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NGOisation in Exile: Necessity, Professionalisation, and Subjective Space in the Case of Syrian Women Activists in Berlin

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Abstract

This article aims to analyse the dynamics of NGOisation in the context of women's mobilisation in exile. It focuses on Syrian women activists who were displaced to Berlin after 2011 as a result of the Syrian conflict. Based on twenty-two semi-structured interviews that were carried out and participant observations, the article analyses the professionalisation dynamics of mobilisation on both the individual and institutional levels, aiming to understand how this professionalisation may be impacting the work of women activists, while examining the functions it may be playing for Syrian activists and for the movement in general. The paper illustrates how the phenomenon of NGOisation plays a different, more complex role in the context of exile, by impeding the activist's complete disengagement from the Syrian context. Through different types of activities such as advocacy, research, and service provision, NGOisation allows activists to remain part of the mobilisation for the rights of the Syrian people while providing them with a space for solidarity and support through their subjective and emotional engagements with other Syrian women.

Keywords: Syria; NGOisation; Exile; Mobilisation; Women Activists; Berlin

Introduction

In 2015, Europe experienced the so-called migration crisis with the arrival of many refugees, the majority of whom were Syrian. Among the Syrian refugees were political activists who participated in the Syrian revolution, which erupted in 2011.[1] The initially peaceful uprising was violently oppressed by the Assad regime. The militarisation and Islamisation of the revolution, in addition to the internationalisation of what became a conflict, complicated activists' mobilisation in Syria, especially female activists. The militarisation of the Syrian revolution and the rise of violence restricted women's presence in the public sphere. The rise of Islamists has worsened the situation for female activists. Secular activists, including women, were targeted by both the Assad

regime and Islamist groups and excluded from the decision-making[2] while women activists in general faced heightened restrictions on the basis of their gender.[3] Women in opposition-controlled areas have suffered constraints related to religious and social norms imposed by Islamist groups. This repression has played an important role in reinforcing the mass displacement and migration of Syrian women activists.

Germany alone has hosted 789,465 Syrians including 323,640 Syrian women, making it the country with the largest share of Syrian refugees in Europe.[4] Many Syrian activists live in Germany today, especially in Berlin, where there are 39,118 Syrians who represent four per cent of the Syrian population in Germany. There are 15,505 Syrian women, which accounts for forty per cent of Berlin's Syrian population. [5]

The Swiss journal *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* refers to Berlin as 'the secret capital of the Syrian opposition'.[6] Numerous civic organisations were created, and many events are regularly held. Activists advocate for their cause and provide a variety of services for Syrian refugees. These dynamics have created what Stephan Dufoix defines as a space of *'*exopolitie*'*, a politicised space in the host country, characterised by 'political fluidity,' which is a positionality regarding the regime in power and loyalty to the country of origin. In the space of exopolitie, political activities are held from afar, with the Syrian community dissenting against the regime in their country of origin.[7]

These dynamics also concern Syrian women activists, who were given an 'opportunity to show their strength and to emerge as leaders' in the revolution.[8] It opened space for them to be present in the public sphere alongside men, challenging the widely accepted dominant gender norm that women are predisposed to the private sphere.[9] Thus women did not only revolt against the regime of Bashar al-Assad but also against the 'limited perception of their role in a conservative society'. They realised that they have a 'role to play that goes beyond the home, beyond domesticity'.[10] Such a change in gender roles was reinforced by the displacement, which led to Syrian women carrying out new responsibilities and obtaining new tools, especially in the absence of the men, who were traditionally seen in Syria as sole breadwinners.[11]As illustrated by Umut Ozkaleli, for some Syrian women in the city of Gaziantep, displacement became a 'transforming experience of personal revolution, liberation or strength' in which women aspired for a better future in the host country or for the home country.[12]

When it comes to mobilisation in exile, women activists can maintain their activism outside the borders of their native country, yet they are compelled to struggle at two levels: the first is in regards to the fundamental struggle of political opposition against the regime while the second refers to the struggle for their rights as women and their political participation within the opposition movement to which they belong.[13] Nadje S. Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt study the role of a diaspora in conflict and peace-making from a gender perspective and power relations in the context of war and peace-making. Their work illustrates how 'gender constitutes one of the factors structuring agency and mobilization' during the formation of diaspora.[14] Women may 'challenge traditional gender ideologies and relations, and thereby increase their political mobilization'.[15] This is

especially true when they live in a country whose 'gender ideologies and relations are far more liberal and progressive'.[16]

Women become active in exile in different ways, including for their rights[17], for their community[18] and for their native country. In this study I aim to investigate how Syrian women, as refugees and migrants, orient their activism towards their country of origin and their community in Berlin. Through many women-led movements and organisations, including feminist organisations, which were initiated in Berlin, and through transnational movements, female activists constitute an important part of mobilisation in exile. This mobilisation mainly takes place through non-governmental organisations (NGOs), resulting in 'NGOisation', a term used to describe the dynamics of activism that take place within the context of NGOs, which imposes a certain level of professionalisation and managerial rationality.

