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H.S. Batainah and M.A. de Percy

A photograph of a refugee camp with several women in the foreground. One woman in the center is carrying a large bundle of colorful blankets on her back. Other women are seen in the background, some carrying items. The camp consists of simple tents and a gravel path.

Syrian Women in Transition

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Contact us

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Contributors

Dr Heba Batainah

Dr Heba Batainah is Assistant Professor in Politics and International Relations in the Canberra School of Politics, Economics, and Society at the University of Canberra. Her research focuses on political institutions of belonging, representations of minority groups, and factors that help or hinder citizens in their pursuit of political participation. Heba has lived in six countries on three continents and speaks Arabic. She is a graduate of the Australian National University (PhD) and the University of Canberra (BPhil Hons – First Class).

Dr Michael de Percy

Dr Michael de Percy FCILT is Senior Lecturer in Political Science at the Canberra School of Politics, Economics, and Society, University of Canberra. He holds a PhD in Political Science from the Australian National University, a Bachelor of Philosophy (Honours) from the University of Canberra, and a Bachelor of Arts from Deakin University. He is a graduate of the Royal Military College, Duntroon, where he received the Royal Australian Artillery prize. He is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport and he is an editor of the *Journal of Telecommunications and the Digital Economy*.

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Introduction

In 2000 The United Nations passed its Women, Peace and Security resolution, which recognises the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts. In the 20 years since then, the Women, Peace and Security agenda has helped focus domestic policies and funding on areas that previously ignored stark gender disparities. It has also produced two decades of research on how gender affects and is affected by conflict. One aspect of this is forced migration. Forced migration highlights the fraught relationships and ongoing politics between refugee-generating conflicts and refugee-receiving countries and the dynamics between international and domestic policy-making and implementation.

The conflict in Syria began in 2010 and produced an ongoing refugee crisis. More than 5.5 million Syrians have found asylum in neighbouring countries – Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt (UNHCR, 2020) and 6.2 million Syrians – one in two (ICRC, 2020) – are internally displaced (World Vision, 2020). Some are refugees in third countries. The unofficial death toll stands at over half a million Syrians. Political negotiations to resolve the crisis have been on-going since 2017, but the conflict continues.

This paper presents a snapshot of what it is like to be a Syrian woman in transition in Jordan or Lebanon. In 2019 we investigated the lives of these women to find out what challenges they face and the conditions, policies and structures that help or hinder their opportunities. We wished to develop locally nuanced knowledge of the circumstances of Syrian women refugees so that we can understand how they might participate in peace processes and ultimately a post-conflict Syrian society.

This paper – the first in a series of three – is part of a wider research project on Syrian refugee women. It focuses on findings from the fieldwork conducted by the primary author on the experiences of Syrian women in Jordan and Lebanon. Between November 2018 and November 2019 we interviewed 100 women between the ages of 18 and 63 (most in their 30s and 40s). The interviews were the primary source of information for this paper. We gave all the women the option to choose their own pseudonym and almost all chose to remain anonymous. There were three groups of women pertinent to this research: women inside Syria; women with no active citizenship, such as those seeking refuge in neighbouring countries; and women resettled in Australia. Because of security limitations, we focused on the groups outside Syria.

Key findings

We found there is no one type of refugee and no single 'refugee crisis' to resolve. Syrian refugees are not a homogenous group – as individuals, they face varied challenges. Our interviews showed different challenges for different women depending on their own unique backgrounds and circumstances and demonstrated the complex situation that Syrian refugees face. By showing the diversity of the interviewees, we hope to dispel myths about Syrian refugees as a coherent and known entity and start to raise questions about the mechanisms and structures that help or hinder their pursuit of safety and livelihoods.

Syrian women in Jordan and Lebanon: who are they and why did they leave?

