towards empowerment, justice, rights, and equality for example. Many women also see civil society as a space to talk, speak to each other, and discuss. Referring back to Arendt, (in William, 2005: 199), dialogue and involvement is what makes action political. Arendt (1958: 3) puts this into her own words, "speech is what makes a man a political being". Furthermore, Arendt (in Yildirim, 2014: 877) claims that by participating in the form of plurality people are able to shape opinions as they discuss and share perspectives. In that sense, dialogue and verbal communication have ways to promote knowledge and exchange of opinion. Kiwan (2017: 123) states that learning and social transformation shape each other. She also states that learning is not necessarily only achieved through formal education but also through informal education (Kiwan, 2017: 123). In this instance, informal is anything that does not involve an officially educative setting such as a school or a university. This leads me to the argument that in this scenario the involvement and access to the space of civil society is a way of informal education. Education promotes a way for individuals to increase social, personal and cognitive abilities and thereby can promote social transformation and change in attitude (Kiwan, 2019: 8). Jeffrey and Staeheli (2017, in Kiwan, 2017: 123) unpack this claim further by stating that knowledge and new experiences that converse with previous viewpoints of an individual can shape and create transformative understanding and knowledge. Gissi (2020: 17) underscores that having political knowledge (such as rights and a basic understanding of their political status) is extremely beneficial for these women.

El Asmar et al., (2019: 11) stresses that displacement can create a way for women to experience responsibilities that are new and different and perhaps aid in making the women more able to combat challenges and difficulties that they face. Barakat and Philippot (2016: 54) underline that these new responsibilities can particularly generate new perspectives on gender structures amongst the women. Many of the women express how they have an increased sense of responsibility, an appreciation for diversity, and evolved perspectives on gender issues and women in particular. Hanafi (2012, in Kiwan, 2017: 124) argues that through action that confers

with political or social structures, individuals evolve or create political subjectivities. What I can draw from these points are two conclusions. First, political characteristics in civil society partly originate from verbal exchange, discussion, and dialogue or how Arendt calls it – speech. Second, the women create and develop their own political subjectivities through experiences of stigma and exile, as well as through exposure to civil society where they encounter new responsibilities and dialogue. The findings offer evidence for the fact that political action in civil society enables positive and educative processes for the women and in that regard increases socio-political awareness and access.

7.4 Meaningful Action

Yildirim (2014: 27) claims that it is action liberating the person and putting them out in the world, away from their given circumstances. In the case of the women, their action does in fact partly enable a way for them to lift themselves from their constricting circumstances. Bayat (2013: 64) underlines that especially action that has value and meaning to the person, enables these individuals to see a sense of purpose in them. Building on that, Barakat and Philippot (2018: 55) stress that being socially or politically active can be a reinforcing factor for individuals who find themselves in dire situations. This becomes visible in the results where the importance of (meaningful) contribution is repeatedly underlined. The testimonies show the need for social relations, participation and meaningful action. Being able to contribute in communities can be a mechanism through which a person can better support herself in the situation of exile (Clarke and Gülan, 2016: 26). As mentioned above, the ability to act and ascribe meaning to the act is essential here. The political component lies in how people who experience marginalization aim for dignity as well as express and process their life and experiences in society (Chandhoke, 2010: 20, 21). This entails interrupting the assumption that refugees are solely receivers of aid and passive bodies in the public. Bayat (2013: 60) calls this "quiet noncompliance", as the women are jumping out of the stratifications of their status and engage nevertheless. Civil society becomes the space in which they can practice that "quiet noncompliance" as they actively participate both in civil society. In other words, individuals who experience legal exclusion due to status, do political acts in their own ways and own spaces, rupturing existent systemic structures (Bayat, 1997 in Kiwan, 165).

Beltrán (2009: 598) puts this into perspective when she claims that interrupting the rigid understanding of refugees or immigrants being either givers or takers, allows for inconvenient or irregular actions such "unauthorized taking" to unfold. Arguably, that "unauthorized taking" happens through encountering the right or ability to actively participate in Lebanese public and

contribute to their community. Kiwan (2016: 160) highlights that seeing refugees as people who mainly take advantage of humanitarian support, creates a kind of depoliticization and with that decreases their ability to be political actors and participate as such. These findings should combat the idea that refugees are homogenous groups, which engages in an overarching narrative (Goodkind and Deacon, 2004: 723). The interviews give an insight into a multilateral and diverse group of women – how they cope and how they make sense of their situations. In fact, it is a political act in itself that these women give interviews in light of the authoritarian regime in Syria and potential vulnerability in Lebanon (Gissi, 2020: 18). Arguably, with their words and their stories, these women contribute to this study and enrich Syrian women's refugee narratives as political acts as they speak out about combatting systematic exclusion. These points lead me to make two arguments. First, meaningful action increases a sense of purpose and can help overcome hardship to a certain extent. Second, that political action breaks the boundaries of legal barriers and interrupts an inferior understanding of a (female) refugee.

