

Presented at 2019 WARP Annual Meeting
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Dear members of the beautiful WARP family,

I come to you from Lebanon, a tiny country on the Mediterranean Sea, five thousand eight hundred and twenty-four miles away from this conference room. I have traveled a long way to be here yet I feel connected to you, beyond distances, borders, and pre-assigned identities. We stand here together -all of us. One community; united by our love for textiles, and our heightened awareness of the role these delicate yarns and colorful fabrics continue to play in people's lives.

I am blessed and humbled to be standing here and speaking to you. A very warm thank you to Susan, Cathy and the entire WARP family for giving me this fantastic opportunity to tell my story. Thank you for believing in the importance of this story, and thank you for giving me a platform to recount it.

My story is largely not mine. It is the story of a sizeable population of women from my part of the world. A population of women who have faced war and displacement, who have endured difficulty and trauma, but who have risen, a needle in one hand and a thread in another. These women have been pushed by extraordinary difficulties. They had to flee in all directions, sometimes apart from their families, and they have found themselves in a country they do not know. They have seen death and experienced hunger. But despite these testing circumstances, they have found stability, friendship and well-being as they worked on textile commissions to make a living.

My story is also partly mine. I am truly fortunate to have a solid education, a home of my own, and a career I cherish. I am particularly lucky to have a wonderful and caring family, and a supportive best friend who also happens to be my husband. But, like most people in this room and in this world, I have had my share of anxieties. In my worst and dimmest days, I put music on my iPhone speaker and I spread my collection of colorful textiles on the table in front of me. From there on, little could stop me, as I stitched my way to well-being.

There is something magical and reassuring about textiles; They are this formidable guard –this shield– made with mere singular threads. If they break, they can always be sewn back together. They are always amendable. There is no point of no return. In this sense, they give you a solid impression, or even a certitude, that things will be fine after all. As I stitch my fabric together, I am teaching my brain, in a seamless and beautiful way, to stitch my life together.

I stand before you today to tell you the reassuring story of textiles and refugee women from Syria, and to relate my own story as it intermingles and intertwines with theirs.

I am going to start with some background, first about myself, then about these brave and resilient women.

I have been hand-collecting textiles from around the world since teenage. Wherever I went – and I've traveled quite a lot– I bought a vintage colorful piece of tribal fabric. Today, I have several dressers with embroidered and woven textiles from 30 countries. But I actually started working in textiles only four years ago. I worked on my necklaces slowly, timidly, unsure what to make of this new burgeoning vocation. Between 1999 and 2013, I was a journalist and PR consultant then an assistant professor of journalism and media studies, working at a prestigious American university in Beirut.

I decided to become a journalist when I was 8 years old, and I pursued my goal until I got what I wanted. Why did I want that? I remember it quite well, even today. I wanted to “help bring peace to my country.”

I was born in Beirut in 1977, two years after the start of the Lebanese Civil War. The war ended in 1990. This is a picture of me around the time I made my career decision. I'm showing it to you as a quick explanation for my naïve outlook. Looking back today, I am confident that textiles have more bonding capabilities and more ability to bring peace than journalism does. I know that these beautiful interlocked yarns can tell a better, more convincing and more eloquent story than reporters can.

But at the time, I had seen too many bodies on television and even few of them on the street. Beirut looked chillingly grim, empty and divided. I was lucky not to lose a family member, but I did lose a neighbor, a distant relative and my father's best friend. We had to wait in line for bread and gas and lived with a limited postal service, and little electricity, water and phone communication.

Still, I will say, it was not all bleak. Really. It was not all bleak. To our joy as children, schools had to close from time to time –which was wonderfully convenient. Because the upper building levels were more prone to missile attacks, we often ended up several families in the same apartment, with many, many kids to play with. It was bliss. There is also the memory of my grandmother making cookies and angel food cake, and of course, memories of her knitting. My grandmother, God bless her soul, was a master knitter. She made many of our winter outfits as babies. I often sat with her and even learned to knit socks with bright alternating colors. Looking back, I think that knitting with my grandma was my first introduction to the peacemaking power of textiles.

I have many fond memories from my childhood, most of which are from my grandmother's house, or from our home in the mountains. But if I think about it overall, I think that the war did define me. I will candidly admit that, any time I feel greatly happy, I am submerged with the anxious feeling that this happiness will come to an abrupt end. I am very susceptible to noise. I find sound in general very deafening. I am always scared of losing people I love. And I ended up with a strong tendency for perfectionism.

I sat few weeks ago with a Syrian refugee family in the Bekaa. Mariam, the woman in the picture, and I talked about our war experiences and we realized that, despite the difference in time and space, the experience –as a series of stimuli affecting the body in adverse ways– is exactly the same. Through this strong experiential bond, I am connected to the Syrian women whose stories I am relating today.

Syria is Lebanon's influential neighbor. It surrounds us from the North and the East, and we share a common history and many cultural values. Until 1920, which is the year Lebanon was officially established as a country, we were both one same country, governed by the Ottoman empire in Istanbul. And even after the border between the two countries crystallized, and the Lebanese and Syrian republics were established, our histories remained intertwined, sometimes peacefully and sometimes less peacefully.

