A GENDER LENS ON INFORMAL LIVELIHOODS IN DISPLACEMENT:

THE CASE OF SYRIAN REFUGEE FEMALES AS HEADS OF HOUSEHOLDS IN THE BEKAA VALLEY CAMPS IN LEBANON

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ABSTRACT

Syrian female heads of households in general, and in refugee communities in particular, lack proper representation in research on informal adaptive mechanisms. If found, studies on this topic are often quantitative in nature, and lack the ethnographic element that unpacks women's lived-realities, and recognizes their differing experiences. This mixed-method study mainly gives an in-depth look at the journey of a few women tackling the challenges and opportunities that emerge throughout their displacement and refugee-hood. A combination of ethnographic research, open-ended individual interviews and focus group discussions revealed that not one generic 'gender mainstreaming' approach will present the optimal strategy to address Syrian women's needs in refugee communities, but rather flexible and dynamic approaches that accompany the women's transformations at the individual, household and community levels. The overview of women's informal modes of income generation points to the vulnerabilities, changing manifestation of agency and resilience that women develop, and the gaps in current legal and regulatory frameworks that remain. Moreover, the findings suggest that, even today, further work is still needed to ensure female heads of households get targeted support, notably access to education, protection and livelihoods. The paper problematizes decision-making, agency and the changing roles of women heads of households within the existing structures of aid systems, structural and legal barriers to economic independence, and continued patriarchal practices in the community. This study ends with recommendations for programming, policy and further research.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ECC   Executive Committee Conclusion

FGD   Focus group discussion

GoL   Government of Lebanon

INGO   International non-governmental organization

ITS   Informal tented settlement

NGO   Non-governmental organization

PSS   Psychosocial support

SGBV   Sexual and gender-based violence

UN   United Nations

UNHCR   United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

VASyR   Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees

WFP   World Food Programme

INTRODUCTION

The existing literature on the subject of the livelihoods of women post-displacement focuses not only on means of living in terms of income but also in terms of the needs of a disadvantaged group to overcome the great challenges they face in order to help not only themselves but also their families. The displacement itself can often be a source of trauma that can prove difficult to overcome once in a new environment. Though women often find themselves in groups or communities that resemble or mirror the community of their areas of origin, several other factors come into play. For example, their gender makes them a vulnerable group in the first place, and women who are unaccompanied, pregnant, heads of households, disabled or elderly are especially vulnerable (UNHCR, 2018). A change in a familiar environment and a transition from previously internalized roles and rules in a new social field creates uncertainty and leads to stress. When considering that these significant changes also come with the loss of a stable livelihood base coupled with the inability to sell their existing skills for livelihood income in the new environment, the economic vulnerability adds to the stress and in turn puts a strain on the family and social structures (Ghimire, 2011). Traditional cultural practices from their areas of origin may also limit women's access to not only livelihood opportunities but also to basic goods and services. This exclusion could be attributed to lack of knowledge and experience, but also from the internalized roles that are especially found in women whose previous environments were rural (Ghimire, 2011). In refugee camps, assistance might inadvertently follow male-oriented leadership structures that subsequently limits its ability to reach women and girls. One of the coping strategies to address these limitations is the formation of social informal networks made up of other women in similar situations. These groups generally help promote their social and economic development by enabling members to improve their livelihood strategies by exchanging knowledge as well as skills. Most of these groups engage in traditional women's activities based on the home economics extension model, such as sewing, crocheting, baking and so forth (Chambers and Conway, 1992). Most importantly, these networks are also used as a source of information on everything, from where to seek asylum and settle in the host country, to employment, assistance and the policies and procedures of states and NGOs (Barbelet & Wake, 2017).

Informality also mainly encompasses the livelihoods sectors that women are able to integrate into, since "women's economic and empowerment opportunities may be stifled by lack of documentation, weak protection, no or limited right to work, and limited or no opportunities that match their skills" (Gettliffe & Rashidova, 2019). This compels and limits women to informal work or casual labor in return for livelihood income. Academic work helps to distinguish between primary or secondary work and the informal sector. Dual Labor Market argues that "the informal sector is composed of people who are unable to access primary and secondary work. Secondary, unlike the primary, is of low wage, low security, and poorly regulated." Informal work can also include people who operate their own small business or do casual labor, which is considered as labor performed for an employer but without the rights associated with formal employment, such as sick leave, paid leave, or a formal contract (Devey et al., 2006). Scholars agree that several factors can help to overcome challenges associated with new environments and the dynamics that accompany it, and that gender definitely adds a layer of difficulty, but also offers a different interpretation to related concepts. These factors include resilience, agency and empowerment. For example, resilience is associated with 'positive adaptation' (Luthar et al., 2000), the ability to 'bounce back' (Sossou and Craig, 2008) or 'rebound' (Chan, 2006) within the context of significant adversity or threat. More specifically in the context of the experiences of immigrant and refugee women, resilience is said to work as a form of agency that refutes 'the dominant discourses that portray immigrant and refugee women solely as helpless victims, lacking in agency or resources to make positive changes in their lives or in the lives of those around them' (Spitzer, 2007). In a related academic work, the author states that this specific perspective goes beyond the assumption that resilience is simply a strength that emerges from within, and argues that it emerges from the capacity of individuals and groups to utilize resources in order to successfully navigate and surmount environmental contexts as they change (Ungar, 2011). Agency was mentioned as related to resilience, and associating it with women specifically can be said to take place through a fundamental shift in perceptions, or "inner transformation," where women have understood that self-interest can dictate their choices, and consider themselves as not only able but entitled to make these choices (Sen, 1993; Kabeer, 2001).

Kabeer (2001) goes a step further and describes this process in terms of "thinking outside the system" and challenging the status quo. With agency comes more favorable outcomes that are aligned with these self-interests, but Sen (1993) argues that it still follows a moral judgment that is socially molded to include a sense of accountability and legitimacy. Nonetheless, she underlines that for these outcomes to count as women's empowerment, they must originate in women's agency. In other words, women themselves must be significant actors in the process of change rather than merely recipients of the change that is being described or measured (Sen, 1993).

Other authors have also mentioned how resources and agency are considered as catalysts for empowerment but in some of the other literature, these terms are often referred to as control, awareness, or power (Malhotra et al., 2002). Empowerment, especially in a context regarding women, comes with its own definitions and conditions. In general, it can be defined as "the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them" (Bennett, 2002). However, women's empowerment has some unique additional elements because the locus of disempowerment is often the household itself (Malhotra et al., 2002). Therefore, empowerment is "altering relations of power... which constrain women's options and autonomy and adversely affect the health and well-being" (Sen, 1993). When women and marginalized groups experience displacement, they do so amidst a series of unequal points of social, economic and national hierarchies, and one author argues that resisting and coping with these inequalities involves power dynamics that create a continuum between rational agency and victimhood (Kojima, 2007).

The empowerment model developed by Naila Kabeer follows a conceptual framework that involves many of the factors mentioned above and comprises three dimensions, referring to them as pathways through which empowerment occurs (Kabeer, 2005). The first of these dimensions comes through as resources, which can be understood as the conditions of choice, meaning one perceives and is able to choose alternative options (pre-conditions). The second dimension is agency, which is a process by which one distinguishes between strategic life choices and second-order choices, and makes choices in either

arena. Lastly, the third dimension is achievement, which refers to the consequences of the choices made (Kabeer, 1999). Therefore, her definition of empowerment is "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" (Kabeer, 2001).

