The Everyday Burden of Dignity:

An Exploration of Syrian Refugeehood in Bekaa, Lebanon

University College London

Institute for Global Prosperity

Doctoral Dissertation

Natalie Garland

Declaration form

I, Natalie Garland confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This doctoral dissertation uncovers the lived experience of dignity amongst Syrian refugees in Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. I apply an immersive longitudinal community-based approach (2021-2023), working closely with a team of four Syrian researchers. The use of participant observation, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions evoke the ways in which dignity is socially constructed through space and time. Analysed through the concepts of subjectivity, spatiality, agency, and temporality, the empirical data tells a site-specific story of the simultaneous loss and preservation of dignity in exile. As such, I engage with dignity as an overlooked object of anthropological inquiry. In particular, I examine how dignity operates across society, gender, generation, future and past desires, as well as within the physical spaces of the home, school, bakery, border, and humanitarian intervention. This refugee-centered analysis complicates Western liberal philosophy, revealing how dignity in exile is far from inherent, but rather an embodied endeavor of continuous preservation. Expanding upon a thin body of critical dignity theory, I urgently rethink this concept as inherently emotional, relational, processual, and in constant renegotiation, developing new knowledge on dignity in refuge as *burden*. This research contributes a novel 'dignity lens,' a new methodological and analytical approach that pluralizes sites of everyday dignity, revealing an agentic and precarious lived experience core to subject making in contexts of dispossession. The proposed lens offers an ethical and immersive framework for locating and unpicking sites of dignity exploitation, problematizing the often-overlooked socio-political entanglements undermining this essential feeling to humanity.

Impact Statement

The expertise, knowledge, analysis, and insight presented in this thesis can be put to beneficial use both inside and outside academia. Of primary importance is applying my research to improve dignity outcomes in contexts of vulnerability more broadly (i.e. forced displacement, racial discrimination, poverty, death and dying). In the dissertation that follows, I contribute new contextualized and community-based understandings of the lived experience of dignity in forced displacement, explicating where and how this feeling essential to humanity becomes threatened by structurally precarities and vulnerabilities. This intellectual discussion, which complicates normative, top-down and universal conceptualizations of dignity, can be directly applied to practice, with potential to inform and improve standards of humanitarian action in the Global South. According to my research, the international humanitarian industrial complex, positioned as the providers and protectors of dignity, systematically strips my interlocutors of their dignity. Through locating this humanitarian paradox and explicating how my interlocutors restore their dignity on their own terms, my doctoral project offers the critical tools for developing and monitoring dignified humanitarian interventions through a community-based approach. If applied to practice, this research can guide local and international non-governmental organizations towards a dignified model of aid distribution.

Furthermore, two applications of the multifaceted dignity lens have been piloted in this doctoral project. First, I developed Lamsa, a community-based fashion initiative that collaborates with Syrian crochet artisans to leverage the power of craft as a pathway towards dignity in exile. Over the course of this research, I worked closely with 10 women, creating an ethical and impactful alternative to normative aid models. Second, in collaboration with my team of student researchers, I adopted the lens to produce an educational documentary film (*The Lens of Dignity*, 22 mins). The film was screened at Lincoln University in a pilot workshop to see if/how this teaching tool can be used to change perceptions of refugeehood amongst young people in the West. The workshop will be refined and scaled over the course of 2025.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The question of human dignity is surely inseparable from the question of what it is to be human.

-Malpos, 2007:19

1.1 The Lens of Dignity

1.1.1 The dignity revolution

February 2011. A police officer slapped the face of a merchant's son in central Damascus. A crowd of curious and enraged bystanders gathered. The Syrian people cannot be humiliated, they shouted (Wannous, 2012). Under the Baathist regime, where the walls have ears, Syrians were often characterized by their engrained fear of defying the government, even in the privacy of their own homes. This seemingly mundane moment in time would soon be considered a breaking point of the Syrian revolution.

Three months earlier in Tunisia, 26-year-old fruit vendor Mohammad Bouazizi was also slapped in the face by a man in a governmental uniform (Fahim, 2011). Mohammad refused to pay a bribe, resulting in the confiscation of his electric weighing scale. When filing a complaint and demanding his rights to his property, the officials responded with mockery. He was humiliated and degraded. Mohammad proceeded to commit self-immolation in front of the governor's office in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia. This provoked what Tunisians referred to as "The Jasmine Revolt" or the "The Dignity Revolution" - a mass uprising of people of all ages and classes united against injustice. After 28 days of civil resistance their authoritarian ruler, Ben Ali, abdicated his throne. At the one-year anniversary of Mohammad's suicide, Tunisia's first elected president was in attendance, honoring Mohammad for inspiring the Tunisian people to reclaim their dignity (Chomsky, 2013).

Mohammad's story resonated with ordinary people beyond Tunisia. In Syria, the success of the Tunisian revolution strengthened an appetite for political change. Their patience for withstanding the indignity of day-to-day life as the political elite assumed disproportionate wealth was also quickly shrinking. A few weeks after the spontaneous chanting in central Damascus, the wall of fear was completely broken, with ordinary people risking their lives in the streets in the name of *karama* [dignity] (Harken, 2018). The protests spread not only across Syria, but Libya, Yemen, and Egypt too. Ordinary people were demanding social, political, and economic justice and equality. Fighting in the name of dignity was both central and shared (El Bernoussi, 2021; Harrison, 2024). These extraordinary events in history, marked by the hope and determination for alternative political possibilities, continue to influence the lives and futures of people across the Arab region.

Described as the 'Dignity Revolution' by Syrians themselves, the loss of dignity was a core propeller for revolution. Pearlman (2013) and Harkin (2018) critically address the role of dignity in the Syrian context, placing analytical focus on the uprisings as the ultimate manifestation of a reclaimed sense of dignity. These works, which engage with dignity as intertwined with the shifting sociopolitical milieu, only begin to address the struggle of dignity. Indeed, the multiplicity of mechanisms for which this essential inner feeling of cohesiveness is continuously threatened and restored through space and time remains an overlooked theoretical discussion. So, while scholars before me locate the struggle for dignity in revolution, how does dignity operate in ordinary daily life? How can we make sense of dignity as an *everyday* endeavor*?* In the dissertation that follows, I explore dignity as an embodied lived experience, making visible the continuous agentic processes of dignity preservation that consume both mundane and extreme everyday encounters. This exercise of focusing on dignity as a lived experience draws on the work of Vena Das who, in a 2010 interview, clarifies her focus of the everyday:

> There is a long history of thinking that ordinary life does not require work in order to be maintained, that it has the force of habit and that it will therefore go on

> sustaining itself. I think part of the challenge with regard to this manner of thinking about the ordinary is a methodological one, so it is argued that methodologically one can best detect agency at moments of resistance or at moments of transgression, because of the presumption that ordinary life just goes on into the kind of flux in which it is not obvious that the act of actual agency could be located. And my argument throughout has been to state that we need to think about agency in much more complex ways. I see everyday life as a kind of achievement, not just as part of habit.

It is through this methodological and analytical vantage point that I have developed a nuanced understanding of dignity as a social construct. Dignity is fluid and shifting. Dignity is cultivated. Dignity is shaped by everyday interactions, exchanges, and our particular capacities to defend ourselves, our families, and our communities from injustice. This dignity that I speak of is not *given* in the form of a right or a status through policy, but it is *made* on the terms of my Syrian interlocutors. The following investigation of dignity as an embodied lived experience will decenter the normative discourse on refugeehood and forced migration, bringing overlooked perspectives, emotions and desires of the dispossessed to the fore.

As I complete this dissertation in 2025, the Assad Regime has just fallen, fourteen years after the start of what was once considered the failed Syrian revolution. These geopolitical shifts and the uncertainty that lingers underscore the ways in which dignity becomes an everyday endeavor of continuous preservation: it is far from fixed nor linear but flows through space and time in unpredictable patterns. It is also always embodied. In summary, this dissertation engages with a dignity as a fragile, fleeting and overlooked anthropological notion and develops a multifaceted lens of dignity to capture the complexity of dignity loss and preservation in Bekaa, Lebanon.

1.1.2 Project origins

In 2017, with a master's in social anthropology under my belt, I set out to work in the humanitarian sector. For the next two years, I would be immersed in Geneva’s aid and

refugee research industry, depleting my energy and replacing my idealism with disillusionment. I was the research assistant of a well renowned human rights activist and physician, allowing me access to high level meetings on Syria as a fly on the wall. The abundance of rights-based Western-led solutions, juxtaposed to the lack of critical perspectives and disregard to Global South voices, began to weigh heavy on me. Western decision makers and researchers spoke with a moral and intellectual superiority that frustrated my boss too. Together, we attempted to carve a new path. But by 2019, I was eager to experience the other end of the humanitarian spectrum: the grassroots sector. With this motivation, I moved to Lebanon, joining Multi-Aid Programs (MAPs), a Syrian-led community-based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in the Bekaa.

I threw myself into the work, and life in Lebanon, trying to make sense of the Bekaa. I also brushed up on my Arabic, which I had studied throughout university. Wineries bustling with tourists next to informal tented settlements, armed checkpoints, and child laborers in the fields – contrasts were everywhere. In response to the mass influx of Syrian asylum seekers since 2011, agency logos were printed on tents, water tanks, and the sides of Toyota Land Cruisers. Grocery stores took UN food stamps. The atmosphere here contrasted sharply to Beirut, the city where foreigners can enjoy a sense of familiarity in the cosmopolitan restaurant, cafe, and nightlife culture. It did not take long before noticing how Western researchers flock to Bekaa only periodically, often in tandem with humanitarian actors and their 4x4s. I observed how they moved through the Bekaa, fearful of veering off the tracks of their guided tour approved by their home institutions. Indeed, witnessing how the prevailing knowledge on Syrian refugeehood was produced through sanitized and removed interactions inspired this research. In particular, I developed this project in response to the systematic exclusion of Syrians from narrating their lived experience in exile and the critical lack of theoretical knowledge on multifaceted refugee subjectivity.

With time and patience and through endless discussions, I developed a close bond with the MAPs community, participating in the creation of new creative ways for restoring dignity in refuge. I accepted dinner invitations from colleagues, spending the night on

empty mattresses when it got too late. Sleeping over in the Bekaa became habitual. It was much easier than traveling the mountain between Beirut and Bekaa every day by public transport. It also meant delicious meals and the comfort of a family. In the years leading up to this doctoral project, I became integrated into a Syrian household and spent 1-2 nights each week at the home of MAPs' crochet trainer. The crochet program, which we developed together in 2019, consumed our lives. The work was rewarding and meaningful. We were also nurturing new relationships outside of the archetypical space of humanitarian intervention. In the space of the home, the aid worker – beneficiary dichotomy dissipated. Late evenings drinking *mate* on the balcony became part of my everyday life. I took part in cooking meals, learning how to roll vines leaves and burn eggplants on an open flame. Family arguments, marital issues, secret love lives, and financial stresses were not hidden from me. Behind closed doors we laughed loudly, gossiped, danced, enjoying each other's company in ways that were not socially acceptable in the public space of MAPs. It was not long before my Syrian accent developed a Homs twang and later, I earned the title as an honorary Syrian. For some, I became a daughter. My research builds from this embodied knowledge and thick relationships, from an emotional connection and commitment to this Syrian community that welcomed me into their homes, families and lives.

It is here in the Bekaa that I developed an understanding of dignity, a concept that up until this point, was an empty term thrown around by politicians and humanitarians. The ubiquitous use of dignity in Geneva offered a facade of Western morality without any connection or relation to the communities described. At MAPs, the organization's mission, 'one family towards dignity' had a different connotation: they were on a path to *reclaim* their dignity. Here, dignity had been undermined collectively, and they were struggling – but determined - to restore it on their own terms. This dissertation is not only concerned with making the continuous preservation of dignity visible. More broadly, this is an attempt at reclaiming and reappropriating the meaning of dignity on the terms of the dispossessed. This initiates a critical exercise in decentering the Western-centric forced migration discourse to engage with a different notion of dignity as experienced by forced migrants themselves. I've identified a paucity of research on

dignity as a social construct or everyday endeavor. Instead, dignity continues to be a ubiquitous term that is oftentimes an empty slogan for change or at worst, appropriated by politicians. It is also most commonly positioned as a commodity that is given *to* refugees by Western powers in an act of moral superiority. In the realm of scholarly work, dignity is often grounded in Kantian moral philosophy, assuming different meanings and interpretations. These tensions will be unpacked in richer detail across Chapter 2, where I pay careful attention to the need for a more critical and decentered approach to the study of dignity.

In summary, this research destabilizes hegemonic applications of the concept, engaging with dignity not as an inherent status nor commodity, but as something cultivated, preserved, and restored by refugees themselves through both mundane and extreme practices that sustain everyday life. The lack of knowledge of how dignity operates at the community, family and individual levels demands attention as it affects humanitarian programming (local and international), policy and how we engage with refugee vulnerabilities. As we will soon see, receiving humanitarian aid *harms* my interlocutors' dignity. Such a paradox begs for the critical reconceptualization of the ubiquitous term. To do this, I build from scholars who are critically reorienting notions of dignity, urgently moving away from universalism towards theories of relationality, process and emotion (such as Debes, 2017; Harrison, 2024; Harkin, 2018; Lloyd, 2023; Malpas, 2007; Pearlman, 2013). Over the following chapters, I piece these strands of critical dignity scholarship together, developing a fluid and novel understanding of dignity as an agentic and precarious everyday endeavor. As such, my research also expands the critical scholarly conversation on refugeehood more broadly, building on a range of critical perspectives that complicate static, rights-based frameworks and binary refugee subject positions often reproduced across the prevailing policy-orientated academic discourse (see Butler, 2020; Cole, 2021; Chatty, 2017; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018; Krause and Schmidt, 2020; Slaughter et al., 2017).

1.2 The Empirical Context

1.2.1 Lebanon's political history and economy

At the time of conducting this research, Lebanon was enduring political and economic turmoil. Such instability in the country is not traceable to a particular rupture but instead is a result of overlapping crises that have weakened the country's social, political, economic, and physical infrastructures through complex geopolitical entanglements. This includes the French colonial occupation at the end of World War I (1923-1946), sectarian civil war (1975-1990), the Syrian occupation (1976-2005), the influx of Palestinian refugees in 1948, compounded by ongoing Israeli invasion and US imposed sanctions (Abouzeid et al., 2021) which undermine the nation's capacity to recover. In 2011, with the escalation of war next door, hundreds of thousands of Syrians sought asylum in this already conflict riddled country lacking in public services and thriving sectarian divides. Financially incapable of responding to the growing needs of Syrians, UN agencies played a crucial role in protecting and supporting asylum seekers, attempting to fill in the gaps of the Lebanese government. This, in turn, created a lucrative sector amidst the country's financial collapse. Since 2011, more than 10 billion dollars for education (UNICEF), health (WHO), livelihood (WFP), and monthly cash assistance (UNHCR) have entered the country (see Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, 2025). By 2015, with the number of Syrians in the country rising to one million, attitudes towards asylum seeks shifted drastically. Lebanon, once positioned as a site of refuge for Syrians, evolved into a site of hostility where tensions between locals and refugees emerged from a critical scarcity of resources. Resentment of refugee-centric aid is not unique to Lebanon, but a well understood social phenomena that UNHCR has long recognized (Rogers, 2022). Programs striving for 'co-existence', 'social cohesion' and 'peacebuilding' are such attempts to reduce these tensions, although these strategies often fall short of addressing deeply entrenched resentments (ibid). In the context of Lebanon, the memory of the Syrian occupation compounded with political negligence continues to weaken such efforts. In the chapters that follow, these deeply entrenched social tensions will be brought to the fore.

Meanwhile, Lebanon's politicians continue to welcome foreign aid into their bank accounts, profiting from the Syrian war, since receiving money is not necessarily conditional on anything. In fact, Lebanon is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention and thus cannot be held accountable for violating refugee rights in the international arena (Janmyr, 2016). Instead, the government works with the UN in "ad-hoc agreements" that suit their political interests (Diab, 2023). In 2015 the Lebanese government demanded UNHCR stop the registration of all Syrians, preventing new asylum seekers from obtaining international protective legal status (ibid). Residency permits replaced UN paperwork, offering legal protection through a cumbersome an expensive bureaucratic system accessed by only 17% of Syrians (ibid). Intended to disincentivize Syrians from entering the country, Syrians found alternative routes, often through the smuggling industry. After 2015, and over the course of this research, anti-Syrian specific policies escalated to new levels, pushing the boundaries of an acceptable life. As of 2025, 815,000 Syrians from an estimated total of 1.5 million are registered with UNHCR "refugee" status (see UNHCR Lebanon, n.d.). This means that hundreds of thousands of Syrians are invisible to the wider international refugee regime. But with the emergence of Lebanon's residency permit laws, the majority of Syrians across the country remain vulnerable to refoulement, arrest and exploitation. Here, the term "refugee" becomes an ambiguous and contentious legal vocabulary that can refer to Syrians with or without the UNHCR status (Cole, 2021). It is also a term denied by the Lebanese state who treat Syrians as temporary and in-transit migrants, while advocated by Syrians who defend their right to humanitarian assistance and protection. In the chapters that follow, I move between the terms refugee and refuge, forced migrant and forced migration, focused more on the lived experience than on static Western legal languages that continue to shape and distract the discourse.

Since Syrians began seeking refuge in Lebanon in 2011, the country has spiraled. In 2019, after a failed mass uprising against sectarianism, corruption and political negligence, the country became the third most indebted country in the world (Shawish, 2019). In 2020, with Lebanese people plunging deeper into poverty and the rise of Covid, anger grew over the attention to the Syrian community and heightened

pressures were placed on UN agencies and the European Union to divert funds to the Lebanese instead. By 2023, according to the World Bank, the Lebanese Lira lost 200% of its value (World Bank, n.d). For my Syrian interlocutors, this translates to lack of employment opportunities, unpaid and exploitative labor, and dwindling humanitarian assistance. Syrians are increasingly treated as an existential threat and blamed for the country's degradation, ignoring political negligence, sectarianism, and colonial legacies.

The country's financial collapse has led to a domino effect of fuel, electricity, water and pharmaceutical shortages, compounded with periodic closures of public primary, secondary, and higher education (Bou Sanayeh et al., 2024). Households have grown accustomed to prolonged electricity outages, developing mechanisms to limit the frustrations that come with the habitual lack of power. While conducting fieldwork, Lebanese and Syrians alike were enduring fragile dignities amidst prolonged uncertainty. The dissertation that follows is an attempt to make sense of how Syrian people in exile negotiate these structural precarities and rebuild their social worlds.

1.2.2 The field site: Bekaa Valley

This research was conducted in the Bekaa, a fertile region with a historically weak state presence. As a result, some areas of the Bekaa developed informal economies, including smuggling and cannabis cultivation. While these do provide income, they also entrench cycles of poverty and lawlessness, limiting legitimate development opportunities. The economy of the Bekaa has traditionally been agricultural, relying heavily on seasonal and low-paying farm labour. With the flow of job seeking Syrians into this region, wealthy and opportunistic Lebanese landowners increasingly took advantage of the situation, reinforcing economic inequality and underdevelopment. The informal tented settlements dispersed throughout the valley are not UN operated, despite the UNHCR logo covering the plastic sheets. Instead, these camps are run by local landowners and managed by a *shawish* [a local community member], who either charge rent or provide accommodation in return for labour. Such forms of indentured work are common and often exploitative. Indeed, there are resources in the Bekaa, but in the hands of a few.

The Bekaa region has also been directly affected by regional and internal conflicts, including the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), the Syrian occupation (1976-2005), and ongoing Israeli invasions and terrorism. Throughout this history, seasonal labor migration was common and interactions between the Syrian-Lebanese Bekaa border was porous. This left openings for spill over during the Syrian civil war, and between 2014-2017 the town of Aarsal was under Islamic State in Syria control until Hezbollah drove them out with the help of the Lebanese army (Cassani, 2021). These compounding conflicts continue to disrupt agricultural production, deter foreign investment, and deepen insecurity. Despite economic and infrastructural pressures from the flow of Syrians, this region has never been prioritized in international humanitarian funding, with areas close to the border marginalized and abandoned as a result of travel bans.

In 2023, UNHCR reported that the Bekaa hosts 318,713 registered Syrians, representing 39% of the country's total refugee population (UNHCR Lebanon, n.d). This number does not include those who remain prevented from registering, a statistic difficult to measure. With the country's economic collapse and the rise of Syrian xenophobia, life in Lebanon is riddled with challenges. More specifically, Syrian-specific labor restrictions become a key tool for disincentivizing Syrians from remaining in the country (Janmyr, 2016). Legally only allowed to work in agriculture, construction and cleaning, Syrians earn meager wages after working long hours in harsh environments, often under abusive treatment. A UN report cited that Syrian households in the Bekaa average only 10 days of work per month at only $10 USD per day, making this the poorest region in the country (UNHCR Lebanon, 2015).

This research project is based in central Bekaa, an area within the Bekaa that has been physically and economically transformed by the Syrian community. The urban landscape over the last 14 years has developed to accommodate hundreds of thousands of people, contributing not only to the housing market and sustaining landlords' livelihoods, but supporting shopkeepers and local industries more broadly.

On holidays this becomes even more evident, with the streets bustling with Syrian families buying clothes, sweets, and plastic trinkets. In particular, the MAPs headquarters in Tannayal was my base. It is where I often began my day, either meeting my research team or conducting interviews and focus groups. In the late afternoon, I would visit my interlocutors by local tuk-tuk drivers who became familiar with my different destinations, including the municipalities of Saadnayal, Al-Marj, Ksara, and Talabya. The comfort and ease for which I was able to conduct this research was built on the thick social relations nurtured since 2019 in my role at MAPs. Having spent extensive time with the organization, visiting their program sites and attending community events, I assumed a pre-established acceptance across the community. These relationships were also crucial for my personal safety and ability to navigate the Bekaa independently. My tuktuk drivers were often family members or neighbors of my interlocutors and the places I visited throughout this research were familiar to me, including informal tented settlements where I conducted interviews.

1.2.3 Syrian dispossession

From the emergence of peaceful protests in March 2011 that shocked the world and region, to an intractable armed uprising comprised of multiple factions, the Syrian war and its effect on the Syrian people is a complicated and violent story of dispossession. The war, and mainly the military involvement of powerful competing nations (US, UK, France, Russia, Iran, Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia) propelled the mass forced displacement of twelve million people, the greatest number of refugees since World War II (Chatty, 2018). The use of airstrikes and chemical weapons killed an estimated 306,887 civilians, turning homes into dust (OHCHR, 2023). This toll doesn’t include the 150,000 people who disappeared into the Assad’s regime’s prison networks, many of which died from torture or execution (El Deeb and Harb, 2025).

Crucial to understand is that for most of my interlocuters in the Bekaa, who fled from opposition territory, their exile began well before fleeing to Lebanon. With loved ones disappeared, many families spent years internally displaced, moving through the war-torn country, living in tents or crowded apartments outside of their known region to seek

safety, waiting for the day to return to their homes. They were often welcomed into these areas with hostility and suspicion. Their dignity threatened. Experiences of exile in Lebanon are part of the same non-linear trajectory of compounding and continuous ruptures and repair that shape multifaceted refugee subjectivity and their standards of an acceptable and dignified life.

Due to its proximity to their homes just over the mountain and the pre-existing ties to the valley's agriculture sector, the Bekaa attracted a large proportion of Syrians from neighboring cities who held onto the hope of returning home soon. Life in the Bekaa was always considered temporary. Many of my interlocutors are from Homs and its countryside, a region heavily bombarded by Lebanon's Hezbollah's military force in alliance with the al-Assad regime. Displaced in Bekaa, they live amongst those who caused their exile, exacerbating senses of insecurity and challenging the UN's call for 'social cohesion'. Throughout the course of this research, with their homes destroyed and the Assad regime in power, a safe return to Syria without arrest or forced military conscription remained unlikely. My interlocutors described "the list" which included the names of all wanted people by the regime. Access to that list from inside Syria required bribery. From Lebanon, it required an official application registered with the Syrian Embassy. Applicants could be rejected or pass the security clearance. But even if "passed", stories of arrest and disappearance upon returning are well known in the Syrian diaspora.

The dissertation that follows documents a moment along the distorted non-linear trajectory of dignity where the boundaries of knowable world were tested. Dignity is not finite; the need to preserve and restore this essential feeling of inner cohesiveness will continue in the process of building a just new Syria. Understanding how dignity is an embodied, agentic and precarious everyday endeavor of continuous preservation can inform these future undertakings.

1.3 Overview of Argument

1.3.1 The ubiquity of dignity

Beyond the Arab Uprisings, uses of dignity are ubiquitous in our everyday lives. In contemporary Western ethos, the notion underpins the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which proclaims the 'recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world'. From Portugal to South Africa, dignity is the cornerstone of several modern constitutions and the basis for human rights (Debes, 2017a). Calls for dignity are heard within the Black Lives Matter and Palestine liberation movements. The notion underpins one of the last public addresses given by the late Edward Said in 2003, titled "On Dignity and Solidarity". The term appears in humanitarian agency slogans and mission statements, and very often in political addresses. They are embedded into bioethics, guiding practitioners on how to treat their patients. And, in our personal lives, we each have our own interpretation of what dignity means to us and how it *feels*. What we are encountering here is a multiplicity of dignity meanings and applications in our everyday lives. And, as I will unpack in later chapters, sometimes these applications reveal problematic sites of appropriation.

When investigating the notion of dignity in academic discourse, however, one will quickly observe a scarcity of research. In the introduction to an anthology of dignity, Remy Debes (2017b), a leading voice in the critical reorientation of the philosophical study of dignity, writes:

> relative to other areas of philosophical inquiry, the study of dignity is very thin. There is, to be sure, a considerable body of literature on Kant's particular view of dignity. And dignity is often marshaled by name to justify various arguments in contemporary moral and political philosophy. But there hasn't been much study of dignity itself. There hasn't been much independent theory about what dignity *is*—let alone a serious, comprehensive history of the concept. Admittedly, this has started to change, and this change is welcome. However, given the weight the concept bears in western value systems today as the implicit or explicit grounds for egalitarianism and theories of human rights, as well as a principle of

> legal theory, judicial reasoning, and even written law—the paucity of research into dignity is odd. (9)

Philosophers, historians and legal scholars, and bioethicists are now collectively spearheading a critical contemporary intellectual debate on the plurality of meanings and historical underpinnings of dignity, debunking normative platitudes surrounding the concept. This includes the work of Jeff Malpas and Norelle Lickiss whose 2007 anthology, *Perspectives on Human Dignity,* has further shaped and grounded my conceptual understanding of dignity. Despite these persuasive scholarly efforts to rectify the pitfalls of dignity, problematic gaps remain, such as the critical lack of empirical data and site-specificity. These epistemic blind spots mean that dignity has yet to be fully investigated as an embodied lived experience shaped and re-shaped through spatial and temporal dimensions. The following dissertation addresses these failures, engaging with dignity as an overlooked social construction. More specifically, Chapter 2 thematically unpacks the overlapping, complimentary and contradictory theories around dignity, making evident the problematics of universalism and idealized moral philosophical frameworks. Critical theories around relationality, process and emotion, emerge as more conceptually useful frames for engaging with an embodied experience.

1.3.2 Thesis overview

I begin this dissertation with an overview of the academic literature (Chapter 2: Defining Dignity). This discussion addresses the ongoing intellectual debate surrounding dignity, underscoring the conceptual confusion that frustrates scholars. I synthesize an array of dignity definitions, exploring how dignity theories are multiple and fluid, embodying different meanings across time and disciplines. This includes understandings of dignity as 1) inherent and universal 2) relational 3) processual and 4) emotive. The gaps in the current literature are clarified, mainly the paucity of site-specific empirical knowledge on dignity as a lived experience and everyday practice. This chapter situates my theoretical contribution in the broader context of critical dignity literature, positioning my research amongst relational, processual and emotive notions that ground my analysis

of dignity, unpacked across four analysis chapters. I later engage with these conceptualizations not as separate theories, but I put them into conversation with each other, illustrating the dynamic facets that help us to better understand the agentic and precarious modalities of everyday dignity.

Chapter 3: Methodology details the methods of research and rationale for applying an immersive community-based and participatory framework to investigate the lived experiences of a theoretical concept often examined in philosophical and legal debate. I describe how this project was made possible in partnership with MAPs, and particularly the collaboration with a team of four Syrian student researchers from their higher education program. After team training, meetings and workshops (September-November 2022), we conducted six focus group discussions (November-December 2022), in addition to in-depth open-ended interviews. Participant observation was conducted throughout the project (2022-2024). Field work activities include time spent at MAPs, in interlocutors' homes, and attending events and celebrations. My several years of working experience in Bekaa prior to conducting research greatly strengthened the project, providing invaluable contextual insights that led to the production of this situated knowledge.

These early chapters set the foundation for the in-depth analysis of dignity through four analytical vantage points: subjectivity, agency, spatiality and temporality. Each discussion evokes how dignity is emotive, relational and processual, arguing the inherent fluidity and fragility of this concept. Unpacking the particularities of how dignity is continuously lost and found reveals the interactions between structural precarities and modalities of agency. Taken together, these chapters create a multifaced dignity lens, offering a new analytical framework for complicating the static refugee subject.

Chapter 4 investigates dignity as subjective, elucidating how it is experienced in different ways across scales of society (collective, familial, and individual), gender and generation. Building from this conversation, Chapter 5 investigates how dignity is related to agency, arguing that dignity is preserved through the sometimes-radical agentic and resisting processes of sacrifice, creativity, generosity, and narrative. Chapter 6 argues that dignity is spatial, identifying where and how my interlocutors are

asserting their agentic capacities detailed in the previous discussion. The analysis concludes in Chapter 7, where I argue that dignity is temporal and theorize a new facet of dignity – *burden*. Dignity as burden evokes the continuous struggle to live with your dignity fully unscathed, providing a language to name the continuous renegotiations with future hopes, desires, and aspirations embodied in the agentic and precarious struggle for dignity.

When taken together, these interconnected arguments and analytical vantage points pluralize sites of dignity, painting a comprehensive illustration of a hidden and overlooked everyday burden. This analysis successfully complicates right-based static engagements with the concept, offering new knowledge that re-centers and de-essentializes the multifaceted lived experiences of the refugee subject. I conclude this dissertation by contributing the dignity lens, considering its applicability as both an analytical and methodological tool for understanding the everyday in contexts of vulnerability more broadly (i.e., refuge, racism, poverty, death and dying). Social impact is then considered, describing a pathway from theory into practice.

1.4 Theoretical Contribution

This doctoral project identifies a critical lack of rigorous conceptualizations of dignity as a socially constructed lived experience. As Khraisha et al. (2024) write:

> Much needed in the social sciences, are bottom-up examinations of how migrants and refugees strive for a dignified life under conditions of precarity (...) When it comes to understanding the pursuit of dignity, the evidence base for refugees, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, is very limited. (2)

My aim is to fill this gap in academic literature and to offer new knowledge that identifies *where* and *how* refugees are continuously renegotiating their fragile sense of dignity with empirical specificity. I effectively pluralize sites of everyday dignity, investigating how the feeling operates through society, space and time. Dignity is an

amalgamation of relationality, process and emotion, a different understanding from Western moral philosophy which grounds dignity in autonomy. Through this multifaceted lens of dignity, my work generates nuanced knowledge on collectivity in exile, contributing to the destabilizing of normative static representations of the individual refugee subject. This becomes explicit through the detailing of dignity loss and preservation: an empirical illustration of how Syrians navigate their simultaneous precarity and agency in relation to each other. The importance of this analytical framework is grounded in the critical perspectives of Judith Butler (2004, 2020), and in particular, their ethico-political theory that reconceptualizes and de-essentializes notions of precarity, victimhood, and vulnerability that have become inherent characteristics attached to refugees. Butler persuasively complicates these static categories, arguing that precarity is structural, not inherent. Their theory elucidates the multifaceted construction of the refugee subject, suggesting that vulnerability and agency are not in contradiction, but collectively shape the lived experience. Polychroniou (2021) builds on Butler, advocating for new radical paradigms for theorizing refugeehood:

> As long as the dominant socio-cultural trope of refugee illustration remains enclosed in the distorting hetero-representative threat–victim binary, we imperatively need to continue seeking alternative interdisciplinary frameworks for the depiction of the refugee subject. (266)

Expanding from these works, I leverage the lens of dignity to untangle the Syrian lived experience from layers of state and non-state violence, making visible the multiplicity of structural precarities and simultaneous modalities of agentic and resisting capacities that shape everyday life in exile. Through this intellectual exercise, I contribute the agentic, resisting, and precarious notion of *burden,* naming this societal, spatial and temporal struggle for dignity.

Chapter 2: Defining Dignity

2.1. Introduction

2.1.1 Defining dignity

“You can’t define dignity,” Labash tells me. “It is something different for everyone.” We are sitting cross-legged on the wooden floor of his small painting studio in the Mar Mikel neighborhood of east Beirut. Labash is Syrian and at the time of conducting this research, he could not return to his home country due to the risk of arrest or forced military conscription. He is a “refugee” according to his legal papers with UNHCR, but he will never use the term. “Painter” is his preferred descriptor. It is more dignifying. Since the start of this doctoral project, our friendship has provided me with invaluable perspectives and validation on my data collected in the Bekaa, and overall analysis. In Lebanon, the Syrian struggle for dignity is unanimous, multiple, and continuous, shifting through time and space.

The particularities of life in displacement means that everyday operations of dignity are not only multifaceted, but they are in continuous renegotiation. When engaging with the academic literature surrounding dignity, it becomes clear how these empirical observations are not only provocative, but they also do not fit into an established body of ethnographic or community-based scholarly work. That is, dignity has yet to be unpacked with an anthropological toolkit, even though understanding its meaning demands grappling with subjectivity, care, relationality, performance, agency, temporality, liminality and so on.

This chapter begins by grounding my linguistic choices and then outlines the ongoing conceptual confusion and debate surrounding the multifaceted concept of dignity. I investigate normative dignity theories of intrinsic, universal and individual worth which continue to dominate the academic discourse. This sets the foundation for the

dissertation's overarching objective: to destabilize hegemonic notions of dignity underpinned by moral rationality and unattainable idealism so that we can make space for a new, more useful concept that can be applied to our lives.

2.1.2 Dignity versus كرامة (*karāma)*

This research seeks to reconceptualize, reclaim and re-center the notion of dignity on the terms of Syrians themselves. When explored in Arabic, the language of my interlocutors, 'dignity' is not so simply translated, but embodies a set of terms with interconnected roots and meanings, signifying its deeper cultural significance. This includes the broader notion of *karāma* [the noun, dignity] which can be performed through *karam* [the duty to be generous and hospitable] and described as *kareem* [generosity or nobility]. For instance, 'dignity' in MAPs' slogan, 'one family towards dignity' is written as *kareem.* Meanwhile, the organization's subsidized grocery store is called 'Karam Shopping Center', implying the same meaning 'dignity' but using its complimentary term. What we encounter here is a set of socially constructed characteristics and actions that can deepen our understanding of 'dignity' in a more collective, complex and contextual way. In the chapters that follow, notions of *karam* and *kareem* emerge as crucial and self-evident pathways for dignity preservation that have substantial potential for improving how practitioners and researchers engage with communities in the Arab region and beyond.

Although *karāma* names the geographic, temporally and socially specific concept of dignity that I identify among Syrians – and which is distinct from Western moral philosophy - I do however employ the English word 'dignity' as opposed to its conventional Arabic translation, as an attempt to reorient ongoing engagements with this concept in Anglophone discourse. Applying the Arabic phrase indicates that this term is only understood or relevant in the Syrian or Arabic context, running the risk of minimizing the applicability of this theoretical underpinning to other contexts and limiting international engagement. As described by Mattson and Clark (2011:305), "Logically, people need some shared understanding of human dignity if the concept is

to serve instrumentally and practically as common ground." Thus, the aim is to apply local knowledge and practices to a broader theoretical exercise, thereby decentering the prevailing dignity and migrant discourse to accommodate the values of the communities it proclaims to serve.

