Syrian brides and the Global Compact on Refugees: How Canada's FIAP can reimagine refugee women's empowerment

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Abstract

The current Liberal government has publicly endorsed a feminist agenda which has led to initiatives such as Canada's feminist international assistance policy (FIAP), initiated in 2017. At the same time, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Report (TRC) of 2015 reiterates how the histories of colonialism are still persistent and need to be addressed in our curriculum, research, and policy. This essay argues that a fully feminist agenda must be anti-colonial in nature, rejecting Eurocentric, stereotypical and universalizing explanations and leaving space for cultural interpretations, local solutions and listening to the voices of marginalized groups as experts. In short, FIAP and the TRC must be brought together in practical and policy-orientated ways to promote women's empowerment and gender equity through a decolonizing framework.

In support of Canada's leading role in the advancement of refugee issues and the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), and informed by its feminist approach to foreign policy and FIAP which "comes with "aggressive" funding targets for gender equality and women's empowerment" (CCIC, 2017), it is important to scrutinize the notion of gender empowerment and related notions, such as forced marriage and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Drawing on doctoral fieldwork conducted in Egypt summer of 2017, this paper uses the case of Syrian refugee women who marry 'for refuge' to explore how certain groups of refugee women and their stories challenge international humanitarian perceptions that often stigmatize similar arrangements as exploitation, sex trafficking and/or forced marriages. I use what I refer to as *marriage for refuge* and *marriage immobility* to demonstrate how humanitarian notions such as empowerment and related notions such as SGBV and forced marriage can be reimagined. The study aims to offer insights for a gender-responsive refugee policy that is feminist, decolonizing and sensitive to culture, context and diversity.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) is a unique opportunity to respond to increasing global human displacement and to better define international cooperation, political commitment and equitable responsibility-sharing. The GCR emphasizes four key objectives: (a) ease pressures on host countries; (b) enhance refugee self-reliance; (c) expand access to third-country solutions; (d) support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity (UNHCR 2018). Canada has played an active role in drafting the GCR, and as asserted by Canada's Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Ahmed Hussen, Canada's Minister of International Development Marie-Claude Bibeau, and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) Representative in Canada, Jean-Nicolas Beuze, Canada is committed to UNHCR goals including the GCR and is "well-placed" to take a leadership role in its application and advancement (Hussen et al., 2018). Guided by its Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), which was adopted in 2017, Canada has emphasized its commitment to supporting the GCR and UNHCR's efforts to developing gender-responsive humanitarian actions that support gender equality and empowerment (Marwah, 2018).[i]

FIAP is built on the assumption that Canada's interests, safety and prosperity are tied to eradicating global poverty and vulnerabilities and that the latter is best accomplished through addressing the gender gap. A feminist approach is more than just focusing on women and girls. Rather, as advocated by Marie-Claude Bibeau, it is the most effective way to overcome global poverty and insecurities (Canada's FIAP, 2017). At the core of FIAP is to support efforts towards Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls, particularly through supporting initiative to reduce sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), advance women's rights, enhance services to women and girls and improving gender analysis (Canada's FIAP, 2017).

In the same vein, Paragraphs 74 and 75 of the GCR reiterate attention to gender equality, empowerment and gender responsiveness through recognizing that girls and women face unique experiences and obstacles because of their gender. It, hence, encourages states and relevant stakeholders to "adopt and implement policies and programmes to empower women and girls in refugee and host communities, and to promote full enjoyment of their human rights, as well as equality of access to services and opportunities–while also taking into account the particular needs and situation of men and boys" (GCR–Final Draft, 2018, 14). This commitment is coupled with a meaningful involvement and leadership of women and girls and seeking their input in developing relevant policies and solutions (GCR–Final Draft, 2018).