Moving forward, the following chapter will seek to fill the gap in research investigating women–led households in displaced communities of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The current research overarchingly questioned the informality of coping strategies of Syrian refugee women in securing their livelihoods and those of their families, and how their choices, strategies, and personal trajectories have been facilitated and/or constrained by their prior and shifting "gender identity" as well as prior and emerging "class identity", which is particularly obscured by "refugee-hood". It also highlights the survival mechanisms these women have embraced, and how they articulate their choices in terms of their own agency and the structural constraints imposed by the political and practical legal conditions in Lebanon. How do these women recognize and articulate their gender identity in their experience as female heads of their households, as opposed to the masculine values which govern their communities? How has the experience of protracted displacement in light of the existing legal restrictions —which disproportionately affect women compared to men— led to a shift in gender identity? How do these women understand the role of the adaptive mechanisms they have adopted in their future "social identity", on the one hand, and the vulnerability and marginalization of themselves and their families, on the other?

Given the layered vulnerabilities the Syrian refugee women have been facing, interlocking with pre-displacement traditional intra-household dynamics and emerging *shaweesh*[1] power systems (*shaweesh* is an authorized person who manages the camp affairs), this research adopts an intersectional approach of analysis to answer these and other questions. Intersectionality is defined by Collins (2015) as the understanding that race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability and age operate as reciprocally constructing phenomena. In that respect,

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1 *Further elaborated on in the section of shaweesh-dependent work arrangements.*

intersectionality attributes the different causes of discrimination to multiple factors interacting in a simultaneous fashion and creating a specific form of discrimination, which means that individuals who are subjected to different forms of discrimination, such as Syrian refugee women, are not going through the discriminatory experience in a fragmented fashion. Some regional treaties have included the concept of intersectionality, including the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women, and describe several conditions that increase the vulnerability of Syrian women as refugees, such as the status of refugees, migrants or displaced persons. Syrian refugee women initially suffer from discrimination due to the conditions of refugees in Lebanon, which entail not finding proper livelihood conditions and facing several social and economic inequalities compared to others. Since the start of the war in 2011, every refugee has been in a difficult situation, but Syrian refugee women have experienced a higher level of vulnerability because of gender roles and relationships which impose additional vulnerabilities on women as women. In that respect, the conditions of refugees and women have to be examined as inseparable factors that directly impact the daily lives of Syrian refugee women.

This constellation of relevant and related research provides a useful theoretical and practical foundation on which to build, but it also underlines the extent to which enormous gaps remain. More research is urgently needed to fill in these gaps by exploring the relationship between gender, informality, displacement, and livelihoods in a rigorous manner.

Layers of vulnerability and informality for Syrian women

Lebanon hosts the highest proportion of Syrian refugees per capita worldwide where one out of five inhabitants is now a Syrian. The Government of Lebanon (GoL) estimates that the country hosts 1.5 million Syrian refugees who have fled their country's conflict since 2011, including nearly one million registered with UNHCR (UNHCR, UNICEF, & WFP, 2018). Even though Lebanon has not ratified the convention related to the status of refugees, its government signed a memorandum of understanding with UNHCR that would give

them the mandate to work in Lebanon in support of the Syrian refugees. However, such registration stopped in 2015 and many refugees who fled to Lebanon after that date remain to this day with no legal status or residency permit. This also prevented them from access to work and justice, leading them to a situation of further vulnerability in their protracted displacement. Some subpopulations within the refugee communities face several layers of vulnerabilities. In addition to that of refugee-hood, the mere fact of being Syrian in Lebanon, and the inequality that this entails before the law, and of being a woman, and the social and economic factors that this entails, place Syrian refugee women at a disadvantage compared to the rest of the population.

According to the VASyR 2018, and despite a noted decrease in poverty levels and an increase in average per capita monthly expenditures amongst Syrian populations in 2018, 69 percent of Syrian refugees remain below the poverty line, or the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket. The majority of households within this population are female-led and face extremely harsh economic conditions, forcing them to take on illegal jobs in order to support their children. This form of vulnerability is exacerbated by the fact that less than one-third of Syrian refugees have obtained legal residency papers and are consequently unable to secure any kind of legal jobs. In addition to the aforementioned vulnerabilities, according to VASyR 2018, roughly half of the Syrian refugees suffered from abuse which includes harassment and evictions, however almost the majority abstained from notifying authorities.

In 1995, the Executive Committee Conclusion (ECC) showcased a link between coerced displacement and sexual violence against refugee women. A report published in 2012 by the International Rescue Committee showcased Syrian refugee women who stated that sexual violence and rape were common practices used against them in both Syria and Lebanon. In Lebanon, "survival sex" is a common phenomenon observed among Syrian refugee women who suffer from a poor economic situation and lack the means to afford a decent standard of living. Several national and international NGOs including Amnesty International, the International Center for Migration Policy Development, Human Rights Watch, and KAFA, have been constantly reporting cases of sex trafficking which have taken place since the start of the way in Syria in 2011.

Due to the lack of a proper legal status, the socio-economic conditions of Syrian refugee women has, on average, fallen below the poverty index. The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that they are less likely to have access to education and jobs, which pushes them to seek alternative informal and illegal ways of earning money and, as a result, are targeted by organized criminals who are taking advantage of the situation and exploiting them sexually. The other forms of legal and less dangerous informal livelihoods have not been profitable enough to sustain Syrian refugee women in Lebanon. According to the Lebanon Support report (2012), Syrian refugee women initially began selling homemade food but failed to generate enough profits due to a discriminatory market. One woman from a tented settlement explained: "Once people know that these meals come from the camp, they immediately refuse the food, even if it's a good deal or good quality." As a result, women are left with no choice but to either join the already struggling formal workforce or to resort to illegal and exploitative forms of work. Moreover, a recent study conducted by UN Women (2017) revealed that more than three-quarters of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon are unable to meet the basic needs of their households. One participant stated: "I need nothing but work. Work allows you to preserve your dignity and self-respect". Similarly, another participant explained: "It is very hard to ask for money from a complete stranger or from someone you do not know very well. Therefore, to find a job is key to our survival."

METHODOLOGY

This report presents findings and recommendations from a seven-month research study based on ethnographic work and field research with Syrian refugees in Lebanon's Central and West Bekaa Valley. The Bekaa Valley hosts the highest proportion of Syrian refugees in Lebanon; 37.3 percent of Syrian refugees are currently settled in the Bekaa (342,875 of those registered with the UNHCR until 31 October 2019), compared to other Lebanese governorates (UNHCR, 2019). The Bekaa is among the poorest and most underserved regions in Lebanon, characterized by a lack of sufficient social services, weak infrastructure, and limited livelihood opportunities.

SAWA for Development and Aid is a grassroots NGO registered in Lebanon that works with over 40 informal tented settlements (ITS) in the Bekaa Valley in Bar Elias and Sa'ednayel. The organization provides holistic support that spans alternative education, protection, livelihoods and relief programming. The role SAWA plays as one of the NGOs providing relief placed us in front of a variety of methodological challenges relating to potential participants who could have been prior beneficiaries of the services provided by the organization, and we attempted throughout the study to mitigate biases. In this, we were assisted by the fact that the issue was rights-oriented and had no relevance to service provision. In terms of managing the participants' expectations: in the process of securing informed consent, all participants were assured that their participation or non-participation in this research project would have no bearing on their access to aid and services from SAWA. The long-standing presence of SAWA programs in the Bekaa and the mutual trust between SAWA staff and refugee communities enabled us to tackle sensitive topics in an in-depth and professional manner. Furthermore, another potential bias was mitigated through the selection of staff members tasked with working on the project or conducting the interviews. It favored those who had not worked extensively or for long durations with the targeted refugees. The research team initially conducted periodic visits to some refugee communities, with the aim of consolidating good and reliable relations with refugees, as well as experiencing the conditions in which they live, thereby gaining a greater insight into the dynamics of their daily lives. Seeking to address other possible

biases, we selected participants with a range of relationships to SAWA in addition to the above criteria for purposive sampling. The sample includes current and past participants, while the majority were those who have never participated in SAWA's programming. Similarly, it includes participants living in ITS adjacent to SAWA's centers, where SAWA has an active presence, as well as those from ITS and residential accommodations farther away, where SAWA does not work at all.

