Can the Subaltern be heard?
A Discussion on ethical strategies for Communication in a Postcolonial World

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Abstract

This thesis relies on the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Seyla Benhabib in the field of Postcolonialism. Guided by their theoretical insights it is aiming at providing an understanding of how postcolonial structures within the International Humanitarian Aid discourse takes form and discuss strategies for communication that would be deemed justified in this context. Through a field research in Lebanon, focusing on the Lebanese Red Cross and their methods used for communication, it provides a scrutiny of the theoretical insights of Spivak and Benhabib, in order to see how plausible they are when discussing the way Global Humanitarian Organizations operate in todays’ world. In the conclusive discussion, the study exposes the importance for these organizations to let go of their essentialist way of looking at the subaltern, continuously depriving her of her subject position. In a context of asymmetrical power relations, there is a need for these organizations to ”learn to learn from below”. The people of the Western world need to unlearn Western privilege to enable themselves to relate to people and communities outside of their own paradigm and thus create presuppositions for an ethical communication.
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Chapter 1 - Introduction

“The real tragedy of our postcolonial world is not that the majority of people had no say in whether or not they wanted this new world; rather, it is that the majority have not been given the tools to negotiate this new world.” (Adichie 2006:101)

Postcolonial studies examine the human consequences of external control and economic exploitation of native people and their lands. Sometimes concealed in acts of benevolence, the exploitative structures are still present today. Postcolonial critics asserts that Western humanitarian organizations are complicit in the construction of the “Third World subject” effectively silencing the people they claim to be helping and thus maintain prevailing power structures. But is it possible for humanitarian organizations to communicate with vulnerable people without elements of oppression? This thesis will discuss strategies for communication in a context of unequal power structures.

The case of Lebanon constitutes the point of departure for this study. The country is highly dependent on the assistance of humanitarian organizations, partly due to one of the worst humanitarian crisis of our time, the Syrian civil war. An estimated 11 million Syrians have fled their homes since the outbreak of the war in March 2011. Most of them are internally displaced or have been forced to seek safety in neighboring countries. One in four people in Lebanon is now a Syrian refugee, which makes the highest per capita concentration of refugees in the world (Amnesty, 2015). The crisis puts a huge pressure on the humanitarian organizations operating in Lebanon, a country already burdened by a paralyzed government and a highly strained economy. One of the actors responsible for the receipt of the Syrian refugees is The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). It is the world's largest humanitarian network that reaches over 150 million people worldwide (IFRC, 2016). This thesis will discuss the question of how such a powerful organization meet the needs of vulnerable people without reproducing colonial power structures. And in more general terms investigate the question: What strategies for communication can be deemed justified when NGO: s are dealing with vulnerable people?

In order to approach the problem, there are some useful work done by postcolonial theorists and ethicists. One of the most influential writers within the field of postcolonialism is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, professor of comparative literature at Columbia University. She tells us that the continuity between today’s world and the colonial period is almost completely intact and that the many times well-meaning neo colonizers are failing in their understanding, and therefore in their representation, of the subaltern (Spivak, 2014:15). Her critique towards Western Humanitarian Organizations will be used as a tool when discussing how to approach oppressive structures within the international humanitarian discourse.
Further, the theoretical insights of philosopher Seyla Benhabib are useful in the discussion of communication in a context of asymmetric power structures. For the purpose of this thesis, her exploration of the ethical dimension of communication is of relevance. Benhabib provides a discussion of the way we look at “the Other” and how this perception affects moral standards (Benhabib, 1985:411).

Spivak and Benhabib are both touching subjects that are actualized in the work of the IFRC. But how plausible are their theories when analysing the work of global humanitarian organizations in a postcolonial perspective? Can their theories be used in order to find communication strategies that are justified when dealing with vulnerable people?

This study will scrutinize the strategies of communication within the work of The IFRC. The subject of the study is the Vulnerability Capacity Assessment (VCA), a project directed to refugees and vulnerable communities in Lebanon carried out by the Lebanese Red Cross (LRC). The theoretical approach of Benhabib and Spivak will be used when analysing the material while simultaneously scrutinizing the theories themselves in the light of the findings of the field study. This paper is aiming at providing a discussion of oppressive structures within the field of international humanitarian aid, and what strategies of communication that would be deemed fair in this context. The study is delimited to the Lebanese context, and the theoretical insights of Spivak and Benhabib have been chosen for the purpose of this thesis and do not claim to be exhaustive in any way.

1.1 Research purpose

The purpose of this study is two-fold. Firstly, the aim is to critically analyse communication strategies of human rights actors when their projects involve extreme human vulnerability. When dealing with refugees in vulnerable situations, the asymmetric power structures creates a great need for a critical review of the methods and strategies being used for communication. The thesis will focus on the strategies of the Lebanese Red Cross (LRC) program on disaster risk reduction directed to refugees in Lebanon. To improve our knowledge about this, will also mean gaining information about what approach that will lead to improved awareness, knowledge and a positive development in vulnerable communities.

The second aim of this thesis is to scrutinize the theories of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Seyla Benhabib in order to find out how plausible they are when discussing the way global humanitarian organizations operate in todays’ world. By exploring the theories in the light of the field research, the aim is to provide a critical discussion of the theoretical insights of Spivak and Benhabib.
1.2 Research question

The research question of this paper is:
*What communication strategies are justified when International Humanitarian Organizations are dealing with vulnerable people and communities?*

The research question will be processed using the theoretical analysis as a point of departure in field observations, in-depth interviews and a scrutiny of two key policy documents distributed by the IFRC.

1.3 Theoretical framework and methodological approach

The methodological approach of this paper is a combination of desk research and field research. The theoretical framework has been chosen for the purpose of providing a tool to investigate the research questions, and the findings of the field study will make up for the empirical part of the analysis. The findings of the field research combined with the theoretical framework will constitute the foundation of a discussion aiming at answering the research questions of this paper.

On an overarching level, Seyla Benhabibs’ communicative ethics’ will be used. In her book *Situating the self: gender, community and postmodernism in contemporary ethics* – she examines the presuppositions of creating an ethical relationship with ”the Other”. She further includes a discussion of the way we look at ”the Other” and how this perception affects moral standards. The Lebanese Red Cross operates within the context of the Lebanese society, thus the organization has to adapt to the institutional norms on a political, economical and judicial level. The unstable political situation and the highly strained economy in the country constitute obstacles for creating norms of respect and reciprocity on a societal level. For example, this becomes visible in discriminatory laws imposed on Syrians in Lebanon (which will be discussed further in the section presenting the Lebanese context). When the institutional conditions of creating an ethical relationship with the other are not present, it becomes difficult to create an ethical strategy for communication even on a micro level. However, this is a very important task for the LRC.

Benhabibs’ theoretical insights operate primarily on a higher, societal level, discussing norms for democratic legislatures. However, for the purpose of this paper her theoretical approach will be brought down and used to suggest norms for communication on an individual level. Benhabib invites for this interpretation herself, claiming that her theoretical approach has implications for familial life no less than for legislature in a democratic society (Benhabib, 1992:39).
The theories of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak are complementary to Benhabibs’ in that Spivak is straightforwardly investigating the ethical dimensions of communication between human beings. She’s using a postcolonial approach when scrutinizing the unequal power structures in the relationship between Western humanitarian organizations and the aid receivers in the Global South. Further, Spivaks’ theoretical insights are useful in in the discussion of what it means to teach and what it is to learn, what is being taught, and the communication strategies being used in the teaching process. Spivak emphasizes that humanitarian aid workers must recognize that they operate in a postcolonial context. It is, according to Spivak, of great importance to use a pedagogy that looks critically at the role of essentialism in the politics of identity and culture. Moreover, Spivak claims that knowledge should not be seen as something objective, but as part of an imperialistic strategy, maintaining the economic structure in benefit of the West. (Spivak, 34)

A couple of Spivaks’ central works will be used in the analysis. These are *Can the subaltern speak?*, *A critique of Postcolonial Reason* and *Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular*. Her work will be used as a tool and a point of departure for the observations.

1.4 Previous research

A lot has been written within the field of postcolonialism. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is one of the most influential writers within the field, and her work has been analysed by a great amount of theorists. The same is true for Seyla Benhabib within the field of communicative ethics. The two fields of research shares common interests, and are both touching subjects that are actualized in the context of the field research of this thesis.

When putting forward the theoretical analysis of Spivak and Benhabib, interpretations of their theoretical insights made by other scholars are presented in order to get a deeper understanding of the, for the purpose of this thesis, most central parts of their work. Viewpoints of Ilan Kapoor, professor of Critical Development studies at York University, and Rosalind Morris, professor of Anthropology at Columbia University are used in the analysis of the theoretical insights of Spivak. They are both shedding light on perspectives in her work that is important when discussing international humanitarian aid more specifically. In his essay, *Hyper-Self-Reflexive Development? Spivak on Representing the Third World ‘Other’*, Kapoor investigates the essential questions of representation in the works of Spivak, as well as her argumentation of the need for self-reflexivity within the Humanitarian aid discourse (Kapoor, 2004). In turn, Morris puts forward her interpretation of Spivak in the book *Can the subaltern speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. She raises the question of audibility of Human rights actors that constitutes an essential part of the theoretical insights of Spivak (Morris, 2010).
Cheshire Calhoun, Professor of Philosophy at Arizona State University, writes in her review of Benhabib's book Situating the self about what Benhabib puts in her theory of communicative ethics. She provides an interpretation of the principles of universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity that Benhabib puts forward as the foundation of a process of moral consideration (Calhoun, 1994). Due to spacing, the presentation of the analysis by the aforementioned scholars is very limited and should only be seen as a tool to shed light on different aspects of the relevant theories.

1.5 Disposition

This paper is divided into 6 chapters in total. The first chapter contains a general introduction of the thesis, the research questions and the purpose of the study. It also includes the theoretical framework, the methodology of the study and previous research. Chapter 2 presents the context of the field, giving some facts about the political situation in Lebanon as well as the refugee situation in the country. A short background of the Lebanese Red Cross and the specific program that has been chosen for this case study is laid forth. Chapter 3 introduces the theories of Seyla Benhabib and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. It also contains interpretations of their theories made by other scholars to get a deeper understanding of their views. The chapter ends with an operationalization of the theories, to turn the views of Benhabib and Spivak into tools for the field study. The fourth chapter presents the material that is collected and analysed, and the methodology of the study. A discussion about the limitations and ethical considerations of the thesis is laid forth. Chapter five presents the findings of the field study. Chapter six is a conclusive discussion of the theories in the light of the findings and vice versa. The research questions will be discussed. In the final part of chapter 6 you will find a reference list.
Chapter 2 - Background

The field research of this paper was conducted between February and April 2016. The political situation in Lebanon has somewhat changed since then. The same is true for the refugee situation. The following section describes the situation by the time of the field visits.