The war in Syria erupted in 2011, first as a revolt against President Bachar Al Assad's regime, then soon a civil war where the Syrian government, various local factions, ISIS and multiple governments from the region and beyond came to fight.

Estimates about the toll of this war vary depending on the source, but wherever you go and whomever you quote, the numbers are bleak and disheartening. According to the United Nations, the death toll in Syria is four hundred thousand, or two percent of the population. Two percent of the population! And the number of refugees, between the internally displaced and those who fled the country is 13.5 million. You may find the number moderate in US standards, but the entire Syrian population is 22 million. This means that half of the Syrians overall have left their homes.

What did they take with them? Where they could, they probably took their passports, some money, a bag or a suitcase, and few pieces of clothing and shoes.. All of these belongings are textile-based. They are textile-based. Fabric is this warm, textural shield from the elements, from the war, and from displacement. It is, for Syrian refugees, one of the very few connections with home. It is a tangible way to remember the past and a fragile bridge to a Syria that is no more. And this is, truly, one of the priceless values of textiles. They seem to extend beyond their actual surface to connect us to people, spaces and times that we cherish and love. It's as if the warp is able to endlessly stretch and take us places in mystical ways.

Lebanon, Syria's tiny neighbor, and my homeland, is home to 1.5 million Syrian refugees. I also need to put these numbers in perspective. The entire Lebanese population is 4 million. We are now, with the flow of Syrian refugees into our country, averaging at 6.5 million, yet our territory is only twice the size of Delaware. You can cross Lebanon in three hours and a half from North to South and in one and a half hour from West to East. In other words, it's crowded. It's very, very crowded.

Already burdened with many internal problems, my government has not been able to cope properly with the flow of Syrian refugees. For a variety of reasons, it has denied many of them

residency and the ability to join the formal economy. Syrians are allowed to work as farmers or construction workers, and –if they are rich– to open businesses. But otherwise, the most unfortunate Syrian refugees in Lebanon cannot legally work.

So what did the refugee women do? They stitched! They took their needles and the skills they acquired as young girls, and they stitched. Several Lebanese, Syrian and foreign initiatives saw the light. They built connections between designers on one side, and refugees on the other, creating a win-win situation for both parties and scores of stunning handmade objects. For the women coordinating, the women designing and the women stitching, it's needles that proved to be mightier than the sword.

As we say in my part of the world, “hardship always comes with twice as many blessings.” Before Mariam came to Lebanon, she was an assistant pharmacist. Unable to work, but so eager to educate her daughters, she took on embroidery. Today, she says she is much happier with her work than she was back in Syria. “It just brings me peace of mind,” she told me. “Whenever I start stitching, I find myself daydreaming and enjoying the work I am doing, more than I enjoyed work at the pharmacy.”

There is something soothing about the repetitive movement of the heddles. Working on a loom is ongoing, rhythmic, stable and profound. It is grounding meditation. In this sense, the theme of this conference is most appropriate. Syria may still be at war but the women of Syria have gained real peace, inner peace, through textiles. As part of a research paper I did on the topic, I talked to many Syrian artisans. They explained to me that they were not interested in designing a textile product or a collection. They just wanted to be given a commission, a task, that they could execute without too much thinking. The finding took me by surprise. Why would someone not want to leave their signature? I asked myself. As a designer, I found it hard to believe at first. But then the answer dawned on me: The women did not aspire to be creative. They were just looking for peace.

They were looking for a peace that their country lacked. They were looking for a stability that their financial situation lacked. And in the middle of all the limitations and the challenges, they found it by going back to an essential, ancient and stress-free motion: stitching. And I did too. I did too.

In the summer of 2012, right around the time I started experimenting with necklaces, I was diagnosed with a severe and complicated case of arrhythmia. I remember that the first time I felt the symptoms, I was on vacation in Prague, the beautiful capital of the Czech Republic. Walking with my husband and my sister, I suddenly felt that I was unable to keep up. Just like that. My athletic and healthy but nonetheless overworked body did not give me any warnings. Soon, I was passing out and spent most of my days on a hazy and unfocused cloud. It took a number of tests to know that I have five types of arrhythmia at the same time, and it took five years of tests, an 8-hour heart operation and a Medtronic pacemaker to tame them.

I remember well that, after my first operation, I was weak and scared, and that I only found comfort inside my fleece pajamas. Their tactile tenderness brought me real peace.

In this world of shiny screens, we tend to neglect the sense of touch. We celebrate sight and cherish sound. We love TV series, social media, earphones, music, musicals, museum shows – where we are specifically instructed not to touch. But when we are first born into this world, and leave the safe and reassuring wombs of our mothers, we find ourselves surrounded by new sights and sounds, and we're terrified. We cry. We cry, not only because we're gasping for air. We cry because we're scared. And at this critical and defining moment of our lives, it is only the mother touch that brings us back to safety. When our mothers hold us in their hands and reassure us that everything will be ok, we stop crying.

It is this kind of peace that textiles unconditionally offer us, even as we work with them. One of the Syrian women I talked to put it in the best way possible. She said that when she works with fabric, she becomes a child. I know what she means, and I think, that in this room, we all do.