We came to Lebanon thinking we would be here for two months, those two months turned into six years ... (Sanaa', Beirut, 27)

Syria before the conflict

Most of the women we interviewed led what they described as 'regular' lives before the conflict. They lived in rural areas, villages, towns and cities with tight-knit families and social networks. Before the conflict Syria was a strong welfare state with high standards of government-funded education and health services, and relative physical and economic security. While women's socio-economic and educational fortunes differed depending on geographical location and family fortune, and while their domestic situations varied, their citizenship was not in doubt. Most women we interviewed were not politically active.

Where did the women come from and where are they now?

Syria is a large and geographically diverse country. It has historically been richer and more powerful than Jordan or Lebanon. Syria and Lebanon have had a strained relationship since the Lebanese civil war and the Syrian occupation of Lebanon, and this has had repercussions for Syrian refugees there today. The relationship between Jordan and Syria has historically been close and amicable but has changed recently because of the conflict and the ensuing refugee crisis.

To capture as broad a picture as possible, we interviewed Syrian women living in many different locations in Jordan and Lebanon. In Jordan this included women living in formal refugee camps, in bigger cities such as Amman and Irbid, and in rural settings. Around 93% of refugees in Jordan live in host communities (UNHCR, 2020a).

Most of the Syrian women living in the north of Jordan originally came from Dara'a in the south-west of Syria (UNHCR, 2019b). Many of the women we interviewed had never travelled outside Syria before the conflict, but many were accustomed to members of their family regularly travelling across the border for seasonal work or to visit family members. This was also the case in the north of Lebanon.

Lebanon has no formal Syrian refugee camps. Some Syrians are living in informal tented settlements in the Bekaa Valley. Others are in cities and towns all over Lebanon. Most of the Syrians in Lebanon are in areas that are already impoverished and marginalised (including in Palestinian camps). This situation has both limited the opportunities for women and increased their vulnerability. Many are constantly on the move as their economic circumstances change.

Jordan and Lebanon are poor countries. At a time of crisis in housing affordability and limited job opportunities, the strains on natural resources and public services, including infrastructure, education and health, have exacerbated tensions between Syrians and the wider community. There is also a perception that Syrian refugees are benefiting simultaneously from foreign aid and from access to the labour market.