2.1.3 Chapter objectives

This chapter demonstrates how the concept of dignity is continuously re-imagined and debated across the literature. I am interested in the ways in which legal and moral thought, race theorists, philosophers and bioethicists define and apply the concept of dignity over time. I have synthesized an array of contradictory and complimentary theories of dignity that exist across these fields of study, organizing the literature into three themes. We explore 1) dignity as intrinsic and universal (moral and legal philosophy) 2) dignity as relational (history, philosophy and bioethics) 3) dignity as processual (race theory and political science). I further examine sites of misuse and contradiction, underscoring the potential and pertinence of establishing a more analytically useful framework for addressing the particularities of dignity in refuge. Currently, no theoretical framework effectively tells the emotive story of the everyday struggle for dignity in displacement. I build my academic contribution in this overlooked space.

2.1.4 Ongoing conceptual confusion

Navigating the range of perspectives and debates within the academic discourse on dignity demands attention to ambiguity and contradiction. Scholars such as Harrison (2024) articulate this conceptual confusion:

> In short: dignity is always easier to describe as ideal than as reality, and those who pursue it will usually make fools of themselves. Consider this a health warning as we plough into the thorny problem of dignity. (1)

A growing number of critical scholars fall into a similar line of thinking, expressing discontent and frustration with the field of study. In an article titled ‘Dignity’s Gauntlet’, Debes (2009:49) argues: “the philosophy of dignity remains a young, piecemeal endeavor with only a small, fully dedicated literature.” Their work problematizes the normative moralized foundation for which the prevailing theories of dignity are built, calling for a substantive and pluralized enquiry to more carefully delineate its multiple meanings through time. Miller (2017) also identifies weakness in the scholarship and outlines key shortcomings, suggesting:

> While dignity remains a vitally important concept, its contents are ambiguous, underdetermined, and inadequately examined, resulting in its status as a concept that is, at turns, useless, meaningless, ineffectual, biased, and ungrounded. (111)

Mattson and Clark (2011) further exemplify the pitfalls of the dignity discourse and argue:

> The concept of human dignity is in such disarray that it does not provide even a minimally stable frame for global discourse and action. (305)

This conceptual confusion troubling scholars is not only an intellectual matter, but the elusiveness of the term exposes it to misuse and appropriation that undermines the very foundation of human rights (O’Mahony, 2012). Prime examples include the Israeli Defense Force use of ‘human dignity’ as a key value, while Western politicians frame their military support of Israel as eradicating terrorism in the name of ‘dignity’. In an October 18, 2023, press conference, President Biden stated: “what sets us apart from the terrorists is that we believe in the fundamental dignity of every human life”. The appropriation of ‘dignity’ here serves as a disguise of American terrorism, creating a facade of Western moral superiority that distinguishes “them” from “us” through the human virtue of dignity. Because of the abstract nature of the term, it becomes a key word that resonates with Western audiences 'at home', while simultaneously not possessing any particular meaning or action. The ease at which dignity is manipulated to serve contradicting political interests is not simply a result of academic failures: this

Western moralized notion was constructed in the aftermath of World War II to galvanize nations with distinct interests and ideologies to take part in the formation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (O'Mahony, 2012). More acutely - the intentionally elusive and malleable notion of 'human dignity' served as the glue that bound together the foundation of our modern humanitarian industrial complex. In essence, the term's ambiguity nurtured a sense of inclusivity.

A range of other scholars have picked up on these sights of appropriation. For instance, Carpi and Saleh (2015) identify the harms of such abstraction, critiquing the misalignment between the aspirational rhetoric of dignity embedded in humanitarian programming and the reality of funding cuts which undermine this moral ideal and the preservation of dignity. These issues are also articulated by Macklin (2003) and Pinker (2008) who go as far as suggesting that dignity is a 'useless concept' without any meaning or purpose, considering it more a slogan for action than an intellectual concept. It is clear to me that the concept of dignity needs reclaiming on the terms of those whose dignity is made fragile.

The critical scholars described throughout this chapter are contributing to a substantive theory of dignity, engaging with the ambiguity problem noted above critically, advocating for pluralism and contextual specificity. I position my theoretical contribution among these works, leveraging the tools of community-based research to enrich our understandings of dignity as an embodied agentic and precarious experience shaping the everyday. This novel engagement with dignity presents a crucial move beyond universalism and idealism, arriving at a more dynamic and contextual theoretical conversation where abstract debates of *what* dignity is are replaced with illustrations of *how* and *where* dignity operates to sustain people's everyday life. In doing so, this dissertation effectively destabilizes all uses of idealized one-size-fits-all definitions, pluralizing the slim body of critical and politicized dignity scholarship to arrive at a useful notion with potential for change and action.

2.2 Dignity as Intrinsic and Universal

In this section we explore meanings of dignity as intrinsic, universal, and distinctly attached to human subjects. This is a normative and moralized conceptualization of human dignity. It is present in Judeo-Christian theology, which believes that humans share intrinsic worth and value from being made in the presence of God (Miller, 2017). In the Christian bible, Genesis 1:27 reads, “And God created humankind in the divine image, creating it in the image of God—creating them male and female.” Islamic thought embodies a similar underpinning. The Koran mentions *karama al-insaan* (human dignity) 47 times as a reminder to uphold non-distinction between people, respect and self-respect, justice and compassion for all because of our shared worth (Kadivar, 2022). Being made in the presence of God, interpreted as the embodiment of intrinsic human dignity, justifies the moral obligation to treat others well, and to acknowledge the shared worth of humanity.

Beyond conceptions of intrinsic equal worth in theological thought, eighteenth-century enlightenment philosophies continue to shape and dominate the academic discourse on dignity. This body of work emphasizes the innate value and worth of humans because of our unique capacities to act with reason and moral rationality (Lewis, 2007). It is precisely these characteristics which differentiate humans from other living creatures, and which provide humans with the equal capacity to realize our inherent dignity. Kantian theory created the foundation for this prevailing moralized conceptualization of dignity, encouraging scholars to interpret human dignity as an objective, fixed and universal truth (Nordenfelt, 2004; Debes, 2009; Sensen, 2009). In this philosophy, dignity is defined as rational agency or an inherent autonomy to realize one’s individual intrinsic dignity, and thus a capacity to bestow onto ourselves moral law. Simply, it is our *individual* rational agentive capacities to discern right from wrong that makes us uniquely dignified creatures. To quote Kant (1996: 434):

> (...) a human being regarded as a *person*, that is, as the subject of a morally practical reason, is exalted above any price…he possesses a *dignity* (absolute

> inner worth) by which he exacts *respect* for himself from all other rational beings in the world. He can measure himself with every other being of this kind and value himself on a footing of equality with them.

Across a range of literature, scholars interpret and apply this humanist and fixed notion in a multiplicity of ways. For instance, moral philosophy has been applied to human rights scholarship, grounding the rational for rights in our innate and equal inner worth and value (Mattson & Clark, 2011; O'Mahony 2012). This line of rights-based theorizing dominates the academic discourse on refugee dignity (see Kavuro, 2019; Carozza, 2013; McClain et al, 2022; Mieth & William, 2023; Kupferberg, 2021). From this analytical vantage point, dignity has become reproduced as an idealized principle upheld through human rights and the recognition of our shared dignity, whereas the loss of dignity is indicative of unmet basic needs and the failure to uphold refugee rights outlined in the Geneva Conventions and Declaration of Human Rights.

Such Kantian applications demand attention and problematizing. Killmister (2020) unpacks and critiques this normative moralized view, suggesting that rights-based interpretations of Kantian philosophy reveal 'status dignity'. Here, dignity has been reproduced as a commodity – as a right given *to* refugees, as exemplified in a call by Parekh (2022) to 'give refugees dignity'. Because this notion of dignity is dependent on rights and social norms, it is therefore inherently susceptible to change through sociopolitical ruptures. Killmister's identification of 'status dignity' persuasively reveals contradiction in the universalist discourse, as status is thus not inherent to the individual, but inextricability interconnected with political interests and perspectives of moral obligations at a particular moment in time.

In addition to Killmister (2020), a growing number of critical scholars are complicating universalist definitions (Harrison, 2024; Debes, 2009; Miller, 2017; Nussbaum, 2009). These works problematize the focus on human essentialism, individualism and rationality, drawing attention to Kantian ethics as a building block for capitalist and neo-liberal ideologies that best serve the able-bodied European philosophers that developed this particular definition and the intellectuals that reinforce and reproduce it.

While Debes (2009) does voice concerns around historical, cultural, racial, and gender biases embedded in Kantian approaches, they are also weary of how scholarly efforts to re-define dignity are fixated on these shortcomings, describing this line of thinking as holding a 'conceptual hegemony over dignity.' Debes (2009) suggests that a substantive theory of dignity should be less concerned with Kantian critique, and more focused on reconciling an "account of what dignity consists in, with a conception of 'agent' that defies the kind of static attribution of value from one self-constituted, objectively minded person to another, which western enlightenment thinking presupposes" (68).

Debes' argument underscores a crucial nuance that ties all theories of dignity together: a sense of agency and autonomy. When we consider Kantian critiques through this lens, it becomes clear that scholars are not necessarily contradicting the notion that humans share value or an inherent capacity to realize their dignity, but instead the core of the issue is embedded in universalism and the fixed underpinning of *rational* and *moral* agency. This doctoral research, structured to contextualize the everyday social operations of dignity, assumes a similar approach, moving beyond static and self-constituted definitions to explore the interpersonal and subjective elements of dignity, highlighting the multi-faceted nature of and limits to the pursuit of dignity. In the sections below, I describe more fluid and dynamic conceptualizations of dignity, examining theories that define dignity as relational, processual and emotive.

2.3 Dignity as Relational

In this section we examine dignity as relational, thinking through the concept of *dignitas* during ancient Roman times. At this juncture, dignity was not intrinsic but predicated on personal relationships and a hierarchy of merit or honor (Ober, 2014). A *dignitary* was a person with a high ranking and merit who behaved in a particular manner, and whose dignity was earned. Thus, it was not always ensured, but instead fragile and in need of constant defense. According to Ober (ibid), this precarity of one's dignity was the reason for incessant feuding and dueling. For some scholars, this historical usage of dignity is what differentiates dignity from *human* dignity, where the latter signifies the

egalitarian, non-hierarchical and intrinsic conception described in the previous sub-section. This brings attention to a crucial point of analytical confusion and contradiction. When navigating the intellectual debate, one must critically assess how scholars are approaching these nuances, and particularly, the move from 'dignity' to the contemporary moralized notion of '*human* dignity'.

Below, as we examine more critical definitions, we will see how notions of relationality and non-egalitarianism that shape dignity's usage in ancient Roman society are fundamental to the development of an analytically useful dignity theory in our current world plagued by inequality. So, while a moralized notion dominates the contemporary discourse, I suggest that engagement with dignity as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection is a more effective point of departure. The argument that dignity is relational underpins this transition: dignity is interconnected with our complicated social worlds, influenced by the relationships that shape our lives and therefore inherently vulnerable. For Malpas (2007), dignity is always in 'relation to' something. That is, a sense of worth we have in relation to ourselves, to others, and to the wider world. Malpas (2007) writes:

> That dignity is expressed here in terms of a 'relation to' should not be taken to suggest that the dignity at issue does not belong to anything 'in itself' but rather that dignity always and only appears as something standing within a wider structure of relations since only then does something even appear. (22)

In this relational definition, an individual's dignity is fluid, operating across multiple dimensions and comprised of many interacting elements. This means that dignity can simultaneously be lost in relation to others, while remaining intact in relation to oneself. In the scenario of imprisonment, slavery or any form of humiliation where dignity is threatened by others, a person can still resist indignity, as their own sense of dignity 'is not solely dependent' on others (ibid:23). Malpas's argument complicates and expands how we think about our shared capacities to maintain our dignity and realize our worth in relation to interacting scales of society. In this conceptualization of dignity, autonomy

remains fundamental to dignity preservation, though not characterized as ‘rational’ autonomy to be moral actors described in the Kantian discourse.

A range of other philosophers and bioethicists are also working through the complexity of the subjective and intersubjective components that shape our senses of dignity and the experience of being human. For example, Killmister’s (2020) theory of dignity is built around notions of respect and status, emphasizing the importance of recognition and treatment within our social worlds, and in relation to ourselves. Lickess (2007) presents a similar argument and writes, “Human dignity is, like a person, intrinsically relational, and may be intimately concerned with the cohesiveness of relationships, which constitute the person,” (37). Their theory of relationality draws on the ‘inner cohesiveness’ of an individual that is crucial to maintaining our sense of dignity. Lickess (2007) provides an example of an ill patient to evoke how suffering can “trigger” the loss of dignity through the breakdown of this essential cohesiveness. Here, suffering is not conceptualized as a physical pain, but as a “sense of impending personal disintegration”. As Lickiss suggests, patient suffering can be limited or prevented by others, positioning human relationships as the source for which a patient can maintain their “structural integrity”, and thus their dignity.

The clinical research of Chochinov (2004) further underpins the meaning of relational dignity, detailing the fragility of one’s own sense of dignity when experiencing terminal illness. This loss of self dignity often triggers desires of death and expediates a patients’ decline. To relieve the harmful mind and bodily effect of indignity, Chochinov developed 'Dignity Therapy’, an evidence-based therapeutic tool to reduce suffering through supporting end of life patients to reclaim their sense of lost agency and autonomy. This clinical approach improves patients’ hope and wellbeing by simply ascribing meaning and purpose to their lives, shifting patients’ harmful perceptions of how they perceive themselves in relation to others. The clinical improvements from this intervention elucidate the arguments described above, revealing the ways in which

dignity is intertwined with our own conditioning, our interactions with our social worlds and our desires for social recognition.

The literature described here also creates the foundation for unpacking the ways in which dignity can be simultaneously lost and found through space and time. Understanding dignity as something fragile and inherently vulnerable to our social worlds underpins this dissertation's analysis and the move beyond moralized and rights-based philosophy. As Debes (2009) suggests, engagement with relational theories is also useful for complicating the common scholarly critique around the ambiguity of dignity. They draw attention to the interpersonal and subjective components of dignity, advocating for pluralism, and not relativism, in the dignity conversation:

> Instead of seeing ambiguity as implying a relative nature, and more than noting that dignity may be defined by interpersonal responses, they suggest that dignity is in part constituted by interpersonal relationship or communication (especially as realized in emotional responses), and thus dignity is prone to diverse expression even if its nature is universal. (ibid:48)

The work of Harrison (2024) arrives at a similar conclusion, thinking beyond static moral and legal frameworks. Here, dignity is treated "as a political relation between different agents (human and institutional alike), one that is subject to constant renegotiation," (ibid:3). They offer a theory in the realm of the political, defining dignity as a "sense of what we are due from others and from ourselves," (ibid). Argued as a relational and renegotiated political principle, rather than a matter-of-fact or fixed universal status,
Harrison (2024) counters the imposition of "predefined dignity" with a "predetermined end." Instead, their political definition is grounded in "real-world uses of dignity" (3), placing much needed emphasis on the multiplicity of contextual meanings. Harrison, like Debes, foregrounds pluralism, drawing attention to the particularity of dignity meanings.

In summary, dignity as '*getting what one feels is one's due*' emerges as a bottom-up approach distinct from the normative universalist predefined assumption of what a 'rational' human *should* feel or *should* be granted. This non-normative definition of political dignity is grounded in the notion of relationality. What someone *feels* they are due is influenced by their socially constructed worlds, including their relation to the state. In Harrison's (2024) reconceptualization, policies and social rights can bolster a citizen's sense of worth and value on the one hand, while stripping their dignity away as a form of punishment on the other. We see here how political reflexivity and attention to complex everyday social dynamics are essential to discerning what dignity means in particular contexts. Harkin (2018) whose work focuses on the Syrian revolution, offers a similar politicized, relational and bottom-up interpretation, arguing that, "Dignity is a signifier of (political) practices in a particular time and place" (176).

This dissertation builds on this critical foundation to illustrate how the lived experience of dignity in forced migration is inherently relational and contextual. Rethinking relational dignity with Harrison's and Harkin's political specificity marks a critical shift in the study of dignity. In the chapters that follow, we will see how my research applies this theoretical approach, offering much needed empirical data to the conversation. There remains a paucity of anthropological scholarly work contextualizing the lived experience of relational dignity. Much of this documentation sits within the field of bioethics, and in particular, within the space of the hospital. A key aim of this dissertation is thus to pluralize the geographies of dignity. Although this body of work is thin, the scholars I describe in this section help ground and guide this pathway towards plurality, strengthening my ability to distinguish my theoretical framing from normative, universalist and predetermined conceptualizations.

Building from the conversation of relationality and the influence of our social worlds in maintaining or threatening senses of dignity at multiple dimensions, the works below offer theories on how dignity is reclaimed when it is lost. This conversation also engages with notions of autonomy, but from a different vantage point: it explicitly

centers agentic capacities of the vulnerable and marginalized whose dignity is systematically threatened or denied.

2.4 Dignity as Processual

In this section I explore critical scholarly work that engages with dignity as processual, derived from agentic capacities to reclaim a deprived feeling essential to humanity. Critical race theory offers a wealth of knowledge on this topic, strengthening our understanding of dignity from the perspective of collective struggle.

> For a colonized people, the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land, which must provide bread and, naturally, dignity. But this dignity has nothing to do with 'human' dignity. The colonized subject has never heard of such an ideal. All he has ever seen on his land is that he can be arrested, beaten, and starved with impunity; and no sermonizer on morals, no priest has ever stepped in to bear the blows in his place or share his bread (Fanon, 1961:34)

The fight for racial dignity has been a cornerstone of Black politics, philosophy, life and social movements. In addition to Fanon, figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcom X, Angela Davis, and Barack Obama have all linked Black struggle with the deprivation of dignity. These uses are distinct from *human* dignity, the moralized concept created on the terms of the colonizer, not the colonized. Across racial social movements dignity is a term instrumentalized by activists as an inspirational value that can galvanize people to realize, reclaim and assert their dignity amidst oppressive systems of white power that can inflict harmful self-perceptions of self-worth. Words of empowerment aid this process of reclaiming dignity through activating the marginalized to believe in their collective right to freedom. This brings Harrison's (2024) theory of

political dignity into the conversation but goes even further to underscore how dignity loss derived from socially constructed inequalities fuels a particular bodily resistance, bringing agentic capacities required to reclaim dignity to the forefront. This interplay between political and processual conceptualizations of dignity is illuminated in Vincent Lloyd's *Black Dignity* (2022). He writes:

> One sense of dignity is attacked by racism, but this makes another sense of dignity come to light: dignity achieved in struggle, not at the end point but in the very process (2).

Floyd describes the experience of ex-slave Fredrick Douglas to illustrate struggle in the bodily process of reclaiming dignity more explicitly. Through defending himself with force against abuse from a landowner, Douglas petrified the abuser and in turn, was never whipped again. Although he was not set free, Douglas experienced a rekindled sense of liberty, taste of freedom, and improved self-image. His bodily self-assertion was a crucial reminder of his agentic capacities to resist domination, even if only momentary. Through the lens of Black dignity, spaces of collective oppression, struggle, love, joy, music, and tactical silence all become sites of dignity reclaimed. In the description of Douglas, it was the body that became the site of struggle and resistance.

If we engage with other critical works on dignity from the vantage point of struggle and injustice, we begin to see a multiplicity of other sites where dignity is reclaimed through process, assertion and resistance. For example, Gatwiri & Moran (2022) document how Black youth in Australia reclaim their dignity in the space of social media and online community, framing the act of posting and commenting on Instagram with hashtags as processes that support youth in deconstructing anti-blackness and realizing their selfworth. Notions of processual dignity are further evident across scholarly work centering on the Arab world. In an interview at the beginning of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, Ilan Pappé stated:

> What is happening now is not only the assertion of self-dignity in the Arab world; it is a defining moment for the West and its rather colonialist attitudes towards the Arab world.

The use of ‘assertion’ here indicates a processual understanding of dignity, positioning the act of protest as the process through which dignity is restored. Similar conceptualizations are voiced within Palestinian discourse, which often describes resistance to the occupying power as restoring their dignity. For example, the work of Albadawi (2023) investigates the space of the prison as a context in which dignity can be defended through hunger strikes. Resonating with Floyd’s Black dignity described above, dignity here is also restored through the process of bodily resistance. Albadawi (ibid) writes:

> This resistance method is known to prisoners and Palestinians in general as the battle of the “empty stomach” and is undertaken in a quest to secure human dignity. (285)

Albadawi’s work, which locates the imprisoned body as a site of dignity reclaimed, presents a non-normative and processual definition that contributes to pluralizing geographies of dignity. However, they situate their research within the prevailing intrinsic and predefined notion of universal *human* dignity. The work of Harrison (2024) offers analytical tools for identifying this misalignment between critical findings grounded in normative analytical frameworks. Harrison observes this pattern in the work El Bernoussi (2021) who presents a critical description of how dignity was instrumentalized by protestors in Egypt’s revolution, while still grounded in an intrinsic and pre-defined theoretical underpinning of dignity. Despite these inconsistencies, Albadawi and El Bernoussi do help build out a stronger critical and politicized discourse that locates sites of agency as processes of reclaiming dignity. Addressing the contradictions in these works is essential for moving the dignity discourse out of moral and legal philosophy, limiting the need for critical scholars to continuously distinguish their conceptual frameworks from universalism.

If we examine the work of Harkin (2018) through a similar lens, we see how their political conceptualization of dignity both fits the criteria presented by Harrison and falls into the category of a processual definition. Harkin documents the politicized uses of dignity from the beginning of the Syrian non-violent protests, providing examples of statewide ‘dignity’ strikes and the naming of ‘dignity square’ in Dar’a on March 18, 2011 – the first day when the regime opened fire on protestors. These provocations of dignity were unifying, instrumentalized by activists to inspire people to defend their worth and to resist state sanctioned humiliation and repression. Here, the process of reclaiming dignity was achieved in protest and the refusal to be dehumanized. This work is carefully positioned in opposition to universalist and intrinsic conceptualizations of dignity, articulating how the meaning of dignity in the Syrian context is fluid, evolving, multiple, used in an array of non-violent and armed revolutionary discourse. Harkin (ibid) clarifies this:

> I suggest that Syrian revolutionary invocations of dignity should be considered outside the mere legal framing of human rights, even though many of the civil society activists were to become deeply involved in gathering information on human rights abuses. (182)

The scholars mentioned above have identified sites of dignity reclaimed in bodily resistance, joy, love, hunger strikes, unarmed protest and social media. When considered together, these contributions are pluralizing the dignity discourse, expanding our critical analytical toolkit. This dissertation builds upon these works, contributing to the complication of inherent and moralized *human* dignity through a pluralized lens. I do this by locating sites of dignity lost and found through subjectivities (Chapter 4), agentic processes (Chapter 5), space (Chapter 6), and time (Chapter 7).

2.5 Dignity as Emotive

The relational and processual theories summarized above have guided me towards a deeper understanding of dignity. Yet, there remains another crucial facet that intersects with these conceptions, and which demands attention: dignity as an emotional experience. Few scholars engage with dignity from this particular vantage point, revealing a crucial gap in our understanding. I build my argument from Mattson & Clark (2011) who state:

> Ultimately, all of this is about an emotional and cognitive experience, ineluctably an experience lived and felt by individual people. Viewed this way, dignity is not a principle, but rather a subjective integration of an individual's experience of the many facets of human life, and it is a judgment made by each person for him or herself, informed by culture, social interactions, and physical experiences. (309)

We see how this description is closely intertwined with relational definitions and the focus on embodied practices. What distinguishes this work from the scholars described in the section above lies in the underpinning of emotion. The work of Pearlman (2013) on emotions in the Arab Uprisings offers further insight into the interplay between dignity and emotion. They position certain emotional processes as the cause of revolution, while positioning other emotions as the cause of resignation. Here, anger, joy, and pride are considered 'emboldening' emotions that compel ordinary people to risk their lives in protest for the sake of reclaiming their dignity. Whereas sadness, fear and shame are
'dispiriting' emotions that enable people to endure indignities for the sake of security. In this theory, sites of injustice fuel different emotional responses which influence particular behaviors for reclaiming dignity. This conceptualization compliments and strengthens how we understand processual dignity, underscoring what compels people to assert their agentic and resisting capacities. If we apply this emotive underpinning to Lloyd's (2022) Black Dignity or Albadawi's (2023) work on hunger strikes described above, we can grapple more carefully with the particularities that drive people towards the risks and sacrifices embodied in the fight for dignity. Pearlman's work introduces the pertinence of emotion to the study of dignity and will be woven into the later chapters

as we explore process my carefully, and in particular, the process of sacrifice in Chapter 5.

2.6 Contribution

This doctoral research builds from the critical scholarship outlined in this chapter. I conceptualize dignity in forced displacement as a site specific, emotive and dynamic lived experience, distancing my work from universalist and static theorizations that fail to move beyond the self. In the chapters that follow, I develop new knowledge around everyday dignity, weaving together the conceptual strands of relationality, process and emotion to evoke the Syrian story of the everyday struggle for dignity. As we will see in Chapter 7, I theorize burden as an additional site-specific facet of dignity that underpins the agentic and precarious lived experience. Mattson and Clark (2011) bolster this multifaceted understanding of dignity:

> Dignity is something to be realized through the individual human experience of autonomous choice in the domain of the political; of happiness, well-being, self-esteem, and psychological integrity in the domain of the psychological; of belonging to a group or culture, adhering to a set of norms, with access to approval, respect, and recognition in the domain of the social; and of access to security, food, shelter, and physical integrity in the domain of the material. (309)

While theories of relational, processual, and emotional dignity offer crucial knowledge on how dignity operates within our dynamic social worlds, I identify a paucity of academic knowledge contextualizing dignity experiences with ethnographic specificity. This points to crucial methodological limitations within the study of dignity that limit our understanding of the complexity of everyday dignity, and in particular, the mechanisms for which dignity can be simultaneously lost and maintained across multiple dimensions.

Pearlman (2021) argues that the Syrian “refugee crises” is a “crisis of dignity.” Pearlman approaches dignity through three perspectives: dignity as a cause of displacement, dignity as a need in settlement, and dignity as a need in interactions in host societies. This description of dignity alludes to relational and processual definitions, while suggesting dignity as a ‘need’ brings in universalist, intrinsic and status conceptualizations. Through much needed ethnographic grounding, I move from a “crisis of dignity” to the precarious and agentic everyday fight for dignity.

In the analysis chapters that follow, I position dignity as an ethnographic object of inquiry, grounding my analysis in the seminal anthropological work of Veena Das (2006). This approach evokes the hidden and ordinary lived experience of fragile dignity in exile, strengthening my ability to locate and pluralize sites of everyday dignity that sustain life in mundane ways. Moving the conceptual debate on dignity out of moral and legal philosophy and into the realm of anthropology means that we can now investigate dignity as core to subject making. Such an analytical and methodological shift to the study of dignity opens the conversation to intersubjectivity, gender and generational divisions, complicating and enriching our knowledge of what dignity means and feels like across multiple dimensions, pluralizing sites of dignity in novel ways.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter draws attention to the varieties of dignity conceptions across different fields of study. I categorize scholarly works into four main themes: universalism, relationality, process and emotion. Critical theorizations that detach themselves from intrinsic worth or status help ground and guide this dissertation. In particular, I aim to pluralize the geographies of dignity through a multifaceted lens that locates sites of dignity lost and found through subjectivity, agency, spatiality, and temporality. At these

different vantage points, I engage with relationality, process and emotion, evoking the particularities of dignity in refuge and the complexity of the fluid refugee subject.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 De-essentializing and *Re*-centering the Syrian Lived Experience

In 2019, I attended a conference at the American University of Beirut where researchers and humanitarians shared the stage to debate the Syrian “refugee crisis”. A Syrian seated in the audience asked the panel “who is responsible for Syrian refugees?” The selected speakers unanimously agreed it is the responsibility of the international community. As the non-Syrian panelists moved on to the next question, reproducing static and binary legal vocabularies that fit their rights-based frameworks and top-down paternalistic solutions, the exclusion of Syrians from this high-level conversation was thrown into high relief.

Hathaway (2019) refers to these exchanges of language on rights and responsibilities as ‘never-ending talkfests.’ Such talkfests continue to shape and define refugeehood, reducing the complexity of lived experiences into universal indicators that align to Western policy agendas, centering the role of Global North humanitarianism and politics in the solution. Betts and Collier’s (2017) exemplify this hegemonic policy orientation which offers a market-based solution well received by Western politicians, mainly in that it proposes a fix to South-North asylum seeking through economic integration. These perspectives are situated within a wider recent research and policy agenda that has shifted the contemporary refugee narrative from one of vulnerability to one of entrepreneurialism and self-reliance (Easton-Calabria and Omata, 2018; Krause and Schmidt, 2018). As Syrians continue to be excluded from their own conversation, Western imposed narratives of refugee capability personify the deeply engrained paternalism and tokenism plaguing the study of refugees and forced migration (Carpi, 2021).

Critical scholarship has emerged in response to these neo-liberal humanitarian innovations that reinforce static categorical subject positions, and which disproportionately investigate South-North mobility (Cole, 2021). This includes the work of Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2018) who identifies the overlooked socio-political complexities and refugee-host relationality in the Global South, problematizing how hegemonic frameworks render long-established refugee-led responses to displacement ‘invisible’. Polzer (2008) also critiques the invisibility of refugees in the Global South, naming the lack of knowledge on integrated migrants as “fundamental epistemological blinkers,” (494). This methodological and analytical invisibility is further negotiated by Bakewell (2009), who locates trends to define and distinguish between ‘South’ and 'North’ as “creating a false and essentialist distinction,” (5). In dismantling these “political constructions”, Bakewell (ibid) moves beyond the limitations of categorical thinking. Taken together, these perspectives advocate for more nuanced knowledge around refugee interaction and exchange in geographies within and outside of the Western humanitarian purview. As Cole (2021) argues, the move towards a pluralized discourse necessitates the rectifying of fixed humanitarian vocabularies. Such an intellectual exercise can be located across the works of Butler (2004, 2020) as they critically rethink fixed terms like ‘vulnerability’ and ‘agency’ as interconnected experiences, thereby challenging the normative binary frameworks that contain and essentialize refugee subjects. Across these critical works, which I will continue to revisit across this dissertation, there is a collective push towards the re-centering of multi-faceted refugee subjectivities. It is in this move beyond categorical fetishism and universalism that I situate my rethinking of the ubiquitous humanitarian vocabulary dignity and which I developed this community-based methodological framework.

As talkfests and its complimentary literature appropriate the notion of dignity as an idealized principle and moral status provided by Western humanitarianism *to* refugees, this research project draws urgent attention to the meaningful and intimate notion of dignity as an embodied agentic and precarious lived experience. In the chapter that follows, I will detail how I constructed an ethical and dynamic methodological

framework that illuminates such complexity through the active re-centering of Syrian subjectivity. Of particular importance is the process of reflexivity as a tool for limiting reproductions of binary and romanticized narrative constructions.

3.2 Methodological Framework

3.2.1 The approach overview

This research works to destabilize the dominant moralized rights-based dignity discourse through an immersive and community-based approach. Together, these methodologies offer useful tools for both pluralizing sites of dignity and elucidating the lived experience of the forcibly displaced, key analytical objectives of the dissertation. Participant observation is crucial here for providing the contextual depth necessary for a site-specific discourse and theory for elucidating dignity as a process and embodies everyday endeavor. As I will detail below, this project goes beyond a classical Malinowksian model, pushing the boundaries of anthropology to co-produce knowledge through an intimate community-based collaboration. At this much needed interdisciplinary crossover of anthropology, refugee studies, and community-based research, I move beyond the constraints of disciplinary thinking and engage with a Syrian-centered non-essentialized narrative, thereby remedying the intellectual challenges of dignity.

More than a tool for eliciting much needed emotional depth and dimension, this locally engaged approach was shaped by a broader motivation to formulate an ethical research practice. Building on the work of Carpi (2021), I consider the importance of a ‘humane infrastructure for research’ whereby ethics is not simply compliance with institutional protocols but at the very core of the researcher’s practice. This infrastructure counters the harms of over-research and research “hot spots”, while quite crucially also defending against the reproductions of tokenistic and romanticized narratives of ‘empowerment’, ‘agency’ and ‘resilience’ that fail to address the complexity of the lived experience. Later in this chapter I will unpack how reflexivity guided me

towards a ‘humane’ practice, and more specifically, my motivation for producing useful nonacademic outputs.

3.2.2 Longitudinal participant observation

Engaging with the complexity and fluidity of human subjectivity necessitates a multifaceted and immersive approach. In particular, this research investigated the everyday through participant observation, a tool for capturing what people say, what people say they do, and how people actually conduct their lives outside of the formal interview space (Hammerslay, 2006; Nader, 2011). Producing conceptual knowledge through immersive fieldwork can be physically, mentally, and emotionally challenging, necessitating time and patience to establish rapport, and later the capacities to develop and sustain these relationships over long periods of time (Fortun, 2009; Driessen and Jansen, 2013; Sluka 2007). The strength of these relationships, which determine the outcomes of research, falls into the realm of intimacy - on the closeness of bonds and connections, on access to enter the field and people’s willingness to let you into their homes and personal lives (Sehlikoglu and Zengin, 2015). Although difficult to cultivate, and equally difficult to articulate in written word, intimacy becomes crucial to the endeavor of participant observation, providing depth and richness of everyday life that other research modalities fail to capture.

Accomplishing these tasks are not so simple, mainly in that they hinge on intuitive codes of conduct and ethical boundaries that are challenging to teach or to learn in a classroom (Marcus, 2009). Such a “mystique” around fieldwork is sometimes critiqued; other times it is framed as a practice of “craft” (ibid). And for first time ethnographers, the lack of bounds can cause anxiety, a sense of panic and sleeplessness. This was the case for me in 2016, when I entered the field of the Israeli occupation with minimal methodological training to conduct research for my masters. But this is not to say that anthropologists don’t have a methodological toolkit. Defined in 1922 by Bronislaw Malinowski, participant observation is the scientific tool and strategy for understanding people’s lives, aspirations and perspectives. Participating in and observing daily life for sustained periods of time remains crucial to this methodology. In Malinowski’s (1935)

less cited body of work, “Confessions of Ignorance and Failure: Gaps and Side-Steps,” they draw attention to the value of the ordinary, scrutinizing their earlier neglect of “the everyday, inconspicuous, drab and small-scale" (1935:462). This “small scale” and even “small talk” are mundane everyday encounters essential to ethnography; interactions and exchanges that happen outside of a formal interview are just as valuable forms of data (Driessen and Jansen, 2013). The notion of recording the ordinary is also foundational across the work of Veena Das, whose ethnographic research seeks to capture the hidden and unsayable sites of violence.

My research is very much grounded in the notion that understanding the ordinary and the mundane are valuable, and in particular, necessary for a nuanced portrayal of refugee subjects. This project emerged from over two years of working in the Bekaa alongside MAPs. It is from a seed planted in 2019 that a longitudinal account sprouted and where I began to conceive dignity as an overlooked lived experience. More than an established rapport (which is indeed a requirement for fieldwork and knowledge production), such a long-term foundation from years of participating in and experiencing Syrian life in the Bekaa shaped and influenced this project’s intellectual inquiry. Additionally, over the course of research team training and data collection I lived in Jdita, a Bekaa town 45 minutes walking distance from MAPs. Walking was essential to clear my head before long sedentary days of research. This also allowed me to connect more deeply with the built environment of Bekaa, observing the presence of checkpoints, sectarianism, and people’s everyday life in public spaces. Living in Bekaa also meant that I was available to hang out and participate in everyday life until late hours in the evening without causing a son or daughter to give up their beds as in the past. In the chapters that follow, I weave my interactions within the community throughout the analysis, providing richer insights into the continuous everyday endeavor of dignity preservation.

