

## “A Woman without Limits”

### *Syrian Women in the Peddling Economy*

‘Abd al-Masih Haddad’s 1921 short story, “Timthal al-Huriyya” (Statue of Liberty) is a tongue-in-cheek cautionary tale for the Arab immigrant man.<sup>1</sup> The story’s protagonist, Nakhla al-Masoub, brings his young wife, Edma, with him to the United States, where he hopes to enrich their lives economically. Yet, despite being a self-described “lord of the house,” Nakhla strikes out financially time and time again and ends up deep in debt. One day, his brother-in-law suggests that if Nakhla were to send his wife out to work as a peddler, his debts would quickly diminish. The brother-in-law convinces Nakhla of this proposal by noting that “in America, women succeeded in work and they even surpassed men.” Indeed, Nakhla’s wife becomes such a successful peddler that she becomes their primary source of income, and Nakhla eventually becomes the caregiver of their three children. This labor arrangement dramatically challenges Nakhla’s masculinity and his sense of self: “His wife continued to be the breadwinner while he raised the children in their mother’s absence. He left work, his entire life and his family’s life now rested on the shoulders of his wife. . . . After this, Nakhla was no longer a prince in his house, but became a slave to his wife and his children. She became the head of the family and a woman without limits.”<sup>2</sup> This transformation and the tensions it introduced feature in an exchange between Nakhla and his wife:

Nakhla continued to swallow his worries until he couldn’t handle them anymore. That same night, the lady Edma returned home from work to look for Nakhla and found the children crying and sniffing. Once she had tended to them, she went looking for her husband, shaking as if her heart was on fire. There, she saw him sitting on a bench in Liberty Park. He was lost in thought, thinking about how he was once a prince in his own land and now a slave in the diaspora. Edma began to humiliate him and lead him to the house, telling him that if he did this again that she would kick him out of the house and would pay someone to take care of her children in her absence.<sup>3</sup>

Such is Nakhla's emasculation: no longer a "prince" of his home and nation, he is chastised by his peddler-breadwinner wife for not taking care of the children. His descent as "a slave in the diaspora" is simultaneously economic, gendered, and sexual. The anxieties Haddad alludes to aligned with discourses about modernity and changing gender norms, discourses in which men feared emasculation by the "new," modern woman.

Haddad's depiction of gendered oppression was not unique for his time. Elizabeth Saylor notes that several Arab migrant writers regularly commented on the situation of women under patriarchal structures. These critiques were, however, somewhat undermined by their overwhelming focus on men's perspectives—as is the case with "Timthal al-Huriyya."<sup>4</sup> Haddad's story hits at the heteropatriarchal structure of the Syrian family and at the disruption and transformation wrought by migration and living in diaspora. To gain insight into Edma's perspective, we must look and imagine elsewhere.

Syrian women were the nexus of the queer ecology of peddling. Their participation in the peddling economy was central to this sexual, gender, and family transformation because their labor had sexual and gendered implications for how they were discursively and materially constituted in diaspora. First, Syrian women peddlers trespassed gendered boundaries of space and labor when they worked outside their homes and traversed public space in the course of their work. Second, all Syrian women who participated in the peddling economy—whether as peddlers, boardinghouse operators, or makers—brought the gendered and classed norms of Syrian motherhood into stark relief. Working outside the home or turning the home into a site of nonreproductive labor called into question a Syrian woman's maternal fitness, in both Syrian and American contexts. Third, the archival legacies of the peddling economy highlight the sexual economy of the Syrian immigrant family. The measures taken to discourage women from participating in the peddling economy emphasized the ideal of women's labor in the Syrian immigrant family as, essentially, sexually reproductive. The fact that, in some instances, Syrian women and girl peddlers were more successful than their male counterparts only deepened this tension.

Syrians also debated internally about the consequences and propriety of women working as peddlers. One consequence of this debate came in the form of frequent gossip about women's and girls' behavior, as well as the threat of gossip ("what will the people say?").<sup>5</sup> (I examine these internal debates as a form of Syrian community self-policing more fully in chapter 3.) While the concerns about peddling Syrian men were overtly sexual, concerns about Syrian women in the peddling economy were often expressed through the identification and violation of gender norms. It would be a mistake, however, to understand these expressions of gender anxiety as divorced from the sexual. I examine gender alongside sexuality as an analytical tool. This approach does not presume an equivalence or necessary link between sexuality and gender, but rather recognizes that gender remains a

“crucial modifier of sexuality.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the social welfare concerns regarding gendered morality, as explored in this chapter, were always simultaneously concerns about the sexual.

Shifts in the economic and family life of Syrian Christian peasants, who formed the majority of these migrants, actually began before migration.<sup>7</sup> For example, farmers in Mount Lebanon participated heavily in the silk industry, raising silkworms to feed on their mulberry trees. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 boosted this sector even more over the following few decades until increased competition from Chinese silk dampened Mount Lebanon’s industry. In this context, some women and girls began to work in silk factories, while men continued to work the land. This arrangement has been called a sacrifice of women’s honor, offered so that men could retain their own honor, as well as their social status, both of which were based in the land.<sup>8</sup> It may be more accurate, however, to call attention to this process as imbuing the concept of “women’s honor” with a kind of flexibility to adapt to these economic changes while still allowing for patriarchal control.

In diaspora, Syrians were presented with relatively fewer options for having a sense of self and doing land-based forms of work, particularly when many of them intended to return to the Levant after making some money. If we accept the premise that some Syrian men’s sense of honor (i.e., their sense of heteropatriarchal-based identity) had already weathered some blows in the decades just prior to migration, the lack of land-based but short-term economic opportunity in diaspora exacerbated these issues in Syrian masculinity. Certainly, such a generalization was not absolute. Some Syrians were open to permanent or long-term relocation (and thus a wider variety of work), and others were more adaptable and receptive to these changes in gendered labor than others. In addition, this dynamic may have been particular to those migrants from Mount Lebanon, whereas those from cities like Damascus may not have felt these gendered changes in exactly the same way.<sup>9</sup> But in other cases, such as that of Haddad’s characters Nakhla and Edma, women’s successes as peddlers were a reminder of these cultural changes and of Syrian men’s diminished opportunities to sustain an economically based sense of masculinity within the diaspora. Such differing experiences of these massive gendered and cultural shifts paved the way for women’s and girls’ behaviors to become the basis for ethnic and nationalist identity in diaspora.<sup>10</sup>

Early Arab American studies scholarship bears out these transformations wrought by migration and peddling. In one of the earliest publications on Arabs in diaspora, published in 1943, Lebanese sociologist Afif Tannous studied emigrants and their descendants from his home region who had relocated to Vicksburg, Mississippi, some fifty years earlier. Comparing the norms of the diasporic community with those of their ancestors and contemporaries in Mount Lebanon, Tannous traced acculturation through family structure, economic culture, social integration, and citizenship and nationalism. He argued that peddling suited Syrians’

temporary intentions in the United States because "it did not tie them down to the place permanently" and it allowed for "quick and lucrative results."<sup>11</sup>

Tannous understood the changes in gender norms and marriage customs to be key factors in this process of acculturation. He was particularly interested in fertility rates, the advent of divorce, and the "breakdown of the family unit" from an extended kin household to a two-generation household consisting of a married couple and their children. Peddling, and women's participation in it, was a sharp departure from the "original culture," as were changes in the family living structure: "Complete departure from the original culture has occurred with respect to the subordinate role of the bride in particular and of woman in general. Instead of going to live with her husband's people, the bride now starts her home independently with her husband. She takes full charge of the home. She has also achieved occupational equality. With this goes full economic equality, to the extent of joint ownership of property and business in many cases."<sup>12</sup>

