

Decolonial Approaches to Refugee Migration

Nof Nasser-Eddin and Nour Abu-Assab in Conversation

Nof Nasser-Eddin and Nour Abu-Assab

■ **ABSTRACT:** In this conversation, Nof Nasser Eddin and Nour Abu-Assab—the founders and directors of the Centre for Transnational Development and Collaboration (CTDC)—discuss the importance of decolonial approaches to studying refugee migration. In so doing, they draw on their research, consultancy, and advocacy work at CTDC, a London-based intersectional multidisciplinary Feminist Consultancy that focuses in particular on dynamics in Arabic-speaking countries and that has a goal to build communities and movements, through an approach that is both academic and grassroots-centred. CTDC attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice through its innovative-ly transformative programmes, which include mentorship, educational programmes, trainings, and research.

Nof and Nour’s conversation took place in November 2019 and was structured by questions sent to them in advance by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh. What follows is a transcript of the conversation edited by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Mette L. Berg.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Arabic-speaking countries, decolonial research, Eurocentrism, feminism, intersectionality, neoliberalism, Palestine, refugees

Nof In this conversation, we will be talking about our perspectives on refugeehood migration from a decolonialist feminist intersectional framework. We will reflect on our work and try to conceptualize refugeehood migration from a more Southern perspective, because most of the arguments have been Eurocentric and focused on the global North.

Nour To make it easier, I’ll start by reading out the questions we have received from Elena and then we’ll go through the questions one by one.

It’s increasingly acknowledged that studies of policy, political, and programmatic responses to migration and displacement often have a strong Northern bias. For instance, in spite of the importance of different forms of migration within, across, and between countries of the global South (i.e., South-South migration), there is a tendency to focus on migration *from* the South *to* the countries of the North (i.e., South-North migration), and prioritizing the perspectives and priorities of diverse stakeholders associated with the North.

That is true. And then the question reads: “What is your position with regard to such critiques of Northern bias or Eurocentrism in studies of migration and displacement?” Shall we start now?



- Nof Well, I think this is a very important topic, because we agree with you, Elena. Most studies, not only in academic institutions, but also those undertaken by institutions like governments or civil societies, have focused on the “refugee crisis” between Southern and Northern countries, and this is problematic, because doing this undermines the importance and extent of South-South migration and displacement flows. If we specifically focus on migration and refugeehood in Arabic-speaking countries, which started long before the current “refugee crisis,” there have been migrations from the first Iraq war and the second Iraq war, where many Iraqi refugees fled to Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, with the majority staying in those countries. Most Iraqis didn’t want to leave those “transit” countries, and we call them “transit” because, supposedly, they are meant to be there for a temporary time. But no, they eventually stay in those countries, and don’t want to carry on with the journey to reach Western countries.
- Nour Yes, and I’m talking for Nof as well when I say that we definitely take the position of these critiques of Northern bias and Eurocentrism. These critiques hold truth in terms of how the refugee is conceptualized, how borders are conceptualized, how the nation-state is conceptualized. And there is this dissonance somehow among policy makers and sometimes maybe some academics, and you also see it often in media: the way global Northern states are framed as if they’re the safe haven, as if they’re the best place to be, for all these disadvantaged refugees. And this is a discourse that resembles narratives of economic migration as well, as if the Northern context is the ideal, in terms of governance, in terms of resources, and this is why so many people want to go there, even though this is not necessarily true.
- Nof Actually, we have done a lot of research with Syrian refugees who are in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, and most of these people don’t want to go to the global North. Also, we need an intersectional lens here because we have to ask ourselves who goes to these countries: are they women, are they men, are they families, and what routes are they taking to go to the global North? We cannot just assume and generalize that all refugees and migrants want to go to the global North, we have to look at the different experiences of these people, and why certain people choose to take that route and others don’t. We have also to acknowledge the agency of people who have been displaced—a lot of refugees bluntly asked us: why would they want to go to the West? There are also examples, including from my work with Iraqi refugees in Jordan: some refugees were sent to America and they chose to return. They said, “We don’t want to be in the States.” When they first arrived in the US, they thought that they would be resettled in nice houses, but apparently they were resettled in detention centers, where they were treated like prisoners and criminals. We have to be aware of the way that people are treated, the rhetoric that is used, such as “they have come to steal the benefits of the people living in the global North, and they’re bogus and they don’t have a . . .”
- Nour “. . . Valid reason to be here . . .” Yes, antimigration and antirefugee sentiments revolve around resources, in one way or another. It is actually what policy makers in Northern countries try to do: they make people believe that their situation is the best, even though they forget about the homelessness that is caused by governmental policies there. They forget about how the UK government itself, for example, is cutting funding from the National Health Service [NHS], it’s not because of the migrants that suddenly the NHS can no longer cope. And we think these critiques are really valid and important for people also based in the global North in terms of thinking about how they want to hold their governments accountable for the situations they’re in.

