Article

SEXUALITIES

Sexualities
2024, Vol. 0(0) 1–23

DOI: 10.1177/13634607241262147
journals.sagepub.com/home/sex
Sage

Strategies of passing: Hypervisible bodies, disrespectable affinities, and Syrian trans refugees in Lebanon

Nisrine Chaer
Utrecht University, Netherlands

Abstract

In today's Lebanon, Syrian trans refugees face intersecting systems of violence that position them as hypervisible 'deviants' in multiple ways: as refugees without formal legal residency, as trans individuals without congruent gender markers, and as working-class individuals. Attending ethnographically to the notions of hypervisibility and (dis)respectability that underpin such deviances, this article explores how the Lebanese security-morality apparatus enforces hypervisibility on Syrian trans women by eroding their respectability and privacy. In the context of recent crackdowns on Syrian-majority areas and LGBT spaces, I look specifically to how (dis)respectability is deployed by and against Syrian trans women in their crisscrossing of the boundaries of both a 'trans closet' and ideals of middle-class Lebanese (cis)womanhood. My analysis evolves the concept of respectability to account for how my interlocuters navigate the permeability of their private spaces, secure themselves against potential harm, and assert their sovereignty. This is accomplished through the use of two strategies: 'respectable passing'—investing in markers of class and citizenship over those of gender, and 'disrespectable affinities'—engaging in a politics of the vulgar and forging social connections between hypervisible communities, effecting alternative forms of sociality that unsettle the border between trans and cis Syrians in the racialized and classed order of contemporary Beirut.

Keywords

Hypervisibility, Lebanon, refugees, respectability, transgender

Corresponding author:
Nisrine Chaer, Faculty of Humanities, Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University, Utrecht 3512 HJ, Netherlands.
Email: nisrine.chaer@gmail.com, n.chaer@uu.nl

'I order lots of food delivery because I'm a working woman who can afford it'.

says Siham to her nosey neighbor who wondered why Siham's garbage bags were so big. Originally from Syria, Siham is a working-class trans[1] woman in her thirties who fled war and persecution in 2012 and has been living undocumented in Lebanon for eleven years. Lebanon, despite hosting the highest proportion of refugees per-capita in the world, predominately Syrians and Palestinians, has not ratified the United Nations 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees nor the 1967 Protocol. After the Syrian refugee population grew exponentially following the 2011 Revolution, Siham witnessed the rise in anti-refugee sentiments and practices. Syrians were increasingly surveilled and securitized across the country.

Siham's neighbors in the Ain El-Remmeineh area of Beirut do not know that she is a trans woman, but several of them intrusively interrogated her after learning that she was a Syrian woman living alone. They suspected she was a sex worker. In riposte, Siham chooses to capitalize on that which marks high economic consumption—here, her piled-up garbage bags, indicative of her frequent food delivery orders—to signal a more respectable class position vis-à-vis her meddlesome working-class Lebanese neighbors. While Siham is often preoccupied with maintaining social prestige and performing wealth in front of her nosey neighbors, around her friends and during our interviews she is quite the opposite. When I asked her 'what do you want to achieve in life?' Siham answered, jokingly: 'My dream is to go to Europe, have the surgeries, date a drug dealer, have sex for three years, and then die by overdose.' To 'how do you identify?' in regards to her gender/sexuality, she replied: 'I identify as a woman in a hurry to suck dick.' On another occasion, she told me, 'All I want in life is 12 boyfriends, not just one, I've been so deprived.'

Siham's provocative humor sparked my interest in respectability and how it is deployed, built, and ruptured. The notion of respectability was evoked by many trans Syrians I talked to. I was initially struck by how Siham, whose expression and personality is defiant and transgressive, seeks to 'pass' as cis by mobilizing a politics of consumption and thus presenting as, in her words, a *mrattabeh*[2] (respectable) woman. Why would a self-identified 'licentious' and disrespectable woman like Siham invest in such a *mrattabeh* public image? I came to understand that Siham, like many other Syrians in Lebanon, mobilizes prevailing notions of class respectability to neutralize negative backlash against her apparent 'Syrian-ness,' and to pre-empt the possibility of being 'outed' as a trans woman. Syrians deploy respectability as a balm to hypervisibility. Siham, for example, compensates for her hypervisibility as a working-class trans Syrian by practicing respectability in her neighborhood. She is both undesirable as a disreputable working-class Syrian *and* despised as a trans woman that poses an internal threat to the moral/gendered order in Lebanon.

Trans refugees are a newly recognized group in the international asylum system.[3] They occupy a specific and contentious position in Lebanon, where they are made hypervisible as both refugees and gender/sexual deviants. This hypervisibility is produced intersectionally; trans refugees are deportable migrant subjects who lack the formal protection of legal residency or UNHCR refugee status; trans subjects who lack congruent gender markers and documentation; and working-class subjects who lack access to the means of

production. By deploying a middle-class Lebanese *mrattabeh*-sensibility, Siham is able to protect herself from the threat of anti-Syrian sentiments and transphobic violence posed by her neighbors, the police, and the state. Her appropriation of class-specific habits, behaviors, or aesthetics that are socially understood as befitting of a respectable Lebanese, middle-class cis woman points to the important ways that gender/sexuality and citizenship status are classed in the Lebanese context. Siham's strategy of passing and story also underscore the extent that both gender/sexuality and citizenship are interwoven with questions of personal safety, public and private space, national security policy, and nation-building practices.

Lebanon is an ideal site for a case-study examining trans refugee governance, as it has often been framed by both Western media sources and local LGBT activists in Lebanon as being more tolerant, more modern, and thus, more LGBT-friendly than other Arab-majority countries (Moussawi, 2020). In general, trans refugees can apply for asylum via the UNHCR and are able to claim refugee status due to persecution based on their gender identity. Both of these factors have contributed to making Lebanon a popular destination country for many queer and trans people from the Middle East and North Africa who would prefer to reside in a 'friendlier' country, whether permanently or as they wait for approval and resettlement in the West. Yet, what is often occluded from these narratives of tolerance is that the reality of contemporary Lebanon entails a highly discriminatory regime where multiple security apparatuses locally, nationally, and internationally operate in tandem with nationalist anti-refugee rhetoric. Following the 2011 Syrian uprising's devolving into an ongoing civil war, and the subsequent rise of Daesh,[4] the Lebanese state has further weaponized its stake in the global 'war on terror' by mobilizing and inflaming domestic discourse on the so-called 'refugee crisis' as an instrument of governance with the aim of fortifying its security apparatus (Chamas, 2021). Syrian trans women's hypervisibility and their embodiment of (dis)respectability, allow us to examine how gender, citizenship and class in Lebanon are regulated, embodied, and negotiated, and how, globally, states' repressive security apparatuses punish hypervisible subjects unworthy of respect. I approach hypervisibility as a relation between the state and its subjects. It encompasses a modality in which the state enforces hypervisibility by assaulting respectability, resulting in racialized and sexualized subjects or marked bodies of subordinate classes becoming intensely visible as state, police, and media gazes and becoming targets of fear and desire (Amar, 2013, 231). Additionally, it involves a modality in which hypervisible subjects utilize strategies of (dis) respectability to maneuver violence and reassert their sovereignty.

The lives of the participants demonstrate that to better understand how hypervisibility as a modality within the state-security apparatus operates in Lebanon, it is important to study respectability and how trans refugees deploy respectability politics. Thinking alongside Siham's investments in respectability and disrespectability, and through the passing strategies of hypervisible trans refugees[5] in Lebanon, I ask how we might better understand the relationship between 'respectable' looks/behaviors and the hypervisibility of trans refugee subjects? How is this (dis)respectability lived and embodied along gendered, classed, and citizenship lines in the highly militarized context of Lebanon? What can these practices and strategies of (dis)respectability deployed by trans refugees in Lebanon teach us about trans closets and the politics of trans passing?