Tannous included an excerpt from one of his interviews with a seventy-year-old woman to illustrate these changes. The woman's husband had come to the United States alone at first, refusing to let his wife accompany him, "saying that it would be a shame on him to let his wife travel to the end of the world in order to earn a living."<sup>13</sup> But when the husband had difficulty with the climate and became sick, the woman left their children with their grandmother and joined him in the United States: "I tried peddling, as soon as I arrived, and succeeded very well at it, making much money. *Then I sent my husband back home* and continued my successful peddling."<sup>14</sup> In the absence of further information about this particular arrangement, we can only imagine the perspective of Tannous's interviewee; perhaps, like Edma in Haddad's fiction, "she became the head of the family and a woman without limits."<sup>15</sup>

Early Arab American scholar Philip Hitti advanced an argument about women's economic utility in his 1924 book, *The Syrians in America*. As soon as Syrians realized "the economic value of the woman," Hitti observed, women began to migrate in larger numbers. In particular, the work of peddling "lent itself more easily to women workers who had freer access to homes."<sup>16</sup> As discussed in chapter 1, that differential access was based on the perceived *sexual* threat of Syrian men and the lack thereof in Syrian women and children. Later studies corroborated this link between migration, women's labor (and peddling in particular), and changes in family life. Two early studies in the 1969 edited volume *The Arab Americans* showed the significance of women in the Syrian peddling economy. In her chapter on Arab Americans in Boston, Elaine Hagopian noted that "some of the best and most successful" peddlers were women, some of whom took up peddling as their husbands moved on to open their own businesses.<sup>17</sup> Safia Haddad argued that the shifts in women's economic position resulting from migration challenged the patriarchal status of men. Haddad detailed the changes in women's "spatial world" (that is, into the public sphere) because of peddling and women's adaptation to commerce inside the home (by making things for other peddlers to sell). These

characteristics of Syrian women’s labor shifted the traditional structure of gender and the family, but Haddad contended that both men and women knew it was economically useful.<sup>18</sup> No matter what Syrians thought of them, these changes were substantial and the woman peddler became a symbol of them.

To investigate women’s participation in the peddling economy, this chapter relies primarily on social welfare records in which Syrians were both aid recipients and social reformers themselves. In their archival legacy, as well as their power to shape public discourse regarding poverty, gender, and citizenship, social welfare agencies reveal a dynamic and inconsistent understanding of Syrian immigrants. Social welfare records reflect the changing and often contradictory opinions held regarding (and to a certain extent, within) the Syrian community and reveal the mechanisms through which Syrians were discursively disciplined into (or expelled from) the US national body. Once Syrians began to appear in US social welfare records starting in the late 1880s, their living conditions, family structures, cultural markers of difference and similarity, and laboring practices became sites of scrutiny. Of course, this development fit with larger discourses questioning the place and assimilability of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe and from across the Asian continent. Although naturalization rights were based on a claim to whiteness, uncertainty persisted regarding Syrians’ racial qualifications for citizenship even after the courts settled this question in Syrians’ favor in 1915. Thus, in social work records, we can see how Syrians’ “degrees of undeserving or deserving” the privileges of Americanness remained in flux.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, Syrian women in particular populate the pages of social welfare records, for a variety of reasons. First, many of these agencies were, as a rule, primarily concerned with women and children and thus sought contact with women and children from various communities. In some cases, social workers would not aid a particular family without first seeing the woman of the household.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, women and children in general appear more frequently in social work collections than men—whether as social workers themselves, who were overwhelmingly middle-class women, or those whom social workers sought to help. Second, Syrian men who peddled would have been away from home for longer periods of time, and thus women were more likely the ones seeking aid for their families. Women peddlers usually stayed closer to home.<sup>21</sup> Finally, some Syrian men may have felt too vulnerable (and potentially emasculated in that vulnerability) to seek aid from what was usually a female social worker.<sup>22</sup> Children also appear abundantly in social welfare commentary. Their appearance was always an indictment of their parents, and specifically their mothers. Thus, the social welfare commentary surrounding Syrian communities and peddling produced damaging discourses about Syrian women and their families.

The sources used in this chapter include proceedings and reports from charity organizations, articles from periodicals on social work and philanthropy, news media, census data, case files from the International Institutes of Boston and

Minnesota, and the papers of the Syrian Ladies Aid Society of Boston. Agencies of social welfare were a venue through which Syrians sought assistance with employment, health and medicine, money, and in some cases issues more centrally related to immigrant needs, such as English-language classes, naturalization, and family reunification. At such places as the International Institute of Boston, case files show hundreds of Syrians came to the agency's offices for aid or received visits from social workers regarding abandonment or neglect by a husband, physical and sexual abuse, the need for child care, or financial assistance.<sup>23</sup> Other Syrian immigrants attended language and "Americanization" classes or sought help in bringing other family members to the United States. The collections of social work organizations and periodicals are but one set of sources where records on working-poor and working-class Syrian immigrants can be located. The content of such archives often contrasts starkly with community and family-based Arab American collections, whose curation might well have been shaped by donors' desire to preserve a narrative of respectability (as discussed in chapter 4).

Although some outside the Syrian community saw virtues in the Syrian peddler, few social workers seemed to do so, particularly when women peddled. Many in the various fields of social welfare derided peddling as a dishonest and lazy form of work, painting Syrian men as manipulative, Syrian women as pitiful and unruly, and Syrian children as endangered and dangerous. In some rarer circumstances, social workers saw women peddlers as exercising new opportunities for independence and prosperity. Peddling was not something that could be done in isolation. At the very least, it required a supplier of the items for sale. More often than not, peddling was an enterprise that also needed support from other peddlers to ensure safety on the road and to avoid competitive quarrels, as well as support from family members who took care of children and the elderly at home. Moreover, nonpeddling women often made lace or other items for peddlers to sell, or they operated boardinghouses where peddlers would lodge on their long-distance routes. So, although peddling required a degree of disconnect from the community, it is better understood as a highly interdependent system of work. And precisely because this system blurred the classed and Eurocentric boundaries of public and private gendered and sexual labor, it attracted the gaze of the state. The public-private boundary hinged on prescribed gendered and sexual roles and was central to Eurocentric conceptions of modernity. To social welfare workers, the peddling economy became a symbol of Syrians' violation of this boundary and, by extension, called into question their capacity to be properly modern. Peddling was embedded in a web of social welfare scrutiny of Syrians' homes, boardinghouses, parenting practices, intimate relationships, and larger support networks that sustained peddling as a profession.

There are gradations of participation and scrutiny to attend to here. Some peddlers, including women, were praised for their hard work and initiative in finding a way to survive in a strange land. In addition, it is difficult to even make

distinctions between “positive” and “negative” representations of Syrian women in the peddling economy, as such characterizations relied on a normative system of evaluation that scripted women’s work into binary categories of modern versus traditional and American versus Syrian. Women’s labor in the peddling economy was controversial, but it was not universally maligned. Still, social welfare reformers saw peddling as an inherent threat to the family—one that allowed men to abandon their familial duties, women to neglect their children, and children to be exposed to the moral and physical dangers of the streets. Charity and social workers’ scrutiny of peddling among Syrians—and particularly among Syrian women—was at once a concern about female gender and sexual normalcy, about the racial classifications of Southwest Asian immigrants and their assimilability, about the policing of public space, and about poor and working-class immigrants who lacked (or seemed to lack) the aspiration to a middle-class, sedentary professional life. Syrian women’s adaptability to the norms that social workers articulated for them correlated directly with their perceived fitness for US citizenship, a privileged category predicated on standards of white, middle-class heteronormativity. When social workers pathologized Syrian women for their parenting, homes, and laboring practices, they created an opportunity for others to interrogate Syrian racial, sexual, and gender normativity.

#### WOMEN PEDDLERS AND RACIAL PRESCRIPTIONS OF GENDER

Syrian women took to peddling in great numbers and, in doing so, challenged both Syrian and white American gendered prescriptions for women and girls. The ramifications of this challenge varied. In some cases, peddling women were a curiosity; in others, they were cause for great alarm.

