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# **”The woman was born to do activism”**

**A minor field study of Palestinian refugee women’s  
activism in a Lebanese refugee camp**

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Title: “The woman was born to do activism” – A minor field study of Palestinian refugee women’s activism in a Lebanese refugee camp

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this study was to investigate how Palestinian refugee women in refugee camps perceive themselves as actors who affect and influence their lives and communities. Research shows it is a topic that is not often discussed or highlighted in today’s discourse about refugees. The material was conducted through semi-structured interviews with eight Palestinian women in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, and we analyse the results in relation to the theories of empowerment and social identity. The study shows that important motives for the respondents’ activism are their shared Palestinian identity and their identity as women and mothers. We see that involvement in activism has been empowering to the respondents and their community, and that their actions can be understood as resistance against patriarchy, paternalism and predictive beliefs of them as a passive and homogenous group. Furthermore, we draw the conclusion that the Palestinian women’s voices are irreplaceable in research regarding their lives, and how studies like this one contribute to an image of Palestinian women as actors with capacity and strength, who through their activism have been affected on a personal level and impacted upon their community.

Key words: Palestinian refugee women, empowerment, activism, social identity, resistance, Lebanon

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## Problem statement

In this study we had the opportunity to speak to eight Palestinian refugee women who live in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. There exist many relevant reports from humanitarian organisations which show that refugee women face many difficulties (UNHCR n.d. b). However, both media and organisations often portray refugee women as a homogenous, vulnerable group and the complex reality in what ways they are active in influencing and affecting their lives is not something that the public often hear about.

There is a lack of research on the variety of the lives of refugee women and the places attracting most social researchers are the ones that are poor and crisis-experiencing (Sukarieh & Tannock 2013 p. 5). People living in over-researched places are often met with the same questions from social researchers and when they are described in research it is often in simplifying ways, where the focus is directed towards the difficulties and vulnerability of the place and group of people. The complexity and heterogeneity of populations and social groups are often lost when they are portrayed in studies (ibid.).

A study that shows another image of refugee women is made by Holt (2010), where Palestinian refugee women speak about their memories of Palestinian history. A woman explains how during her time in a refugee camp in the 1980's she became active in the Palestinian Women's Union. Her husband was continuously supportive of her activism and stayed home with the kids when she was involved in different kinds of political activities (ibid. p. 95). This article portrays refugee women in a different light than usual; as actors who affect their lives and who are fighting for their rights as refugees and women.

The Palestinian identity has been shaped and expressed through collective traumas and major obstacles. The experience of defeat, dispossession and exile guaranteed what their identity was to become: Palestinians. With the formation of Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the Palestinian women's union, it is a fact that Palestinians tend to become more politically active during hard times (Holt 2010 p. 9).

Abdo (1995 p. 141) argues, however, that Western feminists for a long time have constructed the Muslim and Arab women as passive objects, rather than subjects and actors of their own history. Abdo (ibid. p. 142) argues that the Intifada in 1987, which is the first significant Palestine uprising against Israeli policies, had a big impact on changing the Palestinian images on the West from 'passive', 'submissive' and 'domestic' to public participants, popular organizers and builders of society. This led to an important change in the struggle of the Palestinian women's life in which they challenge their gender role by focusing on women's issues (ibid. p. 144). However, one cannot isolate a single experience called "Palestinian women's experience". The experience of those who are living under the Israeli occupation differs from the experience of those who are living in Jordan, Lebanon or in the Gulf (ibid. p. 142).

In her article '*Moving from silence into speech*', Holt (2010) investigates how several Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have developed a unique identity, which is based on the difficult circumstances they experienced in Lebanon. They have struggled not only against violence and the absence of rights in the country, but also against negation of their identity as a nation. This has given them strength to reclaim their power and their rights as Palestinians (ibid. p. 83). We are therefore not only interested in how Palestinian women were and are politically active, but also in how they themselves look at influencing their own lives and situations in refugee camps. Our aim with this study is to investigate and study these women as actors, and study how they shape their own lives. The work of NGOs and other international organisations is important but we also believe that the woman's voice and perceptions of activism is significant for social work to develop.

When researching Women's rights movements and social movement in different contexts, it is usually focused on the movements driven by activists who are partly privileged, for example economically privileged and/or white women (Sarifa 2004). This has also been the case with Palestinian women's movements (Ababneh 2014), which have consisted mostly of middle class or upper class women. Sarifa (2004) states that activism worldwide, led by working

class and/or non-white women has not been acknowledged. This is another reason why we believe it is important to look at the views of women in refugee camps on how they are affecting their lives and communities, and not Palestinian women's activism in general, since that often leads to focus on the partly privileged groups.

## Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate how Palestinian refugee women in Lebanese camps present themselves as actors who influence their lives and communities, and to analyse how their perceptions can be understood in relation to empowerment and social identity

Assuming the women as actors, we state the following research questions:

- What are the motives behind the women's actions in relation to social identity?
- How do the women interpret their actions in relation to empowerment?
- What functions, according to the women, do their actions fill for themselves and for their community?

## Concepts and categorisations

### Empowerment

Empowerment is a central concept in this study. Empowerment can be considered both a value orientation and a practice for community work, as well as a theoretical model for understanding processes and outcomes when marginalized groups and individuals work for increased influence and control over their lives (Kabeer 2001). Empowerment as a concept implies a process of change where a group or individual gain increased ability to make their own life choices and represent their own interests in matters regarding themselves (ibid. pp. 17-25). Arnfred (2001 p. 74) discusses how women's empowerment differs from men's empowerment in the sense that also have to reclaim power from patriarchal structures. Altmann's (2007) studies involvement and activism in relation to empowerment, and comes

to the conclusion that involvement, for example, in community work can contribute to one's increased self-esteem, self-trust and confidence. Empowerment theory will be further presented in the theory chapter in this study.

## Social identity

Another central concept in this study is social identity, which is about intersocial group behaviour where people together find similarities which form social categorization where they can recognize each other (Jenkins 2008 p. 41). Society is structured categorically and organized by inequalities of power and resources. It is in this context that group identities are formed. People collectively identify themselves and others and they conduct their everyday day lives in terms of those identities (ibid. pp. 111-112). Those categorizes within the social identity will be further presented in the theory chapter and help us to analyse this work.

## Palestinian refugees

In this study we use UNRWA's definition of Palestinian refugees, as "persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict." (UNRWA n.d. a)

## Background

To understand the context where this study has taken place, and the result and analysis that will follow later in this study, we will in this chapter give an overview of Lebanon's history, Palestinian history and of Palestinians' situation in Lebanon.

## Lebanon

Our study is based in Lebanon. Lebanon is a small country on the coast in the Middle East, and has 4 million inhabitants. There are three main religions in the state; Christians with the Maronite Catholics as the largest denomination, Shia Muslims and Sunni Muslims (Harris 2009 p. 9). Lebanon is located between Syria and Israel, which has caused political tensions

throughout the years. Syria occupied Lebanon until 2005, and there is still political tension between Lebanon and Israel. Lebanon and its people suffered from the Lebanese civil war during the period 1975 to 1990. In 2006 Lebanon was in war because of a conflict between the Lebanese organisation Hizbollah and Israel (Rubin 2009 pp.2-3). Due to the present war in their neighboured country Syria, UNHCR (n.d. a) approximates that there are nearly 1.5 million Syrian refugees living in Lebanon at the moment (ibid) and almost 10 percent of the Lebanese population is made up of Palestinian Arabs since the displacement of the Palestinians in 1948 (Harris 2009 p. 10).

## Palestinian history background

Due to the Second World War when six million Jews were murdered in the genocide, the United Nations decided to divide Palestine into two parts and to give half to the Jewish people. This led to war between the Arabs and the Jews, and it cost the Palestinians their majority status and their hope of controlling the country. 1948 marks the birth of the state of Israel, but also the decisive defeat of the Palestinians which led to a displacement of 1.4 million Palestinian Arabs. This is period is inscribed in Palestinian memory as *al Nakba*, “the catastrophe” (Khalidi 1997 p. 177-179).

