

# Towards inclusion and integration? Syrian refugee women's fragile new livelihoods in Jordan

- Syrian refugee women's new working lives in Jordan have transgressed traditional norms, but uncertain legal, community and family support leaves their emerging livelihoods disconnected and highly precarious.
- Refugee women lack access to credit and have few social networks (with formal constraints on collaboration), meaning they typically engage in individual, piecemeal work with limited economies of scale.
- Early marriage rates are higher among Syrian refugee women in Jordan than in Syria, limiting opportunities for present and future work.
- Recent international agreements have extended opportunities to engage in legal employment, but further legislation is needed to provide safe access to work with legal protection, especially for women.
- Aid programmes should seek to better understand local contexts, and be directed towards improving community and family attitudes, and local protection, particularly related to girls' education, early marriage and women's work.
- As new allowances are agreed around refugee social organization, agencies should support joint enterprise development through the formation of women's groups and facilitating access to credit and business support services.

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Young married women are particularly constrained in their work choices, but, across the board, refugee women are 'increasingly interested' in work.

Alaa' is engaged as a cash-for-work beneficiary in UN Women's mosaic workshop in Zaatari camp

### The need for a new approach to the Syrian refugee crisis in host countries

A new strategic approach to protracted refugee situations is urgently required that embraces a 'shared vision' (Carrion, 2015), and allows both host countries and refugees to thrive. This may be particularly critical for marginalised groups such as women, as they encounter new situations—and potential opportunities—in displacement contexts.

As the war in Syria enters its sixth year, Jordan remains at a critical juncture in its response to the Syrian refugee crisis. Emergency and survival needs are gradually being met with the assistance of the international community, and provision of basic services, but Syrian refugees lack sufficient opportunities to engage in safe and adequate livelihoods. In particular, restrictions on refugee rights and assistance have constrained their economic potential and local integration, creating a situation in Jordan that has negatively impacted upon the increasingly long-term refugees and the local population.

In February 2016, the 'Jordan Compact' signalled a change in approach, promising jobs for Syrian refugees in a selected number of industries and also opening new possibilities for supporting refugee livelihoods and programming (Government of Jordan, 2016). However, more change is needed, and Jordan now has the opportunity to build upon this international agreement in ways that will benefit both the refugees and the local population.

### Survival on the fringes: Syrian refugees in Jordan

Syrian refugees currently make up at least 8–10% of Jordan's total population. Most Syrian refugees in Jordan reside in host communities (78%), especially in the north of the country, with high proportions found in Irbid (135,000 refugees), Mafraq (159,000) and Zarqa (108,000).<sup>1</sup> Host community areas are often poor, with persistently high unemployment, particularly among young people. An estimated 86% of these refugees live below the absolute poverty line (UNHCR, 2015).

Tensions were initially sparked in host communities in Jordan with the high influx of mostly poor Syrian refugees in 2011-12, and the increasing demand on public services, ranging from education to municipal water, electricity and waste collection, especially in urban areas (Mercy Corps, 2014). Economically disadvantaged Jordanians in host areas have also experienced problems of rising costs to rent housing, as well as concerns about declining social stability, falling wage levels, deteriorating work conditions and increasing competition for jobs (Carrion, 2015).

In 2014, an ILO report indicated that over half of working-age Syrian refugee men but only 7% of Syrian women in northern Jordan were in paid employment—mostly temporary and mostly illegal (ILO and Fafo, 2015). As informal workers, Syrian refugees often lack formal contracts, work longer hours, are paid less and are less informed about work-related hazards, compared with their Jordanian counterparts (Ibid). The same report found that most refugees are from rural parts of

1 <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/documents.php?page=1&view=grid&Country%5B%5D=107> Accessed 29 Nov 2016.

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southern Syria (mainly Dara'a), and are less educated than Jordanians. Low education levels are notably being reproduced among Syrian refugee children in the context of displacement, with only 65% of primary school-aged refugee children attending school in Jordan; and under 40% remaining in school after 15 years of age, compared with over 95% of Jordanian children of the same age (ILO and Fafo, 2015).