Despite this foundational role of participant observation in understanding subject-making, the attention and value placed on being in or reflecting on “the field” can overshadow the production of conceptually useful or rigorous research (Marcus, 2009;

Salzman, 2002). For instance, Marcus (2009) suggests ethnographers should focus more on producing work with “legs” and shaping field work around a conceptual inquiry. A range of interdisciplinary anthropological work has emerged in this line of thinking, focusing the ethnographic lens on medicine, forensics, technology, filmmaking, forced migration, and critical humanitarianism (Chatty, 2014). The strategy of participant observation, by drawing attention to otherwise hidden perspectives and desires, has been vital to capturing the lives of the dispossessed, who up until the 1970s had been largely invisible to researchers (ibid). Since the establishment of the field of refugee and forced migration studies, this area of research has an intent for action and change, disrupting normative notions of refugeehood, dispossession and statelessness (see Chatty, 1986; Harrell-Bond, 1986; Malkki, 1995). It is in this same vein that I developed my doctoral project, paying careful attention to the everyday in a way that maximizes the potential for improving peoples’ livelihoods and raising standards of international and local humanitarianism. The challenge therefore was shaping the project’s “legs” to do just that. In an attempt to create something theoretically and practically useful, I grounded this research in community-based participatory research, attaching my skills and interests in humanitarian programming, workshop facilitating, filmmaking and craft to an anthropological backbone.

3.2.3 Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

The foundations of the research have been shaped and influenced by my experience working with MAPs, learning and understanding the value of community based and led humanitarian programming. In 2021, as I transitioned into a research collaborator, I thought carefully about how to incorporate their community-based model into this project, engaging in dialogue with the organization to co-create research of mutual interest and meaning. This process I describe can be understood as Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) - a dynamic and widely applied methodological approach grounded in notions of co-production and action. Emerging in the 1970s from revolutionary thinkers across the Global South, the origins of CBPR and its commitment to amplifying local interests and knowledge are a response to colonizer

tendencies in research (Minkler, 2005). This includes the work of Palao Freire (1970) who has shaped this post-colonial orientation through attention to critical reflection, action and co-learning. As both a methodology and ethical ethos, CBPR seeks to reduce power imbalances between the researcher and the researched through the co-development of creative, engaging, and contextualized interventions and research design processes that can promote positive outcomes for the communities involved (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010; Hacker, 2013). This means that research objectives should thus be both intellectual and actionable, challenging surface level partnerships. Arriving at effective co-production requires researchers to relinquish control over the project and reject hierarchal thinking. From my experience, the advantages of involving a community organization, leaders and individual community members in the research process, and allowing them to have a claim over the research agenda, is not only a matter of ethics. But in doing so, participants feel confident and purposeful, leading to more free-flowing ideas, and thus creativity, innovation, and new conceptual discoveries.

Despite the progress in postcolonial and ethical modalities of research, exploitation and marginalization are often unintended by-products of well-intentioned CBPR. Sukarieh and Tannock's (2012) study of 'over-research' within Shatila refugee camp exemplifies these harmful dynamics. Their work documents refugees' frustrations over unmet promises of social change, alienation from the research process, and damaged social relationships from within the community. In a later article, Sukarieh and Tannock (2019) further problematize how UK researchers 'exploit' and 'alienate' community researchers in Lebanon, suggesting that this produces a 'hidden colonialism' that exacerbates community tensions.

To limit local tensions and ensure the ethical production of useful research, I incorporated the collaborative and egalitarian characteristics described above. In particular, four key interconnected elements shape the humane infrastructure of this research:

1) A long-term commitment to the local community, created by living and working alongside the Syrian community since 2019;
2) Establishing an in-depth rapport in spaces outside of the humanitarian gaze, mainly socializing and designing crochet within the artisans' homes;
3) Nurturing the time and space for unstructured dialogue between me and my research team which continuously refined and developed the research;
4) Continued involvement with MAPs to ensure the research offered both intellectual and practical outcomes (i.e., film), and thus a mutual benefit and interest.

This project's CBPR framework consisted of a team of four Syrian students enrolled in the Southern New Hampshire University's online program facilitated by MAPs. Together we co-developed and co-conducted interactive focus group discussions and interviews with the Syrian community that generated new knowledge on dignity as an everyday endeavor. Our collaboration concluded with the production of a co-directed educational documentary, *The Lens of Dignity* (22 mins). This creative and experimental non-academic output was crucial to the wider objective of producing useful and action-oriented research. Because the student researchers were routinely at MAPs for their course, there were continuous pockets of unstructured interactions that further enriched the research outcomes. This dynamic collaboration (detailed below) and our experiences knowledge sharing later transcended into the way we worked together while eliciting emotional and intimate responses from the wider community, sometimes conducting interviews in interlocutor's houses. As an immersive project, this collaboration was not an end to a means, but our daily interactions and exchanges became invaluable to the production of conceptual knowledge. Our discussions – planned and ad-hoc – were always provoking. These in-between mundane moments standing in the MAPs hallway by the water cooler, eating a *manaosuhe* [flat bread] in an empty room, or waiting for a coffee to boil in the kitchen, have shaped my in-depth understanding of Syrian dispossession through unstructured small-talk.

As described above, even well-intentioned co-production can be compromised by unforeseen local frustrations. To actively mitigate these potential risks, I sought to develop a project that had meaning and purpose for the student researchers as individual agents as well as for MAPs. This necessitated the nurturing of a safe and inclusive environment within our team where the students felt comfortable communicating and disagreeing with each other *and* me. Often, I would have to remind my team to tell me when I was wrong, actively dismantling hierarchal boundaries engrained in Syrian culture to respect elders – and from my own experience, a habit of telling people what they want to hear. Active listening and ascribing meaning to each team member's perspective were fundamental techniques that built trust and confidence, and in turn, fostered a creative atmosphere of uninhibited dialogue essential for establishing a connection to and a claim over the research (Hacker, 2013). Drawing on the work of Freire Paolo, it is in this process of positioning oneself as a catalyzer and facilitator of knowledge production - and thus not all knowing - that hierarchal structures that both limit effective research and fuel tensions can be avoided.

Furthermore, it is crucial to identify *how* my research values and ethics have been shaped through my previous lived experiences managing research partnerships at MAPs prior to this doctoral project. Often the organization was brought onto research projects as the gatekeepers to the Bekaa community, rarely ever included in the complete research process. Partnerships would be established *after* the researcher developed their methodology and primary questions, leaving minimal space for community input. Not only did these practices reduce the quality of research, but they become insulting, uncomfortable and explicit signals of power imbalances. While developing this doctoral research partnership and transitioning from staff member to research collaborator, I engaged in critical dialogue with MAPs research department and student researchers, acknowledging these harmful research tendencies to establish pathways to create useful and mutually beneficial research.

3.2.4 Critical reflexivity: positionality and research ethics

With an aim to produce conceptually useful and action-oriented knowledge, critical reflexivity became a crucial tool throughout both fieldwork and theory building, guiding me towards a humane infrastructure of research. By 'critical' reflexivity, I am referring to a multifaceted approach for thoroughly investigating the multiple layers of relation that shape my interlocutors' lives and interests (Viswanathan et al., 2004; Maton, 2003; Salzman, 2002). This allows me to situate myself in relation to my interlocutors, unpacking how my how my identity as a non-Arab American woman and academic researcher has the potential to reproduce avoidable and *un*avoidable systems of power and tensions (Guillemin and Gillam 2004; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This doctoral project has been shaped by my tedious and oftentimes uncomfortable process of self-inquiry, guided by the questions: what makes *me* – a non-Syrian - uniquely positioned to do this research and why does this research matter? Grappling with these tensions in the development phase of the project resulted in the formation of an immersive, action-oriented, community-based and participatory approach. Applying a purely ethnographical framework in this context of humanitarian crisis and over-research where Syrians are systematically excluded from crafting their own narratives felt deeply problematic. In the dissertation that follows, I leveraged my training in anthropology and thick relationships in the community to evoke the everyday while actively circumventing extractive and exploitative dynamics.

Crucial to understand is how researcher identity is only important when unpacked in relation to how it influenced the production of knowledge. Here, in identifying the inherent interconnectedness between researcher and researched, researchers can leverage their subjective gaze to evoke nuance (Sehlikoglu, 2021). It is within this line of thinking that I consider how my interlocutors and I relate to each other. That is, addressing how my interlocutors may have wanted to be seen by me and how they may have crafted their responses in relation to what they may think I want to hear – or what may improve their livelihood. This was identified in the work of Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2014) for example, where Sahrawi refugees performed ideal refugeehood to humanitarian actors for the sake of aid. In the context of MAPs however, I was less concerned about the performance for aid, but more observant to the performance of

self-sufficiency. From my experiences at the organization, I grew familiar with positive narratives of self-reliance, capability, and hope. Even in donor meetings, my Syrian colleagues would seldom describe the suffering and vulnerability of their community to a Western audience eager to empathize; leaving this tedious task to me instead. This doctoral research was an opportunity to make sense of this duality – the suffering and the desire for dignified representation. It was only through an established rapport and a community-based and participatory approach that I was able to unravel this complexity, digging deeper towards the roots and emotions of precarity. Telling this story honestly and with dignity became a fundamental reflexive, ethical and analytical challenge.

As expressed from the outset, this research project was not inspired through literature or my own self-interests, but through living, working, and engaging with the community through acts of care and solidarity. These intricate layers of relation and reciprocity earned me the trust of the Syrian community in the years prior to data collection. From the local perspective, my positionality never changed as I was still a close member of the MAPs family, actively listening and learning with endless curiosity. For me, however, this transition was difficult and anxiety-inducing: I was eager to develop and lead a project that had meaning and value to the community not only in the long-term, but in the short-term process of research. Through careful self-reflexivity and community dialogue, I sought to balance the intellectual demands of the academy with the action-oriented demands of my partner organization. These unavoidable tensions inspired the incorporation of multiple methodological tools, outputs, and even the creation of LAMSA, a crochet enterprise that consumed my spare time over the four years of the doctoral program. In essence, I resisted a full transition out of an activist mindset, carving out a space where I could contribute to theory and livelihood simultaneously. Indeed, MAPs continues to hold me accountable for producing actionable outputs, strengthening my community-based practice and shaping this research project. Immersed researchers must reconcile the sacrifices, stresses and sometimes contradictions embodied in our pursuit of generating meaningful research. That I hold sole authorship of this doctoral dissertation even when produced through community participation is not lost on me.

A critical reflexive process must move beyond researcher-researched relationality, as this approach alone will not evoke holistic or nuanced knowledge of lived experiences in a complex socio-political milieu. I argue that similar attention must also be applied to untangling the complex overlapping layers of socio-political oppression and violence that shape subject making in exile. This practice of identifying multiple, fluid interacting elements that shape knowledge creation can be described as 'epistemic' reflexivity, a notion which gained popularity from Pierre Bourdieu in response to frustrations of individualistic self-reflection (Maton, 2003). The suggestion here is that researchers must also consider how knowledge is shaped in relation to socio-political dynamics, and to intellectual fields of study. Abdelnour and Abu Moghli (2021) embody this epistemic reflexive lens, arguing how research conducted in Lebanon demands awareness to the region's compounding past and current socio-economic, political, sectarian and colonial complexities that inherently shape knowledge produced in this context. As previously laid out in the Introduction, the descent into the current turmoil has interconnected origins, tracing back to a long history of conflict and violence that has weakened Lebanon's physical, social and political infrastructures when compounded with the influx of 1.5 million Syrians. Through grappling with these compounding complexities, I designed a methodological framework that could identify the injustices endured by the Lebanese host-society so to unpick how this sociopolitical crisis influences my interlocutors' everyday interactions and exchanges. Furthermore, as I discuss below, my team and I continued to refine and strengthen the project throughout each phase of the research, changing and expanding on our ideas, adjusting the focus group script with each round. The significance here is in the collectiveness of the epistemic reflexive process.

Zadhy-Çepoğlu (2023) argues that the notion of care is the missing link in reflexivity, and particularly in the context of forced migration. They suggest that reflexivity should not only be about the research agenda, but about being ethically present for our participants and prioritizing their needs (ibid:2). This caring ethical framework demands researchers pay attention not only to unequal power relationships, but to the ways in

which the research benefits participants. In essence, researchers should not only think about thinking – but we should think about what we are *doing*. This also builds from Pillow's (2003) feminist perspective that reflexivity is "not only about investigating the power embedded in one's research but is also about doing research differently" (178). These perspectives on practicing an ethics of care fits within a similar ethos presented by Carpi (2021) who describes a 'humane infrastructure for research' as going beyond an ethics of institutional codes:

> Ethics, in fact, are not only an institutional code we need to comply with to carry out field research but, more importantly, need to be translated into an intimate process of self-inquiry. (39)

In these ways, an ethical and caring reflexive practice shares many overlapping values with a community-based framework as described above. Through working in a collaborative team, much of the potential harms of research can be defended against. Co-production models demand caring efforts, such as supporting the team emotionally throughout fieldwork in contexts where research topics are vulnerable, as was the case for me. I further extend caring reflexivity to participant representation in the writing process, which is crucial in ethical research where subjects can feel exposed. In several instances throughout this dissertation, I chose to withhold certain intimacies as a way of protecting and respecting the privacy of my relationships within the community. These decisions were not guided epistemologically, but with an ethics of care. I revisit the topic of ethics at the end of this chapter, explicating challenges and harm reduction tactics.

3.3 Research Methods

3.3.1 The research process

This doctoral research project was created to investigate overlooked intellectual questions. My methodological approach and theoretical framework led to the use of three main strategies: participant observation, focus group discussions, and interviews. Collectively, these tools guided me towards an understanding of the social construction of dignity in exile. Below I detail seven phases of the research process, explaining how I applied community-based and participatory theories to practice.

Phase 1: Establishing the partnership (Early September, 2022)

Foundational to ethical co-creation is communication and interactive dialogue with the local partner at the first instance. This project began with initial in-person meetings in 2021 with the director of MAPs, who remained updated throughout my research proposal development process. We discussed 1) the idea of focusing on the concept of dignity 2) working collaboratively with a team of SNHU student researchers and 3) brainstorming how this research could be useful for the organization and community. The specifics of how this project was going to be implemented and the methodological tools and research questions were discussed in further detail in September 2022, prior to conducting the research. In this second in-person meeting with the Director and the MAPs' Research Coordinator and Research Manager I presented my research proposal, describing the relevant literature, the gaps, and my potential intellectual contributions to the field of refugee studies. We discussed the academic objectives relevant to my PhD program, and our shared interest in creating a project that had meaning, purpose and use to MAPs. This in-depth conversation set the tone of the collaborative nature of the research as I transitioned from a MAPs staff member to a research collaborator. In practice, this meant no longer attending donor or strategy meetings, supporting proposal writing, or developing fundraising campaigns. Adhering to these boundaries, intended to reduce burnout, was often difficult at an organization where staff members are involved in multiple projects at once. The busy atmosphere of MAPs and the sense of urgency around their work becomes contagious. That is why if not in the classroom conducting focus groups or meeting with the research team, I was

in the homes of artisan women, designing crochet handbags. While conducting this research I developed a fashion brand, leveraging my time spent in Bekaa to create something useful and meaningful, while simultaneously enjoying a creative outlet amidst the rigor of fieldwork.

Phase 2: Creating the research team (Mid-September-October, 2022)

As described above, fostering a comfortable and egalitarian team dynamic is fundamental to collaborative research. Effective and ethical research is built on trust and an ethics of care. As such, I approached the outreach process for my team thoughtfully, considering how the applicants would work with each other and with me.

Conducting outreach for the research team took several weeks. I first drafted a call for researchers in which the research coordinator at MAPs distributed to ten pre-selected students from the SNHU program. These students were considered to be the strongest candidates that demonstrated potential. They were also successful and on track in their university program, which was a key criterion from MAPs. The candidates were all fluent in English, which was our language of communication throughout the process. Students were required to submit their resumes with a brief cover letter. I reviewed eight applications in total and interviewed them all in person at MAPs. My final selection was based on the thoughtfulness in their responses, and particularly, in their explanation of what dignity meant to them. The students who indicated reflexiveness were selected. Although I initially wanted a gender balance, only one male applicant was suitable. I discussed my final selection with the MAPs research team for feedback, and to ensure agreement. In the end, I hired a team of four researchers, who were renumerated for their time participating in all aspects of this participatory project, including workshops, trainings, focus groups, and the documentary film development which was funded by UCL Grand Challenges. The student researchers also earned university course credit for their participation in this project, which was an added incentive.

As the students were already familiar with each other from MAPs, there was no need for formal introductions or icebreakers. Their pre-established friendship enabled us to dive into the topic quicker, setting a strong foundation for meaningful conversations. However, fostering team intimacy for fluid knowledge sharing and debate was less simple at the beginning, necessitating continued meetings before all students were confident expressing themselves. It also required the management of four distinct personalities, each requiring its own type of relationship.

I initiated our collaboration with an orientation phase. This included a series of interactive workshops where I guided the students through conceptually and emotionally challenging discussions around dignity. Each meeting and workshop session, which lasted about 2 hours, was conducted in English and recorded for the purpose of documenting both the methodological process and the unique perspectives and subjectivities of the student researchers that shaped this project. In our first workshop, we shared with each other what dignity meant to us individually. This became an effective entry point into deeper conceptual discussions. It was also crucial in explicating the plurality of meanings and experiences embodied in the concept. Applying critical reflexivity, we began to unpack certain synergies and tensions between their meanings of dignity. I synthesized their responses in bullet points on a white board, circling repeated themes in real time. There was much debate, and even confusion, on what dignity meant. It was important to let the students share freely, without too many follow-up questions or structure. This workshop elucidated the complexity of defining dignity with a singular definition, and the need for a multifaceted theoretical framework. It also sparked the students' curiosity and intellectual interest in the topic. The workshop was an energizing beginning and set the tone for our future collaborative process.

Over the next few days, I analyzed the students' perceptions of dignity more carefully, drafting a loose model that incorporated the key elements that emerged from our first discussion. I also conducted a literature review, finding Nordenfelt's (2004) work on the variety of contradicting and complimentary dignity theories and using it as a guide. This

inspired the structure of our next team workshop, where we discussed these multiple notions of dignity (the dignity of merit, the dignity of moral stature, the dignity of identity, and the dignity of inherent worth). We debated if and how western constructed dignity models can be applied to the refugee context, paying careful attention to the gaps in this model.

In our third workshop, I presented a more comprehensive model that told the story of what dignity meant to my research team, incorporating the discussion from the previous two workshops. We discussed each element carefully, unpacking how this did and did not capture their feelings. This co-production of knowledge set the foundation for our fourth workshop, where we formulated research questions that could elicit similar complex responses as an intellectual exercise. After the students prepared and shared their list of questions, it became clear that eliciting emotive understandings of dignity was going to necessitate a creative approach: asking direct questions about dignity experiences could potentially be intimidating and lead to a rigid dialogue. This concluded the phase of our team rapport building, critical reflection and dignity theory orientation, setting the groundwork for further research training and co-developing a creative focus group discussion that could stimulate dynamic and thoughtful conversations with the wider community.

Phase 3: Methodology development (October, 2022)

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) are a useful method for stimulating conversations where participants can exchange their perspectives and challenge each other (Freeman, 2006; Scheelbeek et al. 2020). The interactions between participants can underscore differences between experiences and beliefs, generating nuanced and more in-depth understandings of the social production of ideas and knowledge. Although widely applied, implementing effective FGDs where participants feel comfortable to share and debate, is difficult (Colucci, 2008). In contexts where there are social divides between the researcher and the participants discussions can feel extractive or transactional, greatly affecting the quality of the data generated and

challenging the ethics of do-no-harm (Colucci, 2008; Scheelbeek et al. 2020). Attention to divides between participants is also crucial for the same reasons.

Research training and our continuous team discussions developed the students' confidence and knowledge, strengthening their capacities to lead the focus group discussions, thus limiting the challenges noted above. I implemented a Citizen Science training developed by the Institute for Global Prosperity's Lebanon based research center, which provided an overview of research methodologies and ethics, and strategies for focus group facilitation. Space for question ideation was extended over a few days, as this phase was the most challenging - particularly the refining of the questions and translating their meaning into Arabic. Although facilitating a similar exercise in the orientation, our second attempt still did not produce results. Our focus group script was not conducive to an open and emotive discussion.

The next day, after taking some time to reflect, I asked the students to write a list of the spaces where they felt their dignity was either lost or found. The discussion that followed was engaging and nuanced, and I began to develop a much deeper understanding around dignity as an everyday endeavor of continuous preservation. From this, we decided that focusing on dignity through a spatial lens could be a solution to the problem noted above. This approach offered a contextual specific approach for the reconceptualization of dignity. The idea of photo elicitation then emerged, and we began to develop a PowerPoint presentation, collecting photos from each of these spaces from our personal libraries (see Appendix C). The team searched through their phones to find photos of their favorite meal, a special gathering, a sunset from their balcony, weddings, and shisha. Photos of checkpoints, bakeries, camps, UN headquarters, and borders were harder to locate, so images were found on the internet instead.

Once the PowerPoint was ready, we drafted a list of 3-5 questions per image that could guide a deep discussion around dignity lost and found in these spaces (see Appendix

B). An open-ended question was posed, *“how does this photo make you feel?*”. This would allow space for a more emotional, fluid and organic discussion. Each place and set of images, curated to elicit different emotive responses, were accompanied with other descriptive questions. These questions, refined and translated, reflected deep contextual knowledge. For example, with the image of a long queue outside the local bakery, we asked, *can you describe a time when you waited in these lines?*” This question would not hold the same significance to someone outside of the Syrian community. With the image of the house, we asked, *how do you feel inside your house?* The follow-up questions to these responses each circled back to a questions such as, *do these feelings you just described relate your sense of dignity?* Or, *is there a relationship between these feelings and dignity?* Instances where participants replied *no,* made it easier to discern where and how dignity operates. For instance, while there was an image of Syrian foods and celebrations, few participants related their dignity to these feelings elicited, and therefore this was not analyzed as a component of dignity. As you will see in the coming chapters, this focus group model became an evocative and effective way of contextualizing the emotions of dignity in relation to the social construction of spaces.

Each focus group was co-led by two of the four student researchers who would take turns asking questions. We chose an icebreaker activity for the participants and practiced the script. In collaboration with the MAPs Research Manager, we finalized the participant consent form, prepared a system for collecting signatures before the focus groups, and confirmed storage of the paperwork in the research office. We then spent nearly an hour debating about what food to serve, finally agreeing on *sfeeha* [a savory pastry].

Phase 4: Focus group outreach and implementation (End October-December, 2022)

Conducting participant outreach and selecting a criterion was done in close collaboration with MAPs which enabled an intentional and contextualized outreach

process specific for this project (end of October-November). My rapport with the Research Manager, and familiarity with the Syrian community, led to thoughtful conversations around sampling options, and purposive sampling was chosen. Several of the participants selected were people who knew me from my work at MAPs, or through my time spent with the crochet artisans and their families. Groups included people of different socio-economic backgrounds, and we took steps to ensure members from all backgrounds would feel comfortable sharing their experiences (i.e., no group should have only one person who lives in either a camp or an apartment). Participants were selected a week prior to the focus group and always re-confirmed the day before to limit dropout. Each participant was invited individually to participate in the discussion via WhatsApp where they received a summary of the project, including the topic of discussion (dignity) and their consent to audio recording for research purposes.

It was paramount to not only focus on the most vulnerable people residing in informal tented settlements, but to also include employed and educated people whose lived experiences in displacement are often overlooked. The groups we decided on were: 1) female youth (18-24) female adults (25-54) male youth (18-24) male adults (25-54) 5) mix of all (18-54) and 6) female crochet artisans (30-50). The groups of 8-10 people were curated to elicit dynamic conversations with multiple perspectives. Categorizing participants based on gender and age was essential to the student researchers, who believed that women would not feel comfortable speaking openly in front of men, and that the younger participants would not feel comfortable in the presence of their elders. The diversity of participants is reflected in the range of ages, employment status, education levels and residence (i.e., residential building or camp). This way we were able to investigate the role of class in shaping dignity experiences, understanding the range of Syrian society without narrowing the analysis to the most vulnerable, as is the case with humanitarian assessments and research. Including one mixed discussion was meant to test a different conversation orientation and see how gender and age differentiations shaped the discussion. The addition of the female crochet artisan group was added at the end to provide more nuance into daily experiences of dignity, and in

particular, to elicit perspectives on gender and the role that craft making plays in their lives.

Overall, we conducted six focus groups with a diverse range of members from the Syrian community in the Bekaa between November and December. Each focus group, which lasted 2 hours, was audio recorded and transcribed within 48-hours of the discussion by one of the two student researchers who led the discussion. The document was then translated into English by the second student researcher within the next few days. Directly after each focus group, the two student researchers who co-led the discussion and I would have an hour debrief where we collectively reflected on the discussion. This i) improved the script before the next focus group ii) catalyzed in-depth conversations on certain themes I flagged for the analysis phase and iii) inspired the idea to conduct follow-up interviews with members from the discussions to grasp deeper contextual knowledge on certain topics. For these reasons, we decided to leave three days in between discussion groups to allow time to critically reflect, process and refine.

Although the focus groups were led by two student researchers, I introduced myself and the topic of the discussion (in Arabic) each time. This was important for demonstrating my role, establishing trust with the group, and as my team told me – speaking Arabic was also an icebreaker. Fostering a space where participants feel comfortable, welcomed and familiar in the presence of a foreign researcher is essential. Trust was further established through my follow-up questions which revealed knowledge and sensitivity to their experience. While it was crucial for me to be visible in the discussion and interject when necessary to ascertain more context, providing the space for the team to build their research capacities and experience from facilitating was prioritized. This dynamic became advantageous as it also allowed for a free-flowing discussion without the need for constant translation that disrupts a conversation. The second student researcher, not asking questions, would whisper to me when I struggled to understand the conversation. This structure was intentionally different from prior focus groups I observed with external researchers at MAPs, where

the external Western researcher would read their questions off a sheet of paper in English, to then be translated on the spot by a member of MAPs staff who they did not have a rapport with.
This interaction did not lead to positive research outcomes nor a fulfilling conversation.

After discussions with MAPs director and program managers, and consistent to other research projects at the organization, participants of the focus groups were not paid for their time, but instead were reimbursed for their transportation and provided food and beverages. This meant that all participants were fully committed to and interested in discussing the topic of dignity.

Phase 5: Face-to-face interviews (November-December, 2022)

Interviews are an essential method for understanding individual perceptions around a topic and can be helpful for articulating key research themes. This differs from the collective experience elicited from the focus group phase. To gain more in-depth knowledge around dignity experiences and perspectives, I conducted follow-up face-to-face interviews with participants from the focus groups to diver deeper into topics that were only briefly discussed due to time constraints. Specifying the face-to-face element is an important distinction, as this type of interview enables a more comprehensible and collaborative interaction. Observing and interpreting non-verbal elements of communication, mainly body language, facial expressions and pauses, can deepen the researcher's understanding (Irvine et al., 2012). This provides the researcher with cues to know when and how to dive deeper into difficult topics. Face-to-face interviews are further advantageous as they create more space for 'formulation', described as the phenomenon when researchers rephrase what they just heard to ensure and demonstrate understanding of what is being said (Irvine et al., 2012). In these ways, the addition of interviews in this methodological framework strengthened my understanding of dignity as an emotional process.

In preparation before each interview, I carefully re-read the focus group transcript, highlighting moments where I wanted to go deeper and understand participants' subject-making more carefully. Because of our pre-established rapport and my general knowledge of their perspectives, the interviews assumed a semi-structured format, with ample space for dialogue. The interviews were conducted in Arabic (with some English), audio recorded, transcribed and translated into English. In each interview, I was accompanied by one student researcher who took part in the interview while helping with interpretation. Sometimes, when I struggled to understand something, I had two voices to learn from, which was an unforeseen advantage. With time and funding limited, and unexpected deportation campaigns that forced MAPs to close the center, I was only able to conduct follow-up interviews with participants from three focus group discussions.

In addition to follow-up interviews, I conducted several unstructured and unscheduled interviews throughout the research process. These types of interviews differ from what I describe above because they take the form of more casual conversations (Roulston, 2010). This happened on several occasions with MAPs staff and the crochet artisans, both at the center and in people's homes. My identity as a researcher and presence at the organization conducting focus groups each week enabled me to record these conversations with consent. On several occasions, the people I would engage with in these conversations were participants from the focus groups who wanted to share more. The data generated from these shorter and spontaneous interactions and exchanges provides a particular depth and dimension to my overall understanding of the community's perspectives, interests, worries, and daily stresses.

Phase 6: Participant observation (September – December 2022 and March – October 2023)

Throughout my fieldwork, I paid careful attention to the subtleties: observing the changes in a person's mood and energy levels, the re-arranging of a family's living space, the food cooked for dinner and the absence of certain family members from the

table, the guests invited over for *sabhia* [morning coffee] and the topic of their small talk, the tone and body language when responding to a question, or the exchanges just after a focus group ended. These moments accumulate, providing that intimate depth and contextual knowledge necessary for effectively capturing a more nuanced account of refugee subject making. But participant observation is also embodied and intimate, forcing researchers to negotiate their personal boundaries while simultaneously willing and excited to become entangled in the lives of others. For me, this meant sleepless nights in busy houses, over caffeination and overeating, and the witnessing of (and sometimes involvement in) family arguments, emotional breakdowns and panic attacks. This happens alongside joy too. I attended wedding celebrations, goodbye parties and birthdays, ate picnics in the park, helped prepare Ramadan *iftar* [the meal breaking the daily fast], visited community members during Eid, cradled newborn babies, danced *dabke* [traditional Levantine dance] in living-rooms, and designed crochet handbags with artisans. My ability to communicate in Arabic, and enthusiasm for dancing, crochet and meeting new people meant that I was frequently invited for coffee and to social gatherings. My appetite for Syrian meals became widely known, and women would quite literally demand I come over and try their version of my favorite dishes. As a young woman and having been part of MAPs for an extended period, I was naturally included and welcomed into family homes by other women. With my own family thousands of miles away, these women took me under their wing; feeding me, caring for me, interested in understanding my world as much as I was interested in understanding theirs. Through our mutual needs and mutual openness for intimacy, close bonds were formed over several years. This project is possible because of this sturdy foundation. More than an accumulation of specific ethnographic observations, these moments of joy that we shared strengthen my capacitates and motivations to tell a story of life and dignity.

When an interview or focus group was finished, the day of research and community interaction continued. I spent countless hours discussing and reflecting on dignity with members of the research team. These everyday conversations with MAPs staff members who were interested in the topic provided further invaluable depth. In the

chapters that follow, the story of my colleague Bathena and my experiences in her family home becomes foundational to my analytical thinking. Morning coffees and lunch breaks gossiping in the small kitchen with the janitors were other mundane moments that built my relationships with community members, and which connected me even more deeply into the nuances of psychosocial dynamics that influence refugee subjectivity. When not in Bekaa, I was in Beirut, taking time to sleep, recharge and process the dichotomy between these two distinct geographies which offered contextual specificity useful in the analysis. I kept notes and phone recordings on the different home atmospheres and family dynamics, the common stresses of daily life, the direct effects of policy changes on individual people, the assaults on Syrians as they happened in real time, the difficult decisions around resettlement and stresses of visa applications, as well as recent divorces among women in the community. Participating in and observing mundane everyday life effectively captures the complexity of social relations, subjectivity and intersubjectivity in a rapidly changing environment. It is through these experiences that I developed an embodied knowledge around the everyday struggle for dignity.

Phase 7: Co-created documentary (July 2023 – October 2023)

From the outset of this doctoral project, the co-production of useful non-academic outputs was prioritized. The medium and applicability of such outputs, however, was not defined until after data collection – and more specifically, after months of discussions, debates, and intimate sharing between September – December 2022. By this phase of the project, my student researchers developed a strong criticality around humanitarianism, narrative construction and normative refugee representation. Their passion to reclaim what it meant to be a Syrian refugee was strikingly clear. Meanwhile, I observed a critical lack of refugee youth-centered narratives and visual media easily accessible to people in the West – the audience the students wanted to speak to the most. In fact, the initial idea for creating video content was inspired by the lack of refugee-led media available in Massive Open Online Curriculums which were often made *for* refugee learners without consideration to the potentiality of refugees as

teachers to a Western audience. In March 2023, the vision of co-creating an educational documentary film was refined; the objective was to produce an engaging refugee-led teaching tool that could empower the protagonists in the process of making in the short-term, while changing Western-based students' perceptions of their refugee peers in the long-term.

The output, *The Lens of Dignity* (22 mins), was only possible because of the student researchers' high level of engagement and interest in the topic of dignity and strengthened self-confidence to articulate their own experiences of refugeehood. With these conditions in place, participatory filmmaking can be an effective methodological tool for capturing self-constructed narratives and representation within marginalized communities (Gutierérrez, 2025; Lennette 2019, 2020; White, 2003). Across communication for development scholarship, researchers identify locally-led and constructed visual media as sites of empowerment with potential to influence policy making (see Servaes 1999; White, 2004). My aim here was to leverage the power of film as both a development *and* research tool. Namely, I sought to explore the relationship between narrative construction and dignity. How do the students self or collectively present themselves? What does a dignified narrative of refugeehood sound like? How can representing the Syrian community through this lens of dignity influence how people in the West perceive refugees? These questions are revisited in Chapter 5 through the lens of agency. In the dissertation conclusion, I then consider the wider implications of applying the multifaceted lens of dignity across not only fields of academic study, but to the production of visual media.

Building on the spatial lens applied in the focus group design, the film follows three of my student researchers through *their* spaces of dignity (a park, a cultural center, a Ramadan gifting campaign, and MAPs). The aim was to nurture an opportunity for Syrians to shape their own narratives on their terms and to represent a story of refugeehood through a dignified lens. Each student had their own vision of what that meant for them, and in collaboration with a filmmaker, they sketched out their scenes on a story board. Bayan wanted to be documented writing and reading her poetry, for

Reem it was volunteering, and for Eman it was drawing. Transcripts of the narratives elicited in this film were analyzed, shaping and strengthening my understanding of dignity. As we will later see, the ways in which these young women relate their dignity to creative activities, self-expression, and community engagement evoke the daily endeavor of dignity preservation.

Three versions of the film were screened as a team, offering students an opportunity to provide thorough feedback and to feel proud of their narratives. This film was later screened in a UK workshop at Lincoln University as a way of shifting perceptions of refugees in the Global North. From this pilot alone, the film elicited powerful emotional reactions from participants. Further research and dissemination plans are ongoing with the aim of contributing an evidence-based teaching tool for discussing refugeehood in classrooms, shifting harmful perceptions and strengthening global solidarity.

3.4 Analysis

The transcripts generated from the FGDs, interviews, the film, and field notes were thematically analyzed using NVivo software. My strategy was to code for three main categories: i) where dignity is lost and found ii) what dignity and dignity loss feels like iii) how dignity is reclaimed. The FGDs were already structured to help elicit answers to the former question, and I immediately created cases for each of the spaces discussed in the group discussions: the mosque, the bakery, the home, the school, the UN HQ and aid spaces, borders, general security checkpoints, and wedding celebrations. I then coded all moments where feelings related to dignity loss and preservation appeared, connecting these feelings to space. I also coded for the experiences of dignity, what it looks, feels, and sounds like, applying descriptors (codes) such as: care, freedom, community, hope, security, giving. These codes were repeated several times, indicating key themes around dignity experiences that helped me build out my analytical framework. Later, through the processes of re-reading transcripts, writing and re-writing, and deeper engagement with the literature, the analysis became more

complex, nuanced and refined. Of particular significance was thinking beyond dignity lost and found through spatiality, but as a core characteristic of dignity in refuge that can be identified across subjectivities and temporality too. Additionally, as described above, the co-created documentary helped shape the analysis, further contextualizing the relationship between dignity, narrative, self-expression, and community engagement.

3.5 Ethical Considerations and Field Work Challenges

3.5.1 Ethics and harm reduction

This research received two ethical approvals from UCL, covering both the research (high-risk 22437/001) and the filmmaking project (low-risk 22437/002) (see Appendix A). The ethics protocols were adhered to throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained repeatedly, data was stored safely, and identities of were pseudo-anonymized when used in writing outputs. However, when writing about the perspectives of my student researchers elicited through the film, their identities are not anonymized, as they consented to be seen and named on camera for a public audience. Access to the film remains private, available on request and for educational purposes.