2.1 The Lebanese Context

2.1.1 The Political situation in Lebanon

Politics in Lebanon are based on a post-civil war imposed sectarian system. The Presidency is reserved for a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister post for a Sunni and the post of the Parliament speaker for a Shi’ite. The parliament, with 128 seats, is divided equally among Muslims and Christians, and Lebanon’s 18 religious branches are all recognized in parliament. This system shows the close connection between politics and religion in the Lebanese society. The 18 religious groups are in turn divided into two main political blocs, the Western-backed March 14 Alliance, and the pro-Syria March 8 Alliance (European forum, 2016). The Syrian crisis has further deepened the political and religious division within the country. Conflicts between the groups escalate from time to time, and the unstable situation has lead to a continuing postponement of parliament election, last one held in 2009. The parliamentary failure to elect a new president has lead to a power vacuum and a political paralysis creating frustration among the Lebanese population (ibid).

The massive number of Syrian refugees within the country increases tensions even more. The huge increase in population since the Syrian war started in 2011 has affected almost all aspects of Lebanese society. The pressure is felt in all sectors including education, health, housing, water and electricity supply. Competition for jobs and resources are fuelling tensions, estimations showing the labor force has grown with up to 50% since the start of the Syrian war. The World Bank estimated already in 2013, that the crisis had pushed approximately 170,000 Lebanese citizens into poverty, a number that has increased by two-thirds over the past four years (Schenker, 2016).

2.1.2 The refugee situation in Lebanon

Lebanon has the highest per capita concentration of refugees in the world. With by the beginning of 2015 more than 1.3 million registered Syrian refugees in the country, Lebanon struggles to meet the needs of the oftentimes traumatized people seeking refuge from the war. (UNHCR, 2016).
Lebanon has a long history of accommodating refugees. Today 450,000 Palestinians reside in 12 refugee camps throughout the state, as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. As a result of discriminatory regulations preventing Palestinians from working and owning property, they now represent a permanent and increasingly frustrated and radicalized underclass in the country. Similar discrimination is now faced by the Syrian refugees, a group that now constitutes a quarter of the population in the country. Several restrictions are imposed by the Lebanese authorities, as part of a policy to dissuade and prevent Syrian refugees to seek protection in Lebanon. A report from Amnesty International states that no matter the magnitude of the burden, the restrictions imposed on the refugees are indefensible in a Human Rights perspective (Amnesty, 2015).

In the beginning of 2015, the Lebanese Government ended its previously open-door policy for Syrians, which had allowed them to enter the country without visa and to renew their residencies virtually free of charge. The new entry regulations stated that all Syrian refugees wishing to enter Lebanon have to justify the purpose of their visit. In May 2015 the government instructed the UNHCR to stop registering new refugees, which makes the real number of Syrian refugees in the country obscured. Estimations vary, but since the conflict continues it is now pointing at the number being 2 million or even above. The refugees entering Lebanon today need a Lebanese sponsor to stay legally in the country. Complicated administrative procedures, and a fee of approximately €180 per adult for a renewal of residence permit, leads to an increased number of refugees becoming undocumented (ibid, 2015). The new restrictions put the undocumented Syrian refugees in an extremely vulnerable situation, always at risk at being subject to arrest and detention. Refugee settlements are frequently exposed to security raids, which leave the refugees in a situation of constant stress. Further, immobilization occurs due to a fear of being arrested at checkpoints (Human Rights Watch, 2016). According to Amnesty international, the policy amount to breach of the prohibition of non-refoulement – the obligation not to return individuals to a situation where they would be at risk of persecution or serious human rights abuses. The principle is recognized by the international community and binding for all states. Undocumented Syrian refugees are also lacking the access to services (where healthcare may be the most pressing one), the ability to move is highly restricted and they are continuously exposed to abuse and harassment (Amnesty, 2015).

The Lebanese "No camp"-policy, prohibiting the settlement of formal refugee camps within the country has worsened the situation of the refugees. Partly due to difficulties for humanitarian actors to deliver aid to remote areas where the poorest people are forced to reside in informal settlements such as makeshift camps, garages and abandoned buildings, the Lebanese government has received heavy critique because of this policy. One reason behind the policy is that the establishment of formal camps will make the Syrians becoming a permanent part of the population, just like the Palestinians have become. Lebanese authorities further claims that reasons are due to giving the refugees a better chance of controlling their own situation, and to live a dignified life (ibid).
2.1.3 The IFRC, the LRC and the DRR-program

On the official webpage of The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) the organization is describing their mission in the following way;

“Together, we act before, during and after disasters and health emergencies to meet the needs and improve the lives of vulnerable people. We do so without discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. Guided by Strategy 2020 – our collective plan of action to tackle the major humanitarian and development challenges of this decade – we are committed, in this fast-changing world, to ‘saving lives and changing minds’. Our strength is in our volunteer network, our community-based expertise and our ability to give a global voice to vulnerable people. By improving humanitarian standards, working as partners in development, responding to disasters, supporting healthier and safer communities, we help reduce vulnerabilities, strengthen resilience and foster a culture of peace around the world.”

(IFRC, 2017)

The federation consists of 190 National Societies, in which The Lebanese Red Cross is one of them. The LRC was established in 1945, at first as an independent national society. It was recognized by the state about a year later as a public non-profit organization and as an auxiliary team to the medical service Lebanese Army. In 1947 the Lebanese Red Cross joined the international Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. On the webpage of the LRC, it is stated that their primary mission is to mitigate the suffering of vulnerable people, to provide relief for victims of disasters (natural as well as human made), and to help people prevent, prepare and respond to emergencies. (LRC, 2017)

The Lebanese Red Cross (LRC) is working with refugees in many areas, and one of the activities undertaken to mitigate the vulnerabilities in the refugee camps is the implementation of the Disaster Risk Reduction program (DRR). The program is implemented by the Disaster Management Unit (DMU), as part of the Lebanese Red Cross. The DMU consists of a central administration in addition to 13 working groups to manage the activities of the unit, as well as coordinate cooperation with other branches of the society as well as with donors through different programs and projects. As a response to the Syrian crisis, the DMU was activated to provide relief for the Syrian refugees as well as supporting vulnerable local communities by distributing food and non-food items as well as implementing programs to improve life conditions (ibid, 2017).
2.1.4 Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment

As an integral part of the DRR, the Vulnerability Capacity Assessment (VCA) is a first step of identifying the risks and hazards present within a community. The methodology is implemented internationally, and has been developed by The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). The vulnerability capacity assessment is a methodology for risk analysis and capacity building. In the step-by-step guide on how to do a VCA, it is stated that the aim of the VCA is to, through a participatory way, gather information about vulnerable communities, with the purpose of increasing the community members’ awareness of risks and to help them reducing their vulnerability and increase their capacity before a disaster happens (ibid, 2017).

Through the VCA the IFRC is shifting it’s more ”traditional role” as service providers, and increasingly work alongside vulnerable communities. This puts the LRC in a different position where the importance of communication becomes obvious. The shift requires that a new set of ideas, attitudes and methods be implemented in order to meet the objectives when working with people in need.
Chapter 3 - Understanding Seyla Benhabib and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

This chapter will introduce the theoretical insights of Seyla Benhabib and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The interpretation will serve as the point of departure when analysing the findings of the field research but will also be subject to a critical analysis in the final and concluding part of this thesis.

3.1 Introducing the theorists

Seyla Benhabib, born in Istanbul, Turkey, is a Professor of Political Science and Philosophy at Yale University. As already mentioned, her work will be used in the discussion of communication in a context of asymmetric power structures, where she explores the ethical dimension of communication. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, born in India, is a postcolonial theorist and professor of comparative literature at Columbia University. She investigates the aspect of representation and power in a postcolonial context. Both theorists have an intersectional feminist approach.

The theories of Benhabib and Spivak are complementary and operate on different levels, covering different aspects of the empirical analysis of this thesis. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the work of Benhabib will be used on an overarching level, suggesting norms of communicative ethics, while the theories of Spivak will in turn shed light on the boundaries of communication. From a postcolonial perspective, Spivak is questioning the whole project of communication within the international humanitarian aid discourse. The theories discussed have been limited to the parts that are relevant for the purpose of this thesis, and do therefore not claim to be exhaustive in any way.

3.2 Seyla Benhabib and communicative ethics

Investigating the meaning and potential of communicative ethics, Seyla Benhabibs’ point of departure is the Habermasian theory of discourse ethics. Discourse ethics puts forward the criteria to be used to judge the inter-subjective validity of moral principles or norms of action. It is a type of argument claiming that “only those norms can claim to be valid that meet with the approval of all concerned in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse” (Benhabib, 1992:37).

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Following the same line of thought, Benhabib is, however, skeptical towards the principle of universalizability that Habermas formulates as a further criterion that every justified norm has to fulfill. This principle stipulates that for a norm to be legitimate, all affected by the consequences and the side effects of that norm has to accept it. Further, the anticipated consequences of the norm are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation (Ehnberg, 2015:157). Benhabib claims, in opposition to Habermas, that universalizability does not have the effect of guaranteeing consensus, instead she argues that the principle of universalizability creates a procedure of moral reasoning that everyone would deem fair and reasonable. She states that;

“Consent is a misleading term for capturing the core idea behind communicative ethics: namely the processual generation of reasonable agreement about moral principles via an open-ended moral conversation. It is my claim that this core intuition, together with an interpretation of the normative constraints of argument in light of the principle of universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity, are sufficient to accomplish what U [the principle of universalizability] was intended to accomplish, but only at the price of consequentialist confusion”

(Benhabib, 1992:37)

It is clear that Benhabib shifts the focus from the Habermasian goal of consent to the process of making moral considerations. She claims that “Our goal is the process of such a dialogue, conversation and mutual understanding, and not consensus” (Benhabib, 1992:52). The shift of focus enables Benhabib to take other values into consideration. When the theory of Habermas is restricted to issues of justice, Benhabib enables values, needs and conceptions of the good life to take part in the process of moral reasoning.

