

Sexualizing and Villainizing Male Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

Adriana Qubaia and Mathew Gagne

In a quiet café just off the streets of Hamra in Beirut, a friend arrives late for an afternoon coffee. He apologizes for his tardiness, explaining that he stopped to speak to a Syrian man on the main street. He had witnessed the Syrian – a refugee in Beirut – being slapped in the face by a Lebanese man passing on a scooter. Attacks like these, as well as rampant discrimination, sexual exploitation, and economic marginalization, are prevalent against Syrians in Lebanon. Lebanese citizens, like the man on the scooter, feel empowered and justified in harming Syrians with impunity. But why is this case?

In late 2013 and 2014, several media stories rapidly circulated about alleged sexual violence, harassment, and rape perpetrated by Syrians living in Lebanon against Lebanese citizens. The retelling of these stories often included discussions about groups of Syrian men on the loose and ready to repeat their crimes. According to one story, an undefined number of “Syrians” raped a woman and left her bleeding by the side of the road. The news spread so quickly it prompted security forces to immediately investigate. They latertweeted that the story was a rumor, without any further detail. Medical and security reports subsequently revealed the woman in question had been admitted to a hospital for “personal circumstance” – a cryptic reference to menstruation.

Other stories about brutal attacks by Syrians against Lebanese civilians have never been clarified, addressed, or corrected. Where Syrians have been found to be innocent, state agencies and most media bodies have failed to publically release the information or facilitate justice for those falsely accused. In December 2013, a woman from Timneen in the Bekaa valley claimed her disabled son had been raped by a group of Syrian refugees from an adjacent refugee camp. To substantiate her claim, she claimed to have found blood on her son’s pants. In an act of retribution, the town’s residents burned several of the camp’s tents and expelled the rest of the refugees, while security forces stood by.

A forensic report later found no traces of blood or forced rape on the man. All the suspects were released, although those who burnt the Syrians’ tents and

belongings were never punished. Despite the innocence of the accused, very few news channels followed up on the story, leaving public demonization of Syrians unchallenged. The security forces' lackluster response, as well as the media's lack of clarifications reinforced the status of Syrian refugees as unwanted and deserving of punishment.

As Maya Mikdashi argues, stories of alleged sexual violence produce moral and sexual panics, regardless of their accuracy. The sexual vilification of Syrian refugees, combined with economic and ethno-national marginalization, have also helped to reproduce imagined national differences between Lebanese and Syrians. Part of this process involves defending social boundaries and values based on a sexual moral order that justifies the use of violence by Lebanese men against Syrians. At the top of this hierarchical order are Lebanese citizens, particularly heterosexual men, who may use violence to defend the nation's socio-sexual boundaries against offenders. Syrian male refugees are at the bottom of this order, and viewed as dangerously sexual and hypermasculinized, rapacious, morally bankrupt, and flat out criminal.

Deflecting Blame Onto Outsiders

The sexual vilification of Syrians is part of a larger project aimed at blaming refugees for the social, political, security, and economic ills Lebanon suffers. As Bassem Chit and Mohamad Ali Nayel argue, this "blame" deflects attention from longstanding structural problems inside Lebanon that existed long before the massive influx of refugees. When this blame is filtered into the intimate and sexual spheres of life, it elicits amplified reactions not only from Lebanese citizens, but also from security forces eager to prove they can maintain the socio-sexual order at a time when they are receiving heavy criticism for failing to manage security threats.

When the unwanted Syrian man is implicated in alleged sexual crimes against Lebanese nationals, he is seen as enacting violence upon a sexually proper Lebanese public. In this sense, acts of violence upon an individual body become symbols for moral violations against the Lebanese public. The (allegedly) raped bodies of a woman and/or disabled man – figures otherwise seen as vulnerable and needing of community and state protection and interference – thus represent the suffering of a nation at the hands of outsiders and bear the moral outrage of an entire community against another.