The project relied on a combination of semi-structured, multi-session individual interviews and small-sized focus group discussions (FGDs). We utilized purposive sampling, selecting participants based on age, marital status, place of residence in Lebanon, type of income-generating activity (inside vs. outside the home), and disability status within the family. Regarding demographics, the sample includes women from ages 18 to 55, living in both ITS and residential apartments. Ten Syrian governorates are present in the sample, with participants from rural Damascus, Homs, Raqqa, Aleppo, Hasakah, Daraa, Idlib, Damascus (Yarmouk Camp), Hama, and Quneitra. Ten different ITS are represented, including settlements in Bar Elias, Sa'ednayel, Ta'anayel, Al Marj, Ghazzeh, and Taalabaya. In terms of pre-crisis income and socio-economic background, the majority of participants self-identified as low-to-middle income. Over 70 percent of participants have children, with an average of nearly five children (4.84) per mother. In light of the small sample size and geographically limited scope of this research project, these results are not representative. Instead, in profiling a small number of Syrian women who are heads of their households, this research seeks to provide a window into the experiences, struggles, and insights in order to prompt better research and policy-making. All names have been changed in order to protect participants' privacy.

RESULTS

Pre-displacement and prevailing context in Syria

Family dynamics, education, employment and livelihoods in Syria

The structure of the Syrian family system in rural and suburban areas plays a key role in decision-making, negotiations, intra-household power dynamics, who has authority over household responsibilities, and establishing who has unlimited power. Roles are deliberately distributed and gender-stereotyped, forming stable, rigid gender and social identities. Negotiations are almost nonexistent under such a strictly positioned and socially-normed family system; the father is the highest authority at home, while the mother is responsible only for taking care of the children and for domestic chores. Girls and boys are raised within this system to mimic these same roles in the future. However, some lenient locales differ in rural and suburban areas in terms of negotiations and the distribution of power. The emerged awareness that has led to these kinds of clusters that overcome social norms remains subject to the level of education as well as social and economic development. In rural areas, the education level of girls remains limited to primary or intermediate and women's labor remains limited to domesticity and often to agriculture and livestock farming, without any room for improvement in the familial and societal situation or perhaps even in agency opportunities. By contrast, the upheld socially conservative nature of communities in even the urban areas is more tolerant towards the rights of girls and women; this could translate into girls attaining a higher level of education, a higher age of marriage, and skills and capabilities which largely relate to the level of higher and tertiary educational attainments and which are not exclusive to domesticity.

Schooling in Syria is compulsory for all Syrian citizens up to the age of 11, and all levels of education are free. Enrolment rates of girls and women heavily depend on family customs, geographical location and availability of finances. Early marriage and a lack of understanding of the need to educate girls also increases their dropout rate. In 2002, the illiteracy rate among women was 25.8 percent, and among men was 9 percent. Before the conflict, an estimated 97 percent of Syrian children attended primary school and 67 percent of youth attended secondary school (Norwegian Refugee Council [NRC], 2018).

The enrolment rate for both sexes has now fallen to an average of 50 percent at the secondary level.[2] In rural areas, most families give priority to the education of boys while girls leave school, submitting to family pressures to marry or work, whereas in urban areas both sexes have a more equal access to education; over a quarter of the country's youth was enrolled in tertiary education, and data showed that over 51 percent of university graduates were women.[3]

Reflecting on the study participants, few of them reported having completed high school, and no participant had graduated from college. A small number were illiterate, having grown up in rural areas without access to formal education. Most participants had made it through primary school and had reached a level between the 6th and 9th grade, after which they generally dropped out, sometimes to work or pursue vocational training (generally for beauty and hairdressing school), but more often to get married. They cited over and over the link between schooling and marriage, emphasizing that their academic and professional opportunities were heavily constrained by expectations around marriage. Prior to the conflict, all participants who were married had stopped attending school. Some women firmly stated that they found nothing wrong with their role as mothers and homemakers. One participant asserted: "I was happy to not have to finish my studies. I didn't mind dropping out when I got married. It was normal, it was expected." Others expressed regret or resentment over having to drop out of high school or college. The conflict itself cut some participants' education short. Several were in high school or university when it began, and they had to abandon their studies when they fled to Lebanon. One young woman explained, "I was three months into studying Business Economics in university when my family fled to Lebanon. Five years later, I don't know if I'll ever be able to finish my studies." This sentiment was shared by another participant: "I couldn't finish my studies because of the war. Our school curriculum is different from the Lebanese curriculum, and this country is not my country. How should I start over? I didn't know where to start."

Though Syrian women have increasingly participated in the labor force and prolonged their education,

2   NGO Report (2014), Geneva, Switzerland. Available at: http://wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/CEDAW-Report_without-partners.pdf

3   Ibid.

they experience great difficulty in achieving upward mobility and only a small percentage make it to the university level. Not only are women and girls from rural areas at a disadvantage regarding employment opportunities, but they are also up against the prevailing expectation from their families to remain at home and fulfill domestic duties. Even those in the labor force mostly find themselves doing manual work for little or no pay, such as in the agricultural sector. The lack of women occupying jobs in the administrative, technical or industrial fields, jobs that would contribute the most to the development of the Syrian economy, suggests that these sectors are difficult for them to access (Bellafronto, 2005).

Many participants, particularly those from rural areas, reported having had work experience prior to the Syrian conflict, but very few had any paid or formal work experience. One woman, for instance, used to help her father in his clothing shop. She used to work in the shop after school, but did not receive remuneration and was not technically an employee. Most working women were engaged in activities pre-crisis that included handicrafts, weaving, knitting, crocheting and agriculture, but they were considered an extension of their 'domestic duties' and not formalized or salaried. Others referred to these kinds of work as "just a hobby" (with regard to making clothes and other handicrafts for the family), "normal duties", and "domestic obligations." These activities were cast in the light of 'women's work' as distinct from 'real work', which is exclusively relegated to men: "I used to cook and clean and mend clothes, take the children to appointments, help them with their homework, take care of all the day-to-day household tasks. But none of this was seen as real work, just what women are expected to do." None of the women we interviewed identified as having been the head of her household back in Syria. Several spoke about how they viewed marriage as automatically disqualifying them from work outside the home: "When I got married I had to put the idea of working out of my head."

Informal livelihoods: Dynamics and configurations

Informal employment can be split into two components: informal self-employment and informal paid employment (Charmes, 2010). Informal employment, so defined, entails a large and heterogeneous category, (....) and it is,

therefore, useful to subdivide the term into informal employment and wage employment, in order to then group together more homogeneous sub-categories associated with status in employment (Vanek et al., 2012). For the purpose of analysis and making policy recommendations, this paper adopts the operational theme-based classification of female-headed households coping with the climate of economic informality as follows: 1) *Shaweesh*-brokered work outside the home (wage employed) 2) Self-organized work outside the home (wage employed) 3) Self-organized work inside the home (self-employed) 4) Work through NGOs (self and wage employed). Almost all women formulated their involvement in income generation for their families in terms of their husbands', fathers', or brothers' inability to fulfill this responsibility. One participant explains this dynamic: "My husband still goes out to try to find work, but whenever he finds something, he never ends up getting paid. That leaves me having to work since there's no one else." Similarly, another participant emphasized that women have, on average, an easier time securing their families' livelihoods as compared to men: "As bad as it is for us in terms of not being paid for our work, or facing harassment, or being paid very little, the exploitation is even worse for the men." Women who head their households and originally come from rural areas in Syria stated that they are more comfortable with the arrangement of informal self-employment in lines of work such as cooking, hairdressing, handicrafts, weaving, knitting and crocheting. The main exception being, for women from rural areas working inside the home, is *shaweesh*-brokered work. *Shaweesh*-facilitated work opportunities for women in agriculture were apparently observed as a socially acceptable dynamic in researched ITS; all groups of workers were of women with strong kinship ties, often descendent from one tribe, and were paid inadequately and seasonally. Coming from a more tolerant, societal, family environment, and with higher education, compared to women from rural areas, women from urban areas are more likely to work outside the home. Despite there being a proportion of female heads of households working through NGOs, this arrangement cannot be considered solely as one of the coping mechanisms, given that refugee women are originally targeted by NGOs. However, when this arrangement is accompanied by another arrangement – different from working for NGOs – the whole mechanism is considered as an adaptive strategy, given the multitude of efforts that such arrangements entail. Although many participants related to resorting

to a combination of coping strategies, they also emphasized that they have not had great success with any of them.

