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“It Missed Them”: A Refugee-Centered Analysis of the Lebanese Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan

Alonna Despain and Jennifer Rauch

Abstract

This paper examines the 2019–2023 Lebanese Women, Peace and Security (WPS) National Action Plan (NAP) as a case study for WPS NAP provisions on the inclusion of women refugees. The paper documents the Lebanese WPS NAP’s drafting process and implementation status and asks, given Lebanon’s large refugee population, whether the WPS NAP has consulted with women refugees, referenced their needs, or suggested adequate responses to their concerns. Based on responses from interviews, we argue that the Lebanese NAP has not adequately included women refugee’s needs and concerns. Specifically, we find that the Lebanese NAP, similar to other Lebanese government documents, categorizes the refugee population into Palestinian “refugees” and Syrian “displaced” individuals, a semantic choice that creates a legal distinction between these two groups and that has the effect of shielding the Lebanese government from the responsibility of extending the same legal rights to Syrian refugees as Palestinian refugees. We note that the Lebanese NAP is not alone in inadequately addressing refugee concerns. According to our research, most NAPs globally have little to no language on domestic refugee inclusion in peacebuilding or conflict prevention. Given the unique security needs of refugee women, the paper therefore asserts the importance of including women refugees and their concerns as an internally focused priority in NAPs. Based on the criticisms raised throughout our data analysis, the paper concludes by providing recommendations, for future iterations of the Lebanese NAP, as well as future iterations of WPS NAPs more broadly, in terms of meaningfully considering the needs of women in refugee communities.

Keywords: Refugees; Women, Peace and Security; National Action Plan (NAP); Lebanon; Syria; Palestine

Introduction

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, an international “norm bundle,” consists of four pillars: participation in peacebuilding, protection of women, conflict prevention, and relief and recovery (True & Wiener, 2019, p. 553). In theory, National Action Plans (NAPs) are designed to be effective institutional arrangements that allow states to fulfill and operationalize their WPS commitments at a national level. Thus, the creation and implementation of NAPs offer an arena for analyzing behavioral contestation of the WPS norm bundle—in other words, how the theoretical norms of the WPS pillars become practically established (True & Wiener, 2019).

However, there are often differences between the fundamental WPS international norms and their practical implementation at the national level. Theoretically, NAPs should follow the *quod omnes tangit*¹ principle (True & Wiener, 2019, p. 557); yet, they have been criticized for lacking the inclusion of vulnerable groups who should be prioritized in content and implementation (Cabrera-Balleza & Fal Dutra Santos, 2018, p. 21). Refugees and internally displaced persons are often not included in the formulation of national and international policy documents, and their needs remain largely underrecognized and unmet. To explore whether NAPs adequately address the needs of refugees, we selected Lebanon as a case study, because it currently hosts the largest refugee population per capita in the world (Christopherson, 2020).

Due to the government’s inaction,² the millions of refugees within Lebanon constitute an immensely underserved population with distinct and growing needs (Zaiter, 2018, pp. 42-43). Our research³ therefore focuses on the implementation of the WPS agenda in Lebanon, with particular attention given to its WPS NAP and the institutions involved in its creation and implementation; these include various United Nations (UN) agencies, government bodies, and civil society organizations (CSOs). Our research centers the experiences of refugees, specifically women refugees, and how their unique needs are included or excluded in national WPS mechanisms. We contend that the Lebanese NAP drafting process did not sufficiently consult refugee communities and that NAP implementation has not adequately prioritized the needs of refugee women. We found that CSOs, rather than government institutions, have the greatest impact on advocating for and implementing WPS measures within refugee communities. Further, we argue that the

fundamental norms of protection and participation within the WPS agenda should be expanded to include the participation of refugee women in NAP drafting and implementation, given their unique security concerns within host countries.

Methodology

Considering the WPS norm bundle, in particular protection and participation, our research critically examines how the Lebanese government and civil society behaviorally contest these norms in the implementation of the Lebanese WPS NAP. To address these questions, the following evidence was collected:

- A literature review on the international WPS framework (including UN treaties and UN Security Council Resolutions)
- Comparative research on current WPS NAPs around the world, with a specific focus on the inclusion or exclusion of refugee populations
- A series of qualitative interviews with important stakeholders engaged in the drafting, consulting, or implementation of the Lebanese WPS NAP

We conducted 20 qualitative research interviews over Zoom during a two-month period with staff from UN agencies, governmental offices, and local CSOs (Table 1).⁴ Interviewees were selected by their affiliation with and/or participation in the NAP drafting and implementation process, as well as their connection with refugees and refugee women’s rights advocacy.⁵ Despite our request, we were denied an interview with a representative of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Table 1

Research Interviewees

Organization	Interviewees
UN Agency	4
Government	3
Civil Society Organization	14

Overview of the WPS Agenda and its International Framework

The WPS norm bundle consists of several UN treaties and conventions. Notably, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)⁶ is the first human rights treaty exclusively dedicated to women's rights. In 2013, the CEDAW Committee published General Recommendation No. 30, linking the peace and security agenda to the provisions of equality guaranteed under CEDAW (O'Rourke & Swaine, 2020, p. 1). General Recommendation No. 30 outlines how the rights ensured under CEDAW apply to and are impacted by conflict and therefore provides state parties with a guide for incorporating gender-inclusive measures into conflict prevention and peacebuilding mechanisms (O'Rourke & Swaine, 2020, p. 3). Moreover, General Recommendation No. 30 reinforces the notion that the implementation of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) WPS resolutions constitutes an obligation under CEDAW, connecting substantive state obligations to WPS resolutions and encouraging states to include WPS activities in reports to the CEDAW Committee (O'Rourke & Swaine, 2020, p. 3).