Methodologically, this article draws on ethnographic data collected during my fieldwork in Lebanon between 2020 and 2022. I conducted interviews[6] in spoken Arabic and used participant-observation with nineteen trans and queer refugees. I have spent time in meetings, gatherings and outings with the interlocuters, oftentimes at their private houses. Ten in the group[7] identified as 'trans women' (or as a 'ladyboy,' or, simply, as 'women'). The majority were Syrians, and the vast majority did not have legal residency in Lebanon, did not finish elementary or secondary school or did not speak a second language. I conducted this research not only as a researcher-observer, but as a person who is involved in queer and trans organizing in Beirut and in a mutual aid group that supports trans refugees in Lebanon. Over the years I developed intimate friendships with many interlocuters. In this article I focus on the experiences of Syrian trans women in the group, particularly on transfeminine hypervisibility and the distinctive nature of anti-Syrian securitization in Lebanon.[8]

Firstly, I sketch out the literature and the debates surrounding the lived experience of trans migration, the notion of hypervisibility as a strategy of state securitization, and the construction of respectability through gendered moral and social codes. My approach seeks to contribute to the queer/trans studies field by rethinking these core concepts. Secondly, I outline how state violence in Lebanon operates, imbued and enmeshed with citizenship, classed, and gendered regimes. I demonstrate that Syrian trans women are hypervisiblized and criminalized by the security-morality apparatus[9] due to their Syrianness and lack of legal residency, their gender nonconformity as well as their working-classness. I focus on the state's crackdowns on Syrian-populated areas—where trans Syrians are subjected to denigration in their private space. In response to the state's hypervisibilization, which erodes respectability and privacy, transfeminine refugees adopt an attachment to respectability and female seclusion as a means of self-protection against violence. This is not an attempt to occupy a middle-class female positioning, but rather a strategic response to the state's attacks. In the third section, I develop and offer 'respectable passing' and 'disrespectable affinities' as ways of understanding how trans Syrians' navigate hypervisibility. 'Respectable passing' accounts for how trans Syrians' 'pass' by investing in class and citizenship markers over those of gender. However, respectable passing is not solely about embodying class and citizenship-inflected etiquettes, social positionings, and moral gendered codes, but rather about creating a protective shield against the daily violence that trans Syrians experience. On the other hand, 'disrespectable affinities' explores how trans Syrians practice a politics of the vulgar[10] as a means of resistance against violence and to challenge respectability and piety. These practices are also enactments of alternative forms of sociality that disrupt the border between trans and cis Syrians in a racialized and classed Beirut.[11] Both 'respectable passing' and 'disrespectable affinities' are survival strategies employed to protect oneself from potential violence. Whether through performing feminine middle-class positioning, or through forging social affinities between hypervisible communities despite differences, both strategies provide a means of protection.

Throughout this examination of disrespectable affinities, and over the course of this article's exploration into how hypervisibility collapses the walls of privacy and respectability, I offer an analysis of the 'trans closet'. This analysis demonstrates the

permeability of the closet's borders, illustrating how the closet constantly morphs and its walls thicken based on the enacted strategies of passing. I delve into its deeply classed and racialized textures, highlighting how it is marked by disrespectability and surveillance rather than solely sex and gender.

Hypervisibility and (dis)respectability

Several black feminist scholars used the concept of hypervisibility to understand the simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility of black women's bodies, which stems from racialization and racial otherness (Lorde, 1984, 66), as well as the dynamics of sexualization which reproduce "black men and women's alleged sexual deviancy" (Collins, 2000, 130). Paul Amar introduced the concept of hypervisibility to understand how new security regimes in the global South have emerged, arguing that human-security regimes invest in sovereign power and govern through the new enmeshments of morality and security.[12] Maya Mikdashi's notion of the 'epidermal state' similarly evokes the role of the state in regulating hypervisible bodies through securitization, violence and the law (2022). In response to the state's assault on their respectability (Amar, 2013, 214), 'one route by which subjects can escape the logic of hypervisibility is to strive constantly for respectability [through] a historically classphobic (demonizing the working-class), gender essentialist moral praxis consisting of self-disciplinary practices that are depoliticizing and aim for assimilation.' (232)

This notion of hypervisibility, however, rests on an overwhelmingly state-focused structural approach, in which subjects are turned into 'perverts' by the security state, through state-enforced hypervisibilization. My ethnographic engagement with trans 'refugee-ness' shifts the attention to how subjects themselves experience and navigate hypervisibility, through multiple strategies including acts of deviance, which Margot Dazey calls 'disrespectability politics' (2020, 587). Beyond frameworks that look exclusively at how state power is exercised in a violent form through state institutions, governance, and political economy (Amar, 2013; Mikdashi, 2022), I look at how 'the formation of certain sovereignties through the work of love, affect, and care' (Zengin, 2019, 80) can offer different formulations of the operation of power, ones that do not solidify into hierarchies but instead 'become[] actively mobilized against the state from below' (El Dardiry and Hermez 2020, 199).

This inquiry draws on Adriana Qubaiova and Ghassan Moussawi's research on queer sexualities and tactics in Beirut, with a focus on the political economy of visibility and its relationship to individuals' gendered and classed positions. I draw on Qubaiova's concept of 'hedging sexualities' which theorizes the investment of Syrian trans women in multiple and contradictory gendered, classed and raced identities and bodily performances as a way to minimize the risks of being framed as morally deviant, risks posited by the state apparatus (2019).

Moussawi's take on (hyper)visibility is used to understand how individuals' visible nonnormative markedness makes them vulnerable to violence and how they strategically choose to showcase certain aspects of themselves to access safety (Moussawi 2020, 107-108). However, while Moussawi focuses on Lebanese women and genderqueer persons,

my fieldwork centers on non-Lebanese trans subjects who are outside the project of the nation-state. This has implications for how state violence is conceptualized, as the system of citizenship often supersedes the violence emerging from the system of hetero-patriarchy. Yet, as my article will illustrate, although trans Syrian bodies are positioned outside the project of the nation-state, a more nuanced perspective reveals that they are both inside and outside of it. This paradox arises from the Lebanese state's reliance on trans Syrians' outside/deviant status to uphold its legitimacy as a protector of the nation against the combined threats posed by Syrian terrorist-deviants and sexual-deviants.

The concept of respectability has received considerable attention from Middle East anthropologists, who have primarily focused on blood family kinship and cis femininity, particularly in relation to women's sexual reputation. Suad Joseph has argued that conceptions of the self in the MENA region are entwined with structures of 'gendered and aged forms of domination moralized by kinship rules, moralities and idioms' (1999, 2). Within this context, middle-class urban women frequently sacrifice their natural needs in order to maintain respectability and affluence, which are both associated with being married and the likelihood of future marriage (Hamadeh 1999, 169; De Koning 2009, 164).

Based on fieldwork conducted for this study, I have found that Syrian transfeminine refugees' embodiment of respectability differs from the analysis of social relations presented by Joseph in which kinship networks, patriarchal connectivity, and family honor shape relations vis-à-vis cis women. Furthermore, it does not align with Zengin's (2019) findings that the blood family, in alliance with the state and Islamic regulations, is a chief sovereign actor that reinscribes the gender/sex of the body of trans women in Turkey. Due to being dishonored by their families in Syria, displaced by war, and living as gender/sexual deviants, the displaced transfeminine migrants' embodiment of respectability is shaped by factors beyond those mediated by kinship networks and the nation-state. As a result, my research suggests that the displacement of transfeminine migrants from structures of nation-state and family kinship undermines the traditional role of these institutions in shaping and regulating respectability.

In her study on interwar rural-to-urban migration in Egypt, Hanan Hammad (2017) observed that working-class women, due to their class position, were unable to conform to the societal expectations of being *mastura*/respectable, a status that involves moral and sexual sheltering. Many of these migrant women had become disconnected from their family and community networks as a result of distance, which led them to engage in jobs deemed disreputable for women or in petty theft without fearing loss of their *mastura* status. Similarly, working-class Syrian trans women in Lebanon, in line with Hammad's research, had little at stake regarding social status due to their working-classness and non-citizenship status. This was made more prominent by their loss of connection to their blood family following displacement to Lebanon and family abandonment due to their gender/sex transgression.