One 1888 news article implied far-reaching consequences of Syrian women’s peddling. A Syrian nun living in Brooklyn was peddling beads door to door to raise money for an orphanage in Syria. She was accompanied by a young boy who served as her interpreter. An onlooker reported her to the police because “her strong masculine features and her big feet led him to believe she was a man.” Police detained the nun and the boy until their story could be verified. While police could not confirm the nun’s womanhood directly (a fellow religious sister vouched for her), the police were satisfied that her statement as to her intention was truthful and released them both. Still, the news reporter felt certain that the sister was no sister at all—neither a nun nor a woman—and he set out to determine this by interrogating others and tracking his suspect back to her residence. From here, the reporter built a sensational, quasi-anthropological account of his foray into Brooklyn’s Syrian neighborhood. His investigation took him from shopkeepers to churches to saloons, and eventually to “batter[ing] at every door he came across” at 57 Washington Street, a boardinghouse where many Syrians lived.

Finally, he encountered "a person who was dressed like one of Barnum's Arabs." Careful to refrain from using any gendered pronouns, the reporter noted the appearance and contents of the room while describing the impossibility of communication:

Besides the Syrian and the reporter there was in the room an old bedstead, upon which the Syrian sat, and a couple of old chairs, upon neither of which the reporter sat. The floor was bare. There were some pieces of leather straps and a piece of old rope near the window. Some old clothes hung by a hook from the wall. The reporter could not make the Syrian understand that he was looking for the Sister who was said to be living in the house, and started out to look for an interpreter. The Syrian closed the door and locked it.<sup>24</sup>

The reporter discovered later that this person was indeed the sister he had been seeking. Other Syrians continued to vouch for her, but the Catholic church from which the sister was said to have a letter was vehement that they would "not give a letter to anyone let alone these Syrians." The reporter continued his account by reflecting on the mendacity of Syrian peddlers, their propensity to drink "big schooners of beer," and their cheapness. In one store that the Syrian sister was said to have frequented, the shopkeepers said that sometimes other sisters would encounter her there. In those instances, she would "hasten away," causing the shopkeepers to reflect that it was "queer the way she acted." Moreover, when they tried to question her boy interpreter, the two would leave.

How might we think about this historical artifact of a person's life, in this case, the Syrian peddler? Maybe this was indeed a cross-dressing Syrian peddler living in late-nineteenth-century New York City. This could have been a man dressed as a nun, with a story about raising money for an orphanage so that his peddling efforts would be more profitable. After all, Syrian men were perceived to be sexual threats to their (presumed) white women customers, as demonstrated in chapter 1. Women peddlers were received with more sympathy and thus were more likely to make a sale. In some cases, children peddled with fathers to mitigate their perceived threat.<sup>25</sup> We certainly cannot conclude that fabrications of narrative were never used to persuade customers.

But can we also imagine a different reality than that suggested by the reporter? In the absence of archival information about the peddler themselves, we can draw on what we do know about the time and the context to imagine an alternate scenario:

*Mariam would rise early in the morning, just as the first birds began to chirp. This was her indication that others would rise soon, and her time would no longer be her own. Careful not to make too much noise, she washed her face and pulled on the long robe and habit that was typical for her order. She checked her reflection once and brushed a wisp of hair under her habit. While others tended to think her odd-looking for a woman, she was quite satisfied with the rough quality of her features and her towering*

size. *Better to be feared than to be dominated, she thought. Better to be unlikely than common.*

*She double-checked that her kasha, her peddling box, was stocked and opened the door. Elias was seated in the hallway, waiting to begin their route. She often wondered if it would have been more prudent to leave him at the orphanage, but he seemed to grow from their adventure. Plus, he hadn't lost his manners or his kindness. She reassured herself.*

*Their first stop was the holy store on Barclay Street. They came here on the first Wednesday of every month. Sometimes as they left, they were able to catch customers, drawn by the prospect of blessed rosaries from Jerusalem. The boy called to an older woman who was descending the front stoop, but she hurried away from them as they approached. The two entered the store and saw that a group of Syrian ladies, the Khoury sisters, were gathered near the purchase counter. Upon seeing Sister Mariam and Elias, the sisters whispered in hushed tones and averted their gazes. Mariam felt her cheeks hot as the shopkeeper's curiosity bubbled over. He said something to Elias in English, and Elias's tug at her sleeve indicated it was time to leave. In moments like these, any attempt to satiate inquiring tongues only led to more questions and more suspicion. She didn't want to put Elias in the position of having to defend her, and she wanted to keep her own anger manageable. They left without a word. They proceeded to their next stop, as if nothing had happened.*

We can wonder: was her jaw too square, her gait too lumbering? Did she not smile enough? Was she simply taller than the women the reporter was accustomed to? Perhaps she was neither a masculine woman nor a cross-dressing man but a gender transgressor of another sort. We cannot know how this particular historical figure thought of themselves; that barrier to our knowledge is a frustration, but it also holds endless possibilities. The questions about this particular figure—and others—are important, as is the attempt at a response. Regardless of what we might imagine, the answers remain open-ended. We can, however, glean from this remarkable story that Syrian women's peddling constituted a serious transgression of gender for some.

Another instance of reporting on Syrian life, published decades later, hints at some of these implications of gender transgression in women's peddling. In 1911, the *Detroit Free Press* published a piece on the ubiquity of Syrians working as peddlers and of women, in particular, among their ranks. “Kindly-disposed people are distressed at the burdens these women carry,” the brief article noted, but, it reassured readers, “eastern women are trained from infancy to carry” such loads.<sup>26</sup> The article continued: “The water jar, which such a woman carries home on her head thrice a day from the fountain, perhaps a hundred feet deep in a valley below her village, is far heavier than her suitcase of embroideries and kimonos. . . . Whatever the disadvantages of peddling, the weight of the pack is not one of them.”<sup>27</sup>

This article was excerpted from a series of essays published throughout the summer of 1911 in the social welfare periodical *The Survey*. Written by missionary and editor Louise Seymour Houghton and funded by a grant from the Carnegie

Foundation, this four-part series chronicled the history and life of Syrians in the United States.<sup>28</sup> The standing of Syrian women figured prominently in Houghton's reporting. The excerpt printed in the *Detroit Free Press* spoke directly to perplexed Americans (presumably white and middle-class) who wondered at Syrian women undertaking such physically demanding work. This particular excerpt from Houghton's series—which the newspaper titled "Syrian Peddlers: Eastern Women Trained from Childhood to Carry Heavy Weights"—trafficked in a form of essentialism that was simultaneously gendered and racial. That is, although the proper American woman might be too fragile to undertake such work, the Syrian woman was perfectly capable of undertaking such loads.

If we think about the *Detroit Free Press* excerpt and the investigation of the peddling nun as indicative of the racially gendered unease that Syrian women peddlers provoked, we might even ask if Syrian women peddlers were indeed considered women at all by others. In the eyes of those who believed that proper women limited their labor to unpaid domestic work in their own homes, Syrian women peddlers may have been unruly subjects for categorization.

These violations of gendered behavior were not the only aspect of women's peddling work that threatened Syrians' ability to fit either within Eurocentric visions of gender difference or within Syrian heteropatriarchal family structures in diaspora. The economic independence that women could gain from peddling fueled anxieties about the changing nature of Syrian communities under migration. One second-generation Syrian American told of a woman from Zahle who gained such independence. She came to the United States, and after receiving goods from a supplier, she started peddling. She eventually earned enough money to return home, where she "saw herself as better than her husband and built herself a beautiful home."<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, many women found a particular opportunity in peddling that they may not have found in other work. Historian Alixa Naff's research concluded that "a surprising number [of women] continued [peddling] well into the thirties and forties, long after most men had turned to other pursuits. . . . Some who gave it up returned to it intermittently in times of economic crises, between pregnancies and even after the childbearing age."<sup>30</sup> While Syrian men began increasingly to take on nonmobile jobs after 1910, some Syrian women continued to find economic opportunity and flexibility in peddling. One woman, 'Aqlah Brice Al Shidyaq, immigrated to the United States by herself in 1894, leaving her husband and children behind in Mount Lebanon. After arriving in West Virginia, she changed her name to Mary and began peddling. Despite being illiterate, she learned rudimentary English, Italian, Polish, and Hungarian and built a base of loyal customers.<sup>31</sup> She continued to peddle into her sixties, at which point her sons persuaded her to stop. But as the Great Depression began, she took up the profession once more to aid her family and peddled until she was almost seventy years old.<sup>32</sup>

Some women were eager to leave peddling for the more respectable vocation of marriage and childrearing—and, indeed, there were community and external pressures to do just that. Based on her oral history interviews, Naff claimed that “most gladly gave up peddling to marry and raise a family.” She lamented that “no one will ever know how many girls who peddled yearned for some man, any man, to free them from the drudgery.”<sup>33</sup> Even so, for other women, the true drudgery may have been a middle-class marriage itself, devoid of their own endeavors outside the home. These women gained pleasure, independence, and self-worth from their peddling work.