Since the 1990s, the world has witnessed an expansion of civil society and the correlated proliferation of NGOs[19], a trend that has been illustrated by many scholars. NGOs were promoted as vital actors of civil society and as an alternative to the paralysed state unable to cope with neoliberal economic policies.[20] Consequently, the development of civil society and that of NGOs are very much intertwined.[21] Countries of the Global South witnessed what is called a 'boom of NGOs' financed by the Global North. These NGOs dominated emancipatory social movements, including women's movements.[22]

As a case in point, the feminist movement in Latin America underwent a process of NGOisation through which the women's struggle was led by NGOs, which differ from social movements or grassroots groups. NGOs are characterised by a high degree of professionalisation and donor dependence.[23] Therefore, the struggle of women has been transformed from a large-scale movement to smaller professionalised organisations, as Sabine Lang describes feminist NGOs in Germany.[24] Islah Jad illustrates a similar transformation undergone by women's social movements in the Middle East due to the retreat of the State and its inability to provide services, alongside the international community's desire to support civil society through NGOs. According to Jad, NGOs differ from the grassroots groups active before the 1990s due to the fact that NGOs have neither a 'large popular base', nor 'local tools'.[25]

Other authors, however, contend that NGOs played an important role in the Middle East, particularly in regards to politics and legislation, before 2011 in the context of authoritarian regimes. They underline NGOs' role in 'pressing governments to be accountable, to adhere to the rule of law, and to abide by broad principles of good government'.[26] Women-led NGOs, which represent a heterogeneous spectrum of diverse local realities and demands in the Middle East,[27] were part of this dynamic of resistance in the Middle East in regards to their role in shaping new proposals, laws and institutions (28).[28] Women-led NGOs are regarded as major actors in increasing the visibility of women in the public sphere, representing a form of 'social participation' and an 'organizational expression of women's movement'.[29] In Egypt before the 2011 revolution, Nadine Sika illustrates how the emergence of NGOs, operating under the control of the regime and later protesting it, contributed to the women's struggle for equal rights and to women's attainment of higher education.[30] Even in other contexts such as Latin America, according to

Alvarez, who criticised the 'boom of NGOs' in the 1990s[31], the effects of the NGOisation must be nuanced, emphasising the role of NGOs in sustaining mobilisation and affecting policy-making.[32]

In Syria, civil society as an opponent to the State was a dynamic that emerged at the beginning of the uprising. Before 2011, the regime of Bashar al-Assad, considered to be one of the 'more intensely authoritarian regimes in the Arab world'[33], had 'eviscerated any form of independent civil society or political opposition'.[34] Although many initiatives and NGOs had been established since 2001, the majority of them were led by Asmaa al-Assad, the wife of Bashar al-Assad. This was one of several 'authoritarian upgrading' strategies employed by the Assad regime to portray itself as democratic in order to avoid international pressure.[35] Asmaa al-Assad was an official sponsor of many women-empowering NGOs. Nevertheless, these organisations lacked any political independence, and they functioned under the guardianship of the regime, which limits the domain of engagement to 'service provision, education, training, sports, youth development, and other areas that are seen as apolitical and therefore non-threatening'.[36] Meanwhile, the Assad regime has repressed and eliminated any truly independent organisations, parties, and syndicates that may challenge its authoritarianism and attempt to make actual change in the social or political situation in general and that of women in particular.[37]

Since 2011, NGOs opposing the Assad regime have increasingly spread, outside and within Syria, especially in regions no longer controlled by the State. Many local social movements, as noted by Rana Khalaf, were 'forced to be registered as NGOs' in order to adapt to the tendency of 'projectisation' of civil society and to 'attract foreign financial and technical support'.[38]

Syria's humanitarian sector has expanded in tandem with the rise in emergencies and urgent needs throughout the country. Since 1965, the global humanitarian sector has been dominated by NGOs, according to Phillipe Ryfman. NGOs along with other public agencies have contributed to reorganising the global humanitarian system into an 'international aid system'.[39] In Syria, the deterioration of living conditions and the urgent need for humanitarian aid have pushed activists to establish or join NGOs in order to become part of the international aid system, in order to better enable them to respond to the country's need for increased employment and effective financial management. NGOisation has progressively expanded to include diverse fields, leading to the development of Syrian civil society and attracting Syrian activists as employees.[40]

The phenomenon of NGOisation becomes clearer in a context of exile. As Leo Forum explains, Syrian activists in Lebanon turn their political activism into humanitarian engagement, illustrating a kind of agency that overcomes 'the hardship of exile'.[41] However, the boundary between humanitarian engagement and political activism is blurred, as shown by Johanna Siméant and Pascal Dauvin. Humanitarian engagement does not translate into a complete rupture with the political sphere or an opposition to the inefficacy of politics.[42] Furthermore, the debate about the politics and the humanitarian sector can also be related to the institutionalisation and professionalisation of the system. The humanitarian sector, structured around NGOs, follows 'managerial rationality': professionalisation and institutionalisation imposed by donors and demanded by local partners.[43] Jad argues that the tendency to institutionalise and professionalise

activism may lead to the transformation of 'a cause for social change into a project with plan, timetable and fixed budget'.[44]

Nevertheless, the dynamic of NGOisation and its role in political and social development should be nuanced in two contexts; first, in the context of authoritarianism, where other means of opposition are restricted, and second, in the context of exile, where activists are far from their country and social bases, as will be shown through this study. This paper aims to examine the dynamics of the NGOisation of Syrian women activists' mobilisation in Berlin, focusing on professionalisation at an individual and organisational level, and analysing how professionalisation impacts and reframes the activities of Syrian NGOs.