The first and most notable UNSC WPS resolution is Resolution 1325. Resolution 1325 (2000) brought attention to the unique experiences of women in conflict and called upon the UN and Member States to integrate women at all levels of conflict prevention, management, and resolution. Resolution 1325 also urged Member States to integrate women's perspectives at all stages of conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. Subsequent UNSC resolutions in the WPS framework—1820, 1888, 1889, 1960, 2106, 2122, 2242, 2467, and 2493—have increased awareness of the experiences of women in conflict by reinforcing operational requirements for integrating gendered perspectives into the four pillars of participation, conflict prevention, protection, and relief and recovery. Overall, the current international legal frameworks, including CEDAW, the CEDAW Committee, and the various UNSC resolutions on WPS, call on governments to promote women's inclusive participation in conflict prevention decision-making.

Refugee Inclusion in WPS NAPs

Lebanon's large refugee presence requires an analysis of the inclusion of refugees in international WPS frameworks. Current WPS resolutions provide limited mentions of refugees thematically: Six of the WPS resolutions include one or two mentions of refugees, and four have none. Instead, refugees and displaced women are mentioned exclusively in terms of conflict-

affected regions rather than as a distinct population with specific security needs in all countries, including those not directly experiencing violence or conflict (Holvikivi & Reeves, 2017, p. 2). Critically, CEDAW's General Recommendation No. 30 specifically mentions the importance of protecting and including refugee women in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, noting that:

The provisions of the Convention prohibiting discrimination against women reinforce and complement the international legal protection regime for refugees and displaced and stateless women and girls in many settings, *especially because explicit gender equality provisions are absent from relevant international agreements, notably the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol* [emphasis added].

The Recommendation continues by requesting that State parties make a particular effort to protect refugee women and girls when implementing their obligations under CEDAW.

At present, 104 countries have published at least one NAP, with an additional seven published by regional organizations. Among WPS NAPs published and available online,⁷ 28⁸ have no mention of refugees at all; 17⁹ have moderate (11–30) mentions of refugees; and only six¹⁰ have extensive (30+) mentions of refugees. Our qualitative analysis of refugee inclusion in NAPs found that countries, particularly Western nations, tend to focus on refugee-specific concerns only if they were or are experiencing conflict, rather than addressing the needs of their internal refugee women population. An interesting example of this is Poland. Despite its moderate mention of refugees, Poland's WPS NAP only references refugees in the context of the Middle East rather than addressing refugees within its own borders (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Poland, 2018), an issue the country will now have to confront given the sudden and massive influx of Ukrainian refugees since late February 2022. On the other hand, the Netherlands' NAP mentions refugee women's involvement in local peacebuilding initiatives and the inclusion of gender-sensitive refugee processes (1325+ and Dutch NAP Partnership, 2021).

Current research addresses the inclusion and exclusion of refugee and internally displaced women in global WPS NAPs. Noted by researchers Holvikivi and Reeves: "As the conflict-affected woman flees and seeks safety and security...she moves to the periphery of the area of concern in WPS policies in discourses" (2017, p. 1). They further note that refugees, while present within WPS policies such as UNSC resolutions and NAPs, are included as "subjects of marginal and inconsistent concern" (2017, p. 3). Within the Middle East, research indicates that existing NAPs have not

adequately addressed the gendered implications of conflict-related displacement and long-term refugee status (Kaya & Bond, 2019, p. 6). Furthermore, research on NAPs from the Middle East found that refugee and displaced communities have been unevenly consulted in NAP drafting processes or entirely absent from the content of the NAP itself (Kaya, 2020, p. 8). In the context of Lebanon, it is important to note that some research exists on the level of inclusion and participation of *displaced* women in Lebanon (Strasser, 2019); however, we were unable to find government reports or academic papers analyzing the substantive inclusion of *refugee* women and their needs in the current 2019–2022 WPS NAP. This semantic difference between “displaced” and “refugee” is important for legal reasons, as the Lebanese case demonstrates:

Lebanese authorities have failed to recognize [Syrian] refugee status and have officially referred to them as ‘displaced persons’ in order to avoid the responsibility of extending legal and political rights as well as a deviation from the possibility of permanent residence in the country. (Mahdi, 2021, p. 9)

Overall, WPS NAPs provide a necessary framework to translate a country’s obligations in the UNSC resolutions into national and local actions. Even so, a disparity exists in the inclusion of refugee women, their distinct needs, and their involvement in leading peacebuilding efforts.

Refugee Context in Lebanon

Lebanon currently hosts the largest refugee population per capita in the world¹¹ (Christophersen, 2020). As of 2020, the World Bank estimated that out of its total population of 6.85 million, Lebanon hosted 1,349,955 refugees; therefore, roughly 19.5 percent of Lebanon’s total population identified as a refugee (Christophersen, 2020). Despite this, Lebanon is not a party or signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees¹² nor the 1967 Protocol to the Convention and therefore is not bound by either treaty that provides human rights protections to refugees. Lebanon also does not have any national laws for refugees (Mahdi, 2021, p. 8). Nonetheless, the international community holds Lebanon legally responsible for providing basic human rights to refugees within its borders through other relevant international treaties, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Convention Against Torture (Mahdi, 2021, pp. 7-8). UN bodies have also pushed for refugee protections within Lebanon, specifically through the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near

East (UNRWA) and UNHCR, both of whom have been given mandates to provide services for Palestinian, Syrian, and other refugees within Lebanon (UNHCR, 2021; UNRWA, 2022b).