Houghton focused overwhelmingly on Syrian women in the remainder of her series in *The Survey*, often describing the merits of women’s participation in the paid labor force. In an unexpected passage, Houghton described the economic autonomy made possible by Syrian women’s peddling:

The peddler is a free man—more often a free woman. Why should she give up the open air, the broad sky, the song of birds, and the smell of flowers, the right to work or to rest at her own pleasure, to immure herself within four noisy walls and be subject to the strict regime of the clock? Why should she who has been a whole person, and her own person, become a mere “hand” and that the hand of another? . . . When the woman yields and abandons peddling for less congenial (and usually less profitable) work, she yields not to argument, but to a subtle and keen consciousness that her social standing among these incomprehensible Americans will somehow be thereby improved.<sup>34</sup>

It is possible that Syrian racialization somewhat enabled Houghton’s openness here. For instance, the idea that Arabs were exceptionally brutal toward women may have influenced Houghton to view Syrian women’s economic independence even more favorably than such independence among other immigrant women. Still, while many frowned on Syrian women peddlers, Houghton saw the numerous benefits that peddling could bring. She critiqued as meritless the social pressures incumbent upon Syrian women to labor differently. Her mention of women peddlers who gave up peddling for other forms of work came from learning about actual campaigns to convince Syrian women to do so. One such campaign was waged in Boston.

#### SPATIAL BOUNDARIES: GENDER AND SEX IN PUBLIC SPACE

The Syrian community in Boston was much smaller than its New York counterpart but still sizable enough to attract the attention of social workers. Its women peddlers were of particular interest to the Associated Charities of Boston, which in 1899 urged Syrian women to quit their peddling work “for some more self-respecting occupation” (though what other profession would have been acceptable

is unclear). Boston social workers railed against what they too saw as peddling's uncomfortable proximity to begging, arguing that peddling simply enabled Syrians to avoid work and relied on their innate proclivity for deceit: "These persons are said to have very little idea of truth, to consider lying a legitimate method of doing business."<sup>35</sup> The campaign went so far as to assert that buying from peddlers "encourages begging, lying, idleness, neglect, exposure, and a further increase of Syrians to 'sweep up money from our streets.'"<sup>36</sup> Despite the Boston charities' best efforts, a follow-up report from six years later suggested, the situation had, if anything, worsened, as Syrians continued to migrate to the United States and take up peddling. The authors of the original campaign had allowed that Syrians could "eventually become useful citizens." But after the men showed their unwillingness to take up factory work en masse, and the women had stubbornly refused to work only within their homes, the second report now described Syrians as "undesirable immigrants."<sup>37</sup> Such was the unpredictable position of Syrians at the margins of whiteness: there were possibilities for incorporation, but there were also dangers that would lead to exclusion. Women's work as peddlers threatened this already unstable positioning.

Houghton referenced the Boston campaign explicitly in her series. She opened the second installment in her reporting by acknowledging that many people associated Syrians with begging and saw peddling as a mere cover for that practice. She refuted this association, citing no evidence for the claim in her research. While conceding that begging may have been common thirty years earlier, she argued that, if so, there was good reason: "For countless generations begging has been in Syria a privileged, if not an honored, calling." Still, Houghton claimed that the "American spirit" turned Syrians away from begging and toward peddling, which she maintained were distinct activities. Closely related to the claim that Syrian peddlers were beggars was the accusation that the Syrian woman peddler was merely the "drudge of an idle husband who lives upon her hard earnings."<sup>38</sup> Houghton cited some examples of women peddlers being "drummers" for their husbands, but how she came to these conclusions is unclear. Nonetheless, social welfare records likewise often reveal this frequent assumption that Syrian women peddled at the behest of their husbands.

The link between peddling and begging predated the arrival of Syrians in the United States. Mid-nineteenth-century ordinances known as "ugly laws" sought to restrict from public view the display of physically disabled and poor people.<sup>39</sup> A typical ugly law prohibited those deemed "diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed" from being "in or on the streets, highways, thoroughfares or public places."<sup>40</sup> But gender and sexuality were deeply embedded within understandings of "ugly." For example, such laws often prohibited cross-dressing, distribution of "lewd" material, and any woman acting "lewdly" or in "bold display of herself" as well.<sup>41</sup> In the case of male beggars, the ugly laws concerned the disabled or injured body; but for women, the laws also focused on appearance and "lack of attraction and beauty."<sup>42</sup> Proper femininity was not compatible with public display, so these

ordinances explicitly policed how a woman displayed femininity. The category of "unsightliness" used in these ordinances also included anyone nonwhite, disabled or not.<sup>43</sup> A woman's whiteness (or lack thereof) was undeniably linked to her degree of femininity and vice versa; thus these ordinances set white female standards of beauty in stark relief. For Syrian women, simply moving through public space implicated them in this "ugly" history.

Although many in the Syrian community tried to distinguish peddling from begging, the long-held associations between the two activities were difficult to disentangle. The Syrian intelligentsia who did not shun peddling attempted discursively to distance the profession from begging, by emphasizing that peddling was an adaptable and clever form of entrepreneurship. Yet peddling was a transient form of labor (associated with sexual nonnormativity). It confused the supposedly neat Eurocentric boundaries between public and private, and it required performative strategies to make a sale. So, as much as these explanations sought to distinguish between the two, begging and peddling remained linked in the public mind.

Take, for example, the following descriptions of women beggars and Syrian women peddlers, respectively. The first, from 1898, noted how women beggars were typified by their appearance: "Lowest are the door-to-door beggars, 'drifters' or 'floaters,' with the 'blackhoods,' the women who beg on the side streets and in front of the churches and are hard to dispose of."<sup>44</sup> The second description comes from a 1962 interview with a Syrian man who peddled: "Women would wear the black scarves on their heads. Up to 15 of us would leave together daily. You'd see them at the street car stop. A saloon owner used to make fun of them. All packed and dressed funny and going out like gypsies."<sup>45</sup> The black hoods or scarves served to mark women peddlers and beggars visually as the same. The Syrian peddler's own description of the women "going out like gypsies" links peddling to begging through stereotypes of the Romani people. Public concerns about immigrant beggars in particular "played out in contestation over immigrant peddlers," demonstrating the "perpetually thin and wavering" line between peddling and begging.<sup>46</sup> Some leaders from peddling communities even wanted to ban peddling because they felt it reflected badly on the whole community.<sup>47</sup>

Houghton remarked that Syrians "put a hedge around the women, and guard their virtue in the extra-perilous business of peddling. The sense that the eyes of the colony are upon them is a potent influence against bad conduct in man or woman."<sup>48</sup> The only two reader letters in response to Houghton's series reflect this preoccupation with women's reputations and peddling. The first was from a reader who wished to clarify some distinctions between Syrians and Armenians: specifically, that Armenian women were not peddlers. The reader claimed that Syrian women peddlers were posing as Armenians and faking stories of "sorrow and suffering in the recent massacres" to play on the American public's sympathies for the Armenian people. The reader was possibly referring to the 1909 Adana massacres committed by the Young Turks, a precursor to the Armenian genocide

during World War I. "There are practically no Armenian women in America who peddle," the reader wrote, "for the Armenian man, no matter how poor he may be, is almost always too proud *to permit his wife or sister* to run about the streets begging or peddling."<sup>49</sup> A woman's labor, the reader emphasized, was the purview of her husband, brother, or father alone.