Methodology

In this study, I adopt a biographical approach based on twenty-two semi-structured interviews with Syrian women activists who live in Berlin. Most of the participants are mentioned with pseudonyms for protection and confidentiality reasons. I obtained the consent of the participants, noted with pseudonyms and real names, to use their data and quotes in this published study. My position as an 'insider'[45], a Syrian woman who was part of the Syrian revolution, facilitated my access to the field. I used the snowball sampling method, as I contacted activists I knew and every time I met with one, I asked her to introduce me to other activists she knows. Some of these interviews were held face-to-face in Berlin and others via zoom, lasting an average of two hours. The interviewees were between the ages of thirty to sixty-five years old. The majority of them come from a non-traditional social milieu where their independence and freedom of mobility as women is relatively ensured by their families. They belong to middle or upper-middle class and come from or have spent most of their time in Syria in big cities. This factor plays an important role in shaping these participants' gender roles. In big cities in Syria, especially in non-traditional or non-conservative neighbourhoods, conventional gender norms are less observed and opportunities regarding education, culture and engagement in the labour market are more diverse for women. All participants have a minimum education level of a university degree, one has a Ph.D. in natural sciences, and some of them completed their studies in German universities. The majority of them speak fluent English, especially the younger ones. With the exception of two, they have no political affiliation to any political party.

A significant part of my data was collected through participant observation in workshops, which were organised by feminist organisations. The workshops were all held online, although I attended one in person during my field visit to Berlin in the summer of 2020. The workshops were attended by activists from Berlin, activists based in neighbouring countries, and activists who are still in Syria. They dealt with women's issues, such as feminist knowledge and sexual violence, and held writing workshops about exile from a feminist perspective.

The Dynamic of Professionalisation in Berlin: Individual and Organisational Levels

In the Syrian context, both civil society and the humanitarian sector around NGOs were developed in exile, especially after 2011. In this study, participants referenced the beginning of professionalisation during their first exile to neighbouring countries, and mostly in the humanitarian sector in refugee camps. Although it is evident within the collected data that exile plays a key role in reinforcing professionalisation among activists, who were 'all volunteering in Syria'[46], the time factor and the general development of civil society even inside Syria must also be taken into consideration.

At the beginning of the revolution, the concept of being paid for activities that are related to the revolution was not considered by the participants, who believed that it would not take a long time to change the regime. Most of the participants moved from regime-controlled areas to neighbouring countries at least two or three years after the beginning of the uprising. At that time, the Syrian context was already witnessing a rise in NGOisation and professionalisation among activists even within Syria in opposition-controlled areas. Moving to neighbouring countries, considered as a transit for a long exile to Europe, paved the way for participants' initial experience of professionalisation. The unfavourable and tough socioeconomic situation of Syrians, resulting from moving and losing their jobs in Syria and accompanied by challenging conditions in neighbouring host countries, is a key factor in the dynamic of professionalisation among Syrian activists. These conditions favoured activists working in Syrian or international NGOs, better enabling them to maintain their livelihoods. Sarah (a pseudonym) is a forty-year-old political activist who participated in the mobilisation in Syria. In 2013, Sarah was compelled to move from Syria to Lebanon under pressure from security forces. She talked about her first experience of professionalisation: 'Lebanon is so expensive and the economic situation was bad, so I needed to get money to be able to live there. It started from here […] there were the NGOs that were getting funding and gave low salaries to those who facilitated their work […] It began like that'.[47]

Although these challenging conditions do not exist to the same extent in Berlin, the trend of NGOisation can nonetheless be observed among activists. Most of the mobilisation is undertaken through the framework of the NGOisation, which will be highlighted at an individual and organisational level through this study.

Individual level: Professionalisation 'push' and 'pull' factors

In contrast to the situation found in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Turkey, the factors that enhanced the trend of NGOisation are not completely related to difficult socioeconomic conditions, but they are also related to the negative consequences that exile, as a transformative event, leaves on activists' lives, including their professional ones. Working in an NGO is one dynamic of resource mobilisation to address the consequences of exile as a transformative event. Although there are no legal restrictions in terms of work in Berlin, exile's negative effects favour those working in Syrian NGOs over those working in the German labour

market, especially early on when they do not necessarily speak German and when they face restrictions regarding their legal status and residence permit.