In support of Canada's leading role in the advancement of refugee issues and the implementation of the GCR (CCIC, 2017), it is important to scrutinize the notion of gender empowerment and related notions, such as agency, forced marriage and SGBV. This paper uses the case of Syrian refugee women who marry *for refuge* to explore how certain groups of refugee women challenge international humanitarian perceptions that often stigmatize similar arrangements as exploitation, sex trafficking and/or forced marriages. The narratives of those women reveal the shortcomings of "universalizing the empowerment experience" (Bawa, 2016, 14). Thus, this essay stems from the argument that traditional and local experiences expand empowerment beyond economic benefits and financial independence.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This paper is part of a broader study that I completed during my fieldwork in Egypt summer of 2017. At that time, I conducted 30 in-depth qualitative interviews with Syrian

refugee women who escaped the conflict in Syria and married Egyptian men after 2011, once they settled and 10 Egyptian husbands in Greater Cairo area and Alexandria. The data was collected over the course of four months in Egypt, including the greater Cairo area and Alexandria, the two areas with the highest concentration of Syrians. I have relied on personal connections, snowballing, social media as well as perseverance in getting in touch with key informants to access my sample. In the sample, I was cautious to represent all socio-economic levels. Thirty in-depth qualitative interviews were completed with Syrian women who are currently married or were married to Egyptian men. In addition, ten interviews were conducted with Egyptian husbands of women from my original sample. In this paper, I focus on the narratives of six Syrian refugee women. While their narratives cannot be used to draw general conclusions about the entire sample, the narrow selection of cases here is intended for two reasons: (a) to emphasize that the objective is not to draw general conclusions but to highlight variations within Syrian refugee women and refugee women at large; and (b) informed by a decolonizing approach, this paper aims to allow a relatively larger space/platform for those women, and their stories. In other words, by offering "more pages" to their voices and stories, the aim is to minimize viewing my respondents as mere numbers or simply the "Other."

Informed by a decolonizing framework[ii], the paper emerges from the assumption that a truly feminist agenda has to be decolonizing in nature, rejecting Eurocentric, stereotypical and universalizing explanations and leaving space for cultural interpretations and listening to marginalized groups, especially women and girls, as experts not mere witnesses or victims waiting to be saved. Thus, this paper asks how listening to the voices of refugee women and taking seriously their experiences and interpretations can contribute to a gender-responsive humanitarian action guided by a feminist foreign policy. How can decolonizing and culturally relevant policies and strategies for refugee girls and women move beyond the liberal, or Western, feminist agenda that often fails to understand non-Western realities and motivations a shortcoming that can exacerbate the marginalizing of women and girls or put them in an even more precarious situation.[iii]

First, I start with an overview of the results of the fieldwork to give some context to those women's stories. Second, I will focus on some common explanations that motivated many of those women to marry nationals of the country they sought refuge in, in this case Egypt. Particularly, I focus on the most common legal, economic and social motivations as explained by my respondents and informants. Third, I explore how such marriage arrangements have created a mixed effect of challenges and opportunities and created special forms of SGBV and vulnerability to my respondents that go beyond the normative forced marriage framework. Fourth, I revisit empowerment and highlight how its meaning is sometimes captured best by focusing on social and moral gains instead of material and economic gains by particularly focusing on how my respondents understood and elevated the concept of motherhood. Finally, I conclude by highlighting some implications from re-envisioning a Canadian foreign policy that is feminist as well as decolonized and culturally relevant to formerly colonized places and people.

Context and Overview

Hosting over 5 million refugees from various countries, all of whom living in urban communities and none in refugee camps, Egyptian officials have confirmed that this figure includes 500,000 Syrian refugees living in Egypt since 2011 (ECHO Factsheet, 2018).[iv] Fleeing one of the worst humanitarian crises since World War II, Syrians arrive to an economically troubled country where they face a lack of opportunities and high costs of living. One of the ways Syrian refugee women have attempted to navigate and survive within such a difficult socio-economic and political terrain is through marrying Egyptian men that they barely know. The latter has drawn the attention of the media, religious

leaders, and advocacy groups (Hassan, 2015). Social media campaigns such as 'Refugees not spoils of war' were initiated as a reaction to this practice in Egypt, as well as in Lebanon, Jordan and other Arab countries where such marriages have been facilitated, and encouraged through marriage brokers, social media and religious groups.

The respondents came from diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds, but the overwhelming majority lives in urban areas within the Egyptian community. The ways they entered Egypt are also diverse. While some of them entered with a tourist visa, most, but not all, applied for asylum later. A few cases arrived illegally through Sudan or as brides as will be detailed. While it might be a challenge here to go through how their diverse backgrounds affected their experiences and decisions, this paper will focus on some themes that were common among a majority of the participants, particularly the legal, social, economic motivations for the marriage.