- Nof I don't think there's a binary: "We want to leave the South to go to the global North for a better life, for a better education." It's not as straightforward as this and we shouldn't look at the global North as being the haven and the global South as being the place of misery. We often forget how many people have migrated from the global North to the global South. For example, when the settler colonial state occupying Palestine was established in 1948, a lot of Jewish migrants and a lot of white Jews came from the global North to Palestine—so we also shouldn't overlook this experience.
- Nour If we take it further, Jewish migration flows into Palestine date back to the late eighteenth century, early nineteenth century, when migration intensified because of all the discrimination the Jewish people were facing in Europe. These migrations are from the global North to the global South, and Australia can also be considered an example of North-South migration, as can migration to South Africa by white colonialists. This also makes migration studies very political, since it can serve the agendas of governments invested in stealing the resources of other nations, and it is also an agenda that is used to portray the North as the haven, versus the South.
- Nof We are completely against that binary and that's why a decolonial intersectional feminist approach is very important when you look at refugees and migration. It makes us think about the reasons behind these migrations: why are people taking different routes, it also makes us think about voicing . . . about listening to the voices of people in the global South, of refugees and migrants who take these journeys.
- . . .
- When we think about policy and practice, we cannot create change without listening to the experiences of people on the ground, and their own needs and their own voices. Even when it comes to migration and displacement, we always need to contextualize these experiences in policy and practice. When we adopt Southern decolonial and anticolonial approaches, we reject, and try to resist, the imposition of certain terminologies, the imposition of certain practices on the global South.
- Nour But we also need to be careful, since not all Southern approaches are anticolonial.
- Nof Of course.
- Nour We do see a lot of colonizing of minds, of the West being centered in the minds of many as the ideal. We cannot take for granted that just because someone falls within the global Southern category it means that they can "do" decolonial work. We need to refrain from creating these identities and re-creating these binaries within these identities, and we also need to refrain from tokenism and mere representation. We have three brown bodies on a panel so this means it's okay, even though the brown bodies are actually speaking to the agendas of the colonialists. This is another very important thing to think about.
- Nof Absolutely, we have to be really careful with the assumption that all people from the global South share the same experiences, or there is only one approach of the decolonial intersectional approach—I don't think there is only one way of doing things. Some people in the global South can be complicit with certain ideologies and terminologies and the imposition of hegemonic Western ideologies. Some people resist it, some people negotiate it, there isn't one agency in the global South, and we shouldn't assume that people in the global South have the same political agenda.
- Nour Because even within the global South, similar to everywhere in the world, we also have a 10 percent of the ruling class that controls . . .
- Nof . . . Who are complicit . . .
- Nour . . . Exactly, with colonization. So that Southernness needs to be . . .
- Nof . . . Unpacked and deconstructed . . .