The social networks that emerged among refugees from either their role in securing work opportunities or their role in the labor market, are not entirely positive supplementary coping strategies. It relatively depends on the nature of these networks in terms of their origin (pre or post-displacement) and the type of social linkages between refugees in the camp (potential kinship relations between refugees, tribal ties, degree of convergence in societal norms, degree of acceptance towards a specific line of work, especially with women, and geographical proximity between the areas of origin of camp residents), where such vulnerabilities accumulate. Refugee women are finding themselves trapped in well-established economic networks between *shaweesh* and employers from the pre-displacement stage of seasonal agricultural labor networks between Syria and Lebanon. Other economic networks that have arisen from displacement are a kind of similarity or extension of those already existing between *shaweesh* and employers. Previously established networks are purely practical or opportunistic, often associated with low wages for women and working girls, unpaid wages or even sexual harassment. The new networks are often based on mutual benefits between the *shaweesh* and refugees living in the camp – higher wages and guarantees to collect wages under the responsibility of the *shaweesh* – and even in cases of non-payment of wages by employers, the *shaweesh* are held responsible. Women investing in their individual relationships to secure employment do not often encounter success unless the work is inside their home (e.g., working in cooking or sewing, etc.) or by working through NGOs – most of the women interviewed obtained work through relatives or friends in the camp. In other cases, where NGOs reinvigorate networks of women in order to establish small-sized, profitable initiatives within camps, these networks of a limited number of women, programmatically triggered by an NGO, may continue to be sustainable even after funding is no longer available.

Participants have reported adopting negative coping strategies to meet their families' economic needs, though very few reported having to resort to the worst coping strategies, among them child labor and prostitution. Still, a significant number of participants reported reducing their food consumption and selling material aid to pay for their rent or utilities. Some

also discussed moving to less expensive housing arrangements, from apartments to ITS, or between ITS, either to find more affordable housing or due to eviction. Many women have also moved in search of better livelihood opportunities, from areas like Tripoli to Zahlé, for example. In terms of securing both their families' livelihoods and their own rights and protection, part-time work with NGOs emerged as the most positive work arrangement:

"Between working inside the home and working outside the home I much prefer working outside the home. It helped me to improve my psychological state, to get out of my daily routine. It lets you see other people and speak with them. It helps you think less about your problems and concerns. When I'm at home all day, I feel depressed. There's always more chores to do, and you don't have any chance to breathe and take a break. I feel safest working in NGOs compared to anywhere else."

UNHCR and WFP aid stood out as the most-cited forms of useful material assistance, though a considerable number of participants emphasized that they are not receiving (either have never received or have been recently disqualified of receiving) any of this aid. For some households, UNHCR aid has meant the difference between tenuous survival and total desperation:

"UNHCR aid is fundamental for many of us. Even though we are working, we would not be able to meet our families' needs without this aid, since the part-time work in the fields and factories doesn't pay enough to cover our rent and other needs."

Aid from other humanitarian organizations, both international NGOs and local NGOs, was also mentioned by participants while highlighting the overall reduction in aid they have experienced over the course of their displacement. Still, employment through NGOs is highly restrictive in terms of the family and caretaking responsibilities, so most women with children are not able to take advantage of these opportunities. According to other participants, working inside the home is the best option, since it allows autonomy and agency in terms of working hours, does not expose women to the same kinds of threats and exploitation that working outside the home may present, and allows them to juggle their overlapping caretaking responsibilities. Most participants have used and are using a complex and ever-shifting constellation of these different strategies, based on seasonality,

social and economic shifts, the availability of work opportunities, the level and kind of humanitarian aid available, and intra-family and community-level needs and responsibilities.

Shaweesh-brokered work outside the home and power dynamics

Power dynamics differ from one camp to another and there is no unified arrangement followed by all camps. It principally depends on the characteristics of the communities from which the camp's inhabitants originate as well as the current demographics within the camp. In some cases, all of the refugees originate from one specific area in Syria, or from several areas that resemble each other in terms of their geography and the characteristics of its communities. In other cases, the population within the camp varies between areas of origin that are not geographically close, but relatively similar to the nature of their respective communities. In general, the level of dependency a camp has to its *shaweesh* system (nizam al shaweeshiah) correlates with the degree to which it is influenced by the pre-established tribal tradition from the areas of origin in Syria.

Fundamentally, there are two types of camps. The first is described as an "Independent Labor Camp". In this particular arrangement, the *shaweesh* has no authority over the inhabitants of the camp, and so it is designated as a self-employment system where one works where they can without *shaweesh* intervention. The refugees' remaining obligations are only to pay the leases and the expenses of basic services. As for the other type of camp, in contrast to the first, everyone is subject to the power of the *shaweesh*; the *shaweesh* himself works on building the camp, and he selectively decides who can settle there so as to advance his own interests, which derive from the employment of camp inhabitants.

The camp has a social structure that is very similar to the tribal one from which it is rooted. In the camp, there must be a leader, and people adhere to the authority of that leader. Within the bounds of this arrangement, the woman's primary role is based in the home – caring for her family and tending to household chores. Polygamous marriage, underage marriage, and domestic violence are common in such systems. The authoritarian role that appears within the family is a diminutive version of that which is reflected in the community outside the home in the

way that all spousal power is concentrated in the hands of the men; gender-normative ideas of what constitutes appropriate work for women then result in job opportunities that reflect familial and service roles normally ascribed to women.

The process of establishing a camp in the first place entails a series of logistical and administrative arrangements that entitles the *shaweesh* to rent the land, obtain the necessary permits from the municipality, obtain approval from the security authorities, and in some cases coordinate with NGOs to obtain the necessary raw materials for the establishment of the camp. One of the *shaweesh* explains his relationship with the Lebanese authorities, saying:

"To be a shaweesh of a camp, you will need to provide a security record to the security authorities on a continuous basis, including the names of all residents of the camp, and keep them fully notified of any problems that may occur within the camp. Not to mention regular meetings with the Lebanese security authorities. If an inhabitant relocates, it obliges me to tell the security authorities. Thus, it is forbidden for anyone new to dwell in the tent without a request and approval from the security services. Likewise, if a tent is to be repaired inside the camp, it will require a repair request and approval from authorities."

Besides that, regarding any possible intervention by NGOs, it is necessary for them to coordinate with the *shaweesh* as well as the Lebanese authorities related to the said intervention. The *shaweesh* has the authority to prevent NGOs from entering the camp if the intervention does not correspond with his policies related to not only the camp and the community norms but his personal interests as well. A staff member of an organization serving in Bar Elias explains how they were prevented from intervening after the *shaweesh* learned that the targets would be minors (10-16 years):

"… The primary goal of our intervention was to target out-of-school children between the ages of 10 and 16. A small school from one hall was established in the camp. We started working with children under the age of 10, but after we asked for older children at the age of 14, 15 and 16, shaweesh began to hinder our work because children who dropped out of school in this category were working in his agricultural workshop. The conflict between our interest in providing literacy to hard-to-reach children and his own material interests seemed obvious."