In response to mounting levels of public discontent, the Jordanian government began a crackdown on refugee engagement in formal and informal employment in 2014–15, increasing surveillance and monitoring especially of refugee men. Consequences of being caught included involuntarily relocation to the camps or deportation back to Syria. In the same period, the World Food Programme vouchers were cut back sharply, causing refugee vulnerability to spike.

### Changing gender norms: opportunities and challenges

Many Syrian refugees in Jordan are from rural Dara'a, a conservative region with traditional gender norms. Men are expected to be the primary breadwinners and protectors, while women remain more home-based (WRC, 2014). A desire to retain these norms has not disappeared in displacement. A recent survey in Azraq camp found persistent conservative views on gender roles, with women expected to fulfil primarily homebound, domestic duties (CARE, 2015). The notion of honour remains paramount, with Syrian refugee women often facing 'strong pressure' to conform to 'acceptable female behaviour' (WRC, 2014).

With the Jordanian government clampdown on refugee employment, and fears of refugee men being caught engaging in illegal work, increasing numbers of Syrian refugee women have been forced to broach new economic roles and contribute to household incomes. This necessity has required women to transgress traditional gender norms, going beyond the private domain to seek both aid services, as well as engage in (informal) work to support their families. Yet simultaneously, financial stress and uncertainty have also led to 'protection' responses by refugee families, including increased rates of early marriage for girls, despite this being prohibited in Jordan.

### Syrian refugee women's emerging livelihoods

Towards a more nuanced understanding of the livelihoods of Syrian refugees, and refugee 'goals, constraints, capabilities and strategies' (Wake and Cheung, 2016), the research specifically examined the emerging economic activities of Syrian refugee women in both community and camp areas<sup>2</sup> in Jordan to explore new livelihood trends, barriers that they encountered and socio-cultural dynamics (Ritchie, forthcoming).

To date, low reported levels of women's economic activity have ignored women's home-based enterprises and other

domestic-related work. In the research, home-based initiatives such as tailoring (mostly mending clothes), food production and hair/beauty services emerged to be the most common types of (paid) work in host communities. Of these, food production and catering were the most popular activities in urban neighbourhoods. Syrian women typically produce and sell food to Jordanian neighbours during festivals, and in some cases supply offices and factories. Less common work includes employment in factories and in agriculture, work as household maids and jobs as shop assistants. Highly desired (paid) 'volunteer' work opportunities with NGOs and community-based organisations are very rare. In Irbid, on average, 20–30% of Syrian refugee women work part-time. In the more urbanised Zarqa, where there are higher numbers of female-headed refugee households, Syrian women's work is somewhat more common, with 40–60% of refugee women working.