Most of the women I spoke to claimed that shortly after arriving to Egypt, they were bombarded with marriage proposals from Egyptian men from different social classes. This occurred regardless of their marital status (divorced, widowed, single mother, or never been married). Informants characterized many of these marriages as (1) quick, taking place within a few weeks or even a few days of the initial proposal; (2) polygamous, where the man already has a wife and is seeking a second wife; and (3) customary or *Urfi* marriages, that are limited to the religious ceremony and hence are not registered with official paperwork. When asked to elaborate on why they thought Egyptian men are seeking to marry Syrian refugee women in particular, almost all of the women made reference to the reputation of Syrian women in terms of physical beauty, femininity, self-care, and high quality as housewives (compared to Egyptian women). However, some of the Egyptian husbands interviewed also complained about the financial burden of getting married to an Egyptian woman including ongoing and increasing requests for material support from her family they said would likely follow. Some of the husbands said that with limited financial resources, they have a better chance of finding a 'higher quality' Syrian partner (they made reference to education and socio-intellectual qualities) who might have fewer options to choose from, due to their displacement, compared to a potential Egyptian partner.

The examples above reinforce the exploitation narrative that is assumed by several advocacy groups and social media campaigns: Egyptian men are motivated to marry because "Syrian refugees are cheaper, prettier, better cooks and easier to marry" (Youssef & Ismail, 2013). Below I propose a deeper understanding of the complexity of these marriages and how they might help scrutinize some humanitarian notions such as empowerment, exploitation and SGBV.

Marriage for Refuge: Legal, economic, and social motivation for marriage

Almost all of the refugee women I have met have referred to marriage to an Egyptian man at some point during the interview as a social, economic and/or a legal survival tool. A few women have explicitly referred to marriage as a legal solution, i.e. to secure a legal residency status for them and their children, which is particularly useful in the unpredictable Egyptian political environment. However, a more significant number of those women had mostly social and economic justifications and motivations behind the marriage. Especially that there are other strategies they can follow to obtain a legal or a semi-legal status such as enrolling their children in college or renewing their tourist visa every few months.

Many of the respondents have commonly referred to marriage as *Sotra*, an Arabic word literally meaning "to cover" that is used often to mean protection or sheltering. This should not be regarded as an indicator of the lack of affection in these marriages. Rather, marriage in such cases often served a dual purpose of intimacy and protection. In this

sense, marriage functioned as a tool for economic support by providing financial security to the household, while also offering protection from other social pressures including attempts to take advantage of these women due to their uprootedness and inability to maneuver the culture and day-to-day interactions. This included protection particularly against sexual harassment.

For instance, when asked about the meaning of *Sotra*, *Marwa*, a widow in her early thirties with two children, who is currently a second wife to an Egyptian man, said: "In my opinion, *Sotra* means a man… when you say: "that's it!" no one is going to harass me, no one is going to impose themselves on me. That's it! I am with this man and so I can rest mentally." *Maha*, a 45-year old divorced woman who comes from a well-off family in Syria, agreed with *Marwa*. Despite her financial stability, *Maha* still felt the importance of getting married upon arrival to Egypt and compared a woman without a husband to "a tree without leaves". *Marwa*, on the other hand was in a less stable economic situation. Unlike many Syrian women, she did not lack the working experience or reject the idea of working to support herself and her kids. In fact, she met her husband because she was searching for a job. She has proven both agency and skills in acquiring jobs and expressed deep satisfaction with her 'printer, computer and very nice office'. However, challenging the liberal feminist rhetoric, when given the option, *Marwa* still preferred marriage over working. Her husband gave her the choice between *Sotra* (here implying *Sotra* through marriage) and financial support through giving a monthly allowance to the kids and she picked the first without hesitation.

Similarly, *Nour*, a 25-year-old widow, also challenged the liberal feminist rhetoric by expressing her conviction that a woman's "natural path is to eventually get married". Despite her young age, her negative experience and feeling of being used by her ex-husband who married her in secret just to leave her after four months to go back to his first wife and children, *Nour* still demonstrated a sense of autonomy and responsibility in both her decision to marry soon after arriving to Egypt and her desire (and confidence) to remarry again after the failure of the first attempt. When I followed up with her months after our initial interview, she was already married to another Egyptian man for the second time.