The second period is called the “lost years” in Palestinian history, between 1948 and 1964, during which time the Palestinians seemed to have disappeared from the political map both as an independent actor and as people. Palestinians were displaced and moved to Jordan, the Gaza strip, Syria and Lebanon. However, even if those were critical years the Palestinian identity was already taking place in the new refugee camps, in workplaces, schools, and universities (Khalidi 1997 p. 178). In 1964, PLO was formed and became very important for Palestinian nationalism. The organisation worked as an umbrella organisation for political militant groups as Fatah, The popular Front For the liberation of Palestine, (PFLP). With their approach “the right to return” the Palestinian people were told to take actions into their own hands and launched armed struggle against Israel (ibid. p. 208). The Arab world recognized PLO to be the representative organisation for Palestinians in 1967 and in 1974 PLO received UN recognition as for a future Palestinian state. PLO was an important actor in the *Intifada*,

which occurred in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank that the Israelis occupied in 1967 during a period known as the Six Day War. During the Intifada, PLO fought against Israeli occupation of their land. In 1993 an agreement occurred between Israel and PLO, so called the Oslo I Accord, which gave the Palestinians the right to govern the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. However, these territories have been targets of and are still being occupied by the Israeli military (Emadi 2012 pp. 161-163). Today the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestinians (UNRWA n.d. a) approximate that there are five million registered Palestinian refugees. Nearly one third of the registered Palestinian refugees live in recognized refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, The Gaza Strip and the West Bank including East Jerusalem. The remaining two third of registered Palestinian refugees live in and around the cities and towns in host countries (ibid.).

## Palestinian refugees in Lebanon

UNRWA has registered 45 000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Around 53 percent of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon live in the twelve recognized Palestinian refugee camps (UNRWA n.d. b). The ongoing war in Syria has forced many Palestinians who used to live in Syria to flee to Lebanon. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are living with one of the worst socioeconomic situations second to the Gaza Strip. Despite their 67 years of living in Lebanon they are still an oppressed group and have never been accepted as legal citizens by the Lebanese government (Chaaban et al 2015). They face legal and institutional discrimination, such as being denied the right to own property and face restrictive employment measurements, such as being banned from some professions. Camps are being overcrowded and their living conditions are linked with the multitude of physical and mental health issues that Palestinian refugees suffer from. In 2015, 65 percent of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon were living below the poverty line (US dollar 208 per/month) (ibid. 2015).

During the civil war in Lebanon, PLO itself got drawn into the war and between the 1975 and 1976. This lead to three Palestinian refugee camps in the capital area, Beirut, becoming victims of a massacre (Khalidi 1997 p. 198).

## Previous research

In this chapter we will present knowledge about our research field. We have used the databases LUBsearch, Lovisa, Google and Google Scholar when we have searched for previous research, and the keywords we used were: *Lebanon, Palestinian refugee women, women's empowerment, activism, and refugee camps.*

What we found through our search was that Palestinians, and especially Palestinian refugee women in refugee camps, have a lot of similar life experiences and face similar challenges, even though the research we found was from several different countries where Palestinians are displaced such as the Gaza strip, Lebanon and Jordan. One of the studies we have gained knowledge through takes place in a refugee camp in the Gaza strip. We are aware that there are differences in Palestinian women's situation in Gaza compared to Lebanon, however, we found that these sources were relevant to our study in Lebanon because the Palestinian people usually live in similar realities no matter which country, since they share the experience of being refugees since birth.

We believe that we have a good overview of Palestinian history, Palestinian women's movement, refugee camps and empowerment and activism in relation to these fields.

## Activism amongst Palestinian women

Palestinian women have been politically active since the beginning of the 20th century, and in 1921 the Palestinian Women's Union was founded. Up until 1948, Palestinian women were active in different political foundations and organisations, and most of the women in the Palestinian Women's Movement were from the upper middle class (Ababneh 2014 p. 41). As a result of Nakba in 1948, much of the organisations in the women's movement drastically stopped and remained more or less inactive until 1965. At this point, the General Union of Palestinian Women, GUPW, formed. Its aim was to mobilize the efforts of Palestinian women, and also to organize a progressive political women's organisation with the intention

of representing Palestinian women everywhere (ibid. p. 41). In the late 1970s, Women's Work Committees (WWC) was founded, a Palestinian organisation who held as one of their goals the empowerment of Palestinian women. They made a survey that amongst others Palestinian women in refugee camps answered. The activist women in WWC, where most were from the upper middle class, were shocked to realize that they had almost no knowledge about the lives and realities of women in the camps, and the challenges they faced such as lack of education, poverty, financial dependence upon men and little knowledge of their legal rights (ibid. p. 42). This finding led to activists in the WWC emphasising the importance of grass root activism and movements, although the WWC continued to consist mostly of members from socio-economic privileged positions. However, during the Intifada in 1987, women of all ages and socio-economic positions in society, especially women from refugee camps, were active in the movement and in confrontations with soldiers. These women had in previous years participated in nationalist-oriented literacy and skill training programs run by women's movements activists, but it was during the first Intifada when they more formally joined their network and fought together with the other activists (ibid.). Palestinian women from refugee camps have hence been activists both in the National Resistance, Women's Movement but also as Wallace's study (2009) shows, exercised activism and resistance in their everyday life in refugee camps, when challenging hierarchical structures.

## Palestinian women in refugee camps

Historically, Palestinian refugee women have had limited access to the public sphere such as education and work possibilities outside the home. Because of Palestinian men's restricted possibilities to work within the area where they live, they have had to leave the home to seek labour in neighbouring regions (Wallace 2009 p. 18). This made women become the main provider for the household, and still today fewer Palestinian girls than boys complete school because they are expected to take care of the household. Apart from education, they are often marginalized and discriminated against both in terms of political representation and in labour force. Wallace (ibid.) writes about the restriction of movement that women in Palestinian refugee camps often experience. Because of this, "Palestinian refugee women have

experienced refugee status differently than their male partners at all levels of the public and private sphere” (ibid.). Wallace presents arguments that one of the most important missions of Palestinian women according to themselves, after 1948, is to preserve and keep the Palestinian identity and culture, by bearing children so that the national identity will not be lost. This has, according to Wallace (2009 p. 18) led to even greater distance between Palestinian women in camps and the public sphere.

Sarifa (2004) examines the contribution of women to social justice movements and liberation movements in a global context. She explores contemporary activism, and defines activism as “involvement in action to bring about change, be it social, political, environmental or other change. This action is in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial argument” (ibid. 39). Historically, social movements have focused on class and economic injustice, but in that struggle have failed to recognize differentiation within gender and ethnicity and how these categories affect how the movement should operate, and what movements are being recognized. The aim to create global movements and activism, even on a national level, often fails to take into account the local experiences shaped by gender and race. Sarifa (ibid.) states that the movements that are being recognized or acknowledged are the movements led by people in privileged positions, and that activism among women who are black and/or working class is often not only unacknowledged but their activism is not recognised as being as effective or important as activism led by women who are white and/or middle class.

## Empowerment amongst Palestinian women in refugee camps

Wallace (2009) discusses whether or not Palestinian refugee women in Gaza can be agents of changing their situation in their personal life and community, since they do not have an independent Palestinian state that can change their situation, and where the Palestinian refugee women are refugees in their own land. Wallace’s research aims to answer this question by examining possibilities for empowerment and resistance in the local context by interviewing men and women of a refugee camp in the Gaza strip. The women in the camp are living under a double occupation; the Israeli Military occupation, and the male-dominated

society. Wallace (ibid.) directs the research's focus towards gender roles, with emphasis on women's roles in the camp.

A conclusion made by Wallace (2009 p. 110) is that women in the camp are demanding increased power to make decisions in their lives, both by participating in community development, demanding programmes and workshops that are beneficial for women, but also in matters of their personal life as marriage and education. That women are wishing for and demanding more power to make decisions in their lives is a process of empowerment, and to have power to make own decisions give them a sense of worthiness (ibid.).

Wallace (ibid.) also comes to the conclusion that from spaces where women can meet and exchange experiences about their lives, beliefs and thoughts, empowerment can arise, because the women can find that a problem they have also is an issue for the other women they meet. Wallace (ibid.) states that the people's fight to survive in a place where their basic needs and human rights as food and jobs are being denied, are acts of resistance, and so it is that the women are asking for and dreaming about education and rights to make decisions in their lives in a patriarchal society. Wallace (ibid. p. 40) writes that everyday acts of resistance, to challenge oppressive structures may not instantly change these structures, but that everyday resistance is closely linked with empowerment.