The *shaweesh* also has the authority to delimit who can settle in the camp – he usually favors extended families of women and girls in order to maintain work in his seasonal farming workshops. Women described working as seasonal farmworkers or in factories close to their ITS, organized and facilitated by their *shaweesh*. In this arrangement, the *shaweesh* provides transportation to and from the fields or other worksites and serves as a guarantor for the payment of their wages. This transportation service is not provided for free: participants reported being charged by the *shaweesh* 2,000 LL ($1.33 USD). This equates to a one-third pay cut for agricultural work, which usually pays in the range of 6,000 LL ($4 USD) for 5-6 hours of work. Women are often left with little choice but to accept this arrangement since it insulates them from wage theft. As one woman put it, "At least when we work through the *shaweesh* we are sure that we will be paid." Participants described the instability of this income arrangement: "We mainly work during the summer. In the winter there is no work, so we have to get into debt with the *shaweesh* and then work to settle these debts in the summer." One woman tells her story with one of the *shaweesh* in her first camp, where she was expelled because she ceased working in agriculture:

"Someone led us to the camp after we were displaced from Syria…. We were first asked by the shaweesh whether we were working in agriculture or not, and our answer was that we had never worked in agriculture, neither me nor my daughters…. After a while we were summoned to work, I didn't mind because my husband was sick. My eldest daughter and I started working in the weeding. After a period of my work, I got sick, and because my husband was sick I couldn't keep working. So it was my daughter who worked. I was subjected to a lot of harassment from shaweesh. He told me literally: 'We did not bring you to the camp to sit, but we brought you to work.' In the season of parsley harvesting, my daughter had to go early to work at three o'clock on the pretext that the parsley is not harvested during the day. That's what raised me a lot of doubts. My daughter stopped working and I asked him to pay my daughter's wages. He refused to give us our wages on the pretext that I had to pay a lot for the electricity and raw materials that we needed to build a tent. Finally, I was forced to leave the camp…"

Debt-driven labor creates a cycle of dependency on *shaweesh* to secure these households' basic needs, especially during the off-season. Work in factories is taxing but pays slightly better: in the range of 16,000

LL ($10.67 USD) for 10 hours of work, 6 am - 4 pm. Although factory work pays more, working women generally prefer to work in the fields. At the same time, for women with child-care responsibilities, working in factories may not be realistic:

"I work in the fields two or three times a week, making about 72,000 LL ($48 USD) per month. I can't work regularly because I have to take care of my four-month-old daughter, so the factory work is not an option for me."

In the absence of an authorized, legal entity or policies that would be able to exert control over the individual camps, this power is delegated to the *shaweesh*. They are then expected to report on affairs happening in their respective camps to the security authorities, creating an opportunity for them to exploit and capitalize on this power dynamic at the expense of the refugees. For example, the *shaweesh* determines the annual value of the lease, whether it will be paid monthly or seasonally, and the charge of basic services provided. The establishment of the camp and the ability to adjust with the local and security authorities allows for a transformation of the camp from a humanitarian displacement point into an opportunistic profit-making business in accordance with policies set by the *shaweesh* himself. The employment of women and girls through the *shaweesh* is coupled with other material exploitation, which is only inflicted under the *shaweesh* regime. In addition to gains reaped by the *shaweesh* from the camp's management, he gains more from brokering for securing job opportunities for women and girls.

Self-organized work arrangements: Inside and outside the home

Women have reported experiencing serious challenges when trying to circumvent or supplement *shaweesh*-brokered work arrangements in factories and in seasonal agriculture. These efforts, however, are largely unsuccessful, resulting in an alarming extent of wage theft and very little structure in place for accountability:

"We tried to find work in other places, but if our shaweesh doesn't coordinate the work, if we get paid at all, we almost never get the full amount we had been promised. Most of the time we end up working for nothing in return. It has happened a lot of times. For this reason, we stopped looking for jobs in addition to the one that we have through our shaweesh."

In female-headed households, income generation also depends on the family's size. Within a family, work amongst the girls is often associated with the work of their mother, heading the households and working through the *shaweesh*. If the mother withdraws from a *shaweesh*-brokered work arrangement, looking for work outside the camp and outside the home may mean that all of the working family members have to withdraw as well, thus losing their *shaweesh*-arranged income, and perhaps ultimately their only source of income.

Women have sought, for example, to enter into business partnerships with local Lebanese community members, to open their own businesses, and to work for NGOs. One participant described working for a local engineer as a part-time secretary to supplement the small salary ($50 USD/month) she received as a paid volunteer at an NGO. She worked at the engineer's office five days a week from 9 am to 2 pm for $200 USD/month. According to this woman, "The salary was low but my schedule wasn't heavy and I thought that as a first step here in Lebanon it was fine."

Even under a *shaweesh* system, women who work outside the home may face sexual harassment, and it cannot be assured that the work environment is safe against such violations. This confirms that the problem of sexual harassment of women is not so much from the informality of the work environment as it is about layered vulnerabilities compounded by displacement to Lebanon. One participant reported how she was subjected to sexual harassment: "After the first month, my boss lowered my salary to $150 USD/month." Because she needed the money and didn't have any other immediate job prospects, she accepted the cut. "Soon he started harassing me, telling me he would lower my salary to $100 USD/month unless I let him touch me and do other things. I quit, but it was scary not knowing where I would get the income from." Similarly, another participant recounted being told by prior informal employers,

"Come on, I will pay you next week, or next month, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. In the end, he never pays you. I prefer to live in poverty, making sacrifices instead of being exploited. I don't work anywhere unless a person I trust recommends it to me."

The most successful reports of dependent arrangement, income-generating activities outside the home come from women working with NGOs. These women generally started out as unpaid volunteers

or even project participants, particularly in women's empowerment, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) prevention, and psychosocial support (PSS) programming. Over time, they transitioned to paid volunteer positions, which are often very low-paid and do not necessarily lead to full-time employment.

Work inside the home protects women from the problems of wage theft, harassment, and SGBV by employers and in transit, as well as allows them to balance their childcare responsibilities. At the same time, it presents new challenges. According to one woman, who runs a small hair salon out of her tent in an ITS:

"Working inside my home is daunting. The few clients I have either complain about high prices or don't trust the quality of my work since I work in a camp. For example, I charge 10,000 LL ($6.67 USD) to dye hair. For them, this is still expensive, and they ask me to lower the price to 7,000 LL ($4.67 USD). But I have to buy the material. If can't make any profit, maybe it's better if I don't work at all."

This woman had decided to work from home precisely because of negative experiences while working outside the home. She had met a Lebanese woman and the two decided to open a salon together, agreeing to split the profits evenly. The woman worked for four months without being paid. The last straw, she said, was when they worked on a wedding:

"We had 20 clients and I worked from 7 am to 9 pm without being paid a dime. When I confronted my partner to claim my share she began to threaten me because I don't have legal residency: 'You are Syrian, who are you going to tell?' she said. After that experience, I decided not to work with anyone else. I'm scared of being exploited again."

In both arrangements, women are reliant upon their abilities in informal social networking as a way to secure job opportunities, aiming to reduce, though not eliminate, the likelihood of wage theft, threats and ill-treatment of *shaweesh*-brokered arrangements. They turn to these arrangements because it is perceived that in and out-of-home work environments would prevent these violations. However, since they constitute an informal sector, and combined with the layered vulnerabilities of these women, they often lead to clear labor rights violations. This leads to the conclusion that labor rights violations are inherent to such environments and structured to exploit women and girls.

Adapting to the role of head of household

The women we spoke with described navigating a series of overlapping challenges in Lebanon. The difficulties of adjusting to their new role as head of their household are compounded by the severe emotional trauma of losing loved ones and being displaced in a context of minimal economic and physical security. Two key challenges emerged through the fieldwork: 1) personal, and 2) work-related.

In terms of how these women took on the role of head of their household, very few made an active choice. Most were forced to assume responsibility for their families' livelihoods as a matter of course, since their adult male relatives, whether husbands, fathers, or brothers, could not do so. According to participants, even when men are able-bodied and present, often they cannot find stable work: "We can't rely on the men since they don't have a stable income if they have any at all. Women are the ones who bring the main income for our families." One participant explained being suddenly thrust into the role of primary provider for her family while still a teenager:

"When we left Syria I was 14. I was in school, in the 8th grade but I had to quit because of the war. My father was detained and disappeared in Syria. My two brothers are disabled due to a car accident. Suddenly I was the only one able to earn an income in the family. I used to work even before but I didn't have such a big responsibility."