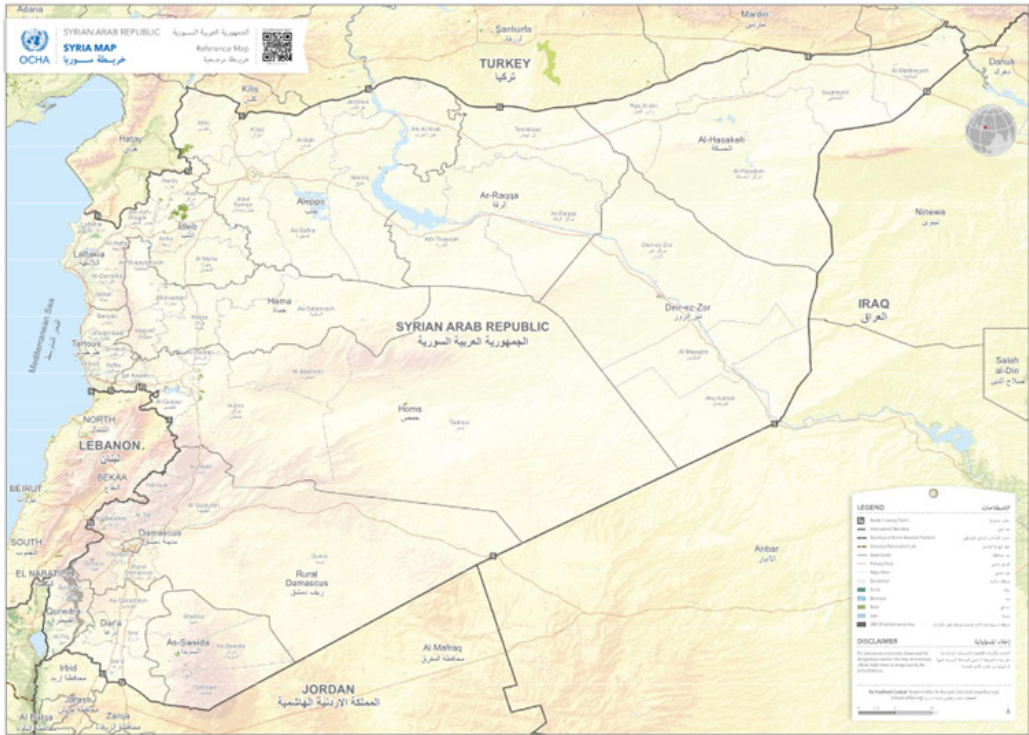


Figure 1: Map showing Syria, Jordan and Lebanon (UNOCHA, 2020)

Why and how did the women leave Syria?

All of the women we spoke to were forced to leave their homes as a direct result of political violence or as a result of the ripple effects of conflict, including less access to resources and economic opportunities. All were in a constant state of transition from the time they first left their homes –moving from one safe shelter to the next and dealing with different societal norms in each place. No two stories were alike but all were of risk, uncertainty, reliance on social networks, planning, anxiety, endurance, fear and violence.

Many of the women left home because they were directly threatened by armed forces and had their possessions taken and their homes bombed. Others from the north-east of Syria had family members kidnapped by ISIS, were displaced as a result of Kurdish political activity, or were separated from family members by internal displacement in Syria or asylum seeking across the borders.

We met young women who had fled the conflict with their families and then met and married their husbands when they were in transition. They told us their stories with their own young children in their arms. Some young women had attempted to finish their university studies during the conflict but had been forced to abandon them. Other women who were older or had been more established at the time had sole responsibility for their children's safety after their husbands had died, disappeared, been unable to leave Syria or been imprisoned in the host country. Many walked long, harrowing and dangerous distances before reaching safety. Others had extended periods of

hospitality from neighbouring villagers before being forced to move again.

All the women described how the war arrived at their doorstep. For many it was gradual and intermittent:

War came slowly. Planes bombing. We would flee to another village for a few days then come back. It would increase in intensity ... you couldn't go back to feeling a sense of stability. It happened over time...

(Sham, Za'tari, 22)

The decision to leave permanently was often very sudden – houses were bombed or ransacked, leaving families with little more than the clothes on their backs.

One of the most devastating aspects of the conflict, and a constant source of anxiety for many of the women, is the separation of tight-knit families. Many had husbands, brothers, married children, parents and grandparents who stayed behind in Syria. Many husbands, fathers and brothers had 'disappeared' – gone to Europe, joined the conflict, or been killed or detained.

Changing sense of self

I changed a lot in the way I see life after the revolution... (Lina, Beirut, 20s)

Many of the women we interviewed, especially those from middle-class backgrounds, lived predominantly in the private realm before the crisis – they did not even go grocery shopping, as this was a task for men in the household. Others had careers as public servants, doctors, teachers and lawyers. All the women spoke about being transformed by their experience of leaving Syria. They face many years in physical transition and the prospect of remaining in the host country indefinitely but without the substantial rights that citizens enjoy.

Refugee status

There are three major groups of Syrian refugees: those who remain within the boundaries of the original Syrian nation-state; those with no active political or citizenship status, such as those seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, such as Jordan and Lebanon; and those who have been resettled in another country. People who are displaced within Syria's borders are technically (according to the United Nations) not refugees but 'internally displaced persons'.

Deciding to leave Syria is the first step in a long process, as Jordan and Lebanon do not provide permanent asylum or a final destination for refugees. Jordan and Lebanon are not signatories to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its related 1967 protocol. Syrian nationals in Jordan and Lebanon are referred to as asylum seekers, refugees, 'guests', displaced (naziheen) and immigrants. Their legal status is as non-permanent non-citizens (asylum seekers in Jordan and naziheen in Lebanon).