## Methodology

We approach our study with a hermeneutic perspective. That nothing is objective, but instead subject for personal interpretation is central in a hermeneutic approach. Another central concept within hermeneutics is *meaning*, the meaning individuals or groups give to their actions. Social researchers with a hermeneutic perspective on their study need to focus on the interpretation of the meanings of social actions (Bryman 2011 p. 32). Zimmerman (2015 p. 2) writes that hermeneutics is the art of understanding, and that "understanding is knowledge in the deeper sense of grasping not just facts but their integration into a meaningful whole".

Since our aim with the study is to understand Palestinian refugee women's interpretations of their reality and what their actions mean to them, we have found the hermeneutic approach to be the most suitable for our study. We used this approach when we collected the material and when we studied our data; since we are not interested to analyse whether the women's actions are 'effective' from an objective point of view, we have directed the focus to the meaning the women give to their actions.

## Methodological considerations

A qualitative approach is used when research aims to understand a social reality on the basis of how participants in this environment interpret and understand it. It is used when researchers aim to gain an understanding of underlying motivations and reasons (Bryman 2011 p. 344). This study's aim is to understand Palestinian refugee women's perspective of their lives and actions, and the research questions focus on the women's own interpretations, hence we have chosen a qualitative approach. Our purpose is not to make a generalization of how many women in camps are active in changing their situation, nor to draw conclusions of what refugee women generally do to change their situation. Instead, we are interested in the variety of perceptions the women we speak to have and the complexity of these, which is something that characterizes qualitative research (ibid.) Furthermore we want to have an openness in our research questions and let the data we collect lead us to the conclusions that we draw, instead of having a hypothesis of what we will find, which is known as inductive procedure (Svensson 2011 p. 192).

## Location of the study area

Our study took place in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. The camp has been established since the displacement of Palestinians in 1948, hence it has developed into a small society where between fifteen and twenty thousand people live. Many people who live there have jobs inside and outside of the camp and there are supermarkets and established schools that are run by NGOs. However the socioeconomic conditions in the camp are poor,

with high population density and lack of infrastructure, just like Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon generally are according to the UNRWA (n.d. b).

## Pre study

We made a pre study of the field before we began collecting the data. Aspers (2007 p. 74) explains that this is recommended when doing research in a new culture and context so that the research questions are rooted in the context that will be researched. We realized that a pre study was necessary for us to be able to understand the context that the women we speak to live in, to research about topics that they find of importance and to get an overview of the camp. During the pre-study which lasted for about three weeks, we had informal interviews with several organisations working with refugees, to gain knowledge of what the situation looks like for Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon and of the Lebanese society in general. We also participated in the work of an organisation that we in this study choose to give the fictitious name Karam, to ensure the respondents' anonymity. Karam has been operating in the camp where we based our study for about forty years. Our association with Karam guaranteed us access to the camp to observe and participate in their workshops about Women's rights, and also to speak to Palestinian women. To enable us to do a study that the women in the camp would find relevant, we believe it was necessary and ethically appropriate to do a pre study, for us to have good insight into Palestinian refugee women's social context before interviewing them.

## Semi-structured interviews as a method

Qualitative interviews enable the interviewed person to share their experiences, perceptions and interpretations (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Ahrne 2011 p. 36). We decided to use semi-structured interviews to collect data. They create opportunities for gaining understanding of the complexity of certain matters (Bryman 2011 p. 415). Since we want to know the refugee women's own perceptions, we believe interviewing them themselves provided us with the most accurate information.

As noted in the problem statement, refugee women are often presented as a homogenous group of people, which is the reason why we wanted to present a variety of women who in various ways change and affect their lives and communities. We believe semi-structured interviews enable that to happen, because the method lets the respondent move in different directions, which produces knowledge about what the respondent finds relevant and important (ibid. p. 413).

By using semi-structured interviews, there is space and opportunity for the respondent to speak about what she believes is relevant, and for us as researchers to change our interview guide in accordance to where the respondent is leading us with the information that she shares (Bryman 2011 p. 413). We do not want the respondent to be limited by the questions we have already made up.

## The method's benefits and limitations

Since we want to circle the issues that our research questions are about, a semi-structured interview technique allows us to focus on certain issues (Aspers 2007 p. 137). Semi-structured interviews are a good way of avoiding sensitive issues that we do not intend to speak about, which would be a risk if we used open interviews as a method when interviewing someone who lives under difficult circumstances.

Furthermore, since there is an unequal relationship between us as researchers and the women we interview, qualitative interviews are opportunities for them to speak and to lead the conversation. Qualitative interviews can therefore create a more equal relationship between the researcher and the respondent since the respondent has more control over the conversation (ibid.).

In qualitative interviews, the social interaction between the respondent and the interviewer together affect what is said and not, and the presence of and questions asked by the interviewer are part of constructing the outcome of it. As researchers, our knowledge, perceptions and opinions about the issues we want to talk about affect the interview itself and

how we interpret the information that we collect (Aspers 2007 p. 135). A risk of using this method, because of culture and language barriers, is that we misinterpret something or do not realize that we and a respondent are talking about and referring to different things. This is another reason why our pre study has been of great importance, because we were able to gain an overview of the respondent's lives and community.

During seven out of eight interviews, we had an Arabic speaking interpreter with us, which adds another dimension to the interview, as she just like ourselves is part of creating the content in the interviews. We found the interpreter to be of benefit for our study, since she could contribute knowledge about Lebanese society and the situation for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. However a risk with using an interpreter is that he or she starts to lead the conversation in a different direction than what has been the intention. To avoid this we spoke to several interpreters before beginning the interviews to find someone we believed was suitable, and we talked her through the details of our expectations of what her role would be.

## Empirical selection

During our first weeks in Lebanon, we came into contact with a variety of NGOs working with refugees. One of these was the organisation Karam which works with refugee Women's rights in all Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Karam has centres in the camps where they run Women's rights programs, e.g. vocational training and workshops. We spoke to people working in Karam who were positive to our research and approved of our presence. When it was time to find respondents for our interviews, we informed women who attended a Women's rights workshop about our study and that anyone who might be interested in being interviewed could contact us. This resulted in interviews with eight women who lived in the camp. The interviews lasted between fifty minutes and one and a half hour. We asked each of the respondents where they would like the interview to take place, which resulted in some interviews taking place at respondents' homes, and others at Karam's centre.

Our sample is called *purposive sampling*. Bryman (2011 p. 434) writes that a purposive sampling is a strategic choice, with the purpose to choose individuals who are suitable for the

purpose of the study. Since the women who come to the organisation's centre go there by their own initiative, and are engaged in different activities and programs, we believe that many of them have thoughts and opinions about the topics that we would like to discuss. Since we will inform women at the centre about what our study will be about, it is likely that the women who approach us are the ones who also have thoughts about these issues and are more engaged than the average person in the camp. Therefore our sample will not reflect all refugee women in the camp's views of their everyday actions, but since that is not our aim with this study, we do not find that problematic.

## Reliability and validity

Bryman (2011 p. 355) argues that it is difficult to be objective in research and therefore it is important that our values and point of views do not affect the outcome of the research. Since we are in a new field and country, we need to be aware of this issue. Bryman emphasizes the importance of internal validity, which means that there is an accordance between the researcher's observations and the theoretical ideas which they develop. Ethnographic studies often give a study high internal validity, because by being in the field during a longer period of time, it is more likely that the study will be rooted in the social context that is being studied, and this will contribute to the reliability of the study (ibid. p. 352). Therefore we believe that our pre study has contributed to the internal validity and reliability of this study.

Another way of ensuring high validity in a study is to be certain that researchers are observing, identifying or measuring what they claim to measure. Since our aim and research questions are directed towards the respondents' subjective understanding and interpretations of their lives, by speaking to them directly we ensure that we gain their perspective and perceptions as we receive the information directly from them. If we instead interviewed, for example, organisations that work with the respondents, we would get the information from a second source which would not reflect the aim of this study. Öberg (2011 p. 69) write that when a study has that perspective, it is important to confirm with the respondents how we as researchers have understood their statements, which is called respondent validation and can increase a study's credibility (Bryman 2011 p. 353). Therefore we have confirmed with the

translator and the respondents during and after the interviews that we have understood them correctly.