Marriage Immobility: Contextualizing SGBV

For refugee women, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a particular threat. The latter is not just limited to physical violence but includes psychological and emotional abuse as well (Young & Chan, 2015). As a result, many refugee women suffer from mental health symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Guruge et al., 2009; Young & Chan, 2015). Nevertheless, for some of my respondents, marriage is the only alternative to homelessness in or deportation from Egypt. Thus, despite suffering from an abusive relationship or even just an unhappy marriage, some refugee women will still choose or feel obliged to stay in that marriage (Ho & Pavlish, 2011). Those women are neither in a forced nor voluntary marriage. They experience 'marriage immobility', a term I coin to refer to this in-betweenness of marriage status, neither forced nor voluntary.

During my interviews, I was exposed to many women who were left in a more precarious situation than before their marriage. A particularly poignant example is when a Syrian refugee woman, despite marrying voluntarily, is forced to stay in the marriage and in the country for reasons that, in their opinion, outweigh her own mental health and well-being. *Mohra*, a 26-year-old Syrian mother of two who was lured to Egypt by an Egyptian man who offered to marry her and take her and her kids out of a war-burdened Syria is a perfect illustration. *Mohra*, married her husband by mailing him a power of attorney which he used to legalize the marriage in Egypt. She travelled to him alone, hoping her kids would follow soon, only to be shocked by the dire social and economic situation he was

living in. Although her Syrian children followed her a little over a year after her arrival, after giving birth to her "Egyptian" daughter, she is now stuck in this marriage. Her case highlights an area between a voluntarily and a forced marital relationship, since she is forced to make a choice between leaving her Egyptian children behind or suffering along with her Syrian children in Egypt every day.

Shirin, in her late 20s, is another case who, after weighing the risks and benefits of her situation, is also stuck in her marriage. During the interview, she painted a picture that she is happily married only to call me a few days later to confess that she lied because she was worried her husband was listening. Although she did not refer to physical abuse, she did mention she was kicked out of the house and had to sleep in the street more than once. She contacted me hoping for legal guidance to explore options that would help her gain financial independence. She was mostly thinking about financial aid not work, since she too has a child from her Egyptian husband which complicates her options (of leaving the marriage as well as leaving the country). For her, paid work is not an option because she would have to spend her income on daycare and even if she was able to find a job that could help her afford daycare, she might not be able to bear the harassment of her husband's family. She mentioned a few times her desire to flee the country and join her older children (from her previous Syrian husband) who risked their lives on a boat to seek asylum in Germany, but even that was not possible unless she is willing to leave her Egyptian toddler behind.

Both *Shirin* and *Mohra,* despite their resentfulness, showed very little will to leave their current husbands. After following up with them more than a year later, they are still with their husbands where there are "the normal ups and many downs" that has always described their marriages. Their cases reflect "marriage immobility". While *Mohra* was adamant that she will find a way to leave the country with *all* her kids and declared her lack of interest in remarrying despite her young age, *Shirin* who was not interested in working whatsoever hinted that a possible solution, or a way out of this immobility, is to leave her current husband for another one (she did not specify a nationality). Such a person might offer her protection from possible ex-husband harassment while also providing for her and her son financially.

Discussion: On Motherhood and Decolonizing Marriage and Empowerment

Spivak developed a research strategy called "unlearning of one's privilege as one's loss" (Danius, Jonsson, & Spivak, 1993), referring to the unlearning means, or in her words "stopping oneself from always wanting to correct, teach, theorize, develop, colonize, appropriate, use, record, inscribe, enlighten; the impetus to always be the speaker and speak in all situations must be seen for what it is: a desire for mastery and domination" (Kapoor, 2008, 56). This "learning to unlearn in order to relearn" (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012, 12) approach is at the core of decolonizing research to challenge Eurocentric worldviews and knowledge production that are the result of centuries of colonization. In this section, I use *marriage for refuge* and *marriage immobility* to demonstrate how humanitarian notions such as empowerment and related notions such as SGBV and forced marriage can be reimagined.

