

Commodified by displacement: the effects of forced displacement on Syrian refugee women in Lebanon's agricultural sector

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Abstract

In an effort to contribute to an emergent body of ethnographic work addressing the labour economy of forced displacement and the contribution of women refugee-labour more precisely, the article uses the case-study of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon's agriculture to uncover how forced displacement has contributed to the exploitation of an already-commodified, invisible, and migrantized workforce. While there is an established and diverse body of literature that investigates female labour invisibility in agriculture (on the one hand), and the relationship between labour commodification and agriculture (on the other hand), less discussed is the relationship between forced displacement and female labour commodification. Based on ethnographic research including interviews and participant observations conducted between May 2018 and September 2019 in Lebanon's Bekaa valley, this article demonstrates how refugee-labourers are subjected to various tactics and instruments of labour coercion, which affect their decision-making power in both the work sphere and the domestic sphere, reinforcing their invisibility as cheap labour and docile refugees. A closer investigation into the labour dynamics on site yet reveals a much more complex reality where women engage in various acts of negotiations by making instrumental use of their femaleness. Notwithstanding the situation of forced displacement, the conditions facing the case of these female refugee-labourers mirrors more broadly the structural problems inherent to contracted labour regimes in corporatized sectors like agriculture.

Keywords: forced migration; gender; agricultural labour; commodification; Lebanon; Syria.

1. Introduction

Whoever visited Lebanon's Bekaa valley before the Syrian war began in 2011 might remember it for its large panoramic fields, beautifully sandwiched by the western Mount Lebanon and the eastern Anti-Lebanon. What might have been noticeable, perhaps less flagrantly, is the catchy sight of colourful garments hiding in between crop lanes and contrasting with the greenness of the fields and the redness of the soil. Those garments reflect the invisible female hands behind the large stacks of vegetables and fruits that end up in markets, grocery stores, and dinner plates. They are the hands of seasonal workers who criss-crossed the Syrian-Lebanese border every year at the start and end of the agricultural season. Since the beginning of the war in Syria in 2011, these workers have become *de facto* refugees.¹ Given the long history of seasonal labour migration tying Syria to

Lebanon, the protracted nature of the Syrian war has caused an agricultural refugee-labour displacement rather than a mere 'refugee influx'. Countless studies have emerged examining the various implications of Syrian displacement, with special emphasis on 'women and children' (Enloe 1993) as vulnerable targets. However, there has been much less attention on the significant role played by Syrian refugee women in Lebanon's agricultural labour economy.

In an effort to contribute to an emergent body of ethnographic work addressing the labour economy of forced displacement (e.g. Kavak 2016; Karatepe, Toren, and Yilmaz 2019; Pelek 2019; Yalçın and Yalçın 2019; Sajadian 2021) and the contribution of women refugee-labour more precisely,² this article uses the case study of Syrian refugee women's role as invisible and commodified labour in Lebanon's agriculture. It addresses a main gap in the literature on the impact of forced displacement on female labour, who constitute a heavily-commodified workforce. While there is an established and diverse body of literature that explores female labour invisibility in agriculture (on the one hand) (e.g. Barrientos 1997; Raghuram 2002; Gunewardena 2010; Théroux-Séguin 2016), and the relationship between labour commodification and agriculture (on the other hand) (e.g. Breman 1996; Basok 2002; Mosse et al. 2002; Breman 2003; Binford 2004; Lee 2010; Holmes 2013; Shah 2016; Cavanna 2018; Shah and Lerche 2020), less discussed is the relationship between forced displacement and female labour commodification. By bringing forward this relationship, the article shows how situations like forced displacement contribute to the exploitation of an already-exploited and migrantized workforce. By doing so, it considers gender as a lens through which the intersections between labour commodification and forced displacement are more visible. The analysis as such reveals how the exploitation of female refugee-labour fits into larger discussions on labour and displacement.

The main argument the article advances is that the systemic commodification³ of female refugee-labour in agriculture was intensified as a result of the workforce's dual positioning as *female* and as *refugee* since 2011. The empirical investigation demonstrates how various tactics and instruments of labour coercion are deployed by agricultural labour contractors to contain and commodify their workforce. These tactics affect refugee women's decision-making power in both the work sphere and the domestic sphere, which reinforces their invisibility as cheap labour and docile refugees. However, a closer investigation into the labour dynamics on site reveals a much more complex reality where women engage in acts of negotiations through their use of their femaleness. Notwithstanding the situation of forced displacement and its explicit impacts on a changing workforce, the conditions facing these female refugee-labourers mirror more broadly the structural problems inherent to contracting labour regimes in corporatized sectors like agriculture.

The article is organized as follows. Following the introduction, I explain my methodology and the ethical procedures underlying the research (Section 2). I then proceed with a critical literature review of three themes to explicitly highlight existing gaps and hence draw the intersections between labour commodification and forced displacement: female invisibility in agriculture, labour commodification in agriculture, and forced displacement and commodification (Section 3). Section 4 delves into the effects of forced displacement on Syrian refugee-labour, drawing firstly on data pre-existing the war and secondly on empirical research. Section 5 unpacks Syrian female refugee-labour commodification in agricultural sites under the contracting system, referred to as the *shaweesh* system.⁴ The findings comprising Sections 4 and 5 are discussed in Section 6. Section 7 presents the conclusions.

2. Methodology

The article is based on ethnographic research conducted for my PhD in the Bekaa valley between May 2018 and September 2019, including participant observations and interviews. The findings are extracted from medium to large agricultural holdings, being one out of

three main types of sites where I participated in the daily work of labour teams—known as *wurash*⁵—which are predominantly female. These holdings are managed by one contractor (a *shaweesh*) or more (*shawaweesh*).⁶ I participated in a multitude of activities alongside the *wurash*, which included seeding, weeding, pruning, rolling cases into trellises, picking, sorting, and packing various crops such as potatoes (as shown in Figure 1), grapes, apples, green beans, and chilli pepper. Interviews were also conducted both separately and during participant observations in agricultural settings and with a range of actors, only a small segment of which are cited in this paper. These participant observations were either stretched throughout the work shift (or shifts), whereas others were either more punctual, focused, structured, or formal. The interviews served to ask more focused questions that I could not have answers to while attending agricultural labour shifts. Interviewed actors include Lebanese farmers, Syrian farmers, growers, landowners, domain owners, labour supervisors, agricultural engineers, activists, volunteers, lawyers, journalists, and official representatives. The variety of interviewees also allowed me to get different perspectives on the effects of Syrian forced displacement on the agricultural economy. The interviews conducted specifically with farmers, growers, and landowners, gave me more focused insights on matters such as the nature of the work, the type of labour arrangements, the type of relationships between workers and contractors and between the latter and landowners/employers, the gendered nature of agricultural work and labour arrangements, the types and levels of skills required for the work, and the challenges faced as a result of the Syrian war and displacement.

Whereas most of the fieldwork was conducted in Central Bekaa (the Zahle district) and stretched across different locations including Saadnayel, Taanayel, Taalabaya, Qab Elias, and Zahle, other areas were visited on a less regular basis including Marj, Jdita, Mekse, Dakwe, Tal Amara, Rayaq (all six located in Central Bekaa), Aana, and Ghazze (both located in West Bekaa). The choice of locations was reflective of the circular nature of the networks that connect various parts of the large valley. Many were the days when the day would start in one location and unexpectedly end in a different one.