The participants' signaling of class status to evade/misdirect presumptions and suspicions directed at their hypervisible bodies, illustrate my proposed framework of respectability, which evokes the capacity of subjects to practice a form of agency and sovereignty through creative strategies, which I call, *respectable passing*, as well as their investment in disrespectability politics, which I develop in the last section. By adhering to

female codes of respectability, the participants create a protective barrier against state and societal violence. This diverges from the works of Middle East anthropologists discussed earlier, who view respectability as an investment in gendered moral codes and socially respectable positionings.

Hypervisible bodies and the state's assault on respectability

In Lebanon, there has been an increase in securitization with regard to anti-Syrian racism and related policies since 2015. Military raids and checkpoints followed the ending of the state's 'open-door policy,' along with restrictive residence permit guidelines, forced repatriations and arbitrary deportations,[13] and the suspension of UNHCR registration processes for Syrian refugees. Such measures have increased the social and legal hardships faced by Syrians, who are largely unregistered and living below the extreme poverty line (UNHCR 2021). Syrians, alongside trans individuals, sexual minorities, sex workers, drug users, the unemployed, and the homeless, are at risk of arrest, harassment, or violence by Lebanon's police and military forces (Mikdashi 2022). The Syrian terrorist-deviant has been produced as a central security threat to the Lebanese nation, alongside the sexual/gender-deviant, who is seen as a threat to the heteronormative Lebanese family (Allouche 2017; Mikdashi 2022). This sexualized-racialized moral panic reproduces the state security apparatus as a means of asserting and reinforcing power and control. This convergence is evident in the crackdowns on LGBT spaces in Lebanon that occurred alongside crackdowns on Syrian-populated areas (Chamas 2021). Under this heavily classed,[14] gendered, and racialized context, Syrian trans women live, striving to avoid the gaze of the security-morality apparatus.

I do not want to etbahdal

Gigi is a working-class trans woman from Syria in her forties who has worked as a tailor since her childhood. She came to Lebanon in the 1990s, fleeing homophobic persecution by her family and escaping forced conscription into the Syrian military. I initially met Gigi after a friend asked me to forward Gigi's contact to groups that had launched gofundme campaigns to collect donations for trans and queer people affected by the Beirut explosion.[15] One year later, I asked for an interview and she invited me to her house in Dekwaneh, where she lives with her trans refugee daughters.[16]

'The last thing we need are *liwat* (faggots) in Lebanon.' This is what the Lebanese army told Gigi after breaking down the door to her room and proceeded to assault and insult her. It was 5AM when the soldiers raided her house in Baabda in 2015 and broke into her room. 'The raid was not targeting me specifically,' Gigi said, 'rather all houses in the whole neighborhood because it is mainly inhabited by Syrians.' Gigi was terrified when they kicked the door down because she was wearing make-up, and her boyfriend was present. Gigi described the raid further:

> I was in a situation that night when I was, I mean, *Ounsa* (a female), how can I open [the door] to soldiers? They thought I was hesitant to open because I had weapons. Listen to me, I am a

Ounsa; I don't want to open because I do not want to *etbahdal* (to be humiliated/lose my respectability)

After seeing her attire, the soldiers searched Gigi's closet, finding feminine underwear and clothing, admonishing her further with '*Louti* (faggot), aren't you ashamed of yourself for wearing this clothing?'

Following the 2015 raid on her former house, Gigi's shop was closed, and she was evicted by the municipality of Baabda, preventing her from continuing her work. Earlier that year, Gigi's shop in Dahieh was forced to close by Hezbollah,[17] who interrogated and terrorized her, asking 'Are you with Bashar[18] or against him?'. In 2016, the minister of labor prohibited Syrians from working in all professions except agriculture, construction, and sanitation. Since 2017, various municipalities in Lebanon have issued discriminatory orders against Syrians, including the closure of Syrian-run shops (Ayoub 2017), and denying them work and housing rights.[19] Additionally, many Syrians experienced physical assaults, including Gigi's neighbors.

When the Lebanese army outed Gigi as a 'faggot' as they raided her home, she was in her private space. Like many non-passing trans women in Lebanon, Gigi uses a 'hedging strategy' (Qubaiova 2019); she typically 'butches up' presenting more masculine in public to avoid putting herself in danger.[20] She resided in Baabda in a building inhabited by working-class Syrian laborers, in a class-inflected geographical location and type of housing.[21] Moreover, Gigi embodied classed bodily signifiers, such as missing teeth and an untreated injured finger from a recent assault. Gigi found safety and acceptance in her tailor shop located in her ground-level room, as her Syrian customers did not complain about the sounds of her sewing machine, unlike Lebanese families had done previously.

Such raids against Syrian-populated areas have happened in tandem with a series of recent crackdowns against LGBT spaces in Lebanon, during which Syrians were especially targeted. For example, Syrians were ambushed in the 2013 raid against Ghost Nightclub in Dekwaneh, which is a predominantly Christian area in the north of Beirut populated by migrants. These individuals were arrested, severely beaten, and insulted for being Syrian by the Internal Security Forces (ISF)[22] (Moumneh 2019). In defense of the raid, which occurred shortly before local elections, the mayor of Dekwaneh, Antoine Chakhtoura, expressed further racism against Syrians, and stated that Dekwaneh, known for being 'the fortress of steadfastness,' needed to cleanse 'half-men half-women' who do not belong there, as 'Lebanon is against *liwats* [fags]' (Mandour 2013, 18). During another incident in 2014, an ISF patrol raided Hammam al-Agha, a bathhouse in Beirut, and arrested twenty-eight Syrian and Lebanese men for homosexuality; they were subsequently subjected to the 'anal exams'[23] among other torture techniques (Wansa 2014).

These two incidents, in addition to the raid on Gigi's and other Syrian homes, demonstrate the state's assault on the respectability of its hypervisible subjects.[24] The statements of Chakhtoura to the media, and of the Lebanese army to Gigi, portray the movement of (trans) Syrian refugees through the nation's borders as an emasculation of Lebanese citizenship (Allouche 2017, 62), and this, in turn, signals the need for increased security to protect the 'national body' from the risk of being 'penetrated' or 'invaded' by the disreputable and morally-deficient racialized-deviant other.

In his denigration of Syrian queer and trans club goers as invading 'half-men half-women,' Chakhtoura invokes both the logic of masculinity central to the construction of Lebanese national identity and an imagery of monstrosity attached to trans Syrian bodies (Allouche 2017). Such imagery of bestiality placed onto racialized gender-deviant bodies manifests in relation to working-class bodies which have always been depicted and produced through racialized iconography of moral degradation and savagery by middle-class morality in imperialist nations (Skeggs 1997, 3).

When Gigi uttered the term *etbahdal* when describing the raid, it becomes apparent how the state assaults female respectability. *Etbahdal* carries a triple meaning in this sentence. First, Gigi is humiliated when she is non-consensually exposed by the army as a woman/female/*Ounsa* who should be respected in her own private space; second, she is treated as a (male) terrorist despite being a woman, and finally, she is humiliated in the sense of being dehumanized and denied her right to dignity.

Gigi's account makes clear how respectability is decidedly a gendered, sexualized and classed concept. Similarly to the term *terteeb/mrattabeh* (looking respectable) *or etbahdal* (losing respectability), the Arabic term *satr* (feminine adjective *mastura*) (Hammad 2017) or *ihtiram* (Chakravarti 2016) captures the gendered and classed notion of respectability which can be retained by fulfilling economic security, preserving moral and sexual honor, and publicly conforming to normative dress-codes and behaviors (Hammad 2017, 378). Respectability has a direct consequence on how we understand privacy. Respectability/*satr* as it is practiced by upper-class women has been associated with the 'ideal of female seclusion in order to prevent casual interactions between men and women [which] affected lower-class women even though they could not afford to be restricted to their homes.' (Hammad 2017, 378).

Gigi's invoking of female seclusion and respectability in her statement 'I do not want to *etbahdal*' is not an attachment to middle-class notions of private space in the same way as Hammad explains it but is rather a form of erupting a protective shield against state violence. For many trans Syrians, the lack of access to safe and respectable housing and to gendered seclusion and privacy are due to the state's hypervisibilization of their bodies. Gigi's wish, articulated as 'I do not want to *etbahdal*', is radically different from a desire for respectable and honorable female codes of seclusion. Her firm refusal (not wanting 'to *etbahdal*') is not a matter of merely preserving respectability; it signifies a deeper desire for dignity[25]. In essence, her statement, when considered within its proper context, elucidates that her priority lies not in attaining or signaling respectability as a means to elevate her social status, but rather in seeking protection from actual and potential state violence. In other terms, her desire for respectability essentially serves as a shield against potential violent raids that would strip her of her dignity.