The majority of refugees within Lebanon's borders originate from Palestine and Syria due to their persistent conflicts. In 2014, Lebanon hosted 1,147,503 Syrian and Palestinian refugees under the mandate of UNHCR. This number declined to 865,300 refugees under UNHCR mandate in 2020, which can be attributed to three specific reasons: 1) in 2015, the Lebanese government requested that UNHCR stop registering Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2022a); 2) Lebanon began the process of repatriating Syrians back to Syria in 2017 (Mahdi, 2017, p. 4); and 3) the Lebanese government has refrained from labeling Syrians as refugees and rather labeled them as displaced (Mahdi, 2021, p. 10). By referring to Syrians as either economic migrants or displaced persons, the Lebanese government ensures that "they are perceived as...not feeling persecution, and that they can return at any time and are residing in Lebanon for economic gains" (Mahdi, 2021, p. 15). In this way, there appears to be an institutionalized process to avoid treating refugees, particularly Syrians, as citizens or legal permanent residents, which partially explains the exclusion of refugees and their concerns in the Lebanese WPS NAP.

Interestingly, this point emerged in our interviews, particularly with those holding government positions. When discussing how the presence of such a large refugee population impacted the activities of the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW), one government official corrected themselves, saying "after the Syrians came, [the international community] funded the refugees...the displaced." When responding to a question regarding the roadblocks to achieving gender equality in Lebanon, this interviewee also stated that "this issue is also linked to our political crisis because we have the refugees, the Syrian refugees. And we have the problem of—*déplacé* (displaced persons), not refugees, the Syrians—yes displaced."

Crucially, some interviewees' opinions differentiated between Syrian refugees and Palestinian refugees. Due to the sudden onset of migration and the drastic increase of refugees into the country, government officials appeared to resent, or in fact blame, the Syrian refugee crisis for their inability to address other challenges. For example, one interviewee reacted to the influx of Syrian refugees, stating:

We don't have strong infrastructures. It's a small country. It's like you have a room of 50 square meters, you can put like four people in it, and now we have 100 people in it. So, the infrastructure, our phones, our water, it cannot handle ... When [the international community] saw the negative impact on the hosting community ... it was on all levels—environment, pollution, on our telecoms—when they saw they began to integrate into their program support to the hosting community. I think it was too late. The damage was already done.

Hostility towards Syrian refugees compared to Palestinian refugees emerged through several striking comments (Table 2).

Table 2

Government Interviewee Reactions to Palestinian versus Syrian Refugees

Palestinian	Syrian
For Palestinians, it's different. For the Palestinians we have community dialogue.	For Syrians, it's different ... [the damage] is also sociological, psychological. This is why we are now working a lot on dialogue because we don't want to lose our empathy.
Now after 70 years of the presence of Palestinians in Lebanon, a lot traveled, are not anymore here, and now the main issues we are facing with the Palestinians, the ladies, the women are old refugees. They are old ladies. ¹³ The youth left, or traveled, or are working in Lebanon...working, making money, and living.	After the Syrians came, because of the conditions they are living, poverty and no proper education ... we had more and more child marriage within the Syrian community and this impacted the hosting community...You have more births, [more] babies born in refugee camps than Lebanese [babies born]. You can imagine the demography. They get pregnant in very hard conditions because the culture is not there ... there's no minimum conditions to have a relationship.

Notwithstanding the history and lived experiences of Palestinian refugees within Lebanon, the tone and content of these quotes imply that the Lebanese government holds a bias in favor of Palestinian refugees, viewing Syrian refugees to be the more problematic population and favoring engagement with Palestinian refugees within the country.

Further, some civil society interviewees reflected the negative perception of refugees within Lebanon. One interviewee stated that refugees are “seen as risks” and that “there is no

social cohesion because even refugee camps [and settlements] are considered a different part of the country... as if they do not relate a lot to Lebanon.” In fact, some civil society interviewees reported that efforts for gender equality should prioritize the needs of Lebanese women over refugee women, instead of tackling these needs in tandem. For example, when asked about refugee women’s political and peacebuilding-related participation in Lebanese society, one interviewee expressed:

When you want to tackle women refugees, you cannot forget about Lebanese women in the same areas...If I take care of these women who are entering the country and leaving the Lebanese women there is an imbalance...the situation of Lebanese women, especially in rural areas where the refugees are, is sometimes worse than the situation of women refugees.

This sentiment was echoed by another interviewee, who stated “if we are tackling the subject of refugee women being included, in Lebanon, not even Lebanese women are included.” When prompted about policymaker opinions on refugee inclusion in peacebuilding activities, one interviewee further added, “Let’s talk now about the refugees? Let’s care about [the] Lebanese.” However inaccurate, there is a perception that refugee women are prioritized over Lebanese women, specifically concerning participation in peacebuilding and safety and security needs. While most of the interviewees supported the equality, inclusion, and advancement of refugee rights within Lebanon, both the government and CSO interviewees’ negative reactions to refugees reveal a fracture in the perceived solidarity between women in peacebuilding, crisis management, and recovery.