There are also many non-refugee Syrians who had to leave because of the conflict. Many left through regular migration channels without seeking asylum, and many Syrians in Jordan and Lebanon have not registered with

the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and do not self-identify as 'refugees' or 'asylum seekers'.

Many of the women we interviewed felt that the term 'refugee' highlighted their vulnerability and their 'nakedness'. One explained:

It means I am without a homeland ... like I am without my hijab on...
(Umaymah, 37)

Many feel a sense of injustice, abandonment and humiliation. They have a sense of being undesirable guests in the host society. Refugee status attracts condemnation and harassment from the general public. The terms 'refugee' and 'Soory/Soorieh' (Arab pronunciation of 'Syrian') are popular slurs. A woman living in the Za'atari camp in Jordan said:

It bothers us. Most of the people that work in the camp are Jordanian and they don't use the word, they might use words like 'Nazih' which means displaced, but 'refugee' is too heavy... (Hayat, 51)

Exploitation

Change can be simultaneously empowering and disempowering for Syrian women refugees. Their vulnerabilities as women, particularly without a husband and with children, can help them access aid and housing, for example. Yet the same vulnerabilities are used to exploit them. The women we spoke to described exploitation in housing. Landlords would raise prices, increase surveillance and limit access. 'Rayan' told us that women had experienced physical control and sexual exploitation in exchange for housing in buildings financed by Islamic organisations from the Gulf for the 'sons and wives of martyrs':

These men... they think 'this is a woman alone, we will support her a little and then we can get whatever we want from her'... (Rayan, Ramtha, 47)

Syrian women in Jordan and Lebanon felt they were harassed and propositioned for sex and marriage at much higher rates than local women. They are accused of 'stealing husbands' and deemed 'cheap' and 'easy' because they are Syrian. In Jordan and Lebanon, Syrian women have long been depicted in a hyper-sexualised way (in cinema, for example) – this is not simply a result of the refugee influx. However, the exploitation of vulnerabilities at the beginning of the Syrian crisis cemented certain attitudes. Some groups practise 'child' or 'early' marriage for Syrian girls, and this attracted many men from inside and outside the host countries to 'shop' for brides. Sex trafficking of Syrian women and an increase in pseudo-religiously sanctified 'pleasure' marriages, sometimes lasting days or weeks, added to the number of victims of the conflict and increased the likelihood of harassment for all Syrian women.

All the women we spoke to firmly believe that child marriage should not be an option but many also said that it continues regardless because the underlying reasons for it have not changed:

A woman is either strong and puts up with the hardship or hunger... or succumbs to exploitation... her circumstances compel her... (Rayan, Ramtha, 47)

Opportunities and limitations

Changes of circumstances can trigger opportunities for some and restrictions for others. Sometimes it can force people to double down on traditions and norms. In other cases, it can be a source of power in that the daily challenges can break up norms and traditional family structures (Mhaissen, 2014, 78). Women who cannot venture out in public have suffered shrunken horizons and fewer opportunities since leaving Syria. Others have had no choice but to venture outside their previous comfort zones to secure their livelihood.

Many of the women we interviewed were completing university studies. However, for many the prospect of working in their field of study is highly unlikely. We interviewed women with advanced degrees, including a medical doctor, who were not allowed to practise their profession in the host countries.

In Jordan and Lebanon, Syrian women can find jobs in various capacities, but employment restrictions make it difficult for them to find legal work that matches their skills and education. This is devastating for educated women who had jobs in Syria and can no longer earn enough money to enable choices for themselves and their families.

Family dynamics

Many Syrian women and children must deal with the effects of the conflict on the men in their lives. Women are often the ones keeping families intact and running households while men are absent either physically or psychologically. The men have limited opportunities in the labour market and are constantly in fear of arbitrary arrest, detention and forced return to Syria. Some men, perceiving the 'feminisation' of the humanitarian sector and the relative ease with which women manage public life, have left their wives to become the primary providers. The reshaping of gender roles has both increased women's economic opportunities and increased their risk of gender-based violence.

