

GUIDANCE NOTE

**GENDER AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE
IN SITUATIONS OF DISPLACEMENT:
THE EXPERIENCES OF SYRIAN
REFUGEE WOMEN IN AL-AZRAQ
AND AL-ZA'ATARI CAMPS**



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UN WOMEN Jordan
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[Margie Cheesman](#), [Deena Dajani](#) and [Marie Gillespie](#)

Researchers and authors of this report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report identifies, discusses, and analyses the range of drivers at the root of the digital gender divide among refugee women in Al-Azraq and Al-Za'atari refugee camps. In so doing, it aims to inform evidence-based interventions by UN Women at their oases centres. The report is based on a mixed methods approach that includes a survey (n=235) and focus groups (n=approx. 230) conducted in Al-Azraq and Al-Za'atari refugee camp during two periods of fieldwork in May and December 2018. The findings are presented and discussed in relation to the wider local context of the camps, and together they reveal that gender based digital exclusion is a complex social phenomenon, and so different kinds of interventions should be considered to tackle specific problems – in particular, in improving women's lack of access to and safe and secure use of digital technology. Evidence-based recommendations are presented more fully in the final section of the report.

The research findings are presented in three sections:

• Digital Access

The study identifies several hurdles to digital access, including the limitations of the local digital infrastructure, affordability, security constraints and structures, and socio-cultural norms. The most readily available device for accessing the internet among refugees in these camps is the smartphone. Less than 1% of participants reported having a laptop, desktop, or tablet. Only 43% of participants reported accessing the internet through their own smartphone, while a further 14% said they did not have a smartphone themselves but used a family member's smartphone to access the internet. In the focus groups, participants said that having a mobile phone with an internet connection “makes women more independent.”

• Digital Use

The study identified that the internet is principally used for social connectivity needs, particularly communication with families in Syria and in diaspora. This connectivity is vital in providing social and emotional security for displaced women. The impact of family separation weighs heavily on women's lives and the emotional support that

connectivity offers cannot be underestimated. The study also found that refugee women regard the internet as a rich resource for learning new skills, most especially YouTube videos for learning or developing craft skills such as cross-stitch patterns and cooking recipes. Despite this, access to online learning resources is limited despite the strong impetus to acquire new knowledge and skills via internet access. Participants were for the most part unaware of free, online educational and training courses that may be available to them. The cost of data was reported as prohibitive, hindering their ability to pursue any such self-initiated skills training via the internet even when they are made aware of such. Finally, privacy issues, especially managing online visibility and safety, is a deep worry for women. Fear of surveillance and distrust is rife and there is widespread anxiety that their internet usage may be picked up on as a security threat. Experiences of the digital were closely bound up with the precarity of refugeehood, and so are difficult, complex, contextual and ambivalent.

• Digital Literacy And Employment

The study documented the widespread enthusiasm and sense of urgency among refugee women to find work. To this end, the need to acquire new knowledge, develop skills and receive training is essential. The women also express the desire for more support to continue to pursue what limited employment opportunities may present themselves in the camps to supplement the meagre household income. Digital training is available through UN Women Oasis Centres in both camps but is limited to offline computer skills. This could be extended to the great benefit of the women if more resources were made available, Women's work prospects could be

substantially improved in the long term if access to digital skills training at Oasis Centres were more developed and accessible to all, including older and illiterate women. Of the 235 survey respondents, 81% described their computer skills as basic or none-existent. While most women were comfortable using smartphones for apps and other visual platforms like YouTube, during the focus groups many reported having no knowledge of computer software packages like Word and Excel, or how to use a desktop computer or an email account. Yet they were very eager to learn and keen for more opportunities to do so.