Without being fully integrated into host communities or WPS documents, refugee communities are at further risk of poverty, trafficking, and recruitment into regional conflict (Zaiter, 2018), creating the potential for further destabilization in the host country. Therefore, the WPS agenda should encourage the equal participation and advancement of all women and devote more attention to the unique security needs of refugee women to avoid potential conflict or exacerbating crises in host states.

The Lebanese WPS NAP

Formulation of the NAP: Inclusion and Exclusion

In 2017, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers tasked the NCLW to create a NAP on UNSC resolution 1325 (NCLW, 2019, p. 4). The NAP was originally designed to cover 2019–2022 but has recently been extended for one year, now expiring in 2023. NAP deliberations in Lebanon began in 2013 following the CEDAW Committee’s recommendation that the Lebanese government “adopt a national action plan in line with the Committee’s General Recommendation No. 30 on women in conflict prevention, conflict, and post-conflict situations” and “seek the support of the international community for the implementation of its obligations” (2015). After several years of informal consultations with various stakeholders, a steering committee was created in 2017 by the NCLW. It is worth noting that there are discrepancies between the NAP’s consultation timeline and the reported dates from our interviewees. Some interviewees reported that NAP-related consultation meetings began in 2011 and 2012, while others stated that most deliberations only began after the CEDAW Committee’s Concluding Observations in 2013. Interestingly, we found these inconsistencies most often from government agencies when asked about the inclusion of refugees in the NAP consultation and drafting process; interviewees stated that refugees were not consulted because the Syrian refugee crisis had not started yet¹⁴ (in 2011–2012), and therefore it was unnecessary to include refugees in the early drafting process. Despite this claim, there was still a substantial Palestinian refugee population present in the country and thus a need to include refugee voices and concerns in the NAP.

Thematic Refugee Inclusion in the Lebanese WPS NAP

Refugees are mentioned 22 times in the official English translation of the Lebanese WPS NAP. Again, the WPS NAP also refers to Syrian refugees as “displaced” persons, rather than as refugees; “displaced” persons are mentioned 14 times. The following themes emerge based on how refugees or displaced individuals are mentioned in the WPS NAP (NCLW, 2019):

- **Historical Context:** Section 4 of the NAP discusses the historical context of violence and conflict within Lebanon, linking it to the current refugee crises in the country.

- **Defining the Number of Refugees/Displaced Persons:** Sections 4 and 5 outline the current estimates of refugees/displaced persons within Lebanon. According to the NAP, the current Syrian conflict has displaced more than one million Syrians to Lebanon; more than half of all displaced Syrians are women. The NAP also includes a discrepancy in the number of reported Palestinian refugees within Lebanon. According to the Lebanese and Palestinian bureaus and the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee, the total number of Palestinian refugees is 174,422. UNRWA, on the other hand, estimates that the number of Palestinian refugees is roughly 450,000. UNRWA further estimates that 32,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria currently reside in Lebanon (UNRWA, 2022b).
- **Reported Concerns of Refugees:** According to the NAP, Palestinian refugee women experience high rates of psychological disorders, domestic violence, and maternal mortality. Some of these concerns are attributed to the poor living and environment conditions inside refugee camps. The NAP, however, offers no strategic objectives to address these reported problems. In addition, there is no specific mention of concerns reported by Syrian women refugees; this is particularly worrying given that UN Women hosted specific consultations¹⁵ with Syrian refugees to ensure their needs and concerns were included in the NAP. The NAP further mentions that UNHCR and other international organizations attempt to “provide basic necessities for refugees although the demand for services is far greater than the supply” (2019, p. 9).
- **Current Legal/Institutional Frameworks for Refugees:** The NAP references two documents in particular that address refugee women: the National Strategy for Women in Lebanon and the National Action Plan for Human Rights (NAPHR). While the National Strategy aims to promote women’s participation in conflict-resolution dialogues and conflict prevention, it does not mention including refugee or displaced women in these dialogues (NCLW, 2011, p. 16) and rather focuses on “increasing efforts to end negative consequences of displacement on displaced women and those in host communities” (NCLW, 2019, p. 12). Unlike the WPS NAP, the NAPHR, which focuses on 21 areas promoting and protecting all human rights in Lebanon, includes sections on both Palestinian and non-Palestinian refugees. While the NAPHR itself provides extensive recommendations for promoting the

human rights of all refugees, the NAP instead focuses on promoting only the “socio-economic rights of refugees” and conducting investigations “on violence against children, refugee children, and child marriage” (NCLW, 2019, p. 12). Further, the WPS NAP highlights the NAPHR’s call to enhance the capacity of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee to improve the human rights of Palestinian refugees. Despite an entire section dedicated to non-Palestinian refugees in the NAPHR (Parliamentary Human Rights Committee, 2014), it lacks a specific focus on non-Palestinian refugees in government frameworks and in the WPS NAP.

