

DECONSTRUCTING THE UNITED NATIONS' IMAGINATION OF 'THE
REFUGEE CHILD': A CHILDHOOD STUDIES APPROACH FOR THE SYRIAN
REFUGEE CRISIS IN LEBANON

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Deconstructing the United Nations' Imagination of 'the Refugee Child': A Childhood Studies Approach for the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon

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As the biggest humanitarian crisis since World War II, the forced migration of half of Syria's population has undeniably altered the social, political, and economic landscape of the region. While all surrounding nations and several Western countries have accepted refugees, Lebanon currently accommodates more Syrian refugees per capita than any other country in the world. Of the over 1.5 million Syrian refugees registered with the United Nations in Lebanon, approximately half are under the age of eighteen. Lebanon currently hosts the largest number of Syrian refugee children in the world. Although the country is facing a seemingly new situation with the Syrian refugee crisis, Lebanon has confronted a similar predicament with the emergence of a Palestinian refugee population as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. As the longest running refugee situation in modern history, the UN's response to Palestinian refugees is imbedded with a particular construction of childhood leading to the continued absence of socioeconomic progress nearly 70 years after their initial displacement. The purpose of this analysis is to reveal the tension between the UN's construction of the 'refugee child' and the more nuanced lived realities depicted by scholars researching refugee children in the region.

Dedication

To my parents,

Dr. Joseph Elias Wehbe and Socorro Pinili-Wehbe, MAHE

For their constant love, support, and encouragement

I hope my future achievements will make your sacrifices worth it.

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“When you write about this, ask anyone who has blood in them to help us.”

-Fatimah, Syrian refugee mother of five, Baalbek, Lebanon

(Bindel, “Ask anyone”)

Introduction

As “the biggest humanitarian crisis since World War II,” the forced migration of half of Syria’s population has undeniably altered the social, political, and economic landscape of the region (UN, “*Secretary-General’s remarks*”). Since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, an estimated eleven million people have sought asylum in neighboring countries (UNHCR, “Syria Regional”). As the civil war enters into its seventh year, the conflict continues to pose formidable challenges for all countries in the Middle East. For the second smallest country in the region, the sheer scale and speed of one of the largest mass movements of any human populations since the Second World War is regarded as “one the severest challenges faced by Lebanon in all its complex history “(Kelley 83). With 1.5 million registered refugees, Lebanon currently hosts more refugees per capita than any other country in the world (UNHCR, “Syria Regional”). In a country of four million prior to the civil war, this constitutes a nearly forty percent increase in population in less than seven years. Also, this crisis has resulted in almost 1 in 3 people currently residing in the country entirely dependent on humanitarian aid or income from the informal economy (Culbertson and Constant ix). Approximately half of the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon is under the age of eighteen (UNHCR, “Syria Regional”). Furthermore, Lebanon hosts the largest population of Syrian refugee children in

the world, totaling 520,000 as of 2015, the year the United Nations stopped registering refugees at the government's request (UNHCR, "Facts of the Region").

Although the severity of the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon is forcing a generation of Lebanese to confront a seemingly entirely distinct social, economic, and political predicament, the country has faced a similar situation with the emergence of Palestinian refugees as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Approximately half a million Palestinian refugees, with roughly 62 percent living in 12 camps throughout Lebanon, and 38 percent living in 27 communities neighboring the camps currently reside in Lebanon (Shuayb 21). Although the rapidity and intensity of the Syrian refugee influx is much greater, the commonalities of both crises bear significant implications for millions of children displaced by war in the country. In addition to the obvious similarities of geographical location and violent conflict as the cause of displacement, both populations are managed by the United Nations. Sixty-nine years after the initial conflict producing a Palestinian refugee population, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) remains the leading provider of social services for all Palestinians throughout the region, while the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) administers aid to all Syrian refugees.

Fundamental to both agencies' policies is a particular conceptualization of the refugee child. Essentially dictating both Syrian and Palestinian refugee children's lived experiences, the narrow conceptual parameters embedded within the UN's organizational practices are particularly salient in their

education policies and its effects on refugee children's labor practices in Lebanon. Although these refugee agencies' primary stated objective is the alleviation of human suffering, for Palestinians in Lebanon UNRWA's efforts to achieve this aim has largely been a failure considering the pervasive poverty and continued dire conditions of Palestinian refugee children nearly seven decades after their initial exile. The abundance of scholarship dedicated to researching Palestinian refugee children is valuable for examining the ways in which the Syrian refugee crisis ought to be approached. As the longest running refugee situation in modern history, the UN's response to Palestinian refugees is imbedded with a particular construction of childhood leading to the continued absence of socioeconomic progress nearly 70 years after their initial displacement. The purpose of this analysis is to reveal the tension between the UN's construction of the 'refugee child' and the more nuanced lived realities depicted by scholars researching refugee children in the region.

Historical Processes Leading to the UN's Management

In order to sufficiently analyze the continued existence of a Palestinian refugee population, the historical processes leading to the over 250,000 Palestinian refugee children currently without citizenship rights and dependent on UN aid will be discussed. As a legacy of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the UN reported a total of 650,000 displaced Palestinians at the end of the war (Gazit 238). Due to travel and land ownership restrictions imposed by Israel, displaced Palestinians were prohibited from returning to their homes after the conflict. Sixty-nine years after the war, the Palestinian refugee population that is legally

registered with the UN alone has increased sevenfold, amounting to a current population of over five million living in exile outside Palestinian and Israeli territories (UNRWA 2015). In addition to this, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS, 2016) claims a population of around ten million Palestinians living as refugees within Israeli occupied territory. The United Nations' commissioner report claims that roughly half of this population is under the age of 18 (UNRWA, 2015). In an attempt to manage the population displaced by the First Arab-Israel War, the UN established the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in 1949. Palestinians are the only refugee population with a specific UN agency created to address their needs, with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) attending to all other refugee populations around the world. Although UNRWA was established to address the immediate needs of the refugee population, nearly seven decades later the agency is still the leading provider of social services for Palestinian refugee children. Since UNRWA allows refugee status registration for all descendants of the population exiled in 1948, the current third- and fourth-generation refugee children are implicated within the UN humanitarian aid system from birth (UNRWA, 2015). The unintended longevity of UNRWA necessitates an analysis of the underlying conceptual framework perpetuating the generational refugee cycle of Palestinians and to a larger degree, the continued desperate conditions of the vast majority of Palestinian refugee children in Lebanon. A fundamental aspect of this cycle of poverty is the

UN's insistence on education as the primary investment towards alleviating poverty (Abdul-Hamid et al. 2).

Comparably, with UNHCR as the leading provider of social services for all non-Palestinian refugees throughout the world, the agency is currently responsible for all Syrians displaced by the civil war. Unlike the Palestinian refugee population which was primarily produced by the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, a conflict lasting for a relatively short span of almost two years, the cause of the Syrian refugee crisis has continued for nearly seven years. Also, the UN's failure to improve Palestinians' conditions for the longest lasting refugee crisis in modern times and continued pervasive economic marginalization of Palestinian refugee children in the country serves as a cautionary tale for future initiatives to be attempted with the current influx of Syrian refugee children. As described in a 2006 Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalization and Poverty report, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are portrayed as "perhaps the most unfortunate and destitute grouping of Palestinian refugees in any Arab host country" (Suleiman 3). Considering the newness and immense scale of Syrian displacement, poverty within the Syrian refugee community in Lebanon is considerably more severe than that found within Palestinian communities.