Intersectionality and Decolonial Perspectives

- Nour One of the main things we need to consider when thinking about studies of migration and displacement is that, as a field, it needs to be decolonized. What we mean by decolonizing that field in particular is that, rather than just describing people's lives, we need to shift the attention to something else.
- Nof Yes, we need to look at the experiences of different refugees from an intersectional feminist and decolonial perspective—this means that we should stop thinking about the personalized, individualized experiences of people, but rather look at the system or systems of oppression that make our struggles much more unified.
- Nour We need to start producing knowledge that actually points out these intersecting and interlocking systems of oppression, systems that create these differential experiences in the first place. We need to also interrogate the reason why some destinations are considered safer than others, and in what ways global North countries and governments are themselves involved in creating forced migration and displacement.
- Nof The problem with intersectionality nowadays, and the way it has been used, is that it singles out experiences—we put the refugee woman who comes from a specific place in one box, and we put the gay person in another box—rather than looking at how, regardless of our sexualities or color or race or gender identities, we, as people, share the same struggles, and how the same structures of oppression are affecting us. The structures of oppression are affecting us differently, but we are trying to fight against these structures of oppression, and that's how we should approach intersectionality. That's a problem nowadays we are seeing in academia . . .
- Nour We see people say “this is intersectional research,” but when you actually sit down and read the research itself you find that it's only intersectional in the way it compartmentalizes people into specific identities, it does not move beyond identities. We know that people have different experiences by now, we do not need those descriptions about people's lives.
- Nof Yes, it also singles out our experiences, rather than . . .
- Nour . . . Coming together to fight the system.
- Nof Exactly. As women, as women of color, as women coming from different sexualities, or non-normative people, we actually start fighting each other rather than fighting the structures that actually separate us.
- Nour Exactly.
- Nof Intersectionality can be used to “divide and rule” in a way, it can divide us as people sharing the same experiences. As Nour said, it's compartmentalizing our experiences. And that's how we need to . . .
- Nour . . . Nuance it a bit better. And we also need to create a discourse around it that is different, that does not satisfy an outsider's gaze into people's lives, that does not satisfy governmental agendas, we need to start working against the system itself.
- Nof Yes, the way intersectionality is being used now, it's actually serving the Eurocentric global North paradigm, when we talk about the refugee crisis because . . .
- Nour . . . And surely this is not what Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) meant when she came up with the term intersectionality, it has been appropriated . . .
- Nof It has been appropriated by Western hegemonic discourses when it comes to refugeehood, women, sexualities, and gender. Even if we look at the queer concept—queerness and queer as a concept, it's against borders, it's anything which is not normative.
- Nour Outside of normative identities.

- Nof Outside of the norm, outside of the boxes that have been imposed on us by governments, by the state system, by laws, by patriarchy and capitalism, and now unfortunately this has been hijacked and it's only used as a label for queerness and sexual orientation.
- Nour So the next question is "How, if at all, do you engage with constructs such as the global North and the global South and the West in your own work?" This is a very interesting question, and we often interrogate our usage of these terms, because they do not necessarily reflect the world we live in. These binaries, let's call them spatial binaries, the spaces people occupy, no longer hold truth because the majority of societies are actually mixed . . . In fact, we've always had hybrid identities, and it's the failure of the nation-states, for example, that makes us think . . .
- Nof . . . With these terms, with these terminologies. We need to be really careful when using certain language and terms such as the global North, the global South . . . We used to use "the West" and "the East" and now we're using the terms "global North" and "global South," but we have to be careful because we don't want to replicate and reinforce binaries. Because now, if we use the West, it is as if we are conceptualizing something as one West . . . but the West is not one thing—you have people within the West who are underprivileged, so the West is not one thing, the East is not one thing. I am concerned that if we overuse the global North and the global South they would be used as a cliché, because we would be using these terms as a binary as well, as if there is only one global North and there is only one global South—what about the global East? What about the global West? We need to be careful about these terms and ask where these terms come from. We need to keep changing them as we go, we need to be critical of the usage of these terms over and over and over again.