- **Assessment/Goals:** Refugees and displaced individuals are mentioned only seven times in Section 13’s implementation matrix. In Strategic Priority II: Prevention of Conflict, one action item includes “developing a gender-sensitive curriculum on peace education and human and women’s rights ... including in schools with displaced/refugee populations” (NCLW, 2019, p. 47). Strategic Priority III: Prevention of and Protection of Women and Girls from GBV (gender-based violence) offers an indicator for improving the capacity of justice, security, and health services to address GBV, including a “number of awareness sessions/outreach in displaced communities” (NCLW, 2019, p. 47). Strategic Priority IV: Relief and Recovery provides the most support to refugees and displaced persons; the main indicator for achieving this priority includes “percent of women refugees/displaced and those in host communities benefiting from the Lebanese Crisis Response Plan interventions” (NCLW, 2019, p. 49). Additional interventions and outputs under Priority IV include promoting women refugees’ rights to economic opportunities in host communities and increasing capacity of humanitarian personnel to assist refugee women in obtaining identification documents (NCLW, 2019, p. 50).

The distinct lack of substantive comments in the WPS NAP about refugee women and their unique needs is surprising. The discussion of reported concerns for refugees focuses exclusively on Palestinian refugees and does not include any references to non-Palestinian refugee/displaced communities and their concerns, despite the assertion that UN Women consulted with these populations. Aside from the problems of domestic violence and GBV, which also affect Lebanese women nationals, the few references to reported refugee concerns—psychosocial disorders,

maternal mortality—are absent from the NAP’s implementation matrix. In the end, only legal documentation and access to economic opportunities for refugees are weakly addressed.

In general, the NAP prides itself as being an inclusive document. Throughout the interview process, several interviewees echoed this sentiment, especially those directly involved in the drafting process. One interviewee stated, “We did [the drafting] in an inclusive way, so everybody was on board, all the ministries, all the public institutions, CSOs, NGOs, and even the universities...We wanted to have this participative approach for our first action plan.” Another interviewee claimed, “We chose different NGOs working with refugees ... I had friends heading NGOs for Palestinians and Syrians and they loved how they were invited, and we took their opinions during the call and also through any email and documents they would send us.” Another interviewee confirmed that UN Women worked to ensure refugee voices were consulted during the drafting process. Unfortunately, the researchers were unable to gather further evidence (or written evidence) regarding the results from these consultations.

Based on the evidence within the NAP and the responses of our interviewees, we can conclude that the Lebanese WPS NAP is not as inclusive of refugees as reported by government documents and officials. Moreover, some of the concerns reported by refugee women, specifically security and economic opportunities, are shared by Lebanese national women. Therefore, combining the voices of both refugee and Lebanese women could serve to counter dominant patriarchal narratives that create barriers to the equal inclusion of women in security and economic sectors throughout the country, benefiting both refugee and host communities.

Refugee-Specific Concerns of Exclusion

Despite claims from government and UN agencies, some of our interviewees—mostly civil society representatives—reported that drafting and consultation processes were not inclusive to all relevant stakeholders and civil society representatives. While interviewees noted other thematic areas¹⁶ excluded from the Lebanese WPS NAP, refugee needs were the most significantly overlooked. Many interviewees reported that the NAP excluded refugee women’s participation and recognition of their status and gender-specific concerns. One interviewee, representing one of the six prominent UN agencies involved in the NAP drafting process, stated, “I have no idea if

women refugees were represented.” Another interviewee added that “at the end, [refugees] were not part of the process of drafting...I think lots of things, especially regarding refugees, were not included in the NAP.” One interviewee, who works to represent refugee women and youth, explicitly mentioned that “the NAP missed refugees. It missed women refugees. It missed it.” This same interviewee, when asked whether they believed the NAP considers refugee needs, further stated, “Actually no. Because it’s more focusing on Lebanese women because they are more looking to make the Lebanese women in charge of decision-making positions ... but it’s not working for the non-Lebanese.” As expected, due to the lack of participation, consultation, and inclusion of refugee women in the NAP drafting process, interviewees expressed that the NAP does not adequately address refugee-related issues. One interviewee explained, “one point that is very important is that the needs of refugees are very different from [Lebanese] needs.” Interviewees expanded on several refugee-specific issues (Table 3).

Table 3
Refugee-Specific Concerns, as Identified by Interviewees

Identified Need/Concern	Interview Quote
Economic Opportunities	“I think for the most part 87 percent of refugees live under the poverty line ... And then of course amongst the younger generation there’s a hope that some of them will get to do something with their lives and they probably won’t because there are few opportunities in Lebanon.”
Legal Documentation	“I think about 17 percent of female refugees don’t have legal documentation to remain in Lebanon, so it’s just not even a possibility for them to be talking about engaging in the armed forces, engaging in political dialogues, serving as mediators for the communities and so on.”
Nationality	“We didn’t start with the legal problem, legal process, legal papers. So, if someone has a son or [daughter], they can’t do anything about this ... they can’t sign their children here in Lebanon because of legal problems. It’s not inclusive at all. No.”
Sexuality	“First thing that comes to my mind is the harassment and sexual abuse. Yeah. It happens a lot there [in the camps] ... there are no protections, no one will protect [women] not even the government or maybe the local policies or the police there. Once, there was a woman that said to me ... her husband hit her, maybe abused her. Then she went to the police

	station...[to] get him in jail. So, the police officer said to her, 'it's ok, no problem, every day I hit my wife.'"
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These quotes suggest that refugees, particularly women, face barriers to participation in government-related peacebuilding or peace-related policymaking. Some barriers are legal and affect all refugees, while others are social or cultural and impact women more directly. Many government-instituted barriers prevent refugees from participating fully in Lebanese society. For example, one interviewee explained:

Palestinians, they are not entitled to vote or to participate because they are not Lebanese ...it denies them the right to participation in elections. There is a Palestinian Lebanese Committee that works on issues of trying to find a common ground between both, but definitely this doesn't make any difference in terms of political participation...[this is] because of the Right to Return,¹⁷ which is in the resolution that the Palestinians need to go back to their homeland of Palestine, so any kind of normalization is giving Palestinians Lebanese identity is forbidden because of the Right to Return.

