

Film review

'Not who we are ...' A documentary about the lives of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon

The film consists of four sections, based on the same number of interviews. In each section, we see Syrian refugee women in their current circumstances in Lebanon. They speak about their past lives in Syria, the decision to move to Lebanon and how this move has changed their lives.

At a time when war and conflict have displaced more than 45 million people around the world, these interviews aim to lead us 'through the refugee experience'. We see women who had lives, not so different from our own, with a home and a family. We see how they have lost the familiarity of the life in Syria and must make the best of their new surroundings.

Afra'a and her sister share a Beirut apartment with three other young Syrians. The rent is 1000 USD. Afra'a had just moved from her home town Aleppo to Damascus, where she had enrolled in the Fine Arts School. She was arrested and released after 29 days, without charge or court case. *'There were women of all ages in that room, some with their children ... We could hear them torture the men ... Now I am here. I have no job. I am practising the keyboard. We are preparing a performance... I miss my mother. I feel very shaky... I feel that this time here leads nowhere. It is a lost time ...'*

Then the camera takes us to greener surroundings and a tent-like structure. We are in the north of Lebanon. Um Omar and Um Ra'ed are sitting next to each other; each with a baby of about 10 months on her lap. *'We were pregnant when we arrived here. We were with 10 families.'*

'First they let us live in a deserted bread factory, but then the owner told us that we had to leave. My brother pleaded with him: "My sister is about to give birth ... "We were allowed to stay a bit longer, but then we moved.'" The camera shows us their living space. It is in the shell of an unfinished building. They have worked on the space, with plastic sheets visibly attached with iron to keep out the wind and rain. We also see other tent structures. Mattresses are neatly folded and piled one atop the other. Some cooking pots are arranged on a shelf. Clothes are in plastic bags that hang from a nail in the wall, but it is not a wall, it is one of the wooden beams holding up the plastic sheet.

'We brought nothing with us. We left with just the clothes we were wearing, and when we moved here, there was the rain!' Um Omar looks at Um Ra'ed and smiles, 'that rain really showed us what rain is! The owner of the piece of land had warned us, this will flood, but we could not imagine it. Then we had to keep moving to higher ground. We see some pictures of the camp in the rain. It looks miserable. Then, the camera takes us outside again. We see the family eating together, outside. It is a spring day. 'Every family prepares one dish, and then we eat together.' It looks like a picnic. Children play.

Now we move to the town of Baalbek in the Beqa' valley. We see a solitary woman in a silent street, walking around the corner, out of our view. The colours are dark and grey. Inside, Sammar's face is blurred. Even with the blurred image, we can see that she is beautiful, but she does not want to be recognised. She says it is very hard to live here. She misses her neighbours. She speaks about Syria. She says that they were a middle class family. She says they were able to make their own decisions. They were not badly

off, and then the shelling started. They were not safe. She knew someone in Lebanon, who gave her this address and they moved, but they did not know any one here. She feels that people do not like them. She has five children. The oldest two are girls, 16 and 14 years old. Her husband is ill and cannot work. In Syria he was better, but there they always had medication for him. Here, sometimes they are unable to find any medication. He is worse in Lebanon. She does not say how they provide for the family, except to mention some donations for refugees. Here, some women are forced to do things that they would never do, at home, in Syria. Sammar explains that her two eldest daughters (16 and 14) are engaged to Lebanese young men. One is the son of the landlord. The other is someone they did not know. He had come to them and asked if they would consider him for the younger daughter. She says her husband was against it. She says she is torn. *'I cannot take care of them. Perhaps this is better for them and for us.'* We see her hands in her lap. The hands are in focus. She says this is what keeps her awake at night. She thinks about it all the time. She is marrying off her daughters at an earlier age than her own, when she got married at the age of 19. She fears that they have no idea what marriage means, and she does not know how to tell them. She says she cannot do it.

Did they know what to expect?

Again we see her hands in her lap. *'I cannot talk to them about this. I don't know. Perhaps the older one knows a bit, but I cannot talk about it. The younger one had had her period only three times by the time she was engaged. How can I do this? I told the mother of the groom: you are her mother now. I want her to feel that this girl has no other mother. We will go back to Syria, but they will stay here. I want the mothers-in-law to be like a mother to them. Not like a mother-in-law.'*

The camera shows her walking in the street again. She walks around the curve. Out of our view. *'Sometimes I feel I want to die. I do not know what to do. The people here talk about us. They*

say, we Syrian women will do anything . . . but this is not who we are. They do not know us.'

In the fourth interview we see Siham, a refugee from Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Syria, walking through Shatilla refugee camp near Beirut.

The fourth interview is the most shocking. Siham tells the story of how they were trying to get bread for people in the besieged Palestinian refugee camp, Yarmouk. It was dangerous, but people were hungry. They had trouble getting back into the camp, and then, when they had just entered, their car came under sniper fire. Her husband died in her arms, in front of their twin daughters. The camera shows us the family in happier days. They are on a boat. The man is holding his two daughters. He plays with them. We hear Siham speaking, *'I loved that man. I have not had an easy life. My first marriage was not good. I have an older son and daughter. And we see them, beautiful young people. But with my second husband, we were so good together.'*

She moved to the home of a friend in the Beqa' Valley, but she could not find work there. We see pictures of Siham walking through Shatilla Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut. *'I thought they would understand . . . I thought they would want to help us. They know what it is to be a refugee. We speak with the same accent. . . I had not expected this reaction. They were not at all helpful. They showed no interest . . . It was very hard to find a room and when we finally did, we had to leave it after a few days because there were rats, but we cannot blame the people in Shatilla. They have a very hard life and no energy left to also worry. They know that for 40 years we were better off than they here in Lebanon. They do not feel that they are in a position to now solve our problems. They can barely take care of themselves.'*

Then we see Siham again, in the interview. She looks good. She has just found a job and she lives with her twin girls in a small apartment in Beirut. She loves her job. She works with a nongovernmental organization for children. She brings people

together and it helps to make them feel better.

What is particularly striking in these four 'refugee experiences' are the differences between Sammar and the other women. Afra'a was with her sister and other young people; Um Omar and Um Ra'ed were together; Siham had the good memories of her second marriage and had found a job in which she was able to generate some pleasure for herself and others. But Sammar walked alone and faced the responsibility of her family alone. She needed to talk. The interview with Sammar is the only interview in which we see no interaction with others. When she smiles over her own words, it is not a smile she can share with others, one that can bring relief. She is also the only one who mentions that she sometime wants to die.

Humanitarian relief efforts often include a psychosocial support component. In this documentary we see that merely being together, going through the same experiences, already functions as a type of psychosocial support naturally provided to each other.

This documentary provides food for thought for those active in the field of psychosocial support. On the one hand, how can we make sure that our interventions make the most of the natural support that people going through the same experience are able to provide to each other? On the other hand, how can we make sure that the psychosocial support we try to generate is not limited to those most easily reachable, those who are concentrated in large numbers and who are likely to already provide some support to each other? How can we find a way of also supporting those who face their new reality in isolation, people like Sammar.

For more information on the documentary, please contact Carol Mansour (cmansour@fwdprod.com) or Muna Khalidi (munakhalidi@fwd.com)

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