The idea that it was Syrian men who decided whether Syrian women could peddle reflected poorly on Syrian men, since so many women did peddle. Syrians were constantly negotiating this fine line between women's economic value and women's improper independence. Syrian women who worked in the peddling economy were not properly dependent on their husbands for economic survival. Dependency was stigmatized for single women (as they were thought to be or expected to become public charges), but a certain kind of dependency was desirable for married women.<sup>50</sup> Syrian women peddlers, in particular, were the "bad" kind of dependent, cast in particularly immoral terms. Some of them relied on public assistance to get by; they placed their children in the care of family members or, worse, in the care of the state in order to peddle; and many refused the "help" of social reformers who sought to return the women to their homes.<sup>51</sup> When social work texts discussed Syrian men, the dependency discourse echoed contemporaneous racist ways of characterizing Black men as "unable to dominate" Black women.<sup>52</sup> Syrian men were seen as idle and lazy, in stark contrast to their stubborn wives, who refused to assume white, bourgeois domestic roles. The Associated Charities of Boston's incisive condemnation of Syrian peddling reflects the violation of this hierarchy: "It is not the custom in this country to let the women work and have the men remain idle at home. It is not natural for mothers to leave their children during the day to be looked after by men. When girls and young men go out on the streets to peddle, they fall into bad company; and, as one who understands his people well says, 'they often end by going to houses of ill-repute.'"<sup>53</sup>

The second reader letter responding to Houghton's series came from a social worker in Boston who defended the campaign against Syrian women peddlers by remarking that any negative characterizations of the community were rooted in experience: "When we first dealt with [Syrians] they were treated by every charitable society exactly as other people, but we found them extremely untrustworthy and unreliable. Few employers in Boston have found them satisfactory and they have taken great pains to cheat the charitable societies, which accounts for the feeling existing here."<sup>54</sup> Comparing the streets and homes in the Syrian quarter with those of other nationalities' communities, the reader found the former "the dirtiest that are in my district." But the crux of the letter refuted Houghton's claim that Syrian women who worked outside the home were unmarried (and thus were not neglecting maternal and marital duties). The reader retorted, "We have here many married women who peddle. Some of them have left their husbands in Syria, and some of them, in the testimony of their own educated countrymen, are of immoral character."<sup>55</sup> The implication here was that Syrian women peddlers were physically estranged from their husbands through their own actions and that they

had children at home or in Syria who were being neglected in their absence; their “immoral character” pertained to their sexual virtue.

Peddling required navigating public spaces, such as public squares and train stations—sometimes without the company of a male relative. Such activities were viewed as trespassing gendered boundaries and were widely linked to the anxieties surrounding unwed mothers and sexual promiscuity.<sup>56</sup> These spatial anxieties affected the reputation of women peddlers, in part because being in public space without a male relative linked women to sex work. Social welfare records also hint at associations between female mobility and sex work.<sup>57</sup>

Within the Syrian community, rumors of such associations abounded for women who peddled far from home (even though long-distance women peddlers usually traveled with a male relative). Syrian community collections reflect these associations between female peddlers and sex work—but perhaps not for the reasons the social workers imagined. Multiple accounts state that women peddling in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and in Billings, Montana, peddled to sex workers at brothels because the sex workers were kind and purchased finer items from them.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, within the Syrian community, rumors also circulated that certain women peddled more than just dry goods and would do “humiliating things” to make a sale.<sup>59</sup> Houghton claimed, however, that “the chastity of the Syrian woman, by universal testimony, is beyond question.” She continued, “A Syrian prostitute was never known; is the testimony of city missionaries, charity organization officials, city magistrates, above all of policemen.”<sup>60</sup> Despite these confident assertions, gossip about Syrian women’s reputations was ubiquitous, making it difficult to discern when Syrian women actually engaged in sex work and when their laboring practices simply crossed prescribed boundaries for women’s sexuality.

As many women of color feminist scholars have documented, the criteria for womanhood and femininity are explicitly linked to sexuality and race. Black feminist scholars in particular have shown that “woman” has historically been “an exclusive, policed, and specifically European gender formation.”<sup>61</sup> While the first half of the twentieth century saw a growing concern with male same-sex sexuality among white men in the United States, the parallel concerns of “perversion” and “deviance” for white women centered on abnormal heterosexuality—particularly for women engaged in sex work.<sup>62</sup> These intersectional precedents created a treacherous landscape for all Syrian women who claimed sexual normalcy and whiteness, but particularly for those who peddled.

#### PEDDLING LABOR AND MOTHERHOOD

The labor that women provided in the peddling economy also provoked anxieties regarding Syrian motherhood. Syrian women peddlers who were also mothers were assessed and judged based on their ability to care for their children while working. If a peddler was married and her husband did not have work, she could leave her children in her husband’s care. One second-generation Syrian American

Muslim noted that many women peddled while their husbands stayed at home with the children.<sup>63</sup> At times, another family member or an older child might assume childcare responsibilities. Syrian women could also seek assistance from child welfare organizations that provided day care and long-term care for children. Since normative femininity also depended on particular ideals of motherhood (in both Syrian and American contexts), the scrutiny of Syrian mothers also risked affecting their racial positioning in the United States. Several newspaper clippings from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offer insight into the ways that peddling mothers could encounter pity, derision, and judgment—sometimes all at once—in their work.

A Syrian woman was arrested in Atlanta in 1910 for peddling without a license. License-related penalties were a frequent nuisance for Syrian peddlers, particularly when they moved through different locales and were unaware of local ordinances that governed peddling. Mandating license fees was a common way to discourage peddling.<sup>64</sup> In the courtroom, the judge took pity on this Syrian peddler when he saw “four children hanging to her skirts and a little babe in her arms” and heard that her husband had recently died.<sup>65</sup> But before the judge could release her without a fine, which she stated she could not pay, the arresting police officer told him that a local Syrian man sent women out to peddle and instructed them to give pitiful stories of hardship if they were caught without a peddling license. Upon hearing this, the judge revoked his sympathy and levied a fine on the woman. An onlooker in the courtroom promptly paid it for her, but the news article did not identify the good Samaritan. Of course, we cannot determine the woman’s true circumstances based on this news story alone. But we might be reasonably confident that she was aware of how her *performance* of motherhood and poverty might affect how the state dealt with her in this instance.

Another story prompts us to imagine the difficulties a Syrian woman could encounter on her own in diaspora. At the beginning of the twentieth century in Pennsylvania, a newborn child was found stowed in a cesspool, having nearly suffocated. Although the *Scranton (Pennsylvania) Tribune*’s initial coverage of the story reported that the mother had not been found (and no father was mentioned), it remarked that “an Arabian woman gave birth to a child recently, and afterwards disappeared.”<sup>66</sup> That woman was Mary Tamar. In subsequent coverage, the paper noted that Tamar was a peddler and, upon hearing that the child had been found, she “took her wares and left her home.”<sup>67</sup> Her husband was living in Jerusalem while she was in the United States, and she initially denied that the child was hers. Eventually, she was found, arrested, and reunited with the baby. At that point, she admitted to having birthed her. Shortly after this, the child died.

Through the circumstances of transliterated and altered Arabic names, as well as the transient nature of peddling work, Tamar eludes the probing confirmation of historical inquiry. Given that just three clippings examine this specific nexus of gender, labor, race, motherhood, and child welfare, the many silences in this news

coverage beckon us to ask after the possible experiences of Tamar and her child. Namely, how did she become pregnant? What consequences did she fear from becoming a single mother to a child, presumably conceived out of wedlock? Caring for a newborn and peddling were already incompatible activities; but overlaid with the threats of violence, poverty, or social ostracism, as one might imagine for Tamar, they would have been untenable.