Thus, Benhabib is not rejecting the principle of universalism all together; her aim is to reconceive moral and political universalism, not to abandon it. The universalizability that Benhabib argues for is an intersubjective procedure of argumentation, geared to attain communicative agreement (Benhabib, 1992:28). Universalizability is, in the theory of Habermas, understood as a test of non-contradiction. Benhabib introduces universalizability as a test of communicative agreement. In doing this, she introduces the conception of interactive universalism, that allows for a view of the self as culturally embedded and socially constituted. This argument will be investigated in the next section, when putting forward Benhabibs’ feminist approach to discourse ethics.
The allowance of plurality is essential in the theory of Benhabib. She writes:

“Instead of asking what I as a single rational moral agent can intend or will to be a universal maxim for all without contradiction, the communicative ethicist asks: What principles of action can we all recognize or agree to as being valid if we engage in practice discourse or a mutual search for justification?”

(Benhabib, 1992:28)

To establish an ideal process of moral considerations, that is, a democratic process that we all would deem fair and reasonable, Benhabib introduces the principles of Universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity as essential. The norm of universal respect is explained as the moral ideal that we as human beings must respect each other as equals whose opinions are worthy of the same consideration as our own or anybody else’s. The egalitarian reciprocity is explained by Benhabib as the treatment of “the other” as a concrete human being. We have a responsibility of creating social practices to give each other the capacity to express our standpoints (ibid: 31). The principle of egalitarian reciprocity require of us to give each participant of the conversation the same symmetrical rights of speech, the same rights to initiate new topics, to ask for reflection about the presuppositions of the conversation, etc (ibid: 29). When discussing the principle of egalitarian reciprocity, Benhabib argues that the structures of communicative socialization in which we all take part holds the norm of reciprocity, which entails that we are treated by others equally insofar as we are members of a particular human group. Benhabib is shedding light on the question as to which groups of humans that are worthy of being considered “conversation partners” and who are not (ibid:31). She is directing heavy critique against the highly unequal power structures making it impossible to create a legitimate process of moral reasoning. She writes:

“As a critical theorist, one is interested in identifying those social relations, power structures and sociocultural grids of communication and interpretation at the present which limit the identity of the parties of the dialogue, which set the agenda for what are considered inappropriate matters of institutional debate, and which sanctify the speech of some over those of others as being the language of the public”

(ibid: 48)

The conditions of developing a sense of self-worth are according to Benhabib essential for creating the basis for respect. However, under conditions of war and hostility, mutuality and respect for others may cease to be an aspect of our life experience. Under these extreme
conditions, when appreciation from others are lacking, the conditions to create a base for mutual respect and reciprocity are very poor (ibid:32).

The ability to reverse perspectives with “the other” is according to Benhabib essential to create ties of reciprocity. She argues that all human communities define some “significant others” within their community that calls for the exercise of reversibility and reciprocity in order to bind the community together (ibid:32). Cheshire Calhoun, Professor of Philosophy at Arizona State University, stresses the aspect of power relations discussed in Benhabibs works, giving her interpretation of the principles of universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity. Calhoun argues, that Benhabibs’ principles make up the foundation of a process of moral consideration:

”…in which all participants have an equal chance to make assertions and recommendations and offer explanations, have an equal chance to express their wishes, desires, and feelings, and are free to thematize the power relations that in ordinary social situations constrain the agenda, language, and range of participants of discourses.”

(Calhoun, 1994:426)

The aspect of power relations is essential when discussing the theories of Benhabib in the context of this thesis. Benhabib is shedding light on the discussion of who gets to take part in the discourse, how language can effectively be used for exclusion, and further, she’s suggesting a solution to create an ethical engagement with “the other”.

The central insight of communicative or discourse ethics derives from modern theories of autonomy and the social contract. Only the norms and normative institutional arrangements that are products of certain argumentative practices can claim validity (Benhabib, 1992:24). However, Seyla Benhabib argues for a broadening of the project of communicative ethics and claims that it involves much more than a continuation of the central idea of the social contract traditions. She suggests that communicative ethics does not have to be restricted to a model of political legitimacy, instead she states that it promotes a universalist and postconventionalist perspective on all ethical relations: it has implications for familial life no less than for the democratic legislatures (ibid:39).

3.2.1 The Generalized and the Concrete other

In the last chapters of Situating the self, Benhabib elaborates with the question of whether there can be a feminist contribution to moral philosophy.
Benhabib argues that the definition of the moral domain in universalistic, contractarian theories is based on the male experience. An entire domain of human activity, namely, nurture, reproduction, love and care, which becomes the woman’s lot in the course of development of modern society, is excluded from moral and political considerations and relegated to the realm of “nature” (Benhabib, 1992:155). When the domestic intimate sphere is put beyond the sphere of justice the same thing happens with gender relations. The privatization of women’s’ experience is further incompatible with the idea of reversibility, which is essential for the defenders of universalism. If the moral self is considered as a “disembedded and disembodied” being, one has effectively excluded the consideration of women’s’ experience from a moral point of view (ibid: 152). This substitutionalist universalism that Benhabib is criticizing, comes from the Western tradition and is defined only by the experiences of a specific group but claims to be representational for humans as such. The substitutionalist universalism consists only of the experience of white, male adults who are propertied or at least professional. Benhabib suggests a different form of universalism – what she calls interactive universalism – that would bring in the plurality of experiences and modes of being human. Differences among humans would make up the starting point for reflection and action (ibid: 153).

Benhabib describes two conceptions of self-other relations, namely the standpoint of the “generalized”, and the standpoint of the “concrete” other. She argues that the conception of the generalized other constitutes a danger that differences between people are treated with indifference, and no genuine reversibility between the self and other can occur. In her critique towards this standpoint, she brings up the example of the Rawlsian veil of ignorance. Benhabib states with this example that it is impossible for a single individual to construct a moral standpoint only through hypothetical thought processes, where all people are by definition identical. Moral reasoning can only be conducted through actual dialogue. Through our capacity to listen to, understand and represent to ourselves the perspective of the concrete other we can create true reversibility where plurality and difference are taken seriously (Benhabib, 1992:169).

To summarize, the theoretical insights of Seyla Benhabib suggests a process of moral consideration that allows for plurality and difference. She focuses on the process or argumentation, rather than the pursuit of consensus. The ability to reverse perspectives with “the other” is according to Benhabib essential to create ties of reciprocity. This is in turn essential to create a fair and reasonable foundation of argumentation. She is criticizing the exclusion of women’s’ (and other oppressed groups’) experience in the process of moral reasoning. While emphasizing the importance of understanding the other as culturally embedded and socially constituted Benhabib claims that the process of justification presupposes us to look at each other as concrete others, rather than generalized others.
3.3 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Firstly, Spivak’s definition of the subaltern will be presented. Her theoretical approach constituting a critique towards international humanitarian organizations and their complicity in the reproduction of postcolonial structures will thereafter be discussed. The last section of this chapter will explore the possibilities and solutions to the critique that Spivak is raising. Using interpretations by Rosalind Morris, professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, and Ilan Kapoor, professor of Critical Development studies at York University analysis of the theoretical insights of Spivak is put forward.

3.3.1 The many faces of subalternity

In her essay “Can the subaltern speak?” Spivak argues that every attempt to study the “third world subject” is necessarily done in cooperation with the colonial project. It is impossible for a western intellectual to accurately interpret the experience of the subaltern, because every attempt to do so will be colored by the own experience and will thus never reach the true face of subalternity (Spivak, 2014:16). Her essay is a rejection of the international civil society’s’ attempts to “save” the subaltern, because this project will only further obscure the identity of the brown woman and consolidate the highly asymmetric power relations between the North and the South (ibid). In the works of Spivak, the subaltern is with few exceptions gendered female, because of the worldwide structural subordination of women.

Spivak defines the subaltern as someone who is "removed from all lines of social mobility" (Spivak, 2005: 475). She claims that subalternity can never be generalized according to the hegemonic logic, and that’s what makes it subaltern (Spivak, 2014:138). Spivak stresses the need not to confuse the meaning of the word “subaltern” with the popular. She claims that subalternity is a position without identity or, in other words, the subaltern is defined by its difference (ibid: 139, 230). Spivak is comparing subalternity with her understanding of the strict definition of class. She argues that class is not a cultural origin; rather it is a collective feeling of economical connection and solidarity that makes up the base for action. Another example is that of gender. Spivak argues that gender is the societal treatment of gender differences that makes up the starting point for action, rather than the feeling of experienced difference. The same is true for race; it presupposes racism. By these examples Spivak is trying to come closer to the understanding of subalternity. The important difference that makes up the defining feature of the subaltern is that “subalternity is where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, does not permit the formation of a recognizable basis of action” (Spivak, 2014:139).
The subaltern lacks the capability of self-abstraction, the possibility to synecdochizing the self, because there are no means to ignore difference (since the subaltern is defined by its difference). The resources for understanding what feature that connects oneself to the abstract whole is absent, and therefore there is no possibility to claim the right to the world one live in. (Spivak, 2014:151). Power and privilege can partly be defined by the ability of self-synecdoche, to let one or a few collective features within a group be the defining ones and through that create a base for collective action (ibid:148). Differentiating features can simply be ignored, if you are privileged enough to do so. Spivak argues that to create a base for action, the solution is not to celebrate or deny difference, but rather to define the type of inequality that leads to the use of difference and identify who has the capacity and privilege to deny it. (Ibid: 148-1499) When the public sphere demands the subaltern to synecdochizing herself without identity political exploitation, the infrastructure that will allow her to do so must be present. This is the essence of Spivaks’ strategic essentialism. This self-synecdoche must be possible to take back when necessary, and should not be confused with identity. The aim is to build infrastructure for agency, to make it possible for subaltern groups to get access to their own situation (ibid 148).

Put in other words, getting into the public sphere is for Spivak the quest to create an ability to metonymize one self to become a synecdoche – a part of a whole. This process makes it possible to claim the idea that the state belongs to one, and the access to citizenship is the ultimate way of claiming the service of the state (Ibid 150).

So how do we create infrastructure that permits a formation of a base for action? Spivak offers no straightforward answer to this question. She argues that it is impossible for international humanitarian organizations to simply lend the subaltern a voice. She states that; “The solution can not come from the international civil society, from the self-appointed moral entrepreneurs that are spreading philanthropy without democracy” (ibid 149). This is partly because one of the obstacles that get in the way is the subalterns’ lack of access to an institutionally validated language. Lacking access to a language approved and used by western intellectuals, means being excluded from the realm of power and control and the ability of self-government (ibid: 151).