Keeping this context in mind, particularly the traumatic and often violent conditions in which participants came to take up the mantle of head of household, is paramount when considering both the challenges and opportunities that these new economic and social configurations present.

Personal challenges

The personal toll of enduring conflict and displacement is widely recognized, but the additional burden of sudden and often involuntary assumption of the responsibility to secure a family's livelihood is much less well understood. Women who participated in this research project pointed very strongly to the psychological and emotional pressure imposed by their circumstances. One woman explained, "I lost my husband and my house. I came to Lebanon with my

child, as a stranger in an unknown country. I wanted to forget everything. I was so scared, traumatized, and depressed." Another woman, from Eastern Ghouta, shared her struggles with managing extreme trauma and loss:

"My husband and one of my sons are still back in Ghouta. I survived a car bombing that killed 20 members of my family, including my other son. Now my husband is very sick, and I don't know when I will see him again. My other children here are struggling too. All of this weighs on me. It makes it hard to make it through every day."

Many women described being daunted and exhausted by the prospect of assuming responsibility for securing their family's income, on top of their other caretaking responsibilities. Over and over, participants used the phrases "father and mother" and "man and woman" to describe the pressure they felt to fill both roles. One woman described feeling terrified of letting her family down and weighted by the knowledge that everyone depends on her. Another remarked, "Even when I'm sick, I have to take care of everything. It's up to me alone." This dual-role arrangement pushes women, who are heads of their households, into constant stress and self-doubt. Women also discussed the additional stress of parenting, either as a single parent or as the chief breadwinner, as a major source of anxiety and stress. Participants described grappling with feelings of overwhelming guilt, for not being able to better provide for their children, and fear for their children's safety and future opportunities. One participant spoke to the difficulty of recognizing but being unable to address her children's trauma:

"I have five children and all of them still need to wear diapers, even my oldest, who is eight. I can't figure out what the problem is, and it's really hard to find the money for their diapers, on top of all our other expenses. I worry about my kids so much. They are suffering and there's not much I can do."

Another participant shared a similar perspective about her youngest brother:

"My little brother, who is nine years old, suffers from involuntary urination. He often wets the bed, and I cannot afford to take him to a doctor to address this problem. I know it has to do with all the trauma and fear he feels, and it is hard to see him suffer like this."

Work-related challenges

The lack of institutional support for the new role they found themselves in was a central challenge for the women we spoke with. For those who had never before had to be responsible for their family's livelihood, monitoring budgets and finances, finding a job, and navigating economic relationships with landowners, *shaweesh* and clients, was all new. Coupled with the fear of eviction and being unable to secure basic household needs, challenges around livelihoods generation are considerable for women who are heads of their households. In practical terms, the demands on their time are often extremely high, between caretaking responsibilities and work. According to one participant, her schedule does not allow for any personal time and means that she is constantly under pressure, both at home and at work:

"I work every day from 2 pm to 7 pm. As soon as I get home, I have to prepare the dinner, take care of my children, help them with homework, and carry out the household chores. I run around until midnight so that in the morning I can finish all the chores before going to work. When I go to work I leave two of my children with my husband and the youngest one with my neighbor, but I worry about them the whole time."

Many female heads of households are unable to advocate for themselves at work, for fear of losing their jobs. Another woman, aged 19, shared her work schedule, which consisted of 12-hour workdays and no vacation time or weekends off. She feels "lucky, all in all" since she has a job that pays marginally better than the average salary. This participant supports 15 people on her salary between her brothers and their wives and children, none of whom can work. Regarding community challenges, many participants reported that host community judgment and harassment presents a considerable challenge. Participants recounted being judged by Lebanese host communities and treated differently by Lebanese employers. One woman expressed frustration with the lack of equal treatment in the workplace: "We work more than the Lebanese works, but if we make even the smallest mistake they start yelling at us and threatening to fire us."

Zooming out: Opportunities for agency transformation

Individual-level transformation

Female heads of households are at the vanguard of identity negotiation and formation among Syrian refugee communities. The traumatic and highly subjective experience of displacement, combined with the challenges and opportunities wrapped up in these women's new identity as heads of their households, does not map onto generalizable or unitary changes. At the same time, patterns did emerge in terms of how these women expressed their changing self-concept and ideas around gender roles and social norms and expectations. Women discussed feeling robbed of their former lives, feeling spread far too thin by their competing responsibilities, and struggling with the psychological toll of displacement, loss, and economic and legal insecurity. One woman confessed, "When I see my neighbors going out, buying stuff, not working, just sitting at home, I feel jealous of them for not having my concerns and responsibilities." Another participant related her story of extreme personal trauma and growing resilience, highlighting the positive role of participating in NGO programming:

"I needed support to cope with my depression and trauma, in the months after arriving in Lebanon. I had lost everything: my husband, our home, my old life. I heard about a local NGO that provides psychological support and counseling. They let me come to these sessions, and then they trained me to give these same sessions to other women. I started working there as a volunteer to help the women in my community build the tools they needed to work through their pain and trauma."

Moving from the role of recipients of services to an active provider of those services played a transformative role in this woman's healing. Another participant shared a similar story: "I started attending psychological support sessions at a local NGO, and that really helped. I did not feel so alone or so overwhelmed. After a while, I started working with them as a volunteer in the women's empowerment programming. Now I want to help share what I have learned with other women around me." Taking up active roles as leaders in their communities was essential to these women's personal development and resilience, and this

model stands out as one of the best examples of livelihoods as a source of empowerment rather than additional vulnerability. Several women expressed having undergone dramatic shifts in how they saw themselves and their place within their families and communities,

"I grew up in a very conservative family and even during my marriage I was simply a housewife. I did not have the freedom to work or to go out whenever I want, I was relegated to the home. The war changed my personality and my mentality. Now I know my rights and how to defend them. The greatest achievement I reached during the war is my personal growth."

Another woman echoed this sentiment, connecting her sense of empowerment directly to her role as head of her household: "Through my work, I found out what I am capable of and that I am able to raise my children, empower them and boost their self-confidence." The experience of confronting extreme vulnerability and trauma and still making it through intact is a source of empowerment and resilience, according to participants, who emphasized that they have gained a sense of their inner strength, discovering abilities and resilience they never knew they had.

Views on the phenomenon of early marriage and its detrimental impact on girls' education, overall independence and wellbeing have shifted dramatically over the course of these women's displacement. Whereas many participants reported having grown up in communities where the early marriage was the norm, many discussed how their views have changed over time.

"When girls don't go to school, they are exposed to early marriage which compromises their development. It starts off a cycle, with early pregnancies that limit any career and vocational opportunities. I also think that early marriage puts girls at risk of domestic violence. I was not used to seeing it this way, but I have a different perspective now."

According to another participant, she feels like her journey as a female head of a household is part of something bigger: "Here, women stood up and showed how strong they are, that they can endure and raise the new generation." This collective empowerment will have enormous consequences for Syrian society in the years to come, both in terms of impact on local economies and in terms of shifting social norms and gender roles.

Household-level transformation

Intra-family transformation is also taking place among female-headed households. For many families, having a woman working as the primary or only breadwinner was initially seen as shameful and unnatural. Though not all families handle these changes in the same way, overall a pattern emerged of gradual opening-up and acceptance within families. At times, however, particular family members and relatives are unwilling to accept this arrangement, and some women reported having relatives completely sever ties with them. One woman related her story of both rejection and support from different members of her family:

"My husband's family believes I have stolen their son away from them, and they've stopped talking to us. We used to live with them, in Wadi Khaled (Tripoli), but after we stopped receiving UNHCR aid we had to move away to find work since we couldn't find a job in Tripoli."