As I have described throughout this chapter, my ethical considerations go beyond bureaucratic processes and institutional protocols. I engage with ethical research as a mode of ‘practice’ and not ‘procedural’ (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). To not reproduce the same harmful researcher tendencies observed in my earlier work in Geneva and Lebanon, I carefully developed this doctoral project in partnership, valuing non-academic outputs that had meaning and purpose to the organization and its community. Ethics shaped the atmosphere of my collaboration and the ways in which I sought to establish short and long-term community benefits. Working closely with a team of students and building their capacities, as well as facilitating meaningful and emotional community conversations on dignity, became important by products of this project.

Several interlocutors when leaving the focus groups, would thank us for allowing them the space to express their feelings. One older man who began the discussion with hostility (offended by the presence of food on the table), asked if we could have more of these conversations on his way out 2 hours later. These moments became important markers that signified the social value of our work. Finding pathways to create useful research outputs that can enhance the organization's future work is also crucial to this, and conversations with MAPs on how to leverage this data are ongoing.

Co-producing knowledge on dignity loss and preservation from the perspective of refugees themselves is an inherently emotional undertaking. The methodological framework was also developed with the intention of eliciting feelings. In practice, as in the day-to-day experience of conducting the research, this immersive study brings the potential to harm to the forefront. How can we speak about experiences of indignity while maintaining dignity? Knowing when and when not to probe in an already intimate discussion and how to address emotional questions are critical challenges. Navigating this required hyper awareness of my interlocutors' tone, energy levels and facial expressions. These concerns were considered prior to implementing the focus groups and in the curation of the images, interspersing the more positive spaces with the negative ones. For example, we began with an image of Syrian foods, not a checkpoint. Similar attention was given to research team meetings and workshops. Ensuring that in-depth conversations around personal, familial and communal vulnerabilities and discrimination did not trigger trauma or produce new unsettling emotions of despair was of utmost importance. Mitigating these risks demanded a deep understanding of my team's boundaries and their sensitivities. Active listening, ascribing meaning to their feelings, allowing space of silence without questioning to ensure team members wanted to speak, and knowing when to move on from a difficult conversation became essential techniques for harm reduction. My team's predisposed criticality around humanitarianism and the Lebanese government allowed for challenging conversations around injustice, racism and victimhood. These in-depth team discussions became crucial to this project, strengthening my ability to analyze a wealth of empirical data with heightened awareness of multifaceted refugee subjectivity.

Processing the weight of the emotions described in FGDs and interviews became an additional challenge to navigate. On one occasion, after leaving an intimate and distressing home-based interview, I embraced my student researcher. Seated in a tuktuk on our way back to MAPs, she was overcome with guilt for thinking her life was hard. I made space for her to process and feel, validating these difficult emotions. We kept in touch that evening on WhatsApp and spoke again in person the next day at MAPs, ensuring she was managing ok. These subtle acts of care are deeply enmeshed in the fabric of an ethical community-based practice.

In addition to the concerns around emotional wellbeing and researching dignity *with* dignity, I carefully considered community representation and the ethics of narrative construction. This was also a core intellectual challenge, reconciled throughout the analysis and writing phases. As I described at the beginning of this chapter, I designed this project to *re*-center the lived experiences of Syrians and to ascribe meaning to their needs and desires. In practice, this meant evoking my interlocutors' agency over their lives without reproducing the normative self-reliant/victim binaries. Through photo elicitation and in-depth discussions on dignity lost and found, my aim was to capture the fluidity of refugee vulnerability and capacity, contributing a new methodological approach to navigating the duality of human subjects and the particularities of overlooked daily interactions and exchanges that shape subject making.

3.5.2 Mitigating risk

Maintaining safety and security to limit the potential of physical harm to yourself, the participants and the community members connected to your participants is of utmost importance. While this research did not put any member of the research team and project in physical harm, there have been periods of fear throughout my work with MAPs. These experiences have shaped my perspectives and understandings of daily life's uncertainty. After the start of this research, the political milieu shifted, causing extreme stress and anxiety to the Syrian community, including my team of researchers

and the MAPs staff. Restrictions on movement intensified during the end of data collection, with checkpoints randomly positioned in parts of the Bekaa to deter those without legal residency papers or UNHCR refugee documentation from leaving their houses. Stories of the military raiding homes and arresting young men considered “illegal” by the state catalyzed a sense of panic across the Syrian community. There were several weeks that I chose not to make house visits and postponed my work with the artisans. MAPs closed the office for a month to ensure the safety of the staff. All in-person activities were put on hold, and I spoke with my team on WhatsApp and Zoom. This period of uncertainty did not drastically obstruct the research timeline; however, it did discourage additional follow-up interviews. As life became particularly draining and chaotic, scheduling more interviews became less vital, and with my ethics approval extended, I was patient. Then in October 2023, with the start of the war on Gaza and south Lebanon, I made the agonizing decision of leaving Lebanon, an unforeseen challenge that further limited the number of face-to-face interviews I was planning on conducting with focus group participants and MAPs staff.

3.6 Conclusion

The application of longitudinal and immersive community-based methodologies provides this dissertation with depth, dimension and site specificity. The methodological framework is intentionally designed to contribute more complex and emotive ways of engaging with the multifaceted experience of dispossession. Such an immersive and collaborative approach is essential for complicating the prevailing moralized and rights-based dignity discourse that continues to position Western-led humanitarian infrastructures as the supporter and provider of ‘human’ dignity. This doctoral project provided an opportunity to shape and develop my own ethical practice, one which embodies care and self-inquiry. It is through this framework that I formulated an analysis and represented my interlocutors with dignity and accuracy.

These methods of data collection and analysis feed into the next four analysis chapters. Observations and unstructured interviews manifest throughout, providing dimension and contextual specificity that enhance focus group findings. Chapter 4, 'Dignity and Subjectivity' draws extensively from longitudinal participant observation and an embodied knowledge of families. Chapter 5, 'Dignity and Agency,' is an attempt to evoke my interlocutors' capacities to preserve and restore dignity for themselves, leveraging the narratives elicited in the documentary film and engaging with the action-oriented codes. In Chapter 6, 'Dignity and Space,' I map these agentic processes onto the spaces discussed in the focus groups, examining sites of dignity lost and found more carefully. Through the process of writing and refining these chapters, a new component of dignity emerged, inspiring Chapter 7, 'Dignity and Temporality.' In this concluding analysis, I think about dignity in refuge as burden, a theory that unfolds across each of these chapters.

Chapter 4: Dignity and Subjectivity

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 Chapter objectives

This chapter argues that dignity is a relational, processual and emotive everyday experience operating at interconnected dimensions. Building from the critical theories of dignity outlined in Chapter 2, the following discussion offers new knowledge on how everyday dignity in exile is constructed at the familial, collective, and individual levels. Crucial to this analysis is identifying how dignity is simultaneously lost and found at these scales, uncovering myriad processes undertaken by my interlocutors to feel their dignity amidst compounding structural precarities. The empirical data introduces the everyday struggle for dignity through the multifaceted lens of subjectivity, unpacking how dignity operations are also gendered and generational. I argue that feeling dignity transcends the 'rational' autonomous self, a key component that differentiates my relational understanding of dignity from normative Kantian theories which conceptualize dignity as a fixed individual experience.

4.1.2 Starting points

This dissertation, positioned to critically rethink hegemonic notions of dignity, began with the review of the literature through time and across disciplinary thinking. In Chapter 2, I thematically organized the prevailing theories into the notions of universalism, relationality, process and emotion. The former emerges as the moralized theory grounded in rational agency and autonomy - notions which this research disputes. Understanding the literature provides the foundation for rethinking dignity as an amalgamation of the latter overlooked critical theories. I begin this exercise through the lens of subjectivity, as this conceptual vantage point effectively destabilizes notions of individual autonomy through the theorization of relationality. This rethinking builds

from the work philosophers (Malpas, 2007), historians (Harrison, 2024), bioethicists (Lickiss, 2007) and feminists (Miller 2017) whose work complicates the normativity of fixed and individualized conceptualizations. For these scholars, dignity is fundamentally relational and fluid, extending beyond the autonomous self and shaped by social, cultural, political and economic contexts. As Malpas (2007) describes:

> How we think about the dignity that is ours (whoever 'we' may be) depends very much on our conception of ourselves. In this respect, my own assertion of the necessary implication of the ontological here can be seen as simply an assertion of the interconnectedness of our concepts and of our thinking. (19)

In line with Malpas's argument, answering the question of dignity should then elicit knowledge on what it means to be human. Whereas contemporary discussions are grounded in ontological assumptions that our dignity is derived from our individual rational autonomy, Malpas suggests that the answer lies in relationality – in our inherent interconnectedness. Beyond the critical study of dignity, theories of relationality are also challenging provocations of individual autonomy in anthropological inquiry as well. This is core to the work of Suad Joseph, who focuses on Arab family connectivity and personhood in Lebanon (see Joseph 1993, 1994, 2018, 2022). Their longitudinal ethnographic account of sociality offers the concept of the relational self, countering cartesian dualism and fixed Western-centric constructions of the autonomous and bound self. This relational self is fluid, dynamic, and intimately connected to others, defying boundaries and dualistic assumptions. The work of Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2015, 2018) further explores the notion of relationality in Lebanon, investigating how refugee communities overlap and interact within urban spaces. This thinking moves beyond refugee-host relationality, offering a nuanced and overlooked account of everyday interconnectedness that also defies hegemonic dualism of the citizen/non-citizen binary.

Taking these accounts of relationality together, a few things become clear. First, the human experience of dignity can only be ascertained through understanding the

particularities of how our existence is shaped in relation to ourselves, others and the world around us. Second, negotiating the complexity of this interconnection necessitates ethnographic inquiry and engagement with multifaceted subjectivity. Third, applying the relational lens of dignity to our understanding of refugeehood has the potential to stimulate and expand contextualized knowledge in a predominantly rigid and categorical field of study.

In this chapter I develop a framework for analyzing how dignity operates through multiple dimensions, first examining family, community, and the self, and later applying a gendered and generational lens. Grappling with family dynamics becomes foundational to rethinking dignity relationally. Through the lens of this intimate and tightly-knit unit, we can make sense of how the cultivation of dignity extends to society. That is, how the preservation of dignity becomes a collective cultural practice. As Joseph (2018) writes:

> We cannot afford not to focus on family. There is not an event social/political/economic/religious/cultural—un-folding in the Arab region that is not relevant to families and for which more rigorous analyses of families could not produce important and critical insights. Family remains the most powerful social idiom throughout the Arab region. (1)

Despite this rich significance, the Arab family in Syria has been overlooked. In a systematic review, Chatty (2018) reveals trends and gaps in the literature, identifying the impediments of research under the Bath regime compounded with the imposition of the Western feminist gaze and research interests. In the 1970s and 80s, scholars such as Margert Meriwether contributed insightful knowledge on family as “a key agent, subject, and catalyst of changing values and experiences during times of social transformation” (ibid: 236). This work considered a wide spectrum of experiences, desires and freedoms across urban, rural and class divides, questioning the applicability of normative notions of patriarchy, tradition and modernity. As we will see clearly from this chapter, Meriwether’s pioneering notion of family and gender

construction remains relevant. I also consider the ethnographic work of Kastrinou (2016), whose research in pre-war Syria investigates marriage as a site of struggle and socio-political relations. In their prologue they write: “Back then it was marriages which were reinforcing, forging, testing and rupturing social relations in Syria. Now, it is war”. Below, I build from these critical vantage points to explore the overlooked recent shifts in family values and gendered desires for marriage as a result of war, displacement, and marginalization. The ways in which life in refugeehood has accelerated the speed of change within Syrian families, placing new pressures on wives, husbands, and children to perform new roles and renegotiate expectations demands investigation. Indeed, marriage remains a site of struggle as Kastrinou (2016) argues, though the power relations shaping these experiences differ in refugeehood.

4.2 Dignity at Multiple Dimensions

4.2.1 Familial dignity

> We say “one family” because of the meaning of the family as the main contributing factor for us as individuals to keep this circle of support to stay standing to support our dignity. The choice of one family, because it is something we belong to, and we take our power and our strength from it. This is from our roots actually. (Interview with Bathena, October 2023).

Bathena is responding to my question about the meaning of MAPs mission ‘one family towards dignity.’ This is the most formal of our interactions. Usually, we are sitting on her balcony in Bar Elias, drinking *matte* [herbal tea] and eating peanuts, sunflower seeds, and fresh fruits, talking until we can't keep our eyes open anymore. Her grandmother, mother, and sister are there too. Her brother is preparing his nightly shisha. Ever since we met at MAPs and started working together, Bathena and I developed an intimate friendship. I have spent the past five years participating in this after-dinner routine cocooned by her family, so our Zoom interview feels far more removed than usual. It is also the first time I ever interviewed her. On the other side of

the computer screen, I can feel her family's presence. We are speaking virtually, and in English, because I wasn't able to travel to Bekaa that day.

When Bathena's family fled Homs to Lebanon during the war, Bathena stayed behind and attended medical school. The war was not going to stop her dream of becoming a doctor. While Bathena studied for exams amidst the sound of aerial bombs, her family was living in a refugee camp in the Bekaa to save money for her schooling. But Bathena only learned of this five years later.

> They [her family] paid the cost of affecting their dignity for sustainable development. This definitely wasn't easy, I used to see them cry. I saw them affected but they were trying to hide these emotions from the rest of the family members. It is not mentally easy. I didn't know at that time that they were living in a camp. They experienced that happening to them and I did something similar to what they did with me. I used to say everything is ok and I am in a safe zone, but at the same time they didn't mention how hard their living conditions are and I didn't know they lived in a camp. I only knew that when I visited them for the first time. I came here [Bekaa] to visit them for one week after graduation from medical school, so I was a resident in the hospital. I took a leave for one week and decided to come visit them. I was shocked and I spent the whole week every night my face covered by the blanket, crying all the night, because I couldn't imagine how they can live there. At the same time, we were five members in the same room, so I don't want to reflect that on to them and increase their suffering. I know it is not easy for them, so I tried to stay hidden. But that shock produced my personal decision of stopping my residency in a hospital to be a rheumatologist. So I went back to Syria that week without discussing with my family and I stopped my residency as a doctor, and I gathered my documents, and I moved to Lebanon. Because I thought that this is the time for me to support them because they need my help right now. I can continue later. This was a sacrifice. I fought for my family's dignity. I withdraw my studies and my academic future at that time because I need to just pay to get them outside of the camp. I need them to just move to the usual lifestyle they

> used to be in. I was as a stranger to this place discovering every tiny step and thing available there. For example, want to use the sink, I want to use the bathroom, I want to sleep at night when it is raining and felt that the water will be covering me. Every detail was burning me. (Interview with Bathena, October 2023).

Bathena elucidates the ways in which family provides the roots of support that nurture and cultivate dignity. In refugeehood, when those roots become torn from the ground, urgent and sometimes hidden sacrifices are made to maintain the strength of the family unit. Bathena's parents, sister and brothers endured harsh conditions in a camp, sacrificing their dignity, to support her future dream. They did so in secret to shield her from feeling their pain – and from enduring any sense of guilt that may dissuade Bathena from completing her studies. This secrecy did benefit her; as soon as Bathena witnessed the sight of her family's living conditions, she experienced a profound emotional response that compelled her to reciprocate her familial duty. She dropped out of her residency program and found work in Lebanon's NGO sector, sacrificing her own dignity to facilitate her family's move out of the camp.

This is our first encounter with sacrifice, which I argue is a core agentic process embodied in the relational and emotive fight for dignity. Building on the work of Pearlman (2013) who describes the importance of bodily risk associated with reclaiming dignity through the process of revolution, I engage with the sacrifice of one's own sense of dignity as an overlooked facet of risk in contexts of precarity. Identifying and unraveling these relational and emotive underpinnings of sacrifice is strengthened by Joseph (1993, 1994), who elucidates how the Arab family becomes an extension of the self, as adults and children are socialized to view themselves relationally. They argue that this connectivity, and particularly the compliance to gendered and generational hierarchies, holds the family together, even energizing the family to preserve each other's honour. The story of sacrifice in Bathena's family aligns with this thinking, evoking how familial connectivity compelled each member to put the other first. In times of war and dispossession, where life becomes shaped by loss, Bathena's parents forgo their hierarchal advantages to ensure someone in their family could still

pursue their future dream. Such observations complicate rights-based dignity theories grounded in a fixed and individualized status and worth, revealing instead an inherent interconnectedness that transcends the autonomous self. Similar sacrifices of self-dignity for the family's honour are further illustrated across the focus group discussions, and in particular, sacrifices made by mothers. For instance, Miriam, 20, says:

> We can't just stop doing everything that threatens our dignity. Sometimes, we're forced to do it even if it hurts our dignity. My mother works at a shop, and there is a guy there who always mistreats her. He always tells her that if you don't like it, you can just quit. However, my mother must stay there as she can't find another job in this situation. She must provide for us. (Miriam in the female youth Focus Group Discussion, November 2022)

Samar, 20, also describes the sacrifices her mother is making for her family's dignity.

> If I was in Syria, I would have gone to university as usual, but here my mother is risking a lot of things to enroll me at a university, including people's gossip. Because I am not in my country, my mother's dignity has been hurt here, because she is forced to bear all of this. My mother is getting a lot of pressure from the people around her. Our neighbor asks my mother every day about why I'm going out alone, and this thing hurts her dignity a lot. *(*Samar in the women youth Focus Group Discussion, November 2022*)*

In the adult men focus group discussion, the importance of preserving familial dignity were further articulated. For example, Abdullah exclaimed:

> A person sacrifices everything for his dignity and the dignity of his children and family. No one abuses me or my daughters. I sacrifice myself if something happens to my daughters. (Adult men focus group discussion with Abdullah, November 2022)

Following Abdullah's statement, Kareem 25, then contributed:

> In fact, they said what I wanted to say. A person should sacrifice everything to preserve his dignity and the dignity of his family. (Adult men focus group discussion with Kareem, November 2022)

Once a source of incessant dignity, the family has been weakened, demanding mothers, fathers and children to sacrifice their self-dignity in order to radically care for each other. Contributing to the family through such risk is not a resented responsibility but instead reflected on by my interlocutors as an honorable duty that restores dignity, exposing the superiority of family over the individual experience. As described by Bathena, the family are the roots in which provide her with power, strength and dignity. In this analysis, the self and the family are interconnected entities that cannot be easily distinguishable, but instead they nurture and depend on each other for support when dignity is endangered, exchanging available nutrients through complicated and sometimes secret processes. Crucial to this analysis is explicating the ways in which a relational understanding of dignity further destabilizes hegemonic universalist provocations around ‘giving refugees dignity’. As elucidated above, my interlocutors position themselves and their families as the cultivators of their own dignity – not the international refugee regime.

4.2.2 Collective dignity

> When you belong to a group of people, or a family, your dignity becomes associated with that community’s dignity. When the people around you are dignified, you automatically become dignified, and vice versa. When the people around you are undignified, you automatically feel discomfort and less dignified. (Ahmed, 24, youth men focus group, November 2022).

Ahmad evokes how dignity operates in relation to the collective experience, derived from observing and absorbing your surroundings, an awareness of, and an emotional reaction to, community and group representation. In line with Pearlman (2013), the empirical data presented below will reveal how dignity can be ‘emboldened’ by positive collective experiences on the one hand, while threatened through ‘dispiriting’ collective experiences on the other. Core to this analytical exercise is negotiating the community

as an extension of the self, as we did above with the family. Through this expanded lens, I offer new knowledge on how dignity is shaped in relation to the collective experience. We can begin by observing the pronouns chosen when describing dignity. For example, Nadia, 45, a crochet artisan says:

> As long as our name is a refugee or a displaced person, there is no dignity when we leave our country, for sure our dignity will be lifted back in our home country, and our dignity will be restored. (Artisans focus group discussion with Nadia, December 2022).

Later in the same discussion, Noor, 31, says “We feel at the highest level of dignity when we are sitting with people we love.” And in the youth female discussion, Leila, 19, expresses, “The only time I feel proud about being a refugee is when the Syrian refugees succeed at something or do something great.” I reference these moments together because they underscore the ways in which dignity is described as something shared and experienced collectively, illustrated through the use of “we” and “our”. Leila’s description illuminates how her dignity is relational to the positive representation of refugees which triggers feelings of pride and joy. But relationality simultaneously exposes my interlocutors to indignity. Bathena elucidates this multi-faceted push and pull:

> A part of our dignity is about the strong belonging. We have to stay belonging to this community and to our Syrian identity that we carry on everywhere. At the same time, we are treated as a group and you can see how others don’t see us as having any differences or specifications. When I see the lack of dignity amongst Syrians as an example, let's say bad actions or behaviors by Syrians in the community where we are, it is then reflected on us when they characterize and generalize their [Lebanese Government] decisions on the entire Syrian identity, so this affects my dignity too, when they say ‘all Syrians are thieves, all Syrians are hungry, all Syrians are making problems and aren’t organized. Or criminals.’ They just rely on individual actions and they generalize and this can happen by the general speech from people in the community, or sometimes from

> the media which is discriminatory. So that affects my dignity. (Interview with Bathena, October 2023).

Bathena is describing the tension between needing collectivity and belonging on the one hand, while being angered by the imposition of collective identification for discriminatory political gains. It is crucial to understand the ways in which collectivity can become weaponized in refuge, threatening dignity through disparaging feelings of shame and anger. The ways in which Syrians are homogenized and then demonized across Lebanese media and political discourse directly affects my interlocutors' senses of dignity. Western constructed narratives of refugee dependency and victimhood manufactured within the humanitarian industrial complex emerge as compounding causes of indignity that operate in the same way as the political discourse. In Chapter 6, we will explore how harmful representation shapes the everyday fight for dignity more carefully. At this stage, it is crucial to understand the importance of collectivity and the influence of collective representation on feeling dignity or *not*.

Furthermore, in addition to harmful representation imposed from the outside, the ordinary daily experience of bearing witness to the suffering of your own people can also threaten collective dignity. This is something repeatedly brought up by the Director of MAPs, who has built an organization to counter this harmful experience. The Bekaa Valley is covered with informal tented settlements and checkpoints designated for preventing Syrian bodies from moving freely. Trucks with food boxes are thrown into crowds of people. For the 85% of Syrians without residency papers, Bekaa is an open-air prison where living a prosperous life is denied. In every aspect of daily life, there is a reminder that you are not welcome. Child beggars on the street, visits to friends and family in poorer conditions, or overhearing anti-Syrian slurs, are such reminders that directly affect senses of collective dignity. These feelings are subtlety revealed through everyday conversations where my interlocutors share stories of their struggling family members or friends, usually over coffee or while engaged in their crochet work. The pain is collective and shared, so these interactions often end quietly, with utterances of *haram* [such a shame] before moving onto another topic. These feelings of sadness

and shame have been expressed throughout the focus group discussions. For instance, Khadija, 54, said:

> As a teacher, I suffer a lot when I see children in the street at the rubbish bins and they do not go to school. Most of them have been suffocated by this life. Sometimes this child is without a father, other times he is present, but he cannot bear the burden himself. Once, I will not forget him, he told me that he loves going to school a lot, but he has to help his father with the house expenses. (Khadija, adult women focus group, November 2022)

These emotional responses surrounding the collective experience mirror in many ways the dynamics embedded in the family. That is, the community becomes an extension of self, shaping senses of dignity. At times, there is a powerful connectivity, and even solidarity, between my interlocutors from being part of the displaced Syrian community and from enduring the same oppression. This is personified in the mission 'one family towards dignity', where the language of 'family' is an attempt to galvanize the same action and energy to preserve honor within the wider community as the family. As acutely identified by Joseph (2018:1), family is a powerful idiom in the Arab world, offering intimacy and motivating followers towards familial commitments and obligations. The blurred and fuzzy boundary between the self, the family and the community epitomizes relational dignity in the Arab context. Framed as a mission, there is also the assumption that society *needs* activating - that one must treat the collective experience with the same intention and care as the family.

Knowledge on how Syrians, and refugees more broadly, rebuild and re-nourish, not only their uprooted familial roots, but their interconnected societal roots too, remains overlooked. Crucial to filling in these blind spots is thus further grappling with the challenges to community building. In particular, I identify sites of everyday discrimination reproduced within the Syrian community. This can be located for instance within narratives of each other, often in the form of stigmatization against those living in informal tented settlements. Throughout my fieldwork I have become familiar with

‘takers of aid’, a name for a group of Syrians who are stigmatized by their counterparts for choosing to live in camps. The insinuation here is that living in camps is for the purpose of receiving aid, and thus by virtue of living in one, you can become marked by the wider community as being lazy, dependent and undignified. Beyond sites of stigmatization and emasculation - which will be further unraveled through a gendered lens below - fragmentation and lack of trust within the displaced Syrian community also challenges the collective pursuit of dignity. The causes of refugee mistrust have been explored from various vantage points across forced migration studies (e.g., Al Ajlan, 2023; Voutira and Harrell-Bond, 1995; Ní Raghallaigh, 2014). The work of Voutira and Harrell-Bond (1995) is particularly revealing, indicating the ways in which the humanitarian regime thrives off and fuels mistrust, creating hierarchal dynamics where refugees must compete and manipulate each other for aid, exacerbating the existing fragmentation within Syrian society. They observe that, “one seldom finds a sense of political solidarity among refugee populations. More often than not, refugee populations are highly factionalized in relation to their different strategies for resolving the causes which led to their flight” (ibid:217). Indeed, my interlocuters feel most at ease amongst those from their village or city in Syria, taking time to trust others. But making new social networks also demands spare time and energy, two components not so readily available.

In the context of Bekaa, this mistrust can be understood through what the MAPs director refers to as ‘the war mentality’, described to me as an element of the refugee psyche which derives from the survival mechanism in wartime to protect yourself, family and sect first. Several interlocutors alluded to this mentality, though it remains an invisible interaction overshadowed by the categorical fetishism that continues to homogenize
‘Syrian refugees’ into one homogeneous group. As Amira, 40, explained, “You feel that the crisis exposed many people and they began to love themselves more than others, so there is no longer trust in others,” (Adult female focus group, November 2022). This mentality of mistrust can be further teased out through the experiences of Bathena and her reflections living under the Assad dictatorship:

> We experienced so many cases of loss of our dear friends and family members, either from being arrested or disappeared just because they shared their political thoughts, so that raised my level of concern and I took time to produce any sentence. We have to paraphrase our words and keep our thoughts anonymous. That was a conflict for me. I want to protect myself physically, but I don't want to injure myself and my dignity. So, I don't want to lie. To be careful, some people used to either lie or say the opposite. For example, I tell people what they want to hear and will talk in your language and be on your side. What I used to do is talk or express whenever it is needed only, not talking anymore and keeping my expressions anonymous so not to lie, which affects my dignity. For example, I talk about the causes but without nominating who, so it was a kind of acting. This is how I could respect myself because I don't want to lie. (Interview with Bathena, October, 2023)

Like familial dignity, collective dignity is also fragile and in flux: threatened by imposed homogenization, the witnessing of suffering and mistrust, but simultaneously restored through belonging and positive representation. In the next chapter, I draw attention to the agentic processes for *rebuilding* trust. I do this through the lens of MAPs, which seeks to activate and unify the fragmented Syrian community. It is here, within their mission of overcoming pervasive mistrust and building a sense of community belonging and interdependence, that collective dignity is restored.

4.2.3 Self dignity

Mona, 45, taught herself how to sew and created her own business selling custom wedding dresses and fashion garments from her informal tented settlement. "Now I have my own project," she said proudly, "so I work by myself, and there are people under me, so I built my dignity by myself after I started working by myself, learning, giving, raising my children, and giving them a different education and upbringing." Her

husband, who works for her, procures the materials. This small business represents a new phase in their life, one characterized by a restored sense of self dignity.

> Naturally, it [education] has to do with dignity, when you are educated in school or anything else in life. Here, dignity is when you learn a certain craft that you master with your own hands and learn as a craft. You create your own dignity. When you make something out of yourself, something wonderful comes out of you, for it is what gives you dignity. (Mona, adult female focus group, November 2022).

Mona's description of 'making something out of yourself' elucidates the relationship between dignity and agentic capacities. As she describes, one must create their own dignity, through learning, achieving and creating. For her, the process of mastering a craft gives life purpose, resulting in feelings of self-confidence.

This notion that a sense of self dignity is cultivated in relation to one's agentic capacities is further elucidated by the lived experiences of the crochet artisans. In our focus group discussion, the artisans described crochet as "dignity itself." This relationship between craft and dignity has been a topic of inquiry since I began working with artisans in 2019. Through this PhD investigation, I developed a deeper understanding of this interplay, teasing out the compounding elements that influence self dignity beyond a simplified understanding of financial stability. In particular, through grappling with Mona's experience, I became more alert to the importance of challenge and the meaningful process of developing an expertise. Compounding with the sense of dignity nourished through achieving at a high level, I further observe the dignifying role of social recognition associated with expertise – a component of dignity theorized by Killmister (2020). Throughout my fieldwork I have observed the ways in which the artisans receive continuous positive social recognition for their work. At small gatherings or morning coffees with their friends, family members or neighbors, the artisans can be seen casually pulling out a half-made animal from their purses, spending their social hours with the crochet needle in hand. The witnesses are

immediately enamored, examining the object in their hands, asking questions about the work, visibly impressed by the toy's quality. Oftentimes, this can lead to the artisan teaching their craft, organically building the crochet community through physically and emotionally intimate social interactions that embolden feelings of self *and* collective dignity. The very knowledge of crochet is historically a traditional craft passed down through generations of women. In exile, non-kin members now gather in their homes or at MAPs to learn this craft from their neighbors or strangers, further blurring this boundary between family, community and the self. I argue that dignity is restored here through the reproduction of familial practices within the public, though deeply intimate, space of the NGO. In Chapter 6, through a spatial lens, we will explore this dignifying process in more detail.

In addition to Mona and the crochet artisans, female university students further elucidate how their sense of self dignity is relational to their agentic capacities to ‘make something out of yourself’. For instance, when I asked Samar in our interview what makes her feel dignified, she revealed a huge smile and spoke about an exam where she earned the highest mark, shocking her Lebanese peers and teachers. “This earned me their respect,” she asserted. Earning high marks within the discriminatory Lebanese school system that hinders Syrians from succeeding, triggers the emboldening feelings of pride, joy and recognition that stimulate a powerful sense of self dignity (c.f. Killmister, 2020).

This analysis reveals how self dignity operates in relation to agentic capacities to create, achieve, and succeed. This builds from the work of Malpas (2007), who suggests that dignity is always in relation to something – whether that is to ourselves, to each other, and the world we inhabit. Fundamental to this relational theory is that it provides the analytical tools for negotiating how dignity can be both lost and found across dimensions. In essence, this fluid and boundless interconnectedness protects us from losing all sensations of dignity at once. As argued above, the roots of the family are the ultimate source of dignity in refuge, prioritized and cared for through the emotive and risky self-sacrifice of dignity. The conceptual significance of these

preservation processes does not simply lie in the precarity of dignity, but in its simultaneous fortification.

4.3 Dignity and Gendered Experiences

4.3.1 Dignity and women

> It is a difficult issue to maintain my dignity. For example, for me, I am like a widow; I do not have a husband. I work, go out and get tired, but it is a difficult issue because I lost a lot and I was exploited so much that I live alone here in a very difficult circumstance (…) for sure being alone is very difficult, especially for a woman who does not have a man in Lebanon or Syria. In these two countries, the situation is difficult. (Interview with Bushra, 38, November 2022).

Bushra articulates her struggles around maintaining her dignity as a widowed and divorced woman. These challenges are social, political, economic, *and* gendered; they are overlapping and cannot simply be reduced to or explained by patriarchy. This way of thinking about the relationship between gender and dignity draws on the critical feminist perspectives of Lila Abu-Lughod (2002, 2015), who advocates for recognition to the wider complex entanglements oppressing women that go beyond Muslim men. In this vein, I consider both the harmful reproductions of patriarchal power that make the experience of living alone as a widow and a divorcee an immense psychological burden – as well as the broader political and economic context that exploits and discriminates against Syrians. These layers are then situated within the historical context of the Syrian war and the rupture to the protective familial roots – the source of dignity.

Bushra’s neighbors spread harmful rumors about her when she leaves her informal tented settlement. Widows, and especially women living alone, are stigmatized and ostracized across the conservative Syrian community in which my research is conducted. In the case of Bushra, because she must provide for herself, she often works late hours, creating the suspicion that she is a sex worker. This directly affects her sense of dignity, inflicting paranoia and social anxiety, and causing stress when leaving the confines of the camp. To protect herself outside her house, she must hide her identity:

> When I go to the grocery store and they know I'm divorced and if I smile or turn around, they say I have bad intentions, imagine! When I go out, I lie and say that I have a husband and children. (ibid)

In her immaculately clean private space, away from people, Bushra feels most comfortable. She is free of exploitation and discriminatory slurs. Bushra’s cleaning has developed into a compulsive disorder, a topic she is not shy to speak about. When Bayan, my student researcher, and I first stepped foot into her tent, she asked us to take our shoes off and wash our feet. She didn’t approve of my washing, taking me by the arm back to the bathroom to teach me how - laughing that foreigners don’t know how to clean properly. It was an unusual, but highly effective way of developing a level of trust and intimacy necessary for the four-hour conversation that followed. Bushra’s loneliness and despair was undisguised, she was self-aware of her endured injustices, pinpointing the causes of her dignity loss with acute precision. Through our conversation it became clear that there was a void here in her spacious tent – Bushra's parents used to live with her but they both returned to Syria when her father got ill. Her brothers and first husband were all killed in the war. As a form of security, she remarried in Lebanon just before her parents returned to Syria, but she soon after initiated a divorce. The marriage, as she described to us, was humiliating, draining and affecting her dignity. In this complicated entanglement of oppression, both marriage and singlehood threaten dignity. As this dissertation develops, I will continue to unravel and unpick these complexities surrounding gender dynamics and the rupture in normative pre-refugeehood patriarchal roles.

The story of Noor, 31, has a similar beginning, though her ability to restore her dignity as both a widow and divorcee is strengthened by familial roots, a privilege in exile. I met Noor in 2019 when she fled Akkar in secrecy to escape the abusive wrath of her ex-husband. She and her one-year-old baby found refuge at her aunt's house in Bekaa, the trainer of the crochet program. We were both integrated into this family at the same time, developing a close relationship and filling the household with laughter. Noor was distracted from remembering the past: she was included in the crochet project where she thrived and took great pleasure from her new independence from her abusive husband. Her sense of dignity, and mental health, had been largely restored, though other challenges persisted. When Noor's first husband was killed in the war, their two young sons were taken from Noor by the husband's family against her will, as per Sharia Law. Widows are not only harassed in the public sphere or stigmatized by their own communities as the case of Bushra, but they can also be ostracized by their husband's families who see a single woman as unfit to care for and protect their grandchildren or nieces and nephews. Noor's sons live in a camp with their aunts and grandma who are now only a few miles from Noor in Central Bekaa, but they were told their mother has died.

We see from these gendered experiences that the loss of dignity endured by widows is particular and extreme – it also operates in relation to support networks and is intertwined with the broader economic and political context. Unlike Bushra who lives in isolation, Noor's dignity has been restored by her family who helped nurture her strength, as well as her involvement in the crochet program which provided financial security and improved her self-confidence. For Bushra, living alone, separated from family due to death, disappearance and diaspora, greatly challenges her fight for dignity. Self-isolation – and her autonomy - becomes both the solution to and cause of her fragile dignity.