Many of the women were preoccupied with poor educational opportunities for their children and limited job opportunities for their husbands, fathers and brothers. They talked about the changed character of these men, explaining that depression and helplessness have broken them. Many saw their children suffering from anxiety-induced bedwetting and other behaviours indicating post-traumatic stress disorder. Their children were missing out on education for a variety of reasons, including because they needed to work.

Many of the women we interviewed lost members of their family, including sons, to political violence. They struggle with redirecting the energies of the young away from a preoccupation with the war and towards the future:

I made sure my other son was married [here in Jordan] so he would feel connected to something and not want to go back to Syria to avenge his brother... (Hayat, Za'atari, 51)

Expanded networks and political consciousness

Many Syrian women who have been unable to find consistent work, or have been prevented from working by circumstances or family members, are volunteering in international and local non-government organisations. Many

told us that this gave them an expanded sense of self and enabled them to form connections with like-minded Syrian women.

Many of the women said that aspects of Syrian society, including religion, religious minorities and gender roles, were changing during the uprisings. Lina, a Syrian national who at the time of the interview worked for a foreign non-government organisation in Lebanon, said:

When the war started, I noticed that the way the people saw women changed... when people started going to the demonstrations they saw a role for women... previously she had a traditional role, like the typical Middle Eastern woman... But when the war started the people noticed that women had a privileged position with the regime, in that the regime would take care when dealing with the women, so this gave women more space, sometimes... and for me it was a revolution, how they deal with women. We lived in a conservative area where men wouldn't speak randomly to women... with the revolution they started talking to me, they started to tell me news, I asked them for news, I give them water, we started having a relationship and it's not the relationship of men and women, it was a relationship of two people having the same cause.

Lina's experience of the public demonstrations was a watershed moment in the reshaping of rigid gender roles influenced her ideas about gender roles and her place in society:

Homs is a very conservative city, the majority are Muslim Sunni... there was a protest there and... young girls were leading the demonstrations without hijabs... or she would sit on the shoulders of a man and chant/shout and the rest of the people including religious men would chant with her... I thought wow, I could feel the change and how men started to change how they deal with women, the young men. They deal with us equally and without harassment... you start feeling equal... but when the revolution started taking a more Islamic turn there was harassment and abuse of women and rape... (Lina, Beirut, 20s)

Religious and gender identity

Religion and religious identity among civilians are far more complex than one might think. In Jordan the research team could not interview many Syrian women from minority backgrounds (one identified as Druze and another was married to a Kurdish man) and were strongly discouraged from asking questions about religious identities in the formal refugee camps. In Lebanon women from minority backgrounds took part in the interviews and were more comfortable talking about religion. This was because of the distribution of power between different religious sects and clearer geographical demarcations of religious identities in Lebanon. However, religion was still a sensitive subject. Women from minority groups explained that religious tension was not widespread in Syria before the war but had increased since then.

In relation to women's identity and future prospects, western ideas – promoted by international and local non-government organisations, for example – may not neatly coincide with the wishes of Syrian women. Some see changes in gender roles as detrimental to their expectations in marriage and in life in general. Lina explained:

NGO workers working with Syrian women think this is a good thing, I think this is a good thing too but many of the Syrian women I work with, they see it as an 'injustice', they feel they were happy before, they had nice lives... before they

were the 'ladies of the house' and their husbands would provide for them, now they have to work... We see independence as a good thing but for them, their way of thinking, it's about perceptions of the role of women... so she wants her daughters to have good husbands, to marry rich men and I understand, I changed a lot in the way I see life after the revolution... (Lina, Beirut, 20s)

Factors contributing to social and economic mobility

Even when they do offer the women workshops... whatever training you give her, if she cannot apply it then the training failed (Rayan, 47).