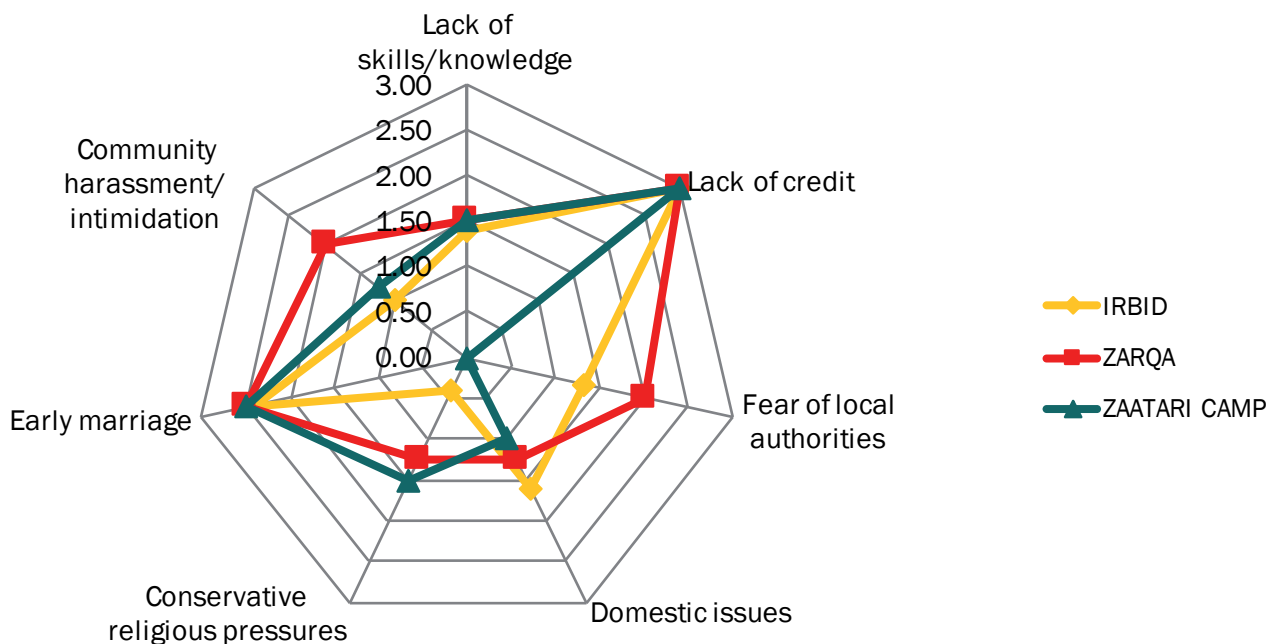
The variation in these ranges is predominantly related to rural/urban differences, with city centres offering more opportunities. There are also significant seasonal shifts in demand, depending on the type of work done. At the individual level, young married women are particularly constrained in their work choices, with their husbands preferring that they work at home. Female-headed households are the most active, but, across the board, refugee women are 'increasingly interested' in work. In city centres, women reported higher numbers of women in the refugee community working than men, following the increased government surveillance in 2015. Women report working to be a change from their lives in Syria, where women typically 'remained at home', with men generally 'not needing them to work', unless they worked in the public sector (for example, as teachers, nurses or doctors).

Most women's work in host communities remained individual, with few collective endeavours. Despite having an interest in doing so, refugees are not permitted to form groups, or join registered or unregistered civil society organisations. Such organisations include all public associations, as well as closed and private societies, all of which are regulated by the National Registry of Societies of the Ministry of Social Development. Unregistered societies are illegal, and engagement with such groups carries stiff penalties. Laws forbidding association and meetings, combined with a lack of experience and the desire to maintain a low profile, result in refugees mostly working alone, with a few notable exceptions.

Unlike the situation in the host areas, very limited numbers of Syrian refugee women in Zaatari camp engage in economic activities (less than 5–10%). Those who do work are mostly involved in part-time work as beauticians, shop assistants and volunteers. However, despite constraining circumstances, conservative attitudes and limited possibilities for work, women in the camp describe becoming 'stronger' than men, and highlight '[gender] role reversals' in their behaviour. In all areas, women report taking on new responsibilities through work and otherwise, challenging traditional gender norms and roles.

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<sup>2</sup> The study sites included eight communities in two northern city areas (Irbid and Zarqa), and two districts in Zaatari camp.



Depiction of barriers in Syrian refugee women's work

### Barriers to women's economic participation

The lack of credit to purchase raw materials (or work permits) is the main reported barrier to livelihood activities in both host communities and camp areas. Early marriage for young women is another major obstacle to women's economic participation. Secondary-level barriers varied in significance across the study areas, yet indicated more complex social constraints. These included domestic issues (household responsibilities and, if present, husband's support), conservative/religious attitudes and community intimidation, fear of authorities and the lack of knowledge or skills.

### Pushing boundaries: precarious livelihoods in the balance

Increasing environmental pressures on Syrian refugee households during 2014–15 have propelled significant numbers of Syrian women—both single and married—into work. Meanwhile, largely excluded from work and often confined to the house, refugee men have become increasingly frustrated, depressed and emasculated (WRC, 2014).