The story of Samar, 21, further illuminates how dignity operates in relation to gender. I visited her in an informal tented settlement for orphans where she lives with her mother and young brother. In this research context, an orphan refers to any child without a father. Seated beside Samar and her mother on a thin mattress, sipping coffee and

periodically reaching for a handful of nuts, we spoke about what made her feel dignified and discussed how she resists the harmful representations of her counterparts through succeeding in school. Being seated in an orphan camp, surrounded by ostracized single women, shaped the discussion of dignity. As Samar's mother told me, she only has "half her dignity". She then continued:

> One will experience a lack of dignity in a nation where one is not accepted. Everywhere I go, people say: 'You Syrians have taken away our rights, electricity, water, and bread, and the UN pay you dollars while you live better than us.' I have to go out and buy items for the house and hear this. If there was a man, I would have stayed at home and not heard all these words. (Samar's mother, Interview, November 2022)

After hearing her mother speak, Samar then turned to me and sighed. In English, she quietly uttered: "when people see a woman alone, they don't respect her." Compounding with this harmful stigmatization against widows, Samar's mother must also endure nationality-based discrimination. Without the presence of a husband or an adult son who often operate as shields from the public sphere, her mother is more exposed to verbal abuse. Throughout my fieldwork, whether in team meetings, focus groups, interviews, or observations, it became apparent that normative patriarchal dynamics in many ways served to protect women's dignity by limiting exposure to exploitation and harassment. As we have now seen, staying at home, in the sanctity of the private sphere, is desired not only for Samar's mother, but for Bushra too. Grappling with these nuances is crucial for producing new situated knowledge on gender dynamics in the context of forced displacement. Building on Abu-Lughold (2002, 2015), I have come to understand the performance of normative gendered roles as protecting women's dignity. The catastrophic loss of husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles and sons has destabilized and ruptured Syrian sociality, forcing my women interlocutors to make difficult sacrifices and endure painful stigmatization unimaginable in pre-war Syria.

Yasmin, 42, has also been exposed to gendered-based violence. In our focus group discussion, she described her struggles of preserving her dignity after her husband was killed in the Syrian war.

> I went through many trials for the sake of dignity. I was supported by my husband and my family before I come to Lebanon, now I lost them all, and my children were young when I first come here. I was subjected to harassment, and everything to exploit me in order to work and feed my orphans (...) It was not only me who was exposed to this, but all those who lost their livelihood were exposed to such not good conditions, but some of them drowned in the swamp and there is no one to get them out of there. (Yasmine, adult women focus group, November 2022)

After our focus group, in the privacy of the small MAPs kitchen, Yasmine described her harassment in more detail as she stirred the coffee into bubbling water. She then put the spoon down to motion with her hands how her boss violated her body. "*Hamdallah*" [Thank God], she says, indicating her relief that it is over and acknowledging that it could have been worse. Yasmine endured years of sexual exploitation, exemplifying the sometimes-excruciating processes of self-sacrifice endured by single mothers for the sake of preserving their familial dignity and protecting their children. Without a husband or any other adult male to protect and defend her physically or financially, Yasmine is made vulnerable to sexual violence. This lived experience further illuminates my argument that the loss of men and the uprootedness of the familial has dissolved normative gender roles, destabilizing women's lives and threatening their dignity and honor. The fragility of women's dignity is exacerbated by the overlapping layers of oppression inflicted by Lebanese and Syrian patriarchal power that exploits, violates or abuses women's bodies, and the broader complex entanglements of war, uprootedness and exile to a politically and economically collapsing country.

4.3.2 Dignity and men

Abbas, 24, works in a factory in the Bekaa for only a few dollars a day. “If a Lebanese were to come and work the same job I do for the same payment, he wouldn’t accept it at all,” he says in our youth men focus group (November 2022). Abbas lives in an informal tented settlement with his new wife whom he is expected to provide for. Refusing work because of its low wage is not an option considering his desperate financial situation. He, like many of his Syrian counterparts, must work multiple jobs to barely cover costs of living. These stresses are echoed across my young male interlocutors in the same discussion. For instance, Yamen, 23, who is also newly married, shared:

> We’re forced to work for lower payment than the Lebanese since if we don’t do so, we wouldn’t be able to pay rent and afford other basic needs. (Youth men focus group, November 2022)

Ahmad, 24, then added to this point:

> We have employers that enslave their Syrian employees and make them work extra time for no payment, and those employees are forced to comply since they have no other choice. Those employers treat those Syrian employees as if they were their property. (Youth men focus group, November 2022)

Forced to undertake multiple jobs to secure enough money to afford daily life, staying awake throughout a 24-hour workday becomes a challenge. Some men have become dependent on captagon pills, a stimulant now widely produced and distributed across Lebanon and Syria. It is not the type of work itself that threatens men’s dignity, but their treatment by Lebanese employers and the explicit distinctions made between Syrians and Lebanese. For younger newly married men with responsibilities as the provider and protector within a patriarchal social system, these pressures to uphold normative gendered roles amidst economic collapse and xenophobia produce fragile senses of dignity.

Young Syrian men are experiencing dignity loss as they withstand exploitation in the workplace and struggle to support their families. But such fragility of male dignity is not only explained through financial constraints: dignity is violated through state sanctioned violence that targets Syrian men, limiting their freedom of movement. As Nassar, 20, shared:

> We need to count to ten before deciding to pass in front of a check point. Our freedom is restrained, we can't go where we want. *(*Nassar, youth men focus group, November 2022).

The role of state violence in threatening my interlocutors' dignity is further illuminated by Abbas, 24, who was arrested in South Lebanon in 2017. He said:

> I got humiliated by the military both in Syria and in Lebanon. I was working in Nabatiyeh, and a military raid came to where I work to arrest a person, but they arrested all of the people present at that time. We got hit a lot while they were taking us to the military cars. When we arrived at the military branch, we got hit even more. They did not ask us for anything, not even for our names, they simply arrested us at Nabatiyeh and took us to Beirut. They stripped us and searched our bodies. We stayed for a whole week in the dungeons not knowing why we came here. After a week passed, they released us after getting hit several times before releasing me. I got arrested for the second time when a raid came to the camp I live at. They arrested me because I did not have valid residency. They started saying, we had enough of you Syrians. Leave Lebanon already. (Abbas, youth men focus group, November 2022).

In the same focus group, Kareem, 23, also described how his dignity was affected by arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. He then shared his story:

> I went to Ablah prison, I stayed for almost 3 weeks, there is a lot of injustice inside, and this thing affects dignity. On the fourth day of detention, someone came and said that all Syrians should stand up. It was a room measuring 2 meters by 2 meters with 28 people in it. All Syrians stood there, 7 or 8 during the

night. He told us to raise both hands above our heads and to keep one leg above the ground. We stood like that for more than an hour and a half, and he kept on going back and forth saying that he didn't want to see any of us resting. After about two hours, he told us to go back to the way we were sitting. Let your hands and feet come down. There was a lot of injustice. (Kareem, youth men focus group, November 2022)

Exile also affects younger men's dignity through destabilizing their future imaginaries of family life - a topic rarely ever addressed through the male gaze. These sensitivities manifested across the youth discussion, revealing an important site of dignity loss that operates in relation to men.

Abbas: I'm married. It is something great, but at the same time you have to be responsible enough for it. When I got married, the situation was better, and I used to get paid more, but now the responsibility on me has grown substantially.

Kareem: The people who marry during this time are mad.

Abbas: Yeah, you're right. It is very difficult to get married right now.

Ahmad: Very difficult during these circumstances.

Kareem: Marriage is the last thing I think about. If I finish my education and establish myself, I will get married.

At the end of the youth focus group discussion, there was a moment of quiet. Ahmad then looked directly at me, and in a whisper, said in English, "It is very difficult to make a family here in Lebanon." I asked him if this affects his dignity, to which he replied: Yes, it does. All the guys talk to each other about how difficult it is to get married these days. We wouldn't be able to secure a lot of things if we were to get married during this period of time. Even if we managed to get married, we wouldn't be able to afford the basic needs if we were to get children, and circumstances are very hard to the point that we're unable to afford those basic needs. (Ahmad, youth men focus group, November 2022)

A week later, in the mixed group discussion, Medi, 20, a student at the Lebanese International University reiterated these same feelings described above:

> When a person gets married and his financial situation is bad, his dignity would be affected since he's not able to provide for his family. It is not logical for a person to marry a woman who used to live with her dignity with her family and make her live with less dignity with him. He must at least provide an atmosphere that is similar to what she had when she was with her family. *(*Medi, mixed focus group, December 2022*).*

To summarize, exploitation in the workplace, the poverty and insecurity that painfully prevents starting a family, and the perpetual threat of violence challenge and shape young men's agentic and precarious fight for dignity. In chapter 7, through the lens of temporality, we will further unravel shifts in men's future desires, revisiting these overlapping layers of violence and inequality that are forcing men to painfully renegotiate their masculinities and their dignity.

It is crucial to also address how older generations of men are negotiating their masculinities. For this older cohort (40-55), they have already sacrificed their self dignity, leaving behind their homes and their land for the sake of their family's dignity. As Ali, 46, shared:

> We joined the revolution demonstrations in order to change our lives, but when the [Assad] regime became armed and there were many dead and victims, we left our country because we could no longer produce anything, and in order to save our children, we came here as refugees. We cannot hold weapons or anything else. We went out in demonstrations for our rights and with the word of truth, which is the word of freedom. We came to this country and found ourselves persecuted and that we are hated people. They hate us here, we are unwanted (...) When we left Syria, we took our dignity with us and took our children out in order to live a better life with our dignity. We left our lands, our cars, and everything that was in Syria. (Ali, adult men focus group, November 2022)

While Ali's excerpt does not explicitly indicate his own defeat, my older male interlocutors are drained from years of discrimination and exploitation, their exhaustion from the continuous fight for dignity is palpable. You can see it in their tired bloodshot eyes, their callused hands – sometimes with missing fingers from precarious jobs- and in their tensed-up shoulders. Ali, like all the other adult men in the discussion, were unemployed. Some of these men may lack the same physical strength and stamina to work multiple manual labor jobs that are offered to younger men. Legal restrictions limit work opportunities and facilitate Syrian exploitation, including the withholding of salaries for months or longer.

With men no longer working, women and children are filling in the financial gaps of the household. This is a phenomenon few men were willing to discuss. Although Abdulla, 54, did exclaim, "whoever let his daughters work, while he does what he wants in his life, has no dignity." I developed a stronger understanding of this new dynamic through the female perception of men, who often framed unemployed husbands and fathers as having lost their dignity. Bushra, for example, initiated her divorce for this reason, and referred to this category as "pigs". Throughout my several years in the Bekaa, I have learned of other divorces such as Bushra's, where widowed women who were remarried in refuge initiated the split because of the new husband's inability to provide. In our interview, Bathena shared:

> I have heard this statement so much from men: 'where is my dignity? I lost my dignity and I am sitting at home like a woman as my wife is working outside and bringing the money.' Many also consider that they lost their dignity when their daughter or wife or sister gives them money at the beginning of the month, for example, to cover the needs of their livelihoods. (Interview, October 2023)

This description elucidates a core element of the gendered and generational experience of dignity in exile. Whereas younger men may sacrifice their dignity and endure exploitation for the sake of their new families in the present, older men are exhausted and less able to make more sacrifices than they already did during the war and in the early years of exile. As described above, many young men are delaying marriage for this reason, even if not having a family also contributes to the loss of

dignity. When taken together, we see that everyday dignity affects women and men at different stages of their lives in distinct ways. Understanding how dignity operates across these different stages of the life course contributes new knowledge on dignity as an inherently relational, emotive and subjective everyday process.

4.4 Conclusion

Building from the critical theories of dignity outlined in Chapter 2, this chapter offers new contextual knowledge on how everyday dignity in exile is inherently relational, processual and emotive. In particular, the analysis is grounded in the notion of relationality, or connectivity as described by Suad Joseph. Through the vantage point of subjectivity, I detailed how dignity operates in relation to society (family, community the self), as well as to gender and generation. In doing so, we see how dignity is an inherently interconnected notion that transcends the ‘rational’ autonomous self, destabilizing normative Kantian theories which conceptualize dignity as a fixed individual experience.

This chapter begins to pluralize sites of dignity, investigating dimensions of subjectivity that allows for a nuanced and comprehensive analysis. By unraveling the complicated interconnectedness of my interlocutors’ social worlds, and their subjectivities, we begin to develop an understanding of how dignity is simultaneously lost and preserved. I did this in part by elucidating how it can be fragile but then fortified by the family. The self sacrifice of dignity nurtures and protects family honour, contributing new knowledge on how women, men, and children are reconstructing their identities and gendered roles in relation to this fragility. This discussion sets the foundation for the next chapter, where I place more analytical attention to the agentic actions for cultivating dignity, including a deeper investigation into the multiple facets of sacrifice.

Chapter 5: Dignity and Agency

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 Chapter objectives

This chapter pluralizes sites of dignity through the lens of agency. I focus on how my interlocutors are preserving their interconnected senses of worth, drawing attention to overlooked agentic processes embodied in the multifaceted everyday struggle for dignity. In particular, I locate sites of dignity in sacrifice, creativity, generosity, and narrative. A thorough study of dignity, I argue, demands empirical attention to site specific agentic and resisting capacities – both the mundane and the explicit practices that emerge in response to oppressive socio-political entanglements. Through identifying the modalities of these situated capacities, the following discussion continues to develop the critical rethinking of dignity as an embodied agentic and precarious lived experience of continuous preservation, contributing new knowledge on the duality of the refugee subject.

5.1.2 Starting points

This chapter argues that dignity is not only inherently relational and emotive, but processual too, building on the critical theories of processual dignity outlined in Chapter 2. This includes Lloyd (2022) whose theory of Black dignity foregrounds the role of process in reclaiming dignity. Their work provides insight into the embodied agentic capacities demanded of Black people to live with their dignity in a racialized world. Dignity here is achieved in struggle. I also draw on political conceptualizations of processual dignity found in literature on Palestinian resistance (Albadawi, 2023) and on the Syrian revolution (Pearlman, 2013; Harkin, 2018). Across these works, dignity is inherently fragile and in continuous process, necessitating agentic and resisting

capacities. These critical theorizations, which convey the social construction of dignity, constitute only a fraction of the literature on dignity. They remain overshadowed by the seemingly non-controversial rhetoric of moral liberal philosophy that has constructed a synonym for humanity. I suggest that for bodies constrained under oppressive governments, with rights denied and freedom of speech or movement prevented, applications of dignity in the moral and autonomous sense *are* controversial and demand problematization. Rethinking dignity as inherently relational and processual sets the groundwork for this urgent transition.

In the previous chapter, I argued that the ways in which dignity operates at multiple interconnected dimensions can fortify dignity. With the support of Butler (2009, 2020), I now want to focus more deeply on how this relationality can operate in the opposite direction, exposing my interlocutors to vulnerability as much as it does to preservation. It is here, within this interconnectedness of our existence, that shapes the precarity of life and the possibilities for the exploitation of our inherently vulnerable sense of dignity. For Butler (2009:61), this precariousness creates the conditions for 'responsiveness'. That is, our vulnerability is often confronted with our resisting and agentic capacities. Such a relational rethinking of vulnerability and agency offers a strong departure point for the further unraveling of dignity as precarious *and* agentic everyday endeavor. What I argue in the chapter that follows is that because dignity is relational, and therefore always vulnerable to exploitation, it is simultaneously always in process and in need of preservation. It is continuously lost *and* found.

This reconceptualization of dignity has political implications in that it creates a framework for unpicking and identifying where and how dignity is abused and restored, rectifying the normative usage of the term which absolves states and the humanitarian industrial complex any responsibility in exploiting fragile dignities. As such, a processual rethinking provides the analytical tools for destabilizing moralized and paternalistic conceptualizations of dignity that position Western humanitarian and legal infrastructures as the bestower of refugee dignity. This is pertinent to the study of refugees and forced migration, where depictions of passivity and victimhood, and neoliberal obsessions with autonomy, are often un-critically and un-intentionally

reproduced, overshadowing the intricacies of agentic capacity and refugee interdependency. Similarly problematic are the romantic or tokenistic depictions of "empowerment" or "self-reliance" which ignore the vulnerabilities being responded to (Carpi, 2021). The discussion that follows rectifies these academic blind spots and presents a conceptual framework that identifies hidden and overlooked dignifying processes that are shaped by the structural precarities of everyday life.

5.1.3 Deconstructing binaries

Through defining dignity as a relational and processual social construct, we are able to locate the sources of dignity loss and preservation. It is only by grappling with this simultaneous push and pull that we can theorize complicated emotional lived experiences of dispossession. It is crucial that the reconceptualization of dignity pays as much attention to action as it does to suffering. In doing so, the multifaceted lens of dignity becomes an effective tool for complicating binary subject constructions that continue to essentialize and oversimplify forced migrant identities. These tendencies around categorization are scrutinized in an expansive body of literature (see for example Bakewell, 2009; Crawley and Skleparis; 2018; Cole, 2021; Zetter, 2007). These works are crucial for problematizing the binaries such as refugee/migrant, agent/victim, North/South, and East-West. It is only through observing the fuzzy in between interactions and exchanges, that we can begin to engage with refugeehood as a precarious and agentic lived experience – not as a fixed or bounded identity. By applying Butler's feminist paradigm to the context of forced migration, this chapter pays careful attention to process – to how my interlocutors are *responding* to precarity to cultivate their familial, collective and self dignity. It is here that we can effectively deconstruct the romanticized and essentialized agent (active) /victim (passive) refugee binary.

It is crucial to unpack more carefully what agency means in the context of this research and as a vantage point for rethinking dignity. As I described in Chapter 2, normative

theories of inherent and universal dignity are grounded in the belief that our dignity derives from our moral rational agency and autonomy – our unique individual capacities to discern right from wrong. This humanist notion of agency, which historically excluded women, non-whites and minors, is a contentious concept that has been picked apart by feminist theorists (see Bilge, 2010 Butler, 1990; Davies,1991; Mahmood, 2001). They ask, how does a subject act independently and autonomously when choices are constructed and shaped in relation to the constraints of an oppressive system in which they are forced to navigate? I build from these critiques to develop my argument against moral autonomy that underpins the normative theory of Kantian dignity. The work of
Mahmood (2001) on the participation of women in Egypt's Islamic revival is particularly helpful for deconstructing normative notions of agency in a context shaped by non-liberal traditions:

> Think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create. (210)

Mahmood (2001) engages with agency as more than the subversion of gendered constraints, widening the analytical lens to make visible the "passive" or the "docile" actions that instead of producing change in the liberal sense, "aim[s] towards continuity, stasis, and stability" (ibid: 212). In what follows, I analyze sites of agentic capacity to reclaim dignity through this nuanced lens, locating agency in both the mundane (avoidance, hospitality, crochet, volunteering) and the explicit (poetry, refusal). In doing so, I seek to detach notions of *moral* agency that have been ascribed as the foundational underpinnings of human dignity, to instead reappropriate the notion of agency as pertaining to a multiplicity of capacities asserted to reclaim and preserve this fragile feeling.

Basil, 23, encapsulates the complexity of dignity loss and preservation, elucidating its relationality and its process. His words set the foundation for the following analysis:

> Dignity depends on what the person does: he can be humiliated or stay dignified. It all depends on what they do. We are being discriminated here in Lebanon, but we can put that behind our backs and keep living. If dignity was sold like other goods, a lot of people would have bought it. However, dignity is a part of the person, and he can empower it depending on what that person does. (Basil, youth male focus group, November 2022)

5.2 Preserving Dignity as an Everyday Process

5.2.1 Sacrifice

When Ali, 46, was compelled to flee his homeland during the war, he did so to preserve his dignity – to secure safety and freedom for him and his family. But decision-making processes surrounding dignity are complicated. The decision to flee embodies the sacrifice of dignity in the short-term, for the sake of long-term dignity. As Ali described his experience, heads around the table nodded in agreement:

> We have already gone out against the regime for the sake of our dignity and freedom, and for the person to feel that he is a living human being. So, there were many pressures on us, as they [Assad regime] forced us into starvation. They put us in camps, besieged us, starved us, and made us and our children flee. (Ali, adult men focus group, November 2022)

Later that week, in a conversation with Akeem, 35, a member of MAPs, I observed a similar tension. “When anyone is forced to leave their country, they lose their dignity,” he told me. This initial sacrifice of dignity itself sets the foundation for which all proceeding sacrifices emerge from. The foundation of life in exile is built on inherently precarious infrastructures.

For Ahmad, 24, who recently arrived in Lebanon, this sacrifice is fresh in his memory. After living in Syria through a decade of war, experiencing the death of loved ones, torture in prison, the lack of resources and perpetual insecurity, he fled to the Bekaa ten months prior to my field research to escape compulsory military service. His choice to leave Aleppo University with only four more credits before graduation was a difficult sacrifice, but as he described to me, forced military conscription directly threatens dignity. “I'm a physical therapist” he said in our interview, “not a murderer”. Ahmad was smuggled across the river at the Syrian – Lebanese border with 25 other young men also escaping the compulsory service. These men sacrificed their citizenship, leaving behind their homeland and lives, to preserve their dignity by resisting fighting for the regime that besieged and tortured them, and killed their families.

Beyond this well described initial sacrifice of dignity embodied in fleeing your homeland for the sake of long-term dignity, several other examples of day-to-day sacrifices emerge as agentic modalities for preserving dignity. These capacities can be understood simply as decision-making processes, sometimes explicit and risky and sometimes mundane, but always embodying a form of sacrifice of dignity. Medi, 20, exemplifies the ways in which choice provides a sense of dignity:

> I think having the freedom to choose the activity I want to relieve my stress is what gives me dignity but not the activity itself. Having the choice is what makes us dignified or is what gives us dignity. (Medi, 20, mixed focus group, November 2022).

Medi is alluding to the dignity in choosing stress relieving activities – something I further describe below in the context of creativity. Throughout fieldwork, my interlocutors continuously described scenarios of quitting, avoiding, or refusing things as tactics for preserving dignity. These processes all embody choices – but not in the liberal sense of autonomy - they are shaped in relation to structural precarities. This notion is exemplified by Aminah, 20:

> Our family decided to quit many things just so we have our dignity unscathed. If someone were to humiliate me to give me something in return, then I'd rather not have it. The most important thing to me is that I have my dignity unscathed inside and outside my house. Just because I'm Syrian doesn't mean that you can exploit me the way you want. (Aminah, youth women focus group, November 2022).

Aminah draws attention to the process of 'quitting' things. This can include avoiding spaces where there is known discrimination. Several of my interlocutors circumvent Lebanese bureaucracy, humanitarian interventions, or even health clinics because of the known indignity involved in these interactions and exchanges. This entails the sacrifice of residency permits, legal documents, aid, or healthcare for the sake of preserving dignity. In our adult female discussion, Mona, 35, alluded to these sacrifices, sharing, "there are places that you cannot go to because it destroys your dignity, so I do not go to them to preserve my dignity." Alya, 19, also made an explicit reference to these precarious resisting capacities to avoid discriminatory spaces.

> Yesterday, I went to a clinic. I had an appointment at 1, but they did not let me in until it was 3:30. That made me extremely annoyed. They even allowed Lebanese people who came after me in. Why do they have to discriminate between Syrians and Lebanese. Sometimes, I'd rather not go to such places even if this would affect my health. (Aya, youth woman focus group, November 2022).

Another similar instance is displayed by Bathena, who decided to 'quit' her medical career and move to Lebanon where she lived in a tent and saved money to help her family secure an apartment, making the choice to sacrifice her self dignity for the sake of her family's dignity (see 4.2.1). These examples underscore the ways in which daily life is shaped by the need to preserve familial and self dignity through the sometimes precarious processes of quitting and avoidance. What we see here is how the sacrifices embedded in dignity preservation can also be honorable. For Mohammad 21, avoidance can be mundane, preserving dignity through self isolation and stasis:

> It [dignity] is an emotional thing that has to do with feelings. If dignity is preserved, a person feels proud and happy, but if dignity is not preserved, a person feels sad and humiliated. Sometimes I have my dignity and sometimes I don't. When my dignity is threatened, I isolate myself and stay alone.

In the next chapter, through the lens of spatiality, I explore spaces of dignity loss and preservation in more detail, contextualizing why my interlocutors are avoiding not only state bureaucracy and humanitarian interventions, but also bakeries, schools and the border. This brings attention to the space of the house which offers a particular form of comfort to not only Mohammad, as described above, but also to Bushra who also prefers to stay at home in isolation to preserve her dignity (see 4.3.1).

In addition to quitting and avoidance as strategies for preserving dignity, my interlocutors also refused things. Assertions of agentic capacities can be located in resistance to humanitarian dependency, including Western resettlement programs. This is illustrated by Basi, 23:

> I'm a person who was offered a chance of going abroad by the United Nations, but I refused. It is impossible for me to get out because I'm thinking of what might happen in the future. Going there might not change me, but it might change my young kids and make them deviate from the right way. I mean I wish I could go back to Syria and not go out to a Western country. (Basil, youth male focus group, November 2022)

Basil describes how he 'refused' an opportunity of resettlement, and thus the chance of increased safety and financial stability, to preserve his children's Muslim identity, and the long-term dignity embodied in preserving religious and cultural values that matter to him. The topic of refusing resettlement to the West became a lively conversation amongst both male groups, with my interlocutors telling stories of Syrian wives in Europe who took off their *hijabs* and divorced their husbands. Their shared concerns of resettlement embodied fear and the concern of losing control over their families. I consider this process of refusal as a sacrifice to familial dignity for the sake of

preserving fragile masculinities. In the weeks after this discussion, I observed this particular familial sacrifice while sitting in the crochet studio when an artisan arrived in tears. Her husband received a call from UNHCR to inform him that the family was granted resettlement to Canada. The husband refused the offer against the will of his family who was determined to leave Lebanon. Like Basil, the artisan's husband felt that life in the West would harm his daughters, encouraging them to live a secular life without Muslim values. In these scenarios of sacrificing familial dignity, fathers maintain their patriarchal role as the family protector and controller, preserving their self dignity at the expense of their children's futures.

The capacity to choose if, how and when to endure discrimination also emerges as modality of agentic capacity, grounded in sacrifice. For instance, young men articulated how they withstood exploitation in the workplace for the sake of upholding their dignity as male providers of the family. Older men however, increasingly *refused* to endure exploitation, sacrificing employment and thus their senses of dignity cultivated through normative masculinity, although preserving their dignity through reclaiming their freedom from discrimination. A similar pattern emerged among young women enrolled in Lebanese schools. Despite enduring discrimination from their peers and teachers, they have made the decision to continue learning for the sake of an education and the long-term dignity embodied in this achievement. Aya, 19, exemplified this:

> Another example of where we have to compromise [our dignity] is at school. Even if we're receiving a lot of discrimination, we would stay silent and bear with it just so we can maintain our basic right of attending school. Even though I'm attending a reputable college, they'd still be talking about Syrians discriminately, and most Syrians would have to stay silent and just listen to what they are saying without actually being able to say anything. We're forced to do that just so we can keep that opportunity (...) That's the case with most Syrian students in Lebanon, they forget about all the humiliations just to get their right of pursuing higher education," (Aya, youth women focus group, November 2022).

I argue that choices around fleeing your homeland, avoiding spaces or people, quitting school, refusing resettlement, or withstanding discrimination can be decisions, often implying the sacrifice of dignity itself in the present, for the sake of future dignity. In applying the perspectives of both Mahmood and Butler, we see clearly the ways in which these agentic processes for preserving dignity (no matter how subtle) are inherently precarious – shaped and perpetuated in response to subordination and injustice.

5.2.2 Creativity

Ahmad, 24, routinely takes a day off work from the bakery to sit by the sea in Beirut. In our interview, Ahmad tells me, “It is freedom, purity and wisdom in this moment by the sea. I feel most dignified when I’m sitting by the sea and have a calm mind.” Sitting in nature, he has chosen his desired activity to forget his problems and anxieties momentarily, offering a release from the daily pressures. He continued:

> We might go somewhere in which the atmosphere is calm, and you can take a breather in that atmosphere and feel the true essence of freedom, once we have freedom, dignity is automatically raised regardless of other things. (Ahmad, interview, December 2022).

To restore his dignity by the sea, Ahmad asserts his agency to carve out the time, even sacrificing his pay from the bakery where he works and putting his physical safety at risk. Ahmad is considered ‘illegal’ - he does not have residency or UNHCR status - and this trip to Beirut requires checkpoints. When I questioned him about this, he smiled, assuring me it was worth the risks. But this dignifying sensation comes not only from sitting in nature, but it is compounded with his creative practice of writing poetry. By the sea, Ahmad enjoys a free mind, the conditions he needs to be poetic. In our interview, he proceeded to read aloud his latest poem he wrote, asserting his identity and dignity through creative self-expression.

As Mona described in Chapter 4, there is dignity in mastering a craft. This discussion builds from this notion, identifying sites of creative self-expression as manifestations of agentic and resisting capacities. Poetry in particular emerges as a common endeavor, restoring dignity through the assertion of one's identity and right to exist – while also a crucial format for releasing anger, frustration and trauma. This is the case for Samar, 20. When I visited her for our interview, she told me that "dignity is about having an identity" and about "developing a personality". She too read aloud a poem to me during our interview, grinning after putting her phone down. Her poetry, which resists Syrian xenophobia, helps her express and process sadness and anger. Writing and then posting her poems on Facebook is a dignifying agentic practice. She is asserting herself and presenting her personality to the world. That is, asserting her right to exist despite being unwanted in Lebanon.

Bayan, a member of my research team, preserves her dignity in a similar way, asserting agentic and resisting capacities to feel her dignity through poetry. This creative practice renegotiates her sense of self, using metaphoric language to express her pain and suffering from being considered "a number" in Lebanon. Her poetry claims ownership over her own narrative and her process of rebuilding her strength in exile. In our co-created documentary, she reads her favorite poem:

> I was twelve feet under
>
> Dirt and dust all around me
>
> Death whispers
>
> Old tree roots grab my neck
>
> Motionless, twelve feet under
>
> Rotten worms about to reach my heart, eyes blinking
>
> Eyebrows withering, heart sink in deeper than before
>
> Can't feel my fingertips
>
> Darkness, twelve feet under

THEN his hand manifests

Guts me out the dust

I cry out as I cried out before; when a hand took me out a womb

He traces all my scars and my tears

Thus, he notices my missing pieces

He does not come back to gather it
He stares astonishingly deeply incredibly deep in my remaining flesh

He places a white seed in my mind

Makes my heart bloom again

He gives birth to me.

Poetry emerges as an agentic and resisting capacity that preserves and cultivates dignity. For Ahmad, Samar, and Bayan, writing is an outlet for rebuilding and reconstructing their personhood – for claiming their right to exist amidst a discriminatory socio-political milieu that denies and exploits their dignity. Even if their poems are just for themselves and not intended to galvanize action or change, these acts, as Mahmood's (2001) lens shows us, are still agentic.

I observe similar patterns amongst the network of crochet artisans. For them, craftwork is an outlet for reclaiming a sense of purpose, identity, and belonging. It also operates as a distraction from life's external stresses. When I asked Noor about her crochet work, she told me, "When I have the hook in my hand, I can breathe." She is referencing the lifted weight of anxiety. When Noor and I met in 2019, she carried with her a plastic pharmacy bag full of medications. I remember her showing me the different pills she takes to treat her various symptoms caused by stress. Soon after joining the crochet project, her life began to change, regaining her self-confidence and personhood. Participating in crochet work, and specifically in the Crochet Community Collective at MAPs, entails overlapping agentic and resisting capacities to master a craft, secure financial stability, and establish community networks despite being denied their legal right to work or to even congregate at MAPs. The collective sustains itself

from sales of crochet – not donors. It is an alternative enterprise model disguised within the broader NGO framework in response to labor restrictions against Syrians as well as undignifying systems of dependency imposed by the humanitarian industrial complex. Taken together, the very act of crochet becomes a powerful collective manifestation of capacity – and struggle for dignity.

With restrictions on mobility, employment and legal status, my interlocutors' freedoms have been denied and dignity is made fragile. In this precarious milieu, shaped by unjust social and political arrangements outside of their control, creativity becomes a departure point for dignity preservation.

5.2.6 Generosity

> Among the commandments is that if you give charity with the right hand, your left hand should not know, and this is evidence that when we want to give someone something or help him, this must be secret and not openly so as not to threaten his dignity, just as God has commanded us to be good to the seventh neighbor and relatives. This is what most Syrians in Lebanon lose when standing in line for aid. (Yasmine, 42, adult women focus group, November 2022)

Yasmine is describing the process of *kareem* [generosity], another crucial site of dignity. What we learn here is how generosity must be practiced discreetly, so that the receiver never feels like a taker. It is in this mundane agentic and pious process to give with generosity that dignity is restored through particular interactions and exchanges. Malik, 20, reiterates this religious significance:

> I believe dignity comes as a privilege once you become a Muslim. Speaking about Islam, there is a hadith that says, “the upper hand is better than the lower hand”, which means that the one who gives is better than the one who takes,

> and this thing is related to dignity. (Malik, male youth focus group, November 2022)

Opportunities to be the giver or receiver of generosity is inherently denied within the bounds of Western humanitarianism. As Fassin (2007) argues, this system, which emerges from Christian values, positions beneficiaries as indebted victims:

> The ontological principle of inequality finds its concrete manifestation in the act of assistance through which individuals identified as victims are established. They are those for whom the gift cannot imply a counter-gift, since it is assumed that they can only receive. They are the indebted of the world. (512)

These problematic tendencies are further addressed by Chatty (2017) who identifies a fundamental tension between rights-based aid and *karam* – the Arabic word for the social duty to be generous - sharing the root with *karama (*dignity). In the Syrian context, the process of giving through generosity preserves dignity for both the giver (who fulfills their Muslim value) and the recipient (who feels respected and worthy through this exchange). My interlocutors, situated within the Global North led humanitarian industrial complex as “refugee beneficiaries”, are rarely ever recipients of *karam.* Instead, they are continuously reminded of their subordination and indebtedness to powerful donor bodies, denied the opportunity to offer a dignifying counter-gift.

Amidst these power imbalances that undermine the need to give, my interlocutors reclaim their dignity through asserting their generosity, performing *karam* where they can. The assertion of agentic capacity is also embodied in the Muslim tenant *zakat,* a mandatory obligation to give charity, which my interlocutors continue to uphold even in exile. For those unable to donate money, volunteering emerges as a crucial process for giving. This is the case for Reem, who in our co-created film, chose to be documented volunteering with children during Ramadan. Practices of giving also manifest in everyday life outside of community work. One evening at Bathena’s house, I observed

how her mother delivered a large tray overflowing with *kibbe* [deep fried bulgur stuff with ground beef] to the young Syrian men across the hall from them. They do this every night of Ramadan, because the brothers are alone in Lebanon without their families. These subtle acts of generosity become crucial during the holidays. Throughout my fieldwork, I have been consistently welcomed into Syrian households and dinner tables, offered beds to sleep in and provided enormous helpings of my favorite dishes. Such hospitality is not unique to me, but the comfort of any guest is crucial to all social exchanges and interactions. Syrian households are also continuously shifting. Several of my interlocutors have opened their doors to extended family members in need, sharing small apartments for long periods as a result of sudden eviction, divorce or for family and friends newly arriving to Lebanon from Syria. From the perspective of my interlocutors, these acts of generosity are mundane. Offering support to those in need marks a subtle and unspoken social contract of collectivity and interdependency that holds the fabric of society together (Joseph, 1993).

At the end of our interview, Ahmad, 24, said almost in a whisper, “In every Syrian heart there is a graveyard, the people who once nurtured your dignity are now gone.” Just before I turned the recorder off, he told me, “Love is the master of dignity.” Financially insecure, with limited opportunities to donate money or the time to volunteer, my interlocutors continue to find mechanisms to *give,* asserting their agentic capacities to radically care for one another through unspoken practices of reciprocity. The subtle and seemingly mundane practices of sharing meals and living spaces and giving love emerge as crucial processes that preserve and reclaim dignity in precarious contexts of dispossession.

5.2.1 Narrative

> The thing is that fear has nothing to do with dignity at all. Fear is one thing and dignity is another. When you feel fear, you will feel insecure. As for dignity, you

> create it yourself even with the presence of fear. (Mona, 45, adult women focus group, November 2022).

Mona encapsulates the ways in which Syrians position themselves as the source of their own dignity in their self-constructed narratives. Investigating narratives of agency and self-determination not only counter paternalistic Western positionings of refugee victimhood and moralized conceptualizations of inherent dignity, but they further indicate nuanced agentic modalities which preserve and reclaim fragile senses of dignity. I argue that narrative (re)creation from within the Syrian community is a fundamental modality of dignity preservation.