What other options did a peddling mother have? The Syrian Women's Union of New York saw many Syrian women struggling and opened a nursery for Syrian babies in 1899.<sup>68</sup> Observing that women were taking very young children with them while peddling—"carrying a child on one arm and a basket on the other"—some wealthier Syrian women in New York raised funds to open the nursery, enrolling twenty children under the age of three in its first year.<sup>69</sup> Women who peddled over longer distances than day peddlers did might well have gone months at a time without seeing their children. Litia Namoura's mother was a peddler in New England who placed her children in boarding schools while she was away. Namoura and her brother were placed separately, and her mother visited them twice a year.<sup>70</sup> Although these options were available, some Syrian families made use only of American charity organizations to shield themselves from Syrian community gossip. In 1921, members of Boston's Syrian Ladies Aid Society were visited by an American charity worker who ran a nursery. She said that they had many Syrian members who left their children in this nursery's care rather than seek aid from Syrian sources.

Syrian mothers who peddled and placed their children in others' care were especially singled out for criticism. A 1901 government report on immigrant communities was incisive when assessing Syrian immigrant parenting practices. The report claimed that Syrians' experience with American missionaries exposed their "intrinsically servile character . . . , [their] ingratitude and mendacity, [their] prostitution of all ideals to the huckster level. No sooner are they landed than they seek the commitment to institutions of such of their children as have not attained working age."<sup>71</sup> Although such a generalization is clearly hyperbolic, some Syrians did make use of child welfare services, particularly when their work did not permit them to look after their children.

The outcome of placing a child in this kind of care, however, varied widely. One particularly haunting story illustrates the risk that came with using such services. In 1884, Dibi Musa left her son and husband behind in Al Munsif and traveled to New Orleans. She was pregnant when she left and gave birth to her baby after arriving. Being without family and needing to work, she left her newborn in the care of Catholic nuns "on the promise that they would care for her while Dibi peddled in the countryside."<sup>72</sup> When she returned from her trip, the nuns told her that her baby had died. Because she never saw a grave, she remained unconvinced of the nuns' story and "lived with the anguish of not knowing the true fate of her only daughter."<sup>73</sup>

Like the other archival traces presented here, this story opens up many questions. On the surface, one might read it as reinforcing the opinion expressed in the aforementioned 1901 government report. Syrians come, they place their children in institutions, they go off and peddle, and disastrous consequences ensue. Certainly, if this woman was knowingly pregnant when she traveled to the United States on her own, one might indeed question her fitness as a mother. But she was unlikely to have undertaken such a hardship intentionally. Indeed, if she had been visibly pregnant, she would likely have been turned away upon her arrival in the United States, on the grounds that she was liable to become a public charge.<sup>74</sup> We must also consider that she might only have learned of her pregnancy after leaving home or only upon arriving in the United States. What choices for survival would she have had then?

Ideas about proper motherhood were of central importance to social workers, who regularly visited homes to assess living conditions and the health of children. Feminist scholarship has shown how social welfare from the late nineteenth century into the twentieth century functioned overwhelmingly as an area of a gender-based politics for middle-class women reformers.<sup>75</sup> As immigration swelled in the second half of the nineteenth century, US nativism responded to changing demographics by developing a "social geology of citizenship based on race."<sup>76</sup> "Maternal practice" and reproduction were the focus of anxieties regarding the production and maintenance of the right kind of Americans. These concerns stemmed from the assumption that character came explicitly from lineage. For many reformers, motherhood was deeply rooted in concepts of assimilation and vice versa; accordingly, reformers prioritized immigrants' assimilation over exclusion.<sup>77</sup> When social reformers entered Syrian homes, every detail could be scrutinized, recorded in case notes, and shared with other social welfare organizations.

At the 1916 National Conference of Social Work, a self-proclaimed "child saver" gave a soliloquy about unsafe home conditions for children: "You know all too well the homes, the over-crowding, the late hours, the tea and coffee drinking, the peddling, the home industries, the home where both the parents go out to work or the mother to play bridge, the lack of proper discipline."<sup>78</sup> The speaker made no explicit mention of immigrant or working-class homes because no mention was needed; the evocation of crowded living quarters, "tea and coffee drinking," and other vivid details called on attendees' shared understanding. Similarly, a social worker giving a presentation on medical casework at the same conference expressed many of the same concerns while discussing a twelve-year-old Syrian boy with a heart condition. The boy's home life was considered at odds with his rehabilitative needs: "A poor home in an overcrowded foreign neighborhood, a large family of children, the father dead, and the mother with little intelligence and no control over her family." The boy was placed in a boarding home for children; but soon after, "the mother demands the return of the boy to the unhealthy, overcrowded, Syrian quarter, where he can again run wild on the streets."<sup>79</sup>

BOARDINGHOUSES AND NONREPRODUCTIVE  
LABOR INSIDE THE HOME

Boardinghouses starkly demonstrated the blurred boundary between public and private in Syrian homes. Some Syrian families took in boarders for additional income, yet doing so invited the critical gaze of not only social reformers but also peers in the Syrian community. Boardinghouses were essential in the peddling economy because they supported long-distance peddlers and offered some mothers a means of financial gain while they stayed home with children. The presence of additional people in the home, however, risked tarnishing any image of domestic normativity according to both American and Syrian ideals. Syrian communities had a word in Arabic, *fadiha*, meaning a “scandal with sexual overtones,” that referred specifically to having boarders in the space of the family home. Boardinghouses were also often designated as houses of ill repute or “ill fame” in social welfare records.<sup>80</sup> For women who ran boardinghouses, which often housed peddlers and other transients, having strangers in their homes invited gossip and risked a visit from a concerned social worker. Women and girls were at the center of boardinghouse controversies, as their reputations were always at stake. Young girls’ sexuality was at risk with nonrelative men in the house, and mothers were at fault for having strangers in their homes. Unmarried women, as well as women who were physically separated from their husbands due to migration, were particularly vulnerable to gossip.

The discursive anxiety surrounding boardinghouses can be seen in the case of the Said family, whose lengthy case file with the International Institute of Boston chronicles its contact with the social welfare organization from 1925 to 1935. The Saids and other Syrians’ primary point of contact with the organization was Victoria Karam, a Syrian American and social worker.<sup>81</sup> Wedad Said, a Protestant, and Salem Said, a Druze, had both been married previously, and each had children from those marriages.<sup>82</sup> Before their marriage to each other, boardinghouses provided a critical subsistence for Wedad. After the death of her first husband, she and her two sons lived with her sister, who ran a boardinghouse. Karam noted that this particular boardinghouse was known to be “somewhat immoral,” but her case notes did not include any details. During that time, Wedad’s sons were taken away from her. Karam’s notes surmise that the other social worker involved in removing Wedad’s sons “got to know about [the sons] through his aunt.” This detail implied that the woman running the boardinghouse—Wedad’s sister—had already attracted the attention of social workers. After her sons were taken, Wedad bought a house, which she used to run a boardinghouse herself.<sup>83</sup> There Wedad met Salem while he was staying at her house as a boarder. Once they married, he convinced her to sell the boardinghouse and put the money toward their family.

Years later, when Salem alternately could not find work or refused to look for work, the Saids took out a loan to purchase a new boardinghouse with a basement

in which they could live. Living with them at this time were Salem's four daughters from his previous marriage, one of Wedad's sons from her first marriage, and their two daughters together, both under the age of one. In December 1926, the youngest baby died of pneumonia, and Karam's notes imply that the death resulted from neglect. In previous visits, Karam had noted that the two youngest children seemed "too pale" and that they were not able to go outside enough because Wedad was busy running the boardinghouse.