The dynamic of hiring in Syrian NGOs can be viewed through 'push' and 'pull' factors, to borrow migration-related terms from Ernst Georg Ravenstein.[48] Push factors are related to the German labour market; for highly qualified and well-educated activists, such as the participants of this study, being a foreigner in Berlin entails multiple obstacles to finding work opportunities. These obstacles include language barriers, the process of recognising Syrian diplomas by the German labour market, and the new exiles' lack of previous experience in the German labour market.

Meanwhile, pull factors are related to the milieu of Syrian NGOs in which activists had developed connections and experience in neighbouring countries in regards to the process of obtaining skills and expertise. Therefore, they became competent in their fields, which are concentrated around areas such as project management, humanitarian work, evaluation, monitoring, and training. This expertise facilitates their integration into Syrian or Syrian-German NGOs in Berlin, in comparison to the traditional German labour market. Thus, working in an NGO become a type of resource mobilisation that dealt with exile's implications on professional life.

In many cases, the acquired competences are very different from the activist's initial specialisation in Syria, and the experience that was undergone by the activist during their first exile allowed them to attain the fundamental skills necessary for being hired by organisations in Berlin. Consequently, their initial exile has come to play the role of a 'pull' factor towards the NGO scene. Recruitment within these NGOs has become more vital for activists who did not seek asylum in Germany and who have a job or study residence permit. These activists do not receive any financial aid from the State; therefore, finding a job is an urgent necessity for them; a necessity that can impede their learning of the German language and their integration into the German labour market. Syrian NGOs provide these activists with job opportunities, which help them find a way out of this impasse despite the low salaries and precarity of jobs in Syrian NGOs in Berlin.

Naya (a pseudonym) is thirty-eight years old and a feminist activist from a small city in Syria; she had lived in Damascus and comes from an 'open-minded' family. She participated in the revolution and moved to Germany in 2016 as a researcher. She talks about her experience finding a job and being hired by Syrian associations: 'I was not able to find a job for the first six months. I was here on a residence permit for research. After that my permit expired; I had nothing. They were giving me a residence permit every three months until I found a job. It [the residence permit] does not provide anything, neither social safety nor money. So, I started to work with Syrian associations at the beginning. I started with three as a freelancer; my work was in research. I needed a salary'.[49]

The participants' experience in searching for a job, under the duress of urgent financial needs, reflects how Syrian NGOs serve as a practical solution for the effects of exile on professional life. Therefore, the dynamic of pushing and pulling between the German labour market and the milieu of NGOs in exile is essential to understanding this micro-analysis of the tendency toward professionalisation among activists and the dynamic of becoming hired by an NGO.

Although professionalisation is a widespread phenomenon among exiled activists, in the case of exiled Syrian activists it has another aspect, embodied in the feeling of guilt. Becoming employed by a Syrian NGO, which works in the context of the Syrian revolution, can generate a feeling of culpability. The concept that activists are paid for work that aims to serve the principles of the Syrian revolution, and/or serve the Syrian people, can be troubling for some activists.[50] Naya described this as a 'dilemma between a trend [NGOisation], which kills volunteering for the cause, and the economic needs of the country as a whole and not only those of exiled activists [referring to the trend of NGOisation inside Syria]'.[51]

This dilemma forms part of the wider political debate among Syrian activists, especially activists who remain in Syria and those in diaspora, regarding the 'opposition of hotels', accusing activists who work for NGOs of 'earning their living at the expense of the Syrian people's blood'.

All of this complicates the situation of exiled activists who work in Syrian NGOs, and thus they cope with this dilemma through two primary mechanisms. The first mechanism is related to volunteering 'a little bit' alongside the paid work in order to alleviate the feeling of guilt. Activists may choose another association in which to volunteer, as Naya did with one of the three organisations in which she was working. The second coping mechanism is working harder and for more hours than is required by the job. By exerting more effort than is required, the participants of the study mentioned that they consider themselves to be serving the Syrian revolution. Thus, they blur the boundaries between their professional and political engagement, and as a result, they gain autonomy from the professional framework that imposes many rules, such as determined hours and tasks. Overwork becomes a coping mechanism to compensate for their feeling of guilt and to justify to themselves being paid. Asia is a political activist who participated in peaceful protests in Syria. She left Syria for a neighbouring country and finally moved to Berlin. She works with a Syrian human rights advocacy group. She deals with her work in this way: 'Volunteering comforts me a lot. I don't know, maybe part of it is self-justification. It is not easy to work with the […] organisation; a lot of people look [strangely] at me because I am paid for this. It is not easy, sometimes I reach moments where I am close to breakdown. You work for a cause, and you earn money but at the same time, certainly I do not deal with this cause like my non-Syrian colleagues. It is guaranteed that we, as Syrians, give a lot, as much as we can. I have never been able to view my job as a nine-to-five job; I always feel urgency and I must finish things'. [52]

To cope with the feelings of guilt and the perception of other Syrians about her job, Asia justifies her professionalisation to herself by insisting that she does not engage with her profession in the same way as her colleagues. All of this explains the dynamic of professionalisation at the micro level, related to the activists themselves. At the same time, it is important to understand professionalisation at the organisational level by highlighting the engagement within an NGO and its functioning.