Lebanese Discriminatory Practices

The extreme prohibitive measures historically taken by the Lebanese government in an attempt to preserve Palestinian economic marginalization were reflective of localized social, political, and economic entanglements pertinent to the country. Merely twenty-five years after independence at the end

of the first Arab-Israeli war which produced a refugee population, Lebanon was at a point where it was attempting to set in place a stable economic and political structure. In a 1969 editorial in *An-Nahar*, the Lebanese equivalent of the *New York Times*, celebrated journalist and founder of the newspaper Ghassan Tueni wrote “The government does not exist, and whatever part of it exists has no authority and whoever has authority is not the government” (qtd. in Bannerman 12). In addition to that, Lebanese politics has operated under a structure of confessionalism since independence in 1943. As a religiously diverse country, a political framework that sought to fairly allocate administrative power to the three major religions in the country was established (Roberts 72). Therefore, under this confessionalist system, the president must be a Maronite Christian, while the prime minister and speaker of parliament must be Sunni and Shi’a Muslims, respectively. Since this designation is theoretically based on the population size of each religion, any demographic shift to the population, particularly ones as massive as Palestinians and Syrians refugees would cause a shift in this hierarchy, a shift the majority of Christian elites in the country fear. Since the majority of both Palestinian and Syrian refugees in the country are Sunni Muslims, granting citizenship rights to either community would in fact cause a shift in the delicate demographic balance currently preserved by relegating them to the legal status of foreigners. This political context has ultimately led to the state’s denial of citizenship rights to Palestinians and further prohibiting access to social services and education, therefore leaving UN agencies responsible for refugee children in Lebanon.

In addition to these political and historical dynamics, widespread poverty within the Lebanese population in the years following independence also contributed to the state's implementation of discriminatory practices towards Palestinians. Although an economic boom in the region facilitated financial growth for some, the vast majority of the population did not benefit from this. "Lebanon, as a gate to the Arab East [Lebanon] served as headquarters for business, financial, and administrative activities prompted by the discovery of oil in the area... the country witnessed sudden prosperity.... [However] prosperity was confined to few areas and few families. Though the country became the finance center for the whole Middle East, profits were not invested in the country, and few development projects were undertaken" (Bannerman 15-6). Consequently, economic underdevelopment and vast wealth inequality among Lebanese in the same time period as the influx of Palestinian refugees also contributed to the social marginalization of refugees and subsequently, the government's discriminatory laws.

Considering these various factors, the state's role in the continued economic marginalization of Palestinians in the country is undeniable. However, as the governing body accountable for their survival, analyzing UNRWA's role in their lack of social or economic progress over the last sixty-nine years is essential towards understanding the continued socioeconomic deterioration of Palestinian communities in Lebanon. Rooted in these aforementioned social, economic, and political factors, the Lebanese government's strategy for coping

with the 1968 influx of Palestinians was one based on the premise of protecting its citizens' wellbeing.

Evidence of the United Nations' Construction of 'the Refugee Child'

While the Lebanese government perceived the integration of Palestinians as a threat to the local sociopolitical status quo, UNRWA's policies and practices stemmed from a distinct construction of the refugee child, and to a larger extent, particular notions of children's rights. The function of this section is to reveal the UN's construction of the refugee child fundamental to the organization's practices. In seeking to provide evidence of the UN's construction, UNRWA and UNHCR policy papers, strategy implementation reports, and practitioner training manuals published within the last five years are employed. Also, as a significant factor in organizational imperatives, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) will be discussed.

The narrow conceptual parameters with which UN refugee agencies operate within are substantiated in the ways in which UN publications approach their analyses and assertions about refugee children. Throughout these documents, children's involvement in UN initiatives is consistently defined by an assumed vulnerability, victimhood, and dependence on aid. For instance, in a 2016 UNHCR publication which "applies to all operational contexts... [and intended to] serve as a monitoring tool", the paper cites the agency's "Age, Gender and Diversity Policy" in stating, "Children are at particular risk and require special attention due to their dependence on adults to survive, their vulnerability to physical and psychological trauma and their needs that must be

met to ensure normal growth and development” (UNHCR *A Framework for the Protection of Children* 11). The emphasis on an assumed “vulnerability” is echoed throughout UNRWA and UNHCR documents. Further compounding these agencies’ construction of the refugee child is a belief in the supposed normal “Developmental Stages of the Child” (UNHCR, “Field Handbook” 91). In a section outlining practitioner guidelines for interviewing refugee children, UNHCR’s field handbook reiterates the necessity of an attentiveness to children’s “four crucial aspects of children’s development—physical, emotional, cognitive, and social” (ibid.). Additionally, UNHCR emphasizes a continued dependence on adults due to these factors in stating, “when children’s emerging abilities and capacities change the nature of their dependency and vulnerability from infancy through adolescence, their need for attention and guidance at each stage remains (ibid. 92). The assumed victimhood inherent to this conviction not only discounts children’s agency and capacity to articulate their own needs, but fundamentally serves as the basis for UN organizational practices. This construction of the refugee child driving these agencies’ priorities is repeatedly affirmed in UNRWA and UNHCR documents.

Also, the assumed victimhood and vulnerability of refugee children effectively produces and perpetuates an organizational vision which affirms their dependence on refugee agencies’ aid and intervention. As an intergovernmental organization, the UN’s asserted aims are inextricably linked to and reliant on the financial support of UN member states and private donor support. Therefore, when constrained by these considerations, the manner in

which top UN officials speak about children they claim to serve is frequently in alignment with the dominant westernized construction of childhood frequently critiqued by childhood studies scholars (Boyden 1997; Burman 1996; Stephens 1995). Reflective of the UN's construction of childhood, prominent UN officials' statements reveal a view of refugee children as one defined by an assumed victimhood and vulnerability. Accordingly, in 2013, at the height of the Syrian Civil War, UNHCR high commissioner at the time, Antonio Guterres stated, "What is at stake is nothing less than the survival and wellbeing of *a generation of innocents*. The youth of Syria are losing their homes, their family members and their futures. Even after they have crossed a border to safety, they are traumatized, depressed and in need of a reason for hope" (Spencer 2013, emphasis added). In October of 2016, the UN General Assembly selected Guterres to succeed Ban Ki-moon as the next UN Secretary General. Seated in the most powerful position in the organization, Guterres frequently employs a specific construction of childhood when speaking of refugee children. In a 2014 UNHCR report examining the agency's strategy for refugee children in the Middle East and North Africa, Guterres claims, "The world must act to save a generation of refugee children... Humanitarian organizations and governments are desperately trying to address the needs of *these vulnerable children*" (UNHCR *Protection of Refugee Children in MENA* 7, emphasis added).

While the aforementioned citations are specific to the Syrian conflict and Guterres, the tendency to define refugee children according to an assumed passivity and vulnerability is common to statements made by representatives of

various UN agencies operating in many regions throughout the world. In a 2016 UN News service article reviewing the “Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict”, the author cites Leila Zerrougui, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict in describing her efforts for “calling upon Member States to *treat these children primarily as victims* to ensure the full protection of their human rights and urgently put in place alternatives to detention and prosecution of children” (UN News Center 2016, emphasis added). This prominent UN official goes on to state, “In South Sudan, children were victims of gruesome violations... I wish to remind everyone that it is crucial to ensure appropriate resources for the reintegration of all the children released, with special attention given to psychosocial support and the needs of girls” (ibid.). Zerrougui’s approach in emphasizing children’s victimization and psychosocial development is indicative of the construction of childhood currently dictating the UN’s approach. Akin to the tension between the UN’s construction of the refugee child and their lived realities, childhood studies scholars’ offer more complex, accurate analyses and depictions of child soldiers, while UN agencies nevertheless conceptualize child soldiers as mere victims, and ultimately, as passive recipients of adult imposition.