Against Binaries

- Nour Yes, we need to refrain from re-creating spatial geographical binaries. And, of course, our work has developed over time and the terminologies we use have also changed. Now we often use the global North and the global South, but at the same time, we are using them more as ideological terms rather than geographical ones.
- Nof Exactly. I am concerned about those terms, so we cannot really separate geography from politics, we always have to think about these terms from a geopolitical perspective.
- Nour Absolutely. Often disadvantage, oppression, etcetera, are associated with the global South, and in both popular and hegemonic discourse people rarely talk about . . .
- Nof . . . Poverty in the West, for example.
- Nour Poverty in the West. People in Arabic-speaking countries—and this is how bad the colonial agenda is—think there is no poverty in the West, and this is very problematic. And this shows us that this must have been purposeful, on multiple levels, so that we believe that in the global South, or in our communities, we need to advance in a particular way, in a liberal Western way—and this makes people in the West believe that they're superior and that their countries are the destination that people are dying to get to.
- Nof And that they're the saviors as well. So we have to think about these layers of inequalities that are prevalent in the global North if we look at class differences, racial differences, gender . . . We have to look at these structures from a very classed, gendered, sexed, racialized perspective, even within the global North.
- Nour Absolutely.

- Nof Also, this idea that the global South is the misery—it’s a very colonial perspective, and that’s why we need a decolonial lens to unlearn what has been learned throughout history.
- Nour This is a struggle sometimes. Working with people and movements in Arabic-speaking countries, it’s such a struggle to get people just to recognize that there is poverty in the UK, for example. It’s such a struggle to recognize that in fact traditional politics in the UK is a puppet show.
- Nof That’s a very good point, Nour, and also it’s a struggle for us to unlearn that our standards are not those of the West or the global North. I think about colonialism and colonialist processes, and I still use the term “colonialism,” not “neocolonialism,” because in certain countries, in Arabic-speaking countries, we still are colonized, materially colonized. We have to think about how we can unlearn all of these processes without thinking that the white man is superior and is the savior.
- Nour Or thinking that we want our countries to be at the same level as the West or operate in the same way, for example.
- Nof Copying state systems, copying laws and . . .
- Nour Yes, exactly. And Palestine seems like a dream too far away, but at the same time I do not want a Palestine that is prosperous because of the arms trade. I do not want a Palestine that could prosper because somewhere in the world we’re oppressing and taking the resources of other people.
- Nof Yes, or it has the same nationalist sentiments.
- Nour Exactly.
- Nof Okay. The next question is: “You have written on the importance of decolonial approaches to research—why is this approach important to scholars, policy makers, and practitioners working on migration and displacement?” This is a very important approach because it makes us unlearn what we have learned and what we have been taught throughout history, because it’s intergenerational. It’s very important because it’s about historicization. And what we mean by historicization is going back in history to reclaim what has been going on in these places.
- Nour So why is this approach important to policy makers, scholars, practitioners? I think the answer is in the fact that even Theresa May [prime minister of the UK, 2016–2019] acknowledged the impact of colonization on laws related to sexuality in previously colonized countries (BBC 2018), and stated that homosexuality, for instance, has to be decriminalized to undo the harm they have done. I am not saying this because we’re endorsing what Theresa May said, but because we need to put an end to the appropriation of such terms. Because while Theresa May’s move has been welcomed by some activists as a call to decolonize, it was a mere cliché and had nothing to do with an actual process of restorative justice, for example, in the places that were colonized—it had nothing to do with improving the material living conditions of those people. No, her approach is one that suggests: “Ah, we need to remove this bit of law that we imposed on these countries, blah, blah, blah.” But not an actual action to change people’s material realities.
- Nof I also believe that decolonial and decoloniality as a project is important for colonized people because when you have had years of colonialism in these countries, as we mentioned earlier, people start to think that our standard is to abide by Western hegemonic discourses or to follow the West. But I think we need to decolonize our minds, our bodies, and our spirits from these processes, to make clear that we have agency and we are

agents of change for our people, for our nations, and for our struggles. We don't need anyone to help us with that process. I talk to so many people in Palestine, for example, to so many friends where they feel so helpless because they ask how they can change these realities. But decolonial projects help us heal from that process, if I may say, or makes us think that we can change our realities.

Nour Absolutely. When we think about decolonizing research—because you can also decolonize in praxis, not just through research—we really need to start producing knowledge that addresses the causes of oppression, that addresses the main routes of the problems.