This woman continued:

"My husband is a different story. Since I opened a salon, he has changed. I feel like he is really proud of me now, even when he talks with his parents in Tripoli. When he talks with them on the phone he tells them he prides himself on what I am doing for our family. The most important thing for me is that he stands with me and supports me whatever I decide to do."

Some participants still experience criticism and opposition within their families, particularly those with family members back in Syria. One woman described how she came to Lebanon with an aunt, leaving her siblings with her uncles so she could find work and get the situation settled before bringing them over:

"In the meantime, my uncles started telling my siblings that I came to Lebanon to do my own bad things because I was a rebellious girl trying to escape from their control and just looking for trouble. My sisters started to hate me and even now they still think badly of me. It really hurts me."

The diversity of attitudes and experiences at the intra-family level is crucial to keep in mind, in order to avoid further polarizing communities and households, or alienating the families of female-headed households. As several participants highlighted, the more that working women and female-headed households become normalized and visible, the more families and communities' views will shift. One woman expanded on the possibilities created by the Syrian conflict and subsequent displacement:

"In a way, the war benefited a lot of Syrian women. What these women are doing here, they could not have done it in Syria. If they were widows in their community back in Syria and they wanted to work, they would not have been allowed by their own families. Their relatives would have gone against them and would have suffocated her personality. They would not let her raise her children alone, working outside the home, gaining empowerment and being independent."

Although individual women related their stories of personal empowerment, along with continuing challenges, zooming out to the household and community levels is required to reach a more holistic picture of the impact of female-headed households.

Community-level transformation

Syrian women's presence in Lebanon, in the context of social and political instability arising from the turmoil of conflict and displacement, has led community-level transformation to be difficult to evaluate, but participants did relay strong views about what has and has not changed within Syrian society. Some argued that the Syrian conflict has caused a considerable regression in terms of women's rights and place in Syrian society:

"The role of the woman has taken a significant step backward compared to 10 years ago. Poverty has led women to social exclusion, and the law doesn't protect women. Women are not considered. Our community does not see us at all."

Traditional views on gender roles and women not partaking in income-generating activities persist in many communities. According to one participant, "A lot of people are still attached to the traditions and the mentality which forbid women from going out and working." Another woman echoed this sentiment, asserting that "The greatest pressure on women is not from the family, rather from the community." Others took a more positive view of the impact of the war on Syrian communities and their views on women and work. "Here in Lebanon, Syrian women are so strong," remarked one woman. Participants emphasized that Syrian women in general, but particularly those who have become head of households, have had to develop immense creativity and resourcefulness to

support their families. Another woman expanded on this opinion: "After the war, women have become stronger, morally as well as economically. There isn't such a big difference between the role of the man and the role of the woman in the family anymore." This same participant added to this hopeful statement: "Nonetheless, women also became more vulnerable, especially within the community." Traditions and social norms are strongly rooted in Syrian communities, not all of which are repressive or restrictive. That community-level transformation is by no means comprehensive, nor can one clearly draw a positive or negative conclusion on this transformation, which is crucial to underline.

The role of NGOs and service providers: Gaps and possibilities

Overall, some participants reported being particularly dissatisfied with UNHCR's unfair selection criteria of beneficiaries, particularly because of recent cuts and discontinuations of aid, but also because they are dissatisfied with INGOs and NGOs broadly. Participants' expressed four key priorities for NGOs to take into better consideration: expanded access to education for children, improved legal aid for children born in Lebanon without documentation, better needs assessments, and adjustments to programming to make it more accessible. Women emphasized that the way in which aid and services are provided is just as important to them as the material support itself, a finding supported by a collaborative research initiative between the Overseas Development Institute and SAWA.[4]

Women brought up education almost unanimously as a priority area for them. Education access for the children of participants is severely limited, given the severe economic vulnerability experienced by these households. Most of the women with children who participated have one or more children out of school. According to one participant, none of the children in her ITS go to school: "The children don't receive any educational support from any NGO, and child labor is an issue. More than anything, I want to make sure my children have a chance to get an education." Another participant echoed this sentiment: "It kills me to

not be able to see a stable future for my kids. I don't know what's going to happen to them, growing up out of school and often without any documents." Even in light of other pressing needs, education was the number one priority for many participants, who feel strongly that education is the best way to ensure that their children have more opportunities than they have had. It is important to note that expanding funding for the education sector in isolation is not enough, since barriers to education access come from household-level economic and legal vulnerabilities. One woman underlined how widespread legal aid and civil documentation needs are in her community: "There are more than 10 kids in my camp with no papers at all, and without legal registration for anyone in their families." Given the high incidence of children at risk of statelessness, born in Lebanon to a Syrian refugee household, existing legal aid programming must be shored up to ensure that the children of female heads of households are reached. This civil documentation gap will have a bearing on every aspect of these children's future civic life, from access to education, to get a job, to crossing borders to claiming housing, land, and property.

There was a general consensus among the study participants that needs assessments should be improved to better tailor available aid to needs among refugee communities. Several participants expressed deep frustration with the status quo in terms of need determination, highlighting there should be a minimal "accountability and justice" within NGOs and INGOs. One woman shared an example of a woman she knows with serious chronic health problems. The participant raised her case to UNHCR three times, but "nothing happened, she is not receiving any aid, not even winterization support. There should be priorities. What criteria are they using?" Another participant spoke about a project that was providing vulnerable refugee households with accommodation in houses for one year. According to this participant, "those who have benefited from this project were not the neediest families." One Palestinian woman from Syria (Yarmouk Camp in Damascus) told us she had experienced different treatment because of her nationality: "Within the NGOs there is discrimination. I wanted to start a project by myself but I was not eligible, because I am Palestinian." Participants' opinions about the NGOs' level of culpability when it comes to needs assessments varied, from the conviction that NGOs knowingly provide aid to non-vulnerable people, to the idea that the needs assessments are flawed and therefore identify the

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4   ODI (2018). *"Dignity and Displaced Syrians in Lebanon: There is no karama here."*
Available at: https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/ resource-documents/12532.pdf

wrong people. Across the board, their frustration and disillusionment with the way and to whom aid is distributed highlighted the urgent need for improved communication with and accountability to crisis-affected populations.

Beyond this broad recommendation, the women we spoke with emphasized that existing needs assessments fail to take into proper consideration the fact that their status as heads of their households is often associated with heightened vulnerabilities, and that their families need additional support, whether for family members with disabilities or other special needs, for children at higher risk of dropping out of school and/or engaging in child labor, for managing debt burdens, or for the psycho-social needs of female heads of households themselves. In terms of programmatic changes, NGOs should ensure that their services and programming are more accessible to female-headed households. As things stand, many of the most vulnerable women may be excluded from NGO programming, either because of when and where the programming is, or because they believe it will not be useful: "There are a lot of women who are not interested in NGO programming, because they don't have time or don't feel that it is relevant to them." Participants emphasized three central barriers to their access to NGO programming: timing, location, and childcare. First, timing of sessions and workshops is of paramount importance. When sessions are held only during the late morning or early afternoon, women who have rigid work schedules outside the home are often unable to access this programming. For example, one woman told us, "I would like to attend awareness or empowering sessions but my work schedule does not allow me to participate." Similarly, when sessions are not aligned with school schedules, women may have a more difficult time attending if their children are home and in need of supervision. Finally, a greater degree of flexibility in terms of timing would be beneficial, since many women who work through *shaweesh*-brokered arrangements have little control over their work schedule and may have very different working hours from week to week. In one FGD, a participant explained:

"We have never taken part in any project with any NGO, so we don't have a clear idea of what an NGO does exactly. Many times they asked us to participate. But all the projects require a commitment to a set time and we cannot. Sometimes the shaweesh calls us for work without warning so we must always be ready and available. We don't have a stable schedule."