I. INTRODUCTION

Policy actions that support the equitable participation of women in the digital economy have been recognised by the G20 Roadmap for Development, and both gender equality and supporting innovation appear among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted by all UN Member States in 2015. This has resulted in considerable action that contributed to narrowing the gender gap in digital access and use, yet there is still much to be done to support the fair, equal and safe participation of women in digital spheres. Furthermore, evidence shows that the digital gender divide is larger in some parts of the world than others, meaning that advances are not being shared or enjoyed equitably.

In more developed countries, where the digital gender gap is now the narrowest, evidence shows that discrepancies remain in employment sectors related to digital technology, such as in software development and in start-ups and on venture capital investment boards. In developing parts of the world women have less access to digital technologies than their male peers, and less access than their female counterparts in more developed parts of the world.

This digital gender gap between more developed and developing countries is also increasing.

There is a need for more evidence that identifies and understands the digital gender gap within specific communities that experience various forms of political, economic and social marginalization, such as refugees and asylum seekers. For such communities, digital access can boost quality of life by enabling more income generation, increasing employment opportunities, extending access to knowledge and education, and providing psychological and emotional security that comes from connecting to loved ones they were separated from as a result of conflict and war. Increased access to digital technology is enabling for all, but it is particularly significant for refugee women. For people displaced from Syria, a large number of the women are without formal education and were primarily housewives before their displacement. They now find themselves in a new and exacting situation, and in need of new skills to enable them to build new lives.

G20 Digital Economy Ministerial Conference: <http://www.g20.utoronto.ca/2017/g20-digital-economy-ministerial-declaration-english-version.pdf>

UNDP Sustainable Development Goals: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>

OECD Bridging the Gender Digital Divide: <http://www.oecd.org/going-digital/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide-key-messages.pdf>

UN News <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/03/1034831>

OECD Bridging the Gender Digital Divide: <http://www.oecd.org/going-digital/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide-key-messages.pdf>

The Gender Digital Divide in Developing Countries: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/143853840.pdf>

OECD Bridging the Gender Digital Divide: <http://www.oecd.org/going-digital/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide-key-messages.pdf>

The Factors that Influence Adoption of ICTs by Recent Refugee Immigrants <http://proceedings.informingscience.org/InSITE2006/1SJv9p111-121Kabbar76.pdf>

The Living Conditions of Syrian Refugees in Jordan <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/67914.pdf>

Woman Alone: The Fight For Survival for Syria's Refugee Women <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/53be84aa4.pdf>

There is also the need to recognize that while the digital offers opportunities to engage in increasingly tech-driven societies, the experiences of refugee women are a reminder that digital connectivity also carries risks of

surveillance, fraud, manipulation and other online harms. Digital technologies can reinforce and give rise to new problematic power relations and inequalities. Such experiences must be attended to and mitigated.

II. AIMS AND SCOPE OF THE PRACTICE NOTE

THIS REPORT AIMS TO:

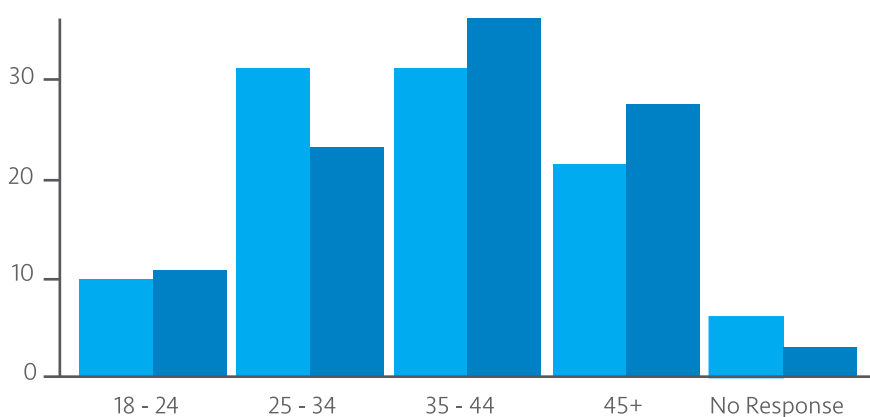
- I. Bolster the evidence base on the gender digital divide among refugee women in Jordan's Al-Za'atari and Al-Azraq camps;
- II. Identify the many drivers at the root of the gender digital divide among refugee women;
- III. Draw attention to possibilities for critical intervention by UN Women in mitigating these inequalities and building digital skills through its Oasis centres.