Wedad apparently grew frustrated with her husband's lack of employment in contrast to her own full load of work. As Karam put it, Wedad "has to take care of the whole boarding house and the washing and besides care for his daughters and their meals and at the end all her work is not appreciated and she does not have a cent in her pocket while he loafs around and does not make any effort to work."<sup>84</sup> Although the boardinghouse revenue enabled the family to get by, Karam tried to convince Wedad to stop working and devote all her energies to her children and her home. But Wedad refused, because her husband was not bringing in any income. That their home was the generator of their revenue was of great concern to Karam and the other social workers in her network, despite the fact that the boardinghouse (and alternately Wedad's sporadic work outside the home) provided the only income supporting the family.

For another family, the boardinghouse was a central feature of tragic events. Due to poverty and a tumultuous marriage, Mary and Najeeb George came in contact with the International Institute of Boston in 1925. Najeeb was disabled from a work-related accident and was diagnosed with a psychological condition. Mary was living separately with their children but returned to her husband when she was granted legal guardianship over him. Karam's notes reveal that Mary had relationships with other men, who at times also housed her and supported her financially. Karam also noted that several of Mary's children were born out of wedlock.<sup>85</sup> Eventually, Mary and Najeeb divorced, and Mary left with their youngest two children. She opened a boardinghouse and had a third child; she did not remarry. This case file ends after one of Mary's children was beaten by a boarder and died from the injuries. Here, the boardinghouse served as the catalyst for Mary's failed motherhood: the death of a child due to violence from a stranger in the home.

Boardinghouses were thus reliable sources of income but also potential sites of violence. One case illustrates both the violence that a boardinghouse could bring and the community policing of women's sexuality. Ramza Hamaty, a forty-year-old Syrian woman who had a husband and son in Syria, ran a boardinghouse in Boston. In 1926 one of her boarders, a Syrian man, raped her and she became pregnant. When she went to the hospital just before giving birth, Karam, the Syrian social worker, was called to interpret for her. Hamaty "was almost crazy at seeing a Syrian," fearing that knowledge about her situation would spread. She wanted to place her baby for adoption, but she initially refused to talk to Karam, "saying she is lost now that a Syrian knows about her." Based on Karam's notes, Hamaty

had an intractable fear of Syrian knowledge of (and gossip about) the violence done against her and her unplanned pregnancy. Karam wrote, "Then there was the question of the baby, which is as black as coal and very ugly, thus there would be no hopes of adoption according to Mrs. Hooker [another social worker]."<sup>86</sup> In addition to capturing the violence done to Hamaty in the course of her boarding-house work, Karam's notes reveal one way that anti-Blackness within US society, and both colorism and anti-Blackness in the Syrian community, operated at this historical moment. Without giving further details, Karam noted that the baby was adopted and that the woman continued to live in fear that her community would find out.

Another Syrian woman's boardinghouse was the site of gossip among social workers and presumably her community as well. Having separated from an abusive husband, Noura Jibrail struggled to support her two children while operating a boardinghouse. She rented out the first floor and all but two rooms on the second floor; she and her children lived in the two rooms. The chain of communication between Boston social workers led to a visit from Karam. Karam had been told by a Denison House social worker that Jibrail was "rather friendly" with a young male boarder she saw in the home. The social worker thought that she should "be careful about her reputation." When Karam visited to see for herself, she too was suspicious of this boarder and encouraged Jibrail to ask him to leave. Jibrail was ill at the time but was still working to run the house and take care of her children. Karam even spoke with Jibrail's husband about her situation. He wanted Karam to help her "live in a house by herself and thus save herself the gossip and the work as she was in weak physical condition."<sup>87</sup>

Gossip and rumors are fuel for the imagination. The most compelling aspects of such communication, for the purposes of historical knowledge production, do not revolve around the veracity of the gossip (as my many thwarted attempts at historical verification perhaps signal). Rather, a more fruitful inquiry delves into their function as a vehicle for transmitting cultural information about sexuality. Gayatri Spivak calls rumor a "subaltern means of communication" for which no origin can be traced. The claims within the rumor are irrelevant. Rumor is not error; it is errant. It signals transgression and relays information that is "always assumed to be pre-existent."<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Clare Potter writes that rumors and gossip, particularly concerning sexuality, can be characterized as "truths that are not factual."<sup>89</sup> The anxieties, gossip, and in some cases sheer alarm surrounding peddling mothers and women who operated boardinghouses indicate that Syrian women's labor in the peddling economy blurred the idealized separation of public and private space, according to both Syrian and white American norms.

Similar gendered and sexual dynamics occurred in South Asian migrant communities in the Pacific Northwest during the same time period. While South Asian women were present in these communities in far fewer numbers compared to their Syrian counterparts, Nayan Shah writes, "the rumors of unmarried women

living among men fostered an image of sexual immorality and a wholesale absence of respectable domestic culture, making it impossible to distinguish between the bunkhouse and the brothel.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, some women running boardinghouses were accused of really running brothels. One boardinghouse in Fort Wayne, Indiana, was remembered colloquially by a fellow Syrian as "Mary Malooley's house of prostitution."<sup>91</sup>

When Syrian women put their children in someone else's care in order to peddle, they were accused of neglect. When they allowed strangers (often other peddlers) to board inside their homes, their own living spaces and parenting practices were scrutinized. Working outside the home prevented women from receiving aid, but aid alone was not enough to support a family when they did stay in the home. Leaving children unattended in order to work was grounds for child removal. Sending older children out to work so that a woman could stay home to take care of the rest of the family was neglect. Taking in boarders was considered highly immoral, and receiving any kind of help from a nonrelative male was assumed to be linked with sex work.

Of all the choices that women considered to support their families, few stoked the flames of Syrian community self-policing more than operating a boardinghouse. This self-policing, maintained through gossip, reinforced ideals of Syrian respectability. At the same time, Syrian respectability intersected with and was refracted by the pressures to conform to white American sexual and gendered norms. A thread of presumed heterosexuality may be implicit in this collection of stories of Syrian mothers, but this thread points not just to the idea of failed motherhood but also to the possibility of failed heterosexuality, including both errant heterosexuality (i.e., sexual encounters outside marriage bonds) and sexual bonds among women. In the early years of the twentieth century, increasing attention was paid to the category of so-called normal sexuality and its opposite, "deviance"; for women, this trend meant increased attention to so-called deviant heterosexuality.<sup>92</sup>

#### CLASS AND SYRIAN MOTHERHOOD

The case of the Said family, whose boardinghouse came under scrutiny as discussed earlier, also reveals some stark differences in class, motherhood, and labor in the Syrian American community. When the social worker Karam visited the Said family in May 1925, she had been told by another agency's social worker that Wedad and Salem Said were having difficulties with their eldest son, George, and needed an interpreter in order to place him in a juvenile institution. Upon visiting, Karam learned that Salem Said did not get along well with George, who was actually one of Wedad's sons from her previous marriage. What began as an issue of father-stepson strife, continued into many other difficulties as the case file narrative unfurled. As the family's life came under the gaze of the social welfare agency, the parents' marriage and parenting styles, their work habits, the children's

behavior, and their overall home life all became areas requiring regulation and discipline.

The twenty-nine typewritten pages of case notes plus the correspondence among social work agencies also show how the Said family’s interactions with the International Institute were embedded in a larger context of accessing social welfare services and networking among social workers in the Boston area. On the back of the intake form appears a list of dates and names of other agencies accessed: “6-10-25 SSE, 5/24-21 State Temporary Aid . . . 2/11/22 S.P.C.C. . . . 2/25/26 Children’s Aid Ass’n., 12/2/19 Industrial Aid Society.”<sup>93</sup> These notations were made not merely for the record; they provided information on how much or little the family used social welfare services and also enabled social workers to share information about particular families across agencies. In this instance—in which the adults in the family did not speak English and the International Institute social worker spoke both English and Arabic—Karam also provided a good deal of information to other social welfare parties, which were unable to gain the same level of access to the Said family’s lives. Within the ten years during which the Said family was in contact with the International Institute of Boston, members of the family experienced unemployment, physical and sexual abuse, the births of two children, the deaths of two children, illness, changes in residence, and the death of Salem, the father and husband.