My understanding of narrative is shaped by the work of MAPs, and the integral role narrative plays in the organization's programming for restoring dignity. I have observed the labor needed for this narrative (re)construction: organization meetings, community events, workshops, and its contextualized primary education curriculum each become crucial sites for teaching and re-teaching a reconstructed dignified refugee narrative from *within* the community itself. Buying into a new narrative of refugee capacity is not simple. It necessitates the unlearning of the imposed refugee narratives of complacency and dependency and the dismantling of internalized feelings of victimhood which are reproduced and reinforced in interactions with humanitarian organizations, social media and local Lebanese media. While scholarship has addressed the complicated psychosocial dynamics of internalizing and even performing harmful representations of refugeehood for the sake of aid (see: Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014; Harrell-Bond, 1986), research has yet to investigate the dignifying agentic processes embodied in resisting such narratives. The data presented in this section builds knowledge on how refugees in the Global South are reconstructing their narratives and restoring their collective dignity on their own terms.

My interlocutors are acutely aware of how they are collectively perceived externally. These feelings greatly threaten senses of self and collective dignity. As Yamen, 23, stated:

> The fact that we're in Lebanon is enough of an indicator that our dignity is almost non-existent. Anything that happens in Lebanon is blamed on the Syrians. (...) It is better to be Jewish here in Lebanon rather than a Syrian. I mean we're proud that we're Syrians, but the intensity of the harassment we face every day is just unbearable to the point that we sometimes hate being Syrians. (Yamen, youth men focus group, November 2022)

Despite pernicious discrimination, my interlocutors express a determination to resist the harmful rhetoric and to be proud of their Syrian identity. Across the focus groups, my interlocutors consistently agreed that the term 'refugee', in its normative connation, was harmful to their dignity. For example, in our female youth discussion, Zara, 18, described:

> Being called a refugee hurts my dignity a lot, since the way people say it makes it sound as if they are referring to a group of unworthy people. (Zara, youth women focus group, November 2022)

Crucial to this analysis, is the ways in which it is not the term 'refugee' that threatens dignity, but the harmful narratives associated with it. Miriam, 20, illustrated this:

> Because I'm being called a refugee, I become more motivated to work harder and succeed, to show them that a refugee is capable of becoming successful. (Miriam, youth women focus group, November 2022)

Miriam is not refuting that she is a 'refugee.' Instead, she's interested in changing the stigmatizing characteristics ascribed to this category, motivated to leverage her success to catalyze this shift. In our co-created film, Reem further encapsulates this argument, revealing the challenging but dignifying process of narrative (re)construction:

> So, when you are a refugee, everyone would look at you as a weak person, someone who only need and takes. But we tried and we did, we changed this idea about refugee by giving to Lebanese people and Syrians also. So, we're

> giving, we're not only taking. We have to show that there's something positive in our lives, and something we want to do. We're here to do something for ourselves, and for society. We try to show that we're not helpless, that we exist, because we have no other option and because we don't have another nation. Actually, we exist and we are willing to take action. (Reem in *The Lens of Dignity*)

These narratives emerge in direct response to internalizing and then resisting normative representations of victimhood and dependency through an alternative narrative of refugee generosity. This reshaping and the reclaiming of the Syrian refugee narrative and identity is a powerful expression of agentic and resisting capacities.

If we further investigate these processes of narrative (re)construction, we see how articulations of *hope* are also particularly crucial to the preservation of dignity in exile. As Ali, 54, shared in our adult men focus group, "Hope is what makes us live comfortably. The dream is to return to the country, build your house, and return to the land." A masterful display of this process is the story of Team Hope, MAP's youth robotics team that is trained not only STEM education, but in self-determination. Since its inception in 2016, the team trained relentlessly, determined to one day win the world's largest international robotics challenge with the goal of destabilizing the dominant perceptions of refugee capabilities on a mass scale. In 2019, without a country, the team represented "Refugees" and battled Switzerland and Germany in the championship finals. They won first place, shocking the robotics world and literally bringing tears to the Syrian community watching the livestream on a projector in Bekaa. This became a pivotal moment of transformation. Team Hope toured the Bekaa, spreading the (re)constructed refugee narrative of hope and collective capacity across MAPs' ten schools and community events in tented settlements. They brought Robogee with them, their robot-refugee team mascot which is programmed to speak about refugee capacities, rectifying the harmful collective representations of refugee victimhood propagated across Lebanese media and internalized through humanitarian programming. There was now tangible evidence that even as a refugee, you really could achieve your dreams. Young Syrians across the Bekaa wanted to be part of this

network of high achieving and proud refugees, increasing the demand for robotics education and simultaneously expanding an activating and positive narrative of hope from within the community itself.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter pluralizes sites of dignity through the critical lens of agency and argues that dignity is inherently processual. Dignity is preserved, reclaimed, and experienced through agentic capacities of sacrifice, creativity, generosity, and narrative. Thinking through Butler's reconceptualization of vulnerability as creating conditions for responsiveness and resistance (2009, 2020) with Mahmood's (2001) critical notion of agency as sometimes in search of stasis, I consider both the mundane and the explicit practices that emerge in response to oppressive socio-political entanglements. Through this lens, I elucidate the ways in which dignity is an embodied agentic and precarious lived experience shaped by overlapping constraints of state and humanitarian governance that are outside my interlocutors' control. This negotiation effectively deconstructs the romanticized and essentialized agent/victim refugee binary, urgently redirecting attention to the interconnectedness of agency and vulnerability.

The next chapter continues this discussion, investigating dignity through the lens of spatiality. I pay careful attention to how these agentic processes of sacrifice, creativity, generosity and narrative manifest in everyday geographies of interaction and exchange.

Chapter 6: Dignity and Space

6.1 Introduction

6.1.1 Chapter objectives

This chapter continues to develop my analysis of the emotive, relational, and processual foundations of dignity. The following discussion argues that dignity is spatial. In particular, I examine how dignity is lost and found across the spaces of the house, bakery, school, border and humanitarian interventions, eliciting the particularities of dignity re-negotiations in response to the inequalities attached to these socially constructed spaces of daily interaction and exchange. Continuing to build on the work of Butler (2020), this analysis critiques the perspectives that refugees are inherently vulnerable and victims, associating these experiences to space instead. In other words, I argue that vulnerability and victimhood are a spatial production.

> A view of vulnerability as part of embodied social relations and actions can help us understand how and why forms of resistance emerge as they do. Although domination is not always followed by resistance, if our frameworks of power fail to grasp how vulnerability and resistance can work together, we risk being unable to identify those sites of resistance that are opened up by vulnerability. (Butler, 2020: 192)

Grounded in Butler's critical perspective on vulnerability as a constellation of interacting experiences, I locate *where* and *how* my interlocutors are asserting their agentic capacities, mapping on the processes of sacrifice, creativity, generosity and narrative detailed in the previous chapter to everyday spaces of unequal social relations. As we will continue to see below, the multifaceted lens of dignity presents an effective framework for identifying and unpacking this complicated interplay between vulnerability and agentic and resisting capacities.

6.1.2 Starting points

Global-north responses to refugees position humanitarian regimes as the solution to and provider of refugee dignity (see Chapter 2). When engaging with critical refugee studies more carefully, it becomes clear that such a centering of Western humanitarianism is not only plaguing the study of dignity, but of forced migration more broadly. In both areas, the lived experience of refugees becomes overshadowed by top-down, policy-oriented agendas. I identify a growing body of critical refugee scholarship that complicates this analytical invisibility of forced migrants outside of the geographic parameters of the 1951 refugee convention (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; Cole, 2021; Polzer, 2008). These works seek to reorient the epistemological gaze from fixed archetypal spaces (i.e., camps, detention centers, borders, and formal institutions) to the hidden spaces of daily interaction and exchange outside of these conventional parameters. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2018) applies such a lens when visibilizing the hidden spaces of refuge-refugee relationality through attention to southern-led humanitarianism. Attention is placed on the interactions between overlapping refugee communities that co-exist within urban geographies of exile, complicating normative Eurocentric assumptions that position Global North host-communities as the affected stakeholders of mass displacement. The work of Cole (2021) draws further attention to the methodological shifts needed, advocating for ‘pluralizing the geographies of refuge.’ They write:

> Through adopting a normative starting point that renders assemblages and spatial ‘fixes’ in non-signatory states and spaces outside of institutionalized support as intrinsically inferior, or at the least inadequate and transitory, academic work on forced migration had appeared less able to engage with actions, spaces or populations ‘on their own terms’ (ibid:103).

My objective to pluralize sites of dignity lost and found builds on these critical conversations. In elucidating *where* and *how* my interlocutors are asserting their agentic capacities to reclaim their dignity through space, I offer new empirical specificity and nuance to the debate. I weave Butler’s multifaceted notion of vulnerability into this

analysis, identifying the social construction of these spaces as triggering the agentic, resisting and precarious struggle for dignity.

Observing the particularities of how vulnerability and agency work together presents analytical and methodological challenges. As Das (2006) describes in their ethnographic work in post-Partition India, violence and pain become ‘folded into the recesses of the ordinary’, attaching itself to the everyday in ways that render it invisible. Sites of violence become camouflaged to the untrained eye. As I locate overlooked sites of dignity loss and preservation, I leverage a spatial lens to detach violence and vulnerability from the ordinary, naming the sources of structural precarities shaping my interlocutors’ fluctuating sensations of dignity.

6.2 Home

Conceptualized as an intersection of place, identity and belonging, home is a complex and multifaceted object of inquiry (Blunt and Varley, 2004). Home can be experienced as a site of safety, comfort, security, a space where women perform hidden and unpaid labor, or as a site of violence (Hobart & Kneese, 2020). For bell hooks (2015), home is an escape from discrimination and a space to resist and organize against white supremacy. Within refugee studies, an extensive body of work investigates the practices around remaking ‘home’ and reconstructing identity (Malkki, 1985), often exploring uncertainty and precarity from material or architectural perspectives (Kissoon, 2015;
Jansen & Lofvig, 2009; Brun & Fabos, 2015). When life is on the move, ‘home’ has also been understood as made and unmade not only through materiality, but also through the relationships forged within this space that offer a sense of belonging (Nowicka, 2007; Tolia-Kelly, 2004).

I build on this scholarship, investigating the space of the house as a site of dignity in refuge. In particular, I detail the particularities of how dignity is simultaneously lost and found within this private space and conceptualize practices of remaking home as

agentic processes for reclaiming dignity through practices of generosity. This discussion offers new knowledge on the complicated relationship between dignity and home, complicating simplified understandings around the harms of encampment.

6.2.1 Dignity *lost*: uncertainty and humiliation

Five years ago, when Mona, 45, and her husband lived in an apartment, they were indentured to their Lebanese landlord who owned the building. In return for their rent free house, they cleaned and maintained the building, working as what is referred to as the concierge. Across buildings in Lebanon, this role is often assumed by Syrian families. In the case of Mona, she and her husband were prevented from leaving the building together or from inviting guests into their house. “In fact, only in this place did I feel my dignity flattened, I got tired psychologically after this matter, so I decided to work for myself only,” she explained.

> I lived in an apartment, and I lived in a tent as well, but I did not feel that I had dignity, neither in the house nor in the tent. Both are the same thing. I did not feel comfortable, neither in the apartment or in the tent. Sometimes you have to live with people, and in this case you have lost your freedom, and when you lose your freedom, you lose dignity with it. You do not have privacy, confidentiality, or anything else (…) I had been sitting in a house, and the owner of the house suddenly came and wanted the house. My sister was going to travel suddenly, and I have never wanted to live in a tent since I came to Lebanon, and I have lived in a house, but he suddenly came and wanted the house. All our belongings were thrown into the street. They [the landlord] took the belongings out of the house and the luggage in the street, and this was very disturbing and humiliating. So, I decided to sit in a tent. Until now, I have not found a house because of the high rents, and I am not comfortable living in a tent. (Mona, female adult discussion, 45, November, 2022).

After the focus group, as the other participants left the room, Mona approached me to quietly divulge more intimate feelings and experiences privately. She wanted me to

know that her landlord was also physically abusive. Mona's description encapsulates how dignity, in the space of the house, can be lost through multiple overlapping injustices. The lack of physical freedom, the uncertainty, and the humiliation fostered in the power imbalances between Syrians and Lebanese exploit the fragility of dignity across apartments and tents. What is also crucial to identify is the ways in which my interlocutors move between encampment and apartments, with no fixed or linear trajectory.

Several other participants in this study share similar experiences. For instance, Miriam, 20, who lives in an apartment, relates her sense of dignity to her treatment from the landlord. In our youth female discussion, she shared:

> The thing that hurts my dignity the most is how the landlord treated us the way he likes. He would raise the rent anytime he wants, and he would prevent us from doing some things inside the house. For example, he once prevented us from putting our laundry on the veranda and from using too much water. We weren't comfortable at all. He always said mean things to us. He even prevented my brothers from playing outside and he only allowed them to go out for an hour each day. I mean it is a clear undermining of our dignity when Lebanese children are allowed to play, while our children are not. (Miriam, youth woman focus group, November 2022)

In our artisan discussion, Basma, 55, described a similar experience, sharing her denied right to freedom in the space of her house also as a result of her landlord. When she has guests over, the landlord turns the water and electricity off, humiliating her and disincentivizing her from hosting gatherings. These experiences directly affect her sense of dignity. In addition to enduring these discriminatory dynamics, there is also the perpetual feeling of uncertainty. Sudden eviction, whether from an informal tented settlement or an apartment such as Mona describes above, is a shared experience.

> At any moment, the owner of the house will come and tell you that he wants the house, and you will be on the street without shelter. There was a family, and it was composed of an elderly woman with her two grandchildren. She was thrown

> in the street until an organization came and took her from the street to a tent, (Khadija, 54, adult women discussion, November 2022).

Zara, 18, elucidated how Syrians are reconciling such structural precarity:

> The idea of having to move to a different place whenever the landlord decides is always making us feel unsettled and insecure. We just always feel that this is not our place. In addition, if we were to move to a new place, we'd have to start from square one where we'd have to make new friends and get to know our new neighbors, and the hard thing about this process is that it takes a lot of time and effort. Furthermore, whenever we get adapted a little bit to a new environment, we'd have to move to another place. That's why we're always unsettled, and we don't feel any sense of security even though we're living in an apartment, (Zara, youth woman focus group, November 2022).

Participants residing in tents describe similar feelings of instability and insecurity in the space of their house. However, their sense of precariousness is heightened in particular ways.

> Living in a camp is difficult my friend. Every once in while the Lebanese army would come to the camp and start ordering us to get out of the camp, or to not use Wi-Fi, and they take everything from us during this winter and snow. My dignity did not get affected from living in a camp, but from how the people treat us. For example, the landlord of the camp raised the price of rent for each tent and most people could not afford to pay what he demanded for, so he kicked them out of the camp, (Abbas, 24, youth men discussion, November 2022).

The experiences of living in a tent and an apartment both embody structural vulnerabilities. Important to understand is how my interlocutors who reside in camps were reluctant to draw connections between the infrastructural challenges of life in a tent and their dignity. Their dignity is not threatened by the poor quality of the tent's materiality or its plumbing infrastructure, but rather exploited by the socio-political arrangements that govern informal tented settlements. As Abbas states above, "my

dignity did not get affected from living in a camp, but from how the people treat us." What then becomes clear is how the common assumption that dignity is upheld through housing renovations entirely undermines the *social* construction of the space. My interlocutors draw attention to the humiliating social dynamics and fears of sudden eviction which shape their experiences of precarity within the space of encampment and apartments, thereby identifying the roots of precarity. These experiences can effectively inform urban planning, encouraging architects and planners to think beyond merely the physicality and materiality of space (Grossmann and Trubina, 2022). In our adult female discussion, Yara, 49, encapsulated this critical difference between sociality and physicality:

> Well, the degrees of insecurity differ in the house and the tent, but in general, given that it is not your home, at what time does the owner of the house come and ask you to vacate it? You have a two-hour deadline. (November 2022).

In response to Yara, Khadija, 54, then exclaimed:

> Even though I have lived in the house since I came to Lebanon, I do not feel safe even though it is a beautiful house and its location on the main street and it is large, but you should not buy many things for the house, as this house is not for us. Since you are not stable, you bring the basic things...I do not have this desire to establish something that I do not feel belonging to.

These feelings Khadija expresses prevent her from attaching to and investing in her private space. When I visited Bathena's house, her mother apologized to me for not having a couch to sit on. She was embarrassed and wanted me to know that it was because they felt temporary in the house, and in Lebanon. I have come to understand a couch-less home as representative of uncertain futures, a sense of unbelonging, and a personification of the precarity endured even behind closed doors.

Aya, 19, further described feelings of unbelonging and uprootedness that are exacerbated by the uncertainty of housing:

> We once were residing in an apartment where we were prevented from making a sound while walking. Having a bad landlord made us move houses multiple

> times. This made us feel unsettled. Just like any other human, we wanted to have that feeling of stability and security. When we don't find those factors in that new place, we try to find a place with such factors.

Compounded with the lack of freedom and instability associated with experiences in the space of the house, humiliation emerges as another core feeling threatening dignity in both apartments and camps.

> I don't feel safe here at all, especially since we live in a camp (...) now, there is more pressure on the camps than on the apartments, as the internet is banned and the water is cut off, in addition to the insults and frequent raids (…) I have been living in a tent for a long time, and until now, these raids come suddenly and humiliate us. In fact, we accepted the situation in which we live due to the lack of money so we can't afford to rent a house. Our orphan children who live with us, when asked about this life, we tell them that what is important is our good health, but the disturbing thing is the great insult that they direct to us in the raids or in the family sums that they demand from us, even with living in the tent. This is a great insult, but the housing structure has no direct effect on dignity like the insults we receive (Bushra, 38, adult woman discussion, November 2022).

In this discussion, Bushra's voice was loud, and her hands moved vigorously through the air with each sentence. I asked her what she does to feel comfortable in her tent.

> Well, sometimes I used to put a song by Michael Jackson and start dancing to it just to entertain myself and get rid of the negative energy I had throughout the day, but now I can't, especially since they banned the internet inside the camp. Sometimes you just want to lock yourself up, smash or break things. You try to make relationships with them on the outside, but there is no trust and there is no safety (Bushra, adult omen focus group, November 2022).

The excerpts shared above illustrate how my interlocutors experience feelings of sadness, anger and humiliation within the space of their houses. Here, dignity is lost

within the unequal relationships between host-community landlords and refugees. This discussion contributes site specificity that locates not only where inequality emerges, but also the emotional responses to the endured injustices in exile. Of particular importance are the ways in which my interlocutors reject a relationship between the physical structures of their apartment or tent and their dignity.

6.2.2 Dignity *found:* generosity

After almost a decade of displacement, Aya's family finally enjoy a sense of stability in their rented apartment. This was the third house I visited since meeting her family in 2019. Moving every 1-2 years has become standard practice unless there is a good relationship with the landlord. I spent more time in Aya's house than anywhere else in the Bekaa because her mother and I work together in the crochet program. On several occasions their Lebanese landlord arrived at the door unannounced. Aya and her mom would dash into the kitchen to prepare coffee and a bountiful platter of treats, followed by an engaging and energizing conversation with laughter and charm. This performance of hospitality – this duty to be generous – should not be misinterpreted as submissive or passive. But in this particular context, I suggest that the capacity to perform in these inherently unequal social situations is a powerful assertation of agency. Aya's family is unique in their ability to navigate and leverage social connectivity with their Lebanese counterparts as a mode to secure their apartment – to feel their sense of dignity in the space of their house. As much as relationality can expose my interlocutors to vulnerability, we see how it can also serve to protect them in the space of their house.

I begin with this illustration of Aya's family to elucidate how feelings of dignity and security in the space of the house are far from inherent nor are they individualized – but they are sought after and carved out through collective action. In these ways, I argue that dignity can be found through social process of re-homemaking, particularly through carefree and generous interactions that not only strengthen relationships with landlords – but that also bring life, joy and meaning into the space, even if momentarily. In the discussion that follows, I consider how my interlocutors assert their agentic and

resisting capacities within their private domestic space amongst each other, placing emphasis on the social dynamics that influence dignity operations.

As Mohammad, 21, articulated, “I feel dignified inside my home when I’m with my family and I feel respected.” Amina expressed a similar sentiment. “I feel comfort and ease when I’m with my family. Whenever I’m with people who love me and respect me, I feel dignified,” she said in our female youth discussion (November 2022). With mobility in refuge restricted, compounded with minimal access to public spaces in the Bekaa, interactions with family and friends are often located in the home. These exchanges of love and joy distract my interlocutors from daily anxieties.

> We, in our home, forget about everything that happened to us outside once we enter the home. Whenever I’m home, I just forget everything that happened outside. Then, my friends would come, and we’d help each other forget about what happened outside (Miriam, 20, youth woman focus group, November 2022).

Abdul, 29, further illustrates the comfort of home relative to the outside world. He illuminates the sacrifices embodied in the fight for dignity, and in particular, the choice to avoid society in times of struggle:

> Life is not dignified here in Lebanon, our rights are deficient, and there is sectarianism and racism. When my dignity is threatened, I go home and isolate myself and stop mixing with society. The solution is to escape from reality (Abdul, mix focus group, December 2022).

The house offers certain comforts, and mainly a momentary escape from discrimination and harassment. This is the case for Bushra, as I detailed in chapter 4. Experiencing the emboldening feelings that cultivate dignity manifest through continuous and at times, exhausting agentic processes of re-homemaking. As I have observed, it is often mothers who protect and nurture their children through radical practices of care. This observation is exemplified by Arwa, 35:

> When I’m at home, I try to create a safe atmosphere for my family to feel at ease from outside disturbances. My children grew up recently to the point that they tell

> me that they don’t want other people to find that they are living in a camp. They became a little sensitive as students at school would bully them just because they are living in a camp. Whenever they come to me saying this, I would tell them that it doesn’t matter where we are living, what matters is who we are. I would tell them you are great on the inside, so don’t worry about other’s opinions of you. (Arwa, Mixed focus group, December 2022)

These acts of love are agentic: the ways in which exhausted mothers access reserves of energy for their children and families is a powerful capacity. This can be as simple as taking the time to cook a child’s favorite meal after a full day's work. The following narrative, taken from our focus group discussion with adult women, further illustrates this argument, and in particular, the practices of care required to carve out moments that make life worth living in precarity.

> Yasmin, 42: For me, I start dancing with the kids, and they get over it, but we have to do it to entertain ourselves.
>
> Amira, 40: I think it's the same. I dance with my children, we read the Qur’an, we drink something, and we talk about Syria and its beautiful days.
>
> Yara, 49: Well, for me, I put on a movie that suits all family members, or a program on TV, a medical or scientific program, with a glass of Matte and an evening snack.

My understanding of reclaiming dignity through generous practices of re-homemaking is further derived from participant observation during time spent within the private spaces of the crochet artisans. Rihab, a crochet artisan I visited each month, lives in the same apartment complex as her extended family and old neighbors from their village in Syria. This reproduction of the tightknit village in the Bekaa provides a sense of normalcy to life amidst fears of eviction and the compounding anxieties of everyday life. Surrounded by family and old friends, Rihab can let her kids run outside and play with the other young neighbors. Sitting on her balcony, you can hear the sounds of laughter from below. One evening after dinner, I visited Rihab’s in-laws in the apartment next-door. The extended family was there, the three sons and their young kids, along

with neighbors. It was the week after Eid and the last remaining *mamule* [butter cookie filled with dates] were still getting passed around. “Do you know how to dance *Dabke* [traditional Levantine folk dance]*?”* Teta [Grandma] asked me. Soon enough, the son blasted music from the television. It would be easier to refuse a second *mamule* than not join hands. The grandpa handed me his prayer beads, insisting I dance with them. He was just swinging the beads in circular motion above his head, so I mimicked his moves. My audience clapped and whistled. But suddenly the beads let loose, flying in different directions around the room. While my cheeks became red from embarrassment and uncontrollable laughter, the family kept dancing. The music didn’t soften. I was instructed to stop picking the beads up from the floor. *Yalla*! They told me, keep dancing! On this ordinary evening with Rihab’s family, the *feeling* of home was remade. With the prayer beads spattered across the room, a palpable sense of freedom had been cultivated. Dance remains foundational to the process of re-homemaking. I have spent countless evenings with Syrian families in similar ways, dancing *dabke* and then to Arabic pop-music, with cups of coffee flowing until late hours of the night. I have a ‘Bekaa’ playlist on Spotify which has all the favorite songs to dance to. It is through sharing these energetic and spontaneous moments of joyful chaos that I began to piece together not only the feeling of collective dignity, but the ways in which my interlocutors navigate through the public sphere so tightly bottled, almost bursting at the seams in urgent demand to release their anxieties. With the smallest spark, a mundane evening becomes a sweaty celebration.

Guests also fill Aya’s home almost every night that I spend there. Her family recently renovated their sitting room, so they can host up to ten people comfortably, maximizing their opportunities to *give* and nurture a sense of belonging. Social bonds are not only crucial for establishing trust with landlords or enjoyable distractions, but useful for maintaining links and connections to Syria. Hosting friends or neighbors for coffee or *matte* [herbal tea] becomes crucial everyday acts of generosity that forge social bonds. This becomes a crucial time for receiving updates from their hometown villages, sharing tips on where and how to buy the highest quality and cheapest produce, how to

navigate the complicated visa and residency bureaucracy, or discussing a new call for participants in an NGO workshop. Matchmaking, sharing stories of discrimination, and gossiping are equally crucial. Each of these visits is then reciprocated within the coming weeks, strengthening social capital amidst a rapidly shifting context. Ali, 46, illuminates the significance of drinking *matte* as a cultural performance for strengthening connectivity.

> In fact, *matte* has a special feeling among the Syrian people. There is a certain time that you reserve in order to drink *matte* when you are comfortable and you have nothing to do, and it is not like a cup of coffee in five minutes and we go, and the presence of *matte* means that it is a long visit.

Taken together, the empirical data presented above illustrates the ways in which dignity is simultaneously lost and found in the space of the house. In detailing my interlocutors' processes for reclaiming their dignity within this space through generous acts of care and love, I contribute site-specific knowledge that elucidates how refugees themselves respond to structural vulnerabilities and precarities, detaching these victimizing characteristics as inherent to the refugee subject and re-attaching them to the social construction of the house. Through this spatial vantage point we can unravel and differentiate the particularities of what makes life is forced displacement so challenging, offering much needed depth to the discourse. Behind closed doors, hidden from humanitarian needs assessments, my interlocutors effectively cultivate self, familial, and collective dignity through crucial social exchanges that make life worth living.

6.3 School

Refugee education is an expanding topic of academic and humanitarian interest. The UN has cited quality education as a strategic Sustainable Development Goal, improving access to accredited primary schooling options for refugees globally. But the scope of these humanitarian resources are narrow, often neglecting secondary and tertiary education and the compounding barriers that are limiting refugees from lifelong learning

(Garland et al., 2023; Morrice, 2021). While research is making visible where and how refugees navigate the gaps in the Global-north led response (see Hammoud and Shuayb, 2021; Shuayb et al., 2014; El-Ghali and Alameddine, 2019), it is crucial to think beyond a policy-oriented discussion. Below, I offer more nuanced knowledge on the emotional lived experiences of young Syrians attempting to secure their futures, locating the school as a site of everyday dignity lost and found. By focusing on this space, we can grapple with the subjectivity of young people more carefully, and their agentic and resisting capacities to reclaim their dignity.

6.3.1 Dignity *lost*: nationality-based discrimination

> Most of the discrimination I've seen in Lebanon were at schools and universities. They ask the Syrians for double the tuition fees when they can't even get the degree at the end. My friend studied 3 years in the pharmacy major in Syria, she tried make those three years accredited here in Lebanon so she could continue studying and obtain a degree. She was not able to gain accreditation of those three years and they told her to back and continue studying in Syria, when she's not able to go back there. This is the case with many other Syrian students here in Lebanon. (Focus Group with Fatima, 19, November 2022)

Fatima's experience exemplifies the ubiquity of Syrian discrimination within the Lebanese public school system. These scenarios of nationality-based discrimination are not unique but are very much characteristic of the school context. For instance, in our mixed focus group, when Medi, 20, shared his story of being beaten up by a group of his Lebanese peers, there was no reaction nor sound from the rest of the group, just silence. These instances of violence against Syrians have become folded into the seams of the ordinary, rarely uttered from within the Syrian community. Such geographies are sites of dignity *lost*. When examining school policies, and particularly the shift system allocated to Syrian students, we see more carefully how my young interlocutors' sense of dignity is threatened by structural inequalities.

> In general, the afternoon shift at the Lebanese official schools is specified for the Syrian students. The students are getting humiliated, and their dignity is being hurt. Syrian students are getting humiliated while trying to get their right of basic education. (Amina, 20, youth women focus group, November 2022).

Ahmad, 24, further describes the indignity surrounding Syrian-Lebanese differentiation embodied in the shift system:

> I teach elementary students, and they told me about their night shift and how they are treated different than other students, and how they are unable to adapt to the Lebanese curriculum. (Ahmad, youth men focus group, November 2022)

Zara, 18, shared a similar experience, further indicating the ways in which dignity operates in relation to unequal public-school policies and the general discriminatory atmosphere attached to the space of the school.

> I came to Lebanon as a little kid, and I was lucky enough to be enrolled at an official school in the morning shift. Then, they established another shift at the same school, which was specified for Syrian students. My brother was originally on the morning shift, but they moved him to the other shift. A little while later, I went to the school to check on him since we noticed that his performance started to get worse. When I was there, I was talking to the directress while another teacher was there. I told her how my brother's performance changed after moving to the other shift. The teacher that was there asked, "why did you move him to the other shift?" I told her that the directress insisted on moving him to the other shift. Then, the directress got agitated and told me that this place is not meant for you, but for the Lebanese students and that we only belong in the other shift, and she was like, "you Syrians are taking the rights of the Lebanese." After that, I told her that I thank God that I learned and succeeded. I told her that I'm glad I have nothing to do with this toxic place anymore. I told her to not make me feel as if she is in a higher position than myself. I was only asking about my brother's situation and then she started to say that this place is not his place."

The agentic and precarious fight for dignity manifests in Zara's confrontation with her brother's teacher, illustrating the ways in which dignity is exploited in everyday unequal interactions between Lebanese teachers and Syrian students. As we see clearly from her reflection on this exchange, Zara did not reply passively. Instead, the indignity of the situation triggered a defense – one which many young Syrian women would find difficult to do. This could have potentially led to the risk of her brother's expulsion. To live with your dignity is to continuously defend and protect familial, collective and self worth, sometimes through risky endeavors.

In addition to the power imbalances between teachers and students, peer-to-peer bullying is another crucial dynamic affecting dignity in the space of the school. As Bushra, 38, stated:

> There is unnatural bullying against the Syrian people, even if he is smart and educated, so they continue to bully him a lot. In our family, the children of the students left school because of the bullying by the Lebanese (Bushra, adult women focus group, November 2022).

Such harassment and discrimination become unbearable for many young Syrian students, resulting in high rates of school drop-out. The following conversation is taken directly from the youth women discussion to evoke the prevalence of this phenomenon:

> Fatima: Some children get bullied at school just because they are living in a tent. In most cases, kids start to hate school and where they live. They might even start hating their parents for making them live in a tent. I believe such incidents affect those children psychologically and destroy their self-esteem. Those kids might not know that their dignity was affected, but it was.
>
> Miriam: I was once teaching at a kindergarten, and there was that kid who was wearing old clothing. The other kids refused to play with him, and he'd always sit alone. I tried to make the other kids change their attitude towards him, but they

> told me that their mothers commanded them to stay away from children living in camps. Thus, one's experience at school does affect his dignity (...) My brother started to isolate himself from such mistreatments. I know that the Lebanese kids are beating him up at school, but there was nothing I could do since I'm powerless here in Lebanon.
>
> Samar: I got bullied at school and that made me leave school. There was a Lebanese teacher that used to teach me, and every time she comes to class, she would humiliate and mistreat me, and she would cut my marks at some time for no reason (...) These things hurt my dignity. I mean I'm a student just like the others, why do I receive a different treatment that the others when I'm outsmarting them? Why would I receive a different treatment just because of my nationality? Why!?
>
> Aminah: A lot of Syrian students dropped out of school just to preserve their dignity and not get hurt.

This conversation from the youth women focus group exemplifies the modalities of dignity loss that emerge from within the school. The experience of bullying is pervasive and frequent, ordinary and normalized. Our focus group presented a rare occasion for releasing frustrations and anger around these injustices. Of particular importance is the theme of stigmatization for living in a camp. This topic also emerged in my interview with Bathena, further illuminating this nuanced form of harassment:

> A child each day at school hears this on a regular basis or from other colleagues, 'so you live in a camp'? This sentence is harassment. It is a direct shot towards dignity (Bathena, Interview, October 2023).

Taken together, these lived experiences, perspectives and emotions on school reflect the multiple overlapping forms of discrimination that exploit the fragility of dignity. This discussion draws attention to the overlooked socially constructed barriers to education

that directly challenge my interlocutors' pursuit to earn degrees, develop themselves, and plan for their futures. As Medi, 20, poignantly questioned:

> If the students aren't treated with dignity inside the classroom, how are they supposed to continue their education? (Medi, mixed focus group, December 2022).

Meanwhile, parents are witnessing the discrimination of their children – sometimes with an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and sometimes triggering agentic and resisting capacities. The latter is the case of Maysa, a Syrian mother I have a close relationship with. In 2019, after her son was refused a spot in the local Lebanese public high school, she crafted a solution: that I come with her to a meeting with the headmaster and advocate for her son. Seated side by side in the headmaster's office, I leveraged my foreignness, doing my best to secure Maysa's son a spot and successfully achieve her mission. This exemplifies the persistence and dedication demanded of parents to enroll their children in school, beyond the discomfort of witnessing your child be discriminated against. Ali, 46, revealed he made the decision to sacrifice his daughters' education for the sake of preventing them from being harassed:

> I put them [daughters] in a school before, but it turned out that it was only for entertainment, teaching them to play, and they stayed there for a year, but they did not learn anything. Then Sama, we registered her in a Lebanese school, but because my daughters are young, there was a lot of harassment, so I did not allow them to go to school yet (Ali, adult men focus group, November 2022).

Adham, 42, further described the challenges of enrolling his children in school. It took him several months before finding a spot in an Islamic school that he trusted would not exploit his children's dignity.

> I went to the public school, but from the first day there was discrimination and bullying from the Lebanese teachers. The teacher grabbed the student's hand and twisted it and beat him, then told him to go and tile the sea and go and complain to the UN. When I went to the administration school to register them, I saw another teacher saying that he wanted a hammer, so the principal gave him a plastic hose to beat them (Adham, adult man focus group, November 2022).

These myriad experiences of nationality-based discrimination and structural vulnerabilities attached to the space of the school exploit my interlocutors' fragile dignity. The discussion contributes much needed depth to the critical study of refugee education, explicating the overlooked socially constructed barriers to learning. Through the multifaceted lens of dignity, we can move beyond policy-oriented discussions focused on access to school to engage with students' experiences *within* school.

6.3.2 Dignity *found*: sacrifice, narrative and creativity

Self-isolation from others or drop-out emerge as coping mechanisms to preserve and reclaim dignity in response to pernicious discrimination attached to the space of Lebanese public schools. This section investigates these mechanisms more carefully, considering how withstanding discrimination in school becomes a short-term sacrifice of one's own dignity, for the sake of long-term dignity that education and knowledge embodies for the Syrian community. Ahmad, 24, newly enrolled in the Southern New Hampshire University accredited BA scholarship program, illuminated this relationship:

> I remembered what Islam advocates for, which is to seek knowledge and preserve, and leaning is a right. I recently got back to education. Previously, I was studying at the university of Aleppo, and I was just a few steps from graduation, but I was forced to immigrate to Lebanon, and I was not able to get my degree. This hurt my dignity as I was unable to get the degree that I worked hard to get (Ahmad, youth men focus group, November 2022).