Professor Rosalind Morris puts forward her interpretation of Spivak in the book Can the subaltern speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea:

“The point is not that the subaltern do not know how to speak for themselves, rather the claim on the part of the intellectual that subalters can and do speak for themselves stands in for not doing anything about the problems of oppression. At the same time, the claim to do something about the problem, as simply speaking “for” the subaltern also furthers the problem and the civilizing mission of benevolence while occluding the question of audibility. In asking us to re-present ourselves, Spivak asks us to supplement our benevolent
intention of “speaking for” with an ethics of responsibility- in the sense of cultivating a capacity to respond to and be responsive to the other, without demanding resemblance as the basis of recognition”

(Morris, 2010:88).

By speaking for the subaltern, human rights actors ignore the question of audibility, and effectively conceal their own culpability in the colonial project. Further, demanding resemblance as a basis for recognition is incompatible with the aim to set up an ethical relationship with the other. Instead, Spivak is aiming at the goal of International Humanitarian organizations that she argues should be to “learn to learn from below”. The final section of this chapter will further investigate the meaning of that.

3.3.2 The construction of the subaltern

In an example from colonial India, Spivak examines the British abolition of widow sacrifice (sati), as part of their “civilising mission”. The abolition actually restored the practice, because it was no longer only a custom, rather it became an action of resistance towards the British colonial power. The Hindu position was, in opposition to the British, to excuse the practice by claiming that the women wanted to die. In the end, both positions found their legitimacy without listening to the voice of the widows themselves. The brits tried to “save” these women from their men, while the Hindu position saw the practice as a reward, letting ”their” women commit a courageous act of purity. The voice of the widows was continuously ignored. By being forced to abolish the custom, the Hindu law were skipping the line between the private and the public sphere. (Spivak, 2014: 253-254)

The protection of the ”Third World Woman” has become a characteristic of the establishment of a good society. Discussing gender in a postcolonial context, Spivak is criticizing the masculine-imperialistic ideological formation that uses the woman as a scapegoat, with the desire to remodel her as the subject of hysteria. The construction of the ”third world woman” is a continuation of this ideology. The imperialist logic genders the subject peoples, claiming their right to ”save” the subaltern woman from her male counterpart defined as ”the Other”. This highly oppressive logic conceals ethnicity and class making gender the one defining characteristic. The victimization of the subaltern woman effectively conceals the politics of the West, and their interest of maintaining existing power structures (ibid: 249).

Spivak argues that even today Western humanitarian organizations are silencing the subaltern by forcing their ”help” upon them. Putting aside the huge problem of unequal power structures, one of the problems is the lack of insight and understanding of what the problems really are and if there even is a will to be ”saved” coming from the subalterns themselves. The critique towards this civilizing mission is that it’s questionable if this is really about saving women from oppression. It is, according to Spivak, easier to believe that it’s really
about consolidating the power of the Western world and further muting the people outside of it.

3.3.3 Western worlding of the world

Cultural imperialism is a process that allows the West to dominate colonial societies and silently spreading Western culture as superior to cultures of the South. Spivak refers to this naturalization of epistemic and cultural domination by the west as the “Worlding of the West as world” The human experience of the West constitutes a norm for all people, and is part of the colonial structure that is reproduced in the attempts to incorporate “the Other“ in Western culture and perspectives (Spivak1999: 114ff). The idea of modernization is an expression of this type of imperialism that the Western world is responsible for.

When discussing the theoretical insights of Spivak, Professor Ilan Kapoor argues that within the field of international development it is easy to see how well the idea of modernization has managed to conceal the aspect of oppression. He argues that colonialism is barely even mentioned within the modernization thinking, and the history of the Third world begins after the World War II. This line of thought provides only one way forward for the Third world countries; namely the First world growth patterns as a guide and goal for progress (Kapoor, 2004: 629).

In ”Selected Subaltern Studies” Spivak is critical towards the mainstream education that she argues is tainted by imperialist assumptions and the sanctioning of scholarly ignorance. By sanctioned, she is referring to how ignorance is rationalised within the educational system. Western universities are simply leaving any other culture, tradition or history aside. She writes:

“It is correctly suggested that the sophisticated vocabulary of much contemporary historiography successfully shields this cognitive failure and that this success-in-failure, this sanctioned ignorance, is inseparable from colonial domination”

(Spivak, 1985:6).

She claims that this ”sanctioned ignorance” is a purposeful silencing through the dismissing of a particular context as being irrelevant and that it is not happening by chance. The project of sanctioned ignorance effectively excludes particular types of analysis or considerations from entering into the debate, and agency stays in the hands of the Western intellectual (ibid: 6).
3.3.4 Learning to learn from below

When investigating what the elite must do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern, Spivak is claiming that the question of the “woman” is the hardest part to overcome (Spivak 2014: 248). She uses the antisexist project as a point of departure when continuing the discussion. Spivak is not rejecting attempts to collect information from, or take part in the antisexist work being done by brown women or women under class oppression in the first or in the third world. Yet she warns that the imperialist subject-constitution continuously silencing the subaltern woman will sustain such work (ibid: 249). The way forward must, according to Spivak, be a process of “learning to learn from below”. She states that;

“In so fraught a field [the antisexist project], it is not easy to ask the question of the consciousness of the subaltern woman; it is thus all the more necessary to remind pragmatic radicals that such a question is not an idealist red herring. Though all feminist or antisexist projects cannot be reduced to this one, to ignore it is an unacknowledged political gesture that has a long history and collaborates with a masculine radicalism that renders the place of the investigator transparent. In seeking to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual systematically ‘unlearns’ female privilege. This systematic unlearning involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse with the best tools it can provide and not only substituting the lost figure of the colonized”

(ibid, 249-250).

Part of the process of learning to learn from below, is to unlearn our intellectual prejudice in the encounter with the subaltern. This is contrary to what is happening today, when humanitarian aid workers try to teach the subaltern in a top-down way. This process is a quest to shift our way of thinking, international humanitarian organizations set out to teach the subaltern need to learn to learn from them and be aware of their own historical legacy before having a chance of creating an ethical relationship with the subaltern.

Further, Spivak rejects the claim made by Western intellectuals of being transparent and objective in their representation of the subaltern (Spivak, 2014:215). She stresses the need to acknowledge the historical role of the intellectual, and criticizing their quest to show that intellectual work is the same as physical work (ibid: 24). Hegemonic knowledge and research has historically justified conquest of other cultures, and the superior position of the West. Thus, according to Spivak, knowledge can never be objective, but must always contain oppressive structures, maintaining economical and political structures in benefit of the West.
This holds true even for perspectives that are critical towards the construction of “the Other” since it is articulated with the hegemonic vocabulary that is in itself part of the imperialist project (ibid: 16).

So how do you “unlearn” your privileges? How do you learn to learn from below? Kapoor has interpreted Spivak’s suggestion of a process as the pre-disposition to “retrace the itinerary of our prejudices and learning habits (from racism, sexism and classism to academic elitism and ethnocentrism), stop thinking of ourselves as better or fitter and unlearn dominant systems of knowledge and representation” (Kapoor, 2004:641). According to Kapoor, learning from the subaltern requires this previous step. It is necessary to clear the way for an ethical relationship with the subaltern. (ibid).

Kapoor claims that the most urgent questions that Spivak raises, for a humanitarian aid worker could be summarised as follows:

1) What are the ethico-political implications of our representations for the Third World, and especially for the subaltern groups that preoccupy a good part of our work?

2) To what extent do our depictions and actions marginalise or silence these groups and mask our own complicity?

3) What social and institutional power relationships do these representations, even those aimed at 'empowerment', set up or neglect? And to what extent can we attenuate these pitfalls?”

(ibid: 628).

Kapoor further investigates the essential questions of representation in the work of Spivak. The need for ”hyper-self-reflexivity” within the humanitarian aid discourse is carefully investigated. First of all, there is a basic need to understand that we cannot encounter the Third world today without carrying a lot of baggage. Working in the field of development inevitably positions us in the development discourse where the North is considered superior to the South and where the western style of development is the norm. This assumption creates a dichotomy between us/them, and the perception that ”we” are there to aid/develop/civilise/empower ”them” (ibid: 629).

There is no quick solution to change this unequal relationship. Humanitarian organizations may now call their subjects ”beneficiaries”, ”target groups”, ”partners” or ”clients”, instead of ”poor” or ”underdeveloped” but this does not remove any of the colonial structures still present within the development discourse, neither does it uncover the dichotomous us/them power relationship (ibid).
As part of the process of learning to learn from below Spivak is aiming for a “re-arrangement of desires” She is criticizing Michael Foucault and his claim that interests will always be a reflection of our desires. Foucault writes; “We never desire against our interests, because interest always follows and finds itself where desire has placed it” (Spivak 2014:212). In opposition to Foucault, Spivak claims that desire and need must be separated. According to Spivak, international NGO’s tend to think that the job is done when they begin to meet the needs that they themselves has put upon the subaltern. The mistakes are two-fold: First, the needs of the global poor have already been identified without involvement of the subaltern group itself. Second, humanitarian actors keep on forgetting the basic fact that everyone has desires, and not only needs. To parse the desires of the subaltern is closely connected to the process of learning to learn from below, it means looking closely on how these groups imagine the world, and valuing their differences from Euro-American capitalist ways of thinking. The process requires a “rearrangement of desires”, that has to go both ways. While teaching the subaltern, Western humanitarian organizations has to re-arrange their desires in the same way as they demand the subaltern to do. The solution lies for Spivak in the education in the humanities. Engagement in the humanities would teach people the ability to re-arrange the desires of mainstream thought, market or mass media. Rigid, one-dimensional and homogenized understandings of the world and of “the Other” would be eradicated. The constraints of hegemonic expectations would be put to an end and people would get the ability to open up to an engagement with the world through alternative representations (Spivak, 2012:2).

In summary, Spivak sheds light on the highly unequal power structures between International humanitarian organizations and the subaltern groups they are set out to “help”. She stresses the need for Western intellectuals and humanitarian organizations to acknowledge their complicity in the silencing of the subaltern. Instead of speaking for, or listening to, the subaltern, Spivak argues for an education that forces the West to “reimagine” the world. This can be done through a dialogic education that allows for a process of “learning to learn from below”. Further, Spivaks’ answer to her overarching question “Can the Subaltern speak?” is no, they cannot, not as long as the Western academic field is unable to relate to the other with anything other than its own paradigm.