Given the highly gendered labour relations on these sites, I was naturally and inevitably influenced to focus my observations and research inquiry on the gendered dynamics of refugee labour governance. Usually, each labour camp is managed by the same *shaweesh* employing the workers (although some exceptions exist). It regroups relatives, families, and workers originating from the same area in Syria or from neighbouring villages. Most of the workers on these medium to large holdings are female. They are either remunerated based on the number of work shifts/days or on a piecemeal basis. The male workforce in those settings is only limited to teenagers whose tasks differ from the females' (mostly lifting heavy weights), and younger boys under the age of 10. The latter are typically recruited at specific times or season peaks such as during the potato harvest season. The rest of the male community comprises labour contractors (*shawaweesh*) and supervisors—(*wukala*).⁷ In the smaller holdings, it was common for the landowner or sharecropper to be regularly present on-site whereas in the larger holdings, agricultural engineers and trainees visited occasionally to monitor the work performance.

My positioning as a woman (Abu-Lughod 1990) has allowed me a fast way into the space that female workers shared in the field, and namely, into discussions that would be considered taboo in the presence of men. It ignited proximity and a sense of shared womanhood and companionship. I do however recognize that my positioning as a 'Lebanese stranger' was at times uneasy to leverage especially given the loaded history between Syria and Lebanon and in a setting that was often highly conservative. Having a PhD scholarship from a UK-based institution, I could have also been perceived as a woman of 'white privilege'. However, spending significant time with the workers on-site performing strenuous work and explaining my sincere intent to give them a voice through my research and writing have helped build trust. Many workers were particularly reassured that I had



Figure 1. Female refugee-labourers in a potato field. Taken by author.

previously worked with a humanitarian organization that assists Syrian refugees⁸; I was not one of ‘those Lebanese who hate Syrians’, as one worker put it. Over time, I turned from someone who was often asked ‘why are you working here with us if you can be resting at home’ into ‘you are one of us’. Furthermore, being a young woman in a context that was predominantly male has somehow meant that I was perceived as less ‘threatening’. My gender identity hence facilitated my access to more restricted field locations, individuals, and workers. Having a ‘stranger around’ helped the female workers build a safe space of sharing without fear of judgement in a socio-cultural context where absence of privacy often meant censorship. Many female refugee-labourers considered me a *confidante* with/to whom they complained, gossiped, shared secrets, and asked for advice on personal life matters. Building that trust allowed me a deeper understanding of many issues regarding the refugee-labour condition.

I must note that the research upholding this paper has been granted ethical approval following an institutional review board. All transcription work and translations from Arabic to English are my own. In respect of the privacy and sensitivity of the subject matter

covered in this work, I have anonymized the participants who wished to be unnamed. There are, however, some people who wished to keep their real names. The pictures I include in this article were also captured in line with the ethical procedures followed throughout the research.

3. Invisibility and commodification in agriculture: a critical review

The employment of women in agriculture is neither a new phenomenon nor a simple consequence of war or forced displacement (e.g. Davis 1978; Saunders and Mehenna 1986; Duvvury 1989; Kinnaird and Momsen 2002; Raney et al. 2011; Tegegne 2012; Mukhamedova and Wegerich 2018). A general review of the literature on agricultural female labour demonstrates that the increasing feminization of Syrian agricultural wage labour in Lebanon is by no means exceptional to the case study. Before unpacking the effects of Syrian forced displacement on the female refugee workforce, I turn to two major interconnected themes that are common to most relevant literatures on female agricultural labour, and which are important to jointly bring into discussion. The first is the contradictory relationship between labour feminization and women's invisibility from the labour process and the second is commodification. On the one hand, the literature on invisibility has addressed both gender and labour as components but has made refugees less visible. On the other hand, the growing literature on commodification has considered refugees as targets yet without much emphasis on the commodification of female refugee labour in particular. By bringing these two sets of literature together, the aim is to enlarge the space for scholarly work on the commodification of in(visible) female refugees in agriculture.

3.1 Female invisibility in agriculture

Invisibility has occupied an important space in various literatures on female agricultural labour given the negative correlation between women's key role in agriculture and their undervalued positioning within it. This positioning generally feeds into discourses and portrayals of women as inferior or as victims of an oppressive patriarchal society, which are central to the work of feminist scholarship (e.g. Hijab 1988; Abu-Lughod 1990; Joseph 1996, 1993; Joseph and Slyomovics 2001; Mahmood 2001; Solati 2017). Most of the available material on female labour in agriculture confirms that, just like in domestic work (e.g. Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004; Jureidini 2009; Chidiac 2014; Dito 2015; Khalaf, AlShehabi, and Hanieh 2015.), women are regarded as 'the hidden ingredient' (Barrientos 1997), or as mere 'helpers' (Raghuram 2002) despite the vital role they play. Two main issues hinder their visibility in agriculture. The first is due to the structural nature of agricultural work being inherently familial, rural, and seasonal. The second is due to the capitalist transformations that affected the agricultural sector as a whole. Agricultural practices were thus established on the grounds of traditional socio-economic and cultural norms that consolidated patriarchal systems throughout time. A very rich body of ethnographic literature has specifically explored the relationship between traditional forms of association made to agricultural work and women's reproductive role, both being non-remunerated. As Gunewardena (2010: 386) explains for example, the stereotyping associated to women's unpaid work in agriculture reproduces their invisibility because their productive and reproductive roles as life-bearers are regarded as one. In her words, this interconnectedness between the 'spheres of social reproduction and production' creates a 'wider gendered production of power in the local social context'. Ample case studies furthermore show how the stereotyping associated with women's roles and functions more generally, and within agricultural labour economies specifically, has negatively affected even their very own perceptions towards their economic value. In their research in Western Samoa and Ethiopia, Fairbairn-Dunlop (2002) and Tegegne (2012) respectively argue that remuneration is a difficult choice for women in traditional contexts, where social conventions limit their role to

unpaid domestic shores, hence making them perceive their labour as ‘unproductive’. When remuneration is possible, women are habitually less paid than men even for the same type of work (Raney et al. 2011). Other studies like Saunders and Mehanna’s demonstrate that the ‘seasonality and occasional character’ of agricultural work reinforces women’s invisibility. As they argue in their exploration of women’s ‘unseen hands’ in an Egyptian village (1986: 106), cultivation work is viewed as ‘low prestige’ and, as such, contributes to a patriarchal and reductionist view of women’s ‘roles as wives and daughters’. This view feeds into a patriarchal discourse that constructs women ‘as physically weak’, ‘devalored as unskilled, unproductive, and secondary’, and as incapable to ‘protect themselves from the dangers inherent’ in field work, (Gunewardena 2010: 386). Invisibility also translates in the segregation of agricultural work whereby male labour is mostly reserved to ‘middle- and higher-level administrative roles and in the lower echelon of field administration’ (Gunewardena 2010). Accordingly, tasks such as driving trucks and tractors, operating machines, spraying fertilizers, and supervising labour are always reserved to men (Gunewardena 2010). The gendered segregation of tasks, which translates into unequal compensation and treatment, has been associated to a lack of decision-making power in women’s work, which consequently contributes to what Thérroux-Séguin (2016: 214) terms the ‘normalisation of hardship and gender stereotypes’. Such practices and stereotyping have ultimately resulted in devaluing agriculture both as a job and as a sector. As I demonstrate in the following section, the prioritization of non-productive sectors in favour of capital accumulation has in fact been a key driver for the ‘migrantisation’ and hence the commodification of agriculture. Female commodification in agriculture is specifically worth examining given the effects of neoliberal transformations on reinforcing women’s invisible labour in an invisible sector.