The findings in this report are based on two fieldwork trips to Al-Za'atari and Al-Azraq refugee camps in Jordan facilitated by UN Women in May and December 2018. The researchers used combined methods (surveys and focus groups) to understand Syrian refugee women's access to and use of digital platforms in the camps. In total, the study includes 235 survey responses (112 in May and 113 in December) and 23 focus groups (10 in May and 13 in December) each

with 6-12 participants and lasting an average of 90 minutes.

All refugee women participants were cash for work beneficiaries of the UN Women Oasis Centres in the refugee camps where they had access to basic IT training and support. There was a spread of ages among participants in the survey, with the largest group being between the ages of 35-44, as illustrated in Graph 1 below.

AGE GROUP
Graph 1:



The underlying causes of the digital gender gap [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604940/IPOL_STU\(2018\)604940_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604940/IPOL_STU(2018)604940_EN.pdf)

III. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

III.a Digital Access

The study identified several hurdles to digital access. These included: **local digital infrastructure, affordability, security structures, and socio-cultural norms.** Together, they prohibit refugee women's participation in the digital world. These hurdles were often related to each other in complex ways. For example, the local digital infrastructure (the availability of internet in the camps) did not include a constant clear signal. This also had implications for cost and affordability. During the May 2018 fieldwork trip, there was limited access to the internet in the camps due to lack of provider signal. In some locations across the camp, residents could sometimes acquire some internet connectivity from receivers of nearby towns. This led to patchy and unreliable internet connections. In addition, this also meant that although residents paid for 3G sim packages, they only received 2G signals. As participants in the May 2018 focus groups repeatedly mentioned:

"The network with the strongest signal keeps on changing"

"We need to keep on buying new sim cards"

"We buy credit and a few days later it is useless. By the time the signal returns, the credit has expired."

"They [the telecoms industry] are taking advantage of people."

This also had implications for the issue of safe access. The above hurdles intersected with socio-cultural norms that very directly affected refugee women's access to the digital. As participants in our May 2018 focus groups explained, in reference to the patchy internet discussed above,

"There are spots across the camp where you get better connectivity, mostly the Shabab [male youth] go there and stand next to each other closely. We [women] don't go."

"Women are too embarrassed to go and stand like that. Only the young men can do that."

In other words, **in instances of lack of access to the 2G signal, women were the first segment of the population to lose access to the digital.**

Cost continued to be an obstacle even when access to signals improved. In the December 2018 fieldwork trip, internet signal for refugees in the camps had improved. Participants described the internet as central to their lives but explained that the monthly cost of having access to the internet was prohibitive at JD12 (\$17) – and even then, this covered only their connectivity needs. "The internet is expensive" was a very common complaint in the focus groups. In the survey, 86.7% of participants said they experience financial shortfalls

and are unable to meet their family's needs.

In addition, 52.2% of participants said they experience this shortfall "Always (every month)" and a further 30.1% said they experience it "Most of the time (nearly every month, with a few exceptions)". Only 4.42% of respondents said they experience financial shortages "Rarely (twice a year)" and no respondent reported

"Never" experiencing financial shortfalls.

The high cost of the internet relates to the digital infrastructure in Jordan where telecoms industries are unregulated. In fact, Jordanian digital policy papers prioritise the maintaining of revenue streams for telecoms providers over issues like maintaining a quality service or protecting customer rights, like ensuring they are provided with the bandwidth they pay for.