3.4 From theoretical analysis to empirical observations
What lessons and challenges can be brought from the theoretical analysis of Benhabib and Spivak to the empirical observations? The operationalization of the research questions has been made through a scrutiny of the theories to find a number of key points that are actualized in the context of the field research. The questions raised by the theoretical framework of this thesis have been guiding the design of the interview questions as well as the focus of the observations. The questions are oftentimes intertwined and will therefore not be dealt with separately in the empirical analysis.
3.4.1 Communicative ethics

Seyla Benhabibs’ version of discourse ethics argues for a focus on the process of making moral considerations. The principles of Universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity stresses the need to see “the other” as a concrete human being, whose opinions and thoughts are worthy of the same consideration as our own or anybody else’s. In the empirical analysis, this line of thought raises questions about the possibilities of an open and equal relationship between the LRC and the refugees. Using the theory as a tool in the field research, the following questions will be asked to the material collected: What are the conditions for having an equal communication? Is the LRC letting everyone speak to the same extent? Who has the opportunity to raise questions or set the agenda for the conversation? Is there an open dialogue between the LRC-representants and the refugees where different perspectives are welcome?

3.4.2 The Generalized and the Concrete other

Benhabib argues that a feminist contribution to moral philosophy is essential. By shedding light on the differences of male and female moral reasoning, Benhabib argues that by failing to acknowledge women’s experience, there is no way to create universal democratic institutions approved and trusted by all. This theoretical argument raises many questions in the empirical analysis. Is the gender perspective present in the performance of the VCA? Are the female participants of the VCA truly free to speak their minds? What could be seen as obstacles for such freedom? Do the female refugees have different needs and desires than their male counterparts?

Moving from Benhabib to Spivak, the central insights of her theoretical approach will be interpreted as follows, for the purpose of this thesis.

3.4.3 The construction of the subaltern

Spivak claims that Western Humanitarian Organizations are responsible of constructing the Third world woman as a victim in need of being saved. They deprive her of her position as a subject, and instead of listening to her; the Western world is defining who she is and what she needs. In this process, the West is concealing their own complicity in the oppression of the people of the Third world, while maintaining their privileged position. Further, Spivak insists on a division of desires and needs based on the fact that human beings are more complex than Western humanitarian organizations seem to be aware of. The questions raised to the empirical findings are the following:
How are the aid receivers portrayed by the IFRC? What are the methods used by the IFRC to define the needs of the aid receivers? Are there elements of essentialism in the
communication between the LRC and the refugees? Is the LRC prejudice in the encounter with the refugees? Are there strategies to identify the desires of the subaltern groups within the operation of the LRC? What is defined as a need and who has the privilege of making such definition?

3.4.4 Western worlding of the world

The epistemic violence of imperialism, the naturalization of western thought, needs to be subject to observations in the empirical analysis. How does the LRC define development? In the performance of the VCA, what resources to “learn to learn from below” are available? Are there any real possibilities for the refugees to define their problems as well as the solutions to these issues?

3.4.5 Acknowledging the complicity in the colonial project

On an overarching level, Spivak argues that Humanitarian organizations need to acknowledge their complicity in the muting of the subaltern. This critique leads us to the following questions: Do the LRC act as though they’re blameless in the political realm of oppression? What resources are available for evaluation and self-reflection?
Chapter 4 - Method

4.1 Methodological approach
The methodology of the field research will be presented in this section. The material has been collected during 8 weeks in Lebanon between February and April 2016. Through interviews with key informants from the IFRC, the LRC, and with people residing in the refugee camps visited, as well as through observations of the Vulnerability Capacity Assessment undertaken by the Lebanese Red Cross in the targeted communities situated at different places throughout Lebanon, the relevant material for this paper has been gathered.

4.1.1 Material
The material that is used to approach the research questions is collected through interviews and observations of the Vulnerability Capacity Assessment undertaken by the Lebanese Red Cross. The material further consist of the internationally distributed policy documents "How to do a VCA" and the strategy of the IFRC for 2020, "Saving lives, changing minds". These documents have been scrutinized in order to investigate whether they contain oppressive elements, woven into the fabric of the text, in the parlance and behind the words, but also in order to find out what resources for evaluation and development of communicative strategies that are present in the work of the IFRC. These two documents are chosen because of their importance for the development of the VCA and the IFRC respectively. They set up the foundational strategies for the organization and for the specific project scrutinized in this study. Ten field visits have been carried out, alongside several interviews with informants from the IFRC, personnel and volunteers from the LRC and the refugees currently residing in the refugee camps visited. The full list of field visits and interviews conducted is to be found at the end of this thesis.

4.1.2 Controlled Observations and Semi-structured interviews
Controlled observations of the Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment delivered by the LRC have been conducted. A method of controlled (structured) observation is suitable because the theories used provides for an understanding of what to look for in the observations beforehand. The design as well as the implementation of the VCA have been critically scrutinized and analysed in order to identify what methods and communication strategies that are being used, what effects they have and how plausible they are.
Combined with the observations, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with key informants within the organization of the Lebanese Red Cross and the IFRC as well as with refugees living in the camps visited. Interviews have been necessary as a complementary source of information, beside the findings of the observations. By interviewing people with different positions within the organization, as well as participants of the VCA, it has been possible to triangulate the results to shed light on different perspectives on the communication strategies used in the VCA. The semi-structured method of interviewing has been chosen because it allows new ideas to be brought up during the interview as a result of what the interviewee says. Further, when dealing with people in extremely vulnerable situations, it is important to be flexible and able to adjust the questions depending on the context and the interviewee. All interviews have been conducted in accordance with the Swedish Research Councils’ ethical guidelines. These are summarized further on in this chapter, under “Limitations and ethical considerations”.

Before each field visit, the LRC-personnel were well informed about the purpose of my fieldwork. After conducting a VCA, the refugees residing in the camps were asked to participate in short interviews for about ten or fifteen minutes each. LRC-personnel were translating. The very limited time span for interviews was due to lack of access to translators. The questions were focused on how the refugees perceived the activity of the LRC and more specifically the VCA. They were also asked about their situation in the camps in more general terms. The questions were to a certain extent designed beforehand, but the intention was to let the interviewees guide the direction of the conversation as much as possible, which made it necessary to step aside from the interview guide. The strategy was to ask open questions and follow up the direction of the conversation by asking supplementary questions.

The interview techniques were very different depending on the subject of the interview, and demanded different things from me as a researcher. In the interviews with the LRC- and IFRC representants, I took a more active role in guiding the direction of the interview. The time span for each interview was longer, up to about one hour, and the interviews were planned in advance and held at the office of the LRC and at the office of the IFRC.

### 4.1.3 Selection of case

For the purpose of this study The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) was chosen because of the power the organisation enjoys within the International aid discourse. The IFRC is the world's largest humanitarian network that reaches over 150 million people. It is therefore of great importance to scrutinize how such a powerful organisation communicate with vulnerable people without elements of oppression. The Lebanese Red Cross is in turn the national society guided by the policies and programs developed by the International Red Cross society.

Lebanon is interesting for the purpose of this study for several reasons. The Syrian civil war is one of the worst humanitarian crisis of our time. The effects of the crisis are overwhelming
and impossible to fully comprehend. The question of what the future will look like for the Syrian population is depending on their chances of creating a new life outside of Syria, which in turn depends on the receipt in their new countries. To scrutinize the organizations responsible for the reception is therefore of great importance. Further, in a complex context such as the Lebanese society with it’s own history of civil war and hostility, it serves a purpose to scrutinize if a context influenced by conflicts have implications for creating ethical relationships even on a micro level. Further, because of the paralyzed government and the extremely strained economy in the country, the Lebanese Red Cross is enjoying a more powerful position than in many other countries and stands in for the non-functioning welfare system in Lebanon. Because of its position in the country, it becomes even more important to scrutinize the methods of the LRC.

The VCA-program is a new approach that is being introduced and the design and implementation of the program needs to be analysed in order to identify and gain a better understanding of communication strategies when dealing with vulnerable people and communities. To improve our knowledge about this, will also mean gaining information about what approach that will lead to improved awareness, knowledge and a positive development in vulnerable communities.

By looking at one specific country and one specific program this paper is aiming at providing a discussion applicable in a wider context, where asymmetrical power structures creates an obstacle for an ethical communication.

4.1.4 Limitations and ethical considerations

A study like this carries several limitations. For example, an obvious obstacle is the language barrier. When conducting the interviews with the Syrian refugees, the personnel of the LRC have been translating. This holds two problematic aspects; first, the translation has not been performed by a professional translator but by someone who does not speak fluent English. A lack of nuances in the translation makes up for a possible loss of important information and misinterpretations. Second, using a representant from the LRC as a translator makes it difficult for the refugees to feel comfortable to really speak their minds and bring up eventual critique when evaluating the work of the Red Cross. Fear of being critical towards an organization that is set out to help them might influence the answers given by the refugees. However, at the same time, the trust and credibility that the LRC enjoys within the refugee camps have been essential when conducting the interviews. It would have been impossible for me to establish a relation of trust on that short amount of time, if I did not have the company of the LRC. Another problem that was solved by the help of the LRC was the very limited accessibility to some areas where the refugee camps are situated. It would not have been possible for me to enter the camps without the company of the Red Cross. Further, the unstable security situation in Lebanon makes it difficult to travel alone, especially when l
lacking the knowledge about the areas where the camps are situated. This aspect was also overcome by the support of the Red Cross.

My own background must also be taken under consideration. The fact that I am a westerner coming from an in many ways more privileged society will have an effect on the information that I will be given and it will also effect my interpretation of the information gathered. It has implications on how I conduct the interviews in terms of what questions I ask and how I approach the interviewee. There is not a lot to do about this other than trying to stay critical towards my own perspectives and the interpretations that I make as a result of my background.

The interviews with the LRC and IFRC representants have problematic aspects too, since there is an interest in coming off in a positive light. This is partly because the organization is depending on outside funding and the trust that they enjoy from the Lebanese society is essential for their work to be successful. However, spending a lot of time together with the representants of the LRC also meant creating a good relation, which to some extent solved this problem.