The narratives of the women in this study reflected a strong awareness of their social position, and the social risks and restrictions that face them. Such restrictions are often a multiple product of their gender, nationality, and displacement in a foreign country where they lack social capital and support. That said, they were also able to identify options that suited their interest and made the best out of their situation. I want to demonstrate how the notion of empowerment can have various cultural interpretations if analyzed outside a liberal feminist humanitarian understanding. In other words, I contend that some refugee women can find empowerment in cultural practices, such as *Sotra* marriage, and

traditional gender roles, such as motherhood.

Thus, while marriage can be argued as a practical, "decent", and a culturally relevant solution to many refugee women who are also single mothers, it cannot be viewed in isolation from other cultural norms and discursive powers that have shaped those women's consciousness. This is not to deny the patriarchal and unjust conditions, such as fear from harassment of distress about personal safety, that underlie those women's socio-cultural milieu and shape their preferences and decision to marry. Rather, I want to pick up on Saba Mahmood's argument which sought to problematize question that have dominated scholarship, such as: "how do women contribute to reproducing their own domination, and how do they resist or subvert it?" (Mahmood, 2001, 255). Here, I would like to re-emphasize the objective of this project to challenge the assumption that desire to freedom from subordination is universal and innate to human nature (p. 256). I argue that the decision/desire to marry for those women is determined by a complex web shaped by: (a) explicit/liberal understanding of agency and weighing one's interest against custom; (b) patriarchal dictations that re-articulated marriage as the decent and almost the only solution; and (c) those women's moral agency. Such moral agency does not particularly aim to enhance one's material interest or status but rather to "attain a certain kind of state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (p. 210). In short, those women have perceived marriage as an agentive act not just in terms of promoting their socio-economic interest or to maneuver social structure but also as a moral and virtuous act that complements their existence and understanding of their gender (which in Butler's words (1990) should not be understood as having an inner core) and femininity.

Many studies have explored conjugal relationships which challenged the idea of the nuclear family as the natural and only form of family, and that love and attraction are the main reasons for marriage (see Al-Sharmani, 2010; Kim, 2014). Kim (2014) for instance, demonstrated how cross-border marriage gave North Korean women the opportunity to "choose and utilize marriage to make a living in exchange for their sexuality and labour" (p. 559-60). Other studies have suggested that traditional gender roles have in fact helped refugee women adapt faster than men (Szczepanikova, 2005; Franz 2003; Säävälä, 2005). For instance, Szczepanikova concluded that "migrant women often appear to show greater resilience and adaptability than men because they maintain household and childcare routines, which provide them with occupation and also self-confidence during the stressful period of uncertainty in exile" (p. 292). In contrast, other studies have shown that a main motivator for women to go to the public sphere was "the survival and well-being of their families rather than their own individual development or progress" (Franz, 2003, 102). This can be reinforced in my respondents' narrative who had a clear vision that their children's best interest outweighs any other priorities. For instance, when she chose to be a second wife in an unregistered marriage, a very precarious position, Nour responded as follows:

I: Oh so you mean you don't care if you are a first or a second wife as long as your daughter is with you?
N: Yes dear. Excuse me but for women like us we don't think about ourselves, we think about our children. When you buy anything for the house do you think of yourself or your son? […] In my country, I had my rights and I was able to manage. Here I am in a strange country. Why would I work and degrade myself, meet this and meet that, the good and the bad? No, I apply Sotra to myself and my daughter and find a human being who is honest and straightforward and offers me a decent life. I'm not saying that I want a car and a big house. Middle ground. A decent life….
(interview with Nour, Summer 2017).

Based on Nour's rationale, other solutions like working as a hairdresser, her job before she married her first Syrian husband, would keep her away from her daughter during the

workday and expose her to a relatively foreign culture. Such paid work would make her prone to exploitation and "humiliation," which also implies sexual harassment and unwanted attention. For her, marriage, even if in secret and even as a second wife, was the safe or "decent," if not the obvious, option for her situation, especially given that she set her priorities in relation to her only child.