Nof It's about finding solidarity with each other rather than saying that I want to help you and save you. What you said, Nour, about the production of knowledge, is a very good point when you look at all of the knowledge that we depend on, like gender theories or class theories: we need to start thinking to produce knowledge about our struggles, about our ways of doing things in our language. Decolonizing is also reclaiming our language, reclaiming our knowledge, and reclaiming our experiences. We need to look at the structures of oppression rather than the symptoms, because what's happening now when people speak of decoloniality is they use it as a cliché, it just looks at the symptoms—"Yes, let's change the laws"—but we don't change the structures of oppression that put these laws there in the first place.

Nour That is why we need a decolonial approach, but also we need an intersectional decolonial approach that looks at the intersection of interlocking structural oppression.

Nof Absolutely. When we think about decolonizing, it needs to be accompanied by a process of decanonizing: we need to stop looking at the canon that is hegemonically Western or global Northern . . . You want to say something, Nour?

Nour Yes! That's where our feminist consciousness comes into play. It's about looking at the experiences of people, it's about raising the voices of these people who are at the receiving end of colonialism or who are the colonized. Rather than describing their lives and their experiences, it's more about how they themselves describe their experiences and their lives from their material experiences. That's how we also look at decolonial approaches. I don't like this term "giving voice," but it's about *voicing* the experiences of these people, and that is a decolonial approach.

Nof Yes, with people producing knowledge about their experiences themselves, describing or talking about their own realities in their own terms and their own terminologies. It's more than about their experience, it's about their voice being acknowledged as a valid source of knowledge, the knowledge of indigenous populations.

Nour We need to understand systems of oppression the way people understand them, which is very important. The majority of refugees know what caused their distress, they recognize it, and it's important to put it out there to policy makers so they see it again and again and again. There is no harm in saying to policy makers: You're doing the wrong things . . . So let's return to the importance of decolonial approaches to policy makers, scholars, and practitioners working on migration and displacement. We started by saying that there is a great importance to it, but at the same time I think what the majority of people often struggle with is how to operationalize this. It sounds like a theory to many, but how to make it work in practice is . . .

Nof . . . The challenge.

Nour . . . This is the challenge. One of the things that we talk about often in our own work is that we cannot decolonize without processes of self-reflection, self-critique, and also . . .

Nof . . . Taking responsibility. And that part of self-reflection I really agree with, it's very important because it also gives responsibility and agency to us as people who were colo-

nized and who are still colonized. Decolonialism and decoloniality makes us think about us as part of that process, that we need to liberate ourselves and we need to take responsibility for what we're doing. When we liberate ourselves, as Angela Davis famously said, "we have to talk about liberating minds as well as liberating society"—and that's part of decoloniality, and decolonialism, where we are not seen in that binary. There isn't a savior-victim paradigm.

Nour Absolutely.

Nof That also pushes us not to abide by NGOs and practitioner and academic institutions that impose a certain Western hegemonic discourse that is very masculine actually, where they look at us and see women of the global South, or queers of the global South who need saving—it creates that binary and that victimhood narrative.

Nour Absolutely, the savior-victim binary makes the process of doing programs or projects around refugees very commercial and capitalist, whether we like that or not. One of the main problems of what's being done around refugees and migration and displacement is that it does not take many aspects into account; rather, it's just based on this framing of the victim and savior. Many people in NGOs would actually tell you they're "saving" or "helping" people, they would not acknowledge the processes of learning that they themselves also go through. To actually create a decolonial approach within policy or within the NGO sector or within academia we need to start thinking about our positionalities, we need to start really positioning ourselves within the research rather than merely saying we're doing this research "for" this group of people or that group of people. Because our personalities and stories as researchers, as people doing nongovernmental or charitable work, our personal stories are the reasons that push us in the first place to do the work we do. And it's really important to acknowledge that as a process of learning, rather than a process of saving.

Nof And unlearning too.

Nour And unlearning, of course.