## Ethical considerations

To integrate ethical considerations in the whole research process, both in the planning of the research, during and after it, it is essential to protect the research person's integrity and self-determination. It becomes even more important when doing research of a group that is in a vulnerable position (Kalman & Lövgren 2012 p. 15). As previously stated, Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon are a group that lack political rights, and who especially in refugee camps are more likely to suffer from poverty than others. Therefore, we as researchers need to be careful in our research process and accurate to make sure that all ethical guidelines are integrated in our research so that none of the respondents are affected in a negative manner by the procedure of collecting the data or in how they are presented in this paper. Kalman and Lövgren (2012 p. 17) writes that when the respondents belong to a stigmatised or vulnerable group in society, they are often more anxious about how they will be presented in a study compared to other groups because they are used to being presented in negative manners in media. We believe that our focus on the respondents' agency and activism handles this well since the focus is directed towards something positive in relation to the respondents.

As many NGOs have operated in the camp for many years, the people living in the camp are used to volunteers coming from abroad to work to improve conditions in the camp. In line with what Aspers writes about researchers' transparency (2007 p. 112), we were clear from the beginning, both to the people living in the camp and to Karam that we were there as students completing research, and not as volunteers or people who would help to change their situation. We were also clear that we would only stay for a limited time, to avoid any false hopes or impressions about our purpose there. Aspers (ibid.) emphasizes that the most difficult group to base research on are those who are in a vulnerable position. Therefore it is important not to give expectations that in the end can turn out in disappointment.

To protect respondents' integrity there are ethical guidelines to follow for researchers. One of these is called *the information requirement*, which concerns that the researcher informs the respondent about the aim of the study, the methodology that is going to be used and how the collected material will be handled. *The approval requirement* involves informing the respondent that the participation is voluntary and that the person can withdraw their participation at any time, and if they choose to participate, that they can choose to not answer certain questions (Kalman & Lövgren 2012 p. 13). This information was given to the respondents both at our first meeting at Karam's centre when we delivered information about our study, and also at the beginning of each interview with the respondents.

*The requirement of confidentiality* concerns how the collected data is handled, such as notes from field studies and transcribed interviews. It is of great concern that no person other than the researchers can access this data, and that the respondents are anonymized. To protect the respondents' anonymity, we have not used their names, nor have we used the name of the camp where they live and where our study was based. *The requirement of use* means that the collected data is used only for the purpose of the research. Just as with the information and approval requirements, this information was shared with the respondents both at Karam's centre when we informed them about our study, and before starting with the interviews.

In this study's planning process we had to think about what the risks associated with interviewing refugee women. We discussed the matter and the potential ethical dilemmas we could face thoroughly with our supervisor, before and during the process, who was supportive of our idea. We also had contact with the board of the Ethical group from the School of Social Work at Lund University, who after discussing the matter approved of our idea as long as our supervisor did not believe that we crossed any ethical boundaries.

We have been careful and thorough when planning the interviews and during them to not approach sensitive topics that may cause hurt or hard feelings. Before beginning with the interviews, we let a psychologist who has been working in Karam for many years and who

meets with women from the camp daily, review our interview guide. Since she knows the context and the women coming to the centre well we believed it was of benefit to let her look at our questions in case we were unaware of questions that represented sensitive issues. The final version of the interview guide is attached to this paper (see Appendix 1).

It is important to take into consideration that as researchers we also have a responsibility to make room/ a space for the voices and experiences of marginalised and discriminated groups in today's society (Andersson & Swärd 2008 p. 237). To research about empowerment and activism for refugee women without asking them about their own experiences would not make it less likely for us to obtain truthful information, but it could also be seen as unethical to see these women reduced to the circumstances what keep them in a vulnerable position, instead of subjects with agency capable of sharing their perspectives and experiences. We believe that the uniqueness of this study, to highlight how the respondents view their everyday actions to affect their situation is important and well needed knowledge, which would not be possible to do without interviewing the refugee women themselves.

We believe that the pre-study that was described above was important for the study to be ethical, so that our aim and research questions have formed through the knowledge that we gained there, to give it a fair outcome.

During our time in Lebanon we also were involved with an organisation that works with refugees from Syria in refugee camps settled in the Bekaa Valley, close to the Syrian border. These camps are in very poor condition and some of the people living there came from war in Syria only a couple of months ago. The Syrian and Palestinian refugee camps differ vastly in size, conditions, and how long people have stayed there. As stated earlier, the Palestinian camp where we based our study looks more like a small society and is not crisis-experiencing, unlike the Syrian refugee camps.

Since we have been on both fields, we believe that we have gathered the knowledge to determine that it would not be ethically correct to interview people who live in the Syrian

refugee camps because of their conditions and the very acute nature of trauma for these refugees. However we believe that the Palestinian camp we visited is established enough to base our research on.

To ensure that the respondents were given the possibility to take part of this study's results, when we finished this study, we went back to Lebanon. We presented the study to the respondents and discussed its outcome.

## Distribution of work

As we believe it is important to have good knowledge about our topic, we both read the same literature. Throughout the work process we made the interviews and wrote the problem statement and research questions together. Then we separated different parts to write, however we have at most times written side by side in order to aid discussion and to gain support from each other. When we have written separately, we have maintained regular contact.

## Analysis and processing of the material

Rennstam and Wästerfors (2013 p. 196) write about the importance of being close to the material as researchers to be able to get to know it well and to discover patterns and themes. Therefore we discussed and processed the material consistently throughout the research process. At the start of the analysis process we sorted the material in order to get a clear overview of it. We used an *open coding* (ibid. p. 198), where we discussed the material and commented it, with the aim to read the material with an open mind and curiosity. However, the preparatory work when we read previous research and theories influenced us in the sense that we already had ideas about what concepts and theories the material could be understood in relation to. After the open coding we used a *selective coding* (ibid.) which was based on patterns that reoccurred in the data. This resulted in the themes that we found to be central to our research, and formed our analysis and how we structured it. These themes were Palestinian identity, women's identity, activism, empowerment and resistance.

# Theory

## Empowerment

One of the theories that we have chosen to analyse the data for is the theory of empowerment. Empowerment has become a popular concept over the last decades. It can be considered both a value orientation and a practice for community work, but also a theoretical model for understanding processes and outcomes where marginalized groups and individuals work for increased influence and control over their lives (Kabeer 2001 pp. 18-19). The concept is often vaguely defined and can have different meanings. Some describe empowerment as a process to increase collective, political power, and some describe it as a personal, individual feeling of having self-control without any real change of structural conditions (Askheim & Starrin 2007 p. 8). Askheim and Starrin (ibid. p. 19) introduced an approach to empowerment called *the establishment of counter-power* which emphasizes a person's awareness of the relationship between the single individual's life situation and the structural conditions of the society.

What unites the different approaches within the theory is the positive outlook of human beings as actors and people who knows what is best for themselves who have good knowledge about their own situation, which are in opposition of paternalistic beliefs that sees individuals as passive and in need of someone else to decide what is in their best interest. Since our focus in this study is about Palestinian refugee women's own ability and command to affect their situation we believe that empowerment as a theory is relevant to our study.

## Empowerment as a therapeutic approach

The therapeutic approach to empowerment emphasises the strengthening of individuals' self-esteem as a psychological process. This approach of empowerment has been criticised for directing its focus only on this issue and not dealing with the structural conditions that have put the individual in a position where her self-esteem is low. However, Trägårdh (2000) writes that from a feminist point of view, increased self-esteem can be a purpose of its own,

as much as a way of gaining increased political power, as the feminist slogan “the personal is political” means. Kabeer (2001 p. 27) also states that empowerment at all levels, the individual level, the intermediate level such as social spheres of lives, and the structural level are crucial and that these levels cannot be separated from each other.

### Empowerment as establishment of counter-power

“The concept of empowerment is conceived as the idea of power, because empowerment is closely related to changing power: gaining, expending, diminishing, and losing” (Hur 2006 p. 524). For marginalized groups to gain power, the individuals and groups need to be strengthened “in such way that they gain power and strength to change the conditions which have put them in a weak and powerless position” (Askheim & Starrin 2007 p. 20). The point is to initiate processes and activities that will give groups or individuals a greater self-confidence, self-image, knowledge and skills, which will increase their self-control. However, unlike other approaches, this state of strengthening one’s self-esteem is a temporary focus and its purpose is that it will lead to individual or collective action to increase the degree of control and power someone has over their life.

This approach has the assumption that the individual’s position in society is a result of human-created and historical processes which determines the degree of control and power someone has over their life, and that this can be changed.