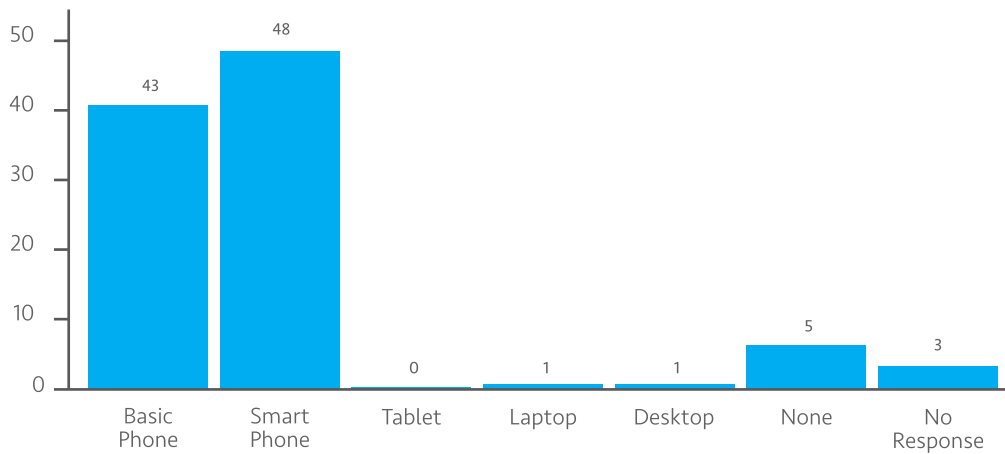
Prohibitive costs also means that families have to share internet access, sometimes **giving the male partner control over when and how the female partner accesses the internet.** In the survey, 48% of participants reported owning a smartphone

Participants said that with JD12 a month they could video-call family in Syria once a week, and text via WhatsApp during the week. This allowance afforded them only minimal access to Google, YouTube or Facebook, which participants considered vital sources of information and education (more on this further on).

through which they can access the internet, but a further 14% said they have access to the internet through a family member. These results are illustrated in Graphs 2 and 3 below. One participant said her husband refuses to share a data hotspot with her until he thinks she has cleaned and cooked to an acceptable standard. While this experience was not shared by the majority of women in the focus groups, participants agreed with the general statement that having a mobile phone with an internet connection "helps women be more independent."

Which of these devices do you own personally?

Graph 2:

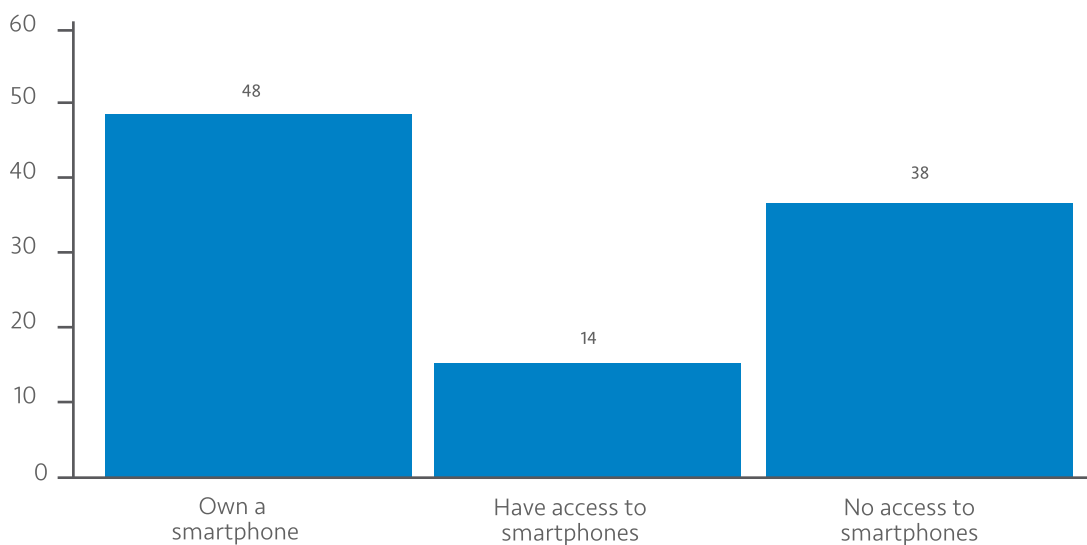


Ownership of digital devices among refugee women in Al-Azraq and Al-Za'atari.