3.2 Labour commodification in agriculture

Whilst women’s invisibility from the agricultural labour process has a lot to do with traditional views and stereotypes regarding their (re)productive role, this explanation fails to account for the significant implications of capitalist and neoliberal policies on all sectors and the agricultural sector more specifically. A growing and diverse body of migration literatures is in fact drawing attention to the relationship between commodification and the neoliberal nature of labour markets (Anderson and Ruhs 2010; Anderson 2013; Ferguson and McNally 2015; Khalaf, AlShehabi, and Hanieh 2015; Hanieh 2019; Walia 2021; Sadiq and Tsourapas 2024). More specifically, there is extensive ethnographic literature uncovering the correlation between agricultural labour commodification and neoliberalism, with relevant work on gendered dynamics (Breman 1996; Basok 2002; Mosse et al. 2002; Breman 2003; Binford 2004; Lee 2010; Holmes 2013; Shah 2016; Cavanna 2018; Shah and Lerche 2020).⁹ As Sachs and Alston (2010: 280) explain, corporatization has given way for the segmentation of workers on the grounds of gender, marital status, ethnicity, and citizenship while allowing producers ‘flexibility in production practices’. Low wages thus increase women’s dependence on men, putting them at a disadvantage since their ‘(often invisible) labor’ is co-opted by the increasing corporatisation of agriculture’ (Sachs and Alston 2010: 279). Corporate capitalism has led to misrepresentations of women as dependent and undervalued based on the view that income is the ‘sole source of autonomy and empowerment’ (Gunewardena 2010: 392). Nevertheless, kerbing women’s value to income ‘obviates an understanding of cultural sources’ and reinforces labour commodification and, by default, profit (Gunewardena 2010). Consequently, the weakening of women’s contributions and decision-making power leads to a ‘spillover effect in the domestic arena’, where their financial contributions are already severely undermined (Gunewardena 2010). As I later show, an analogous analysis can be made of Syrian female refugee-labour.

Although a more thorough discussion of contracting systems remains outside the scope of this article, it is important to briefly highlight the relationship between contracting

systems and labour commodification. Reporting of the reliance on labour contractors in the agricultural economy goes back to as early as the nineteenth century (Barrientos 2013). However, their indispensability is relegated to the neoliberal restructuring that started in the 1980s (Brass 2004). Most literatures on agricultural labour commodification and migrant labour scholarships address the role of labour contractors or recruiters as a by-product of postcolonial societies that were built on ‘new forms of inequality’ (James 2011: 327). Agricultural labour contractors play a vital role in navigating and coercing cheap, casual, and vulnerable labour without involving employers or farmers (Brass 2004: 315–16) while ensuring the highest degree of flexibility and adjustment to market and seasonal fluctuations (Nye 2020).¹⁰ At the same time, companies use brokers while taking advantage of workers’ precarity to evade any regulations they are *a priori* forced to implement to ensure rights protections (Palumbo 2016). Various tactics or instruments of labour coercion are used by contractors to contain their workforce and these include delaying payments, longer working hours, and absence of paid or sick leaves, all of which drive workers into self-exploitation (Mosse et al. 2002: 75; Binford 2004: 130). Nye (2020: 224), for example, reports that the ‘typical seasonal worker’ might work involuntarily due to lack of alternatives since ‘casual workers in agriculture and horticulture’ are still integrated in ‘the secondary labour market’. The major problem in these practices is in the very system that allows contractors (and employers and farmers by default) to become abusive (Bremen 2003). Brokers effectively mirror the institutionalized commodification that occurs at the level of big corporations and organizations.¹¹

3.3 Forced displacement and commodification

Whereas the link between commodification, agricultural work, and gender has been the subject of countless literatures, less attention was dedicated to the relationship between forced displacement and commodification, and female commodification more precisely. A few important contributions on commodification have recently emerged in the literature on migration and refugee studies (e.g. Freier, Micinski, and Tsourapas 2021; Irgil and Norman 2024; Sadiq and Tsourapas 2024). They clearly highlight how the policies and tactics currently deployed by host states (mostly located in the Global South) make instrumental use of refugees for ‘material and non-material payoffs’ (Freier, Micinski, and Tsourapas 2021: 2748; Irgil and Norman 2024: 2). A more thought-provoking take on this issue reveals how these tactics and policies are essentially a reproduction of Western colonial legacies that endure to date (Sadiq and Tsourapas 2024). However, whilst these analyses are necessary to shift mainstream narratives around forced displacement from being resource-depleting to resourceful, the target of these payoffs (refugee subjects) remains invisible from the discussion. Furthermore, a gendered discussion of refugee labour commodification is missing, although essential.

The relationship between forced displacement and female commodification is very apparent especially in devalued sectors like agriculture. For example, studies done by Palumbo (2016) and Sciarba (Palumbo and Sciarba 2015, 2018) in Italy’s agriculture—where a large majority of agricultural workers are female Sub-Saharan refugees and asylum seekers—have exposed how exclusive migration/refugee policies intersect with labour commodification, leading to the exploitation of ‘an-already vulnerable group’ in an already vulnerable sector. Although the literature that draws on the link between agricultural labour commodification and forced displacement has significantly grown in recent years with rich empirical studies on Syrian labour in particular (e.g. Kavak 2016; Akay Erturk 2016; Pelek 2019; Karatepe, Toren, and Yilmaz 2019; Yalçın and Yalçın 2019; Osseiran 2020; Turkmani and Hamadé 2020; Cassani 2021; Sajadian 2021; 2024), a few of them specifically address the gendered dynamics of refugee-labour commodification. The empirical findings I present in the following pages (Sections 4.2 and 5) aim to address some of these gaps.

4. Syrian female labour in Lebanon and the impact of forced displacement

Numerical data on seasonal Syrian migration to Lebanon and on female migration precisely is limited. However, a 2002 ESCWA report titled *Women and Men in the Syrian Arab Republic* (ESCWA 2001: 67) offered a good sense of the labour dynamics in Syria between 1970 and 1995. Rural areas employed a higher percentage of women when compared to urban areas, which is in large part explained by lower education levels. Furthermore, it was found that rural women reached their peak of economic activity between the ages of fifteen and nineteen, which is explained by higher early marriage rates. Additionally, unemployment rate during that period was higher in urban than in rural areas, which was associated to female activity in the agricultural sector (ESCWA 2001: 71). Women's participation in agricultural activities was much higher than men's, reaching 60 percent of active women in 1995 (ESCWA 2001: 95). However, there was a noticeable gender pay gap within the active population and specifically within the agricultural sector, where '75.1% of women in agriculture were unpaid family workers compared to 32.5% of men' (ESCWA 2001: 75).

Another ILO report (2018: 37) confirmed an excess of labour supply in Lebanon after the influx of refugees. Agricultural activities (24 percent) constituted most of the employment for Syrian refugees, followed by construction (12 percent) (ILO 2014: 25). Although these numbers are neither fully accurate nor representative, they provide a good indication regarding the importance of agriculture in labour recruitment activities for Syrian refugees. Based on the report survey, the percentage of female workers in agriculture reached 70 percent in 2014, while men took on occupations mainly in construction, services, and industry. Those 70 percent of Syrian female workers were almost equally divided between Bekaa (36 percent) and Akkar (34 percent). Findings also show a correlation between gender and type of occupation as women 'are expected to work in agricultural activities, mainly because they work as groups,' which is perceived as 'a secured way of work for relatives' (Abdelali-Martini, Ibrahim, and Dhehibi 2016: 7).