Nof Another reason that decolonialism is really important is because it allows us to define ourselves, it allows us to find the terminologies that we feel comfortable with. I can give you an example from our work with CTDC. We have worked on a research project in relation to non-normative sexualities and gender, well, LGBT bodies and subjects, and this research was in Arabic-speaking countries where people were asked about how they defined themselves. Of course, this research was funded by an organization in the global North. Now, one of the main findings of our research is that people couldn't identify within the LGBTQ+ letters, and we were building our research and our theories and our conceptualization of gender and sexuality based on that finding.

Nour We even reframed our project to match that finding.

Nof Exactly. But, of course, the global North funder didn't like that. And actually, not only the global North funder, but also the research partners in the Arabic-speaking countries that are complicit with the hegemonic masculine discourses, Western discourses. In the end they didn't like that finding, that data, and they took it out of the report: it didn't match their policies, it didn't match their agendas, because people didn't identify. Decolonialism allows people to define themselves, it allows people to find their own terms and terminologies.

Nour Absolutely. Within CTDC or with our work in general, we think that in order to decolonize any project that you are embarking on—because it's really difficult to decolonize projects that already exist, which is something that we need to be aware of—when we really want to decolonize we need to think about five major points:

(1) We need to think about *historicizing* the issue: to ask what's the history of that phenomena we're studying, what's the history of that oppression we want to tackle, where did it come from, how did it emerge in that specific context?

(2) The next part would be *politicizing* the topic, thinking about all of the political agendas that are involved in it. When we think about refugees, there are also political, in a traditional sense, stakeholders that are involved in that process, involved in the process of creating the reasons for migration, creating the reasons for refugeehood, and so on.

Nof And creating discourses around refugees and migration.

Nour Absolutely.

Nof So we cannot just talk about gender and sexuality without *criticizing* gender and sexualities.

Nof (3) The third point is about *contextualizing*: we have interlocking and intersecting structures of oppression that we are fighting against and we are trying to unify our struggles, but at the same time, each context is different. So we cannot, for example, appropriate causes. That brings me to an example of Palestine where in some demonstrations in Palestine they use the slogan "black Palestine lives matter," but that is appropriating other causes. It doesn't mean that we cannot go together in the same protest and we cannot protest against the same structures of oppression, but we cannot appropriate and hijack other causes. At the same time, we get really angry when people start saying that Palestine is an apartheid state like what happened in South Africa. No, it might be one example, but we cannot say Palestine is like South Africa, Palestinian life is like black lives in the States—this is about appropriation, and appropriating other causes.

Nour Yes, and I think this also happens when people become fixated on describing lives or describing things, rather than talking about the reasons that have created them.

Nof The reasons, exactly. Just to be clear, we're not saying that we cannot protest against the same structures of oppression. We are saying that we cannot hijack each other's causes, as people from the global South. Because when we hijack and appropriate, we are reinforcing a monolithic way of looking at the global South, when we need to be really careful not to put the global South or global South struggles in one box.

Nour (4) The fourth important element is *globalizing*: thinking about the global structures that create the specific phenomena that we're trying to address. I think globalizing might be very relevant to the politics of care and also politics of consciousness, because when we globalize we can also understand more. For instance, when we buy cashews at the store, we understand where these cashews came from.

Nof It pushes us to think about our consumption, our choices.

Nour Yes, and our positionality within a global context is important. The system that governs us all, all over the world—and I will allow myself to say that because it is the same system—disconnects us from our practices and behaviors in a way. We stop interrogating, for example, how am I, by eating quinoa in the UK, somehow affecting people who produce it elsewhere? How about the rice industry in South Asia, how about . . .

Nof . . . Avocado production . . .

Nour . . . Avocado production. It's like a puzzle and we need to put all the pieces together—this would make good research, this would create good policies . . .

Nof We always get asked in talks, especially, to be honest, from people who are white: How can we help? And I say: You cannot ask this question, you're part of that structure.

Nour Exactly.