Crackdowns enforce hypervisibility by blurring the boundary between private and public, a spatial border particularly fraught with distortion, as they demonstrate the primacy of state sovereignty over the privacy of Syrian trans women, which is explicitly violated and invaded in the name of state security. The 'gendered wall,'—the representation of architectural separation and privacy in relation to gender—as a 'a room of one's own'[26] or 'a trans closet'[27] shifts in texture and becomes more permeable for hypervisible racialized bodies expulsed from bodily privacy under the security state in

Lebanon. Indeed, 'privacy is [not] distributed equally such that anyone might choose to relinquish or retain it… privacy is not a default status but an exceptional one, granted largely on the basis of wealth and racial privilege' (Beauchamp 2019, 3). Thus hypervisibility, as a process that dictates the relationship between the state and its subjects, is inscribed in the private space.

Crackdowns can hence be understood as events where the status of the house/room as an enclosed and decisively bordered space is contested. Crackdowns strip the closet from its discursive meanings and qualify it at the material level at the disreputable intersection of trans-ness, Syrian-ness and working-classness, where not only the literal walls of the house are destroyed under the boots of the Lebanese armed forces, but where the walls of privacy and respectability themselves collapse. Gigi's story underlines that we must rethink the a-priori association of hypervisibility to public space that often characterizes the ways we speak of trans subjects' visibility. Gigi is hypervisiblized in her own private space/apartment as a degenerate Syrian trans woman, as a Syrian *Ounsa*, when she is faced with anti-Syrian state violence. However, among Syrian laborers, she is less hypervisible and feels safer. Importantly, Gigi's desire for privacy, dignity and respect as a Syrian *Ounsa* is not rooted in the traditional moral and respectable dimensions of female seclusion, but rather serves as a protective measure against violent raids.

In the following section, I examine the various manifestations of (dis)respectability among trans refugees as they navigate hypervisibility. Specifically, I investigate issues of harassment and safety in public spaces, challenges associated with legal documents and mobility, as well as the politics of respectable passing in its classed, racialized and gendered dimensions. Additionally, I explore the concept of disrespectability as it relates to the adoption of a vulgar persona and the formation of affinities between trans refugees and marginalized groups.

Navigating hypervisibility: (Dis)respectable passing

Strategies of respectable passing: Lebanese middle-classness

I met Siham on October 17th, 2019.[28] Some days earlier I had responded to her anonymous request communicated through a common friend via social media, asking for someone to accompany her to a laser hair removal clinic in Dahieh, an area I know well from having lived there most of my life. Dahieh has some affordable shops but is also a highly securitized area with many military and Hezbollah checkpoints, which is why Siham requested accompaniment. Since then, we have become friends and have also worked together in a trans mutual aid group.

Like many other trans women, Siham usually spends hours every other day epilating her facial hair with a tweezer and hours daily to do her make-up. This is not because she enjoys these tasks, but because she must cover up her trans identity to pass as a woman. Passing, or living in stealth mode, is about having a mixture of physical gender cues (hairstyle, clothing, behavioral attributes, voice pitch, etc.) that are culturally associated with a certain gender identity. To pass successfully (if ever), many trans people need to undergo expensive and demanding gender reassignment surgeries and procedures.[29]

Before her medical transition few years ago, Siham would 'butch up' when she leaves the house by wearing a male hair wig and a cap. After undergoing a series of surgeries, laser hair removal, and hair extensions, that were unaffordable 3 years ago, she is now able to present as a woman with greater ease around her neighbors and on the street. It is crucial for Siham to pass as a cis woman in her current neighborhood, given the potential repercussions of being outed as trans with expired documents that may reveal her undocumented status. Siham refrains from carrying her expired documents to avoid the risk of exposure based on incongruent gender markers. Importantly, Siham seeks to pass as a *Lebanese* cis woman, and has perfected a Lebanese accent, a common strategy employed by Syrians in Lebanon to pass as Lebanese citizens.

For Siham, passing as both a woman and as Lebanese is absolutely necessary. Unlike Gigi, who chooses not to renew her residency papers due to financial constraints, Siham has never possessed legal documents, having entered Lebanon illegally. Obtaining legal residency would necessitate securing the assistance of a lawyer and paying a significant accumulated fine for her extended illegal stay. This process is further complicated by Siham's status as a post-operative trans woman, which may require her to present as male when dealing with Lebanese courts.

That is however not the only reason why Siham doesn't carry her documents. As a defected soldier, she faces the grave danger of being forcibly deported to Syria and subjected to persecution (Amnesty International 2021). Despite applying for resettlement through the UNHCR/embassies, Siham's application was likely denied due to her prior military service, which is often viewed as a possible indicator of involvement in war crimes, even if conscription was forced. This not only leaves Siham undocumented, but also limits her chances of securing resettlement in the West.

Lebanon's Penal Code contains articles that are used to regulate and incarcerate individuals with non-normative gender and sexuality.[30] Those who are most commonly targeted and incarcerated under these articles are often working-class, transfeminine, and/or non-citizens, further underscoring how homophobia/transphobia is embedded in the particular patriarchal, capitalist, racial and sectarian nature of Lebanon (Mikdashi and Puar 2016). The enforcement of these laws is not solely determined by legal provisions, but also involves extralegal means that are influenced by factors such as gender, race/citizenship, class, and geographic location. Police often interpret non-normative symbols in ways that justify arrests and detention, even if they do not fall within the legal scope of the provisions (Qubaiová, 2019, 78).

Trans individuals with inconsistent gender markers on their ID are vulnerable to arbitrary detention, accusations of public indecency and 'masquerading as a woman,' debauchery, or suspicion of sex work by the police and military (Saleh and Qubaia 2015). Some trans individuals attempt to avoid arrest by using the ID of a relative who resembles them, but this tactic also exposes them to the risk of identity theft and impersonation (Qubaiová 2019, 74).

Accessing healthcare and other essential services can also be challenging for trans refugees due to the risks of being outed as trans and/or undocumented. To navigate these challenges, some trans refugees—including Siham—borrow or use fake IDs with a matching photo, while others amongst those I interviewed seek housing contracts under

the name of a Lebanese citizen or look for landlords who do not ask for identification or who tolerate trans or refugee tenants. For trans refugees, proper documentation is essential for accessing services, mitigating the risk of exploitation, arrest, or deportation, and ensuring mobility and safety (Camminga 2019; Saleh 2020b).

An important aspect of spatial mobility in Beirut is the ability to pass through myriad checkpoints, barriers and security blockades installed throughout the city, the success of which depends on visible markers of class, markers not readily accessible to working-class Syrians and working-class people more generally in Lebanon.

Expanding on the notion of 'working-class' within a Lebanese context requires recognition that this categorization lumps together diverse groups including agricultural laborers, construction and industrial workers, service workers, dwellers, and the poor. Yet, markers of working-class difference extend beyond occupation or income to encompass clothing, attire, grooming style, means of transportation, place of residence, demeanor, accent, and language (Monroe 2016, 12). For instance, reliance on public transportation like service taxis or buses as well as motor scooters, or the wearing of plastic shoes like flip-flops, is often indicative of a working-class background. Furthermore, the absence of *wasta*, which refers to networks of influence and patronage rooted in sectarian affiliations, further defines working-class belonging in Lebanon by lack of access to informal channels for securing advantages ranging from bureaucratic expediency to employment opportunities and evasion of legal scrutiny (Monroe 2016, 135). Consequently, working-class individuals are disadvantaged by their disconnection from the elite networks that circumvent official governmental procedures and merit principles (Knudsen 2020, 211).