The collective is an important part of empowerment, both for becoming aware of the situation for the collective and for taking action. When an oppressed group share their experiences with each other, they gain awareness of the situation of the collective group which creates a base for them to together take action against the oppressors. The oppressed themselves need to fight for their liberation. The liberation cannot be realised if other groups are fighting for them, it has to come from themselves (Askheim & Starrin 2007 p. 21). Processes where individuals come together to develop skills, knowledge and collective action, to increase power to overcome obstacles and reach social change for *collective empowerment* (ibid.).

## Empowerment and resistance

Askheim and Starrin (2007 p. 21) also discuss the term counter-power. When individuals who share experiences of the same oppression come together, they form a counter-power towards the people or system who contains power over them. Their collective action can be seen as a *resistance* towards those in power. However, individuals can also exercise resistance, not only acting as a collective (ibid). Lilja and Vinthagen (2009 p. 54) write about the concept of resistance and how it can be understood as a part of empowerment.

Lilja and Vinthagen (ibid. p. 51) define resistance as: “A subordinate’s response to power, a practice that can challenge and undermine the power, or such a practice carried out in solidarity with a subordinate [my translation].”

According to Lilja and Vinthagen (ibid.) it does not matter if a person who has made resistance had the intention to do it, nor if the resistance creates a change. What makes it resistance is that there is a theoretical potential to undermine those in power.

When a group shares common marginalization and oppression, common identity is created which paves way for resistance and social movements that are based on gender, ethnicity, and sexuality etc. Their common experiences also contribute to a positive identity development which challenges the negative identity those in power have been given them, and can be internalized by the oppressed. For individuals and groups who are being devalued and stigmatized because of their identity position, to redefine and upgrade this is a common resistance strategy (Vinthagen & Lilja 2009 p. 77). Lilja and Vinthagen (ibid. p. 74) speak about the so called every day resistance, which is the unorganized or individual actions of resistance, aimed towards those in power.

Resistance can be seen in different parts of processes of empowerment, not only as an outcome of it. For someone who is stigmatized and not considered an important part of society, to demand his/her place in society by, for example, educating themselves is a form of resistance (ibid. p. 75).

## Social identity

The second theory that we want to present is that of social identity.

Personal identity refers to self-categories which define the individual as a unique person in terms of their individual differences from other persons. Social identity theory on the other hand refers to social categorizations of self and others, which defines the person in terms of his or her shared similarities with members of certain social categories, and the theory aims to explain and understand intergroup behaviour. The social group that someone belongs to becomes an “us”, a so called *in-group*, and the ones that do not belong in that group becomes a “them”, a so called *out-group* (Ellemers, Spears, Doosje 1999 p. 8). Jenkins (2008 p. 3738) argues, however, that the individual and collective identity are entangled with each other and that individual and collective identifications only form in interaction.

The individual identity can be explained as the *internal and external dialectic* of identification where you through the internal dialectic define yourself, and through external dialectic are defined by others (ibid. p. 40). Jenkins argues that how people see us is as important as how we see ourselves, and that this forms our identity. The internal and external dialectic is a process of a routine in everyday life and both, internal and external are therefore equally important (Jenkins 2008 p. 40-41).

## Collective identities as an understanding of social identity

Another concept within social identity is *collective identities*, which can be defined by two parts or processes. First the individuals are believed to have something significant in common and second the members realize that they share similar situations and define themselves accordingly as members of a collective. Jenkins explains collective identity by meaning that the one thing we have in common is our difference from others, and through defining “us” we also define “them” (Jenkins 2008 p. 43).

A collective group doesn't necessarily need to be aware of its categorization, but it is still more common that they know that they have been lumped together in the eyes of others.

Individuals within a group that are aware that they are categorized as “stupid” etc, might take action, and be empowered and encourage the group members to deny that these labels apply to them (Jenkins 2008 p. 108).

### The collective identity as a group and categorization

Within a collective group, the members might not know each other personally but they can recognise each other as members within the category the individuals belong to and when mutual recognition of their categorization is made, the first step towards group identification has been taken (Jenkins 2008 p. 108). To understand collective identity Jenkins (ibid. p. 104) argues that we must understand it by *group* and *categorization*. These two terms together form the collective identity. The collective identity can be defined through the *group* itself, they know who and what they are. *Categorization* is about how other people define the collective group and how they are recognized by others. This leads us back to the internal and external dialectic, where a group identity is a product of collective internal definition, the relationship with significant others we draw upon identifications of similarity and difference, and in that process generate group identities. However, this is an interactional process and therefore the collective external definition is of importance, where the identification of others is a part of the process of identify ourselves (ibid. p. 105). Jenkins argues that the definition of the group by its members is not enough for a collective group to be “real”; that will just lead to limited presence in the world. Therefore the external recognition, the categorization of others is important for the group to be recognized for the human world (ibid p. 106).

Jenkins (2008 p. 43) further argues that group identification and categorization are generic processes, in which power and politics are unavoidable.

### Ethnic identity as a collective identity

Jenkins (2008 p. 121) discusses ethnic identity through Barth’s model where he examines how ethnicity is a process that generate collective forms. Instead of looking at the content of ethnicity he contextualises the history or cultural characteristic of ethnic groups. Shared common sense, common knowledge and behaviour can be understood as products of

processes of boundary maintenance between different group categories. “Ethnic identity is a dialectical process with internal and external moments, involving ‘them’ as well as ‘us’” (ibid. p. 123). Hall (1999 p. 223) also emphasizes that identity is something that is never completed and always in production. He discusses the cultural identity as one shared culture, where people share the same historical experiences and shared cultural codes, which can be seen as “one people”.

Another term in social identity is gender, which is a part of the categorical collective. Further than the individuality, gender also is a collective matter and it is one of the most identificatory themes in human history. Jenkins (2008 pp. 82-83) further argues that the sharing of similar life-experiences allows gender to be a group formation.

## Result and analysis

In this part we will analyse how the respondents’ statements can be understood in relation to the theories and research that we have described. In the analysis’ first part we look at how empowerment with both political and individual dimensions can be understood in the respondents’ stories, in the second part we aim to understand the respondents’ involvement in activism in relation to their collective identity as women and Palestinians. In the last part we discuss how the respondents’ activism can be understood from a resistance perspective, with the focus on patriarchal and paternalistic structures, and stereotypical beliefs.

We will now present the eight respondents, in what they are involved in and for how long they have lived in Najmah, the fictitious name that we have given to the camp where the respondents live. We have also given the respondents fictitious name to keep their anonymity. The organisation in which many of the respondents are involved in, and where we met the respondents, we have chosen to call Karam.

*Asilah* came to Najmah three years ago, from Syria where she was born. Asilah leads and organizes recycling workshops for other women with up to sixty participants. On Women’s Day she participated in a psychodrama with different topics, for instance equality for women

and sexual harassment, where the purpose is to spread knowledge and information about these issues to people in Najmah.

*Malak* has lived in the camp during two periods of time. First until 1982, afterwards she lived in Syria, and three years ago she moved back to Najmah. Malak has had an important role in the PLO during its significant years. Malak is involved in recycle projects and knocks on doors to inform and educate people in Najmah about recycling. She also leads workshops at her home about how to cope and work against violence against women, sexual harassment and domestic violence. Malak has used WhatsApp, a communication app, to create a group where she encourages other women in Najmah to participate in her workshops. She is also active in social projects in another organisation, that support people in the community. Malak also teaches kids about certain topics, which they in their turn can inform and educate their mothers about.

*Hala* has lived in Najmah for about twenty-five years. She participates in Karam's workshops about Women's rights, and how to raise and communicate with children. She also attends the workshops about the Palestinian cause, which she afterwards teaches her children about.

*Jaanan* has lived in different countries in the Middle East during her upbringing, and has now lived in Najmah for ten years. She is involved in a recycle project and participates in workshops that are held by Karam. She is politically active on her Facebook page, where she writes about the Palestinian cause, amongst other topics. Jaanan also participates on demonstrations and hold speeches about Palestinian rights.

*Samihah* is born and raised in Najmah. She participates in conferences that cover subjects of domestic violence, how to raise and communicate with children, the situation of refugees, their suffering and how people in Najmah can deal with the fact that they are refugees in Lebanon.

*Layan* was born in Najmah and lived all her life there. Layan paints walls and buildings with colourful paint. In Najmah she sings with her friends on the streets. She is a journalist who writes in magazines about events and the situation in Najmah, and teaches girls in the camp how to ride bicycles and motorbikes.