- Nof Don't disconnect from the structure that gives you privilege, or maybe sometimes it doesn't give you privilege; instead, think about how you are part of that structure, because positionality is a key.
- Nour Yes. Understanding that race is an issue, not only for black people: race is an issue for white people as well. Sexuality is not only an issue for queers: it's an issue for heterosexual people who, for instance, are expected to get married, which is itself oppressive. This is how we think about tools for decolonizing within these spaces.
- (5) Finally, *language* is an important tool, the history of the language, especially when research is being done within a context where we are unfamiliar with the language. Nof, do you want to give an example?
- Nof Yes, when we think about language we think about context, we think about history and we think about politics or politicizing. For example, in our work we struggle with the word "gender" because people cannot relate to the word "gender." If we think about gender, when did it appear really? I will just speak about Arabic-speaking countries here—when did this word appear? It appeared through NGOs in the 1990s.
- Nour Yes, in the 1980s, 1990s it started becoming a thing.
- Nof The UN agency that used to be UNIFEM and is now UN Women, UNDP, international NGOs, and other stakeholders started to use the word "gender" and asserted that we want to mainstream gender. But people didn't relate with that word, it didn't resonate with people.
- Nour And it creates knowledge gaps.
- Nof Of course. An additional problem is that gender has often really only been related to women, and that's a misconception . . . And now we need to add the men into the equation. It's the same with the way that race has also only been associated with people of color and black people; gender has only been associated with women; sexuality has only been associated with queers and non-normative people. That creates gaps in knowledge, it creates, again, a disconnect with people and it creates the compartmentalization of people's experiences.

Queer Theories and Decolonial Approaches

- Nof Do you want to move to the next question? The question is: "Your work is also committed to intersectionality, feminism, and queer theories—how do you view the relationship between intersectionality, feminism, queer theories on the one hand, and decolonial approaches to research in this field on the other? Why is this important for understanding and responding to migration and displacement?" That's a really good question.
- Nour I don't see any separation, as we have discussed earlier: we cannot really disconnect intersectional feminism from decoloniality.
- Nof For us, feminism as a movement is not about only women, it's about looking at different experiences of marginalized groups, so we look at classism, we look at patriarchy, we look at different structures. When we think about feminism as a lens, we look at the structures of oppression that marginalize people.
- Nour Absolutely. And what I want to add is that the word "queer" emerged as anti-identity. Where queer studies are heading toward now is queer as in LGBT identities rather than a political standpoint, rather than rejecting boxes and normativities imposed by the different systems we live in—within the family, outside the family, within the state system

as well—within the state itself. We write on queerness, but we also detach ourselves from white queer theory, if I may call it that.

Nof Exactly. And that's why we don't conceptualize using a queer theory lens . . .

Nour Yes.

Nof Rather, we prefer using an intersectional decolonial feminist lens because it goes beyond the boxes, it goes beyond the identities, because it looks at different structures of oppression. As Nour said, queer theory unfortunately is being pushed toward that identity focus, and it's replicating structures of oppression actually.

Nour This is the problem with queer theory or theories and where they stand at the moment . . . There is a major dissonance between the name of the theory—queer as an anti-identity—and where it's going and where it's heading now.

Nof . . . And that's why we don't use queer theories, because an intersectional decolonial feminist framework makes us think about how to be much more inclusive rather than exclusive.

Nour Intersectionality, for example, in the global North emerged as part of third-wave feminism, and we think that queer theory only initially came to nuance that, and to say we are non-normative. Unfortunately, that's not where queer is going, so we feel more comfortable reclaiming intersectionality rather than . . .

Nof . . . Reclaiming queer . . .

Nour . . . At the moment at least.

Nof Especially because queer has been associated with white theorists as well. And again, the production of knowledge is being done only by white queers, for example. For us, it reinforces certain gender dynamics and sexual practices, as if all the queers have the same gender, and like there's the boxes of what queer is, and if you don't fit one of the boxes then you're not queer enough.

Nour Absolutely.

Nof Because some people don't identify with these practices and ideologies and identities.

Nour Absolutely.

Nof So it's homogenizing the experiences of queer people.