<https://www.7iber.com/technology/review-of-ict-policy-draft/>

Smartphone ownership / access

Graph 3:



Access to a smartphone through which refugee women access the internet.

In other words, **in an unregulated digital market environment, cost and affordability become major obstacles,**

and they intersect with socio-cultural norms to hinder equitable access to the digital.

III.b Digital Use

Smartphones and online platforms are used for a wide variety of purposes, but principally connectivity and communication. In the December 2018 fieldwork trip, participants often described being able to connect to members of their families they have been separated from as akin to “breathing again” or having their soul “expand” after a period of contraction. The emotional security of connectivity cannot be underestimated in situations of displacement, often characterised by various kinds of trauma.

Connectivity was still hindered by anxieties arising from online visibility and security. Participants in the focus groups described only talking about issues like the weather and what they cooked for dinner with the family they have been separated from. This insecurity in conversations with families in Syria was due to the political sensitivities which give rise to fear for themselves and their families in Jordan, Syria and elsewhere. **Sometimes this anxiety was expressed as related to socio-cultural norms.** A few participants in the group told us it was their husbands that “barred them” from talking to their family in Syria for fears that such contact will be looked at suspiciously.

Second, smartphones and online platforms were used **as a resource for developing hobbies and skills.** Participants in the focus groups often cited YouTube as a valuable educational resource where they could learn new cross-stitch patterns or new recipes. These possibilities were hindered by cost and affordability. Participants said that they could not afford to watch many educational YouTube videos because of how expensive data is.

Third, **these skills were sometimes described as possible avenues for financial revenue.** In one focus group participants said that the internet can be used to market the handicrafts and handmade goods they can produce. One participant said that she would be interested in learning about marketing and applying her learning to help the community if such opportunities were made available. Participants were unaware of free, online educational materials that they could access. While they had the drive to develop new skills, they lacked the guidance on how to do so – and the economic means to buy sufficient data given free WiFi is not available.

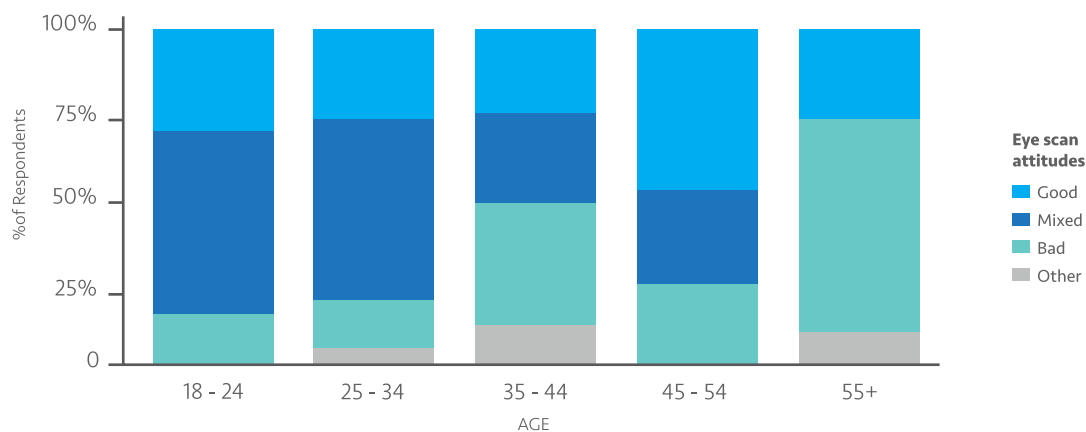
Fourth, **refugee women rely on the internet for local news about the camp.** Facebook groups were described as crucial for knowing about what is happening in the camp, including floods in some parts of the camps and the arrival of new goods for distribution. They said that while not all information posted online was trustworthy, on the whole it was considered a reliable source of information pertinent to everyday life in the camp.