Whilst these reports help us draw a picture of the labour market dynamics and gender distribution in Lebanon and Syria respectively, there is less numerical data available on Syrian female's seasonal labour participation in Lebanon. One report (ESCWA 2001: 21) nevertheless indicates that despite the high concentration of seasonal work in the agricultural sector where women are indeed the most active, outmigration abroad was most common for men than for women. Many of my informants confirmed this trend, observing a sharp increase in female labour participation after Syrian displacement. According to investigative journalist Saada Allaw, who is a Bekaa local: 'before displacement, younger women did not work in the fields. Women who worked as seasonal workers mostly comprised older women and some teenagers who had completed compulsory schooling.' Providing more detailed evidence on women's role in agriculture in the pre-conflict period, Abdelali-Martini and Dey de Pryck's study on Northwest Syria (2015) demonstrates that most of the seasonal wage labour came from 'poor farming and landless households', the female among them 'with little or no education.' The land reforms implemented by the Syrian state in the decades preceding 2011, and which had already uprooted many Syrians from their villages (Hamadé 2010), are said to have diminished the social stigma associated to working women even in better-off families due to the rising need for money (Abdelali-Martini and Dey de Pryck 2015). However, a particular characteristic of Syrian displacement in Lebanon is that a significant number of female refugees who joined the agricultural working force either migrated from areas that were not exporters of seasonal workers (Abdelali-Martini, Ibrahim, and Dhehibi 2016) or had never been agricultural labourers. The emergence of female heads of households among Syrian refugees has actually compelled many women to 'reluctantly take on jobs in the agriculture sector' (Turkmani and

Hamadé 2020: 4). Given the majority of the labour teams comprised young workers, most of them were inexperienced.

4.1 Diversification of the labour workforce as an effect of forced displacement

Whilst specific data tracing the patterns of female labour participation post-displacement remains limited and difficult to collect given the variance between one context and another, one of the noticeable changes I observed was the diversification of the labour workforce composition. To explain this diversification, I borrow from the agricultural labour profiling made by Abdelali-Martini and Dey de Pryck (2015) in Syria, which covers up until the period of displacement. They observe that labour groups in the early 2000s mainly consisted of ‘young unmarried women aged 15–20 years old, and a few married women, widows, and divorcées’ (2015: 904). Even though this profiling remains to a certain extent relevant, I identified two main categories of female refugee-labourers on the sites under study. The first group corresponds to once-seasonal female workers. While some of them migrated to Lebanon to accompany their husbands and work seasonally on a part-time basis, others were full-time seasonal waged workers. As most of them are now elderly, they only constituted a minority of the workforce. The second group consists of female workers who never worked in Lebanon before 2011 and were forced to join the agricultural labour force to help their families make small ends meet. I split this group into three sub-categories. The first includes women who worked as unpaid family labour on male-owned lands in Syria; some of them either never seasonally migrated to Lebanon whereas others did so in the company of relatives or a related *shaweesh*. The second group includes university/school students or graduates who had never engaged in agricultural work, either because they did not originate from or live in agriculturally-productive areas, or simply because they were full-time students. The third category comprises young girls (and boys) who were not yet teenagers at the time of fieldwork and as such were mostly either born in Lebanon—as refugees—or in Syria right before the war began. This new labour configuration indicates how displacement has forced new categories of women into joining the workforce to meet subsistence needs. The findings I present below confirm this analysis.

4.2 Feminizing male labour as an effect of forced displacement

I previously mentioned that the feminization of agriculture was a by-product of neoliberal transformations that more generally contributed to the devaluation of productive sectors. However, fieldwork conducted in large labour-intensive agricultural holdings has revealed that forced displacement has also directly contributed to male labour shortage, which led to the feminization of male agricultural tasks. This transformation is key to unpack the intersections between commodification and female refugees’ invisibility from the labour process. To this end, I highlight three main factors driving the shortage in male agricultural labour. I examine these factors concomitantly with a gendered analysis of women refugees’ (in)visibility, drawing on what Toth (2005: 72) described a contradiction between ‘patriarchal stereotypes of gender differences on the one hand and actual gender interchangeability on the other’. The first factor that explains male labour shortage in agriculture is the direct implications of forced displacement including outmigration, military service, and death or disappearance in the conflict. The second factor is the replaceability of the male workforce with cheaper female refugee-labourers to perform tasks that were not initially reserved to them, ultimately a synonym for female wage devaluation. The third factor is the cultural and gender-based stereotyping associated to agricultural wage labour that were analysed in previous parts of this article, and which I argue were reproduced or consolidated by displacement.¹²

Since the war in Syria started, contractors and landowning farmers have been increasingly relying on women including in the execution of tasks that were reserved to men.

Active male participation had been reserved to what is considered skilled agricultural work (rather than *shaweesh*-contracted work) or to the management of small privately-owned lands (Abdelali-Martini and Dey de Pryck 2015: 4). As one of the landowners I met explained, the tasks that are usually reserved to men either include hard tasks like ploughing or shovelling or ones that assumedly require more skill such as trimming and grafting. As I observed on large labour-contracted sites, male participation alongside female labour workers was limited to menial work. It was mostly performed by young boys and teenagers who would eventually find their way out when they become older. While some of these male workers were also involved in cropping, sorting, and packing, the tasks that were more generally performed by men included lifting and packing heavy weights. As for the tasks that are regarded as exclusively male such as driving trucks or fixing machinery, they have not been feminized. Although women were increasingly performing some of the tasks that were traditionally allocated to men, they were subjected to unjustified pay-cuts due to being treated as cheaper commodities (See Figures 2 and 3). In fact, female workers constantly complained to me about the excessively demanding nature of the work especially since more was expected from them as male-substitute commodities. As one worker bluntly shared:

We have less work this year so recruiters can save more money. They increase their productivity due to the excess of farmworkers resulting from the refugee influx. Instead of hiring let us say ten female workers per day, they can hire twenty workers to do the work faster. 6,000 LBP¹³ per shift is nothing. This is good for the employer but not for the farmworker.

From my observations, there was not much distinction in the assignment and intensity of the work among young and old female labourers. For example, many women found shovelling to be one of the hardest among male tasks. To trigger a conversation about this issue, I asked one of them if this physically-challenging work was reserved to men before the war. She replied:

Yes, it was. But now it is for both men and women due to the situation we are in. We have to do it, it is obligatory. May God help us my dear.

I found a revealing contradiction in this dynamic of ‘labour interchangeability’ (Toth 2005), which exposes the commodification of women’s labour contribution even while performing work that was normally ‘valued’ for being male-assigned. A discussion I had with Nabil, a Lebanese labour manager in one of the large holdings, pertinently unveils this prevalent contradiction between ‘patriarchal stereotypes of gender differences’ and ‘gender interchangeability’ in this context:

We usually employ *banāt*.¹⁴ Let us say we want one hundred of them on a given day. If the *shaweesh* brings fifty *bīnt* and fifty males, we would pay the male as much as the *bīnt* because we had initially asked for females and so the *shaweesh* is responsible for *what* he is recruiting. The daily cost of a male worker is about 28,000 LBP¹⁵ per day so if I recruit a *bīnt*, it saves me 10,000 LBP¹⁶ per worker. But if I have a male worker, I will ask him to do the work rather than send him back even if he will be less paid. We do not ask for male workers for soft weeding. If men are recruited, they receive the same pay as the *banāt*. As for harder tasks such as lifting wheat bags, we insist on having male workers.