Nour We do see a lot of links, from our perspective, as we think that intersectionality and feminism resonate with the decolonial approach. A lot of the teaching of feminists, feminist methodologists, etcetera, go hand in hand with decolonial approaches, starting from positionality, self-reflection, they're very similar in so many ways. They are probably similar because they come from the perspective of the marginalized rather than the perspective of those who are dominant.

Nof With feminism, we try to look at the erasure of knowledge and experiences of women who have been silenced. The same with decoloniality, we try to look at the knowledge and experiences of indigenous people who have been silenced. So there is that link.

Nour Absolutely. Okay, shall we do the next question?

Nof Yes: "Could Southern decolonial or anticolonial or other approaches lay the foundations for policy and programmatic responses to migration and displacement that resist rather than reinforce neoliberal hegemony?"

Nour They can definitely, but we also need to think about an actual dedication to reframing policy, an actual dedication to reframing what programmatic responses mean and what they should look like and how they should be led. This can change things, but we cannot just keep doing what currently people do—suddenly they decide to do gender mainstreaming so they're okay on gender, and then suddenly they decide to include LGBT, so they're okay on sexuality and then . . . No, they need to be designed from the beginning

- through a decolonial approach, because decolonizing them as they exist is a massive task that will require a lot of . . . not just unlearning, but also a tearing apart of politics.
- Nof We also have to be realistic that some of these programs and policies, which are implemented in the global South, reinforce neoliberal hegemonic discourses. We see civil society organizations in the global South that are replicating structures of oppression, replicating, for example, LGBT discourses. It depends on who's doing it, it depends if people are really willing to change.
- Nour The problem with NGOs—and we can talk about the Arabic-speaking region because that's where we've been working with NGOs most of our lives—the problem with NGOs is that they are even governed from within using a neoliberal approach. They are governed from within . . .
- Nof . . . Because they are also confined by funding. So, for example, some of these organizations that work on gender issues are conditioned by the funding that they are applying for, and they cannot really change within these discourses because of that funding. We cannot really think about NGOs, and the practice of NGOs, without thinking about where the money is coming from. But there is another layer to that: a lot of these organizations think that they cannot negotiate and resist the funders' agendas.
- Nour Yes, absolutely.
- Nof They think that the funder has the upper hand, has the final word. But this is what we try to also talk about in our trainings and our work, especially with new organizations: no, you have to resist these agendas, you have to . . .
- Nour . . . Push back.
- Nof Push back, of course, for your agenda—and that's how you create change.
- Nour But we also can't deny that some people benefit from that system. This is actually one of the reasons we first refrained from doing LGBT work, even though eventually we started doing LGBT work: the whole discourse of identities is neoliberal anyway. That reinforcement of neoliberal and liberal thinking around sexuality and colonialism and compartmentalized struggles is the reason why we started self-critiquing as well.
- Nof We also started thinking—and this is why part of decolonialism is about politicizing—that we cannot think about LGBT and sexuality without politicizing.
- Nour Yes, and whether we like it or not, the majority, for example, of LGBT organizations promote an Islamophobic discourse that . . .
- Nof . . . Is serving consequently a neoliberal hegemonic discourse.
- Nour And this conversation makes us also question how we can get away from this neoliberal hegemony—what are the possibilities of getting away from neoliberalism as a system of oppression? In one way or another, it makes you feel that the whole world needs a reset. No?
- Nof Yes, and if we look at what's happening in the world now, what we're witnessing in Lebanon, Ecuador, Chile, Palestine, people are protesting, people are protesting the same structure of oppression. The manifestation might be different—the way it's being practiced is different—but people are protesting the same sort of oppression and that gives us a lot of hope, thinking about all of these people, all of these non-normative people—queers, domestic workers, women, refugees, people from impoverished classes . . . they are revolting against the same system.
- Nour They are revolting against neoliberalism . . .
- Nof Exactly, a neoliberalism that is sexist, that is homophobic, that is racist, that is classist.
- Nour And this is the thing: we want to talk about policy and programs but we also want to question the intentions of these programs and policies.

Nof Yes, are they challenging the structure of oppression? Are these programs and policies and NGOs, are they really challenging the structures of oppression? That's a question that we need to continue asking.

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