Organisational level: Professional standards and short-term projects

In Germany, the first step to establishing a non-governmental organisation is to register it officially by law with a local court called *Amtsgericht.* Thus, legal or official recognition is a fundamental

characteristic of an NGO.[53] This concerns most of the NGOs based in Berlin, including transnational ones which are not necessarily registered in Germany and may only have a branch there. Recognition here does not only mean recognition by the law, but it also means recognition by a spectrum of local partners and international entities who are interested in the Syrian cause.

The institutionalisation of engagement through an official structure manifested as an NGO facilitates the development of communication channels with decision makers and specialised entities who form part of a global system which favours and recognises these NGOs. Therefore, NGOisation in the context of exile becomes one of the resource mobilisation dynamics that is necessitated by the system. Activists' experiences with decision makers and international entities reinforce the importance of NGOs when it comes to the recognition of issues or demands. NGOisation also facilitates the obtainment of funding, which is essential for activities that take place in exile and that have been transformed relative to political engagement in the native country. Funding is also necessary for employees' salaries, and the NGO's different activities -such as workshops, research, events, and campaigns - require a specific budget. The funds are usually used to build the capacity of the organisation and to cover the cost of their activities, as referred to by many interviewees.[54]

For example, activists (before Covid-19) may travel from Berlin to Geneva to give a testimony at a session of the United Nations. This travel demands a specific budget to cover trip and accommodation costs that activists are not necessarily able to cover. Therefore, even movements whose members are not paid (such as survivor and family groups mobilised for the issue of detention) had to be part of this system; first, in order to be recognised, and then to cover the cost of their activities. According to the interviewees, being paid for one's mobilisation in search of a detained family member is unacceptable. Hence, being active in a cause that concerns the activists personally impedes their integration into the NGO system.

Nevertheless, these movements still form part of this overall NGO system, through other NGOs that conduct related work. Activists in Families for Freedom[55] do not receive any salary for their mobilisation as they are active for 'their loved ones' – besides, the organisation is not registered as an NGO. Nevertheless, they have partnerships with three organisations which manage their funds, relations, and all administrative issues. Fadwa Mahmoud is a member of the Communist Labour Party; she was arrested in 1992 and imprisoned for two years under the regime of Hafez al-Assad. When the revolution began, she was active politically alongside her husband. In 2012, her husband and son were arrested at the airport in Damascus when they returned from China for political negotiations. In 2015, she left for Berlin, where she lives today as a political refugee. After two years of individual advocacy for the detention issue, she co-founded the movement 'Families for Freedom' in 2017. She explains: 'The work in our movement is certainly volunteer. This is the cause of detainees; it is not possible to get paid; we did not register it as an NGO. We do not want to be part of the NGO system; the history of NGOs is discouraging […]. However, three organisations – Syria Campaign, Dawlaty and Women Now – do the NGO work for us. They cover our costs; they apply for funds in the name of the movement […] for a specific project'.[56]

Although such movements attempt to resist the phenomenon of NGOisation, they nevertheless form part of it through other organisations that play the steering role in providing a sort of institutionalisation and funding, both of which are essential to carrying out various activities in exile. Both institutionalisation and funding impose a certain level of managerial rationality. The management of that funding compels NGOs to follow professional standards and create specific job positions in their organisations. To obtain funds, activists need to apply by writing a proposal for a project. According to the proposal, they receive funding for a specific period of time and for the stated mission(s) in the proposal. At the end of the project, they must write a financial report justifying all expenses. These steps entail a logic of managerial rationality and require specific job positions. These projects tend to be designed for the short term and focus on particular issues, as donors often prefer to provide small amounts of funding for projects with precise themes.

Thus, every proposal considers the need to fund small parts of the mobilisation; for instance, covering the costs of short-term activities such as a workshop or a campaign. This logic generates a tendency to create more projects in order to be able to obtain more funding, which can ensure the financial continuity of the organisation. Thus, the funding logic through this system would itself lead to a transformation in activism. This transformation occurs because funding and activities are mutually reinforcing. In other words, activists in exile need funds to hold activities, and the funding itself generates a dynamic of short-term projects that influence these activities. In addition, this dynamic may result in competition among organisations due to the lack of resources. During my research, such information circulates among activists who themselves form part of this system. They describe the NGO scene as competitive and tiring. This aspect of NGOisation, which is related to financial issues and the interaction between organisations, needs to be addressed in a future study.

Many scholars, including the aforementioned Islah, Lang, Chahim and Prakash, have illustrated that the phenomenon of NGOisation quells social movements and volunteerism, leading to the loss of a large popular base and replacing it with a small number of employees applying for project funding. Yet in a context of exile, where the social movement has already lost its popular base due to distance and also has a higher possibility of ‘exit’ (borrowing from the terminology of Albert O. Hirschman[57]), I contend that NGOisation can be an alternative for maintaining engagement and can play a different role. The NGO represents a space for mobilisation in the context of exile through which the possibility of disengagement is higher than it is in the country of origin, providing an arena for an array of activities and specialisations such as advocacy, documenting human rights violations, research and service provision. More precisely, on an individual level, NGOisation impedes exiled Syrian activists from completely ‘exiting’ or leaving activism, instead keeping these activists connected to the Syrian cause through the provision of job opportunities and the weaving of solidarity links among them.