To further tease out the gendered dynamics and labour arrangements that Nabil explained, I purposefully asked him why he thinks women are paid less than male workers for the same work performed. His automatic answer was: ‘it is the nature of the *wurash*’.



Figure 2. Women harvesting and sorting potatoes. Taken by author.



Figure 3. Women sorting and packing chilli pepper. Taken by author.

He then followed it with stereotypical statements regarding women not being as physically strong as men. 'A male worker can do anything whereas a female cannot drive a truck, she cannot fix an engine, she cannot build a grape trellis', he added. The experience of Adnan, one of the truck drivers who works in the same domain strikingly disputes Nabil's view. One day, two domain employees and myself volunteered to collect and pack the huge piles of potatoes left behind the workers after a clash between their *shaweesh* and the domain managers made them immediately evacuate the site. Towards the end of the shift, Adnan paused tirelessly and said: 'My work is much easier and less demanding than the work of these women!'

5. The *shaweesh* system as an instrument of female refugee-labour commodification

Whilst Syrian agricultural workers have historically relied on contractors to facilitate their movement from their villages in Syria and their work during the season, the situation of forced displacement was a turning point. Female refugee-labourers became exposed to new forms of control and commodification under the *shaweesh* system. To demonstrate these changes, I first discuss the implications of the *shaweesh*'s intersecting services as labour and shelter provider. I then examine marriage, menstruation and love (or intimacy) as three arenas where control over women's productive and reproductive bodies intersect.

5.1 Labour and shelter as commodities

We did not work like this in the past. We are now tied to a *shaweesh* and so we are not free to work whenever we want. In my hometown Deir Ezzor, we grew cotton on the shores of the Euphrates. We did not work for anyone. We rented a land and cultivated it at our own expense. We were free to choose when to work and for how long.

As this testimony by an elderly woman from Deir Ezzor reveals, forced displacement has compelled the workforce to be more dependent on their *shaweesh*. Working for the *shaweesh* was, in most cases I encountered, a precondition to guaranteeing a shelter in the camp he manages. The intersectionality between access to labour and shelter hence became a defining feature of the *shaweesh* system, and a main factor of female refugee-labour commodification. This coercion strategy undeniably leads to the double normalization of forced labour and displacement as women have had to forcefully comply to their contractor's conditions. Even though contractors had been facilitating labour arrangements for several decades prior, workers were not as strictly tied to the *shaweesh*'s complementary services. There was a felt sense of dignity associated with seasonal work among pre-seasonal female workers and especially among those who worked on their family farms. However, forced displacement has changed the situation. The story of Maha, a twenty-year old woman from Al-Hasakah in the North-eastern part of Syria, is one of extreme cases. Maha fled with her two younger brothers. Having reached conscription age, her other brothers could not risk being stopped at checkpoints so they hid at home and fully relied on family remittances.

I arrived to the camp with my brothers in the middle of the night after crossing the border illegally. It took us about 6 hours to cross the mountains from Syria to Lebanon. Around 5 am the next morning, I woke up to work.

Longer working hours had become the norm even among elderly workers like Um Abdallah. Owing to her seniority and experience in agriculture, Um Abdallah was one of the most dependable workers in her *warsha*. She was a vital source for her *shaweesh* especially since her five children also served as workers. On a hot summer morning, she was

looking tired and unusually silent. I knew she had diabetes that got amplified due to the harsh work conditions, but I asked her if anything else was going on.

Yesterday was one of the longest and most tiring days. I thought I will go home to rest in-between shifts and prepare something to eat. I usually boil an egg and have some tea with it as I am always tight on time and have nothing else to eat at home. We started the first shift at 6 am thinking we will have a short break at noon. We got back home at 8 pm.

This scenario was a recurrent one especially during season peaks. I particularly recall one of those days when a single shift turned into a triple one without notice. Having initially planned for the afternoon shift to end around 4 pm, the female workers and I continued picking green beans until 7:30 pm. Throughout the day, the workers rationed on no more than a few sips of water from a gallon they shared and circulated. No one carried the usual snacks (that typically included bread and tomatoes) given the extension of the work shift was neither foreseen nor planned. As the habit has it within this *warsha*, the eldest of the workers would be equipped with a big jug of home-brewed sugar-heaped tea to help the workers refuel their tanks and survive the heat. However, there was no tea that day. Yet as every day, the workers were hunched forward for hours on end. Due to the intense workload required to meet the needs of the season, a break meant standing straight for just a moment before returning to the usual bending or kneeling positions. By the late afternoon, the valley's breeze had pleasantly changed everyone's moods and energy levels, signalling the near end of the day's last shift.

Even for the younger women who could have deployed their skills and education degrees in other sectors, they were forced to work in agriculture because they needed cheap accommodation that was only accessible in refugee-labour camps managed by a *shaweesh*. According to a big *shaweesh* who has been working in Lebanon since the 1980s, many refugee women who joined the workforce and who became primary breadwinners overnight had never worked in agriculture before.

The workforce who used to seasonally migrate to Lebanon in the past were those who were in need. The main source of labour came from Raqqa. People who worked and studied in Syria were not seasonal wage-workers. I now have many girls here who are educated but who were forced to work due to the situation. Some of them are working in garlic and onion storage rooms.¹⁷

As a worker named Salma accounted, the sewing lessons she took in Syria after school would have potentially made her more money. However, she was tied to the *shaweesh* who had facilitated her family's movement to Lebanon; 'I would have had to afford a place outside the camp', she said. Before the war, Salma had what she described a normal life. She was engaged to a man she loved and who died in the military during the war, and her family owned a land and a few cows from which they produced and sold dairy products.

I was not used to doing anything except studying. Now the situation has completely flipped. My parents are old so I work to pay rent and food. I am unhappy here and I do not wish to stay in the camp. Everything is hard for me; work is hard and life in the camp is exceedingly difficult. The water is smelly and polluted. I used to live near the Euphrates in Deir Ezzor. We were surrounded by bamboos.

Another worker named Mona also fled Syria when she was a first-year university student. She was working as a teacher, which was a requirement to complete her Education degree. She said she had ambitious career plans that were turned down by the war in Syria.

Criticizing the Lebanese government's policies that restrict Syrian refugees from working in most sectors including education, Mona had no other option but to work in agriculture.

It is true that we are living but we are not alive. I am obliged to work here in the fields to have accommodation in the camp.

5.2 Forbidden seasons, forbidden cycles, forbidden love: the (re)production of refugee female commodification

'Marriage in summer is usually avoided', labour contractors repeated. Although the banning of marriage during high seasons was not practiced across all sites and contexts, it was a common tactic to prevent labour shortage. Yet, as one of the workers explained: 'it depends on the person's conditions since some women have to keep working even after getting married'. 'But at least when we are married we are tied to our husbands and we can have a choice', she added. As this woman highlighted, not all refugees are placed at the same rank. Whilst some found an easy escape in marriage, others have seen their hardship further grow. As an example, a pregnant woman in one of the *wurash* I was accompanying kept working until her ninth month of pregnancy—'she was even shovelling!' her friend exclaimed. Conversely, the wives of labour contractors are exempt from working because it is perceived to be socially degrading. Maha, the woman I mentioned earlier, is a good representation of this staggering paradox. After I learned that she lives in the same camp as her sister, it came out naturally to ask her if they were also part of the same *warsha*. 'No, she is one of the *shaweesh*'s wives! He would not let her work', she said brusquely. In this case, agricultural labour is regarded as degrading rather than empowering whilst the home-place is paradoxically seen as a mark of status, at times ironically consolidated through polygamy. However, the reality on the ground challenges simplistic or dichotomic hierarchizations.