In another clear articulation of the UN’s conceptualization of childhood, a United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) report on child soldiers highlights children’s supposed inherent vulnerability and lack of physical or psychosocial development as the primary cause of children’s involvement as soldiers:

Most observers agree that the practice continues because children make for cheap and obedient fighters, and are easier—because of their youth and inexperience—to mold into effective and expendable combatants... The proliferation of light weaponry has also fed into the problem, making it possible for very young children to bear and use arms... all agree that the most obvious reason armed forces take on children as soldiers is because they can” (OCHA, “Special Report” 2).

This conceptual framework of childhood is also apparent in children’s narratives employed by the UN to convey child soldiers’ experiences. The first story included in this report under the subheading “Too Small to be Fighting in Anyone’s War” is of a 12-year-old child soldier in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The report calls attention to the boy’s nickname being “Kadogo” meaning “small’ in Kiswahili” (ibid. 1). Writing of this particular boy, the report further emphasizes his lack of physical development in reiterating, “the name suited him for he was tiny, much too tiny, in fact, to be involved in anyone’s war” (ibid.). Another common demonstration of the UN’s construction of childhood is apparent in this report as the author further highlights child soldiers’ assumed victimization and passivity in asserting, “at 12, Kadogo was already a veteran of a vicious bush war between ethnic militias in eastern DRC. So were his comrades at the transit camp, *victims like him* of a practice that has drawn widespread condemnation” (ibid., emphasis added). The report concludes with a predictably standard statement from then UNICEF executive director Carol Bellamy as she claims, “Children are not expendable. They belong in schools and in their families. It is our responsibility to ensure that they are protected from the horrors of warfare” (ibid. 6).

Influence of the UNCRC in the construction of 'the Refugee Child'

Bellamy's assertion of schools and homes as the appropriate place where children "belong" is reflective of the most comprehensive document concerning children produced by the UN, the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). As clearly stated in the UNCRC, "Recognizing that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding" (UNCRC Preamble). Currently ratified by all UN member states with the sole exception of the United States, the CRC is "by far the most fully endorsed product of UN efforts to establish global standards for human life" (Hart, "Saving Children" 5). As a signatory of the UNCRC, Lebanon is theoretically obligated to implement certain policies for children in the country, including all refugee children as outlined in article 22. While the document has been frequently challenged by childhood studies scholars (Boyden 1997; Burr 2002; Burman 2008; Nieuwenhuys 1998), the CRC is consistently and repeatedly cited in UNRWA and UNHCR policy and strategy papers and handbooks. For instance, in UNHCR's most recent Global Appeal publication, the UNCRC is employed to define a child as anyone under the age of 18 (UNHCR "Global Appeal" 167). Also, the notion of children's best interests strategy is cited as the key strategy for managing refugee populations in this publication (ibid. 13). Based on Article 3 of the CRC which states, "in all actions concerning children... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration" (UNCRC, Article 3).

The notion of the factors constituting children's "best interests" as outlined in the CRC and within UN practices has been challenged by scholars (Freeman 2007; Schiratzki 2013). Nevertheless, this notion is frequently found in UN documents. The influence of Article 3 on the UN's construction of refugee children is found in two UNHCR publications, "Field Handbook for the Implementation of UNHCR Best Interests Determination guidelines" (2011) and "Guidelines on Determining the Best Interests of the Child" (2008). Also, a 2012 UNHCR strategy paper states, "Children's rights are enshrined in international law, including in the UNCRC, and are at the heart of UNHCR's protection mandate" (UNHCR *Framework for Protection* 7). Similarly, the UNRWA equivalent of this paper for Palestinian refugee children also cites the UNCRC as the primary basis for their practices (ibid. 3). For both refugee agencies, an emphasis on protection is evident in their strategic aims outlined in these documents. Moreover, article 32 of the UNCRC which states, "states parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education" is also frequently included in UN documents. (UNCRC, Article 32). As made apparent by UNHCR and UNRWA policy papers and the repeated emphasis on Article 32 found within them, the UN envisions education for refugee children as a form of protection.

Focus on Education for Refugee Children in UN Documents

Embedded within the UN's approach towards refugee children is a particular conceptualization of protection. Integral to this is an insistence on

equating schooling with protection. For instance, this belief is revealed in UNHCR's "Protection Checklist for Emergencies" (2013), the guidelines for the standard procedure practitioners should follow in all emergency refugee situations. Listed under "specific protection concerns" are two itemized questions for a "quick assessment of situation in regard to child protection", the first being an order to account for the presence of children, and the second a directive to report their "educational needs... approximate number of school age children" (UNHCR *Protection in Emergencies Toolbox* 4). As a main priority of humanitarian aid and development initiatives, both agencies publish annual education strategy and implementation reports. The ways in which children are discussed in these documents also reveal the UN's construction of childhood as one defined by victimization and passivity to structural forces and the supposed protection from said forces through compulsory education. For example, as outlined in UNHCR's most recent education strategy policy paper, the second point is included under the heading, "Schools will protect children and young people" (UNHCR, *Education Strategy 2012-2016* 14).

As clearly stated, "a fundamental objective of refugee education is to meet the protection needs of refugee children and young people. Schools provide essential physical protection. Participation in school prevents forced recruitment, protects children from sexual and gender-based violence and from child work" (ibid.). Also, in UNRWA's most recent publication on their "Outline of Protection Initiatives", the agency's education program is discussed under the heading, "Protection Through Education" (UNRWA "Outline of Protection

Initiatives” 9). Article 28 and article 29 of the UNCRC, the right to free primary education and education as a tool of development respectively, are also frequently cited by both refugee agencies. In the foreword to a 2014 UNHCR report detailing protection efforts of the agency specifically in the Middle East and North Africa region, Amin Awad, the current Director of Operations for UNHCR in the area writes, “The greatest threats posed by conflict and its ensuing displacement are faced by those most in need of protection: children” (UNHCR, *Protection of Refugee Children in MENA* 3).

In these policy papers, refugee children are presented as victims of war to be protected and saved. This approach by the UN has resulted in a considerable amount of research dedicated to challenging the assumption of a universal childhood in which childhood is defined as a protected time consisting of school and play. According to sociologist Virginia Morrow, “in educational policies, children are mainly understood as *learners* and citizens in the making—adults in preparation. The focus is, in the main, on their educational outcomes” (Morrow 7, emphasis in original). Furthermore, as encompassed by Liisa Malkki and Emily Martin in a tribute to Sharon Stephens,

It was evident to Stephens that the concepts of children and childhoods are not universal or natural but, rather, deeply historical and political, differing greatly through place and time... yet the images of children that have been universalized through many modernist transitional discursive and other social practices are predominantly those of Western and white, middle-class children (Malkki and Martin 217).

In providing evidence of the UN’s construction of the refugee child through UNRWA and UNHCR documents, the tension posed between the organizations’

narrow conceptual parameters and refugee children's lived realities becomes increasingly apparent. Therefore, Stephens's recognition of the complex nature of childhood is valuable for analyzing the current conditions of Palestinian and Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. Additionally, as accurately stated by anthropologist Liisa Malkki, "the net effect of the administrator's views... was to depoliticize the refugee category and to construct in that depoliticized space an ahistorical, universal humanitarian subject" (Malkki 378).