7.5 Acts of Citizenship

To build on the fact that political action does occur in civil society, concepts that operate under the greater term of acts of citizenship can visualize some additional implications that such actions cause. This concept especially applies to individuals or groups who are not citizens, however through their actions constitute themselves as citizens so to speak. Beltrán (2009: 595) explains that the act of "noncitizens" or people without citizenship who nevertheless access labor is a political act. Beltrán (2009: 600) captures labor less as an incentive of citizenship and more as a way to induce transformation and a practice of freedom. In that way, Syrian women insert themselves in a space that is public, which offers them exposure to economic access, and partly interrupts that intended exclusion. Rancière (1999, in Tambakaki, 2015: 927, 930) calls this politicization, which means that someone who experiences exclusion from institutions still finds a way to enable action on a public scale and simultaneously tackles injustices. In that regard, politicization is traceable in the women's testimonies as they amplify how their action and participation in civil society partly allows them to interrupt unjust processes and sets them into the public realm. Tambakaki's politicization in turn emphasizes once again the political element in the women's actions in civil society: political action. Isin (2009) and Kiwan (2016: 163) argue that people, who claim their rights through their actions, act as if they were citizens.

In turn, the actions that the women do in civil society protests the so-called "citizen-noncitizen binary" as they encounter activities that their status does not per se permit them to (Tambakaki, 2015: 923, 926). Noncitizenship is a category that aims to counter differentiation

between what is illegal and what is legal and claim that any individual has the ability to be a "citizen" when they confront or combat the exclusive structures of citizenship (Tambakaki, 2015: 926, 927). In fact, the results show that the women do confront some of the exclusionary structures of citizenship by taking the right to work, asking for political recognition and being active in the public realm. In the case of the participants of this study, civil society constitutes a space for the women to act as citizens to a certain extent in light of Isin's (2008: 18) thought. Kiwan (2016: 166) stresses the need for recognizing "participative citizenship" that works away from legality. Perhaps if this category would be more prevalent in scholarship as well as in policy, refugees would have more participatory rights and access. In the end, sometimes for acts of citizenship to occur, people need to question law and sometimes break it (Isin, 2008: 39). In the particular case of the women in this study, they do disobey the rules that are set out for them, and it is in that way that they act as though they are citizens from a legal point of view. With the provided evidence, this study shows that several binaries are broken through the diverse experiences and perspectives that come forth in it. In this instance, I trace the political by alleviating the need for membership in institutions or states and rather underline action. This passage allows me to make one major argument. By engaging in the labor market (although it is unofficial), the women act politically as they break the boundary that is set out for them and partly enter the capacity of a citizen.

7.6 Critical Remarks

In this study, civil society is a medium through which women can advocate for themselves on different levels, enhancing positive experiences and outcomes for their situation in Lebanon. Most women deny any kind of negative aspect of civil society during the interviews. However, the ones that do address this topic explain some deficits in civil society such as dependency and lack of professionalism. Lang (2013: 34) brings forth the need to view civil society critically, as it is not inherently good or naturally leads to constructive dialogues and a positive atmosphere. Structures such as patriarchy, class or even religion can become repressive and create or increase power relations between participants of civil society (Chandhoke, 2010: 13). Evidently, civil society is neither perfect in theory nor in practice. Therefore, a critical eye can perhaps visualize the potential for it to become ambivalent or create negative experience for particular members. Additionally, as civil society is dependent on funding and donors, these often dominate how civil society operates and collaborates with beneficiaries. Two women mention a twofold critique in terms of civil society. First, a lack of expertize from the staff due to insufficient professional experience and according lack of

qualification. Second, a strong and disempowering dependency on donors. Bayat stresses this when he expands critically on the fact that indeed donors often decide activities, in additional to there being a lack of competent coordination due to minimal experiences by the participants (Bayat, 2013: 88). Another hurdle that many civil societies face is the fact that funding sometimes comes too short, which can lead to shutting down the civil society (Hallisso, 2014). These factors are important to keep in mind, as there are some limitations to civil society. However, Chandhoke (2010: 20) makes a valid point when she underlines that ultimately civil society is what participants make of it themselves. This shows that civil society can be an outlet for different participants and is fluid in the way, in which it carries different meanings and has a flexible definition (Glasius et. al., 2004). The fluidity of civil society allows it to become a convenient analytical tool to comprehend women's actions, as it is not rigid and can be different things for different women.

