

GRADUATE WOMEN NZ PROGRESS REPORT

HALA NASR, MAY 2019

RESEARCH PROGRESS

My research, at the time I was applying for the GWNZ scholarship, was focused on responses to gender-based violence (GBV) experienced by Syrian refugee women, with the aim of providing localised and collectivised examples from Lebanon. Just over one year into my PhD, I have since narrowed down my scope to the most popular form of GBV intervention for Syrian refugee women: women and girl safe spaces (WGSS).

To give you a sense of how prolific WGSS have become in recent years, UNFPA (the lead agency for the global GBV sub-cluster) is currently running 541 safe spaces in 23 countries and UN Women established 59 safe spaces in 31 crisis-affected countries in 2017 alone. It appears the Syrian conflict has been the focal point for this proliferation. For example, 271 of the 541 safe spaces that UNFPA run are in Syria and its neighbouring countries.

WGSS are imagined as places where women are safe from gendered inequalities and GBV. They are implemented in many ways, which I have summarised into three main categories:

1. Individualised GBV services such as case management, counselling, and legal aid;
2. Group services focusing on rights awareness, collective empowerment and solidarity-building; and
3. Or a combination of the individual and group services, mainly through psychosocial services.

However, despite being widely recommended and implemented, there is very little academic and grey literature on WGSS in development and humanitarian settings to support their design and implementation. Currently most evaluations of WGSS are assessed solely through quantitative indicators. Beyond the 'numbers', we have little understanding of WGSS' impact on refugee women's lives and opportunities, particularly from their own perspectives. My PhD hopes to fill this gap, centring on the perspectives and experiences of Syrian refugee women accessing two WGSS run by two different international NGOs¹ in Lebanon, which I have secured access to.

The process for getting approval to do research on sensitive topics such as GBV with refugee women who are in vulnerable precarious situations has been lengthy. Following four months of various checks and balances, I have received ethics approval from the Ethics board in mid-May 2019 and high-risk travel approval from the Academic Registrar at the University of Melbourne in late May 2019.

¹ These NGOs have requested anonymity.

I am now set to travel to Lebanon for six months to conduct my field work, with a planned stopover in Athens, Greece to visit a successful WGSS for Syrian refugee women.

HIGHLIGHTS SO FAR

There have been several highlights thus far. At the one-year mark of a PhD, candidates submit an updated in-depth research proposal as well as a half-hour presentation to the public and academic peers. My PhD panel convened and officially confirmed me as a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne in late April 2019. The feedback I received was extremely positive, specifically my public speaking skills and my ability to explain complex ideas in a simple relatable way.

In addition, I have published an IRiS working paper entitled, “What responses, approaches to treatment, and other supports are effective in assisting refugees who have experienced sexual and gender-based violence?”, alongside my two supervisors, Karen Block and Cathy Vaughan, and a colleague Sara Alsarraf. This was a major highlight for me, as the value of my contributions meant that I was named second author.

Lastly, I was accepted and presented a paper entitled, “Whose Voice is Louder?” Safe Spaces as a Response to Gender-based Violence, at the Researchers for Asylum Seekers conference in November 2018.