Given the present role of Syrians in Lebanon's cheap labor market, particularly in sustaining the agricultural and construction sectors, and considering historical dynamics of early Lebanese middle-class formation vis-à-vis neighboring communities (Khater 2001), Syrian-ness in Lebanon assumes significance not only a racial category but also as a classed one. While refugee-ness could be mitigated by attaining a certain level of affluence or cosmopolitanism, it remains crucial to underscore that being Syrian, Palestinian, or Iraqi (refugee) inherently carries connotations of class and racialization, irrespective of an individual's actual socioeconomic position. Hypervisible working-class Syrians and Palestinians who do not possess the correct markers of respectability are faced with carceral scrutiny and suspicion by the state police and armed forces.

In this sense, securitized violence, securitization and the risks of suspicion are not exclusively encountered by trans refugees; rather, they are enactments of state and class power that both Lebanese citizens and non-citizens are subjected to. At security checkpoints, profiling practices are commonly employed by security forces, drawing upon factors such as social status and potential criminality, often initiated by suspicion directed at certain raced and classed bodies (Monroe 2016, 88). The assessment and categorization of threat levels are conducted through the metrics of social hierarchy, employing sensorial modes of identification, including visual detection, verbal communication, and mental assessment of identities such as gender, age, class, religion, and nationality (Monroe 2016, 89).

For instance, speaking a Syrian, Palestinian or Iraqi Arabic dialect often exposes one's nationality, potentially leading to discrimination and increased securitization due to its

association with working-class and refugee backgrounds. As previously noted, refugees sometimes adopt a Lebanese accent in an attempt to mitigate securitized violence. However, given Lebanon's deeply class and sect-stratified society, it is crucial to note that even Lebanese citizens themselves leverage accents as a tool to navigate Lebanon's classed and sectarian social landscape, striving to adopt a Lebanese urban accent to distinguish and assert one's non-rural and middle-class statute.

Importantly, in Lebanon class has a distinctively gendered dimension.[31] Siham gains symbolic capital when she succeeds in passing as a Lebanese woman, so her strategic concealment of her Syrian accent and of her deep masculine voice is done to counter the state's violent exposures. Yet, for Siham, as for all my trans Syrian informants, passing as non-undocumented, non-Syrian and non-trans is not fully achievable under the systems of state surveillance and morality in Lebanon.

On an evening in October 2020, when Siham and I were walking together on the Beirut Corniche, several people called her 'shemale', then a man said, 'who's the man among you two?', and another man stood in front of Siham and grabbed her breasts and genitals while saying 'I want to destroy your dick.' Even today we are not sure if she was outed because she didn't pass as a woman, because I, a Lebanese transmasculine person, didn't pass as a man, or because the combination of two gender-nonconforming individuals walking together rendered Siham as an easy target of violence. Just prior to this incident, Siham had undergone facial feminization surgery and breast augmentation. A few months after this incident, Siham invested in $600 worth of hair extensions which she believed made her less vulnerable to violence. During another stroll at the Corniche, she told me: 'You know it was these $600 I paid for my hair that turned me from a target of violent attacks to a target of desire by these same men.'

The assault on Siham reveals how decency and public morality operate through the attachment of fears and anxieties to hypervisible queer and trans bodies, the disciplining and punishing of vulgar subjects of disrespect, the pitting of vulgarity against respectability (Amar 2013, 214–215), and the investment in hegemonic masculinity to produce properly respectable males (Zengin 2016).

To understand how Syrian-ness and Lebanese-ness manifest in relation to respectability in the experiences of Siham, Gigi and Syrians in Lebanon more broadly, it is important to delve deeper into the historical context of Lebanese middle-class formation.

A significant aspect of the making of a middle-class in Lebanon can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when over a third of Mount Lebanon's population—predominantly comprised of peasants—embarked on journeys to the West (Khater 2001, 8). These migration processes, coinciding with both the rise and subsequent decline of the silk industry in Lebanon were largely propelled by French interest in the quality of Lebanese silk and its resulting industrialization. Notably, these migration processes were deeply intertwined with the long-standing transnational ties between Mount Lebanon's dwellers, particularly the Christian Maronites, and Europe (Hage 2021, 29).

Peasant emigration created a unique process of middle-class formation in Lebanon, intensifying the link between "modernity" and "tradition". Unlike neighboring regions within the Ottoman empire (including Syria), where "modernity" was preserved for the upper classes, in Lebanon it was the peasantry that drove the processes of modernization

(Khater 2001, 187). This was evident in the experiences of migrants as they settled in diasporic communities, predominantly in the Americas, and upon their eventual return to Lebanon—where a substantial portion, up to 60%, chose to permanently reside (Khater 2001, 10). The return of these migrants to Lebanon brought with it not only material but also cultural elements of modernity, manifested in the proliferation and accumulation of material wealth, and a heightened emphasis on education— often emphasized possibly due to the large illiteracy among these peasants. In other terms, the creation of a rural middle class in Lebanon promoted the early construction of an ideology of the "modern" among the peasantry, significantly impacting public life well before similar transformations occurred in neighboring countries (Khater 2001, 187).

Furthermore, respectability in Lebanon is a highly gendered notion. Patronage and clientelistic brokerage through *wasta* are deeply embedded within Lebanon's contemporary political systems (Hamzeh 2001). Prior to the war, accessing the economic and social advantages facilitated by *wasta* typically involved becoming part of clientelistic networks overseen by an urban merchant elite composed of male political leaders, known as *zu'ama* (*za'im*, singular) in exchange of political allegiance (Knudsen 2020, 211). However, as a class-stratified patronage system that confers respectability upon its constituents, this network of *wasta* largely controlled by male *zu'ama* is heavily gendered and patriarchal. In this context, respectability in Lebanon emerges as a profoundly gendered and patriarchal modality that is bestowed first and foremost to men. Women, in turn, attain respectability through their male counterparts, a dynamic that has persisted throughout Lebanon's contemporary history as the patriarchal moral economy has systematically exploited the economic value of women while emphasizing their honorability (Hage 2021, 75). This exploitation has been perpetuated by the power of the *za'im*—the cornerstone of Lebanon's masculinist society and state, where notions of respectability are upheld even amidst instances of racketeering, repression, and sectarian rhetoric.

After examining how Syrian-ness and Lebanese-ness manifest historically in relation to respectability in its gendered dimensions, several insights surface. If Gigi's vilified Syrian-ness is the main reason for the army breaking into and penetrating her privacy and her respectability during a crackdown, it is precisely Siham's withdrawal from Syrian-ness that assisted her in becoming not only a semi-passing trans woman but a semi-passing middle-class Lebanese trans woman, who now lives in a less precarious/penetrable/disrespectable neighborhood, with less permeable walls and a thicker closet. Whereas Gigi was hypervisiblized in her former house, which was raided, as well as on the street if she were to dress as a woman, for Siham, it is exactly the other way around. As a defecting soldier at risk of abduction, Siham is less hypervisiblized in both private and public space as a Syrian trans woman due to her withdrawal from Syrian-ness. This withdrawal is possible thanks to the money she is able to use for her transition and to rent a place less likely to face the penetration of crackdowns. While Gigi's concern with transition is more about fixing her teeth and her dysfunctional finger than access to laser therapy or hormones, which according to her is impossible because she is poor, Siham has managed to pay for her medical transition thanks to donations from the LGBT community and a recent part-time job at an NGO.

Under a process of hypervisibilization that demonizes undocumented Syrian trans women, Siham amplifies her femininity and passes as a woman by enacting Lebaneseness and its associated class status. Speaking a Lebanese dialect is just as desirable for Siham as having gender reassignment surgeries. Yet, as she desires to pass as a woman in the conventional norms of femininity, she places the desire for womanhood at the site of safety in public space and decreasing the risk of detention, not at as an enactment of respectability or middle-class aesthetic.[32] Next, I show that alongside using respectability strategically, Syrian trans women invest in disrespectable affinities with other trans-feminine refugees and with cis Syrian workers.