7.7 Conclusion

The data from the interviews offer a rich insight into some perspectives, motivations, changes, and experiences of Syrian women in Lebanon. Most of all, they show a fracture of Syrian women, who have the ability to become engaged in civil society and benefit from the work they do. In that way, the evidence is diverse and is able to show how the women make sense of their situation in Lebanon and the exclusion they face due to their status. On a more theoretical note, the data functions as evidence to be able to manifest and capture political action in civil society. That means, working closely in line with three major characteristics that outline Arendt's line of thought on political action and see the data through the lens of those characteristics. That made it possible to delve further into the material and later lead an analytical discussion. Overall, the data provides evidence for the fact that participation, plurality and action are active elements in civil society. Arendt's political action is especially convenient in this study, as it moves away from institutional or party politics and rather addresses "unconventional" forms of politics by "unconventional" bodies in the public. As this action occurs outside of institutional or official state settings, it gives more opportunity for individuals to act and participate despite their legal or political status.

The testimonies in line with the theme of participation show that civil society has the capacity to become a medium for women to engage and participate in society, contribute to their community, and generates an increased sense of belonging and purpose. While civil society provides a basic opportunity to participate, it also allows for economic participation and with that economic gain to occur. That is remarkable as all the women in this study do not have

a permission to work due to their status and thereby surmount a certain restriction that their status stipulates. The testimonies in line with plurality show that the dynamic of group settings enables a space where mutual recognition can take place and offers exposure to a diverse setting, which generates an increased sense of awareness of social or political topics. Additionally, it offers a space for social relations to grow and for members to interact. Apart from criminalization, lack of freedom of movement, and exile, many women additionally face stigmatization in Lebanon. This can be due to nationality and political status and thereby makes the space of civil society increasingly safe and soothing. Plurality is hence a major factor of civil society and additionally offers a way for the women to gain access to a rather stable environment where there is a sense of acceptance. The testimonies in line with action show that the women do act and become actors through their engagement. According to Arendt, action becomes visible through action (or deeds) and speech (or dialogue). The results show that discussion, discourse, and verbal communication is a reoccurring factor and becomes of great meaning to many of the women and encourages educative processes.

The analytical discusses encompasses several insights. Civil society provides a space in-between where the women are present in the public, however can act out in ways that would not be possible in other public settings perhaps. Civil society then provides a space, in which women can understand their rights, educate themselves and hence rebuild political subjectivities. It also provides a space to enlarge a social network and economic gain to be able to provide and have well-needed social relations. By conversing with each other and getting to know different people with different mindsets, civil society generates the women to engage and access new perspectives and encounter new responsivities. Overall, civil society offers a way to do political action and thereby advocate for each other, participate with each other and emancipate themselves from their ascribed identities. In that way, the women mediate a space for themselves, fight exclusion, and nurture change on a larger and smaller scale, meaning on a public and on a personal level. Their action partly emulates how active citizens can participate in a society and perhaps even offers fragments and increased senses of (political) freedom in some instances. This might increase a sense of dignity for the women and increases their quality of life minimally. However, their action lacks in enabling greater change on a policy level, which could drastically change their position and recognition in Lebanese society.

However, women do claim a space for themselves in the public and increase their livelihoods and their well-being in the harsh environment of exile and previous war experience. Kiwan (2019) calls this “exclusionary intersectionality” as the exclusion that refugees face in

this scenario happens on social, political and economic levels. The already existing difficultly of being in exile increases the importance of civil society, as it gives them access to positive and reinforcing experiences. The women are then able to mediate a space for themselves where they fight the exclusion. This in turn constitutes a political experience according to Arendt and generates social transformation as it gives women access and exposes them to environments where they are able to participate, and act in plurality. Moreover, civil society is a space where women discuss their circumstances and collectively and individually challenge restrictions and daily constraints. That political action offers a way for the women to emancipate themselves from their status to a certain extent. By inducing labor, the women contest their roles as receivers of aid and gain a certain autonomy from role. Nevertheless, the way in which the women access economic gain does not provide them with official working rights, which increases their vulnerability within the civil society as well as in the Lebanese legal system.