Later in the discussion, he added:

> Education is something essential and it is one of the bases of dignity for humans. Education is one of the basic needs that we need to get to succeed in life, but if we're unable to get it, then we wouldn't feel that we're still human. (ibid)

Ahmad's association between dignity and knowledge is shared with other participants in this study. For Bushra, 38, "the most important thing is that the greater their knowledge, the greater their dignity." For these reasons, my interlocutors are sacrificing their dignity in the short-term, enduring discrimination for the sake of earning degrees and gaining knowledge. These complex agentic and resisting processes are exemplified in this project's collaborative documentary*,* where Bayan, Eman and Reem each decided on their own terms to describe the discrimination in school as prominent personal and collective challenge in their pursuit of a dignified life. For example, Reem, 19, expressed the withstanding of discrimination for the sake of an education, applying the pronoun "we" in her narrative:

> We tried to preserve ourselves to get our dignity back and continue. We didn't want to stop, even though it was the best option or maybe the easiest option is to stop. But we couldn't do that. We don't want to do that because we can do more. (Reem in *The Lens of Dignity*)

With the pervasiveness of discrimination, as well as other gaps within the Lebanese public school system, privately run, non-formal, schools for and by Syrians have developed across the Bekaa. For example, MAPs' primary schools implement its own contextualized Arabic curriculum that integrates STEM education with social and emotional learning, Islamic values and Syrian history, creating a dignified and creative learning space that preserves Syrian identity and memories of the homeland. While a MAPs degree has been denied accreditation or recognition by UN institutions and the Lebanese Ministry of Education, their schools are foundational to the community's wellbeing. They are spaces for spreading the emboldening narrative of hope and capacity that help to rectify the indignity of externally imposed narratives of victimhood. It also prepares students for returning home. This also benefits families who are included in continuous public programming that happens within these schools. Bayan,

who teaches in a different non-accredited Syrian school, articulated the importance of Syrian-led schools for children. In our film she states:

> This is kind of good for them, and for us, because when we are dealing with each other they won't be afraid of Lebanese discrimination or that someone will mock them. (*The Lens of Dignity*)

In this section I have argued that dignity is simultaneously lost and found in the space of the school, locating my interlocutors' agentic capacities for securing their long-term dignity through the sacrifice of dignity itself. The ways in which non-formal Syrian-led schools become creative alternative learning spaces that nurture emboldening emotions through narratives that both deconstruct harmful anti-Syrian tropes while also igniting hope to one day return home, is crucial to understanding where and how refugees are reclaiming their individual and collective sense of dignity for themselves.

6.4 The Bakery

Bread is a longstanding symbol of revolution. During the 2011 Egyptian Uprisings, a photo circulated of a young boy on his father's shoulders raising a piece up pita – referred to as *aish* [life] - in his hands. 'Bread, dignity, and social justice' became the defining slogan of the protests, evoking the deprivation of the Egyptian people (Anderson, 2018). Here, the accessibility of bread becomes an indicator of a society's wellbeing. If we apply analytical attention to the role of bread in the Lebanese context, a similar story emerges. In this section I document the weaponization of bread as a form of political control and dominance over Syrians, locating the space of the bakery as site of dignity lost and found. The stories described are mainly from the summer of 2022, the period of Lebanon's bread crisis. The loss of Lebanon's largest grain silo during the port explosion, compounded with supply chain bottlenecks as a result of the Ukraine war, caused a nationwide bread shortage (Cavalcanti, 2022). At the time of the focus group discussions, the memories of the crisis were still palpable. Although bread was no longer rationed, there was a fear that the crisis may return.

6.4.1 Dignity *lost:* humiliation and differentiation

The image of a bakery flashed on the projector. Within seconds and without hesitation, Adham, 42, exclaimed:

> This is the period that we went through, and it actually is the height of humiliation in every sense of the word. I am one of the people who stood at the bakery line once. I do not accept standing in such a row again because we have been insulted. Once my wife became angered when she saw that the Lebanese were entering from the other side of the line before us. She pushed the guy who was standing at the door and entered and took the bundle of bread and went out and told them that when they respect us and stop distributing bread behind our backs for the Lebanese, but Syrians do not take it, so she will do that and she will take it, and I will take the same as the Lebanese. I was there when this situation happened, but I was standing far away. Today, a bundle of bread is not enough for us, so my wife went to get another one, and this is what happened. (Adham, adult men, focus group, November 2022)

Adham is recalling a humiliating memory from waiting in line for a bread ration. His wife, overcome with anger from the unequal treatment of Syrians, took her bread by force. This story exemplifies the effects of the bread crisis and the indignity endured by the Syrian community in the space of the bakery. Countless other interlocutors witnessed Syrian-specific abuse in bakeries, relating these experiences to the loss of dignity. Below I share a range of similar experiences from across the youth/adult and men/woman focus group discussions to convey the severity of this crisis:

> Any Lebanese guy can go inside the bakery at any time and get the bread that he needs. However, any Syrian guy would have to wait in line to get the bread that he needs. A lot of fights broke out because of that discrimination. (Leila, woman adult focus group, November 2022)

> I witnessed the extreme moments, as I saw a man beating a woman in front of me with a stick. They shouted out for the security guard. The man went away,

but he came back, and he is the man standing at the door to organize the line. (Ali, male adult focus group, November 2022)

I did not experience the circumstances of the bread crisis myself. However, my mother's friend told me about a situation that happened with her. She was standing in line when someone started to say some despicable and painful insults to her, and she was not able to reply to those insults, not even in one word. She told me that this country is not ours and that I had to stay silent so that she could get a pack of bread for her children. (Aya, 19, youth women focus group, November 2022)

When I was waiting in front of the bakery, there was this woman that was trying to get bread for family, the person who was standing on the door prevented her from going inside and she fell on the ground after he pushed her back. (Abbas, 24, youth man focus group, November 2022).

These interactions and exchanges within the bakery personify the socially constructed precarities and vulnerabilities ascribed to space. Such lived experiences of violence and harassment shape the everyday, occurring in the most mundane of instances – buying bread to feed their families. Syrian personhood and collective senses of worth are shaped in relation to these forms of subjugation, threatening dignity and triggering powerful emotional responses. What becomes quite clear, are capacities to articulate and acutely identify these injustices, naming the source of indignity themselves. This can be observed across generation and gender.

I felt the bitterness of discrimination. A lot of discrimination and racism cases occurred during that crisis. It happened with me once, I was standing in line to get some bread. A Lebanese soldier was standing in front of me, and he was telling the owner of the bakery to let me get in before him, and the owner of the bakery was like, I don't allow Syrians to get in. The soldier got three packs of

bread and left. When the owner of the bakery came back, I asked him how he knew I was Syrian, and he was like, I knew from your appearance that you're Syrian. At that moment, I felt as if I was struck with lightning, and that I shouldn't have stood in that line (...) It's true that this crisis affected our dignity." (Miriam, 20, youth women focus group, November 2022)

There was a bakery that made two entrances, one for the Syrians and the other for the Lebanese. Each Lebanese person was given two packs of bread, while each Syrian person got only one. Their act of making different entrances for each group of people is what affected my dignity the most. I feel like every Syrian has a wound in their heart from that act. (Aminah, 20, youth women focus group, November 2022)

If all people were treated equally during that time, then it would have been normal to wait in line. However, none of that happened and Lebanese people had the priority of taking bread. The fact that I have to wait and others are getting bread without waiting is humiliation and indignity to me (...) When someone comes after I've been waiting in line for over an hour, and he gets bread before I do, of course it would affect my dignity. (Nasir, 20, youth men focus group,
November 2022)

There was a lot of humiliation during this crisis. Having to wait and having to hear unpleasant things from the Lebanese people humiliates our dignity. This crisis would have been solved if the prices of bread were raised. People had to stand in line and buy bread. It would have been better to have the prices go up and buy bread for a higher price. We'd rather pay more money and not get humiliated for getting a loaf of bread. (Hamza, 23, youth men focus group, November 2022)

> In fact, here [the bakery] dignity was destroyed, as they fought us directly for the loaf of bread (...) When the Syrian stands outside the bakery and the Lebanese enters, the Lebanese take the bread and leave, for this there are Syrians who change their accent and speak the Lebanese accent in order to take the bread. (Khadija, 54, adult women focus group, November 2022)

These narratives of dignity loss elucidate the humiliation and violence embodied in being refused bread and differentiated from their Lebanese counterparts. I listed their voices in this way to capture the tone that rings throughout each of these excerpts – it is one of vulnerability and agency. In asserting that it is not the bread rations itself but their differential treatment, my interlocutors reclaim a sense of justice and reorient the narrative from being takers of Lebanon's resources to being denied their rights. This nuance is further described by Noor and Jamal:

> I would not have a problem standing in line. I mean, if they treated us with respect and politeness, and without offensive words, I would have stayed standing for two days. (Noor, 31, artisan focus group, December 2022)

> Well, if there was no distinction between a Syrian and a Lebanese, it would have been normal, as the crisis comes and goes, but they let them take the bread while we wait for two or three hours, in vain. In this situation, dignity is completely destroyed. (Jamal, 54, adult men focus group, November 2022)

The excerpts illuminate how dignity operates in relation to the space of the bakery. Syrian differentiation is magnified in this space, threatening dignity through inequality rather than the rationing of bread itself. A spatial vantage point centers the socially constructed vulnerabilities that exist outside of my interlocutors' control. This complicates dominant illustrations of refugees that associate vulnerability as an inherent makeup of the refuge identity.

6.4.2 Dignity *found*: sacrifice and narrative

At the age of 19, Fatima has developed her sense of self in relation to these discriminatory dynamics. There is no passivity in her articulation of the bread crisis. Instead, she expresses her capacity to defend her fragile dignity, describing how she refuses bread – thereby sacrificing a staple in her diet for the sake of her dignity.

> We can conserve our dignity by setting some boundaries. It's true that we're not in our country, but we still can defend our dignity if someone were to threaten it. If someone were to humiliate me just to give me a pack of bread, then I'd rather not have it. I can find alternatives where I'm not humiliated if I were to get them. (Fatima, youth women focus group, November 2022).

Fatima articulates a powerful assertion of collective agentic capacities to preserve and reclaim dignity for herself and Syrian counterparts. This practice of refusing bread is a powerful resisting modality, emerging across the community. These sites of agency however are shaped by sacrifice, which are inherently precarious.

> We fight to protect our dignity so that it is not scratched. There are many situations that we move away from and sacrifice so that no one affects our dignity, such as standing at the bakery. You can pay more so that your dignity is not insulted. These are also sacrifices. We sacrifice many things. (Yasmine, adult woman focus group, November 2022)

Such sacrifices for the sake of dignity is further reiterated across the focus groups:

> I don't stand in line for the bakery, even if I'm hungry. I can bake myself or cook pasta, so we started looking for food with rice, or we bought *saj* [unleavened flat bread] so that we wouldn't run out of bread for a certain period. (Bushra, 38, adult women focus group, November 2022)

> If you used these methods because you do not want your dignity to be humiliated, then standing there is a great insult and saying that the Syrians will

> not eat the right of the Lebanese bread, so we did not accept to stand there so as not to hear such words. (Yasmin, 42, adult women focus group, November 2022)

For those who could afford the inflated prices, they bought bread from the black market to avoid standing in the bakery line. This was described repeatedly.

> We have begun to buy bread from people who make the bread crisis a trade for them, so that they take a double price so we buy it even in a higher price so we do not stand in a bakery row and insult our dignity. (Yara, 49, adult women focus group, November 2022)

> I did not try to stand because he entered quickly, so I tried to avoid destroying my dignity in this place. Even when the bread became expensive, I used to bring it at a double price, just so that I would not stand in this place. (Amir, 25, adult men focus group, November 2022)

Asking Lebanese friends for help in bringing bread was only mentioned by Amira, 40, revealing a less common form of boundary setting during the bread crisis.

> Dignity is violated here. When we want to buy bread, my husband does not go, but he asks his Lebanese friend to help bringing the bread. He no longer stands in line for bread. (Amira, adult women focus group, November 2022)

Taken together, these agentic modalities emerge in response to the discrimination within the space of the bakery. A refusal to wait in line or decisions to cook rice instead, negotiations made with Lebanese friends, or navigating the black-market bread trade each reflect responses to the injustice of differentiation occurring in bakeries. My interlocutors make difficult choices for the sake of their self and familial dignity – for the sake of eating bread or not. And, while several interlocutors described giving up bread,

others did sacrifice their self dignity in these humiliating lines, committed to putting bread on the table for their children:

> Some people neglected their pride and dignity just so they can provide for their family; just like my mother, she stopped thinking about whether this thing affects her dignity or not since she is responsible for a family. (Miriam, 20, youth women focus group, November 2022)

> In fact, it is sad, especially for those who have children and bread is the basis for them. This is a great insult to dignity during this crisis, especially for those who have a family. (Bushra, 38, adult women focus group, November 2022)

In forced displacement, the mundane and ordinary practice of buying and eating bread becomes a precarious and agentic matter of dignity lost and found. The experience of feeling dignity loss for hours while waiting for a ration of bread can trigger a powerful emotional response that prevents one from suffering those indignities again. This illustrates the ways in which living with your dignity is in continuous process and renegotiation, necessitating agentic capacities to adapt to rapidly shifting dynamics as you move through spaces of daily interaction. In this discriminatory milieu, the fight for dignity becomes a hidden, mundane, and ordinary everyday endeavor that shapes how and where and when refugees move through space.

6.5 Humanitarian Interventions

Human dignity remains the cornerstone of the moralized humanitarian industrial complex (see Chapter 2). Hathaway's (2019) description of the 'never-ending talkfests' where scholars exchange the language of rights, and not action, illuminates this. The discussion in this section is an attempt to rectify an absence embedded in this rights-based, top-down, Global-North centered discourse, clarifying what dignity means and feels like from the perspectives of refugees themselves. Fundamental to this analysis is

locating Western-led humanitarian interventions as sites of dignity lost – a revealing and alarming empirical finding. Building from the previous chapter and the work of Chatty (2017), I evoke the tensions between the overlooked social duty to be generous, and the prevailing Western humanitarian rights-based agenda that undermines community building and interdependency through attention to autonomy, self-reliance and hierarchal transactional giving. Through the multifaceted lens of dignity, the investigation exposes the otherwise hidden emotional responses and agentic responses occurring within this heavily surveilled space of interaction, offering knowledge on the dignifying alternatives practiced among refugees.

6.5.1 Dignity *lost*: humiliation and dependency

> We must believe that help is an essential part of society, we must help each other, dignity is related to the way help is given. Whether it is a decent way in which you're treated as a human being, or if it is being presented in an inappropriate way (...) Here they are underestimating the value and dignity of humans, and humans need the help of other fellow humans in any society. (Ahmad, 24, youth male discussion, November 2022)

Ahmad describes the indignity embodied in the international humanitarian industrial complex. Core to his narrative is how he problematizes the methods of distribution, not the aid itself. Ahmad has identified the point of contention between *karam* (the duty to be generous and hospitable) and rights-based humanitarianism. More specifically, he draws attention to how 'help is an essential part of society', reorienting harmful narratives that humiliate and emasculate refugees for receiving aid, to a reminder of our natural interdependency on each other. Across the focus groups, my interlocutors repeatedly expressed this particular feeling about the method of distribution. As Kareem, 25, stated in our youth men discussion: "A person has the right to receive aid, but the method of distribution is humiliating." He is referring to the lines, an explicit site of dignity lost described extensively:

> It hurts my dignity since I have to wait in in lines to get that aid or renew my file at the UN. (Samer, 20, youth women focus group, November 2022)

> I feel that standing in line is a difficult thing, because I stand far away and they keep calling my name, Bushra, Bushra, come, so I stand far away. (Bushra, 38, adult women focus group, November 2022)

> We were in need of those aid at some point, and we had to stand in line to get these aids since we had no other choice. That's why our dignity was affected as we needed those aids to help us in living. (Nasir, 20, youth men focus group, November 2022)

> We feel humiliated from having to wait in lines and taking from those NGOs, but we had to do it as we were in need of it. (Abbas, 24, youth men focus group, November 2022)

> There is humiliation in taking aid. There are people who are in need of this aid and people who don't; they simply stand in line because they want to take this aid even though they don't need it. Taking aid itself is humiliating. (Jamal, 52, adult men focus group, November 2022)

> I am a Syrian registered with the UN, and I have a number of children, why don't they come to the house and knock on the door respectfully and give us this help, as there will be no insult in this way. (Ali, 46, adult men focus group, November 2022)

The 'lines' described above refer to distribution projects that are funded by UN agencies and other international non-governmental organizations (iNGOs). The distribution of foreign aid is often implemented by local partners, the majority of which employ Lebanese staff. This includes distributing food boxes, so-called dignity-kits, Covid-19 cleaning boxes, and other essential nonfood items. My interlocutors described how

these lines last for hours, often with fights occurring and discriminatory words being uttered by the staff. I have experienced these lines myself, observing fights and even gunshots. Other crucial causes of dignity loss include being called by their UNHCR number, not their names, photo-taking without consent, and sharing those photos across social media to prove use of funds to western donors. Often beneficiaries are required to sign release forms before receiving their food box, coerced to give consent for an image of themselves posing with their food.

The humanitarian industrial complex manufactures the conditions for Syrians to beg for their aid, constructing a scenario of Western dependency and moral authority that violently undermines notions of *karam*. It is also emasculating. The lines for *taking* emerge as the personification of the social construction of indignity embodied in spaces of aid distribution. But this taker-giver dynamic is not an unintentional byproduct of aid delivery. Instead, it reveals the Christian foundations of Western humanitarianism which positions those in need as fixed victims and indebted receivers (Fassin, 2007). The following narrative indicates how passive victimhood and vulnerability are not inherent characteristics of refugee subjectivities, but instead they are features that have been imposed onto them.

> We as refugees do not have rights. If you want to work, there are limits for that, and if you want to produce something for yourself, there are more limits. They (Lebanon state) made us besieged for a living, they made us dependent on the United Nations food card or any other association that pities us. (Ali, adult man focus group, November 2022).

In conjunction with the previous discussion on the bakery, we can locate queuing as an undignified daily endeavor. In addition to waiting for bread and aid boxes, the lines for cash assistance too are crucial sites of dignity loss. Syrians registered with UNHCR have bank cards that allow them to receive monthly stipends at local ATMs. But because of Lebanon's financial collapse, many ATMs in the Bekaa remained out of service from 2020-2023, resulting in hours-long lines in front of the one operating

machine in the local area. At the time of conducting this research, queues of impatient looking men became common as I drove through the Bekaa. Instead of humanitarian staff, private bank security guards were designated to monitor the lines. Whether bread or finance, Lebanon's socio-political context is intricately connected with the Syrian lived experience. State and humanitarian governance exploit and undermine Syrian dignity.

Beyond the indignity around queuing, several participants describe discrimination endured specifically at UNHCR when registering or renewing their asylum paperwork. These harmful interactions and exchanges with Lebanese staff reveal how sociopolitical dynamics continue to shape senses of dignity. Resentment, fear and frustrations around the high proportion of Syrians per capita in their country is not only projected onto social encounters in the bakery, but in the space of the UN – a space proclaimed to protect and uphold ‘human’ dignity. This reveals an alarming humanitarian paradox.

> It’s true that the UN has helped the Syrian refugees a lot. However, the treatment we get inside the headquarters is harsh and humiliating. Most employees there treat us as if we went there to beg. It’s a right that the UN gives us. (Miriam, 20, youth woman focus group, November 2022).

Amira, 40, also described the discrimination while renewing her refugee status.

> It [UNHCR] affected us a lot, so we started to feel humiliated, so we start remembering our situation before we become refugees when we were in Syria, and now we are in Lebanon, and how the employees insult us and shout at us, although it is the right of every Syrian refugee, but the employees insult you a lot, and this affects our dignity a lot. (Amira, adult woman focus group, November 2022).

The story of Mona, 35, further conveys the discrimination that ensues inside the space of UNHCR. She shared how she was mocked in a UNHCR resettlement interview for wearing *hijab* [head scarf]. She was applying to live in France, to which her caseworker replied that she wouldn't be welcomed there unless she removed her scarf. As Mona recounts, the interaction was rude and humiliating, threatening her sense of dignity. These stories are numerous and ordinary, particularly among women. Several women in the focus groups endured harassment in these interviews. If not a comment on wearing hijab, it was a comment on irresponsibly having too many children.

These scenarios illuminate the multiplicity of ways in which dignity is made vulnerable in the UN. But beyond these particularly humiliating exchanges, there is also the underlining issue associated with this space from the very first instance: the label "refugee". The memory of receiving refugee-status and that decision to file for this status remains crisp in the mind. This decision – and the UNHCR appointment to prove one's victimhood that follows – symbolizes a loss of self. Khadija, 54, shared these emotions, and described why her daughter initially refused to complete the paperwork.

> We thought that we would return to Syria quickly, but now we need this paper registration, so you feel that something has been removed from inside of you and it hurts you a lot. (Khadija, adult woman focus group, November 2022)

These experiences evoke the reasons why forced migrants – and Syrians in particular - choose to remain undocumented. A growing body of scholarship identifies this phenomenon, drawing attention to the advantages of remaining invisible to the modern refugee regime (Cole, 2021). In the context of Lebanon, however, my interlocutors seek to be seen, to be internationally protected, to have a form of legal status.

> We came here to Lebanon. We didn't want to register in the nations to not be a number, but circumstances forced us. We want to put the children in schools. We want to move around the country, even to the area where we stay. We need

> something to prove that we came here from Syria. That's why we were forced to register with the United Nations. (Basma, artisan focus group, December 2022)

Desires to remain ‘invisible’ become overshadowed by the need to be visible in order to survive. Dignity here is painfully sacrificed to navigate a stigmatizing system, by being forced into the category ‘refugee.’ But from legal status comes other freedoms, and the chance and the hope for long-term dignity.

6.5.2 Dignity *found*: generosity and creativity

Spaces of international humanitarian intervention systematically undermine my interlocutors’ dignity. It is not the aid itself, but the method of delivery and the social interactions and exchanges within these spaces that demand attention. Through my long-term involvement in the day-to-day operations of MAPs, I developed a nuanced understanding of these particularities, observing the dichotomy between the faith-based ethos that drove MAPs, and the paternalistic, rights-based language of the broader international industry. Navigating between these two worlds, engaging with this juxtaposition, shaped my criticality well before this doctoral project. Through a deeper engagement with the social philosophy of *karam* and notions of reciprocity, I have sharpened my understanding of dignified aid as a set of processes. As illustrated by Basma, 55, respect is core to this process:

> At the United Nations, we are all numbers, and when we go to receive something they start taking pictures. As for here [MAPs], we are dealt with respect. The letter reaches us so that we can receive anything that will be started in our name, with respect (...) Here, we have restored our dignity. (Basma, adult women focus group, November 2022)

Beyond being called by your name, dignity at MAPs is also restored through ordinary social interactions that take place from within the organization. After discussions of the discriminatory dynamics that shape indignities attached to spaces of the house, school and bakery, we see how the joy and ease fostered at MAPs becomes exceptional.

Yasmin, 42, a janitor at MAPs, who expressed her sense of comfort at the center, evoked this point:

> I did not feel that I had dignity except in the MAPs center, I confess, and I said that in front of the United Nations. I did not feel the support except at MAPs, so I feel the comfort and safety that I lost outside (...) but when I work with my dignity at MAPs between these employees that are as my brothers and sisters, I have a value (...) I preserved my dignity here. (Yasmin, adult women focus group, November 2022).

Making coffees in the small kitchen, she is surrounded by other Syrian women, sharing stories and sometimes enjoying gossip. There is an unspoken, though palpable, solidarity between this mixture of staff members and beneficiaries. The boundary between these two categories is blurred. Yasmin is among an expanding community of Syrians whose dignity has been nurtured within this MAPs ecosystem that cares for its staff and its beneficiaries. These groups are not in opposition but part of the same collective mission. Thinking and acting beyond the fixed victim/beneficiary and giver positionings offered by Western humanitarianism and Christian theology, creates an alternative space where mutual respect is nurtured, and subject positions are fluid. The rejection of static Western vocabularies is further exemplified in the operations of the Crochet Community Collective, whereby 60 women who would normally be categorized as “beneficiaries” are instead employed as “artisans,” receiving monthly incomes from the sales of their crochet work. As Nadia stated in our artisan focus group, “at the end of the month we will receive a salary, and that is much better than the aid”. Foundational to the wider organization mission to strengthen community through nurturing Syrian interdependency (and independence from the international system), the collective is not only carving out opportunities to *earn,* as opposed to *take,* but to also *give.* A
percentage of the artisans’ earnings from each item made is donated to MAPs’ primary schools, funding the education of their community’s children.

Beyond the crochet collective, if we examine the education programs, we see that the students too, have opportunities to give back to the Syrian community, both directly through volunteering and in longer term commitments to rebuilding Syria. In every other aspect of the organization's operations, an ethos of giving *and* receiving - of nurturing connectivity can be found. In observing the fluidity of generosity and the shifting giver-receiver subject positionings, processes of reciprocity emerge as crucial to restoring dignity in humanitarian spaces. As described in the seminal work of Mauss (1925) on gift giving and further reiterated by Graeber (2011), exchanges of generosity create strong social relationships that are essential to humanity. Expanding on the thinking of Chatty (2017), who draws a parallel between Maussan gift giving and *karam*, it becomes clear how Syrian interdependency carves a pathway to restoring collective dignity. By creating opportunities for community members to rely on each other, MAPs is rectifying the indignity embodied in transactional Western humanitarianism that undermines the logic of reciprocity and *karam*, and thus the very nature of community building. In these processes trust is restored, mending a torn social fabric together through the collective struggle for dignity.

With enforced legal restrictions on Syrians which prevent them from incorporating businesses, MAPs is one of the only Syrian organizations operating in Lebanon's humanitarian ecosystem. In contexts like Lebanon, where displaced communities are governed by both the host-nation and the international refugee regime, attention to refugee-refugee exchanges are crucial.

6.6 The Border

Borders can be conceptualized as non-places, defined by supermodernity, transit and minimal social interaction (Auge, 1995). Or a liminal space separating one nation state from another (Elías, 2023). Borders are also discriminatory spaces, enforcing exclusion and subordination (Briddick and Costello, 2021). And as Cole (2021) argues, borders are archetypal geographies of refuge which reinforce fixed Global North vocabularies of

“refugee” or “asylum seeker”. If we examine more specifically how scholars are describing the relationship between the border and dignity, we will notice a normative human rights-based argument centered on refugee protection from a Western policy or legal orientation (re: McClain et al., 2022; Crépeau & Samaddar, 2009). Through a multifaceted lens of dignity, I contribute new knowledge to this conversation, investigating how the territorial border of the Mediterranean is a complicated site of dignity simultaneously lost and found (analyzed together below). This border differs from the Syrian-Lebanon porous land crossing which many of my interlocutors, and particularly women, move between, often to renew or secure paperwork for their children’s education, or sometimes for medical treatment and visiting family members. Below, I decenter both Western humanitarianism and Western obsessions with refugee desires of Europe, unpacking my interlocutors’ willingness to endure the known risks embodied in sea crossing for the sake of their dignity. I intentionally conclude this chapter with a discussion of this space, as the pressures and inequalities conveyed above underpin the motivations to make such sacrifices.

6.6.1 Dignity *lost* and *found:* sacrifice

We are looking at images of borders. The land crossing elicits no response. My interlocutors are focused on the sea – a space imagined, discussed and debated in ordinary everyday conversations over tea, coffee and *matte*. Stories of successful journeys, circulating within the MAPs building through whispers and then into Syrians homes, nourish a sense of hope that there is a way out of this prison. The border manifests a tangible solution to the endured desperation of exile in Lebanon. Simultaneously, stories of failed attempts emphasize that there is no viable risk-free option out of Lebanon. People articulate anxiety and a sense of suffocation. Engaging with the complexity of these contradictory emotional responses to the border demands the reconciling of the compounding everyday indignities of life in refuge. As Khadija, 54, described:

> This represents how much the Syrians lost their dignity until they reached a point where it no longer mattered to them whether they were alive or dead. The

> amount of pressure and oppression they experienced was enormous. (Adult women focus group, November 2022)

Yamen, 23, expressed a similar reaction, underscoring Syrians' response to desperation:

> The difficulty of living here makes us do this. The situation here is hard. Some people did not have their dignity here and that's why they left by such means. Some others went outside simply to search for a job, as here in Lebanon they work, but at the end of the day they don't get their payment. (Youth male focus group, November 2022).

During the period between 2020-2024, Syrians and Lebanese alike suffered as the country's economic crisis dragged on with no resolution in sight. Smugglers multiplied during this period to accommodate the demand from within the destitute Lebanese society (Spring and Al Halabi, 2023). The selling of land, cars, and wedding gold for a ticket to board a boat became increasingly common. There were two options: a higher price to pay off Lebanon's border security to ensure a "guaranteed" crossing, or a lower price without a guarantee. Regardless of the outcome, smugglers make millions of dollars per boat, generating wealth through an exploitative and corrupt state sponsored industry.

> Many families go out and die at sea and risk their lives for the sake of dignity. Dignity is the basis of everything. We are now manageable of doing anything in order to preserve our dignity, it is the basis of everything. (Abdullah, 54, adult men focus group, November 2022)

Khadija, Yamen and Abdullah evoke how the loss of dignity in displacement encourages families to risk their lives out of desperation. This difficult decision, rooted in the hope for a better life, is reiterated extensively across the focus group discussions, crosscutting age and gender.

> People know that they might die during those journeys, but they still take the risk in hope they could secure a better future for themselves if they survive. (Aminah, 20, youth women focus group, November 2022).

> The people traveled using this way in search for hope, in search of a decent life. A person would not put himself in danger unless he's living in misery and searching for a way out. If they were to go back to Syria, they'd die, so they'd rather try their chances using this method. (Ahmad, 24, youth men focus group, November 2022)

This complicated and contradictory interplay of dignity *lost* and *found* at the border is further articulated:

> This way of traveling is humiliating and takes away our dignity, but the final destination restores and preserves it. (Aya, 19, youth women focus group, November 2022)

> The means itself [border crossings] is undignified, but the final result at the end will help you restore your dignity. (Abdul, 29, mixed focus group, December 2022).

At the end of each summer, as the sea gets more dangerous, the window to fleeing narrows, adding heightened pressure on people to decide. During this time, I spoke with two interlocutors whose younger brothers were in direct contact with smugglers claiming access to a giant yacht that could handle the waves. Images of this yacht circulated across WhatsApp groups, enticing young men to make the decision. One was
Bathena's brother, who was caught and stopped by his family; the other was kidnapped by the smugglers after paying and held captive for an additional $2,000. These brothers were spared, as this boat they were lured onto capsized off the shore of Syria, recorded in the Guardian as one of the deadliest shipwrecks in Lebanon's recent history (Strzyzynska, 2022). Though it was advertised as a yacht, it was instead a fishing boat, incapable of handling the 150 passengers. When I asked Bathena why people would board the boat, I was told they are often held at gunpoint by the smugglers, forced against their will to board and refused their lifesavings back. Despite these known risks, numerous participants told me they would travel this way if they had the chance:

> I'm going to borrow money at the beginning in the summer and get out of

> Lebanon. We won't live with dignity until we get out of here. (Yamen, 23, youth men focus group, November 2022).
>
> I would do it if my family gives me their consent. The reason why I would do it is because I went through a lot of trouble to get accreditation to my degree, and nothing seems to work at all. I'm desperate to continue my education, but I can't. That's why I want to take the risk even if I might die. If I survived, I'd be able to continue my education and rights, and free myself from the humiliation and suffering that I've been through. (Samar, 20, youth women focus group, November 2022).

While the sea presents hope to families across Lebanon, it is crucial to expose the Syrian-specific experience more carefully. My interlocutors' daily lives are interconnected with socio-political and economic entanglements of Lebanon's crisis that fuels the anti-Syrian atmosphere, exacerbating structural precarities. As I continue to untangle the Syrian experience from the broader crisis context, what becomes clear are the ways in which peaks in motivations to flee occur in tandem with the intensification of deportation campaigns, which are coordinated with smugglers. The smuggling apparatus facilitates the exit of Syrians from the country, creating both the causes and the solution to indignity. The following dialogue is from the adult male focus group:

> Ali: They are the best people. I wish I had the money to leave as they did, because dying at sea is better than staying in Lebanon.
>
> Kareem: But in this way you will lose your life.
>
> Ali: I lost my life in both cases because life here is not life. If we arrive, we will live a decent life, and he will be a human being in every sense of the word, and he will be able to secure a life for himself and his family in a good way.

Whether initiating or continuing the journey of refuge, sacrifices to dignity are made at the territorial border. The excerpts presented above capture how my interlocutors imagine the simultaneous loss and preservation of dignity within this space of interaction and exchange, epitomizing the vulnerable-agentic duality embodied in the

refugee subject. A sacrifice of short-term dignity for the long-term dignity is embodied in the decision to flee.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter leveraged a spatial lens to contribute empirical specificity to the conversation on refugee subject making, and in particular, the duality of vulnerability and agency. I examined how dignity is lost and found across the spaces of the house, bakery, school, border and humanitarian interventions, eliciting how dignity is renegotiated in response to the inequalities attached to these socially constructed spaces of daily interaction and exchange.

I conclude by arguing that these spaces become reproduced as their own territorial borders, and more specifically, as distinct boundaries shaped by their own particular precarities and their corresponding modalities of resistance. The fight for dignity can be traced through the weaving in and out of these borders that govern and surveil Syrian bodies. Such a rethinking is grounded in the work of Balibar (2002) who writes:

> The term border is extremely rich in significations. One of my hypotheses will be that it is profoundly changing in meaning. The borders of new politico-economic entities, in which an attempt is being made to preserve the functions of the sovereignty of the state, are no longer at all situated at the outer limit of territories: they are dispersed a little everywhere, wherever the movement of information, people, and things is happening and is controlled—for example, in cosmopolitan cities. (75)

Balibar's argument counters normative depictions of fixed territorial edges of the nation-state. They suggest that borders are shifting, multiple, fluid, emerging within cities and thus not only at the peripheries. This chapter illuminates such critical complexity, adopting this language of borders to evoke the hostility of movement through everyday spaces. In this rethinking, the overlapping and compounding structural precarities embodied in these spaces can be identified, unpicked, and problematized.

Chapter 7: Dignity and Temporality

7.1 Introduction

7.1.1 Chapter objectives

This chapter explores dignity operations through the lens of temporality. The discussion that follows concludes my argument that dignity in exile is simultaneously emotional, relational and processual, necessitating the assertion of agentic capacities through not only social and spatial dimensions, but also temporality. I evoke the ways in which the fight for dignity is experienced through distorted and uncertain time-space and argue that the weaponization of liminality in exile challenges dignity preservation. I do this by explicating the particularities of how dignity is in continuous renegotiation, arguing that these processes are transforming and reconfiguring Syrian sociality, patriarchal dynamics, and standards of a dignified life. I develop the concept of burden to critical dignity discourses, offering a multifaceted theory that specifies dignity in refuge. Dignity as burden becomes the site-specific empirically informed concept that amalgamates emotion, relationality and process described in the previous chapters. The discussion reconceptualizes Syrian refugeehood as the burdensome everyday fight for dignity.

7.2 The Burden of Refugeehood

7.2.1 Refugees as 'burden’

Refugees have long been considered burdensome. The preamble of the UN 1951 Refugee Convention states, “Considering that the grant of asylum may place unduly heavy burdens on certain countries, and that a satisfactory solution of a problem of which the United Nations has recognized the international scope and nature cannot therefore be achieved without international co-operation." This excerpt calls on the joint

effort of nation-states to share, and ultimately, reduce, the burden of refugees. More explicitly, the convention encourages international solidarity through *burden-sharing,* which can be performed *financially* (contributing to countries of asylum) or *physical* (dispersal of refugees among states) (Boswell, 2003). However, burden-sharing through international solidarity has been proven difficult to achieve. Global North nation-states with stronger infrastructure to receive and support refugees prefer paying much weaker Global South states to keep asylum seekers closer to their homelands. The money offered by Global North states is significantly less than what it would cost to offer resettlement. Boswell (2003) identifies this as burden "shifting" rather than burden "sharing".