For most Syrian women in Jordan and Lebanon, permanent settlement is not an option and they are constantly looking for opportunities to change their circumstances. Women often bear the responsibility for keeping their families intact while negotiating their way in the host countries. The women's legal status and access to justice, educational background and opportunities in the labour market are all potential sources of social and economic mobility.

Class and standard of living

Class is important in societies in the Middle East and it greatly affects mobility and quality of life. We found that challenges for Syrian women differ depending on their previous socio-economic position.

Middle-class women that we interviewed indicated that life had changed dramatically for them. Many used accumulated wealth to survive their initial displacement. They also had to continue to pay rent and other expenses in Syria as well as in the host community. If they do not have a steady income stream, they had to resort to selling their gold jewellery.

Job opportunities are limited to working legally in agriculture or construction or illegally in other industries. Many of the women we spoke to had fathers or husbands who were not accustomed to menial labour and had severely injured themselves on work sites in the host country, forcing the women to find work. Almost all the women we spoke to accepted help from relatives in one form or another.

Educated women who display particular class characteristics in dress, speech and mannerisms have access to better opportunities, especially with humanitarian agencies and 'volunteering'. However, most people in host countries believe that a refugee is usually someone who is 'visibly poor', so they may question or deny someone's refugee status if they do not look like this. In many circumstances it is not in the interest of refugees seeking third-country settlement to display any image other than the image popularised by the media.

Education

Before the conflict, Syria was well known in the region for being a generous welfare state. Health and education were readily available – although services and access differed across regions – and many of the women we spoke to had completed tertiary education. The women from rural towns tended to have less education than women from cities. Younger women were more likely to have completed full or partial degrees than older women. Some of

the women we spoke to had no formal education; some had finished only primary school or 7th or 9th grade before marriage.

All of the women identified education as important in their lives. Whether it was for themselves or their children, many felt the only way out was a reasonable education.

Many Syrian children displaced within Syria or in host communities cannot or do not go to school. Reasons for this include lack of documentation, child labour, early marriage, transport costs, and psycho-social difficulties as a result of trauma. Both Jordan and Lebanon have attempted to incorporate Syrian children in state-run schools in a split system of 'second shifts', where teachers start teaching them in the second half of each school day (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Women we interviewed in the Za'atari camp criticised children's education there as lacking standards and perpetuating a hopeless environment. Many said third-country settlement was the only option for their children's education. The United Nations estimates that only 3% of refugee children make it to higher education (UNHCR, 2017).

We interviewed several women on university scholarships in Lebanon and younger women who had missed out on scholarships in Jordan. While some were happily pursuing university degrees in their chosen fields, others were undertaking degrees in Sharia law as they were the only scholarships available.

Many international and local non-government organisations facilitate workshops for Syrian refugees. However, opportunities to attend these are limited. Many interviewees living in the broader community had not heard about the workshops. Many had only participated if the organisers covered travel costs, at least.

There are many success stories around community-based women's groups. Workshops, and some employment, in baking, handicrafts, canning, soap-making and other activities have appeared in both Jordan and Lebanon. These projects tend to be tied to one-off grants and limited donor support, and to work arrangements where refugees must be 'sponsored' by a Lebanese or Jordanian national. In practice this often leaves women with a new skill but no prospect of turning it into a livelihood.

Employment

Lack of access to the labour market is the key issue preventing many Syrians from achieving independence from humanitarian aid. Host countries prevent Syrian nationals from getting formal employment, saying their main concern is to protect job opportunities for their own citizens.

For women living in Jordan, a turning point came in 2016, when the European Union and Jordan signed a compact (the London Compact), accompanied by aid, to improve the living conditions for Syrian refugees and vulnerable host communities. Before this, Syrians in Jordan were 'non-nationals' and subject to labour market permits, penalties and associated fees. Syrians were restricted to certain professions and required local sponsorship. Expensive fees, bureaucratic procedures and lack of necessary documents

further complicated access to the labour market. The London Compact enables Syrians to get a permit without sponsorship to work in agriculture or construction, and some can also work in the previously inaccessible Industrial Zones.