NGOisation: Impeding a Complete Exit and a Subjective Space

Impeding a complete exit and maintaining engagement

In exile, as attested to by the collected data, migrants started their lives anew, from scratch. Moving to a foreign country, especially in the context of war and exile, has negative implications and entails unique kinds of loss. It is a 'non-chosen rupture' imposed by repression and duress, causing a state of disequilibrium which affects all aspects of life and causes an emotional and social rupture.[58] Therefore, the possibility of making an 'exit' from mobilisation or activism can be higher in the country of exile than in the country of origin due to geographical distance and social consequences. However, finding a job in an NGO can impede a complete 'exit', bringing activists back to the milieu of activism in Berlin.

Some interviewees decided to make an exit or take a distance from the Syrian revolution, in order to prioritise their lives, which needed to be rebuilt from scratch, and to try to advance in the host country in terms of language learning and studies. Nonetheless in the end, they found themselves working in a Syrian NGO focused upon the revolution. Although the emphases of their work vary - from working with the local Syrian community, to international entities, to the host society, to work focused upon the country of Syria itself- in the end they all serve the Syrian cause in one way or another. They keep engagement alive in a context where activists are far from the popular base on the ground due to distance. I argue that exile itself puts an end to the concepts of a large popular base and local tools. Therefore, the claim that professionalisation transforms the women's struggle from a large-scale movement to small, professionalised organisations must be nuanced in the context of activism from afar. Working in an NGO impedes activists, as Naya explained, in 'getting far from the Syrian situation' in terms of engagement; in other words, it decreases the possibility of a complete exit.

Jelnar Ahmad is a civic activist and pharmacist who participated in the peaceful protests in Syria and then became active in humanitarian engagement. She moved to Turkey in 2013 and to Germany in 2015. At the beginning of her exile, Jelnar decided to focus on language learning and studies. Nonetheless, in 2017 she found herself working in an organisation called Impact. The organisation's objective is to empower civil society for democratic change, through conducting research and organisational capacity building. Its main focus is Syrian civil society. Jelnar is the director of the research, mentoring and evaluation department. It is the same field in which she worked while exiled in Turkey and accumulated three years of experience. Her team, based in Berlin and Syria, conducts research about Syrian civil society, aiming to evaluate its needs and challenges in order to support it. Through her job, she contributes to supporting Syrian civil society, and also works closely with activists from partner organisations in Syria and in Berlin. As a result, Jelnar has become more engaged in the activism scene and - in addition to attending workshops and events due to her job - she attends other workshops voluntarily. Although she does not consider her work as a kind of political engagement, it brings her back to the Syrian context and activism scene, thereby allowing her to engage with issues at the heart of the Syrian revolution. Her profession has become devoted to the political cause in a context of exile by which she does

not have direct access to the ground or grassroots mobilisation. Although Jelnar considers her work as merely a profession, it also serves, in other ways, the general Syrian revolutionary cause. Thus, for Jelnar, the boundaries between her activism and her profession have become blurred.

In other cases, as well, activists do not see their work only as a profession. They view it differently, as Asia mentioned above, by giving more effort as a type of engagement; or, by considering it as a duty which keeps them in touch with a popular base in Syria. This reflects an overlap between employment and activism. Even the participants who did not work in Syrian NGOs tried to devote their work to serving the cause. Their commitment to the struggle is reflected in their work, which becomes part of the resistance in exile. One such example of this resistance is the Syrian lawyers who work in European entities in the field of transnational justice, targeting the regime and working with survivors.

Joumana Seif is a fifty-one-year-old lawyer who began working as a human rights activist in Damascus in 2001, with a focus on political prisoners. She was raised and educated in a very political environment and became engaged in the Syrian revolution. She has worked in Berlin since 2017 as a research fellow at the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights. She works with the Syria team, focusing on two legal cases. The first is the al-Khatib trial, which began in April 2020, suing high-ranking officials of the Syrian intelligence services for the crimes of enforced disappearance and torture. The second is a case she proposed to build, suing officials for gender-based crimes in detention facilities after a complaint was submitted by seven survivors to the Federal Public Prosecutor in Karlsruhe in June 2020. Joumana talks about her job: 'The focus of my work is our cause and the crimes committed by the regime [...] When I work with survivors, in the end it is a human rights issue, aiming to expose these violations and crimes.'[59]

Joumana perceives her effort targeting the regime and working with survivors as work for the cause. It is a part of the exiled Syrian communities' mobilisation in Europe in pursuing transitional justice, itself a kind of political engagement. Activists channel their commitment through their professions within NGOs. Therefore, in the context of exile, where the social movement has already lost its large popular base, NGOisation can play a different role in impeding a complete exit and reinforcing engagement in activism. At the same time, it can play a role in providing an emotional and subjective space of interaction and solidarity links among activists in exile. This space opposes the traditional-masculine way of understanding the managerial rationality and professionalisation imposed by the process of NGOisation.