The field research for this thesis calls for the need of making several ethical considerations. When interviewing people in extremely vulnerable situations, there is a great need to respect the integrity of the interviewees. Being aware of cultural differences and avoid questions that may be perceived as private or sensitive for different reasons is obviously important. To get support on this issue, The Swedish Research Councils’ ethical guidelines have been followed throughout the process. These principles can be summarized as the requirements of information, approval, confidentiality and usage. In short, these hold the requirement to inform the interviewees about the conditions of their participation in the study. The information should include all the elements that could affect their willingness to participate. The interviewees need to be informed about their rights as participants. The researcher must further be transparent about what the results of the study will be used for (The Swedish Research Council, 2002: 7-14).

Another ethical consideration is actualized when conducting interviews with informants from the IFRC and the LRC. When these interviewees have expressed something about the situation or experiences of the Syrian refugees, there is a need to be careful not to turn these statements into truths. It is important to remember that this kind of information is always an interpretation and it would be unethical and patronising not to acknowledge that.

It is further important to be aware of the ethical aspects of the language used in this thesis. The label "Third World" is problematic because it implies a hierarchic relation, where the "First World" is considered better or fitter. Further, it is not clear what countries belong to The Third World and it thus provides a vague label for an imprecise collection of states. However, the term is frequently used by theorists referred to in this thesis. The label will be
used when quoting these theorists or when referring to past ways of thinking. In other cases the more neutral term “The Global South” will instead be used.
Chapter 5 - Subaltern voices

5.1 Findings from the field

In this chapter, the findings from the field research will be presented. The questions raised to the material, as an operationalization of the theoretical analysis, are oftentimes intertwined. However, in order to keep the empirical analysis structured it is divided into subsections following the same structure as the questions formulated in the previous chapter. In chapter 6, the findings of the field will be discussed and analysed, and some final conclusions will be drawn to approach the research questions of this paper. The analysis is based on conclusions drawn by the researcher, as a result of the interpretations from the field.

5.1.1 Communicative ethics

What are the presuppositions for having an equal communication? Is the LRC letting everyone speak to the same extent? Who has the opportunities to raise questions or set the agenda for the conversation? Is there an open dialogue between the LRC-representants and the refugees where different perspectives are welcome?

Seyla Benhabib brings up the importance of developing a sense of self-worth to create a basis for respect and reciprocity, which is in turn foundational for an ethical conversation. The extreme circumstances in the refugee camps visited provide very poor conditions for developing a sense of self-worth. According to key informants from the LRC-team, diseases are spreading fast within the camps, partly due to poor hygiene. Not surprisingly, through interviews with the refugees it becomes clear that lacking resources to take care of ones personal hygiene has a negative effect of the way the refugees living in the camps perceive themselves. Before entering the camps, The LRC-team was warning not to get too close to the people residing in the camps. Even if that is a rational standpoint, this approach creates in itself an obstacle for creating a mutual respect between the communities and the LRC. Further, the camps are informal and set up illegally, and most of the refugees lack a permit to stay in the country. They therefore live under a constant fear of being forcibly deported, since the Lebanese police are frequently doing raids in order to deport illegal immigrants and close the camps. The feeling of being met with hostility is creating a lot of stress and does not favour the development of mutuality and respect.

Findings from the observations further shows that the very setting of the place where the VCA is held does not constitute a good foundation for an equal communication. The participants (the refugees) were sitting on the ground with the LRC-volunteer holding the session in front of them. The LRC-representatives were standing, writing on a piece of paper attached to the wall of the tent. The setting of having the participants sitting on the ground and the LRC-representatives standing constitutes an obstacle for creating an equal
communication. Further, the method of writing is highly questionable, since a majority of the people residing in the targeted communities is illiterate. This way of working is excluding, it deepens the unequal power relations and creates a distance between the Red Cross and the participants of the VCA. The observations show that the participants were many times guided in a certain direction of thinking, in that the LRC representants were asking specific questions or bringing their attention to concerns found by the LRC.

Another problematic aspect was that children were always present during the sessions, sitting in the laps of the women. This meant that the female participants were oftentimes interrupted by their children, and sometimes even forced to leave the session. The women were therefore not given the same presuppositions to participate as their male counterparts.

In the policy document of "How-to-do-a-VCA” distributed by the IFRC, the importance of participation within the targeted communities is clearly highlighted. The following section describes the importance of being aware that the process is supposed to be “owned” by the community and not by the Red Cross national societies:

“Working with volunteers and communities does not necessarily mean that you are working in a participatory way. The actual role of these groups in a VCA will determine the degree to which they feel as if they ‘own’ the process, or whether they are simply being asked to provide information and implement activities. If the volunteers and community members are active participants in implementing a VCA, their commitment to the process could transform the way branches and communities work – as people themselves become the principal authors in projects that reduce local vulnerabilities.”

(IFRC, 2007: 19)

However, in an interview with a key informant from the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, responsible for the design of the Disaster Risk Reduction program, it becomes clear that participation by the communities is depending on resources and cannot be considered a foundational question. According to the interviewee community participation is something that the IFRC is considering, but because of scarce resources it is sometimes neglected. On the question of whether the LRC is defining the problems within the refugee camps beforehand, informing rather than asking about the concerns of the refugees, the interviewee states that (here talking about the first sessions being conducted when the DRR program was first introduced):

"No, We try not to, we try to remain relevant, although, we decided to develop these first three sessions it was based…it wasn’t a community participative way of deciding because we were focused on testing a concept. We know that the topics are relevant; we don’t
impose them on the community. We ask 'do you want a session about this?' And if they say yes then we provide the session. But once the concept is there, it is there now, and then we can develop new sessions based on their feedback. What we try to identify is a common need in many places, we can't develop sessions just for one small community it would be too much of an effort.”

(Informant, IFRC)

It does not become clear how the IFRC know that the topics are relevant without involving the people who actually reside in the targeted communities. Nor do the interviewee give an explanation of why the LRC did not involve the community when they started providing the sessions. Looking at the policy document of the VCA, the involvement of the community is very important, especially in the initial phase of the project. In conclusion, the findings show there is a gap between the policy of the VCA and the implementation of the program.

There are however examples of the opposite scenario than the one presented above. It has happened that targeted communities have chosen to abstain from the help of the Red Cross; one example is brought up from a community with severe problems of scabies. After undertaking a VCA in that community, the obvious problem of scabies was not brought up by the people living there. Other problems were instead defined within the community, and therefore the LRC decided to leave the problem of scabies aside and instead listen to the people of the community.

However, as observations from the field show, the vulnerability of the refugees leaves them very little space to refrain from the help provided by the LRC. Some of the refugee camps had received no aid from any organizations for a long time. Fear of being critical towards the (in some cases) only humanitarian organization present is deepening the unequal power relationship between the LRC and the targeted refugee camps. Further, because of the unstable political situation in Lebanon and the paralyzed government, the refugees can expect no help from the state. The interviews with the refugees showed a desire for something to happen to break the feeling of hopelessness and boredom in the everyday life of the refugees. Anything that the LRC could provide would therefore be of interest. This creates a situation where the LRC can decide on the terms and conditions of the aid entirely.

In one of the interviews with a representant from the IFRC, It was stated that some humanitarian organizations operating in the field alongside the LRC put specific conditions on the aid provided. If the refugees did not participate in the beforehand chosen activities, they were not given material resources. This way of working was rejected by the Red Cross, because it was considered unethical by the organization. This shows that the aspect of power is at least to some extent considered within the organization of the Red Cross. It further makes up for an example of how power can be exercised in unethical ways.
As Benhabib states, to communicate in an ethical way presupposes trust and transparency in the encounter with the other. The aspect of trust was continuously stressed by the LRC-personnel, who all agreed that building trust between the organization and the targeted communities is essential to enable cooperation.

The observations from the field show there is to a rather high extent already established what the LRC can do in targeted communities before even starting a VCA. In the process of identifying vulnerabilities in a new community, the participants get to vote for the most urgent needs, no matter if the LRC is able to deal with that specific problem or not. On the question of whether the information about these specific problems is being communicated further, or rather, on the question of what happens with the information collected from the refugee camps, informants from the LRC are not able to give a clear answer. Further, when asked why the LRC let people vote for the most urgent problems if nothing is being done with the problems that fall outside the mandate of the LRC, no clear answer is given either. This shows a lack of respect in the relationship between the organization and the community. If the LRC is not being transparent enough to share with the community the terms and conditions of the aid, as well as the resources that the organization dispose and how far their mandate is reaching, the partners of the conversation can not be said to participate on equal terms. This is also contrary to the instructions in the VCA-manual, stating:

“The role that VCA plays in program planning must also be clear from the beginning. Gathering information and then not doing anything with it serves no purpose…”

(IFRC, 2007: 20)

However, the problem of not being transparent is said to be that it serves no purpose. The aspect of power is not reflected upon even in the policy manual.

A final and general observation is that members of the LRC-team are very respectful in their encounter with the refugees. The reverse is also true; the LRC team is met with curiosity and happiness. The LRC manage to create an atmosphere of hope and positivity, which is also brought up in the interviews with the refugees.

5.1.2 The generalized and the concrete other

Is the gender perspective present in the performance of the VCA? Are the female participants of the VCA truly free to speak their minds? What could be seen as obstacles for such freedom? Do the female refugees have different needs and desires than their male counterparts?
The findings of the observations and interviews show that gender-related issues are effectively excluded in the undertaking of VCA. It seems that it is a non-issue, which for example becomes visible through the answer of an LRC informant when being asked about the difference of the vulnerability of female refugees and their male counterparts:

"I don’t know, I’ve never asked the women"

(Informant, LRC)

This lack of knowledge is also shown in the education that the LRC-volunteers go through prior to the undertaking of a VCA. Observations show that the final exam of the VCA-course does not include a gender perspective.

On the question of whether there are other problems within the camp that was not identified during the VCA, one woman tells us that she is a victim of domestic violence. She continues by telling us that domestic violence is common within the community and it is the women that are suffering. This kind of problem has horrible and crucial implications for every aspect of life for these women, still the topic is highly sensitive and could not be discussed under the circumstances that the VCA provides. Thus, there is a great need to change the presuppositions for women to shed light on these issues. Further, the interviewee was promised the possibility to talk one-on-one with one of the female LRC-volunteers after the session. However, the team left the camp when the session was over, seemingly forgetting about the promise. Throughout the field research, there has been no sign that the organization is considering how to improve their working methods to acknowledge gender-related issues.