Construction of 'the Refugee Child'

The two seemingly oppositional forces of the Lebanese government's historically informed, deeply politically entangled view of refugees and the UN's construction of the refugee child have ultimately created and perpetuated a cycle of dependence (ibid.). For Palestinian refugees, the tension posed by these forces manifests in the creation of one of the biggest education systems in the Middle East and significantly, continued extreme poverty levels nearly seventy years after their initial displacement. Furthermore, with UN agencies serving as "the administrator" (ibid.), UNRWA's continued failure to facilitate socioeconomic progress for Palestinian refugee children in Lebanon embody Malkki's broader argument of "the forms typically taken by humanitarian interventions that focus on refugees as their object of knowledge, assistance, and management" (Malkki 377). The institutional imperative for UNRWA's emphasis on education as the primary investment towards children's futures is also grounded on deeply imbedded notions of children's rights.

Although an extensive analysis of the historical roots of this conceptualization are beyond the scope of this paper, a brief explanation is necessary in order to understand the deeply ingrained nature of the current discourse dictating the lived experiences of millions of refugee children. As cited by Chris Jenks, Robertson states,

If the philosophy of the enlightenment brought to 18th century Europe a new confidence in the possibility of human happiness, special credit must go to Rousseau for calling attention to the needs of children. For the first time in history, he made a large group of people believe that childhood was worth the attention of intelligent adults, encouraging an interest in the process of growing up rather than just the product. Education of children was part of the interest in progress which was so predominant in the intellectual trends of the time (qtd. in Jenks 65).

As argued by many scholars, education was fundamental to the shifts in the construction of childhood. According to philosopher John Wall, “the League of Nations’ landmark 1924 Declaration of the Rights of the Child... was the first truly international human rights agreement in all of history... its major aim was to actively provide for children with the basic necessities for survival and development” (Wall 46-7). The fourth and fifth articles to the 1924 Declaration state, “the child must be put in the position to earn a livelihood [and] the child must be brought up in the consciousness that its talents must be devoted to the service of fellow men” (UNICEF, “Geneva Declaration”). As the first internationally recognized document affirming children’s needs, the Geneva Declaration was followed by the 1959 Declaration on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. All aforementioned

declarations explicitly mention or allude to the significance of education for children.

The narrow conceptual parameters of refugee children UNHCR and UNRWA operate within are echoed in the policies and practices of countless humanitarian aid organizations. In an analysis of 65 years of UNICEF policy documents, Schaub et al. identify the 1959 UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child as the determining factor which drove the current construction of childhood forward. In the years following the adoption of this document, a universal notion of childhood became the prevailing construction with which aid organizations grounded their practices on. In their words, “the dominant global construction of what all children are entitled too—physical protection, education, and self-actualizing development—in short, the right to a protected, nurturing childhood that addresses the whole child, a universalized and individualized construct that preempts traditional constructions of childhood” (Schaub et al. 302). The extent to which this construction’s significance became entrenched in humanitarian efforts becomes clear with the authors’ recognition of the moral implications the construction further represented. For instance, “children’s survival, education, and development were ‘no longer matters of charitable concern but a moral and legal obligation” (Schaub et al. 316). According to James and James, legally binding directives effectively serve as a “powerful cultural representation of the concept of childhood” (qtd. in Schaub et al. 316). However, when local cultural specificities of the region and lived realities the refugee children articulate contradict this broader universal

construction of childhood, the institutions claiming to enact on behalf of children ought to recognize the imperative to actively seek more sustainable, constructive practices.

In light of this, the emphasis on education as the primary investment towards refugee children's progress in Lebanon has been an organizational imperative since the emergence of a Palestinian refugee population. As simply assumed by the global human rights organization, Right to Education, education "lifts marginalized groups out of poverty" (Understanding education as a right"). However, in the nearly seven decades since the conflict causing Palestinian displacement, education has simply failed to do so. Largely due to the conceptual framework UNRWA and UNHCR operate within coupled with the Lebanese government's rationale for implementing discriminatory practices, the Palestinian precedent of focusing on education has failed to function as an effective poverty alleviation strategy. When the UN effectively operates under Rousseau's claim of "give him not what he wants, but what he needs" (qtd. in Woodhead 129), UNRWA's education system as the dominant trope through which their futures are imagined fails to address poverty and consequently leads to various means of survival for children including severe labor conditions and early childhood marriage.

Child Labor as an Economic Necessity

For Palestinian refugees, child labor has existed for generations. Certainly, the inability of UNRWA's education system to facilitate social mobility is linked to child labor. Furthermore, gender consistently plays a role in

researching the educational needs and outcomes of Palestinian refugee children (Hammad and Albakri 31). Due to certain gender norms prevalent in the Middle East, girls mostly left school to help their mothers cope with household chores and care for family members (Chatty and Hundt 53, Marshy 17). In addition to that, early marriage is increasing among Palestinian girls due to the financial burden girls place on families (Marshy 17). A study included in Chatty and Hundt's landmark publication echoes the same sentiment towards girls' schooling (77). Accordingly, the education of boys is also threatened by poverty and the difficult conditions arising out of financial instability. The need for additional income is most often cited as the reason for leaving schools (Al-Hroub 64, Chatty & Hundt 79). Although both parents and sons indicated labor as the main determinant for leaving school, a 1999 UNICEF study concluded that half of boys who dropped out of school aged 7-17 did not work (Chatty and Hundt 79). The primary cause of this is most likely the scarcity of available work opportunities. While a 1998 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics concluded the same results of half of boys who dropped out not claiming to be working, Chatty and Hundt indicate a pervasive "declining ambition... reflected in the children's narratives" as a particularly salient justification for dropping out of school. As articulated by one research participant in the scholars' work,

Life was difficult so I thought it was better to work... but even if I had gotten the diploma, what can I do with it? A Palestinian can do nothing here... You cannot work, or in regards to the future, there are no stable jobs or a stable life (Chatty and Hundt 53).

Comparably, due to the severity of Syrian economic hardship in the country, child labor is even more pervasive within Syrian refugee communities.

Therefore, a tension between the UN's construction in which education is the dominant trope with which refugee children's futures are imagined and children's reality of working out of financial necessity is apparent. Considering the deeply imbedded nature of this construction of the refugee child, this trend is anticipated to continue with Syrian refugee children.

According to a 2013 International Labor Organization report, sixty percent of Syrian refugees aged 10-14 are working, while half of the unemployed children in the survey claimed to be looking for work (International Labor Organization 22). In the four years since the report was released, socioeconomic conditions have declined even further. Understandably, "the principal reason for parents sending children to work is to provide essential financial support for the household; this was declared by all surveyed Syrian working children" (ibid.). Furthermore, in the absence of formal refugee camps, refugee children can more readily seek work, with the majority of children working in the streets as vendors or beggars, or in the farming sector (Zetter and Ruaudel 6). Although "children working as street vendors say they are earning less than \$5 a day," any additional income is necessary considering the magnitude of poverty prevalent to Syrian families ("Al-Akhbar"). The conditions of working children in Lebanon are obviously exacerbated by parent's lack of income. According to UNHCR, 90% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are now in debt, with the average family owing \$940 (Wood 3). Less than half of all Syrian adult refugees are currently employed in Lebanon, with the vast majority of them working in the informal sector (International Labor Organization 24). Lebanese laws have made it

increasingly difficult for Syrian adults to find a means of income. In order to obtain the legal status necessary for acquiring a work permit, which is difficult to achieve due to a complex process and high fees, refugees must sign a pledge agreeing not to seek employment, although the few who have achieved legal status often disregard this law (Wood 3).