That is to say, many of my respondents chose marriage because they viewed it as their motherly duty. For them, they found empowerment *in* and *because of* motherhood. In addition to giving those women a sense of purpose and a motivation to survive and adapt, it often also gives them social status. Such motherhood status can be perceived by the woman herself as well as the members of her community as more important than socioeconomic or educational accomplishments (Bawa, 2016); it can offer a woman an elevated status among her community that comes with a strong social network and respect among her community. For instance, *Naziha* is a 45-year old divorced woman who is currently happily married to an Egyptian man. She explained that she only considered marriage upon arrival in Egypt as a refugee because back in Syria, as she puts it, "I would be among my family and my people… I would have more than one man to take care of me" because back home she would have such motherhood status. For her, 'wifehood', or marriage, was a way to compensate for the lost motherhood status.

Refugee women, especially those from the Global South, are often seen as victims, not just of displacement but of their patriarchal and 'backward', 'traditional' cultures and practices. The views expressed by many of my respondents describe a woman without a husband "like a tree without leaves," choosing marriage over career, or believing that marriage is the woman's natural path. Such convictions violate core assumption in the liberal/Western feminist understanding of empowerment. From this perspective, such woman might be seen as: "… complicit in the socio-cultural practices that might be interpreted as oppressive to her. Her idea of 'her place' in the home, society and the world at large may offend the delicate sensibilities of feminists, who may view her choices as non-choices, giving her little credit for her agency in the world" (Bawa, 2016, 5). Here is would like to challenge such simplistic view of women from the Global south and scrutinize the versatile meaning of empowerment as understood by my respondents.

In humanitarian and economic development discussions, women's empowerment technically refers to women's ability to make strategic life choices that they have been denied before (Huis, et al, 2017). Often though, women's empowerment is translated as economic and financial independence (Huis et al, 2017; Kurtiş et al, 2016). Other emerging studies, however, suggest that economic empowerment or autonomy is not necessarily coupled with progressive or even favorable outcomes for women (Huis et al, 2017). Rather, women are urged to draw upon local understandings to "resonate with local realities and better serve local communities" (Adams et al., 2015, 223). In other words, social and cultural differences mean that varying components of empowerment will be important or meaningful to members of a particular community; the decisions they can make are reliable indicators of true empowerment (Huis et al, 2017; and Kurtiş et al, 2016). The examples I focused on in this paper are not shared among all my participants. During my interviews I encountered different opinions and sentiments about marriage, divorce, work, and traditional gender roles. The notions and meanings of, and responsibilities attached to motherhood, nevertheless, created the least variability and controversy among my respondents. As long as such cultural perceptions about gender roles and responsibilities remain unchanged, they will continue to shape how certain groups of women view empowerment, exploitation and related notions such as the meaning and purpose of marriage.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The gradual recognition by the UNHCR that gender affects every dimension of the refugee experience and that it is well reflected in frameworks such as the GCR is a step in the right direction. The current government led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and its feminist agenda and FIAP puts Canada in a unique position to take the lead in realizing this principle through policies of gender mainstreaming and gender empowerment. Both the GCR and FIAP stress gender empowerment and combating SGBV as some of their core objectives. Nevertheless, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Report of 2015 reiterates how the histories of colonialism are still persistent and need to be addressed in our curriculum, research, and policy. Emerging from the conviction that a feminist policy should also be decolonizing, this case study sought to demonstrate how such colonial legacy has led to a Eurocentric understanding of many humanitarian notions. This case study showcases how Syrian refugee women living in a foreign country (with cultural proximity) will make different decisions than their counterparts in different contexts and that both often defy many liberal/Western conceptions about gender roles and what constitutes as empowerment. Drawing on the Canadian context, Indigenous women will, similarly, "refuse" (Simpson, 2014) and recalibrate the meanings of empowerment.

My aim is not to deny instances of SGBV and exploitation in the Global South all together. Rather by applying a decolonizing "filter" to better characterize phenomena, such as marriage for refuge, more culturally relevant support can be offered to refugee women and women from the Global south at large. Understanding *Sotra* as means for protection from SGBV and recognizing the different challenges resulting from marriage immobility vis-à-vis forced marriage are but two examples. More importantly, the proposed decolonizing approach helps challenge the image of those women as mere victims and offers them a meaningful platform to be engaged – as experts, in designing and leading local initiatives and solutions at a grassroot level (in addition to high level and policy level). In short, it aims to avoid tokenism in humanitarian aid systems.