*Yahma* has lived in Najmah for about twenty years. She participates in workshops about education, Women's rights and how to raise children, and she also participates in demonstrations about Palestinian rights.

*Nawar* has grown up just outside of Najmah where she still lives. She is active in a Women's rights organisation where she participates in and leads workshops about education, Women's rights and the Palestinian cause. She informs organisations and people about up-coming demonstrations, and hand out fliers of these in before-hand. She also participates in the demonstrations about Palestinian rights.

## Empowerment

### Confidence and self-esteem in the women's actions

In this part we will analyse how the respondents view their actions in relation to strengthening of the individual, which Askheim and Starrin (2007 p. 18) write is an important part of empowerment and that can create a foundation for a marginalised group to later take action to exercise resistance against oppressive structures in society.

Nawar describes how her road to activism began by her friend asking her why she sat home, and invited her to participate in meetings in a Women's rights organisation just outside Najmah. Nawar would be given some responsibility and would be in charge of filling out the different gaps in the organisation.

I liked the idea and I always liked for the women to have an identity, to do something for herself, even no matter how big or how small. So I was excited. - Nawar

When asked about how she felt when she started being involved in this organisation, she said:

I felt free, like I had independence, I'm developing my identity, I'm doing something important, and contributing to society.

Hala speaks about what participating in workshops has meant to her:

I have a stronger personality, for example on Women's day i gave a speech about women's equality, and how they are equal to men even in the sense that we work in the home, and we provide them in a happy environment, and teach our kids. So we are equal to men in the sense that we also do something that contributes to society [...] I am expressing myself, my personality became stronger. Like I was able to communicate better. I love to feel that I am contributing. - Hala

We learn that through the respondents' involvement in their community, their skills, confidence and self-esteem grow. It has resulted from taking small steps into being active, and has not necessarily been there before their involvement. This shows that there is a dialectic relationship between involvement and self-esteem, which Altmann (2007 p. 90) brings up in her study, about involvement and activism as important factors for people to gain confidence.

Many of the respondents explain that through participating in workshops they get tools to deal with difficulties around the issue of for example garbage in Najmah, which all respondents have described as a big issue in their community. Asilah, who is involved in a group that deals with the garbage, explains the result of their work:

There is an improvement, yes. I feel like we have affected this because there is a huge improvement, and the streets are even cleaner than the alley ways.

Through the group's work, one of the challenges in their everyday life is being handled and tackled with. The work can be understood as an ability to cope within the structural constraints that they live under, which Kabeer (2001 p. 21) explains to be something that empowerment refers to. It could be seen as a part of the therapeutic empowerment process, where even though what caused the garbage issue has not been dealt with, but they have found a way to handle it and to take control over what has become an obstacle for themselves and the community.

### Actions as political and individual goals

Some of the respondents emphasize the strengthening of the individual as a goal with their involvement.

Hala: I came here to get an education and to learn and to get some new tools and also to develop my personality, and evolve.

- How about change?

Hala: Yes of course for change

- But earlier you said change here is very hard, that you don't believe in change?

Hala: Change *myself*.

Hala is one of the respondents who speaks about that by participating in workshops she has gained skills, which have increased her confidence and self-esteem. Hala also tells us how when she was in a bad state of mind, her kids' teacher came to her house:

The teacher said: 'you have a personality, a strong personality, you're social, you like to be you know, why are you' [...] and she took me to a workshop and from the workshop I started getting more involved. Like I said, nobody is born fully educated, people learn as they grow up and as they evolve, look at me, now I jump into things and I try to learn as much as I can [...] it's all, it's experience for me, it's more experience and more education.

That Hala and other respondents' experiences of education and involvement increase their confidence and self-esteem can be interpreted as a therapeutic view of empowerment.

However, it can also be understood as a political interpretation of it. Palestinian women in refugee camps in Lebanon struggle against stereotypical views of them, something that the respondents speak about in the interviews and which also Wallace's study (2009) confirms. Increased confidence and self-esteem can in this context therefore be seen as a political matter because it challenges existing beliefs and systems in society that views Palestinian women, and refugee women in general, as not capable of changing their own situation (Wallace 2009 p. 65). It relates to what Trägårdh (2000 p. 20) writes about the personal self-esteem being a goal in itself, as he shows by discussing the feminist slogan 'the personal is political'.

The problem is much bigger than Najmah. We don't get any support, we don't get anything from outside, not from the government [...] We get support, but like Karam gets support, we get like 50 dollars a month, which is nothing. - Samihah

Samihah emphasises the importance of structural political changes for the conditions for themselves in Najmah to change, which relates to what Askheim and Starrin (2007 p. 22) write about, that focus needs to be directed towards society's structures as a part of a group's situation. Having only an individual and therapeutic focus of empowerment can lead to the focus being directed against someone's personal, individual choices instead of the structural dimensions that are causing the oppression. Samihah points out that the problems and difficulties they are living through are bigger than themselves and that the society outside has to change. This view paves the way for resistance and establishment of counterpower, according to Askheim and Starrin (ibid. p. 19).

### Empowerment of a group

I am like, yalla we need you to come, come to... I gather them, I created a group on WhatsApp for them, so that I also can collect all the information, make sure that I don't miss anybody. To get the information out to them whenever there is a new event. - Jaanan

Askheim and Starrin (2007 p. 20) argue that the empowerment of an individual often is linked to the empowerment of the group that the person belongs to. This can be seen in

Jaanan's story when she explains how she after having participated in Karam's workshops, she uses WhatsApp to spread the knowledge that she has learnt on the workshops. She also uses the app to spread information to people in Najmah about demonstrations and other events, with the aim of affecting their situation.

No one is born with education, I can go and educate other people [...] I tell everybody to come here, every time I tell somebody about the work and what we do here and how the education is, they come. So I recruited people. - Hala

From the beginning, Hala's primary reason for participating in workshops was to strengthen herself by gaining knowledge and an increased confidence. However, this has led to strengthening of other people. Both Hala and Jaanan teach their families, friends and community about what they have learnt in the workshops. We can see how the initiatives that Jaanan has made with creating WhatsApp groups, has strengthened the community as a whole.

## Identity

### Challenging and resisting the traditional role of women

As earlier stated, one important term in the theory of social identity is gender (Jenkins 2008, pp. 88-89). During the interviews it became clear that the respondents found strength to affect their environment, by the fact that they identified themselves as women. In this part we will therefore analyse their perceptions in relation to their social identity as women.

It is very important for women to attend these workshops, because the man is not the all and all, the woman has a personality and we need to exercise this personality and learn our rights. And the more that they tell them, they tell them how to help, how to contribute to the household, how to be a part of this household, not to just sit home and do nothing and wait for the man to do everything. So we have a personality and we need to exercise our rights.  
- Yahma

Yahma is stating that her activism is important for herself and for other women because they need to gain knowledge about their rights. What she is referring to when she says “we” is the social group of women, as goes in line with what Ellemers, Spears and Doosje (1999) mean with an in-group, that a group found something significant they have in common, and defines itself as “us”.

The men here they are the superior being, they don't like their wives to work outside the house. But the woman needs to work, she needs to work because she needs money! Because she needs to improve the conditions of the house. This is something that we learn, to fight for our rights like; No, I'm allowed to work. If I was a bad woman, I could do anything bad at home. I don't need to go outside for that, so you either trust or you don't. And this is the communication that we learn to talk with their husbands, and that's so we can go and work!  
- Yahma

Yahma is active in several projects and her involvement is connected to her belief of the importance of women's work. She says that if she gets the right tools, she knows how to speak to her husband so that she is allowed to go work. The respondents' social gender position in the camp has meant that they have found similarities that they have in common. This forms a collective identity which Jenkins (2008) argues is an important part of the social identity. The shared similarities in these statements are how the respondents are referring their activism in contrast to men and the women's husbands in the camp. The men in this case can be understood as the “them”, as Turner (1999) would argue is the out-group.

Not only were the respondents referring their involvement in relation to the patriarchal system but they also told us that they are active in different projects because they do not want women to be misinterpreted and downgraded by others.

Hala says:

[...] I think to deliver the idea that, you know they think outside that we are the women of the camps who are illiterate and we are stupid but we are not, and we are able to learn, and we are able to do a lot of things...