At the same time, **social media was seen as risky and questionable because of a complex intersection of socio-cultural norms and security related concerns.** Refugee women reported they were careful with how they use social media due to fears of being connected directly or indirectly to sensitive political issues related to the conflict and their life and status as refugees. Some participants said their husbands “forbade them” from using social media for fear of saying the wrong thing. Some older women participants also felt that it is “inappropriate” and “unacceptable” for women to have social media accounts. This view was not shared among the younger refugee women.

Digital technology and the digitalisation of aid systems were also discussed as introducing some new difficulties in the lives of refugee women.

In the case of the biometric iris scanners in WFP supermarkets, attitudes to the digital interface were spread fairly evenly over Good, Mixed and Bad categories (see Graph 4). Several issues were raised and debated by participants in the focus groups, reflecting a range of attitudes towards humanitarian technology. Firstly, women felt that the intangibility of digital money can reduce their sense of financial security: “what if there is a mistake electronically and you don’t get all your money? It is safer to have it cash.” They also associated the precarity of internet networks in the camps with the eye scan system and reported that when the connection is not reliable, they cannot check out their goods and have to wait for extended periods of time.

Graph 4.



Attitudes towards iris scanning interface by age (Survey 2)

Some women complained that their permission was not sought when the eye scan system was put in place, and this was expressed as undermining of their sense of **agency and financial control**. The digitalisation of cash delivery has also introduced inconvenience to those who are no longer able to send a child to pick up items (in the survey, 62% said the supermarket is over 20 minutes journey).

For older women in particular, technologies are treated with some suspicion: across all focus groups, women raised concerns about the health implications of the iris technology and debated its bodily effects: “my eyes itch me for an hour after” I feel like by the time I go back to Syria my eyes will be completely ruined!”

Indeed, for older women, relationships with technology are more difficult. **Participants agreed that age is a significant driver of digital exclusion.** Participants said that an overreliance on digital technologies (with biometrics but also smartphones) excludes old people who must rely on others to even dial a call on their behalf.

However, for others the eye scan system is seen as more organised and secure:

“I prefer the iris scan, my husband is married to another woman, now he has a separate account with his new wife so he can’t use it, but before with the card he could take it and use the pin code”; “it avoids the hassle of possibly losing your card. Ours got lost once and it was a nightmare, we had to wait 2 months for it to be replaced.”

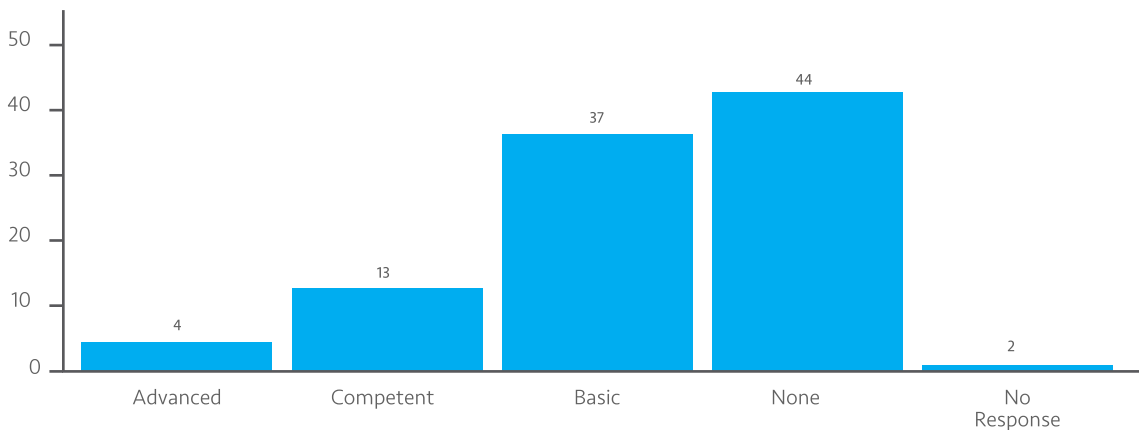
Women’s debates about their experiences with and conceptions of the iris scanning reveal a range of attitudes towards this particular digital intervention. Conversations revealed that choice and agency in using technological devices are fundamental, and that the profoundly precarious feeling of forced displacement and life in the camp is reinforced by the instability of digital infrastructure. Despite these mixed attitudes, **participants were keen to incorporate other digital technologies into their lives** and were particularly enthusiastic about money transfer apps or the possibility of an app that tracks their entitlements and allowances at the supermarket. Participants said they had never heard of mobile money transfer apps and were keen to learn more.