Because of the "Right to Return," there is no naturalization process for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, as providing an option for naturalization would counter the inherent aim of their right to return to their homes in Palestine.¹⁸ This issue with status was refuted in an interview with an UNRWA representative, who stated, "if they have [been here] after 50 years or more, we can't still say they are refugees and [deal] with them as if they are guests and one day they will go back to their home. This is not a visit after 50 years or 60 years." These legal barriers also extend to Syrian refugees; as one interviewee mentioned, "if it's a Syrian [refugee], and if they don't have legal papers, then they can't go anywhere." Therefore, due to structural barriers within the Lebanese legal system, refugees—especially refugee women—cannot participate in government advocacy, nor can they find official means of expressing their concerns. When asked whether refugee women are seeking to participate in government structures, an interviewee responded that "issues of leadership and participation are beyond the scope of what they care about because many of them don't even have legal documentation." Legal status, parental rights, and guardianship are particularly important concerns given that refugee women from Palestine (Human Rights Watch, 2018) and Syria (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2022) cannot transmit nationality to their children,¹⁹ and women and children comprise more than half of the population of Syrian refugees. Claiming

these rights becomes more difficult if the women themselves do not have identity or residency papers in Lebanon. Without identity and nationality documentation, women cannot access essential health services, cannot legally claim benefits for their children, do not have freedom of movement, and often face increased risk for abduction, trafficking, sexual abuse or violence, sex work, or other forms of physical violence (UNHCR, 1990).

Acknowledging the institutional barriers to refugee involvement in government policymaking or advocacy, some organizations working with refugees instead look to the WPS NAP to provide guidance on participation in decision-making and peacebuilding within refugee camps themselves. Participation in UN organizational structures or refugee camp and settlement leadership structures was raised in interviews with UN representatives and civil society refugee-support groups. An interviewee confirmed that UNRWA has been doing work inside camps to encourage women's participation in camp decision-making but that issues of security are largely left to political factions within the group, which are led by men. Another interviewee stated, "the idea of wanting to be in leadership positions in the host countries they are in, it's not [always] about that. [It's] in their camp or structure, but that's different from an institutional or political role." Similar to the benefits of including women in government structures, including women in the decision-making structures of camps would allow for a gender-sensitive perspective on issues that directly affect refugee women, specifically those related to legal documentation, sexual and reproductive health, safety from violence, and childcare.

In addition to the limited opportunities for participation in local camp structures, barriers impacting women refugees are both political and cultural. Confirming the political barriers facing refugee women, one interviewee stated, "at the end, refugee women cannot do anything in political life. So that's why we are more working at building their capacity within their society and community." Some interviewees also mentioned the gendered inequalities related to cultural perceptions of women's and men's roles; for example, one interviewee stressed, "you can't convince parents to let the girl go to school and let her learn and [that] later on they will have their own future. You can't convince people when it comes to culture and what they believe in ... when they stick to religion." Furthermore, security and safety concerns often impede the ability of women refugees to participate in peacebuilding or capacity-building within their own camps and

settlements; as one interviewee explained, “inside Palestinian camps, the mentality is much different than outside the camps because women and girls in the afternoon have to be home at 6:00 [pm] for example. They can’t impact things.” Another interviewee stated that in UNHCR-mandated settlements, “the person who is responsible for the tents, which is a community of tents of that camp, is a man, *shawish*. And this *shawish* is responsible in front of the municipality, in front of the government ... and this *shawish* asks for favors ... you see the gender insensitivity.” Later in the interview, the interviewee explained that these “favors” referred to sexual harassment; the *shawish* would demand sexual favors from women, otherwise threatening to deny their requests to address their needs. Without speaking to refugees currently living in the settlements, we could not further investigate the role of the *shawish*, how he is selected, and how refugee women navigate or leverage decision-making processes under his control.

Due to the intersecting legal, political, social, and cultural barriers reported and experienced by our interviewees, it appears that refugee women were unable to meaningfully participate or have adequate representation in the drafting or consulting process of the Lebanese WPS NAP. The next section examines the inclusion of refugee women and their issues in the Lebanese NAP and whether the issues that were prioritized mirror those that were raised by interviewees in our qualitative research.

The NAP’s Influence on Refugee Women

Generally, interviewees expressed that the Lebanese WPS NAP has not impacted refugee women. By “impact,” we mean that the NAP should provide opportunities for participation in peacebuilding activities, that there should be increased awareness about UNSC resolution 1325, and that some of the goals listed in the matrix specifically related to refugees should be implemented as designed. One interviewee conceded that while the NAP does not impact refugee-specific needs or concerns, “the NAP makes an impact even on Palestinian or Syrian refugees because at the end they are working on gender equality, so some objectives can be achieved through Palestinian and Syrian women.” Outside of the general benefit that gender equality has on all women, most interviewees asserted that neither the NAP nor its implementation activities had a direct impact on refugee women.