Disrespectable affinities

A large body of work has accounted for how respectability and upward social mobility by hypervisible subjects confer 'identity, self-transformation, and reinvention' (Aizura 2018, 17). Higginbotham (1993) coined 'the politics of respectability' to refer to Black women's effort of embodying and retaining middle-class values as a way of resisting the daily racism and dehumanization in the US. Beverly Skeggs (1997) argues that 'respectability is one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class [and] is usually the concern of those who are not seen to have it.' (1) Skeggs found that for working-class women in the U.S, class was displayed though performances of respectability, and disidentification and dissimulation with/from working-classness (74), a social positioning marked as pathological and poisonous[33]. Furthermore, in his study on trans mobility and gender reassignment, Aren Aizura argues that 'respectability and social mobility map onto transsexuality as attributes of the 'ideal' transsexual subject' (2018, 35) through articulations of 'a 'respectable' narrative of transness that does not involve criminalized activities such as sex work or being an undocumented immigrant' (91). Similarly, Liz Mount found that working-class trans women in India, especially ones who have obtained employment in sexual rights NGOs, claim identities in proximity to middle-class respectable womanhood (Mount 2020, 626).

In my research, I discovered that while some trans women may embody identities that align with the discourse of upward mobility for middle-class women and distinguish themselves from their marginalized counterparts (the hijra in India, the *shemale/ladyboy* in Lebanon), the majority of the working-class trans women I interviewed used respectability as a means of self-protection from potential harm, as I previously discussed. This approach did not necessarily entail abandoning stigmatized forms of work, such as sex work, unlike Mount's observations.

Returning to the article's opening, where Siham emphasizes her promiscuity, it is noteworthy that Siham, like many participants, strives to pass while simultaneously tampering and subverting expectations of respectability. This finding diverges from what Aizura terms individualist trans fantasies of 'liberal reinvention and materializing dreams of a better life' (2018, 111) and self-reinvention narratives of hypervisible trans women that involve respectability and consumption. It is also distinct from Skeggs's conceptualization of respectability as a tactic deployed by working-class women to counteract shame, powerlessness, and pathologization (1997, 162). Despite her strong desire to pass

as a woman, Siham does not aspire to a 'good life,' nor does she hold onto cruel attachments (Berlant 2011) to respectable middle-class feminine comportment or idealized heteronormative futures. Siham has expressed her desire to have twelve boyfriends and describes herself as a hypersexual, slutty woman who is not suited for traditional housewifery. Even as she speaks of her demanding trans daughter, whom she is temporarily caring for, she humorously remarks, 'I am the type of mother who can't stand her children.'

During a conversation with Siham regarding a homeless 'shemale'-identified refugee sex worker, Siham shared that she was complaining and disregarding Siham's advice. She assumed that Siham was financially stable due to her housing and recent part-time job at an LGBT organization. Siham felt the need to establish her credibility as a working-class trans woman and former sex worker, and thus responded: 'Listen to me, *ana bent el-Dawra* [I am a Dawra girl]. I used to stand there without even a bra.' 'Dawra girl' means a sex worker in this context, while also emphasizing a migrant/working-class identity. Dawra is an area in the outskirts of Beirut known for cruising areas and for street sex work.[34] Dawra is a locale that embraces different bodies, nationalities, sexualities/genders that face discrimination in other parts of Beirut. Rather than aiming to rehabilitate respectability, Siham does not denigrate sex work as a disrespectable work and stays close to her immoral deviancy, refusing to disavow her past as a non-passing migrant and formerly homeless 'Dawra girl.' Her lack of investment in notions of propriety can thus be seen as a form of cultivating agency. Siham reclaims her deviancy through disrespectability politics by de-sanitizing the state's respectable morality, de-sterilizing it with the figure of the disrespectable trans woman, and hence, by creating affective communities in the face of violence and indignation.

As part of our trans mutual aid group's efforts, Siham and I visited trans women she knew from her time in Nab'aa.[35] Siham suggested we visit between 3 and 5PM, a time when sex workers are preparing for their night shifts. The first neighborhood we visited displayed *Ya Hussein* flags.[36] The second apartment was in a building where Siham used to sleep on the roof when she was homeless. In the entrance of the third apartment, a 10-year-old boy greeted us and called out in Kurdish to a family member to open the gate. Siham explained to me that the men sitting near the entrance of the building, who helped us park the car I was driving, did not recognize her, explaining, 'that's because of the surgeries but also because I am in a *mrattabeh* car with you.'

In my reading, Siham understands that safety is about looking/passing as *mrattabeh*. *Mrattabeh* is a colloquial Lebanese word that describes appropriate self-presentation and refers to a person's respectability and prestige and connotes 'the moral ideas of 'doing things rightly' and 'doing good' [and eliciting] respect and trust' (Ipek, 2022, 758). Simultaneously, in subverting both heteronormativity (by aspiring to have twelve boyfriends) and racism/classism (by identifying as a 'Dawra girl'), Siham enacts a refusal of the promise of happiness offered to her by Lebanese nationalist discourses, even as she desires to pass. While Amar addresses 'the process by which hypervisible subjects assimilate into apolitical invisibility via the practice of respectability' (2013, 210), my analysis captures the everyday disrespectable practices of deviant non-citizen subjects like Siham, whose strategies of 'respectable passing' are merely a protective shield to

guarantee safety. Siham maintains the marrying of vulgar and grotesque ideals that sabotage respectability, as the impossibility of having an unmarked body does not push her to restore respectability. Furthermore, while the participants' strategies are cognizant of (Decena, 2011) notion of code-switching, and Moussawi's notion of queer tactics, my understanding of queer strategies is different. It is supplemented by enactments of irreverence and disrespectability politics, which I call *disrespectable affinities*. The participants exerted disrespectability in the sense of 'indifference toward reputational concerns when deviating from dominant norms [and] the rejection of assimilation' (Dazey, 2021, 586). Disrespectable licentiousness is a way of opening the flesh, asserting dignity, and de-sanitizing the body.[37] Siham reaches out and makes contact with groups ('shemales',[38] sex workers, and working-class Syrians) that are denigrated by state power, groups to whom she belongs.

These disrespectable affinities I found among hypervisible subjects in Beirut take place not only among gender/sexual deviants. Like other trans Syrian interlocuters I spoke to, Gigi invested in relationships with Syrian laborers whom she felt safe with. In fact, the politics of respectability within some elitist LGBT circles in Beirut have appealed not only to civilizing logics that distinguish LGBT subjects from racialized and classed Syrian others, but also to security logics that articulate the need for protection from potential 'terrorists,' a category often projected onto Syrian refugees (Chamas 2021). In this context where securitization is classed and racialized, trans Syrians' proximity to Syrian laborers disarticulates gender/sex from the imaginaries of passing and challenges the metaphor of the closet and the rigid meanings of trans safe spaces, signposting affinities beyond identity politics. It steers us towards an appraisal of the fact that trans Syrians not only challenge middle-class respectability but also defy the global understanding of a trans closet.

This example of disrespectable affinity networks between trans Syrians and Syrian workers directly complicates the question of a 'trans closet' that is obsessed with the Eurocentric binaries of visible/invisible, queer/heterosexual, cis/trans, closeted/out, and public/private. In the context of Lebanon, this framework serves logics that suppose an admission into or membership in a trans or queer community that exceeds social and economic networks of class and citizenship status. This widespread designation of a 'trans closet' not only pits the trans and queer community against the 'potentially terrorist' Syrian cis/heterosexual community, but it also forecloses and obscures the already existing alliances and kinship infrastructures between deviant refugee communities. Rather than merely gender/sex, the trans closet is marked by disrespectability and by forms of policing, deportation, and surveillance that hypervisible refugees experience in Lebanon.

The affinities of trans Syrians with Syrian workers serve as a critical lens through which to probe the regimes of securitization that govern the lives of trans refugees who occupy various deviant and terrorist positionalities. By doing so, they resist the homogenization and globalization of trans narratives while simultaneously acknowledging 'the complexities of trans politics beyond ascriptions of good and evil or claims of authenticity and cultural purity' (Saleh 2020b, 51). These sites of affinity formation within working-class contexts ought to be viewed as more pertinent and apt locations for considering and comprehending the practices of trans world-making (Saleh 2020a, 17).