Since 2018, Syrian nationals in Jordan have been exempt from paying permit fees (Jordanian Ministry of Labour, 2019). More recently international non-government organisations implemented ‘Cash for Work’, coordinating with municipalities in Jordan to provide permits and three-month work contracts for Syrians outside the previously mentioned industries.

Jordan has also increased its quota of work permits for Syrian women. However, they often cannot use them, as suitable jobs are not available. They must get formal clearance to annul an unused permit (otherwise they will be fined). The type of permit they have affects their ability to get future permits, as it is difficult to switch to another industry once they have had a permit for one industry.

In Lebanon it is increasingly difficult for Syrians to seek and to get permits for work. The labour market in Lebanon is geared toward men.

The complicated situation in the labour market forces many Syrians in Jordan and Lebanon, both men and women, to work illegally (without permits). The risk of exploitation is high. Sanaa’ told us:

A week after getting here I was walking the streets looking for work... My accent was Syrian, wasn't it? So that meant I would be denied work, or I would be offered a much, much lower salary... (Sanaa', Beirut, 27).

In addition, there are cultural and social issues around work and types of employment. Syrian nationals cannot legally work in professions. Many of the jobs available to them are viewed as either socially intolerable or unsafe. Some of the younger women we interviewed explained that their fathers or husbands did not want them working out of fear for their safety. Many women cited the lack of reliable, safe and affordable public transport as a key barrier to participation in the workforce. Childcare is another barrier.

In the refugee camps there is no open economy, so employment is very limited. Hayat took out a microloan from a women’s organisation to start her own little shop in the Za’atari camp, which generates some income. She told us:

If I had a choice to leave the camp I wouldn't, I am now used to it ... but if only we could get jobs here or get a monthly salary... We get 20JDs worth of coupons but that's not enough. (Hayat, Za'atari)

Security

My mother used to tell my father, don't trust anyone here, you are Syrian, you have no power. (Nour, Madaba)

The global discussion about irregular and forced migration mostly focuses on issues of state sovereignty and security. Human security is not often the main concern. But it is clear that community resilience and individual security are key factors in addressing wider security issues such as violent extremism.

Protection

Syrian women in Jordan and Lebanon all identified the UNHCR as the central agency in their lives.

In Jordan, registration with the UNHCR is a compulsory first step before registering for government services. The Jordanian government appears to have worked closely with the UNHCR and other non-government organisations on an ordered approach to providing aid and services and monitoring the refugee population.

The relationship between the UNHCR and the Lebanese government is strained. Lebanon has a memorandum of understanding with UNHCR, but recently it has begun to limit UNHCR activities, including by preventing new Syrian refugees from registering with UNHCR. Many refugees refuse to register with UNHCR for fear of becoming 'known' to authorities. UNHCR uses biometric data to identify beneficiaries. Some Syrian nationals believe that it shares this data with the Lebanese government, which then shares it with the Syrian government.

Insecurity

The situation in Lebanon has changed dramatically since the beginning of the Syrian crisis. Initially, the Lebanese government welcomed Syrian 'displaced persons'. Then in 2018–2019 it acted to make life uncomfortable for them by making arbitrary arrests, forcing them to return to Syria and demolishing their makeshift homes. Much of this shift in policy was taking place as we conducted our interviews in Lebanon.

Even before the policy change, a sense of fear and insecurity hampered our fieldwork in Lebanon. Many Syrian women were afraid to take part in the research and most were terrified of being recorded. Many of the interviews continued after the microphone was put away, and we noticed that the level of ease and detail increased after the official part of the interview was over.

Illegality

All the women we interviewed were frustrated with what they felt were ad hoc policies and laws that do not consider the practicalities of life.