Overall, many interviewees expressed that civil society initiatives and projects, rather than government-sponsored implementation projects, tended to have a greater impact on refugee communities, their peace concerns, and peacebuilding activities. When asked if any benefits of NAP implementation had reached refugee communities, one interviewee working with Palestinian and Syrian refugee populations stated that “if NGOs are leading [the implementation], yes. If the government is leading it, absolutely not.” This notion was shared by all interviewees who worked for CSOs that focus on refugee populations and confirms the theory that civil society often plays the role as a behavioral contestant to the government’s inaction on the WPS agenda’s fundamental norms (True & Wiener, 2019, p. 560).

Beyond the implementation of NAP objectives, awareness of the WPS agenda in refugee camps remains low. One interviewee who works with refugees stated, “If you walk now by Palestinian camps and ask someone about WPS they will not understand what you’re saying. They didn’t have a lot of information about these concepts. We are still working inside the camps on this.” Furthermore, knowledge and work surrounding the WPS NAP among refugee-centered UN organizations present in Lebanon appear to be limited. For example, the interviewee from UNRWA did not know about the WPS NAP or the WPS agenda before our email requesting an interview. Likewise, when UNHCR rejected our request for an interview, they stated that they were not yet involved in WPS as an area of interest and therefore could not speak directly to the topic of refugees and the implementation of the WPS NAP. It is incredibly concerning that representatives from UN agencies are unaware of UNSC resolution 1325 and the WPS NAP in general; this further indicates that the WPS NAP has not impacted refugees inside UN-affiliated Palestinian camps or in unofficial settlements populated by Syrian refugees, both of which UNHCR operates.

Given these findings, we conclude that the Lebanese WPS NAP is neither impacting women refugees nor providing further opportunities for their participation in peacebuilding. This confirms True and Wiener’s assertion that “those aspects of the WPS agenda that are vaguer but widely accepted...are contested only through behavior such as the lack of action and prioritization” (2019, p. 561). In this case, the vague priority of participation and protection of *all* women in Lebanon allows for the de-prioritization of refugee inclusion and engagement in WPS structures. Further, we found that civil society, rather than the government, leads the institutionalization of peace

activities within refugee communities. This further confirms True and Wiener's notion that civil society engagement in practices of contestation is vital for framing norm emergence and change in WPS initiatives. Nonetheless, future WPS initiatives must increase efforts to include refugee women's participation in peacebuilding and conflict-prevention activities so that the WPS NAP can be implemented in all sectors of Lebanese society.

Recommendation

Lebanon's experience with refugee populations and the challenges it faces incorporating refugees into its NAP are shared with other countries with similarly large refugee populations. Therefore, we suggest two key recommendations for future iterations of the Lebanese WPS NAP: 1) NAPs should include refugees more robustly in drafting and implementation, and 2) NAPs should be considered a nationally binding document by the government towards gender inclusivity.

Given the large population of refugees within Lebanon, as well as the specific security needs that women refugees experience, it is important that NAPs include internal refugee populations in both the drafting and implementation processes. Without including refugees in both drafting and ownership of implementation, NAPs do not concern a critical demographic of a country's population and therefore do not address their specific security needs; this reinforces a performative value of a NAP, rather than an operational one. Instead, NAPs should work to include refugees at all stages of the NAP process, thus expanding the fundamental norm of participation and acting as a form of behavioral contestation to the global norm bundle of the WPS agenda. To do so, countries that are in the process of drafting, refining, or extending NAPs should look to the practices adopted by other countries (such as Jordan or Uganda) who have similar refugee burdens, have robust language related to refugees, and provide concrete examples of consultation with refugee communities in their NAP drafting processes. Likewise, countries should integrate the policies suggested in CEDAW Committee Recommendation No. 30 for including women refugees in NAP drafting and implementation. By taking examples from countries who have been successful in their thematic inclusion of refugee women and combining these with the policies in CEDAW Recommendation No. 30, Lebanon and other countries can ensure that their practices align with international standards for including refugees.

UNSC resolution 1325 is an internationally binding document,²⁰ yet states are not required by the resolution to create a NAP. By extension, this perpetuates a system where states that do draft NAPs are not required to ensure that their institutional mechanisms allow for the NAP to be effectively implemented. That is, the NAP is knowingly created in a way that it cannot be acted upon because of the institutional barriers in national governments. NAP implementation may require institutional changes to government policies in order to be effective; in this way, NAPs rely on the behavioral contestation of civil society to generate discussion around normative change. To this end, in order to ensure that the commitments of the WPS NAP are implemented, governments should consider the WPS NAP as a legally binding document within their national frameworks, passed by the legislature into law. This is particularly important for refugee women, who require legal institutional changes so that their status may be recognized in their host countries and they are able to advocate for their gender-specific concerns to their host country's government. The United States passed their WPS NAP as official legislation—known as the Women, Peace and Security Act of 2017—offering a possible point of reference for how states can include the WPS agenda in their national legal systems. Without viewing the NAP as legally binding, NAPs will continue to be viewed as “just ink on paper,” as one interviewee noted, rather than as transformative processes that guarantee a government's proactive steps toward changing legal frameworks and encouraging women's participation in local and national decision-making on conflict resolution, protection, and recovery.

