

“It was Not Syria But the War That Gave Us Women Rights!” How Forced Displacement Can Be a Catalyst for Women’s Empowerment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

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Can displacement paradoxically foster positive social change and lead to empowerment of displaced Syrian women in Lebanon? Moving away from a one-dimensional focus on female vulnerabilities, this research suggests a new narrative in addressing gendered displacement; one that emphasises female refugees’ potential to contribute to host and origin communities. Although widely addressed in previous conflict situations, little is known about gendered displacement of Syrian women in the Levant. To explore this phenomenon an in-depth literature review, ethnographic fieldwork and twelve qualitative interviews with Syrian women were conducted in two Lebanese refugee sites. The results suggested, in line with Kabeer’s definition of “empowerment”, that these women made strategic life choices they have been denied previously in two key ways: shifting gender power relations

and the ability to work for the first time. This latter finding significantly impacted the renegotiation of marital roles and increased self-esteem for these women. Becoming the breadwinner of the family, their double-edged vulnerability shifted to a double-edged responsibility: women referred to now being “both husband and wife”. Determined to continue to work, these findings bear critical implications for their return to Syria and the future role of women in a post-war society. At the heart of this research lies the recommendation that interventions enacted in displacement contexts need to consider gender identity and gendered roles. Learning from individuals traditionally perceived as furthest behind and allowing their voices to shape their own narrative is the principal plea at the core of female empowerment in the present and future.