



POLICY BRIEF



# UNPACKING GENDERED REALITIES IN DISPLACEMENT: The status of Syrian refugee women in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq

## Introduction

Now in its eighth year, the Syria crisis continues to forcibly displace hundreds of thousands of people. This has caused neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq to absorb displaced populations at an extraordinary rate, placing significant pressures on host communities, the local infrastructure, and social services while simultaneously creating conditions conducive to the exploitation of refugee populations. Within this already challenging context, gender discrimination and inequality places Syrian refugee women and girls at heightened risk of violence and exploitation, which is again exacerbated by shifting gender roles and conditions in displacement. Within this context, UN Women sought to assess the gendered impact of the Syria crisis, and to look at the status of refugee women and girls in Lebanon, Jordan, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

The aim of these studies is to gain a better understanding of the impact of displacement on gender dynamics, including women's roles and responsibilities, women's experiences of and access to humanitarian aid, and their experiences of violence. Studies were conducted with female Syrian refugees across all three countries, and the resulting reports highlight the situation of women and girls living in displacement. Despite differences in context, similar themes emerged from the studies; these speak to women's life in displacement being characterized by economic insecurity, limited employment opportunities despite a desire to work, challenges in accessing aid, acute isolation,

increasing levels of violence against women, and changing gender dynamics both in the private and public spheres.

The methodology used can be found in each country chapter. In Iraq and Lebanon, an average of 500 women were interviewed using surveys and focus group discussions over a period of two months in late 2017 to early 2018, generating primary qualitative and quantitative data. In Jordan, qualitative interviews were undertaken through focus group discussions.

This is an executive summary of a report series on the status of the Syrian refugee women: "Unpacking gendered realities in displacement: the status of Syrian refugee women in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq"

## Findings

### Rights and Legal Status

In all three countries women noted challenges related to civil status, though these were reported as particularly acute in Jordan and Lebanon. Barriers cited included the high cost of fees related to registration and the documentation needed to apply for civil documents (which may have been



lost or left during flight and displacement). Across Lebanon and Iraq, 88% of women in the study said they are registered with UNHCR and 44% have a residency permit. Twenty-seven percent in Lebanon and Iraq said they knew someone who did not have the necessary documentation to live in their host country. In Jordan, where only qualitative research was undertaken, a few women said that they or someone in their family lacked documentation, oftentimes because their registration had expired or was only valid for refugee camps.

### **Economic Security and Ensuring Livelihoods**

Economic security emerged as a primary concern and challenge for women across all countries. In Lebanon, 79% of women interviewed stated that they were unable to meet their basic needs. In Iraq, 82% cited economic insecurity as their primary concern. In Jordan, where only qualitative interviews took place, women echoed these concerns. Women in all three countries spoke to relying on similar negative coping mechanisms; informally borrowing money from family, neighbors, or shops, and food-based coping mechanisms, such as relying on less nutritious food or restricting their or their household's food intake. For some, limited financial resources also meant withdrawing children from school to save money (usually boys) so that they could contribute to household income.

The proportion of women holding a work permit and levels of employment differed across the countries. One percent (1%) of female Syrian refugees in Lebanon said they had a work permit, while 13% of women reported that they were currently working. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, 78% of women had a Kurdish residency permit, which allows legal employment, though only four percent (4%) said that they had full-time, part-time, or temporary work. According to UN data, 4% of the work permits issued to refugees in Jordan have been issued to women, however none of the women interviewed for this study were in possession of a valid work permit. While few of the women reported working formally, many said they worked informally; cleaning houses, mending clothes, watching or tutoring children, and cooking whenever neighbors or friends needed it. The cross-country data demonstrates that while access to work permits is important in facilitating women's access to the employment, in and of themselves work permits are not sufficient to guarantee women's inclusion in the labor force.

Across all three countries many women reported the desire to work in paid employment more than they did. In Lebanon, 42% of women living in female-headed households stated that they would like to work more than they currently do, and 16% of women in male-headed households stated the same. In Iraq, nearly a quarter of women (24%) said that they wanted to work more than they currently do. Many of the women interviewed in Jordan also reported wanting to be able to contribute to household income, but expressed difficulties finding work. In all three contexts, women indicated they were either unable to find work or unable to find work in the same field as they were employed in while in Syria.

### **Women's Role in the Household and the Community**

Women in Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan all reported a change in their roles within and outside the house. In Lebanon, when asked to compare their roles in public and private life now to before displacement, the majority of women (83%) reported that they currently have a larger role within their households and society, though there were differing opinions as to whether this change is positive or negative. In particular, young women spoke positively to the changes they were experiencing, referencing opportunities which had not previously been available to them. Women across all ages reported some level of acceptance of their role, leadership and engagement in public life.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, when asked to compare their role in household decision-making now to before the Syria conflict, the majority of women (57%) also reported that they now have a larger decision-making role, though some reported anxiety as to their ability to take on this responsibility. Overall, women viewed increased responsibility not as a choice, but rather as critical for the survival of their families. Older women tended to express concern that these new roles outside the home give Syrian refugee women a bad reputation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

In Jordan, while women reported varying roles in both the household and the community, the theme of change since the start of the Syria crisis was also pervasive through many interviews. For some women, this meant taking on more responsibility in their household, venturing into the community more, or even starting a business. For others



fear of the unknown and for their safety meant that they now have far less interaction with the outside world.