Civil society provides a comprehensive lens when looking at the women's action – especially women with refugee status or none at all - partly due to three elementary qualities. First, civil society is set in the public, as plurality and action occur simultaneously (see Habermas, 1992). Second, civil society has a certain autonomy from the state, which allows that space to break through so many restrictions the women would face otherwise. The ability to maintain independent towards the state and the economy to a certain extent (see Cohen and Arato, 1994: 30), provides women with an alternative way to participate in society and make (economic) gains regardless of their status. Evidently, it does not expose them particularly to the Lebanese context, however increases their social exposure and their sense of belonging, which is meaningful. Third, civil society has a certain fluid character that allows for different experiences of civil society to proliferate (Glasius et. al., 2004). These unique structures are of essence here and offer women access. Arendt's political thought on political action is additionally able to unfold the women's action because it offers a way to highlight peripheral or decentralized political acts.

Syrian women experience immense restrictions in Lebanon that have ramifications on well-being, livelihood and socio-political and economic mobility. These either originate from policies or stigma and thereby present formal and informal structures of exclusion. However, the focus in this study lies on how they combat those constrictions and put their potential to do political action into practice through civil society. This is extraordinary as the women receive no political recognition and thereby surmount some informal and formal structures of exclusion to a certain extent. These findings widen the partly constricting and unilateral scholarly and

humanitarian discourse on refugee women and Syrian women in Lebanon. This study portrays these women as potential political actors, counters de-politicization, and at the same time appreciates their vulnerability as disenfranchised members of a society. Restrictive gender norms and discrimination excruciate this precarious situation for Syrians in Lebanon. Most of the women have gone through an enormous change in lifestyle as exile and being alone has brought on new and different responsibilities for those women. The circumstances that the women face in Lebanon are constrictive and expect the Syrian refugee woman to be a receiver of (insufficient) economic support and be an inactive resident. The policies that Syrian women face in Lebanon are disenfranchising and offer little protection and has pushed many women into becoming unregistered. Their vulnerability increases through lack of economic stronghold and an inability to be able to support themselves and their families in an economically unstable country. The space of civil society allows the women to partly access rights that they have no access to otherwise and experience new responsibilities and different gender roles. Civil society generates the social mobility of Syrian women in the public realm, who live under circumstances that do not allow much social interaction with the local culture. This is partly due to deeply engrained negativity towards Syrians as well as stigmatization of refugees.

As any space, in which collective dynamics happen and action occurs, there is a potential for power relations, exploitation or conflict as well as misuse of the concept based on ideological claims. As mentioned previously, civil society is a rather fluid concept. The entire study capitalizes on the fluid and rather undefinable nature of civil society, which allows it to unfold in its own way in this study, building on the evidence that the women provide. Civil society should not count as a sufficient solution for the dire situations the women face in Lebanon. It is important to understand civil society's function in this scenario. Because the women have no formal options to experience their rights or work, they find civil society as an alternative option. The participation of Syrian women in civil society is not accessible to all women, has no way to put rights into real practice, and therefore is not a durable solution for the structural exclusion Syrian women experience in Lebanon. Refugees need recognition as persons with a history and a political reality so that they can have an increased sense of dignity and improve their well-being (Malkki, 1995 in Kiwan, 2016: 166). For Syrian women in Lebanon, this is in no way the case, as there is a lack of recognition on a policy level and on a socio-political level. They not only need to be recognized as refugees who need protection, but also as Syrians who have a heritage and a culture. Finally, as women who have goals and agency and as human being who should have the possibility to live in dignity.