Conclusion

This article has looked at the ways through which hypervisible sexual/gendered and racialized others are produced as security threats and vulgar subjects of disrespect by the security-morality apparatus in Lebanon, and how they deploy (dis)respectability—specifically 'respectable passing' and 'disrespectable affinities'—as they strategically respond to and navigate hypervisibility. Through the stories of Syrian trans women, the question of what hypervisibility means in Lebanon materializes as an embodied formation mediated by (dis)respectable bodies, one that is lived within the overlapping borders of class, Syrian-ness and the trans closet as they intersect in a militarized space.

Syrian trans women reconstruct safety through social relations and passing strategies, re-inscribing aspects of hypervisibility despite violence. Some do this using hair extensions and physical protheses, including gender reassignment surgeries, but also through the prosthesis of a Lebanese accent, food delivery bags or the ID of a Lebanese woman. Others do this through forging affinities and networks with deviant kin–which includes not only trans refugee daughters but also Syrian laborers. This has consequences on how we understand trans lives. My article proposes that disrespectable affinities often happen outside of rigid identity categories, through networks built on trust, recognition and social support that follow class and citizenship status lines rather than merely gendered/sexual ones, especially among trans proletarian subjects.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek.

ORCID iD

Nisrine Chaer https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0999-4852

Notes

1. I use the terms 'trans'/'cis', but I am aware of the debates about terminology within/after trans studies (see Chu and Drager, 2019).
2. For transliterations of Arabic words into the Latin alphabet, I use a simplified system based on the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* transliteration system. To enhance readability for non-specialists and allow recognition of the original terms by Arabic readers, special characters and diacritical marks have been omitted except for the 'ayn (') and hamza (').
3. Existing scholarship on queer and trans migration has thus far focused primarily on the legal and institutional aspects of UNHCR and the refugee determination process (Sarı, 2020; Murray, 2016; Lewis, 2014; Shakhsari, 2014; Luibhéid, 2008). Rather than focusing on the legal

institution of asylum and the humanitarian apparatus, this article builds on recent ethnographic work that investigates queer and trans 'refugee-ness' across the global South in the lived experience of everyday life (Saleh 2020a, 2020b; Camminga 2019; Qubaiová 2019; Aizura 2018). This formative scholarship builds on previous approaches to trans migration by centering and evaluating trans refugee lives *outside* the lens of the legal institution of asylum (Camminga 2019, 11) and by re-orienting towards South-South in lieu of the overrepresented South-North movements in queer migration literature (Camminga 2019).

4. The Arabic acronym for ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).
5. For a genealogy of 'gender-variance' and 'trans' within the Syrian context, see Saleh (2020b).
6. I coded my interview transcripts my fieldnotes using an open coding process based in 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). Some of the codes that were generated were visibility, safety, state violence, mobility, housing/home, and respectability (although I did not explicitly ask about the latter).
7. Additionally, six identified as 'trans men' (or, simply, as 'men'), two identified as 'gay men,' and one identified as a 'lesbian woman.'
8. While the analysis draws on ethnographic data collected with ten trans-feminine refugees in Lebanon, as well as a broader pool of trans refugees, it is primarily framed around the experiences of two central interlocutors in the group, Siham and Gigi. Both Siham and Gigi are working-class trans-feminine Syrians who possess strong ties to the transfeminine community and whose narratives resonate with other transfeminine Syrians with whom I have conversed. My focus on Siham and Gigi is also motivated by my desire to compare the ways in which they negotiate hypervisibility and embody respectability, particularly given that Siham is sometimes able to pass as a woman, whereas Gigi is not.
9. Another apparatus which dictates the lives of trans refugees is the humanitarian apparatus, which lies beyond the scope of this article.
10. I use the notions of 'vulgarity' and 'disrespectability' interchangeably.
11. Trans is both a site of self-fashioning and is bounded by material (Gleeson and O'Rourke 2021) and geopolitical relations.
12. Notably, where sovereign power is exerted, states fight against 'the perversions of globalization,' and queer and trans subjects often become targeted as hyperaggressive agents (Amar 2013, 78).
13. Syrians are at risk of persecution upon return, with repatriations having resulted in the torture, sexual violence, and enforced disappearance by Syrian intelligence officers (Amnesty International 2021).
14. It is important to note that the urban space of Beirut is divided along class and sectarian lines, with significant differences between working-class and wealthy districts (Merabet, 2014).
15. On August 4, 2020, thousands of tons of ammonium nitrate stored at the port of Beirut detonated, killing more than 220, injuring 7,000, and displacing 300,000 people from their destroyed houses. This blast caused extensive damage to the city's infrastructure in the midst of a failing economy characterized by hyperinflation and currency devaluation.
16. Gigi has built an alternative family of daughters who call her 'Mama Gigi'.
17. Hezbollah has worked closely with both the Syrian regime and Lebanon's General Security to deport Syrian refugees (Reuters, 2018).
18. A reference to Bashar Al-Assad, the president of Syria.

19. Municipalities have also imposed regulations on Syrians' lives, such as collecting their information, registering their rental contracts, limiting the number of Syrians in a house, and imposing a 7PM curfew with fines for anyone seen on the streets afterward (Barjas, 2016).
20. Qubaiova narrates the story of Nancy, a Syrian trans woman in Lebanon who identifies as 'straight' and as a 'man' in Beirut's streets, as 'trans' in the NGO space, while presenting in the same physical attire (2019, 12-13). Nancy also used to present as 'ladyboy' when she lived in Syria, similarly to many participants, some of whom still identify as ladyboy as they live in Lebanon. Nancy, similarly to Gigi and many interlocuters, 'uses a hedging strategy, and evaluates what looks, attire, and self-presentation can allow her to pass as both —trans and —straight, while still not undermining her own perception of herself as a —woman' (2019, 12-13).
21. Beirut's informal housing is prevalent in areas where Syrian laborers live and work, particularly near construction sites (Monroe, 2016).
22. with one stating, 'look at what Syria brings us!' (Rainbow Lebanon, quoted in Allouche, 2017, 61).
23. a practice in which a forensic doctor probes the anus to determine whether the person has engaged in anal sex.
24. Syrians, Palestinians, and migrant workers in Lebanon are hypervisible racialized national outsiders within a system of sectarian power-sharing that operates alongside racism, heteropatriarchy and classism, which altogether generate anxieties around potential refugee naturalization (Mikdashi, 2022).
25. I build on the insights of Savci who elaborates on the difference between respectability and dignity in her study on trans sex workers in Turkey (2021, 108).
26. In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Wolf articulates spatial privacy through the concept of the 'room,' an abstract and physical space, which enables not only privacy but also dignity and homing.
27. *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) by Eve Sedgwick.
28. Coincidentally, we met a few hours before an uprising in Lebanon started on that day.
29. Including hair removal laser therapy, voice therapy, hormonal replacement therapy, the binding of breasts, mastectomy, hair extensions, breast augmentation surgery, and face feminization/masculinization.
30. These articles include Article 534—which has its roots in the French colonial rule of the Mandate era—that criminalizes sexual acts deemed 'against nature' and can result in up to 1 year of imprisonment, and articles that criminalize 'offences against morals and public decency,' and 'prostitution'.
31. Gender operates to articulate and naturalize class differences and the ideals of respectable manhood and womanhood, the latter which allows the woman to accrue symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986).
32. Deviant bodies can also disrupt these orderings despite the strategies of the security-morality state being power-laden. By mobilizing the counterstrategy of passing, Siham is taking agency over her body and making a claim to personal sovereignty.
33. Performances of respectability were done through 'investments in their bodies, clothes, consumption practices, leisure pursuits and homes [which] indicated a strong desire to pass as middle class.' (Skeggs, 1997, 95).

34. Dawra and the neighborhoods that border it are populated by refugees (mostly Syrian Arabs, Syrian Kurds, and Iraqi Kurds), Armenians, black African and South Asian migrant workers, trans people, sex workers, day laborers, and informal laborers who live side by side.
35. Nab'aa borders Dawra and is a diverse area with various sects, ethnicities, and nationalities.
36. indicative of the presence of Shi'i population.
37. It is an opening of one's body to other bodies (Zengin, 2016).
38. For a study on the usage of the term 'shemale' in Syrian queer and trans communities, see Saleh (2020b).