Female labour does not stop in the fields. After working double-shifts, women have childcare responsibilities and household obligations in addition to their wife duties. Although many workers remained very reserved about their intimacy and the expectations had of them as wives, discussions took place on a few occasions. One woman was particularly vocal about the difficulties she faced to keep up with her 'duties' both as waged worker and wife. 'We are expected to work all day, earn a living, return home, clean our houses, cook for our families, and then have sex with our husbands! It is too much!' she bluntly protested while her teammates rejoiced in laughter. 'By escaping one roof [the *shaweesh*'s patriarchal authority], you end up falling under another!' I reacted in an atmosphere of laughter. 'A woman's life is hard', a worker responded, 'from the moment she is born, she constantly works and does not have any time off. She is constantly on duty'.

A similar discussion about female labour hardship unexpectedly turned into a conversation about menstruation on a calm afternoon spent weeding and soft-shovelling with a group of young female workers. A worker named Yusra surprised us with her expression of disbelief that 'Lebanese women menstruate'. I asked her why she thought Lebanese nationality would exempt women from this life-giving force. 'They tell us that Lebanese women do not get it on a monthly basis', she said. Amused by our conversation, other workers invited themselves into the debate. Given the welcoming atmosphere, I asked about the work experience during the menstrual cycle. Having had a glimpse of it as a woman, I knew that accessing any facilities was impossible. 'It is like death', Yusra hastily answered without any hesitation. 'We sometimes go far away in the fields and would normally use tissue-paper when we are not equipped'; she then added, 'unlike us single ladies, married women say they need to go home whereas we continue working as normal'. I was then reminded to inquire about one of Yusra's teammates who had passed out in the vineyards a few days earlier. Yusra immediately downplayed the situation: 'it was nothing, she

was just on her period but she could not go home and rest'. The month of Ramadan however offered a good exception: 'it is good we have a monthly excuse to drink water while working!' She confessed laughingly.

Using femaleness as a strategy of work evasion went beyond specific times in the cycle. Yusra's friend gave an example of how this tactic works:

The *shaweesh* does not allow us to urinate in facilities so we have to walk away from the site, usually somewhere that is mountain-facing. Since we do not feel safe going there alone, we walk in pairs. It is an opportunity to chat and have fun [she giggled].

Such evasion tactics unveil the suffering of most women. For instance, Hanan, Um Abdallah's daughter, suffered from anaemia caused by irregular periods: 'she bleeds heavily on a biweekly basis and does not skip a work shift to save every penny'. I later found out Hanan had a kidney stone that needed removal. She had done free tests in Syria but left all the paperwork there when she fled and could not continue treatment in Lebanon. Two weeks after learning about her condition, she was still working double shifts despite painful days and sleepless nights. As Um Abdallah disclosed, her daughter's strength and outspokenness shielded vulnerability and suffering. Nadwa, a nineteen-year-old friend of Hanan, is another good illustration of that suffering. Taking advantage of the paralyzing heat that saved her team from the usual smothering supervision and shouting of contractors, she expressed her resentment towards her *shaweesh* before shyly asking where she can find a *kūfiyyah*.¹⁸ I sensed there was more behind her question so I encouraged the chat. Nadwa had developed a relationship of trust with me that made her feel safe and unjudged to open up. She paused and cautiously looked around her to verify no one was listening before making her declaration:

I am in love with a man called Yusuf. We used to work in the same *warsha* but I have not seen him for six months because the *shaweesh* found out we were in love and told my father. He separated us.

Nadwa and Yusuf met in the fields, which is the only social arena where female workers can encounter new faces outside the refugee-labour camps, if of any luck. Nadwa's father and the *shaweesh*'s family were opposed to her alliance with a 'stranger'—someone who is not a cousin. 'The *shaweesh* is my father's partner in crime', she said. Despite her wish to avoid working with this *warsha*, Nadwa wanted to keep an eye on her younger siblings who also work there. The single trace Nadwa had of Yusuf was a piece of paper marking his phone number. I offered her to secretly call him from my phone but she said she left the paper in a safe place at home. Her hopeless rebellion against her community's masculine values was noticeably a source of pain, struggle, and rage. The only soothing thought that gave her eyes a glow was reuniting with Yusuf and offering him the *kūfiyyah*.

6. Discussion

My empirical findings confirm that the commodification of women's productive and reproductive bodies is situated at the blurred intersection¹⁹ between the private/domestic sphere and the work/labour sphere. It is enacted through the devaluation, control, abuse, and manipulation of their productive and reproductive needs. In Section 4, I showed how despite performing physically strenuous work, women's feminine bodies are treated as cheaper and weaker commodities based on a reproduction of 'patriarchal stereotypes of gender differences' (borrowing Toth's terms again), and despite the 'interchangeability' that forced displacement imposed. Women are essentially deemed unfit to do the work typically assigned to men as it is perceived to be 'too manly'; however, men would not do the

labour-intensive work typically assigned to women as it is ‘too feminine’ and thereof degrading.²⁰ This paradox represents the vicious circle of segregation and abuse characterizing labour-intensive work, which was analysed in previous parts of the article. Confirming such contradictions between gender-based stereotyping and interchangeability more generally, an ILO study (2018: 13) conducted in Akkar in Northern Lebanon indeed demonstrates that even though women engage in activities that often necessitate ‘particular patience and precision, such as sowing, weeding, and harvesting’, they are generally less paid than men and suffer from poorer living conditions. The reasons hindering women from evolving within agricultural value chains are indeed due to these ‘cultural barriers and societal perceptions’ that contribute to their status (ILO 2018). In practice, refugee labour feminization has become synonym for commodification and gender-based devaluation of skill and wage.

As detailed in Section 5, the containment of workers’ bodies and the construction of helplessness associated to their conditions lead to a ‘spillover effect in the domestic arena’ (Gunewardena 2010: 372). Controlling women’s reproductive cycles represents a re-enactment of paternalistic relationships through the *shaweesh* system. By forbidding their workers to marry during high seasons, contractors effectively become in full control over women’s bodies as productive and reproductive labour. Control goes as far as manipulating the workers’ choice of marriage partners, as the story of Nadwa reveals. This commodification strategy partly explains why many women perceive marriage as the ultimate escape from their entrapment in-between forced labour and forced displacement. Nevertheless, the crafted hierarchization of labour power based on ‘status’ positions female workers—perceived as second-class women—at a lower rank than the *shaweesh*’s wife or wives (as was common to witness). Since inter-familial marriages are considered to be the most guaranteed way to preserve the family’s *sharaf* (honour), they consequently lock women in the interspace between labour sites (the work arena) and refugee camps (the domestic arena), making them invisible to any decision-making process involving their own lives, relationships, and bodies. Confirming Joseph and Slyomovics’ analysis (2001: 10), honour in this context also serves as a ‘means of controlling’ the workers’ behaviour. It reinforces patriarchal power by ‘circumscribing’ their sexuality, ‘movement in social arenas, and, to some degree, economic opportunities.’ Whereas Nadwa daringly yet failingly resisted that power, most of her teammates expressed reluctance of resistance.