For a small fraction of Lebanese, the massive influx of Syrian children has nevertheless been a financial gain. Lack of employment opportunities for parents coupled with the sheer numbers of children seeking an income has led to children working in “slave-like conditions” (Jenkins 1). With extreme economic hardship where 93 percent of Syrian refugee families claim to not have enough food to feed their children, their predicament produces particular coping mechanisms and further allows for extreme exploitation (ILO, “Assessment”). For instance, in one village neighboring the Syrian border, “all Syrian children are put to work” (*Telesur*). This process is facilitated by the mayor of the village who looks for child laborers because “employers in Lebanon have a high demand for Syrian and Palestinian refugees and their children because they are much cheaper to hire due to national laws that prevent them from obtaining legal work status and permits” (ibid.). Also, in a 2013 report of Syrian working children, a man who serves as the link between Syrian children and Lebanese employers simply “keeps a cut of their wages” (Young, “As Syrian Refugees Population Grows”). Moreover, countless media depictions of Syrian refugee children convey the continued deliberate exploitation stemming from economic hardships.

For instance, in an article published by *The Telegraph*, journalist Ruth Sherlock details an account of an 11-year-old Syrian refugee who begs for money to feed his family after his father was killed in the war (Sherlock, “Despair”). As the country with the largest population of Syrian refugee children in the world, this article is reflective of the conditions of countless Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. According to UNICEF, throughout all regions where Syrians are now dispersed, one in ten Syrian children are currently working in the informal economy (Sherlock, “Despair”). The need to work places Syrian refugee children at the risk of exploitation and various forms of abuse. In an interview with the director of a charity which seeks to provide aid to child laborers in Beirut, Maher Tabarani states,

Forget what happened to them in Syria... In Lebanon the kids are beaten, sold into prostitution rings, forced to sell drugs. Some parents rent their infants to older street sellers. The peddlers know they'll make more money if they are carrying a baby.' Two thirds of the children who come to the center had been sexually harassed, said Mr. Tabarani, adding that the children were being bought for sex for 'a dollar or two'. One boy arrived at the home in a hospital gown because he had had his stomach pumped after someone put a date rape drug in his drink. In another case an 11-year-old boy said his father had accepted payment from two men who then simultaneously raped him in the bathroom of his home (Sherlock, “Despair”).

The conditions detailed here are indicative of a much broader problem applicable to Syrian and Palestinian refugees throughout the region: that of the ability of adults to exploit children in the face of economic hardship and a UN construction which operates within narrator parameters that do not currently serve the existing refugee population.

As made apparent by the aforementioned data, labor is already occurring on a massive scale. The sheer numbers and evidence of the exploitative conditions of working children calls for a recognition on the part of the Lebanese government and the international community to acknowledge that prohibiting children from working will not prevent them from doing so, but rather positions them at a locus of extreme exploitation and deprivation. As articulated by social anthropologist David Mosse, “policy legitimizes practice, and mobilizes political or funding support; it does not provide a map for people to follow” (qtd. in Crewe 67). Mosse’s statement is valuable for those dedicating to pursue initiatives that are more reflective of their realities, rather than implementing strategies that are confined to a predetermined construction of the refugee child that ultimately perpetuate exploitative work conditions. If, according to Mosse, policy does in indeed “legitimize” practice and the current extreme poverty within Syrian communities require that children will work out of brute necessity, the possibility of approaching policies that are more reflective of refugee children’s realities reveals itself amidst this increasingly volatile time in the country. Although this paper does not claim to offer a solution, illustrating the current realities of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon bears significant implications towards seeking more humane, beneficial approaches for the magnitude of suffering Syrian refugee children currently express.

Furthermore, underlying UNHCR’s current policies is the perception of refugee children as mere victims of war to be simply educated and protected from the adult world of labor. However, this approach has failed in the past

sixty-nine years of Palestinian presence in Lebanon and has ultimately led to pervasive poverty. Although UNHCR's institutional aims have been analyzed extensively, the organization's attempt and failure to effectively shape their lives and future through education has not been sufficiently analyzed in the literature. In an UNRWA pamphlet advertising their achievements and aims, the education section states, "For Palestine, it is a lifeline for the future" (UNWRA, 1991). This pamphlet was printed in 1991, at the end of the Lebanese Civil War, a period marked by extensive economic development and peace, or otherwise what could have been a potentially ideal time to seek better, more integrative solutions for Palestinian refugees. However, with education as the perceived "lifeline for the future", the deeply ingrained conceptualization of the refugee child propelled the UN's policies forward and ultimately failed to achieve their objective of Palestinian economic self-sufficiency (ibid.).

Widening the UN's Narrow Parameters

According to Peteet, "as an object of intervention, the refugee subject is constituted by an interlocking international and local network of power" (Peteet 51). Therefore, as a population that has consistently been positioned at a locus of international and local forces, refugee children both engage with and against these often-oppositional dynamics. Echoing Malkki's recognition of the "depoliticized... ahistorical, universal humanitarian subject" (Malkki 378), Farah claims, "humanitarian discourses obscure the political and historical dimension of most refugee populations displacement" (Farah 192). In addition to that, Farah accurately summarizes the indifference to historical and political factors

inherent to UNRWA practices as she claims, “for refugees they have history and politics, whereas UNRWA has its bureaucracy and ‘beneficiaries’” (Farah 197). Ultimately, some policy analysts blame this approach for UNRWA’s failure to achieve its initial aims to “‘fully integrate’ Palestinian refugees into the economy of the Middle East, to bring direct UN assistance to an end, and to allow Palestinians to take responsibility for their own futures” (Lindsay 65). Indicative of the childhood studies approach of accounting for refugees’ voices and agency, the aforementioned scholars’ contributions offer a conceptual shift from the UN’s victimization narrative.

For instance, political scientist “Edward Buehrig concluded that the ‘overriding obstacle’ was the refugees’ insistence on repatriation and their (correct) assumption that ‘development’ equaled ‘resettlement’ (qtd. in Lindsay 15). Although Buehrig’s claim of “correct” is a point of contention for many throughout the region, the author expands on his argument in attributing the UN’s failure to achieve economic development for generations of Palestinians on the agency’s “unresponsiveness to an economic approach of a problem exclusively political in origin” (ibid). Furthermore, the political nature of the Palestinian situation is particularly salient when one recognizes the influence of the population’s ‘right to return’ discourse passed down from generation to generation.

In keeping with the childhood studies pursuit of accounting for children’s voices in research, anthropologist Julie Peteet’s 2005 publication *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps* illustrates the continued

significance of the 'right to return' discourse for children. As recognized by the author in a retelling of an encounter with "a group of ten to twelve boisterous boys... [when questioned] where they were from, ... replied, nearly in unison, 'We are from al-Bassa.' Turning and pointing to a little boy... they laughingly shouted, 'He's from Ras al'-Ahmar.' Three or four generations removed from direct experience of the homeland, the children's cognitive map of their location in the world was a transported Galilean landscape (101). Peteet's analysis of this experience with the children reveals a conceptual redefinition of a notion of home regardless of their current position as residents of a refugee camp, thus indicating the intensely political and historically informed framework Palestinian children operate within, a framework that is in direct opposition to the UN's "contemporary dehistoricizing constitution of the refugee as a singular category of humanity within the international order of things" (Malkki 378).