Ostensibly, the relationship between this agency and the Said family began because they were experiencing troubles with George, Wedad’s eldest son from her first marriage. But the case notes do not make clear whether the Saids wanted help from a social welfare agency. The notes simply indicate that the interest of a social work student brought the family to the attention of the International Institute. Indeed, the relationship between the father and the stepson had so deteriorated that the son had been found delinquent, and Salem was so troubled that he “had no mind for work.” But once the situation piqued the interest of the Syrian social worker, the son’s behavior became just one of many family issues perceived to need reform. As the son was scrutinized, so were the parents. Karam wrote that Salem, the father, had “led a low and immoral life” as a gambler and womanizer before his current marriage to Wedad. Her notes frequently describe chastising him for a lack of ambition and for his failure to bring in money for the family.<sup>94</sup> In interpreting these notes, we must balance the social worker’s classed perspective with Salem’s unknown perspective. But his lack of work, for whatever reason, required Wedad to keep the family afloat. As a result, Karam was particularly concerned with Wedad’s mothering, her relationship with her children, and her management of the house. Her marital troubles also made frequent appearance in Karam’s notes, including Wedad’s desire to leave her family and Karam’s counsel against this action.

Contact between the International Institute of Boston and the Said family diminished significantly when Karam herself got married, had a baby, and went on maternity leave. The agency’s other social workers remarked in the case notes,

"Since we lost our Syrian worker in April 1929, we have had but slight contact with the family."<sup>95</sup> Even after Karam returned to the organization, now named Victoria Abboud, contact was not nearly as sustained as it had been previously for five years, and it was often made now by the other (non-Arab) workers. At the 1930 Family Welfare Society conference, representatives from a group of agencies convened to discuss the Said family's case. The representative of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCC) felt that it had "never got at the bottom of the difficulties in the Said family" and questioned the veracity of information procured from the family members themselves. Victoria Abboud continued to appeal to Syrian community members and organizations for aid on the family's behalf, but to no avail because "they felt that Mr. Said was lazy and using money he received foolishly and that he should provide for his children." By this time, the oldest daughter was again in foster care, and workers reported that "she hardly ever comes to see her family." Salem Said died in 1933. After a short session in a juvenile girl's facility, the next eldest daughter followed the oldest daughter into a foster home; notes report that she "does not want to go home; Mrs. Said does not want her there, so she is placed in a [foster] home."<sup>96</sup> Despite a sustained and detailed engagement with the Said family over a ten-year period, no more news of the family followed this development.

We have no comparable record of Victoria Abboud's own home life and parenting choices. During the course of her work with the Said family, as noted, she also became a mother, and the contrast between the two mothers' experiences reveals the classed gulf that existed in Syrian migrant communities. Abboud, born Karam, was twenty-one years old when she came to the United States from Beirut in 1922. She was single, appeared to be traveling alone, was college educated, and could speak Arabic, English, French, and Turkish—all of which signal that her background was one of relative wealth and status. In Beirut, Karam had worked with an orphanage, and her trip to the United States was initially for the purpose of fundraising for those children. She began working with the International Institute of Boston in 1924, which led her to also work with the South End Denison House in 1925.<sup>97</sup> There, she and Amelia Earhart worked with the Syrian community, with Earhart teaching English and Karam translating into and from Arabic. Karam attended Simmons College in Boston, where she received a certificate in social work. In 1928, as mentioned earlier, she married Alfred Abboud, and the couple went on to have two children.

Abboud's total career in social work spanned five decades, including supervising social workers for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, which was formed during the Great Depression. Her 2001 obituary (she died at the age of ninety-eight) described her as "a social worker who dedicated much of her life to helping impoverished children, battered women, and immigrant families."<sup>98</sup> While Abboud took leave of her social work responsibilities to devote full-time attention to her newborn son in 1929, Wedad Said never had a moment's rest from the

urgent need to bring in income for her family. Even after giving birth to her fourth child in 1916, Wedad was immediately concerned with how to care for her children yet continue to work. Upon visiting Wedad the night of that birth, Abboud remarked that “the new baby was not taken care of but bundled up and thrown on a chair.” Said was found weak and in bed; she talked with Abboud about how to place her two youngest children somewhere, “pay for their board and go to work.”<sup>99</sup> That newborn died from pneumonia months later. In contrast, Abboud was able to scale back to part-time work once she became a mother. As mentioned, she went on to have a significant career and left behind a written legacy in archival material and in her obituary. The Saids’ legacies, in contrast, are difficult to trace. Further information about the Said family members is sparse beyond the institute’s case file.

The case files concerning the Saids and many others demonstrate how the discursive and material circumstances of gendered and sexual norms were intertwined with labor and class in the Syrian American community. As social welfare reformers, in particular, engaged with Syrian immigrant families, they participated in the management and sometimes pathologization of many Syrian laboring practices, particularly those of women in the peddling economy. The Saids were not peddlers themselves, but what little subsistence they gathered came through the peddling economy: they were owners of a boardinghouse that Wedad managed. Because social reformers also included upper-class Syrian women, like Karam (later Abboud), an aspect of this work—discursively and materially—was a form of community self-policing. An important caveat to this point, which need not negate the presence of community self-policing, is that forms of connection and collective welfare were evident in Karam’s case notes as well.

. . .

When it came to the choices they made to sustain themselves and their families, Syrian women were often in a double bind. In Syrian families whose men peddled and women stayed at home, the adapted living arrangements and support systems that women developed were suspect. When Syrian women were peddlers themselves (or when they held other jobs working outside the home), they were often cast as negligent mothers who depended on the state, because they put their children in state care in order to work. Social workers’ concern about peddling by Syrians was a concern at once about gender and about sexual normalcy, as well as about racial belonging, particularly in Boston, where so many women in the Syrian community peddled.

Despite these pressures, in her extensive research on Syrian immigrants, Naff found that “few women succeeded without the help of one or more women. The earnings of wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters, their sacrifices and labor, staved off poverty and failure in many cases and in many more cases enabled the family to improve and accelerate economic and social positions.”<sup>100</sup> A Syrian woman’s work

outside the home or in addition to unpaid domestic labor often tipped the balance in favor of the family's financial health—but it also increased the chances that the woman would become a target of American social reform scrutiny and of community self-policing, which at times overlapped, as in the case of Karam. When the men of the family peddled and the women worked together to support their families in the men's absence—as often was the case—the family's adapted living arrangements were viewed as a dangerous disruption of the American family unit, as "aberrations from the normal family economy."<sup>101</sup> These kinds of arrangements were enough to cause the Industrial Commission on Immigration to take note, in a report about the New York Syrian neighborhood in 1901: "It is not extraordinary to find 6 to 8 women making their headquarters in such a garret, their husbands away peddling and their children in institutions."<sup>102</sup> That one succinct sentence pathologized the Syrian family in three respects: the neglect of patriarchal duty in men's absence, the abnormality of women in their economy of support for one another, and the dependency of children in benefiting from state welfare.

The Syrian immigrant family was monitored and disciplined in particular through the discursive and material attention paid to Syrian women's labor. Many Syrian immigrant families were quite entrepreneurial and resourceful. Every able member of the family was working or contributing to the father's or mother's work in whatever ways they could; they turned homes into places of business by running boardinghouses or by making laces or other items for peddlers to sell from within their homes. Yet this entrepreneurialism was frequently not condoned or celebrated by the social worker, because it was not embedded within a properly heteronormative family economy that preserved the private space as sexually reproductive and nonentrepreneurial. Here, public and private spaces, and selves, not only were linked through business but were also coterminous. We also see that Syrians themselves were quite divided about peddling and women's role in it (explored further in the next chapter). Community gossip was a potent mechanism of self-policing, particularly in relation to the actions of women and girls.