On the flipside, the soft power tactics refugee women use in the social context of the worksite unveil, as well expressed in Gunewardena’s words (2010: 389), ‘the insidious ways in which the discursive construction of gender-role expectations work and are strategically manipulated by some women.’ In this context, ‘the verbalization of helplessness’ serves as an ‘instrumental tactic’ that is aligned with the ‘powerlessness’ women are expected to display in fields that have become a ‘site for privileging male social and physical power’ (Gunewardena 2010). As recounted, femaleness is used strategically to evade work. Menstruation during the month of Ramadan is seen as an opportunity for women to break their fast on the worksite. Sarcastic parroting of the *shaweesh* is another peculiar way through which workers coped with everyday hardship. It was enough for someone to repeat ‘*Yalla ya banāt!*’,²¹ one of the *shaweesh*’s most used sentences, for the entire *warsha* to burst into laughter. ‘If we do not hear it, we feel as if something is missing! We are unhappy!’ Najah mockingly said, prompting her friends’ frantic laughter. ‘We even wake up to it’, her friend Batul added. As they described, the *warsha* had become so immune to the screaming of the *shaweesh* and supervisors that they could not hear it anymore. ‘You have to find a way to enjoy yourself’, Um Jamil said. To lift up the mood on the worksite, smartphone carriers intermittently played music that initiated singalongs in *crescendo*. Such moments of laughter froze time for the workers, softening their difficult labour conditions while implicitly belittling the contractor’s authority.

These refugee women would not have accepted such conditions had they not been forced to join the labour camp for reasons including displacement-induced family separation and the interrelated needs for protection, shelter, and access to work in an accessible sector. Some believed work gives them *sūtra*, a term referring to a cover or shield in Arabic. *Sūtra*—or ‘*sotra*’ as Taha (2020: 3) spells it in the context of her research on Syrian refugee women’s marriage in Egypt—is essentially a means for women to reclaim intimidation and protection at once. In this case, it also acts as a means to reclaim ownership over their labour power. Hence, the choice of marriage too, even with an unchosen or undesired partner, can be considered a strategic act of ‘deployment of traditional gendered identities’, as Taha puts it (2020: 19). Validating her analysis, marriage for many of these refugee-labourers is a well calculated act that offers, for the least, an alternative gateway from the labour site. As I interpreted it, it is a way to overcome some of the gendered labour hierarchies and the commodification of women’s productive and reproductive systems. Even for those who had to continue working after getting married, they still found in marriage a gateway to embrace and strategically use their reproductive systems whether through pregnancy, menstruation, or the very status they have as ‘married’.

While the field is the only place of interaction workers have with the outside world, socializing remains in most cases limited to their tribe or family lineage. As one worker light-heartedly put it while we debated men and marriage: ‘there are just a few single men left in our camp and we do not go out anywhere to be able to meet other men. It looks like it will take us long’. Finding *sūtra* can hence also be seen through the same lens, as women seek protection by working together as a community. Despite the hardship they experience and that are amplified through the very nature of the *shaweesh* system, work offers them the ability to meet some of their needs especially when they lack the alternative means of evasion that only a minority of workers have. Work can therefore become a strategic choice informed by various contextual, socio-cultural, and economic factors. Therefore, all these different tactics are essentially enacted at the intersection between women’s productive and reproductive roles and, hence, they serve a dual purpose: improving women’s livelihood conditions that were tremendously impacted by forced displacement, and seeking communal protection away from their lost home.

Contractors do not see themselves as responsible for the conditions of these female workers. Rather, they consider it a predicament resulting from forced displacement and, as such, regard themselves as helpers or saviours. Others blame the situation on men’s ‘laziness’, reliance on humanitarian, abusive male behaviour, or habits—such as smoking *shisha* in the refugee camp. Several informants made such stereotypical statements. Adnan, a Syrian farmer from Aleppo, insisted on explaining to me the underlying socio-cultural factors justifying this stigmatization. Reinforcing an urban-rural segmentation in his stereotyping, Adnan proudly referred to his city Aleppo, where ‘most women marry after completing their university degree at age twenty-one’. He spoke of his sister who got married at that age and was still encouraged by her husband to pursue her studies. Adnan’s version challenges in some ways the initial argument I highlighted regarding the effects of displacement on the diversification of the labour force. His explanation fails to account for various factors including but not limited to the systemic devaluation and commodification of female workers in agriculture, the direct implications of the war in Syria, and the hostile policies towards Syrian refugees in Lebanon (Kikano, Fauveaud, and Lizarralde 2021; Nassar 2023).²² Adnan’s testimony is, however, still important as it is indicative of the existence of different versions and narratives to explain the underpinning gendered labour dynamics as well as the effects of displacement on these dynamics. It also translates differences across labour sites, place of origin, socio-economic background, race, and class, all of which visibly manifest, intersect, and transcend the rural/urban dichotomy. Therefore, a key takeaway from this discussion is that there is more into labour recruitment systems

than the exploitative nature of contracted labour. Certainly though, women's hardships have been further intensified and normalized due to their forced displacement.

As I have attempted to demonstrate in this article more generally, while more women have had to join the workforce to provide for their displaced families, their positioning as 'refugees' has reinforced their commodification. Refugee women's contribution in agriculture manifests in the reproduction of gender-based stereotypes and contradictions. These contradictions are revealed even in the way in which they normalize their commodification, considered a *fait accompli* on the one hand, and a condition to be resisted and renegotiated on the other hand. Salma's words resonate to this end:

Work helps me forget household problems. I escape [the refugee labour camp] to get some fresh air. At the same time, if we do not go to work every day, we are punished.

As experienced through the mundane conversations that took place during shifts, labour sites transform into spaces of sociality where workers can reimagine their hardship with a pinch of salt and light humour. It is a way to cope with the humiliation and exploitation they experience as well as with their shared identity as forcefully displaced women. In this light, I vividly recall the words of an elderly worker, Um Jamil: 'we take everything with laughter'. In a way, the fields turn into social spaces where workers are allowed to reimagine the sense of community they lost to the war, and to restore some form of normalcy that transcends their experiences as forced refugee-labour. Workplaces, as such, become fields to harvest non-capitalist relationships such as friendship and leisure (Brook 2009). Besides, there is certainly something magically soothing about the valley's fields that offered these displaced women—and even myself—some stillness and quietude away from the everyday hustle and bustle.

7. Conclusion

This paper has shown how Syrian forced displacement has contributed to the commodification of an already-vulnerable group of people in an already-exploitative sector. By bringing forward the relationship between forced displacement and female labour commodification, it demonstrated how the systemic exploitation of female labour in agriculture was intensified as a result of the workforce's dual positioning as *female* and as *refugee* since 2011. Whilst the agricultural sector had already become highly feminized in previous decades, labour dynamics within it remain gendered. A review of some of the main literature on female invisibility and commodification in agriculture has exposed how despite their indispensability in the sector, women's labour is undervalued through the 'normalisation of hardship and gender stereotypes' (Théroux-Séguin 2016: 214). The case study has specifically highlighted how this normalization was accentuated by the situation of Syrian forced displacement, which remains an under-represented issue in the literature. Empirical findings have clearly exposed how the expanding roles and powers of labour contractors have increased female refugee-labour hardship. Various tactics and instruments of labour coercion are deployed to contain and commodify the workforce. These tactics affect refugee women's decision-making power in both the work sphere and the domestic sphere, which reinforces their invisibility as cheap labour and docile refugees. The paper has presented three intersecting arenas where control over the female refugee-labour force is enacted: marriage, menstruation, and love (intimate relationships). The anecdotal analysis of those themes confirms that control over women's productive and reproductive bodies is situated at the blurred intersection between the private/domestic sphere and the work/labour sphere. The labour site thus acts as the physical representation of the interspace between forced labour and forced displacement, where female refugee's productive and

reproductive bodies are commodified. At the same time, women strategically deploy their femaleness to resist and cope with their commodification.