Furthermore, as O'Leary et al. state

for generations, Palestinian children have been born as refugees in a context of statelessness, despair and ongoing insecurity about where they belong and whether they are safe. Because of this, the collective hope of the 'right to return' can take precedence over immediate and personal hopes or ambitions which are placed on hold until the larger hope is realized. This has significant consequences for hope building and social well being both on personal and social lives. The right to return's presence in the lexicon and daily consciousness of Palestinian refugees sits at the heart of what the future 'will' look like and consequently permeates how children are socialized (718).

Certainly, the children's identification of their "location in the world" as one they had never physically had any interaction with is connected to historical and political processes ultimately leading to Peteet's encounter included here, a

connection neglected by the dehistoricized, depoliticized construction of the refugee child (Peteet 101).

In a rather exceptional ethnographic analysis of Palestinians' interactions with geography of the camps, the book is structured around "the themes of place and identity and their contextualization with a framework of structure and agency" (Peteet xiii). In her words, "Why an ethnography of place? Place is critical to those excised from particular places; it is central to their subjectivity and sense of location in the world. In the stark and jumbled ruins of a highly contested little piece of land where Palestinians were willing to fight to the death, an ethnography of place and its relation to identity and subjectivity seemed a way to approach the problematic of structure and agency and thus avoid a simple recounting of the process of victimization" (18). Pursuing this further, the UN's strategy of addressing the economic marginalization of refugee children through an extensive education system has been grounded in the conceptualization of refugee children as meager victims of war to be educated and shaped into economically viable adults, a notion continuously and boldly challenged by childhood studies scholars.

UNRWA Education System in Lebanon

Nevertheless, integral to the UN's management of both populations is the continuous assertion of education as the best investment towards improving both Syrian and Palestinian refugee children's lives. As a UN agency, UNRWA and UNHCR abide by a strict adherence to the conviction in education as the best means for achieving self-sufficiency. Viewed as a basic human right, fundamental

to both agencies' child-centered initiatives in the Middle East is education for all refugee children. Also, according to the principles codified in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), refugee children have the right to free primary education and access to secondary education without discrimination. As stated in a UN report on "Youth and Education," "Education is central to development and to the improvement of the lives of young people globally... Education is important in eradicating poverty and hunger and in promoting sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth and sustainable development. Increased efforts towards education accessibility, quality and affordability are central to global development efforts" (UN 2015a).

In observance of this, education plays a significant role in Palestinian refugee children's lived experiences. As the agency's main program, UNRWA spends approximately 55% of its budget on education (Chatty and Hundt 38). UNRWA has built at least one permanent elementary school in virtually every refugee camp in all five countries it operates in (Rosenfeld 528). UNRWA schools can be attended by all Palestinian children, even those living outside the camps. "UNRWA operates one of the largest school systems in the Middle East, with twenty-three thousand education staff reaching half a million Palestine refugee children through 685 schools, nine vocational training centers, and two educational science facilities" (Oguzertem and McAdams 59). The agency's initial objective of enrolling the majority of children in elementary school in all camps was achieved by the mid-1970s, while the target of having at least 80% of all

refugees complete nine years of education was achieved by the mid-1980s (ibid.).

Although “the universalization of basic schooling remains the agency’s greatest achievement,” UNRWA funding is considerably unpredictable considering the spontaneous necessity of reallocating funding to provide post-conflict relief (Rosenfeld 529). Moreover, due to limited funding, the majority of children attend school in dilapidated, overcrowded buildings (Marshy 1999). Several studies report an average of 50-60 students per classroom (Chatty and Hundt 2005; Marshy 1999; Rosenfeld 2002). A school day is structured around two shifts due to overcrowding, with classes held in the morning and afternoon (Marshy 1999). For instance, in the Zarqa Camp in Jordan, the school day is separated into two shifts, with the first groups of children attending classes between 8:00 am to noon while the second groups of students attend the noon to 4:30 pm shift. Consequently, children spend “most of their time out in the streets” (Marshood 36).

Nevertheless, sociologist Rosenfeld identifies a “relative advantage of camp refugees, particularly of women, over their non-refugee peers, especially villagers, with respect to opportunities to acquire education” (Rosenfeld 531). According to a 2016 World Bank Study, Palestinian children “are achieving higher-than-average learning outcomes in spite of the adverse circumstances they live under... [and] continually and consistently outperform public schools” (Abdul-Hamid et al. xv). However, Lebanon is the only host country where this statement is not applicable (ibid.). As a country that has historically

implemented discriminatory laws towards refugees in the country, the government prohibits Palestinian children from attending Lebanese public schools and the vast majority of Palestinian parents are simply unable to pay tuition fees for private schooling (Roberts 103). Consequently, Lebanon is the only country where UNRWA operates secondary schooling due to prohibitive laws banning Palestinians from attending public secondary schools (Roberts 103).

Also, the Lebanese government further limited Palestinians' ability to achieve higher levels of education for Palestinians by passing a law which required all foreigners to pay university tuition fees nearly four times higher than fees paid by Lebanese nationals. As all Palestinians are prohibited from gaining citizenship in the country and are relegated to the legal status of foreigners, this law made accessing higher education nearly impossible for Palestinian students (Roberts 103). Although this law was amended in 2002 to allow Palestinians to pay the same tuition fees as Lebanese, the generational cycle of poverty prevalent in Palestinian communities nevertheless still restricted students' access to a university education (Roberts 103). Considering the extreme levels of poverty under which Palestinian refugees live, this is the most significant determinant in increasing children's likelihood of dropping out of UNRWA schools (Al-Hroub 63). In a 2008 UNRWA-funded study, the Palestinian dropout rate among children aged 6-18 amounted to 18.3%, of which 21.7% were male and 14.8% were female (Al-Hroub 53). A similar study

conducted in 2007 concluded a dropout rate of 39%, ten times that of Lebanese children (Al-Hroub 53).

UNHCR Education Initiative for Syrian Children

Considering the deeply imbedded notion of education as the primary investment towards the future, schooling for Syrian refugee children in Lebanon remains a primary aim of UNHCR. Due to the newness and rapid escalation of the neighboring war, Syrian refugee children's access to education is far more unstructured. The UN estimates that only five percent of Syrians aged 15-18 were enrolled in secondary schools in the 2015-2016 school year, yet half of all Syrian children registered with the UNHCR are currently in either formal or informal education. (Jusoor, "Growing Need"). Care International, however, claims only 30% of Syrian children in Lebanon attend school ("Al-Akhbar"). For Syrian refugee children, the obstacles to enrolling in school include school fees, a lack of capacity to fill the needs of many new students, school officials imposing arbitrary requirements to prevent additional students from enrolling, and child labor. For the minority of children enrolled in Lebanese schools, they face additional challenges due to Lebanon's French education system, a language most Syrians do not speak ("International Labor Organization" 22). According to the children's charity Jusoor, "the disruption of education for Syrian children has been one of the worst consequences of this six- year conflict. Years of schooling lost directly correlate to poorer employment prospects and increased social disadvantage in years to come, whether the children have stayed in Syria or are living as refugees" (Jusoor, "Growing Need").

Existing Research with Refugee Children

While the UN's policies and practices are clearly dictated by a singular narrative of suffering and victimization, Malkki offers a more nuanced perspective of refugee experiences in stating,

This dehistoricizing universalism creates a context in which it is difficult for people in the refugee category to be approached as historical actors rather than simply *as mute victims*. It can strip from them the authority to give credible narrative evidence or testimony about their own condition in politically and institutionally consequential forums... In universalizing particular displaced people into 'refugees'—in abstracting their predicaments from specific political, historical, cultural contexts—humanitarian practices *tend to silence refugees* (Malkki 378, emphasis added).