Nawar says:

[...] Because I am not an idiot, and I don't want women to be misinformed and labelled as idiots, sometimes we live misinformed, but we are not, and I want to have the knowledge and the tools so that I can talk back and say what my rights are.

As Jacoby (1999 p. 512) argues, Arab women are often presented as objects rather than real subjects. Being in a collective group does not mean that you have to know this group of people. Some women that we spoke to did not know each other, but everyone seemed to be united about to be labelled with negative terms has led them to participate in workshops and demonstrations so that they can show society outside the Najmah walls that they are the subjects of their own life.

Yahma says:

I want them to know about the women here in the camp, and the Palestinian, there are so many things that we women go through. But no matter how much we suffer, no matter how much a woman is drowned, she stays standing and always fighting...

This statement above is claiming that her background, history and gender makes her keep fighting.

I have one goal, that after me, I would educate enough people to carry on. If I'm gone the year after, I want all the women that I taught something to carry on after me, I want them to keep going forward with the social work. Don't let the circumstances affect you. Keep struggling, keep working. When a woman feels weak, the whole community is shaken. - Malak

Malak also relates her activism to the circumstances in the camp but also as a responsibility as a woman to maintain strong, and that is giving her the will to affect and make a difference for other people. As Sarifa (2004) describes, activism referring to gender and ethnicity is rarely linked in social movements. By these statements above we can notice how both ethnicity and gender have been important motives behind the respondents' activism.

## Motherhood as a motive for activism

The Palestinian women that we spoke to had an important role in the household and in raising their children. Some women were attending workshops that were related to child-bearing. One woman told us that sometimes when she feels angry or anxious due to the circumstances in the camp, she lets her frustration out on her children, and on these workshops she learns how to cope with these feelings so that they will not affect her children. Some respondents were not only referring their involvement in activism as their identity as women, but also as mothers. This implicates having two identities, the so called dual identity (Nicholson 2008 pp. 164-165).

Jaanan explains that by participating in workshops she educates herself and her children:

Because I raise generations, women they raise the next generation. What I teach my kids, it's a reflection of me and my personality and they will carry on. I don't do anything you're not convinced of, don't say anything that you're not convinced of, believe in yourself. I tell my daughter the same thing.... - Jaanan

Hala, who daily participates in workshops about Palestine and Women's rights says:

Everything I learn here I go and I sit my kids down, even though my oldest kid is nine, and I explain everything to them and they understand and they, I told them they have a country, its name is Palestine. - Hala

Being a Palestinian mother is therefore important for the respondents. As Wallace (2009) describes in her research, for many Palestinian women, being a mother means to preserve the national identity for their kids but also to carry on the Palestinian history. However, by the statements above we can also understand the desire to be good role models for their kids and give them confidence so that their kids can have a bright future, as another important part of being a Palestinian mother.

## Palestinian identity as a deeply rooted motive

Ang (2012 p. 113) argues that the problem with categorizing women as one group is to ignore that there are different groups of women with different backgrounds and different experiences as women, depending on their race, class, ethnicity and nationality. During our interviews, speaking to every woman, we found that their involvement, everything from recycling to participating in demonstrations and in workshops about women's right, were strongly related to their Palestinian heritage. In this part we will look at their reflections connected to their Palestinian identity, and analyse these in relation to ethnic identity.

Jaanan, who is politically active on Facebook and holds speeches at Palestinian demonstrations says:

What's important for me is for the world to know, that the Palestinians haven't given up on their land. We are very suppressed, but we haven't given up on our land. It's our land.

Palestinians over generations, wherever they live, have formed a “not-forgetting” mentality, that it is a central aim of their lives. Palestinians' past cannot be effaced and despite all the years in refugee camps they continue to hold on to their rights and dream of return to Palestine (Farah 2006 p. 228). Jaanan's statement about not giving up on their land, is therefore related to Farah's conclusion.

Hala, who is participating in workshops to gain knowledge about Palestine and Women's rights, says:

And I will never ever, for as long as I live, give up the right, I will never forget and I will teach my kids that we are Palestinians and we will not give up the right to go back. Even if I have to crawl on my death bed, and die on the border, I will! - Hala

We are stubborn people, but I became more stubborn because all my problems are because I'm a Palestinian refugee. I was kicked out of every country that I went to and wanted to settle down in, because I am a refugee. I was not allowed to pursue options because I am a

Palestinian refugee. That's all my problems in life, so I became more stubborn, in the sense that I want to fight. – Jaanan

Through these statements we can understand that the respondents' Palestinian identity has led them to political activism, both in demonstrations and in social media, in hope to claim the Palestinian rights back. Through their ethnic identity and their struggle the Palestinians have found the strength to fight for their rights. To relate to Sayigh (1998 p. 167), women have since decades been politically active to things that are associated to the Palestinian nationalism. Even until today we can see clear examples through our interviews that women in the camp are politically active on different levels.

### Lebanon as the Another

One important element of the ethnic identity is “the another” (Jenkins 2008 p. 123). Palestinian identity involves unique and specific elements, and can only be fully understood by the historical narratives and the stories of others; “only when there is an another can you know who you are” (Khalidi 1997 p. 147). All women that we spoke to were referring to their Palestinian identity, but not without mentioning how they are being treated in Lebanon. We can therefore understand their experience of Lebanon as the “another”.

Malak, a Palestinian-Syrian refugee who is active in a sanitary project says:

Because of the situation of Palestinians, all the injustice, forced migration, leaving everything behind, you know everything we went through, the prejudices against us. When we lived in Syria, we had all our rights, we were treated as equals as Syrians but here in Lebanon we are treated like trash.

And she develops her thoughts about living in the camp:

That is why I chose to live in the camp, yes life is a bit inconvenient, but here is our special identity. Here inside, we are all Palestinian, we protect each other, we can live with dignity. Yes the Lebanese government, they poke, and they do things. Outside, no one has our back!

Yahma who participates on several workshops that are organised by Karam says:

If you go just outside these walls, the people are not going to understand one hundred percent what our people go through. And the restrictions they have on us. Because outside these walls there are not that many restrictions. Not the same restrictions.

What we can read from these statements is that the respondents have a strong collective feeling of the place where they live. Even if life is tough, they like living there because they feel safe and welcomed by others. The world outside the “walls” that Yahma speaks of is the Lebanese society, where both she and Malak point out the Lebanese government and society as the “another” or as the “them”. The oppression that the respondents are put through, and their shared Palestinian ethnicity, have been part of the collective internal dialectic where they by their similarities have formed their identity as a group. For them as a collective group to be recognized they have to be categorized by others through an external dialectic. We can see the external dialectic in this situation when the Lebanese government deny the Palestinians rights such as work or to own property, and by doing so they make a clear categorization of the Palestinians; that they are not welcomed to be included in the Lebanese society.

Nawar who organizes demonstrations about Palestinian rights says:

We have to do this because we don't have rights. Because this is our problem, no one feels what we go through. They are trying to face us out, but we are not gonna be faced out. We are Palestinians. We are here, and we have rights, we will keep this fight, because we are the ones going through all these problems, nobody else. So we have to do it. We have our own existence, more or less, we are not gonna be non-existing. They are not gonna erase us.

- Nawar

Sayigh (2007 p. 104) argues that we can tell that Palestinian women's life stories are formed from the national history and that national tragedy is reflected at the family and personal life

in the refugee camps. The collective group have all found something that they share in common and that they found significant in their group. The oppression of the respondents has resulted in a shared “special bond” that no one else understands. That they have been categorized has formed a strong “us and them”- mentality which gives them a strong collective feeling and makes them continue to fight against oppression.

## Resistance

### Resistance against patriarchal structures

In previous parts we have analysed how to identify as a Palestinian woman and mother have contributed to and been a big part of the respondents’ activism. In this part we will analyse how the respondents view their actions in relation to being a woman who is exercising resistance against patriarchal structures in society. Lilja and Vinthagen (2009 p. 20) write about how everyday resistance often consist of people in vulnerable conditions exercising resistance towards the discourses that have created hierarchical and stereotypical beliefs about different identity positions.