### Safety and Security

Across all three studies issues of Violence Against Women (VAW) featured prominently, with high rates of reported VAW and agreement that VAW is increasing within women's communities. Nearly half of the women interviewed in Lebanon (45%) reported that violence against women (VAW) is a problem in the Syrian refugee community, with 37% reporting that it has increased since the start of the Syria crisis.<sup>1</sup> In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, half of women interviewed (47%) stated that VAW is an issue within their communities, with an additional 12% stating that it is a major issue; one-fifth of women (19%) said that VAW has increased since the onset of the Syria crisis. In camp settings in Iraq, reported violence was higher, with 78% of women saying VAW is an issue. Women interviewed in Jordan reported lower incidence of VAW, as not many women interviewed said that they had direct experience with something they would categorize as VAW.

Across all studies the primary focus of VAW was in the private space, within the home. It was generally reported as a private matter to be handled without outsider involvement or reporting, as they did not believe that security services would respond positively or adequately.

### Host Community Relations

The influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan has resulted in reported tensions in some communities between host country nationals and refugees, particularly where the increase in population has been dramatic. Previous assessments<sup>2</sup> have documented that

this is due to perceived and real constraints on national infrastructure, and competition over employment.

Despite this, most women interviewed in Lebanon and Iraq considered the relations with the host community to be positive. In Lebanon, only one fifth (17%) considered the relationship between host community and refugees to be poor or hostile. Most women living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq also considered the relationship between Syrians and Iraqis to be good (74%) or fair (15%). And in Jordan, while some women characterized relations with Jordanians as negative - mostly those who had firsthand experiences of tension that occasionally resulted in violence - there were also women who spoke of positive relations with their Jordanian friends and neighbors, who sometimes helped them financially. Across all three countries, most women said that relations with the host community over time had gotten better or stayed the same, particularly in cases where the flow of refugees had slowed.

### Awareness of and Access to Services

Given the breadth and depth of the needs, it is unsurprising that women in Lebanon, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and Jordan, generally reported having received inadequate humanitarian assistance. Generally, they reported a lack of awareness of available services and facing barriers to accessing the services they needed.

In Lebanon, 15% of women reported that aid was a main source of income for their household in the past 60 days. More had accessed food-based aid (45%) than any other assistance or service, and 15% reported receiving cash-based assistance since arriving in Lebanon. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, while very few women (1%) reported aid as a major component of their household income, 24% of women said that they had accessed food-based aid (including cash transfers or vouchers for nutrition) and 41% said they had accessed cash-based assistance. In Jordan, women mostly spoke about the lack of assistance when compared to previous years or other Syrian refugee

<sup>1</sup> In line with a do no harm approach, respondents were not asked directly if they themselves had experienced domestic or sexual violence.

<sup>2</sup> S Stave and S Hillesund, "Impact of Syrian Refugees on the Jordanian Labour Market." *International Labor Organization*, 2015, [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms\\_364162.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_364162.pdf); D Carrion, "Syrian Refugees in Jordan: Confronting Difficult Truths," Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House, 2015: 5; T Midgley and J Eldebo, "Under Pressure: The Impact of the Syrian Refugee Crisis on Host Communities in Lebanon," Advocacy report, World Vision Lebanon, 2013; International Labour Organization (ILO), "Assessment of the Impact of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon and Their Employment

Profile," 2013, [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms\\_240134.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_240134.pdf); KRG Ministry of Interior's Joint Crisis Coordination Centre, "JCC statement on the alarming situation of Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan region," April 26, 2018, <http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=56760>.



households they knew of. Across all three studies, those that were able to access humanitarian aid, it was generally cited as insufficient and inconsistent.

A major barrier to accessing aid or services was awareness – women reported not completely understanding the aid system, not being aware of what services existed, and not understanding how or where to access them. For example, despite a stated desire amongst many women for greater work opportunities, the vast majority of women in Lebanon and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq were unaware that employment assistance services were available. Compounding this, women reported transport and travel as a consistent barrier to access (both in terms of the cost and safety of services), as well as family and social restrictions on women traveling. In Lebanon, less than one-third (31%) of women reported having regular access to a mobile phone.

## Recommendations

What emerges from these studies is a clear picture of the challenges that families and individuals are facing in displacement and of the compounding impact that gender discrimination has. As the crisis continues, it is thus essential that the response include gender-sensitive programming that can mitigate these risks and empower women to meet both their daily and long-term needs. To this end, the report has made the following recommendations across the three countries. In the country specific chapters, the recommendations have been nuanced for the context.

1. Ensure that the approach to gender mainstreaming in humanitarian and resilience programming is one that prioritizes both women's access to services and women's empowerment; by ensuring that programs address issues of women's access (equal access to services), while also tackling gender discrimination and inequalities, combining service delivery with support to women's leadership, and including efforts to broker meaningful dialogue around gender inequalities, violence prevention, and advocacy to promote gender equal legal reform.
2. Increase access to employment services and financial resources for female Syrian refugees, actively targeting female refugees for livelihoods programming. Ensuring that at least 30% of livelihoods opportunities go to women and girls is the minimal threshold to demonstrate commitment and support for women's empowerment and recovery.
3. Continue to support interactive, safe spaces for female Syrian refugees to meet, network and socialize, not only as a strategy for empowerment, but also to enhance reporting of gender-based violence, and use of GBV services. Within these spaces, increase the availability and quality of psychosocial support services.
4. Continue to ensure information sharing and awareness raising of available services, pairing approaches that utilize technology with those that are based on word of mouth.
5. Promote accountability for violence against women, supporting the judicial system to investigate and prosecute cases of violence against women within the refugee community; and,
6. Recognize the positive correlation between the strength of women's movements and organizations and gender-equal societies, and invest in women-led organizations (Syrian, Lebanese, Jordanian, and Iraqi) as a key driver of short-term and long-term social equality.