NGO workshops: Emotional and subjective spaces of solidarity

Although NGOs are generally considered to be spaces of managerial rationality and professional standards, in the case of exiled activists, NGOs can provide a subjective and emotional space for interaction between them. This space can reinforce solidarity links and bring activists closer together who live in different countries, including in Syria. One of the activities observed though this study was the women's workshop. Women's workshops were organised by NGOs and held online via Zoom, except for one held in Berlin. They were announced on the organisations' social media pages, and were aimed at women, especially activists, living in different countries.

Accordingly, these workshops can be considered as a transnational space. The sessions were held by women instructors and aimed to raise awareness about different women's issues, such as sexual violence, feminist knowledge, and integration. Although in some cases these workshops were primarily aimed at providing specific knowledge, they also ended up providing an emotional and subjective or personal feminist space, which challenges the traditional standards of professionalism and brings activists closer together through two dynamics.

The first dynamic is related to the sharing of personal experiences. The workshops begin with a presentation by the instructor, who is an activist, academic, or a writer. Following the presentation, time is left for attendees to react, ask questions, and participate. Although part of these reactions is in direct response to the presentation, another significant aspect of this part of the workshop is that it becomes increasingly centred upon the stories of attendees themselves. The presentation stimulates the activists' memories and motivates them to talk about related personal experiences. These stories can be viewed in light of the topics addressed at the workshop, which for the most part concerned women's issues and therefore can bring forth stories about women's suffering or challenges such as social oppression and violence. The Syrian tragedy, the war and its losses, and especially exile, are essential components in the narrated stories. The workshop's activities provide a space in which activists can express themselves and challenge difficult experiences that are constructed around suffering. Emotions are evoked that are, for the most part, painful and can end in tears. Thus, the workshop is reshaped as a space that allows activists to be present as emotional subjects with their fatigue, problems, and pain. In the process, they can break away from the professional mentality created through the framework of NGOisation.

This dynamic transforms discussions and interactions within these workshops into personal ones which concern the attendee herself - her life as a woman, daughter, mother, wife, and activist rather than as an employee who is eclipsed by projects, job tasks, and specific professional rules, standards, and obligations. Thus, these workshops represent a rupture from traditional professional standards, including the managerial rationality and depersonalisation imposed by NGOisation as a system. Jelnar calls it a '1, 2, 3 system…not kind, nor close to the person'.[60]

In January 2021, Women Now for Development organised a five-day workshop titled 'Delving into feminist concepts and tools to enrich Syrian feminist thought and work'. The workshop was given by two academics and two feminist authors and attended by around twenty women, mostly activists.[61] The third day was designed to discuss feminist writing and was held by Nora Amin, an Egyptian feminist novelist, and Samar Yazbek, a Syrian dissident and feminist writer who has lived in Paris since 2012. Both instructors began their sessions by representing feminist writing and women novelists' struggle in 'patriarchal dominated literature'. Yazbek directed a question at the women attendees: 'Why do you not write?'[62], and invited them to respond. This question generated an array of personal stories and experiences, evoking strong emotions among attendees. Sanaa (a pseudonym), an attendee who lives in Syria, shared her experience with writing as the following: 'These discussions brought back old memories, and I feel that I want to cry. I started to write when I was a child, about my sister and her boyfriend. My family prevented them from getting married […] At the beginning of the revolution I wrote about my father. The last time I

wrote was also about him - and in the morning, they brought him as a dead body, so after that I stopped writing'. [63]

The story of Sanaa does not only reflect her experience with writing about a conservative society; it also brought forth her emotions and losses, evoking her pain with the loss of her father and her desire to grieve. It represented her as a daughter and as an emotional subject, narrowing the distance between her and other attendees who showed solidarity and support.

The second dynamic of this emotional and personal space is the solidarity links that are interwoven through the sharing of experience. Sharing or exchanging experiences creates 'a safe space' of collective spirit among activists, based upon solidarity links. It is an example of resource mobilisation in order to overcome the hardship of exile. Listening to the suffering of others and the expression of their emotions makes activists feel that they are not alone in their struggles and in the difficulties of living in exile. During my interview with Nour (a pseudonym) who participated in the same workshop, I came to understand how vital the workshop was to creating this collective spirit in a context of exile in which activists are burdened by feelings of loneliness and estrangement. Nour, a forty-year-old political and feminist activist, shared an intimate story during the workshop: 'I felt that [the workshop]is a safe place where I can share a story with other women in order not to feel alone. A woman who has experienced a similar story also does not feel alone. As women, unless we hear the experiences of each other, we will feel that we are alone…foreigners.'[64]

For Nour, this collective spirit is created in knowing that there are other women who may have had experiences similar to hers. This knowledge eases her own difficulties, as she views them through the lens of a collective pain. In addition, the collective spirit can be reinforced by expressions of solidarity and support towards the narrator of the personal story. Attendees often verbally express their solidarity, in person or on Zoom chats, conveying that they stand with the women who tell their stories and that they are there to support them. In the same workshop, when one attendee began to cry as she recalled a difficult story, other women attendees persistently expressed to her that she is not alone in her sorrow – saying, for instance, 'Your tears are precious to us', or encouraging her 'My dear, may God give you strength'. Such expressions of kindness build bridges of solidarity among activists who did not necessarily know each other before the workshop. To summarise, the collective spirit is crystallised by three actions: listening to others' stories, telling a story about oneself, and receiving support and solidarity. Taken together, these actions lead to solidarity and networking among activists, which persists even after the workshop ends.