It is very important for me to tell my story, because I want other women to tell their story. A lot of women are weak, or they hide behind a stigma, or a social taboo. If a woman sees another woman talking, they will tell their story, they don’t have to hide anymore. For example, a lot of people don't like to talk about different situations, for example, if their daughters were sexually harassed, or somebody says something, you know. It’s a stigma. There is a stigma. When it comes to this, there are taboos. But if she sees her talking about it, and her talking about it, I am is one of those people that encourage people talking out so that other people can learn from their experience. - Malak

Malak describes how taboos and stigmas in society have been an obstacle for women to share stories about for example sexual harassments. She explains that if more women speak out about stigmatised matters, the stigmas break, and that she, Malak, actively encourages people to speak out about their lives and tell their stories, so that other people can learn from each other.

We can see that to speak out about sexual harassments or other matters, is a resistance against patriarchal structures that want women to stay quiet and feel shame about sexual assaults and that wants them to believe that it is an individual problem instead of part of a patriarchal oppression.

The woman was not born to only be with her husband and raise her kids, she was born to develop her own identity through work and through social work and activism. The woman was born to do activism. - Nawar

Nawar describes why she is involved in activism and why she believes that other women need to be involved as well, by pointing towards the role of a woman being not only in the private family life but also being involved in activism in the community and society. Nawar's and the other respondents' activism can be seen as resistance towards the patriarchal norms that limits women to the private sphere (Wallace 2009 p. 18), since they now claim their rights to take space and being active agents in the public sphere.

### Resistance against prejudices about people living in Najmah

Besides the patriarchal structures that the respondents are exercising resistance against, something the respondents have in common is that they interpret their actions as a way of exercising resistance towards the stereotypical beliefs about the people living in Najmah.

If I said I live inside Najmah, he doesn't believe me because I go to good places, I wear this, I see high class people that have money, they don't believe me. But actually I want to say to other people that I am from Najmah camp, to change her thinking about Najmah. You understand? So also if I go outside I will say I am from Najmah camp, I am from Najmah camp, I am from Najmah camp! I don't want to...if I said I am from outside Najmah, from high places, for example if I lived in Hamra, nothing will change, but if I say I am from Najmah, they will see that people are friendly and lovely. - Layan

Here Layan is exercising what Vinthagen and Lilja (2009 p. 20) would describe as a conscious resistance. Layan is aware of the stereotypical image the society has about people living in Najmah, especially women. Here she is using the everyday resistance strategy of changing the associations that people have of a “low status identity” (ibid.), by taking place in the society outside of Najmah, meeting with what she calls ‘high class people’ while continuously proclaiming that she lives in Najmah, and she is doing that with pride. She believes that by doing this, people’s perceptions of people in Najmah will change, because their image of them expands and they will be associated with something positive, and not be reduced to being a refugee woman in a camp. This can be understood as a conscious strategy to empower the collective.

As mentioned earlier, Hala showed a group of visitors around in Najmah and invited them to their home. This action can be seen as an everyday resistance strategy, to actively work for changing people’s perceptions of Najmah, to give them a complete picture their community. Hala gives the visitors an opportunity to form their own perception and ideas of Najmah and the people living there, instead by gaining these through for example media.

I don't allow anyone to say anything bad about Palestinians, that they are filthy or dirty, or stupid, or not able to... so that's why I do the things I do, because I want to give the best image of Palestine, the best image of Palestinians. – Jaanan

Jaanan explains how the prejudices against Palestinians has given her a will and motivation to fight, and how she views her involvement and activism as a resistance against these stereotypical beliefs.

### Resistance against paternalism

The respondents are also exercising resistance against paternalism, which is about limiting a person’s or group’s autonomy, with the motivation that they do not know what is best for them. Paternalism is the opposite of empowerment (Askheim & Starrin 2007 p. 18).

I want to do a lot of activities, but from community to community. We don't want help from outside, we can help ourselves, when we put our hands together, we can do fantastic things [...] Anyone can change, and I with my friends can change. I believe in myself, and I am proud, and my family is proud. - Layan

I feel very happy and I feel peaceful inside because now we are working as a community, and we are affectionate towards one another, and supportive of one another, so I feel very happy. Because we are working as a community. - Yahma

Layan and Yahma have the belief that they themselves as a community can change their own situation. Therefore they, just like Hala, exercise resistance against a paternalistic view of them, which claims that they need other people or organisations to help them in order to have meaningful lives. In Layan's quote we can read that she believes that Najmah is filled with people who are capable of forming their own lives, when they do it as a community.

## Final discussion

Through this study we reach the conclusion that the women's motives behind their actions are multiple and connected. We learn that the respondents through a collective matter find significant elements that they share in common with their group, that form social identity categories as Palestinian, women and mothers. The respondents refer their involvement in activism to their identification with these categories; hence it becomes clear that their identity as Palestinian women and mothers is an important motive for their actions. We can also draw the conclusion that the development of social identity is a source of strength and motivation for the respondents, when it comes to involvement in activism on different levels.

Many of the respondents speak about how their will to fight is generated from a desire to change the oppressive constraints that they live under. However, there are also stories in the respondents' statements that explain how activism that started from a point of wanting empowerment in their individual, personal life, soon became important for more people and empowered the whole community. This shows how the respondents' motives are multiple and overlapping, and in a process where one motivation can change into another.

Several of the respondents speak of how their increased confidence, self-esteem and knowledge have been results of their involvement. We can therefore see how activism has been a venue for both empowerment and development of social identity, which have affected themselves and their community. Their activism as a group has contributed to a strong collective identity, which has been empowering in the sense that it has generated a will to fight for themselves, their families and community.

Another motive behind the respondents' involvement in activism is that they want to change the prejudiced beliefs the society outside has about Palestinian women living in Najmah, and through their involvement, they are exercising resistance against these beliefs. Through the respondents' activism, they are making resistance against paternalistic views of them, because they are claiming that they themselves know what is best for them and their

community. Furthermore, they are exercising resistance against patriarchy when they demand their place in society as women and when they do not remain silent about stigmatised matters.

As a result of the respondents' activism, a sense of belonging and solidarity in the community is created, as they come together and learn that they are not alone in their situations. The activism has also contributed to a change of living conditions in the community, through for example the sanitary work. We can also see how the society outside is being informed about the lives and situations of Palestinians in Lebanon, through the respondents' participation in demonstrations and in social media.

As this study comes to an end we remember what Layan said the first day that we came to the Najmah:

Media and research come here and they write about our poverty and misery. We are not poor!

We are not weak! I'm tired of people speaking about us. It is our time to speak now!

As Sukarieh and Tannock (2013) write, it is problematic that social researchers have a tendency to write about refugees as a passive group and only as receivers of others' help. This fact becomes clear in Layan's statement. Another gap in existing research is about refugees' capacity and agency, in how they are active in affecting and changing their situations and especially research that is based on their own voices. Therefore we aimed with this study to gain an understanding of how refugees themselves view and speak of these matters. Our study shows that refugee women are active agents in their own lives and that the ways in which they are active are various, complex and many. It also becomes clear how their activism have affected themselves and their families on a personal level, but also upon their community as a whole. The study also shows how activism, identity and empowerment are linked to each other and how each of the concepts can enable another of the concepts to develop.

From this point of view we want to emphasise the importance with studies that highlight perspectives from refugees' points of view, since it otherwise is easy to portray the group in stereotyping ways.

Another insight we gain from this study is the importance of highlighting *all* actions. The respondents' actions, as individuals and as a group are just as important and relevant as any other social movement in the world. As Sarifa (2004) writes, generally the activism and movements that are being recognized are the ones that are led by privileged groups. Despite the respondents' major activism they are not being recognized outside Najmah as a vigorous and powerful group of people. Therefore we aim with this study to recognize and highlight, in both short and long-term aspects, that every action is important and can lead to social change.

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# Appendix 1 - Interview guide

**General background information** (Age, ethnicity, how long the person has been living in Najmah, family situation)

## **Involvement and activism**

1. Have you ever tried to affect or change something in the camp?
  - Why did you want to affect or change this?
  - How did you do it?
  - Has this affected your life, family or community?
2. When did you begin to be interested in this matter? How come?
3. How does it feel when you try to affect something? What does it mean to you?
4. Do you think it is important to work for change? Why?
5. Is there something that you want to change within the camp? Why?
6. How do you believe that you can affect something in your life or community? In what ways?

## **Being involved as a woman**

1. How does being a woman affect your will to change?
2. What do people in this camp think about changing things?
3. What are women in the camp's perceptions of how to affect things?
4. Do you and other women in the camp work together for changing something?
5. Do you believe that as a woman it is important to speak for yourself and tell your story?
6. Do you believe that you are an inspiration to other women in the camp?