III.c Digital Literacy and Employment

Refugee women ask for digital skills training. In one focus group, participants said they felt comfortable using apps to connect to family members such as WhatsApp, and using online platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, but they

reported having no email addresses and not knowing how to use software packages such as Word. In the survey, 52.2% of respondents said they would like to receive training in digital skills.

What is your level of skill with using a computer? *Graph 5:*



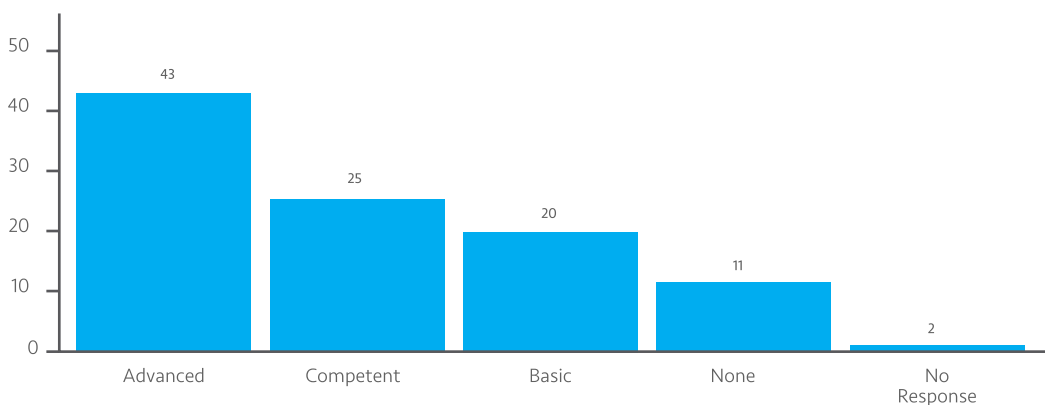
81% of respondents had basic or no computer skills.

Digital skills training should correspond with differing general literacy levels.

In some focus groups, participants raised the issue of literacy as hindering a person's ability to acquire digital skills. They said that the popularity of apps like WhatsApp and YouTube was also due to the primacy of visual media over text. For example, family members unable to

read or write would often send voice notes on WhatsApp. In the survey, 25% of participants described their Arabic literacy levels as basic, 25% described them as competent, 43% described them as advanced, and 11% told us they were illiterate (with the aid of a facilitator to help filling out a survey).

What is your level of reading and writing? *Graph 6:*



Literacy skills as reported in the surveys.

It was unanimously agreed among participants that increasing employment opportunities for refugee women was crucial. For most of the women, working at the Oasis Centre is the first job and individual source of income they have ever had. They described this experience as “giving them their dignity”. They also said that for them, “there is no turning back”, and that “they cannot imagine relying financially on other members of the family again.” There was an expressed interest in skill-based employment (e.g. in factories, clothes-making, and other crafts), for which refugee women felt they were well qualified.