Bridges of solidarity are not limited to verbal or written expressions during the workshop, but also expand to include offering collective help if necessary. The Syrian Feminist Lobby, [65] in parallel with its campaign about violence against women, organised a two-day workshop about gender-based violence via Zoom. The workshop was held by Rima Flihan, a script writer, journalist, and human rights activist, and was attended by seventeen women. Flihan began the presentation on the situation of women in Syria, highlighting relevant laws, politics, the level of violence against women, and potential solutions. Remarkably, during this workshop, the women

gave few reactions to the presentation itself; instead, most of the women's participation consisted of sharing their experiences in regards to the related topics. One of the shared stories was that of Bayan (a pseudonym) who was a long-time victim of domestic violence by her husband in Syria. After divorcing and travelling to another Arab country to live with her brother, she again suffered from domestic violence, this time at the hands her brother. In addition to talking about her suffering, which she believed to be 'helpful', especially in regards to the 'support and solidarity' she felt from other attendees, she also received material support. At that time, Flihan decided to take action by contacting friends and organisations in the country where she lives to provide her with the necessary help.[66]

In the context of NGO workshops, activists receive many forms of support and aid, such as support in finding work or education, including enrolling in studies at German universities. In additional to material assistance, emotional and social support is received by the women activists who meet or gather together after the workshop ends. Thus, workshops contribute to networking among women, weaving links of solidarity and providing support after the end of the workshop, despite the overall distance between the attendees.

In sum, the workshops organised by NGOs provide a personal and emotional space for solidarity among women, which stands in stark contrast to the managerial rationality and traditional professional standards imposed by NGOisation on activists. These links of solidarity constitute resource mobilisation aimed at overcoming the challenges and hardships brought about by exile as a life-rupture; this solidarity as a form of resource mobilisation not only provides emotional support to counter the loneliness and estrangement often felt in exile, but it also provides material support for issues such as domestic violence, education, and employment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the mobilisation of Syrian women activists in Berlin is a representation of NGOisation; in other words, this mobilisation is taking place mainly through NGOs. This study examined the phenomenon of NGOisation in a nuanced manner, situating its dynamics in a specific and unique context, which is that of Syrian women activists in exile. The study revealed a certain level of context-related complexity, which I assert was not adequately taken into consideration by several authors who criticised - in a generalised way – the trend of NGOisation and its effects on social movements in the Middle East.

More pointedly, the study illustrated that NGOisation is rendered necessary in exile at both the individual and organisational levels due to the 'push' factors in the German labour market and the 'pull' factors in the NGO scene at an organisational level; resulting from the need for recognition, institutionalisation, and fund management. Thus, a certain level of professionalisation and managerial rationality is imposed upon activists employed at NGOs – which – as some scholars assert - contributes to elevating smaller segments of activists belonging to a social movement's popular base to specialised and salaried professional positions, thereby diminishing and weakening the movement as a whole.[67]

Nevertheless, in the context of exile by which the distance has already put an end to that popular base and in which the potential for disengagement is higher than in the country of origin, NGOs can play a different role. Firstly, they impede a complete 'exit' from activism by providing job opportunities to activists relevant to their home country and the original cause. These jobs maintain activists' sense of engagement and serve, in a variety of ways, the principles of the Syrian revolution. NGOs also provide a space for mobilisation with an array of activities such as advocacy, research, transitional justice and service provision, which contribute to both the Syrian diaspora's engagement in the political cause and more particularly, to Syrian women's mobilisation for equal rights.

Furthermore, NGOs provide activists with spaces for gathering, which are characterised by personal and emotional aspects, challenging the rigid masculine understanding of both the political and professional sphere. By organising workshops, NGOs offer subjective spaces of solidarity, support and assistance, which creates a durable network among women.

This study provided an overview of the dynamics of NGOisation within the social movement of exiled Syrian women in Berlin. The NGOs and their members form specific networks of activists in Berlin. Future studies can contribute to deepening this subject by analysing other dynamics within these networks of activists and NGOs, highlighting issues such as the dynamics of specialisation, competition, and division. Such studies may focus on funding and the role of donors in both sustaining these NGOs and fuelling competition among them.

And finally, an important topic for further research is the coping mechanisms adopted Syrian activists in response to their feelings of guilt towards the revolutionary cause and the fate of the Syrian people; guilt that often arises in a context of exile and under the process of professionalisation entailed by involvement in NGOs. Such research can focus upon the potential negative ramifications of professionalisation, including psychological ones such as burnout and toxic relationships among colleagues.

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