8. Conclusion

The study started out with a clear introduction that offered an insight into methodological design, situated the research, and outlined some major arguments. That chapter outlined why content analysis is a suitable method in light of the study and explained the data collection and process. The second chapter offered an introduction to the context on an academic level with theoretical and conceptual insight. An in depth discussion of civil society was followed by major contributions by Arendt (and some critique) on her political action. Lastly, I examined literature on refugee women in Lebanon and Syrian women in Lebanon with a focus on active participation and active engagement. I put Isin's acts of citizenship under a lens and highlighted the fact that there is a gap in literature on active refugee women and particularly Syrian women in Lebanon. The third chapter discussed the historical context of both Lebanon and Syria and some relational events. These events included mainly the Syrian conflict in 2011, political conflict in Lebanon, and current socio-political and economic realities in Lebanon in relation to refugee populations. The following four empirical chapters unpacked the testimonies categorized by systematic organization in light of the theoretical framework and methodology. Some of the major findings proved the basic assumption that political action occurs in civil society according to Arendt's political thought. It is imperative to understand that it is not per se civil society as such that makes these women political actors, but rather the way these women do action *through* civil society. Themes such as economic gain, social contact, belonging and meaning, recognition, and political subjectivities were some of the major analytical elements that helped to process the data further. The way that these women act through civil society generally offers benefits and increases access, which according to Isin enables acts of citizenships. By breaching their political status through their widespread action in civil society, they manifest a space for themselves in the public realm. Accordingly, they are able to combat formal and informal patterns of exclusion to a certain extent. Ultimately, by becoming political actors, the women increasingly oppose the passive role and ascribed victimhood as well as interrupt several binaries that exist in much of the academic and humanitarian discourse.

In this setting civil society serves as a lens to understand in depth how marginalized women participate in the public realm and overcome structural exclusion to a certain extent. The Syrian women's testimonies that come forth in this study help to comprehend why these women engage in civil society. It also brings forth how these women learn to advocate for each other and for themselves through civil society, where social and political issues are addressed

and community members come together to interact and act. Hence, they enter a sphere that offers them stability both in the economic sense as well as in regards to social relations, recognition and (political) awareness. This, however, does not mean that they are fully relieved of exclusion or are less vulnerable but rather proposes a way to deal with the difficulties of exclusion. Meaning and understanding of civil society for the women differs. In that way, civil society offers a fitting medium to comprehend different experiences women have through civil society, while at the same time maintaining certain stagnant characteristics. The aim is to approach and answer the research questions, which mainly asks how Syrian women in Lebanon mediate a space for themselves. Civil society is often not the first choice of the women, but rather a result of not being able to participate in official labor or socio-political establishments. For some women on the other hand, civil society is their first choice when it comes to participation in Lebanese society. In that way, it is important to keep a diversified understanding of different motivations and reasons why women act in civil society in mind. Acts of citizenship, Tambakaki's politicization, and the space in-between have underlined the political in what the women do just from different conceptual angles to strengthen the discussion.

The study simply aims to trace the political dynamic in civil society, without stating that it is solely political. This topic partly addresses trauma, displacement and disenfranchisement and therefore should not be romanticized or be taken out of context. Individuals and groups are suffering the consequences of marginalizing policies that partly result in formal and informal exclusion. This has serious and longstanding effects on the quality of life and on mental well-being. Many Syrian refugees become undocumented due to harsh policies, which leads to continued socio-political, economic and legal disenfranchisement. Women can mobilize against imposed restrictions because civil society happens outside of institutional settings. At the same time, this exposes them to the public realm as civil society takes part in the public space. In turn, it is through civil society that the women mediate a space for themselves – by participating through action in collective settings. Arguably, civil society does not present an all-encompassing solution for the exclusion of refugees in Lebanon. As civil society depends on donors, it makes the concept less sustainable and more vulnerable to becoming dependent on donors and less independent. Additionally, the autonomy civil society has towards the state can be both a benefit as the results show, however lacks in providing inclusion into institutional parts of Lebanese society or the public. In that way, the exposure to the Lebanese public through civil society partly happens, however is limited. Overall, civil society proposes a kind of hyperspace and does not fully expose Syrian refugee women to the Lebanese context.

8.1 Contributing to the Field

This study partly advocates for the women in the study and amplifies their actions, to encourage the understanding that Syrian refugee women are not monolithic or have one experience. In fact, the women in this study have shown how they are able to make a great contribution to their community in Lebanon and have the ability to take strength out of harsh experiences and narratives. Both scholarship and the humanitarian discourse on refugee women exacerbates women's victimization and vulnerabilities and thereby makes their action on the ground less visible, less comprehensive, and less political. With this study, I not only advocate for the women that I have talked to but also call for changes in policies in Lebanon and more visibility of (Arab) women in political discourses and their contribution to social and political change. Throughout this endeavor, it was my goal to capture political acts and political action. Another aim was to counter victimization of refugees and highlight how they mobilize against systemic exclusion that originates from policies, stigma and prejudice. The results have shown tremendous abilities by the women to make sense of negative experiences and to become actors instead of being or becoming sole receivers and passive bodies in public and in exile. It is essential to listen to women to understand full realities and marginal narratives that do not dominate the general discourse. To conclude, this study has the academic purpose to add to the debate and fill the gap of understanding women's, Arab and refugee's actions on the ground. It also aims to bring attention to Syrian grassroots civil society in Lebanon that might lack in visibility in public debates.