References

Aizura AZ (2018) *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Allouche S (2017) (Dis)-intersecting intersectionality in the time of queer Syrian refugee-ness in Lebanon. *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research* 3(1): 59–77.

Amar P (2013) *The Security Archipelago*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Amnesty International (2021) "You're going to your death": violations against Syrian refugees returning to Syria. https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2021-09/You%27re-going-to-your-death.pdf?VersionId=EfS7mntuKs_dT6c2g0lEUPL1Q_ZgTikW

Ayoub L (2017) Lebanese municipalities: regulating refugee presence is "our jurisdiction". The Legal Agenda. https://legal-agenda.com/en/article.php?id=3689

Barjas E (2016) Restricting Refugees: Measuring municipal power in Lebanon. The legal agenda. https://english.legal-agenda.com/restricting-refugees-measuring-municipal-power-in-lebanon/

Beauchamp T (2019) *Going Stealth*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Berlant L (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bourdieu P (1986) The forms of capital. In Richardson J (ed) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, Westport, CN: Greenwood.

Camminga B (2019) *Trans Refugees and the Imagined South Africa*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan.

Chakravarti LZ (2016) *Made in Egypt: Gendered Identity and Aspiration on the Globalized Shop Floor*. New York, NY: Berghahn.

Chamas S (2021) Lil watan: queer patriotism in chauvinistic Lebanon. *Sexualities* 26: 1–22. DOI: 10.1177/13634607211047523.

Chu AL and Drager EH (2019) After trans studies. *Trans Studies Quarterly* 6(1): 103–116.

Collins PH (2000) *Black Feminist Thought: knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York and London: Routledge.

Dazey M (2021) Rethinking respectability politics. *British Journal of Sociology* 72(3): 580–593. DOI: 10.1111/1468-4446.12810.

De Koning A (2009) *Global Dreams: Class, Gender, and Public Space in Cosmopolitan Cairo*. Cairo, Egypt: American Univ. Cairo Press.

Decena CU (2011) *Tacit Subjects: Belonging and Same-Sex Desire among Dominican Immigrant Men*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

El Dardiry G and Hermez S (2020) Critical security and anthropology from the Middle East. *Cultural Anthropology* 35(2): 197–203. DOI: 10.14506/ca35.2.01.

Glaser BG and Strauss AL (2017) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Oxfordshir, UK: Routledge.

Gleeson JJ and O'Rourke E (2021) Introduction. In: Gleeson JJ and O'Rourke E (eds) *Trans Marxism*. London, UK: Pluto Press.
Hage G (2021) *The diasporic Condition: Ethnographic Explorations of the Lebanese in the World*. Chicago, USA: University of Chicago Press.
Hamadeh N (1999) Wives or daughters. In: Joseph S (ed) *Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self, and Identity*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
Hammad H (2017) Disreputable by definition: respectability and theft by poor women in urban interwar Egypt. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13(3): 376–394. DOI: 10.1215/15525864-4179012.
Hamzeh A (2001) Clientalism. In: *Middle Eastern Studies*. Durham, NC: Roots and Trends, Vol. 37, 167–178.
Higginbotham EB (1993) *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*. Cambridge, UK: Harvard University Press.
İpek Y (2022) Bala wāṣṭa: aspirant professionals, class-making, and moral narratives of social mobility in Lebanon. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 28(3): 746–768.
Joseph S (1999) Introduction. Theories and Dynamics of Gender, Self, and Identity in Arab Families. In: Joseph S (ed) *Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self, and Identity*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
Khater AF (2001) *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920*. Downtown Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
Knudsen AJ (2020) Competitive clientelism in secondary cities: urban ecologies of resistance in Lebanon. *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 5(3-6): 206–220.
Lewis RA (2014) "Gay? Prove it": the politics of queer anti-deportation activism. *Sexualities* 17(8): 958–975.
Lorde A (1984) Sister outsider: essays and speeches. In: *Berkeley*. Feasterville Trevose, PA: Crossing Press.
Luibheid E (2008) Queer/migration: an unruly body of scholarship. *GLQ* 14(2–3): 169–190.
Mandour S (2013) Potential change in media discourse on sexuality in Lebanon. In: *Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper*. Oxford, UK: University of Oxford.
Merabet S (2014) *Queer Beirut*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
Mikdashi M (2022) *Sextarianism: Sovereignty, Secularism, and the State in Lebanon*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
Mikdashi M and Puar J (2016) Queer theory and permanent war. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22(2): 215–222. DOI: 10.1215/10642684-3428747
Monroe KV (2016) *The Insecure City*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
Moumneh R (2019) The filth they bring: sex panics and racial others in Lebanon. In: Miller AM and Roseman MJ (eds) *Beyond Virtue and Vice*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 220–232.
Mount L (2020) "I am not a hijra": class, respectability, and the emergence of the "new" trans woman in India. *Gender & Society* 34(4): 620–647.
Moussawi G (2020) *Disruptive Situations: Fractal Orientalism and Queer Strategies in Beirut*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
Murray DAB (2016) *Real queer? Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Refugees in the Canadian Refugee Apparatus*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & littlefield.
Qubaiova A (2019) Cross-bracing sexualities: hedging "queer"/sexual non-normativity in Beirut. PhD diss. Vienna, Austria: Central European University.

Reuters (2018) Lebanon's Hezbollah to work with Syrian state on refugee returns. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-lebanon-syria-refugees-idUSKBN1JP29Q
Saleh F (2020a) Queer/humanitarian visibility: the emergence of the figure of the suffering Syrian gay refugee. *Middle East Critique* 29(1): 47–67. DOI: 10.1080/19436149.2020.1704501.
Saleh F (2020b) Trans as a humanitarian category: the case of Syrian queer and gender-variant refugees in Turkey. *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7(1): 37–55. DOI: 10.1215/23289252-7914500.
Saleh AJ and Qubaia A (2015) Transwomen's navigation of arrest and detention in Beirut: a case study. *Civil Society Knowledge Center, Lebanon Support*. Available at: https://civilsociety-centre.org/paper/transwomen%E2%80%99s-navigation-arrest-and-detention-beirut-case-study-en-ar.
Sarı E (2020) Lesbian refugees in transit: the making of authenticity and legitimacy in Turkey. *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 24(2): 140–158.
Savcı E (2021) *Queer in Translation: Sexual Politics under Neoliberal Islam*. Lanham, MD: Duke University Press.
Shakhsari S (2014) The queer time of death: temporality, geopolitics, and refugee rights. *Sexualities* 17(8): 998–1015. DOI: 10.1177/1363460714552261.
Skeggs B (1997) *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
UNHCR (2021) Fact Sheet Lebanon. January 2021. UNHCR. https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Lebanon%20-%20Operational%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20January%202021.pdf
Wansa S (2014) Torture at every stage: The unofficial Narrative of the Hammam al-agha raid. The Legal Agenda. https://english.legal-agenda.com/torture-at-every-stage-the-unofficial-narrative-of-the-hammam-al-agha-raid/
Zengin A (2016) Violent intimacies: tactile state power, sex/gender transgression, and the Politics of Touch in contemporary Turkey. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 12(2): 225–245. DOI: 10.1215/15525864-3507650.
Zengin A (2019) The Afterlife of gender: sovereignty, Intimacy and muslim Funerals of trans People in Turkey. *Cultural Anthropology* 34(1): 78–102. DOI: 10.14506/ca34.1.09.

Nisrine Chaer is a researcher and organizer. He is currently a PhD candidate in Gender Studies at Utrecht University and his PhD research primarily focuses on respectability, hypervisibility and safety with a focus on trans and queer migration in both the Netherlands and Lebanon. His work has appeared in *Kohl Journal for Body and Gender Research* (2015), *Global Dialogue* (2016), *Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 2019), *ZemZem* (2020), *Women Rising: Resistance, Revolution, and Reform in the Arab Spring and Beyond* (NYU Press, 2020), *Crisis Magazine* (2022), *Transcultural Psychiatry* (2023), *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2023), *UntoldMag* (2023) and *The Queer Arab Glossary* (Saqi Books, 2024). He also is a member of Queer Mutual Aid Lebanon, and co-founder of Sehaq Queer Refugees Group in Amsterdam.