A Phoenix in a Blue Sky: Basma's Journey

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The focus of this article is to share my life's trajectory on a personal, professional and academic experience which has been shaped by my lived and inherited status as a third-generation of a stateless Palestinian refugee who has lived with her fellows in one of the Palestinian camps in Lebanon for more than 75 years so far. I was able to pursue a PhD in Migration Studies after getting a fully funded scholarship from the University of Kent in September 2021.

I will start by reflecting on my personal lived experience as a refugee, then will explore how this lived experience led to my involvement in humanitarian work with the UN, and finally, how these experiences shaped my academic journey to conduct PhD in migration studies. In this reflection, I agree with Arendt (1930) about the importance and centrality of personal experiences to shape life's trajectory that influences the processes of making the "Past, Present, and Future".

> *'The Moment We Arrived in Saida [City in the South of Lebanon] in the Afternoon, We Became Refugees' – (Kanafani, 1998, p. 75).*

The sky in a camp

I was born and inherited the status of a third generation of stateless Palestinian refugees due to the expulsion of my grandparents from their homeland in 1948. Due to this protracted displacement, I have lived my life so far displaced with no official belonging to a country and living in one of the Palestinian camps in Lebanon. Living in a camp was and still is a challenging experience for a child and human being to live. My base and the other Palestinian camps in Lebanon are overcrowded, surrounded by military checkpoints and entry points, and have minimal substandard infrastructure, sanitation, and housing conditions. This situation is caused by the requirement of authorisation of the Lebanese authorities to improve housing conditions and bring building materials to the camp.

In addition, in Lebanon, I lived in a limbo legal situation, denied any official status and my fundamental human rights such as the right to employment, healthcare, access to higher

education, freedom of movement and travel and the right to own property. This denial of fundamental human rights created a day-to-day reality for me and my growth as a child and adult in exile and the camps. I remembered that looking at the sky and imagining flying far away and high was one of my childhood dreams and a source of hope while living in the camp.

As a child and an adult refugee, I have been labelled and stigmatised for many years due to my status as a refugee living in a camp with other refugees. This labelling led me to systematically face discrimination, marginalisation, persecution, and hostility with the lack of durable solutions and protracted displacement. However, this built my capacity and ability to adapt, thrive, achieve, and grow in the face of complex circumstances and challenging lived experiences. This lived understanding supported me in knowing my passion, mission, and cause in this life: helping other refugees in any part of this world and using any opportunity to achieve this cause.

A call for support in the field

Living as a refugee led me to discover my passion and mission in this life, where I had a clear plan for where I want to be and how I should engage in building my skills, understanding and knowledge about humanitarian and community work and in influencing public opinions about refugees and their plight. So, I started to engage in my Palestinian community and community organisations as a volunteer to teach traditional dances to young women and girls, English language courses for school children and develop and implement community projects to improve my camp's condition.

As a result of these ten years of volunteering in my camp and other camps in Lebanon to work with and for my refugee community, I supported my application for a full-time humanitarian job to work with international organisations inside the centre on child protection, sexual and gender-based violence agenda and community outreach and mobilisation. I worked with these international organisations in the centres of Lebanon for four years. I had the opportunity to build, expand and enhance my communication, networking, partnership, and engagement skills and capacities, in addition to gaining the needed understanding, awareness, and contextual knowledge to work with displaced communities living in the camps and in a highly complex political and legal environment.

Finally, these valuable acquired local experiences, skills and capacities working with my refugee community in different camps facilitated me to join UN agencies such as UNHCR to work with Syrian refugees and internally displaced after the start of the Syrian conflict. It was an eye-opening, critical, and unique opportunity for a refugee to work with UNHCR to support other refugees in Lebanon and Syria. Based on feedback from a senior colleague at that time, I was grateful that my lived experiences and skills were a real asset to UNHCR

work in Lebanon and Syria. I was privileged to use my understanding and experiences to advocate for Syrian refugees within UNHCR and to raise my voice and awareness about certain harmful practices and negative narratives about the vulnerability, resilience, agency, dignity, and self-reliance of displaced people within our humanitarian work in the field, with my colleagues and with the communities and individuals.

The dream of a PhD

Before pursuing PhD in Migration studies, I received a fully funded Chevening scholarship as the first Palestinian refugee from Lebanon in 20 years who received this scholarship to do a master's degree in development studies at Oxford Brookes University in the UK in 2019. I had free primary and secondary education in UNRWA refugee schools in my camp and was taught by refugee teachers.

Pursuing PhD in Migration studies was inspired firstly by my lived and professional experiences working with and for refugee communities and organisations and noticing their accurate and valuable contributions to humanitarian work and communities. These contributions are attributed to the existing skills and capacities that they both must influence and create societal change and mobilisation.

Second, these experiences have led me to take an informed decision to research and investigate the work and impact of refugee-led organisations (RLOs) and refugees' participation and inclusion in developing solutions to their protracted displacement and in their exile. This decision was mainly influenced by these experiences and my improved understanding of the severe gaps, barriers and possible opportunities embedded within the humanitarian ecosystem regarding RLOs and refugees' leadership in humanitarian action.

So, I am researching the meaning and actual implementation of localisation in humanitarian action through the work of RLOs. I hope to bridge all these experiences and unique positionality to study the impact that refugee-led community-based organisations have through their direct provision of capacity building and development to their communities, representation; their understanding of the migration and refugee crises; and the contributions of displaced people in creating and sustaining durable solutions in humanitarian action.

Moreover, I mobilised every opportunity in the university to shift and counter the refugee and migration studies narrative, like the vulnerability narrative, focusing on the contributions and work of refugees in displacement. I shared my experiences through teaching Bachelor and Master students about refugee and migration topics in the classrooms and through leading, planning, implementing, and engaging in public events, discussions and forums within the university and in the city. Also, through acting as a co-

chair for the University of Sanctuary steering group for our application to become a University of Sanctuary.

Furthermore, I plan to use all these experiences, skills, understanding and awareness to act as a role model and a source of hope to help other refugees worldwide access higher education. I also aspire to contribute to the research and academia in the UK and globally by bringing the lived voices and experiences of displaced people and practitioners from the field. I want to inspire other refugees to lead the research about their displacement and experiences and to contextualise these in the academic field, policy and practice to build better humanitarian solutions for contemporary issues and bridge the gap between academia and practice.

In conclusion, through this life's trajectory and experiences, I have grown emotionally, intellectually and mentally, enlightened, tested, exposed, challenged, empowered, and mobilised to claim my voice, follow my passion and mission in the migration and humanitarian sectors and in this life and to bridge all the experiences from the past to the present and the future. So, I can create a better future for myself and inspire or influence a better one for my fellows and everyone.

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