8.2 Suggestions and Limitations

The insight that these nineteen interviews have provided only present a fragment of perspectives by certain women. It could have been beneficial to interview women from various parts of Lebanon to understand different conditions and different approaches of refugees in multiple parts of Lebanon. Perhaps interviewing more women would have given a more insightful perspective on the issue. In addition to that, my positionality as a foreigner might have influenced the research in the way that I perceived, examined, and presented some information. Choosing another method than content analysis could have encouraged a different way to explore the data and could have presented alternative outcomes. However, being aware of these dynamics can help maintain awareness throughout the study. Lebanon faces immense challenges as a state in regards to economic recession and political turbulence. This is partly rooted in the terms of the current sectarian party system that the public negotiates by protests since 2019. Because the system is overwhelmed, it becomes more of a challenge by caregivers

to offer services or protection to refugees, let alone services to their own citizens. The currently harsh policies that encourage return of refugees and increase the difficulties for refugees to sustain themselves in Lebanon need to be drastically changed. Guaranteed political protection should apply to any person living in a certain country, despite their heritage or socio-economic background. By giving (back) more leverage to the UNHCR to function and operate in Lebanon, perhaps some weight can be removed from the Lebanese general security. Currently, the general security tries to manage services for refugees and thereby fails in providing adequate access for refugees to necessary services such as registration, healthcare, protection and financial support. Lebanon needs aid to deal with its economic crisis and political instabilities to be able to implement better protection on all fronts for refugees as well as its own citizens or other residents (documented or undocumented) and increase the ability to become registered. On a legal and political level, refugees like anyone else deserve political recognition and access to rights as a human being with a history, a voice and a heritage.

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10. Appendices

Interview Questionnaire

1. Where are you from, how long have you lived in Lebanon?

2. What kind of state would you describe your city/village to be in now?

3. What is your educational/professional background?

4. What is your legal stance in the country you are currently residing in - (are you allowed to work)?

5. Since when and to what extent have you been engaged in civil society (Syria or/and Lebanon)?

6. What has motivated you and/or inspired you to become engaged in that way?

7. How would you define civil society in your own words? What are some key goals of civil society as you know it and practice it?

8. What do your rights/freedom/empowerment mean to you? Has your understanding changed since you have been residing in Lebanon?

9. How would you describe the current situation for Syrian civil societies inside and outside Syria?

10. (To what extent) do you think the way the regime deals with political opinion has influenced the way civilians have reacted to the regime?

11. How do you see the situation for freedom of speech in the context of Syria?

12. Do you see civil society as a relevant part of advocating for justice and accountability?

13. Do you think being part of civil society can account for autonomy and dignity for people?

14. What does justice mean to you? How do you envision justice for the people that had to leave Syria?

15. Is there something negative about civil society or something you would change?

16. Do you think violent and non-violent reactions from a civil point of view to the violent conflict was polarized?

17. Do you think collective memory of previous armed conflict in Syria influenced civil reactions to the regime? Do you think that what happened in Hama in the 80s influenced the way civilians reacted to the regime in 2011?

18. Do you think civil society should have clear separations from political or religious thought?

19. Do you draw a connection between civil society and justice?

20. What kind of role does non-violent civil society play in Syria's future?

21. How do you envision peace in Syria?

22. Does empowerment play an important role in the civil society in general and in the one you practice?

23. How has living in exile influenced your life?

24. (How) has living in exile effected the way you understand your rights and justice?

25. Have you developed mechanisms to meet the daily challenges that you face when living in Lebanon with ongoing conflict in Syria?

26. To what extent should women be involved in the rebuilding of exiled communities and/or war-torn countries?

27. Do you think women and men experience war and its consequences differently?

28. Do you think women are less inclined to violence?

29. Do you think that as a woman you have a different perspective on the importance of civil engagement?

30. Does civil society give you some kind of sense of belonging?

31. Is there anything that you would want the international community specifically to understand about Syrian resilience?

32. What do you value most about civil engagement and civil society?

33. Is civil society sustainable?

34. Is there anything else you would like to share?