The excitement about work and new empowering opportunities was accompanied by the most central concern: the precarity and anxiety of having only short-term (3-6 month) work contracts. There were also concerns about exploitation in the labour market outside of the camps as some participants’

relatives would leave the camp for occasional work in construction or farming and be underpaid – or not paid at all: “And many many are exploited. My son worked with a car mechanic. He owes him JD1,500. Never paid up. My son eventually stopped showing up to work.”

Overall, there is a need to address social and economic security by providing sustainable, safe and fair work opportunities for women in Jordan in which they are able to use their existing skills. Upskilling with digital training alongside this could help women find jobs in higher value sectors open to refugee work permits or when and if they one day return to Syria.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings presented in this report highlight the nature and scale of gender based digital exclusion in the social and political context of Jordan's two major refugee camps. They reveal a great enthusiasm for digital learning, communication and connectivity among Syrian women. The findings emphasise the sense of precarity and insecurity around their refugee status, political constraints, internet connectivity, social media use and new interfaces of digital humanitarianism. Different kinds of interventions are required to tackle different issues and to address the complex range of socio-technical challenges women face. UN Women is well placed to draw on this evidence base in order to make strategic interventions through its Oasis Centres that could make a substantial difference to the lives, sense of security and employment prospects of Syrian women.

It is important to build on the work that UN Women are already doing. For example, their Virtual Skills Schools provide vocational training as well as educational courses, to address different levels of literacy. They use a combination of self-study and mentoring and support, to help women overcome physical, financial, and other learning hurdles. In Jordan's camps, UN Women is already offering digital skills training in Office programs in the computer rooms at Oasis Centres. While important, further initiatives are needed to build on these existing strategies to address the complex drivers of the digital gender divide, including variegated literacy levels. For example:

1- Skills-based support

Training sessions in basic digital skills for smartphones and computers catered specifically to older and less-literate women could address particular generational and educational challenges in the digital gender divide. For example, with visual-based online training activities.

2- Digital training

Further training e.g. in software skills for the 52.2% of respondents who requested training in computer skills would address learning needs. Providing free and reliable informational, educational, and training opportunities (e.g. Arabic or English online language courses) using digital resources within a safe and supported environment. This is especially important considering the growing evidence that suggests that by 2022 over 60% of global GDP will be digitized.

3- Cyber security training

To address women's fears around online visibility, cyber security training setting out advisable and inadvisable online habits, e.g. on social media, would give women more information and peace of mind in relation to practicing safe online habits.

Virtual Skills Schools <http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2017/virtual-skills-school.pdf?la=en&vs=449>

Policy Brief: the Digital Gender Gap <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Digital-Equity-Policy-Brief-W20-Japan.pdf>

Through a combination of self-driven e-learning with consistent support and guidance by UN Women, refugee women would be able to effectively expand their access to knowledge and education, increase their employment possibilities, and enable further income generation. UN Women could consider harnessing the myriad learning resources available online by collaborating with refugee education initiatives/agencies to ensure free access to these resources, and guiding participants through the process of identifying the resources that best address their individual needs and capacities. Offering training in collaboration with industry may enable job-placement opportunities, and with educational agencies may encourage more women to pursue formal further education and join high sector job markets – though employment opportunities can by no means be guaranteed.

Much more can be done to support refugee women in harnessing and benefiting from digital technologies equitably and safely. Opportunities must be given for women to define their own experiences with the digital, which as we have seen can be complex and ambivalent. As digitalisation efforts develop, it is crucial to address the issue of online safety, including the risks of cybercrime and harassment. Women around the world are more prone to online risks than their male counterparts, and these issues are of particular pertinence to refugee women who find themselves in situations of political and economic precarity.

The underlying causes of the digital gender gap [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604940/IPOL_STU\(2018\)604940_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604940/IPOL_STU(2018)604940_EN.pdf)

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UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to implement these standards. It stands behind women's equal and increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality



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