A narrative that positions refugees as a burden lends itself to xenophobic rhetoric and policy, justifying exclusion and differentiation between refugees and host societies and setting the foundation for discrimination. In Lebanon, notions of burden are weaponized. The Syrian population is considered as a threat to security and blamed for the country's economic, environmental and infrastructural degradation (Janmyr, 2016). Proclamations around burden led to the 2014 adoption of the "Policy on Syrian Displacement", which legalizes deportation and thereby overrides UNHCR's capacities to protect refugees (ibid). This policy has also led to the increased demand for sea crossings to Europe's borders, strategically applying pressure on the EU to 'burden-share'. In May 2024, the EU granted Lebanon 1 billion euros under the condition that Lebanon respects international law, and most significantly, to ensure the Syrian refugees remain in Lebanon as opposed to arriving at their borders by boat (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

The EU's response might be framed as a display of financial burden-*sharing*, but it is in fact burden-*shifting*. In both framings, Syrians are still considered the problem. Lebanese policies continue to differentiate between Syrian and non-Syrian foreigners. The 1951 Refugee Convention signatories (which does not include Lebanon) have effectively circumvented their responsibility to protect asylum seekers fleeing a region which has been made unstable as a result of their influence.

This literature fails to consider the 'burden' from the perspective of refugees. Thomson (2022) presents the only example of critical work that reorients the narrative from the bottom-up. Her research amongst Congolese refugees reveals how her interlocutors are "tired of being treated as burdens," underscoring the ways in which top-down burden-sharing policies are felt and internalized by refugees themselves. This chapter builds on this important body of work. I flip the trope of burden on its head to center the lived experience of refugees, conceptualizing the struggle for dignity as burdensome.

7.2.2 Dignity as burden

I develop my theory around burden through deeper engagement with Critical Race Theory, a body of work that has been foundational to the analytical construction of this dissertation. As previously described, the notion that dignity is processual and in need of continuous preservation is in part shaped by the work of Lloyd (2023):

> Dignity is also something you *do*, a practice, a performance, a way of engaging with the world. This is a special insight of the Black political tradition, skeptical as it is of abstractions: with time frozen, dignity may look like a status, but in its natural habitat, dignity names friction. In a world that denies Black humanity and embraces racial domination, dignity names an affirmation of that humanity, which necessarily means struggle against domination. (2)

The notion of Black dignity powerfully reorientates the meaning of dignity from inherent worth and a moralized status, to a struggle. There are other conversations within Black studies that further identify the particularities of dignity in a racialized world, such as the scholarship on the "burden from being black" (Austin 2004) and the "burden of blackness" (Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo 2017).

> It [burden] constitutes a load because it imposes a task upon those who bear the color and weighs them down in ways that they otherwise would not experience. The very color of their skin (the blackness) which follows them everywhere causes them to be seen and treated in negative ways that often causes them discomfort. (ibid p.5)

Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo continue to describe their interlocutors as “deeply aware of these constructs and how they are often positioned as inferior in their daily interactions” (Ibid). This work evokes strong linkages between the experience of blackness and refugeehood. It is especially insightful and provoking in relation to the limited body of work pertaining to the refugee burden. The use of burden is not a contemporary concept, but resonates with Fanon’s seminal *Black Skin White Masks* (1952):

> And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. (110)

In Fanon’s description, the black body, burdened by the institutionalization of discrimination, exists in protracted state of liminality. This ‘certain uncertainty’ surrounding his body evokes the distortion of time-space and draws focus to the particularities of what makes life as a black man burdensome. In negotiating these powerful meanings and uses of ‘burden’ across critical race theory, the critical *lack* of ‘burden’ in refugee scholarship is put into relief. Drawing inspiration from critical race theory, which reveal striking similarities with refugeehood, I place the embodied experience of dispossession and uprootedness at the forefront of the refugee burden conversation. This transition from refugees *as* burdens to refugees as *embodying* burden has in part already begun in the previous chapters, by detailing the precarious and agentic fight for dignity.

In this chapter I develop this argument further with the objective of contributing a new theory of compounding societal, spatial and temporal violence endured in exile. Dignity as burden names the multifaceted struggle of refugeehood. This theory names the pain of reconciling the loss of a past life and the processes of renegotiations that are demanded of refugees as they yearn to transition *out* of the unbearable state of

liminality in which they have become entrapped. Dignity as burden offers language for this liminal fight for dignity.

7.3 The Weaponization of Liminality

In the chaotic and violent landscape of exile in Lebanon, my interlocutors' futures are unknown, their bodies suspended in time. The enjoyment of self, familial and collective dignity has become uncertain. An inescapable waiting game shapes daily existence as the right to re-root and re-ground is continuously denied. The notion of liminality, described by Turner in the 1960's as in betweenness, neither here nor there, is a crucial concept to think with when describing the precarious context of forced migration. For Tuner (1967), liminality is a painful transitional period characterized by marginalization, structural invisibility and poverty that is completed through a ritualized transition. Before this transition, the liminal subject has nothing: no status, no rank, no say. They are instead treated as polluting. Turner's ethnographic findings can be mapped onto the everyday experiences of the Syrian community who are also marginalized and treated as pollutants – as burdens. What separates liminality in refuge from other cases, however, is the uncertainty or lack of any ritualized transition to cease the suffering inscribed to this socially constructed condition. Liminality in refugeehood is an emotionally and mentally draining state of questioning and waiting (Horst & Grabska, 2015; El-Shaarawi, 2015; Salem 2023). *Will we return? When will we return? How will we return? What is my future?*

The making of the liminal refugee subject is not simply a byproduct of displacement or an inherent feature of refugeehood. Precarious legal positions are deliberate and manufactured by hosting governments. This is well described in the context of Turkey through bureaucracy that "contains", "criminalizes" and "demobilizes" asylum seekers (Biehl, 2015). A similar pattern is evident in Lebanon, where anti-Syrian policies are "manufacturing vulnerability" by stripping Syrians of their rights, which then legalizes their exploitation and deportation (Saghieh, 2015). As Janmyr (2016: 61) argues, "The

Government rejects, in principle, the integration of refugees and does not consider itself a country of asylum, but rather one of transit."

This top-down manufacturing of liminality seeps into the everyday. The loss of dignity experienced in the house, bakery, school, border and humanitarian interventions stem from discriminatory political ideology, policy enforcement and public perceptions of refugees. As Adham, 42, shared:

> In Lebanon a distinction is made between the Syrian and the Lebanese, so you cannot do anything, but in Syria there was a distinction between the Syrians, but you could speak and confront to obtain an investigation, but here we cannot. (Adham, adult men focus group, November 2022).

Navigating life becomes a continuous reminder of dispossession, where the denial of legal status and rights breeds indignity. The following passage is taken from the conversation with young men on legal papers and renewing residency:

> Abbas: I got all of my papers confiscated by them [the army] since I was arrested in Nabatiyeh in 2017.
>
> Nasir: I first time I went, I was able to renew my residency, but the second time I was not able to since my passport expired, and I don't have an ID.
>
> Ahmad: Most Syrians wants to be legal in this country, but whenever they go to do that, they make it very hard for them to obtain that residency.
>
> Abbas: I did not go to get my papers back because of what happened to my friend. He was in a similar situation; his papers were with them. When he went to get them, they put him in jail. They told him you either pay money and get out or spend a month in jail. After the month passed, they did not give him back his papers, but they released him.
>
> Basil: My papers got confiscated by the general security since 2013, and they are still with them till now. I tried to get them back, but every time I go there, they tell me to come later.

Kareem: I went to Ablah prison, I stayed for almost 3 weeks, there is a lot of injustice inside, and this thing affects dignity.

Ahmad: Every prison you go to, you keep on hoping that you get out of it.

Abbas: I mean why did they humiliate me that much. I'm not the only one who doesn't have valid residency in Lebanon.

Yamen: They don't want us to become legal, and they don't want us to stay here.

Maintaining legal status in Lebanon is an onerous and expensive bureaucratic process characterized by waiting and failure. Without paperwork, life becomes shaped by uncertainty where *feeling* dignity becomes integrated within the litany of unknowns. In this liminal situation, mobility is prevented by a fear of arrest or deportation, work permits cannot be issued, children cannot enroll in school, healthcare cannot be accessed, apartment contracts cannot be signed, birth certificates obtained, or bank accounts opened. Every few months there are deportation campaigns. In the summer of 2024, the Lebanese state conducted the most aggressive anti-Syrian campaign in its history (Amnesty, 2024). The army rounded up thousands of Syrians – regardless of residency or UNHCR papers – and forcibly deported them back to Syrian, threatening their lives. In the Beirut neighborhood where I lived, leaflets on the streets read:

> To illegal Syrians...leave immediately, you have been warned. To Lebanese who are violating the law, it is forbidden to hire illegal Syrians and employ them in your shops and establishments. You are committing high treason. You have been warned.

These overlapping socially constructed precarities of everyday life reproduce the liminal Syrian subject. I leverage the multifaceted lens of dignity to locate where and how this liminality is manufactured by the Lebanese State to suggest that the in-between status endured by my interlocutors is extreme and pernicious, pushing the bounds of a knowable life and world. The weaponization of liminality has forced my interlocutors to renegotiate their dignity and their futures in sometimes excruciating ways. When observed through a wide lens, we begin to see that these renegotiations and new sacrificial choices are accelerating social transformation, transforming gender dynamics

and desires. In this chapter I consider how in the context of exile, these renegotiations share similarities to Turner's 'ritualized transition'. What I want to unpack is how the fight for dignity is found in the agentic and precarious transitional moments of renegotiation where one accepts and responds to their injustice. While dignity is found in these capacities, it becomes lost in defeat, in the inactive waiting game, in the perpetual state of longing for that lost past life, in internalizing narratives of victimhood. This temporality swallows the dispossessed. The everyday fight for dignity is an embodied resistance to it, a manifestation of how refugees assert their right to exist and to be seen.

7.4 Renegotiating dignity

7.4.1 Future imaginaries

Life in waiting is far from static. Social interactions and movement through space and time are shaped by the incessant need to defend and reclaim dignity through complicated decisions. My male interlocutors *do* move through the streets – but only when they must, reviewing their WhatsApp group chats to monitor the checkpoints beforehand. Everyday decisions of eating bread or *not*, leaving the house or *not*, receiving an aid basket or *not*, completing school or *not*, or fleeing by sea or *not* manifest as everyday dialogues of dignity renegotiations. They are manifestations of the burdensome struggle for dignity. What I want to focus my attention on is how these renegotiations are often grounded in future temporal processes. Sacrifices of short-term dignity are made for long-term dignity, and dignified narratives of refugeehood emerging from the community are centered around hope of one day rebuilding Syria. As we see in the MAPs mission, it is one family *towards* dignity, and as Adham stated:

> We left Syria in order to secure safety for our children and their future. Dignity is about being productive and working, but they do not allow you to do so, and we are striving for that. (Adham, 42, adult men focus group, November 2022)

As one of the crucial spaces in the Bekaa where refugees can imagine and dream alternative futures, MAPs plays a crucial role in further shifting temporal mentalities. Their mission to activate the community is inspired by the pervasiveness of *past* temporal thinking, or what is referred to as the "waiting mentality.” This is characterized by a nostalgic longing for the past and its resulting inaction that prioritizes self or family needs over the collective. Replacing the longing for a past with future collective aspirations, emerge as powerful sites of renegotiation in refuge - of radical markers of hope that have the power to restore dignity and resist liminality. Such a mentality shift is far from simple. In organization meetings, awareness campaigns or training program certificate ceremonies, the MAPs director guides the community towards the alternative present-future, telling his peers to “Live your life like you will be a refugee forever, while at the same time live like you will return to your country tomorrow.” Achieving this temporal renegotiation, as burdensome as it is, alleviates the pain and the suffering of liminality. This process is comparable to a particular form of ritualized transition. The space of MAPs, I suggest, facilitates and creates the necessary conditions for initiating this temporal transition.

Throughout fieldwork, I came recognize these temporal shifts through not only narrative, but through materiality as well. Decorated houses with couches, potted plants and caged finches that need tending are material markers of liminal acceptance. Accepting a life of uncertainty allows families to live in the present and to invest in their liminal space, indicating the dismantling of the waiting mentality and a pathway towards future thinking. My theorization of dignity as burden evokes these everyday renegotiations, paying careful attention to temporal processes and the challenges embodied in enjoying a sense of security in a context shaped by the socially constructed liminal condition.

7.2.5 Renegotiations through a gendered lens

Bathena, 31, has chosen to remain single. Though she would most likely have married now if it were not for war and exile. Between 2020 to 2024, she prepared her visa

application for Germany, a rigorous process requiring German language proficiency, $10,000 in a German bank account, and a great deal of patience. For Bathena, studying German in her free time to enhance her visa application was a better future investment than seeking a husband. Her dignity is intertwined with the future imaginary of living a free and secure life practicing medicine, revealing a determination to leave Lebanon and re-root herself first before starting a family. These future aspirations for stability and long-term dignity don't come without a cost. Leaving behind her tightknit family, forced to distance herself from the source of dignity, is a painful process of renegotiation for her and her family.

The ways in which dignity is intertwined with future potentialities is not unique to Bathena. Across other young women, I observed how higher education has become synonymous with certainty, representative of a pathway for continuity and stability. But these gendered desires are recent, emerging in response to exile in Lebanon and the opportunities available to them through NGO programming. Reem, 21, illuminates these social shifts. She is the first person in her family to undertake higher education.

> If I was still in Syria right now, I would be married with three kids already and wouldn't be in university. (Reem, Team meeting, November 2022).

Reem applied to MAPs' Southern New Hampshire University program from a Facebook advertisement and withheld some information from her parents, worried they may prevent her from attending. Before joining the program, Reem's father wouldn't let her out of the house alone, not even to get a bag of chips from the corner shop. After much persuasion, Reem's father allowed his daughter to study. A few years later, when he attended her graduation, he cried with happiness and pride.

As detailed in Chapter 6, education plays a significant role in the lives of young women who are withstanding discrimination, sacrificing their dignity, for the sake of their longterm dignity. If we investigate the dignifying role of education through the lens of temporality, we see how schooling offers a continuous linear trajectory that moves towards a tangible goal, limiting the uncertainty of daily existence. In their work with Syrian refugees in Jordan, Salem (2023) investigates education as a strategy for

navigating liminality, offering the concept of ‘ontological security’ to explicate how the space of the school can nurture senses of certainty. Education becomes an essential tool for resisting the longing for a lost past life which reproduces cycles of inaction. In the case of my interlocutors, as well as my research team, education fosters a radical sense of hope for the future. These positive emotional responses cultivated from learning are reorienting normative future desires for young women in a traditional society, positioning degrees and not husbands as sites of protection – and dignity. The ways in which my young women interlocutors have tied their future security to long-term educational aspirations instead of marriage marks a crucial shift and renegotiation of normative gendered desires.

An analysis of women in contexts of forced migration demands equivalent attention to the shifts in men’s desires, in addition to the overlapping socio political and humanitarian systems of power that shape and influence gendered possibilities for the liminal subject in the first place. As introduced in Chapter 4, men endure particular and extreme vulnerabilities that limit their abilities to physically and financially protect their families. Several of my young men interlocutors therefore choose to remain unmarried, avoiding these responsibilities embodied in marriage and raising a family in Lebanon. These men live at home, where their meager salaries are pooled with their siblings to support their family. This places significant financial pressures on young men, as they reconcile their commitment to their families on the one hand and their desire for marriage on the other. Indeed, in the case of marriage, they will still be responsible for supporting their parents. Beyond these financial barriers, young men struggle to physically protect and defend themselves, let alone their (future) wife and children. With mobility dictated by checkpoints and the threat of deportation to the Syrian regime, the weaponization of liminality weighs heavily on the male body and mind.

I argue that men and women are renegotiating their gendered desires in response to these structural precarities that limit Syrian society from reproducing the normative patriarchal system that existed before exile. Their known and familiar system that once kept the fabric of families and society together has been ruptured and dismantled, causing a breakdown in the attributes ascribed to normative masculinity and femininity.

Women are left to fend for themselves or for their families, filling in the empty gaps left open because of men's incapability. Entrapped in a protracted state of liminality with limited options for establishing a sense of certainty, young women and men are forced to renegotiate their future desires and their standards of a dignified life.

7.2.6 Patriarchy in transition

As I illustrated above, the urge to feel grounded – to no longer be consumed by questioning and the longing for a lost past life – necessitates renegotiations with future desires. For young women this can mean prioritizing education or seeking visas. For young men it can mean prioritizing their families and their physical safety. In both scenarios, the uncertainty of life is challenging desires for marriage. This discussion conceptualizes the broader implications of gender renegotiations, investigating how these sites of transition contribute to a new patriarchal system. If we expand our frame of reference to an intergenerational analysis, we begin to see this transition more clearly. The desire and compulsion to live with security, stability, and continuity - to unmake one's liminal status - is influencing the production of new gender roles and responsibilities. In our adult women focus group, Bushra, 42, encapsulated the essence of how Syrian patriarchy is in transition:

> Men have become women, and women have become men. I mean, there are no longer men as there were in the past. In the past, men used to protect women. I believe that women should be independent and have their freedom, but now they have greater responsibilities as they take care of the internal affairs of the house and go out to work (…) I have no problem with a woman who works to help her husband, but what really provokes me is a woman who works while her husband does nothing and just stays at home. He is not a man who does this and looks like a pig, because they know that there are no good and dangers for women outside. I worked as a painter, I have no problem with women's work, and I also worked as delivery orders here in Lebanon. I even suffered from osteophytes in my shoulders because of this work. In Syria, I did nothing. I was very spoiled. But here I worked to support my father (...) They [men] also stay at

> home and make excuses such as that they did not find a job, or that they came out of the trauma of war, or that they were tired of life, or that they were not in their homeland.

Bushra expresses indignance and a deeply rooted resentment against the men in her life who relinquished their normative gender role to protect her and her family. This is precisely why she initiated her divorce. Her experience is not unique, nor is her anger directed at the incapability of men. Throughout fieldwork, women's frustrations with their husbands were common and frequent, as were desires for divorce. I suggest that these sites of resistance against men are not synonymous to sights of resistance against patriarchy. As we saw clearly through Bushra, the point of contention is how men have become women and women have become men. We are faced with what may appear as a paradox to a liberal feminist: women's frustrations and their impetus to divorce their husbands is rooted in men's incapability to perform their normative patriarchal roles. The desire is not for autonomy and financial independence per say, but for stasis, security and continuity: for men to be able to provide for and protect the family as in the past. Bathena further illustrated these gender transitions:

> I have heard this statement so much from men 'where is my dignity? I lost my dignity and I am sitting at home like a woman as my wife is working outside and bringing the money.' Many also consider that they lost their dignity when their daughter or my wife or sister gives them money at the beginning of the month, for example, to cover the needs of their livelihoods. (Bathena, October 2023)

The patriarchal system is in transition. It has been destabilized and challenged. Its rupture is threatening the dignity of women *and* men as they seek to keep the fabric of the family intact. Crucial to understand here is how men's role to financially provide for the family have shifted *to* women who still remain responsible for their care and domestic work as well. This transition of roles means that while women may enjoy elements of emancipation through their increased economic independence on the one hand, they are forced to negotiate the ruptures in normative patriarchal gender dynamics that once offered them security on the other hand. Furthermore, their new responsibilities may not always come with an increased status in the family. Though in

some families, the superiority of the breadwinning wife or daughter is made clear. The normalization of divorce is further indicative of these shifts, and mainly the loss of control men have over women. When I asked the group of adult men what they thought about shifts in gender roles, the response of Adham was particularly revealing:

> In Syria, people used to say that the glory of a woman or a daughter comes from the glory of her husband, and our people knew that your husband and his house is a grave, so you cannot leave it until you die, even with disagreements. But now the mentality has changed between men and women, and there has become a lot of divorce, so sometimes women she leaves her husband because she is successful and does not want to put up with his family or him. (Adham, 42, adult male focus group, November 2022).

A transitional patriarchy must be situated within the broader socio-political entanglements that oppress the liminal Syrian subject, forcing women and men to renegotiate their gendered identities and make excruciating sacrifices for the sake of repairing their familial and self dignity. The notion of transition here underscores the ways in which these changes are ongoing, current and still in flux. It also draws attention to how these new gender performances are shaped by the urge and need to reclaim a sense of continuity and stasis, thereby drawing on Turner's notion of ritualized transition and the performance embodied in the ceasing of liminality.

In summary, the weaponization of liminality has thrown pre-war gender norms to the side, disrupting normative dynamics between men and women and directly challenging the capacities of both men and women to establish and sustain families, and to preserve their dignity. This transitional patriarchy embodies and is shaped by three overlapping and interconnected layers of oppression. First, there is the dominating Lebanese State governance which weaponizes liminality and denies Syrians from enjoying a sense of security. Such control over men's bodies is painfully emasculating. Second, there is international humanitarian governance which reinforces victimhood and dependency on the one hand, while prioritizing women "empowerment" and neglecting men on the other (see Turner, 2019). The imposition of Western liberal feminist humanitarian action fuels and drives this unsettling transition. And third, it

should be acknowledged that as the system endures transition, traditional patriarchal societal expectations of women and men prevail. While gender desires and roles are shifting, normative expectations of women as caregivers and men as providers remains the most desirable pairing of responsibility, thereby challenging my interlocutors' abilities to accept their new roles and these new standards of a dignified life. These layers of structural inequalities shape this new patriarchy, effecting women and men, exacerbating pressures to be "temporary guests" to the State of Lebanon, ideal grateful "refugees" indebted to the aid system, while also capable of caring and providing for your family. The burdensome struggle for dignity operates across and is shaped by these three entanglements.

7.5 Conclusion

Inspired by Critical Race Theory, this chapter reconceptualized dignity as burden through the lens of temporality. As we now have seen, my interlocutors are fighting for their collective, familial, and self dignity through a distorted time-space. I draw attention to the ways in which the traditional Syrian patriarchal system is undergoing transition in response to overlapping and interconnected layers of socio-political oppression – dynamics which have been unpacked throughout this dissertation. In the context of this chapter, the aim is to draw a line between these entanglements, the rupture in Syrian sociality, and the everyday fight for dignity as a means of repair. In conceptualizing my interlocutors as liminal subjects, I aim to capture the human urge to feel grounded and secure, relating gendered renegotiations as agentic and precarious capacities that facilitate a transition into statis, security, continuity – and ultimately, a transition into long term dignity. The fight for dignity is located in these sites where the liminal condition is resisted. Dignity as burden names this spatial and temporal struggle of continuous renegotiating and the reconciling of a lost past life.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Thesis overview

The 2011 Dignity Revolution remains the most explicit site of Syrian precarity and agency. But this fight for dignity never ceased. Instead, it has become folded into the seams of the ordinary, disguised in its ordinary nature, reproduced as an invisible and unremarkable everyday endeavor of survival. Through an immersive community-based investigation, I unraveled the camouflaged struggle for dignity, picking apart where and how this essential feeling operates through society, space and time. Participant observation, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions were leveraged to capture the multifaceted lived experience of dignity. Building from critical dignity theory, I argued that dignity in refuge is inherently emotive, relational, and processual, and developed an analytical framework to unpack this through the concepts of subjectivity (Chapter 4), agency (Chapter 5), spatiality (Chapter 6), and temporality (Chapter 7). In doing so, the empirical data tells a site-specific story of dignity loss and preservation, elucidating the agentic and precarious fight for dignity. Taken together, I theorize dignity as burden.

This dissertation reveals how Syrians are continuously renegotiating their fleeting senses of dignity as they buy bread, attend school, interact with their landlords or smugglers, collect aid boxes, plan their futures, and care for their families. The sources of these vulnerabilities remain unknown, unseen and unaddressed. Building from Das (2006), I consider how violence here is not a singular event, but an embodied experience that re-shapes sociality as it ‘folds’ into everyday interactions and exchanges, even if unspoken by those it affects. Through careful observation, this dissertation locates and identifies the compounding structural precarities of everyday life, separating these injustices from my interlocutors’ subjectivities to divulge in a more nuanced discussion of agentic and precarious modalities in exile.

Overall, my research critically re-thinks hegemonic Kantian notions and applications of dignity as an inherent worth or status. In the context of refugeehood – or any other site of vulnerability or liminality – this conceptualization fails to capture dignity's inherent fragility. The urgent transition from universalism to burden expands from a range of scholars across history (Harrison, 2024; Harkin, 2018), philosophy (Debes, 2009, 2017a, 2017b), critical race theory (Fanon, 1952; Lloyd, 2022), bioethics (Lickess, 2007; Malpas, 2007; Miller, 2017; Nussbaum, 2009) and political science (Pearlman 2013, 2021). These works engage with dignity as site-specific, fluid, shifting, and in need of preservation. In putting these perspectives in conversation with each other, a much-needed space of critical dignity theory begins to take shape. This research problematizes normative claims not only for the purpose of intellectual debate, but I consider the potentialities of reimagining this concept on the terms of those whose lives are shaped by the need to reclaim and preserve it. Below, I present a framework that carves a pathway to expand interdisciplinary and anthropological explorations of an overlooked object of inquiry.

8.2 Theoretical Contribution: The Dignity Lens

The language of dignity is ubiquitous, embodying multiple contradictory and complimentary meanings. Across moral and legal philosophy, race theory, and bioethics, scholars continue to debate and redefine the concept. And yet, critical literature on dignity remains thin. As Debes (2017b) writes, "the paucity of research into dignity is odd," (9). This observation is not only an intellectual matter, but the elusiveness of the term and the ongoing analytical confusion exposes it to misuse and appropriation that undermines the very foundation of human rights. In Chapter 2, I outlined theories of dignity as universal, relational, processual, and emotive. Of particular importance was conveying the problematics of *human* dignity – a qualifier that names hegemonic moral language that absolves states and the humanitarian industrial complex of their role in exploiting the vulnerability of dignity. Indeed, a rights-

based moralized conceptualization is no longer a viable theoretical framework to think through: it remains divorced from the lived experience of dignity as burden.

For some scholars, these multiple definitions and uses of dignity indicate the concept's uselessness, suggesting the term is only a slogan (Macklin, 2003). For others, multiplicity creates a 'struggle' in defining the notion (El Bernoussi, 2021). And as Mattson and Clark (2011) argue, "the concept of human dignity is in such disarray that it does not provide even a minimally stable frame for global discourse and action," (305). Engaging with these scholarly frustrations is crucial to the pursuit of rethinking dignity, guiding critical theorists towards the development of a conceptually useful notion that can defend against appropriation. Although relational, processual and emotive theories help lead us in that direction, offering crucial knowledge on how dignity is constructed within our dynamic social worlds, something is still missing. I identify a crucial gap: the lack of methodological and analytical cohesion to guide knowledge creation on everyday dignity. There is a paucity of ethnographically specific research on the topic, nor are there readily available frameworks for investigating dignity as a socially constructed lived experience.

This research contributes a 'dignity lens,' a multifaceted theoretical framework that can expand and pluralize everyday dignity to a range of other contexts beyond refugeehood. This multifaceted lens integrates four crucial vantage points: subjectivity, agency, spatiality and temporality. By locating how dignity operates across these dimensions and observing the particularities of relationality, emotion and process, we arrive at a comprehensive understanding of dignity as an embodied agentic and precarious lived experience. It is through this methodological and analytic lens, that I develop knowledge on the particularities and subtleties of how dignity operates in relation to overlapping systems of oppression in the context of Syrian dispossession in Lebanon. These insights produced the notion of dignity as burden, offering new theoretical language that names and identifies the spatial and temporal fight for dignity and locates and problematizes the overlapping socio-political entanglements which exploit the fragility of dignity. It is here that we arrive at a thorough understanding of what Wendy Pearlman

(2021) meant when she called the refugee crises ‘a crisis of dignity.’ The aim of this dissertation is to expand this critical conversation of dignity so that we can begin directing attention to pathways *towards* dignity, as opposed to debunking universalism – an exercise the dignity lens has already done.

8.3 Research Impact

8.3.1 From theory to practice

Rethinking dignity through a multifaceted lens has the potential to improve dignity outcomes in contexts of vulnerability and inequality. This move from theory into practice is not so clear cut, but necessitates a caring reflexive process. I consider how our lives and wellbeing would be better sustained if institutions, humanitarian agencies, decision makers, politicians, community leaders, city planners and so on, had the capacity to first acknowledge and identify the social construction of the spaces we occupy, to then later create innovative solutions grounded in this relational, processual and emotive understanding of dignity. This lens also becomes a useful tool for filmmaking and narrative construction in contexts where subjects are often represented as static victims or wrongfully romanticized for their resilience. As part of this doctoral project, I applied this multifaceted lens to co-create a documentary that conveys the complexity of agency and precarity. This is particularly useful in the context of representation of the Arab region more broadly, which historically has been problematically portrayed in cinema through East/West oriental or politicized framings (Khatib, 2006). I further applied this lens to the creation of Lamsa, a crochet fashion initiative that collaborates with Syrian artisans at MAPs through a caring design process. Lamsa, which means ‘touch’ in Arabic, celebrates the special touch of each of the artisans, creating space for women to assert their personalities and express themselves, support their families, while also fostering a sense of belonging to a community of craftmakers. In these two distinct pathways, the lens of dignity helped guide, shape and improve my practice.

The multifaceted dignity lens also has clear potential in hospital settings, which continues to apply a universalist notion of dignity. Although the implementation of ‘dignified care’ is foundational to hospital protocols, outlined in governmental documents, including the NHS Department of Health plan, as a pathway for improving the quality of care (Matiti et al., 2007), healthcare systems globally continue to strip patients of their dignity. Hospitals globally implement a range of validated ‘dignity scales’ to improve patients’ experiences to counter these harms (Fuseini et al., 2023; Tauber-Gilmore et al., 2018). The issue is that management continues to engage in patient dignity as one-size fits all, often seeking to uphold dignity through infrastructural renovations and autonomy over room temperature. Meanwhile, it is the increasing biomedicalization and commodification of care compounded with hospital staff shortages that dehumanize patients and reduce their treatment into time-oriented tasks, causing harm to patients’ sense of worth and identity (Kleinman, 2012; Darilek, 2018). Through the reconceptualized lens of dignity, we can identify the tensions between universal, top-down and fixed institutional interpretations of dignity and the emotive, relational and processual experiences of dignity that are embodied by patients. This literature reveals crucial synergies with how my interlocutors living in tents negotiate their fragile sense of dignity in relation to encampment. What I argued in Chapter 6, is that dignity was exploited through the social construction of the space – and not its infrastructure. Limited understandings of this nuance are thus not only intellectual blind spots, but this lack of knowledge is preventing modes of care globally.

Williams et al. (2016) draws attention to the ways in which a relational understanding of dignity can improve health outcomes. They describe the “little things that count”, an intimate – and uncommon- caregiver practice designed to maintain patient comfort, respect and dignity. Buying a patient their favorite chocolate, ensuring the water is at the right temperature, and putting on a patients’ socks if their feet felt cold, are ways that a caregiver communicates an acknowledgment of their patient’s worth. These mundane human interactions are subjective, manifesting differently across patient needs, desires and socio-cultural backgrounds. This counters normative bio-medicalized responses to upholding patient dignity, which as described above, continue

to fail. I suggest that there is an urgent need to further flesh out multi-faceted theoretical understandings of dignity as social constructed, so that undervalued notions such as ‘little things that count’ can become elevated as best practice for upholding patient dignity.

Beyond its potential in filmmaking and hospital setting, the multifaceted lens of dignity can alleviate some of the foundational problems embedded in the humanitarian regime. As I have explicated throughout this dissertation, the mechanisms of aid distribution are major causes of dignity loss amongst Syrians in the Bekaa. In a policy brief, Mosel and Holloway (2019) explicitly bring attention to this humanitarian paradox, drawing attention to how aid intended to preserve refugee dignity often directly undermines dignity instead. They present the example of the UN’s ‘dignity kit,’ which in the context of the
Rohingyas, threatened women’s dignity as the white menstrual cloth was too closely associated with the kafan shroud used in their burial services. These researchers ask a crucial question that can guide dignity theory to practice: “unless the humanitarian community knows what dignity means to the people it aims to support, how can it ensure that its response is dignified?” (ibid:1).

As bioethicists and critical humanitarians critique normative moralized notions of dignity, other fields of study are far from making these discoveries. Urban planning is one field that could benefit from the critical rethinking of dignity as an embodied agentic and precarious lived experience. Grossmann and Trubina (2022) problematize the underutilization of the concept:

> It is striking, however, that dignity is not among this range of current orientations in urban geographical research. While dignity keeps turning up as a category of practice, e.g. in urban protests described in the literature, or as a moral category, such a conceptual conversation is largely absent from normative orientations informing the analysis of spatial politics. (406)

In summary, I argue that a multifaceted understanding of the emotive, relational and processual underpinnings of dignity has the potential to improve refugee representation

in media, health care, humanitarianism, urban planning, as well as any site of human interaction and exchange. Its function lies in its effectiveness to capture both duality and interconnectedness; understanding the contradictory and relational nature of humans demands a glance into multiple vantage points. Meanwhile, Western liberal universalist applications of 'human' dignity, often conflated as a status or an ambiguous synonym to humanity, do not perform any useful function in practice. Instead, they offer Western politicians a term to manifest moral superiority and justify military invasion in the Arab world. As Laura Bush stated in a 2001 press conference, "The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women," (The White House).

8.3.2 A politics of dignity

In October 2024, I attended the annual Edward Said London Lecture where Raji Sourani, an esteemed Gazan human right's lawyer, spoke in response to the question: Is the Gaza war an end to international humanitarian law? With the Palestinian 'fight for dignity and justice' core to his argument, Sourani presented an unwavering commitment to upholding human rights with "integrity" - even if the Western constructed infrastructures are incapable of holding perpetrators of genocide accountable. Instead of denouncing these systems as useless, Sourani recognized the unavoidable imbalance of power and chose to use the legal tools of the West against them. Dignity here is achieved through the process of challenging a system of domination with their own language as a refusal to be the West's 'good victims.' Sourani has effectively ascribed a new meaning to international humanitarian law: each documentation of human rights violations becomes a site of asserting the Palestinian right to exist. He has also done this with the meaning of dignity, reclaiming the concept on the terms of Palestinians although still within the bounds of human rights. What dignity means to Sourani is not what it means in the declaration of human rights. The Syrian community is navigating similar tensions, subtlety asserting their version of dignity as the international humanitarian system imposes *theirs*.

This dissertation is a call to engage with this misalignment, to recognize and problematize these tensions. It is a call for the intellectual rejection of a Western liberal notion that obfuscates the very causes of fragile dignity. Releasing dignity from the grip of the hegemonic moral and legal frameworks is not only academic exercise, but it can extend into the realm of the political. Inspired by Aruna D'Souza's (2024) *Imperfect Solidarities,* I consider the effect of moving towards a politics not based on idealized morality or empathy, but a politics of care and dignity. Through the notion of care, D'Souza challenges common liberal beliefs that social and political change must derive from empathy or an emotional understanding of oppression. The issue of empathy as a political foundation is how it is predicated on the oppressed performing their misery so to change your mind – it is a "horrible burden" on those who are systematically marginalized (ibid:15). It also can become an inward looking, self-indulgent practice where white supremacy can "amass capital" through an emotional experience, facilitating paternalistic divisions between the empathizers and the victims. A politics of care, however, is "an obligation to care for each other whether or not we empathize with them" (ibid:24). This is a new point of departure for an imperfect solidarity, where oppressed populations can resist categorizations, remaining "un-translatable into Western thought" (53), no longer required to perform and defend themselves, or to be examined. They write:

> How beautiful this is. I wonder what sort of solidarities and alliances we might form on the basis of such mutual respect, one in which we acknowledge our right not to translate ourselves into terms that another may understand. (57)

I want to bring the reconceptualized notion of dignity into this critical rethinking, as it has potential to clear a path towards mutual respect, the core ingredient to a politics of care. A politics of dignity recognizes our inherent vulnerability and interdependency, it understands that our relationality can exploit our fragile sense of dignity at any moment, anywhere. It recognizes that what is happening 'over there' can very well happen 'here' and that we all, in our own capacities, are fighting to preserve our dignity. A politics of dignity is an urgent plea to undo the harms of individualism, power, greed, borders, and othering that undermines the collectivity that nurtures our wellbeing. In fact, we depend

on collectivity - and will soon depend on it ever more as our governments continue to abandon their responsibilities, feeding the military industrial complex as its own people starve. With very few people on this planet able to defend themselves in these uncertain times, a politics of dignity unites us without the prerequisite of empathy.

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