I left my position as a full-time assistant professor at the Lebanese American University in 2016, two years after my operation. I had been designing tribal fabric necklaces for several years, mainly as a hobby, and I decided, at that time, to make them my profession. I think that I had aged so much with the heart operation, that I need to connect with the child in me in tangible ways. Working with textiles was, and still is, akin to play therapy for me. I founded Kinship Stories, a line of tribal art necklaces, focused on supporting artisans and promoting multiculturalism. I hand-collect vintage and antique materials from around the world and put them together into one-of-a-kind pieces.

Through this professional channel, my road crossed, one more time, with that of the Syrian women in Lebanon. As the business gradually grew, and the exhibitions multiplied, I asked a friend, who works with refugees, for help. Today, our work together is project-based and rather irregular, but it does bring food to the table –both for them and for me.

As I said before, many of the unfortunate Syrians living in Lebanon do not work, due to political restrictions on their work permits. Several live in tents built by the United Nations. This is an example of a Syrian camp in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon and these are typically the tents where they live. Believe it or not, they have to rent these tents from the owner of the land. The tents were built by the United Nations, but refugees have to pay 70\$ per tent to the landlord. The United Nations also gives Syrian refugees a total monthly donation of 135\$. In other words, they end up with 65\$ per month per family.

This is where textiles come in. Textiles provide refugees with some peace of mind because they bring financial support. This is Jamila. She has asked me to use a given name and she was, at first, camera shy. She said she did not want Americans to see her with the head cover and think she was a terrorist or think badly about Islam. I reassured her that her smile, evident in her eyes, differentiated her from the images we see daily in the media. She laughed. Jamila's husband is missing back in Syria. She does not know where he is, or whether he is dead or alive.

But she has a daughter to take care of and educate. Her biggest concern is her daughter's education. She wants her to have a better future. So Jamila took few workshops, funded by non-profit organizations in Lebanon, and took ownership of her destiny. I work with Jamila, among other women, and we both feel good about it.

Most Syrian women work in groups. They either work at home –be it an actual home or a tent, or they work at the headquarters of supportive organizations in the camps. When they work, the environment is communal, supportive, and happy. They talk about home and the children, they exchange cooking recipes, and of course, they nag about the men. Friendship, I guess, is the best way to describe it.

There is something great about working with textiles: It allows you to bond in the most natural and profound of ways. Textile-based work is time-consuming and does not always require sharp mental focus. So you talk. You exchange stories and memories, then you find common grounds, and soon you establish a community of your own. And this community, for Syrian refugee women, has become synonymous with home. It is like a small oasis of Syria inside another country, and it just feels good. A cultural studies academic by the name of Benedict Anderson has coined a term called “imagined communities.” He used the term to speak of socially constructed societies, where a shared feeling of belonging is created through the continuous exposure to a same medium. I will use his concept to argue that textiles have created an imagined community among Syrian refugees, providing them with a nation, a community, a home away from home.

So the power of textiles in bringing peace –internal peace– is substantial. Working with fabric provides you with:

- dignity for your family
- a soothing, tactile experience
- a grounding meditative process
- possibilities for building your own community and a home away from home
- and even a lesson of certitude that everything is amendable.

But most of all, and especially for these Syrian women who left their homes in a hurry, who lost family members and became boxed in this packaged stereotype of a pitiful, unwanted refugee, working with textiles transforms these women into makers. It allows them to see the worthy things that their hands produce and fills them with joy and pride and self-esteem. One woman, whom I will name Kareema, told me that she used to lock herself up every day, scared of any visitors, until she heard about an organization in the camps that helped Syrian refugees. She went there, learned to embroider, and is now teaching others to do so too. Because of her superior skills, she is given commissions by the best designers in Beirut and, as a result, has seen her work travel across the globe. “Me!” She said. “My work. Something I made, is now in New York and Japan.” She laughed so hard, disbelieving but obviously delighted. She has a small Nokia phone and takes pictures of her work to send them to her sister in Syria. She wants to be build a school of embroidery when she returns to Aleppo. From a woman scared to face the world, she is now turning into a woman entrepreneur. If this is not sustainability than what is?

I have come here to relate my story, and that of the Syria women in my country. The refugees, without a proper home, and I, without a proper heartbeat, have been able to find peace, internal peace, in our daily work with the needle and the thread.

I hope that my speech will resonate with many of you. I know that textiles often attract the most sensible souls, looking for the maternal touch in a world of isolation, screens, intolerance and war. All peace starts with internal peace, and relational peace, before easing its way to national and international peace. Textiles, in this sense, help create a more peaceful world, one stitch at a time. Perhaps that our best bet for the future of our children is to get all those presidents of the world to sit together and weave. Weave a real peace.

I thank you for taking the time to listen to me. I hope that my story and that of the brave Syrian women in my country, will inspire you to weave and stitch and dye and print even more and more fabric. I am here to answer any questions you have and I look forward to starting many beautiful conversations from here on. I will end my speech with an Arabic greeting, which literally mean "May Peace Be Bestowed Upon You." Assalamu alaykum.