The scenario presented above shows that women are excluded from the process of identifying the vulnerabilities as long as the VCA-sessions are held in groups with mixed sexes. Victims of gender-related violence and problems connected to it are consequently completely silenced. The need to separate women from men in the undertaking of a VCA is also expressed in another interview with a group of five women residing in one of the camps. One of them starts off by saying (through the words of the translator):

"She says she is thankful, even if we can’t help her the way she wants, at least we can hear her"

(Refugee, Bekaa Valley)

The other women agree. Through the interview it becomes clear that there is a desire to talk, to be heard, and that the material contributions are not always the number one priority. It is about being seen, heard, and respected as a human being. However, some issues can’t be mentioned in front of men, and the interviewees all agree that there is a need for a private space, only for women, to talk about these matters. Through the interviews with only women
present, the interviewees become a lot more talkative than during the VCA, and are in general very concerned about telling their stories.

In another interview with a female refugee, it was stated that the women in the camp need underwear. This is a concrete problem connected to hygiene, and it has a straightforward solution. At the same time, it is a very sensitive and private matter that could not be discussed in the presence of men. The hygiene problems within the camps are connected to the spreading of diseases, which is straightforwardly what the LRC is aiming at preventing. Still, the problem is not brought up because of the lack of gender awareness within the Red Cross. Further, these issues are not only connected to hygiene and the spreading of diseases, but also connected to dignity, to the feeling of self-respect and self-worth. This issue has connections to Spivaks’ critique of Humanitarian organizations’ complicity in the muting of the subaltern woman.

Looking at the ”How-to-do-a-VCA-manual” the word ”gender” is rarely mentioned. The following quote is in fact the only place where gender is even put in a sentence, and not just as a word in a list of aspects that needs to be taken into consideration. This quote is taken from a passage where possible conflicts within communities are discussed.

“Another factor is gender: we cannot on the one hand advocate for gender equality and women’s rights and ignore the fact that in any ‘community’, divisions between males and females are of crucial importance. Do we work on gender issues, or with the ‘community’ that exists on the basis of gender inequality?”

(IFRC, 2007: 38)

The IFRC is problematizing the work on gender issues, but it does not provide a strategy for how the organization should approach such problems. It is remarkable that such an issue is not given more attention in a document of 94 pages that is to be guiding the whole process of conducting a VCA. In the strategy document of the IFRC for 2020, the problem is not given a lot of attention either. In fact, no clear strategy is given on how the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies should approach gender related issues. The failure of not taking it under any further consideration is constituted in the lack of attention the issue is given in the operational work of the Lebanese Red Cross.

5.1.3 The construction of the subaltern

What are the methods used by the IFRC to define the needs of the aid receivers? Are there elements of essentialism in the communication between the LRC and the refugees? Is the LRC
prejudice in their approach to the refugees? Is the LRC prejudice in the encounter with the refugees?

Going through the international strategy document of 2020, the overall finding is that the people the organization is set out to help is rarely mentioned in their roles as cooperation partners or experts who’s’ experiences must serve as the foundation of the operational work of the IFRC. However, the document describes how the IFRC should collect knowledge from a local level, as for example in this passage:

“Informed by the local needs and vulnerabilities of the diverse communities where we work, and guided by the rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled, Strategy 2020 is designed to ultimately benefit all who look to us to help to build a more humane, dignified and peaceful world.”
(IFRC, 2010: 12)

The word informed is of crucial importance since it shows that the organization is being informed by the local community and not the other way around. The quote also constitutes an example of how the Human Rights discourse is guiding the organization. This could be seen as problematic since Human rights are sprung from a Western value system where the majority of the world has been excluded from formulating what rights and freedoms that should be seen as foundational and inviolable. Further, in the strategy 2020, the people who are receiving the IFRC support have been given a rather one-dimensional role as “vulnerable people” throughout the document. Their experiences and expertise does not give them a more multifaceted role in the eyes of the IFRC.

In the observations from the field, a tendency to forget about the heterogeneity within the refugee communities was identified. The overall finding from observations as well as from interviews is that the LRC show a very limited, one-dimensional way of looking at the refugees. The attitude seems to be that all people living in the camp share the same experiences and needs, and internal divisions are ignored. The participation in the VCA is optional, still there were no questions raised such as who chooses to participate, and who does not – and why. As mentioned before, a majority of the people living in the camps is illiterate; many of them have been living in the countryside with very limited access to the world around them. Questions such as how someone with this background perceives the world, how they perceive themselves and their relationships to other people are essential when creating a basis for communication. Interviews with the LRC-representatives all point in the same direction- namely that the knowledge about the participants and their backgrounds is very limited.
Contrary to the above-identified problem, the strategy of 2020 contains the following quote that shows awareness about the heterogeneity within targeted communities:

“It is important not to idealize the notion of ‘community’. The people in any locality that outsiders think of as being a ‘community’ may not always be co-operative on all issues. They can also be in conflict, involving exploitative and repressive relations, especially in relation to their livelihoods (e.g. different access to land and water) and social existence (e.g. caste, ethnic differences, religious intolerances).”

(IFRC, 2010: 38)

However, the document provides no strategy on how to deal with internal conflicts, which may be the reason why the problem is not being addressed in the operation of the LRC.

In Lebanon the racism against Syrians is widespread and visible everywhere. Observations show that this is true also within the LRC-team. The racism seems to be so normalized within the Lebanese society that it is not even reflected upon. Comments on how Syrians think and behave in very sweeping, general (and negative) terms were frequent, even coming from LRC-personell and volunteers. The prejudice view of the Syrians was never showed in the encounter with the refugees, where they instead were met with respect. However, even if concealed, the prejudice view of the communication partners creates an obvious obstacle for creating an ethical relation between the LRC and the community members.

Observations show other examples of essentialism in the encounter with the refugees. The LRC does not fully address the complexity of the human being, instead a rather simplistic view of the human experience is discovered, where the desires of the refugees at least in part fails to be acknowledged. For example, an interview with a female refugee uncovered this problem. When being asked whether there was anything that wasn’t brought up during the session that she (the interviewee) would like to add as a priority, she stated that:

"I’m always taking care of the kids, everyday, and I’d like to do something to entertain myself. Something to… I’d like to learn to sew."

She continues:

"We are willing to learn. We need someone to teach us. And we want other things to entertain ourselves. To forget our problems.”

(Refugee, Zahle)
This kind of problem sheds light on the exclusion of desires of the subaltern peoples. It is not considered important, because it has no straightforward connection to what is within the humanitarian aid discourse considered a need. This would instead be physical problems such as malnutrition, poor hygiene, contaminated drinking water, diseases etc. It exposes a failure to acknowledge that all people have desires, and not only needs. It became even more apparent when the interviewee stated that it has nothing to do with earning money, she really just wanted to do something enjoyable. The importance of shifting the focus from physical needs are also shown in the fact that all the refugees interviewed are focusing on the importance of being listened to, being seen and respected as human beings. Since the desire to do something enjoyable is brought up by the refugees themselves, when they are only given a few minutes to talk freely about what they wanted the LRC to do, it seems as though desires sometimes must be put before what would within the Western humanitarian aid discourse be considered a need. In other words, “desires” must be taken seriously even in conditions of extreme poverty and malnutrition. There is a need to stop the essentialist view of the subaltern, to acknowledge that having desires is part of the human experience, not exclusively experienced by privileged people of the Western world.

5.1.4 Acknowledging the complicity in the colonial project

Do the LRC act as though they're blameless in the political realm of oppression? What resources are available for evaluation and self-reflection?

One of the overall findings from observations and interviews with LRC-personnel and volunteers is that there is a lack of self-reflexivity within the organization of the Lebanese Red Cross. The aspect of power does not seem to be given enough attention, a problem that is pervading different levels of the organization, and becomes apparent in discussions with volunteers undertaking the VCA. The lack of self-reflexivity at this level can be traced back to the training of the volunteers, in which the discussion of the aspect of power is lacking. Before being approved to perform VCA-sessions, the LRC-volunteers need to take a course and pass an exam. This exam did not involve a discussion about the role of the LRC-representant in the encounter with vulnerable people and the question of power was not at all mentioned in the exam of the volunteers. When failing to acknowledge the aspect of power in the education process, one can assume the issue is not prioritized within the organization as such.

The overall impression from the time spent with the LRC as well as from interviews with informants from the IFRC, there is a general interest in improving the work methods of the organization. Starting a new project, evaluations of the outcomes and the methodology are crucial. Moreover, participants of different projects carried out by the IFRC always get to evaluate the sessions afterwards. These evaluations in turn help the organization to improve their methods. However, in the interview with a key informant from the IFRC, it seems as
evaluations are carried out for reasons to become more efficient, rather than more ethical. In conclusion, there are tools for evaluation, but the focus of these evaluations should be shifted in order to eradicate oppressive structures within the IFRC.

5.1.5 Worlding of the world

How does the LRC define development? In the performance of the VCA, what resources to "learn to learn from below" are available? Are there any real possibilities for the refugees to define their problems as well as the solutions to these issues?

In the strategy document for IFRC the foundational principles guiding the operation of the organization are the following:

“Humanity, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity, Universality”

(IFRC, 2010: 5)

These principles are thus to be guiding the methods used by the organization. There are no attempts to problematize the meaning of these words. Unity and universality, but at the same time impartiality, neutrality and independence? What happens if these values are conflicting? Do some principles have precedence over others, and if so, how should such a prioritization be made? If it is up to the IFRC to decide what values that should be characterized by universality, it is hard to assert that their methods does not include elements of violence.

In an interview with a key informant from the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, responsible for the design of the Disaster risk reduction program, the aim of the program was pin pointed:

"…to raise awareness, to change behaviours in a way that will prevent risks for the population."

(Informant, IFRC)

It is problematic that the overarching point of departure for the DRR as a whole is to "raise awareness" and to "change behaviour". Further, words as "empower" and "inspire" are used in the LRC-material when presenting the DRR. The perspective is always from the point of view of the Red Cross, who aims at changing the targeted communities ways of thinking and behaving. The human experience of the West, embedded in values of the IFRC, becomes the
norm for all people and it is imposed upon the aid receivers. This becomes clear when shedding light on the failure to understand the different perspectives of the people the organization is set out to help. The only way for the refugees to legitimize their existence in the eyes of the Red Cross is to agree on the Western way of defining modernization and development, and the idea of the good life. The definition of development is presented in the Strategy document of The IFRC for 2020. It is stated that;

“For us, development means that everyone is able to achieve their full potential, and lead productive and creative lives with dignity according to their needs and choices, whilst fulfilling their obligations and realizing their rights. Achieving this requires a shift in attitude and a change of mind-set about the way that we live our lives. It also requires building appropriate social and institutional capacities.”

(IFRC, 2010, s.11).