Malkki's recognition of the "silence" of refugees is apparent in the UN's policies and practices. Also, "refugees are quite often glad to tell their histories to researchers, *particularly if they have been politicized the experience and recognize it in a political context* (Hynes 13, emphasis added). In seeking solutions to the continued existence of a marginalized Palestinian population and the ongoing Syrian crisis, a more expansive approach which accounts for refugees' voices is necessary for avoiding the current "dehistoricized, depoliticized" approach taken, an approach which has ultimately led to an absolute lack of socioeconomic progress.

The contrast between the UN's conceptualization of the refugee child and the ways in which children articulate their experiences is significant. While UN agencies present a singular narrative of suffering refugee children, the contributions offered by childhood studies scholars provide a more nuanced, multifaceted narrative that is ultimately more reflective of their realities and

capabilities. In Peteet's ethnography, the scholar embraces a more diversified approach to refugees' lived experiences, including her insightful recognition of refugees' capacity to challenge the "refugee" label and by extension, the implications of the label. The author recounts an interview with two refugee men and their migration experience in stating, "Rafiq and Abu Nabil recalled that during morning exercises in elementary school they stood in formation and chanted, 'Return, Return.' They adamantly refused the label 'refugee' with its explicit reference to a disconnection between place and identity and thus de-nativizing impulse" (Peteet 125). Through this rejection of the refugee label, they thereby challenged all that is implied by the term 'refugee' including the notion of a lack of a homeland, suffering, and dependence.

Echoing Kim Kullman's (2010) research findings in "Transitional geographies: making mobile children," Peteet's research subjects redefined labels and experiences to transform seemingly negative impositions by others into more constructive, dynamic personal narratives. In an ethnographic study conducted with Palestinian refugee boys, Hart (2008) reveals a certain sense of fulfillment among the research participants as refugees in the camp. Hart interprets the youth's usage of the Arabic word "Mukhayyamji", or as loosely translated by the scholar as "genuinely of the camp," as "a source of pride" (72), another reiteration of children's capacity to modify meanings and experiences. Furthermore, the boys' ability to express their position in a camp as a "source of pride" signifies a push back against a humanitarian discourse which depicts refugee children, especially those living in camps and entirely dependent on aid,

as victims. Hart elaborates on the one boy's engagement with the word "mukhayyamji" in stating, "the experience of Rami illustrates how individual performance intersects directly with the wider politics of the Palestinian nation-in-exile as embodied in the community of the camps" (Hart 76). This further serves as an articulation of children's internalized knowledge of the political dynamics leading to their encampment, which is in direct opposition to the humanitarian field's depoliticized, dehistoricized view.

Bearing in mind the deeply political dynamics and complex historical processes leading to Palestinians' continued exile, the possibility of a discussion about the Israel-Palestine conflict without the inclusion of politics or history is nearly inconceivable. However, for children and more so refugee children, the UN's approach of discounting these aspects of their predicament is particularly significant. Although this institutional view overlooks children's historical and political awareness, scholarship which confirms children's knowledge of these dynamics are many. As clearly articulated by an eleven-year-old boy living in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan, "My heart is Palestinian, my passport is Jordanian" (Bjawi-Levine 75). In this research study, a twelve-year-old boy claims, "I am a Palestinian registered refugee with a Jordanian passport" (ibid.). These statements are distinct expressions of an understanding and pride in their Palestinian roots. Since the author's fieldwork was conducted in 2004-2005, these children are most likely third and fourth generation Palestinian refugees. While the two children's identification of their heritage could be attributed to the 'right to return' discourse, their statements are indicative of the tension

between their position in refugee camps and a possible awareness of the historical and political reasons for their current conditions.

Childhood studies scholars' efforts in accounting for children's voices are valuable considering the tension posed by children's views and those of the UN's refugee agencies. In addition to that, the childhood studies shift to engage with children has often led to more constructive, specific conclusions on the part of children's perspectives. As Kullman states, "Transitional phenomena are not simply stages that one passes on the way into adulthood. They constitute 'potential spaces' that children and adults alike learn to tap into for careful—sometimes even subversive (Aitken and Herman 1997)— explorations of more enjoyable ways of being in the world" (Kullman 841-2). Kullman's analysis parallels Peteet and Hart's with regard to refugees' capacity for resistance by reshaping the narratives imposed on them into "more enjoyable ways of being" (ibid.). This recognition by Kullman is reflected in Hart and Peteet's research with Palestinian children. Indicative of the childhood studies attempt to unbind children from the previous pathologizing, psychologically oriented approach to childhood, these ethnographies more accurately depict children's realities. Moreover, these works function to account for children's resilience and capacity to alter previously victimizing and essentializing conceptualizations of childhood. This perspectival shift is particularly noteworthy for future research with Syrian refugee children considering the previous inclination to understand Palestinian children as "narrowly restricted to their function as passive beneficiaries of UNRWA's assistance" (Hart 171). As noted by Hart "for the most

part, researchers in the field of refugee studies have tended to share with humanitarian agencies and political leaders a lack of interest in the views expressed by refugee children” (ibid. 174). Therefore, this implied passivity in previous years has made way for the inclusion of children’s voices through the employment of children’s narratives in research (Chatty & Hundt, 2005; Fincham 2014; Veronese et al., 2012). Bearing this in mind, the potential for a more inclusionary approach to the current Syrian refugee crisis is not only feasible, but also essential in order to pursue more beneficial initiatives.

Echoing Ball and Moselle’s (2015) study conducted with refugee children in Thailand who “seek to draw attention to the undiscussed strengths of children who have managed to survive and thrive under harsh conditions. Despite their general lack of stability, resources and formal education, those migrant children who have managed to thrive against all odds as undocumented and often unaccompanied aliens in Thailand”, Peteet, among countless other scholars, likewise successfully navigates between oppressive structural forces and refugees’ capacity for resistance and self-determination within extremely restricted spaces (431). Akin to Peteet’s recognition of children’s subjective interpretation of forced migration, Ball and Moselle offer a more nuanced perspective of children’s understanding of their dire conditions arising from their displacement (Ball and Moselle 434). The tension posed by the personal narratives presented in Peteet’s research and the UN’s institutionalized view of children is reminiscent of an observation made in Madeleine E. Dobson’s article, “Unpacking Children in Migration Research.” While Peteet’s approach is in

alignment with Dobson's recommendation "to understand 'the best interests of the child' by taking account of his or her own perspective", the dominant victimization narrative currently foundational to UN policies does not allow for children's voices to be heard (Dobson 355).

To some extent, the significance of accounting for refugees' voices has been realized by activists currently working with Syrians in the country, but has yet to be considered by UN policymakers. As articulated by a Syrian activist in Lebanon, "If these NGOs don't get Syrians involved in their projects, it's just not going to work. We're the ones who know what's going on, we're working at the school from 8am until 1pm, then afterwards we're sitting with the children for hours at a time. We're Syrians and we understand their situation" (Smallwood 22). Also, "despite the fact that refugee in general, and Palestinian refugees [children] in particular, have suffered from decisions made for them and about them, they have their own views, dreams and aspirations, and wish to be part of the decisions that affect their lives" (Marshood xviii).

Children as 'Stakeholders'

According to Hart, a shift is occurring towards a willingness to include children in the initiatives they participate in. "Over recent years, efforts to engage children and youth as participants in programming, rather than purely as beneficiaries, have grown among development organizations and the donors that support them... across the literature one can discern numerous aims... participation is seen as a means by which the young come to learn the skills and attitudes that enable them to function as citizens in a democratic state" (Hart 2).