The women explained that it was very difficult for them to survive within the bounds of the law. As the laws for Syrians are very restrictive – including curfews, limited legal job opportunities, prohibition on ownership of vehicles, and the need for local sponsors – they end up having to break them in almost all areas requiring official documentation.

This adds to the women's already heightened sense of insecurity and fear. Many fear authorities and are terrified of detention and deportation. Many in the labour market do not have work permits, insurance or social security, which leaves them vulnerable to exploitation by employers. Many fear that registering to get work permits will interfere with aid they receive.

Staff working in legal aid told us that many Syrian women are unaware of the laws and that many of the policies are unintuitive and punitive, either by design or in their implementation. Lack of documentation – 'credential deficit' – is a major impediment to compliance, forcing many to forge documents

such as university degrees and birth certificates. Noncompliance with the law leads to increased fear of authorities, so secrecy, abuse and exploitation are normalised. Issues like gender-based violence, financial abuse, early child marriage, and restricted movement are exacerbated (King Hussein Foundation, 2013).

Expectations for the future

My father wants us all to immigrate to Europe, my mother wants us to go back to Syria. So she can be with her family... He wants us to go to Europe so we have opportunities to study, how can we study in Syria, or get jobs? ...If my brother goes back he will be conscripted... (Nour, Madaba)

The women's expectations for the future varied depending on stage of life, educational background and family structure. Women with young men in their lives could not envisage voluntarily returning to Syria and subjecting the men to mandatory conscription. Families that were once connected to the Syrian Armed Forces but had joined the opposition or were otherwise wanted by the state only had two choices: they could continue their precarious life in neighbouring host countries or seek third-country resettlement.

Not all the women wanted to go back to Syria even if they could. Many do not want to return to what they see as the confines of their old lives. Many are no longer being observed by family members who police traditions and patriarchal values, and they have found new powers of decision-making and choice.

Return to Syria is a risky prospect. Non-government organisations facilitate 'informed return' from outside Syria; however, little is known about what happens to those who choose to return. There is no mechanism to keep in touch with them.

Not all the women would be able to return to their homes. Even more concerning than property destruction is the bureaucratic catastrophe that prevents women from accessing housing, land, and property rights without the correct legal and civil documentation for the whole family – including those who are missing. There are problems with documenting missing persons – for example, it could alert state officials to the person's political affiliations.

The women told us that the social fabric of Syria has broken down and exposed people's propensity for evil. They are afraid of the general lawlessness and the dissolution of traditional norms and conflict resolution mechanisms, including formal access to transitional justice. Displacement has also damaged their social networks.

While non-government organisations continue to provide relief to many in need, they do not provide sound advice on next steps or 'exit plans'. Most of the women see third-country settlement as the way out.

Conclusion

Syrian refugee women come from diverse backgrounds and experience transition in vastly different ways, depending on factors including education, economic resources, networks and kinship ties. So there is no one type of refugee and there is no single 'refugee crisis'. Our research revealed a complex, multi-tiered picture of the situation for Syrian refugees.

We saw that individual Syrian women were engaged and proactive in precarious contexts. However, fragmented policy at the local, national and international levels has had an immense impact on them. The political, social, economic, cultural and policy contexts in refugee host societies are constantly changing, and macro-level political activities trickle down to affect individual choices.

Constant political and legal changes relating to Syrian refugees means there is no single, stable policy. Syrian women continue to navigate chaotic environments in which there is little prospect of being free from the risks of refugeehood until they can reactivate their Syrian citizenship or attain new citizenship in another country.

Syrian refugee women remain misunderstood and marginalised and as a result continue to have less agency than is their right. As well as experiencing the hardships of displacement, they have had their identities heavily politicised. As a result, these women only have the power to act in very limited ways, making them unable to access consistent and dependable livelihoods.

For many, the cost of return to Syria is high. Without a political solution, consistent commitment to transitional justice and careful consideration of women's position in a new Syria, most Syrian refugees are unlikely to return.

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