Notes

¹ Translated to: “what affects all must be approved by all.”

² A 2003 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), signed between the director of General Security and the Regional Office of the UNHCR, formalized “the responsibility shift of refugees to the UNHCR” (Mahdi, 2021, p. 9). In this way, the Lebanese government shifted its personal responsibilities towards refugees, besides Palestinian refugees, to UNHCR and other UN agencies.

³ The present research is a small excerpt of the authors' 157-page master's thesis from New York University.

⁴ We note several limitations to this research, namely: linguistic barriers between English and Arabic; travel restrictions because of the COVID-19 pandemic that limited our interviews to Zoom; interview bias of certain individuals, particularly those who worked for UN or government agencies who may endorse the successes of the NAP; and security concerns, as the Institutional Review Board of New York University

prevented us from speaking directly to refugees for fear of exploitation and limited our interviews to CSOs who work with refugees.

⁵ We consider this sample to be representative of the civil society organizations and UN entities involved in the NAP process. We must note that we do not have a representative sample of interviewees from the Lebanese government, as the only entities that responded to our interview request included the National Commission for Lebanese Women and the Green Party Lebanon.

⁶ Lebanon ratified CEDAW on 16 April 1997, and submitted reservations regarding Article 9, paragraph 2; Article 16, paragraph 1; and Article 29, paragraph 2 (Meeting of State Parties to CEDAW). Lebanon submitted a periodic review to CEDAW in 2014, 2019, and 2022. In its 2020 report, there is limited to no mention of Recommendation No. 30 topics related to peace, conflict prevention, or conflict resolution. In the 2022 report, the Committee again recommended, in line with Recommendation No. 30, that Lebanon ensure the following: 1) there are adequate resources allocated to implement its NAP and to provide results of its implementation efforts in its next report, and 2) women's rights organizations and civil society are actively involved in the implementation, monitoring, and assessment of the NAP, as well as other conflict-related processes (CEDAW, 2022).

⁷ Only two NAPs are currently unavailable for review online: Morocco and Tajikistan.

⁸ NAPs without any mention of refugees include Albania, Australia, Burundi, Denmark, El Salvador, Estonia, Gabon, Guinea, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malawi, Malta, Mexico, Moldova, Nepal, New Zealand, Niger, Paraguay, Solomon Islands, Sweden, Togo, Uruguay, NATO, and the Pacific Region.

⁹ NAPs with moderate mention of refugees include Argentina, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Brazil, the Czech Republic, Finland, Gambia, Georgia, Guinea-Bissau, Japan, Lebanon, Namibia, Poland, Senegal, Spain, Yemen, and the Southern African Development Community.

¹⁰ NAPs with extensive mention of refugees include Cameroon, Djibouti, Jordan, the Netherlands, Rwanda, and Uganda.

¹¹ This research was conducted prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing refugee crisis; these numbers may have changed in recent months.

¹² The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees established a human rights framework for the legal protections of refugees worldwide. The Convention provided a definition of "refugee" (Art. 1) and established the basic rights and obligations of State parties to refugees (Art 6, 7, 8); judicial rights of a refugee within the country of refuge (Chapter 2); welfare services provided to refugees, including social security, education and housing (Art 24, 22, and 21); and expanded on the legal services to be made available to refugees, including documentation, travel documents, and freedom of movement (Art. 27, 28, and 26). Most importantly, the 1951 Convention explicitly denounced the practice of *refoulement*—forcibly returning a refugee to their home country if they risk persecution (Art. 33). While Lebanon has not acceded to either convention, the concept of non-*refoulement* still applies, as it is considered part of customary international law.

¹³ In an interview with another civil society advocate who works directly with Palestinian refugees, the interviewee confirmed that there are more youth in Palestinian camps than originally presented to us by this government interviewee. Civil society members working within Palestinian camps specifically work with youth and young women to promote peacebuilding. Therefore, the claim that Palestinian camps are largely “old ladies” is in fact not accurate.

¹⁴ The UNHCR documents state the Syrian refugee crisis started in March 2011 (UNHCR, 2022b).

¹⁵ We could not find specific dates or locations indicating where or when these consultations were held in our literature review.

¹⁶ Our interviews indicated other areas excluded from the NAP include monitoring and evaluation systems, anti-corruption goals, provisions to combat climate-related emergencies, provisions guaranteeing the implementation of a government quota system, laws, or targets to address child marriage, and assistance for middle-class women.

¹⁷ According to UN General Assembly Resolution 194, the “Right to Return” states that, in reference to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, “refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible” (1948).

¹⁸ This is the interpretation of the Government of Lebanon. The Right to Return is enshrined in Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949) as well as in UN General Assembly Resolution 194. Granting Palestine refugees the rights and privileges of citizenship in Lebanon would not prohibit their right to return to their homeland.

¹⁹ Lebanese women also cannot pass on their citizenship if they marry a non-Lebanese person, further exacerbating legal status problems for women residing in Lebanon.

²⁰ International law scholars and specialists debate UNSC decisions being legally binding. Some note that UNSCR 1325 was not adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and is therefore designated as “soft law” rather than “hard law,” meaning that no element of the resolution legally compels states to act (Miller et al., 2014, p. 15). Other international law specialists contend that all UNSC decisions, especially those adopted under Chapters VI and VII, are globally and legally binding.

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