This stands in clear contrast to the recent case of rape and murder against a five-year old Syrian boy at the hands of a seventeen-year old Lebanese teenager. The case did not result in mass outrage or backlash from the Lebanese public. Although the media covered the case extensively and revealed the nationalities of both boys, it treated the case as an isolated murder and did not frame it in the context of violence unleashed by Lebanese against Syrians.

Lebanese Women and Syrian Men

Stories about sexual misconduct against Lebanese by Syrians circulate at high speeds, spurring some Lebanese citizens into a state of violent panic. Efforts to violently police Syrians often ensue. In June 2014, renewed unrest in the mixed Beirut neighborhood of Burj Hammoud began after a Syrian-Kurdish man allegedly cat-called a Lebanese woman in the company of her Lebanese boyfriend. While the fight was likely motivated by several factors, including anger over the alleged harassment, it quickly became about maintaining socio-sexual boundaries between Lebanese and Syrian men. The Lebanese woman's body was used as a marker of this boundary.

If harassment had been the only issue, then the sheer number of incidents of sexual harassment experienced everyday by Lebanese *and* Syrian women would produce constant moral outrage and mass security interventions. Instead, the resulting anger centered on the fact that a Syrian-Kurdish man had harassed a Lebanese woman. The event led to the killing of one Lebanese man and several days of unrest requiring intervention by security forces.

In response to this incident, the local municipality instituted a curfew for all Syrians, banning them from going out in the evening and early morning. The decision was announced via banners hung in the streets stating: "Burj Hammoud municipality informs the foreign residents (Syrians) that they are banned from movement from 8:00 pm to 6:00 am." The move clearly singled out Syrian residents and distinguished them from other "foreigners," such as Sri Lankan, Ethiopian, or Filipino/a workers. The authorities also ordered the closure of unregistered Syrian-owned stores; although many Lebanese-owned stores also remain unregistered. For the sake of policing a social order, the blanket move targeted Syrians regardless of the circumstances of their arrival or how long they had lived in the area. Many Syrian Kurds living in Burj Hammoud have, for example, resided in the area for over two decades.

Undermining Efforts to Combat Sexual Violence

The institutionalized marginalization and sexual vilification of Syrians in Lebanon is sharpening the divide between what is deemed proper sexual and gendered behavior and what is not. These boundaries and norms are not entirely new and have been used against Syrian workers in the past. Popular narratives about imagined national differences between the two groups have previously produced sexual and gendered representations of Syrian men as more raw, aggressive, and sexual, as compared to the more refined, mannered, willful, and cultured Lebanese man. Depending on the political climate, the same stereotypes have also been used to mark off other marginalized groups, such as Palestinian refugees, poorer and lower class Lebanese men, and members of certain sects. While such forms of othering preexist the current political tensions, they are finding renewed force against Syrian refugees.

In Lebanon (as elsewhere), fabricated rape stories and exaggerated sexual dynamics hurt rape survivors and feminist politics first: false rape claims feed into a long history of disbelief, denial, and out-right dismissal of rape and sexual violence, which survivors have had – and continue – to fight against. In addition, hypersexualizing and demonizing Syrian men creates the false illusion that sexual assault is unique to refugee communities. These dynamics mask the role of Lebanese men in various assaults and imply that harassment and sexual violence did not previously exist. Against this backdrop, feminist activists continue to struggle for the acknowledgment and punishment of marital rape under Lebanese law. Their struggle to rally support on this issue demonstrates that only certain forms of rape – ones that cross national boundaries – are deemed worthy of public and state outrage.

Similarly, the rape of men by men does not yield moral public outrage if the perpetrators are Lebanese and the victims are on the social margins. Nor do forms of socio-economic and sexual violence against and exploitation of Syrian women cause moral panic or mass security intervention. Violence against women and men only receives attention in public and state discourses when perpetrated by the deviant Syrian ‘other.’ State responses and media panic are not about justice for victims, or creating systems of accountability for all perpetrators. Rather, they aim to subjugate Syrians, to vilify and hypersexualize the ‘other,’ and silence the violence perpetrated within Lebanese society.

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