By accounting for refugee children's voices and agency, children should play a role in the system created to serve them. This is particularly applicable for education programs, an effort that permeates their daily lives. "For education to contribute towards ending poverty, a concerted push is needed by systems leaders to build capacity of global systems thinking among all stakeholders" (Briscoe 5). Although children are widely not considered as the primary stakeholders in current education systems, the capacity for young people to enact changes to the system was illustrated in September 2000 demonstrations held in the UNRWA field office in Lebanon in which children demanded two secondary schools be built in order to alleviate their families' burden of the additional fees needed to attend Lebanese schools (Roberts 108). The students succeeded in their aim when two more UNRWA secondary schools were built the following month (ibid.). The students' efforts in successfully coercing UNRWA to build additional schools is an illustration of their ability to generate change to their environments through self-determination and compelling UNRWA staff to hear their voices, two foundational concepts in childhood studies. While these students display these attributes, humanitarian actors' unwillingness to consider the voices of youth manifests in the continued humanitarian narrative of victimization, and ultimately contributes to the further decline of the conditions of refugee children in the country.

Suggestions for Future Research

Considering the sheer scale and massive shock the Syrian refugee crisis has caused in Lebanon, policies and practices that will better serve children are

essential to reaching a better outcome than that of Palestinian refugees. In order to achieve this aim, research that seeks to more accurately understand their lives is necessary. Although the commonalities between the Palestinian and Syrian refugee crises are many, several key differences offer researchers an opportunity for potentially compelling research. For instance, an abundance of research exists about Palestinians' experiences of camps. However, due to Lebanon's rejection of the UN's proposal to establish formal camps, the vast majority of Syrian refugee children are dispersed in urban and rural areas. Specifically, urban densification and the various concerns that arise from this issue serve as topics of potential research. The lack of confinement for Syrian refugees bears implications for the ways they are socialized, access resources, and associate with the surrounding Lebanese communities, among many other topics.

Since the issue of space is closely tied to matters of safety and perceived danger, the ways children negotiate the concept of protection is significant for analyzing children's lives. Considering the pervasiveness of the protection discourse common to aid organizations and especially within UN agencies, children's conceptualization of safety and protection may present an interesting comparison to that of international organization that clings to the universalized construction of childhood. According to a 2017 UN study, one-quarter of all Syrian refugee marriages in Lebanon involve a girl under the age of 18 (Reznick 1). Due to gender norms prevalent in the region, labor is the most common coping mechanism in the face of economic hardship for boys while marriage is

considered the solution for girls. While the UN may perceive schooling as the protected space where children should be, the extreme poverty coupled with the lack of confinement provided by camps create a situation in which gender based violence and sexual exploitation may be more common.

Within this environment, families' socially and religiously embedded notions of purity, honor and social value is seemingly at odds with the UN's conceptualization of protection. "In the discourse of humanitarian agencies the terms 'refuge' and 'asylum' signal protection" (Farah 191), however for mothers, early childhood marriage is considered a form of protection. According to one Syrian refugee mother in Turkey, 'I pray for my daughter to have her menstruation as late as possible, otherwise I will have to marry her... in order to save her' (Baklacioglu 116). Also, "child marriage is done as a coping strategy. But not only for financial security; also because they perceive the threat of their daughter getting raped if single. The threat comes from living in an environment of abandoned buildings and in tented settlements" (Telesur). While gender based violence and early child marriage have also been widely reported in Palestinian refugee camps, in what ways does the lack of encampment facilitate or produce certain marriage or sexual practices for young girls?

While, "increasing numbers of teenage Syrian girls are entering early marriages in order to receive financial and physical protection from their adult husbands", (Anderson, "Hope") the UN and the international community as a whole continue to promote a different form of protection. In a society with deeply ingrained, clearly defined notions of the factors constituting a girl's social

value, the consequences of any sexual act, even rape or any form of sexual abuse may reap grave consequences. In a *New Statesman* piece, Bindel states, “during my visit I was told that one young woman who had been raped by soldiers was then shot dead by her father in order to avoid further ‘dishonor’ to the family” (Bindel “Ask anyone”).

Also, although the main subject of research in this topic is girls and the ways in which specific protection discourses challenge aid organizations’ conceptualization of protection, in the majority of media articles detailing early childhood marriage in Lebanon, mothers play an integral role in protecting their daughters. The link between mothers and daughters and the various ways in which UN discourses of protection may impact their pursuit of protection is worth researching. In addition to that, as simply put by a scholar, “studies on refugee mothers remain insufficient” (Baklacioglu 104).

Another undervalued issue for refugee children is citizenship and democratic rights. Palestinian refugees are relegated to the legal status of foreigners. Unable to apply for a Lebanese citizenship, they are prohibited from owning property or accessing public social services (Hanafi 2). Although many scholars attest to a Palestinian preference for not wanting a Lebanese citizenship due to the ‘right to return’ discourse, is this claim still applicable for the current generation of refugee children? If so, how do they reconcile the nearly seventy years of exile with the pervasiveness of the ‘right to return’ discourse within Palestinian families? More generally, do Palestinian children recognize any

possibility of the ways in which a belief in ‘the right to return’ could in fact prevent progress for future generations?

Conclusion

With a total of 65.6 million registered refugees in the world, the current population of displaced people has surpassed the refugee population in the aftermath of the Second World War (Gladstone, “Displaced Population”). Those displaced by the ongoing Syrian Civil War constitute the biggest population of refugees among all refugees currently displaced throughout the world. For the second smallest country in the region, the sheer scale of the neighboring conflict has caused a transformation of the socioeconomic and political landscape. According to an Oxfam report, since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, a staggering sixty-six percent of Lebanese have fallen below the poverty line (Krukety et al. 9). As described by Nabil Halabi, director of the Lebanese Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, “in general, Lebanon is like a big prison for the Syrians” (Anderson “Inside”). In a 2014 study conducted by the UN Population Fund, “41 percent of Syrian youths in Lebanon say they have had suicidal urges... [since] suicide is considered a grievous sin in Islam” the mere confession of these tendencies reflects the desperation of many young people in the country (ibid.).

Additionally, although Palestinian children in Lebanon continue to live in dire circumstances, lessons learned from the UN’s response to the previous influx of refugees holds the potential for a better future for Syrian refugee children in the country. UNRWA’s Palestinian precedent of operating within

narrow conceptual parameters of a universal notion of childhood further compounded by Malkki's recognition that "the net effect of the administrator's views... was to depoliticize the refugee category and to construct in that depoliticized space an ahistorical, universal humanitarian subject" bears significant implications for the UN's continued focus on education as the dominant trope with which Syrian refugee children's futures are imagined (Malkki 378). In a 2004 International NGO Training and Research Center (INTRAC) report written by Hart, the anthropologist distinctly states,

Young people growing up in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are often willing participants in the national struggle. Their political consciousness is developed to an extent and from an age that commonly takes outsiders by surprise... Agencies that seek to work with young people in participatory ways are obliged to take the political awareness and motivation of Palestinian children fully into account if they are to engage successfully with them and support the establishment of meaningful activities (Hart 12-3).

Palestinian children's political awareness and knowledge of the historical processes leading to their dire conditions is well documented by scholars. However, for those claiming to implement policies and practices for refugee children, the denial of its existence has been unconstructive. Equipped with this knowledge, one is better able to seek initiatives that will benefit the future of millions displaced by the neighboring conflict. In order to do so, we must first deconstruct the construction of childhood binding children to the longest running refugee situation in modern times, the biggest humanitarian crisis since WWII, and various other challenges currently facing humanity.

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