It is difficult to decisively conclude the extent to which the Syrian conflict has transformed gender relations and sexual division of labour,²³ or whether it has created changes in traditional norms and social values that remain highly patriarchal. It is, however, certain that the central role female refugee-labour plays in agriculture has contributed to challenging 'traditional gender roles' (Palumbo 2017: 23). Despite the environment of commodification and abuse, the increased reliance on women as primary breadwinners has made them visibly indispensable. As Nadia, a female head of household and mother of six said: 'if you do not work, you do not eat bread'. Work has as such offered refugee women a means of self-reliance and, in a way, forced displacement has offered the opportunity for many women who would have otherwise stayed confined at home (in the camp) to play a role outside the conventional spheres of containment they have been reduced to (whether traditionally or as a result of forced displacement). As much as their work and living conditions are deplorable, their contribution to the family's income gives them some means of empowerment and negotiation. Their contribution to Lebanon's agricultural economy and their indispensability in the food supply also need to be acknowledged.

The stories recounted in this article reveal how Syrian refugee labourers are already engaging in acts of negotiations and resistance against the oppressive conditions that hold them hostage. More importantly, they uncover the transformation of agricultural fields into spaces where displaced women confide in each other and share mixed moments of lightness and bitterness as a remedy to their lived experiences as refugees, menial labour, and contained (re)productive bodies. For many refugees who have become entrapped in refugee-labour camps, working has allowed them to gain a sense of freedom away from the refugee-labour camp's imprisoning environment and the hardships of forced labour-displacement. The relationships these women have created in the fields have been knotted through female companionship and refugeehood. The labour site has enabled women to resist and negotiate their place within the imposed gendered labour hierarchies by developing coping mechanisms and relative privacy to re-normalize their situation as *forced labour-refugees*. These coping strategies and soft power tactics vary based on several factors such as the type of work, the labour site, and labour power dynamics. Despite conditions of forced hardship and forced labour, many of the workers I met expressed gratefulness and acceptance. As recounted by one of them: 'Some people are poorer than us. At least we are working. Work is dignity. It is better than begging on the streets.' Although this mode of relative coping arguably induces women into silencing the questioning of their refugee-labour consciousness, it has recreated a sense of lost worth.

The case study remains in many ways unique given the particular history of seasonal migration between Lebanon and Syria. However, analogous acts of negotiation in other contexts uncover the complex conditions facing not only displaced labour but also agricultural migrant workers in general. These conditions mirror the broader structural problems inherent to migrant labour regimes and menial labour contracting systems, independently of the situation of forced displacement. By emphasizing the importance of gendered labour dynamics in informing our understanding of forced displacement and commodification, the reflections in this article have therefore highlighted more broadly the intersecting boundaries between gender and capital that continuously shape exclusive migration regimes. Labour exploitation remains a universal issue that is reinforced through these regimes, which reproduce the gendered hierarchies of precarity and commodification. The complexity of female refugee-labour commodification is indeed better understood when re-placed within the much larger exploitative structure of the heavily corporatized, devalued, and migrantized sector that agriculture is. If anything, forced displacement has only amplified what already constitutes an exploitative, gendered, and abusive system of labour commodification.

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Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

Notes

1. I use the term *de facto* because Lebanon does not recognise the 'refugee' status under the Geneva Convention.
2. Most material available on women refugees' contribution in the labour economy consist in studies on refugee integration primarily in the Global North, with much more limited work on women's role in the labour economies of the Global South, which remains the largest refugee host area.
3. By 'systemic' I refer the inherently exploitative system of agricultural labour management, which is embedded within the overall capitalist structure where capital accumulation is prioritised over human value.
4. The *shaweesh* was in charge of bringing seasonal labour from Syria and setting up a tented settlement to ensure their stay during the agricultural season. Since Syrian displacement began, the *shaweesh*'s role expanded to encompass the provision of a range of services that went outside the scope of his work as a labour contractor. For more on the *shaweesh* system in this context, see Shams (2014) and Saghieh (2015).
5. The plural of *warsha* in spoken Arabic. *Warsha* means workshop but is used in reference to a labour team in this context. *Wurash* mostly comprise female workers and younger generations of male workers.
6. The plural of *shaweesh*.
7. Plural of *wakeel*.
8. Owing to my work experience in the humanitarian sector during the early days of the Syrian refugee influx and the fieldwork conducted over several years for various projects in the Bekaa, I have gained extensive familiarity with the valley and its socio-cultural intricacies. The network and my personal attachment to this fascinating region have been therefore foundational to this work. My empirical scope expanded very quickly through a snowball effect stimulated by mutual trust.
9. Whilst I draw on a range of case studies based in the Global South, I must note that scholars who focused on more developed contexts (e.g. Preibisch and Grez 2010) equally denounced how agrifood industries prioritise the increase of their comparative advantage while reducing women labour's role and value.
10. The ILO's definition broadly associates contractors with a 'triangular employment relationship' (Benjamin 2009).
11. 'Unfree labour practices' are, however, not exclusive to a particular context or sector (Bremen 2003, 1061). Two different examples of the institutionalisation of labour commodification through sponsors or agents are the kafala system in Lebanon, Jordan, and most GCC countries (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004; Gardner 2010; Khalaf, AlShehabi, and Hanieh 2015; Battah 2018; AlShehabi 2019; Hanieh 2019; Malit and Tsourapas 2021; Sadiq and Tsourapas 2024), and the temporary migrant worker programme in Canada (Basok 2002; Binford 2004; Walia 2021).
12. As discussed earlier, there are of course other related structural factors pre-dating the conflict (Chalcraft 2009) that have made other non-productive sectors more lucrative and hence more attractive to men.
13. Six thousand Lebanese Pounds (LBP) was worth 4 USD at the time of research.
14. The plural of *bīmt*, meaning girl. In this context, the word 'girls' designates female workers. It has an underlyingly demeaning connotation. By being referred to as 'girls', women are considered less valuable.
15. Worth around 18 USD at the time of research, worth less than a half USD at the time of writing this article.
16. Worth around 6 USD at the time of research, worth around 0.10 USD at the time of writing this article.
17. The working conditions in these storage facilities are particularly deplorable with little exposure to sunlight, strong smells, and high humidity levels. I was able to witness that.
18. A traditional headdress usually worn by workers for protection from sunburn.
19. I use the term blurred because the boundaries between private/domestic and the public/labour sphere are hard to draw, which is often strategically used to contain women.

20. Giving another explanation to women's devalued labour, Abdelali-Martini and Dey de Pryck (2015, 5) note that 'men are very reluctant to divulge their womenfolk's paid employment because of the socially degrading implications that they cannot provide for their families'. This sense of lost masculinity shared by displaced men became amplified with displacement, and as more women took on the mission of providing for or contributing to their family income. My observations were not sufficient to confirm these statements. As mentioned previously, however, many of my informants have regarded this as a purely patriarchal act stemming from stereotypical judgement.
21. It means 'move it girls!'
22. Calls for a re-shift in gendered refugee narratives have become more noticeable in recent years. For example, in *Men on Hold* (2019), a documentary by film director Carol Mansour, the predominant blaming narrative targeting Syrian refugee men is challenged by showing the intersection between masculinity and vulnerability. Turner (2019) addresses these issues in much greater depth in relation to Syrian refugee men's role in humanitarian response agendas in the Jordanian context.
23. See Mezzadra and Neilson (2013, 104).

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