Looking closer at the phenomenon of Syrian refugee women's work, three key observations are important for developing a deeper appreciation of socio-cultural dynamics in women's emerging economic lives in Jordan:

- **Refugee women are challenging gender roles within the context of displacement, but with uncertain legal and social protection.**  
Whilst under forced circumstances, refugee women have forged new boundaries as economic agents. However, this

newfound self-reliance and independence remains fragile in the absence of legal protection, and with prevailing cultural attitudes, hindering women's safety as well as the scope of women's work. The engagement of Syrian women in non-professional, paid labour is often considered highly shameful, and the cash women earn often still goes to their husbands. This highlights the need for family and community support of refugee women's work as they transgress norms in their pursuit of safe and productive livelihoods. Without such support, women remain both insecure and an untapped economic force.

- **Constraints on women's collaboration have hindered their economic activities and kept their home-based work piecemeal and disconnected.**  
Limitations placed on women's collaboration have constrained Syrian refugee women's economic endeavours. Refugee women typically engage in piecemeal work with few joint initiatives due to prevailing legal restrictions and intimidation, as well as their own inexperience and poor finances. This has inhibited collective work—both among Syrians, and between Syrians and Jordanians—and the development of economies of scale. Beyond benefits to the individual/group, intra-community social relations are important in fostering social cohesion, resilience and local stability (Mercy Corps, 2014). Building the capacity of local women's groups can both empower refugee women, and strengthen local communities (Ritchie, 2014; WRC, 2014).
- **Women's opportunities for present and future work are limited by early marriage and low-quality education.**  
Early marriage has persisted and worsened among Syrian refugees in Jordan, with girls typically marrying at 14–15 years old. Girls frequently drop out of school to marry and

do not return. Early marriage of Syrian girls has risen from an estimated 50–60% in Syria to over 75% in Jordan. In addition to financial and environmental reasons for early marriage, Syrian refugee women emphasise the poor quality of education as contributing to girls dropping out to get married, and boys dropping out to work when they are 12–15 years old. Undermining women's skills development prospects, and prematurely augmenting domestic-level responsibilities (WRC, 2014), early marriage feeds the cycle of poverty, risk and underdevelopment. In this way, early marriage shapes both present and future work opportunities for Syrian refugee girls and women.

## Recommendations

The research has highlighted the fragility of Syrian refugee women's economic lives in uncertain family, community and institutional environments in Jordan. Looking forward, this report urges the Jordanian government to better address the rights and needs of refugees through access to quality education, social protection and economic integration. For aid agencies, the report emphasizes adopting a more strategic mix of humanitarian-to-development programming that better responds to evolving social dynamics in (heterogeneous) refugee communities.

The following recommendations outline how both the Jordanian government, and civil society and donors can specifically strengthen their support for inclusive and resilient livelihoods of Syrian refugee women in Jordan:

### National government:

- **Special legal allowances should be provided to allow longer-term refugees some 'rights of association'.** The development of social structures may allow refugees to collaborate, and permit the development of economies of scale in joint enterprise.
- **Building on the Jordan Compact, the government should boost (safe) engagement of Syrian refugees in the**

**economy through access to formal employment with protection.** With new opportunities opening up in specific sectors such as agriculture and textiles, further legal protection in the workplace is needed, particularly for women, to ensure their fair treatment and pay.

### Local government:

- **Local government should conduct an independent review of public schools in host community areas.** The schools' review should evaluate the provision of educational services in host communities and camps to identify weak areas, and where extra resources and staffing may be needed.
- **Local government should address incidences of early marriage through local campaigning and increased law enforcement.** Legal protection of young women should be stepped up across refugee camps and host communities. Local campaigns should engage families, local schools, mosques and civil society organizations.

### Civil society and donors

- **Civil society and aid agencies should facilitate local dialogue and awareness raising to support Syrian women and girls' rights, and ensure their protection.** Local NGOs and community groups should support key issues such as *women/girls' right to education and work, and the risks of early marriage* through a participative analysis of the local drivers of educational dropout and girl-child marriage. This should include parallel advocacy campaigns in schools, community centres and mosques; in the local media (e.g. radio); and outreach work (with local families).
- **As new allowances are agreed around refugee social organisation, agencies should support joint enterprise development through the formation of women's groups.** This may facilitate vocational training options (e.g. food processing, textiles, home repairs) for micro-business, business training support (BDS), and grants for income generating projects.

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