The agency for UN Women outlined key recommendations for the GCR "to ensure it comprehensively addresses gender equality and the protection and empowerment of women and girls" (UN Women, 2017). They highlight the importance of recognizing the specific needs and diversity of women and girls through adopting an Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) approach[v] as well as utilizing the women's contribution to realize gender equality, women empowerment and the elimination of SGBV. They also offer detailed recommendations regarding adequately training staff, offering counseling and logistical and legal support to vulnerable women and developing the women and girls' capacities for self-reliance.

In this paper, I have argued that Canada's FIAP and the UN Women recommendations should advocate for a gender responsive approach that doesn't only consider AGDM but also seeks to rethink and decolonize humanitarian notions such as empowerment, forced marriages and the multitude of meanings and implications of SGBV. *Sotra* marriage, motherhood and marriage immobility are some strategies that challenge the norms of liberal feminism, that were utilized by my respondents to resist SGBV and ensure their social protection, after they weighed their risks and benefits. Syrian women in my research used marriage to maneuver legal, social, and economic pressures of displacement, create their own versions of self-reliance and resistance to sexual harassment. Such strategies, and a wide range of other research on social and physical protection of women, should be part of the discussion of gender empowerment and gender responsiveness for refugees.

I conclude by pointing out some recommendations informed by the decolonizing framework (for FIAP, the GCR context and beyond):

(a) ***Develop geographically, historically, and culturally relevant definitions and indicators to measure empowerment***. This approach should include economic as well as social and cultural indicators such as reducing social pressures (e.g.

harassment, public shaming and tribal and familial pressures) and preventing the erosion of social status such as elderhood or motherhood.

(b) ***Focus on, especially local, initiatives and solutions that are culturally informed about norms of social protection in a particular context*** to support women who choose to use their roles as wives and mothers to strengthening their social capital and enhance family reunification. This also includes designing programs and initiatives that support, or overcome tension with, their conventional gender roles especially motherhood, along with their entrepreneurial goals (e.g. promoting initiatives with work environments where children can accompany their mothers, might encourage more women to participate, in contrast to norms of affordable daycare).

(c) ***Provide culturally relevant and context-specific legal and mental health counseling*** that is able to recognize specific challenges (e.g. marriage immobility and the repercussions of not being able to flee the marriage as well as the country). This includes ensuring service providers have sufficient representation *by* women *for* women, that they are familiar with the implications of colonization, and are trained to mobilize local values to reinforce social justice and empowerment (e.g. Islamic values were central to many of my respondents, incorporating them properly in counseling, support groups, and initiatives can create more impact).

(d) ***Champion innovative solutions that meaningfully engage refugee women in identifying challenges, designing solutions and implementing initiative***. These solutions might include offering a *voice* through advocacy training for refugees so that they can define their own issues and know how to speak and lobby for themselves. They might also include involving refugees in community-based and participatory action research projects to gear research, especially policy research, towards relevant issues.

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Endnotes

i In 1997, the UN Economic and Social Council introduced "Gender mainstreaming" as a process that allowed to consider the implications of any action, policy or program on men and women. Shortly after, gender mainstreaming has evolved into age, gender and diversity mainstreaming (AGDM) strategy in 2004 which aimed to "empower all disenfranchised groups" instead of just focusing on gender or age. As a consequence the UNHCR has adopted an Age, Gender, and diversity policy (see: https://www.unhcr.org/protection/women/4e7757449/unhcr-age-gender-and-diversity-policy.html

ii Scholars such as Homi Bhabha (2012) introduce decolonizing critique as an academic attempt to recognize the inequality of ontological and epistemological explanations and cultural representations caused by the Western political and social 'authority' of what is referred to as the modern world order. Such authority has created "ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic 'normality'" when trying to understand non-Western cultures (p. 245).

iii Liberal feminism has been subjected to many critiques and revisions from other strands of feminism such as postcolonial feminism, transnational feminism, critical race feminism, black feminism, the critique centered around the idea that liberal feminism emerged from the West to reflect the specific experience of white middle class cis-gender heterosexual women and in reflection to their historical contexts and social dynamics and as a consequence fails understand the challenges and meanings of liberation, equality and empowerment in other non-Western cultures.

iv Most of those refugees are not included in the official UNHCR statistics–which only verify 119,665 registered Syrian refugees (Karasapan, 2016).

v See note 1