This definition of development effectively excludes religious aspects from conceptions of the good life, and puts forward the individual as the central entity rather than the collective. This conception is not shared in all cultures or religions, still it is being presented as a universal truth. It is a definition that IFRC has decided on, a goal that they are aiming at no matter what community they are working with or where in the world they are operating.

Further, examples of how the Western way of emphasizing physical pain while considering mental pain less important is shown in the policy documents as well as in observations from the VCA-sessions. The IFRC needs to acknowledge that this is a part of a value system that is not universal. Imposing these values on any community without discretion cannot be done without elements of violence. In conclusion, the findings show a lack of insight and knowledge about the different experiences of being human.

5.2 Summary
To summarize the findings of the field research, the IFRC and the LRC shows a lack of self-reflexivity and does not sufficiently analyse the unequal power structures in the encounter with subaltern groups. The gender perspective is not addressed, thus the LRC is complicit in the silencing of the subaltern woman. There is a tendency to approach the refugees with an essentialist view of ”the Other”, ignoring internal heterogeneity within the refugee camps. As a continuation of this, the LRC seems to be forgetting the complexity of the human experience, ignoring the desires of the refugees and chooses to focus on the basic needs as they are defined by the West. This is closely connected to the cultural imperialism that is embedded within the organisation. The strategy of the IFRC is coloured by Western values, for example in the definition of development, modernity and perspectives of the good life.
Further, there is a lack of transparency in the encounter with the refugees, and the setting of the VCA could be more inclusive and less authoritative.
Chapter 6 - Concluding reflections

The object of this chapter is to discuss the findings of the thesis and come up with a conclusion seeking to answer the research questions of this paper. With a point of departure in the context of the LRC and Lebanon, this chapter will also present a critical analysis of the theoretical insights of Benhabib and Spivak.

Reminding ourselves about the overarching question of this thesis;

*What communication strategies are justified when NGOs are dealing with vulnerable people and communities?*

The findings of the empirical research have proved the theoretical insights of Benhabib and Spivak to be, at least to some extent, plausible in the context of the field research. The empirical analysis confirms, hardly surprising, that the problems cannot be quickly overcome. On the other hand, there are certainly actions that the IFRC and the LRC could take today that would constitute an improvement of their strategies for communication in an ethical perspective.

When discussing what strategies for communication that would be deemed fair and reasonable, the theoretical insights of Seyla Benhabib are actualized in the findings of the field. However, her suggestion of complete reversibility, to put oneself entirely in the position of the other, can be seen as problematic and the approach is at risk of becoming an obstacle for communication. In the attempts to imagine the situation of the other, we have in some ways already decided for ourselves what their position is like, and therefore we loose the ability to truly listen to the experiences of the other. If being told we misinterpreted their position, or if it becomes obvious that we are prejudice, there is a risk that we get defensive and unwilling to listen. If the approach is different, and we’re clear about our own limits when trying to imagine the situation of the other, if we understand that there will always be aspects of where the other is coming from that we do not understand – we will be more open and actually listen to the opinions, experiences and claims of the other. Further, it is problematic to ask of the oppressed subaltern to put herself in the shoes of a privileged Westerner. Asking her to do so seems to be an act of oppression in itself.

The ability to change perspectives with the other, actualizes Spivaks’ argument that the subaltern can never be represented by the Western intellectual. Benhabib argues that anyone has the ability of putting oneself in the position of the other, shouldn’t it thus be possible to represent the other? Could the subaltern thus be given a voice? For Spivak it is clearly not possible and I find it reasonable to agree with her. Every attempt to lend the subaltern a voice
will be an act of oppression. The empirical analysis of this thesis reinforces this standpoint, as it exposes that the power relations are so unequal that it becomes impossible to communicate. The IFRCs’ lack of insight in the experiences of the refugees proves this problem of communication.

Even when putting aside the essential aspect of power in the discussion of whether it is possible to lend the subaltern a voice, it seems like an impossible mission to fully identify with another persons’ existence. And even if we try, there will be no way of knowing if we succeeded or not. We do better in accepting that it is not possible to fully understand the other, and therefore every attempt to represent the other would be deemed to fail. It seems like Benhabib would agree on this to some extent in her critique towards the Rawlsian veil of ignorance. The “self” is highly constituted by norms, language, relationships and so forth, and therefore the subject behind the veil will lack the ability and motivation to separate right from wrong, good from bad. In fact it would not even be a subject behind the veil, it would be something very different from a human being and is therefore of little interest when discussing ethical considerations. The self is so deeply embedded in our experiences that a complete reversibility cannot be reached. Instead, the empirical analysis exposes Benhabibs insight that the concreteness of the concrete other can only be found through an equal dialogue to be central. Without equality between the parties of the conversation there is no way to fully reach the other, to see her as a subject and a socially and culturally embedded human being. The findings of the field show that the methods used by the LRC fail to create a basis for an equal conversation. Instead, several examples show that the methods are further deepening the gap between the organization and the refugees. Without an open dialogue, there is a risk to constitute the otherness of the other by projecting our own experiences and fantasies on to the other, or risk being indifferent to the differences and thus become oppressive. If we are instead clear about the fact that who we are will affect the way we imagine the world and the way we interpret the other, we will enable ourselves to look at each other with curiosity and a willingness to learn.

The empirical findings has proved Spivaks’ discussion on the need for Western intellectuals to ”rearrange their desires” to be useful. The most urgent need of subaltern groups might be very different from the ones expected from the Western world. Acknowledging the consciousness of the subaltern woman is, according to Spivak, essential to stop the on-going imperialist subject-constitution continuously silencing the subaltern woman. Looking at the empirical findings of this field study, it seems reasonable to agree with her. Several examples show that the organization fails to acknowledge desires as well as needs identified by the subaltern. There is a tendency to forget that all human beings have desires, and not only needs. The argument of learning to learn from below is a foundational argument if we are ever to stop the oppression of the subaltern and the unequal power structures between the North and the South.
Looking at Spivak’s critique of the "Western worlding of the world" the empirical findings have shown her critique to be legitimate in the context of the field. It is debatable whether the Human Rights project constitutes an example of cultural imperialism. However, it’s easy to see how the Western value system is integrated in the culture of Human Rights. For example, within the culture of Human Rights, the emphasis has been put on the human body and physical pain. The Human rights discourse is guiding the operational work of the IFRC, and as the observations show, there is a tendency to forget about different perspectives where physical concerns are not always the most pressing ones. Failing to acknowledge that could be seen as an expression of violence.

Benhabib argues that women’s experience is excluded from the process of moral reasoning, she’s criticizing the privatization of women’s experience. Her critique shows to be legitimate in the context of the field research of this thesis. There is a need to acknowledge gender related issues, to bring them to light and make sure not to act as though these concerns are to be dealt with domestically when they are nothing less than foundational to the subaltern woman. Spivak offers another, no less important and closely connected critique towards the active action of constructing women outside of the western world as human beings without discretion. What happens is that international humanitarian organizations are systematically depriving the subaltern woman her subject-position. The findings show that this is problem is actualized in the context of the field research. When the woman is deprived her chances to engage in the conversation on equal terms, she is also deprived her subject-position and she becomes helpless, needy and dependent.

The question raised in the introductory chapter of this thesis remains. What communication strategies are justified when International Humanitarian Organizations are dealing with vulnerable people and communities? The conclusion seems to be that the highly unequal power structures make it impossible to justify any kind of communication from an ethical perspective. Any attempt to communicate with the subaltern will contain elements of oppression. However benevolent these organizations are, the unequal power structures that are present from the start make the mission of creating an ethical strategy for communication impossible. That is not to say that these organizations do not have a vast responsibility in the issue or that they shouldn’t try. But this responsibility lies first and foremost on the international level, rather than at the level of local civil societies. The LRC are operating with very scarce resources, forced to put a lot of responsibility on young volunteers. Their presuppositions to make a real change on the issue are obviously very limited. This study does not provide a solution on how to put an end to unequal power structures in the humanitarian aid discourse. On the one hand, it seems impossible. On the other, that is not an excuse not to try. Benhabib and Spivak are suggesting a way forward, in the impossible process of creating a justified strategy for communication. Firstly, the great need for self-reflexivity and a process of learning from those communities and people that are subject to the operations carried out by humanitarian organizations have been discussed. The communication must start on an equal ground without prejudicial views of the partners of the
conversation. Everyone involved must be ready to reverse their perspectives with the other; in a sense that they are ready to be self-critical and admit that ones’ own worldview is not neutral or more “true” than anybody else’s. The point of departure should not be to give voice to the subaltern, because they already have one. Instead, there must be a genuine attempt to learn from ”the other”, to create ways for the Western world to relate to people and communities outside of the Western paradigm. The prevailing power structures will remain intact as long as the Western ways of understanding modernity and positive development is not questioned. As long as the perspective of the subaltern woman is concealed, it seems impossible to approve any attempts to communicate with her. It is important that Western humanitarian organizations let go of the essentialist way of looking at the subaltern, continuously looking at ”the Other” as the General other rather than the Concrete other. It is important to recognize the complexity of the human being, all human beings, and acknowledge that there will always be aspects of where the Other is coming from that we do not understand. That is not to say that we shouldn’t try. In fact, if we fail to try, if fail to learn from the subaltern, we will never be able to justify any kind of communication with her.
Printed References


Online References


Appendix: List of informants

- 24/2 LRC-representant, LRC office, Beirut. Presentation of the VCA.
- 26/2 Exam initiators, LRC office, Beirut. Observation.
- 27/2 VCA, Tripoli. Observation.
- 1/3 Representant IFRC, Hazmieh. Interview.
- 5/3 Presentation of DRR, Akkar school. Observation.
- 6/3 VCA, Tyre. Observation.
- 16/3 Evacuation school, Tripoli. Observation.
- 19/3 Ethel Camp, Zahle. Observation.
- 19/3 Female refugees, Ethel Camp, Zahle. Group interview.
- 19/3 LRC-volunteer, Ethel Camp, Zahle. Interview.
- 23/3 LRC-volunteer, Interview.
- 29/3 Project manager DRR, Interview.
- 5/4 Project manager DRR, Interview.
- 7/4 Female Refugee, Bekaa valley refugee camp 1. Interview.
- 7/4 Male refugee, Bekaa valley refugee camp 1. Interview.
- 10/4 Bekaa valley, Refugee camp 2, Observation.
- 10/4 Male refugee, Bekaa valley, Refugee camp 2. Observation.