Having a greater range of times for sessions, including in the evenings, and reworking the schedule or system so that women can choose sessions over a longer period of time to complete a program cycle based on their availability would greatly help to address this issue.

Regarding the content of programming, participants advocated for expanded PSS and vocational training programs, as well as awareness sessions, such as women's empowerment, SGBV prevention, and child protection. According to one woman, NGOs have had a tangible, positive impact in terms of providing PSS to women: "The NGOs helped us to get out of our psychological state which was very bad before working with them." While women identified awareness sessions and training as important for them, they also emphasized that these services should not be provided to the detriment of basic material support. One woman explained, "It's good to be aware and empowered but we need financial support more than everything else." Participants emphasized that NGOs can be their biggest assets and that NGO programming and services have been life-changing for many of them, in terms of their practical vocational skills but also their self-concept, psychological well-being, and self-confidence. It is vital to continue to push for improvements to communication and coordination within and between NGOs and all other stakeholders, in order to involve and support women who are heads of their households, in the most sustainable and effective manner possible.

CONCLUSION

Prior to the conflict, the gendered division of roles and responsibilities and the unbalanced access between rural and urban areas to education and socio-economic development have had a determining impact on the variety of skills that women can maintain, aside from those of the home economy. Employment for women in rural and suburban communities was characterized by unpaid informal employment in domestic chores and agriculture. Although women in urban areas, comparatively, had a higher level of access to education, they were often unable to secure high-level jobs. Correspondingly, the stringent gender customs lessen women's ability to access employment or acquire power and agency, whether intra-household in terms of family structures delimiting women's power and agency, or outside the home in terms of employment and leadership. Having had to flee from conflict to Lebanon, Syrian refugee women were obliged to participate in informal income-generating activities, either because their husband or sons had died or were injured and disabled in the conflict. Tightening legal and material vulnerabilities both disproportionately affect refugee women and men in Lebanon, but overwhelm women when supervising their households. Still, layered fundamental vulnerabilities, prior to the displacement in communities of origin, coupled with those in protracted displacement in Lebanon, have resulted in jeopardizing women to more gendered and material vulnerabilities.

The emerging shift in roles remains nevertheless consistent with the former gender-normative roles from their communities of origin in terms of work that is appropriate and ascribed to women but coupled with serious hurdles such as sexual gender-based and working rights violations. Despite a relative stability to the gender notions regarding women and work, there are still some differences regarding women of rural or urban origins, especially when it comes to certain work arrangement circumstances, namely, if it is self-organized or facilitated, who is the employer, and if the work is inside or outside the camp. Rural women who head their households seem to be more satisfied with informal self-organized work arrangements inside the home, with the exception being the *shaweesh*-brokered work arrangements. *Shaweesh*-facilitated possibilities, particularly in seasonal agriculture and sometimes outside the

camp, are still perceived as a socially agreeable dynamic within the camp where residents' mindsets are entrenched in tribalism and ruralism. SGBV and work violations are integral to such circumstances where utilitarian structures are principally established to overwork women and their dependent working girls. While women heading their households rely on informal social networks in and out of the home to sidestep power imperatives imposed by *shaweesh*-established networks, they become repeatedly more susceptible to sexual harassment and work violations.

Female-headed households' reflection on the role of NGOs appears double-edged. On the one hand, women's positionality as principal supporters of their families is not taken into consideration during programmatic interventions. Moreover, programming was often unfair and unsustainable, mostly aligned with unjustified interruptions in service delivery. Besides that, they improperly assessed or neglected their status as heads of household and the needs and obligations accompanying this status, chiefly in circumstances of excessive debt as well as child labor and illiteracy. On the other hand, the presence of these organizations created safe spaces for the women, especially in terms of PSS implementation and vocational training. Awareness programs have been particularly important for those who head their families if they are subjected to domestic violence and sexual harassment, especially in the outside-home work arrangement.

The gender role shifts were sudden and involuntary for many, with extra responsibilities and pressure having been thrust upon them. In their new roles, they encountered additional challenges on both personal and practical levels. Not only were they to continue to fulfill the caretaking responsibilities in regards to the house and the children, but as heads of households, they were also responsible for supporting the family through work and livelihood activities. In addition to having limited support in the home, the women also needed to deal with a lack of institutional support when it came to navigating financial responsibilities, work conditions and managing relationships with landowners or *shaweesh*. While most have not had experience in these matters before, they also encounter judgment and harassment from the host communities, adding another layer of difficulty. These burdens take an emotional as well as psychological toll, making the assumption of this new role strenuous and frustrating. One of the contributing factors of women suddenly finding themselves acting as

heads of households is due to notable incidences of disabilities, people with specific needs, and impediments both physical and mental. Women assumed additional roles because their male relatives were unable to do so. Many of them had sustained terrible injuries from the conflict, the violence and the torture that they experienced. These physical limitations prevent them from working and generating income, thus transferring this responsibility onto women by default. Many related stories of the tragic circumstances led them to where they are and the hardships they have had to carry. It also manifested itself in children and other members of the family, who have difficulty processing the trauma or have insufficient resources to do so. Sometimes the assaults even originated from within the home, in the case of domestic violence. The constant stress and overlapping pressures then lead to other health issues and illnesses such as physical pain and high blood pressure.

This study aims to contribute to a broadening and deepening of our understanding of the socio-economic dynamics of Syrian female-headed households operating in the informal economy from a gender lens. It focuses on gendered implications resulting from layered and structural vulnerabilities and high exposure to different risks in displaced communities and informal social networks, combined with low social protection, and on the interaction between vulnerability and economic informality in a humanitarian context. It also highlights more gaps that require further research to be addressed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

► Create alternatives to work arrangements brokered through *shaweesh* by establishing local committees within camps that will be equipped with awareness sessions on recognizing their exploitative nature and will serve to bolster agency. To complement the exercises of the awareness sessions, livelihood projects should be provided for female-headed households where they can earn an alternative income to that which would be earned through a *shaweesh*, thus discouraging participation in their precarious system.

► Adopt gender equality mainstreaming for programmatic interventions.

- Incorporate a gender mainstreamed approach across the board, rather than siloed-off as an isolated program.

- Incorporate a consistent approach to systematic monitoring and evaluation of gender equality mainstreaming.

- Integrate gender dynamics analysis (e.g., gender norms and inequalities, intra-household and between *shaweesh* and households, and in access to economic resources in *shaweesh*-managed displaced communities) into the entire life of programmatic intervention, from design and implementation, to monitoring and evaluation.

- Integrate accountability and oversight mechanisms for gender equality within NGOs and donor entities, particularly for service delivery and gender-based programming.

► Shore up education programming and access, particularly for girls who have dropped out of school and are involved in informal *shaweesh*-brokered employment, keeping in mind the economic and legal barriers to education access.

► Address legal status and civil documentation barriers for families, particularly for female heads of families, and families with unregistered children at risk of statelessness.

▶ Ensure that programming is more accessible to women who are heads of their households.

- Make programming available during the evening to accommodate work schedules.

- Prioritize childcare during any programming, so that female heads of households and other women can bring their children to sessions and trainings.

- Reevaluate the format for sessions and trainings, to make them more flexible. For instance, consider moving to a module format where participants decide which sessions to attend based on their availability and interests, and need to complete a certain number of sessions to complete a program, outside of the traditional weekly, chronological format.

- Incorporate more training and programming about budgeting, debt-handling, financial literacy, and digital literacy, along with leadership skills and PSS programming.

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Lebanon and the Arab region are facing one of the largest refugee crises spawning serious public policy challenges. Given this context, the Refugee Research and Policy program generates refugee related/policy-oriented research that addresses an existing knowledge gap in the field of refugee studies. Moreover, the program seeks to enrich the quality of debate among scholars, officials, international organizations, and civil society actors, with the aim to inform policymaking relating to refugees in the Middle East and beyond.

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. *Providing a space to enrich the quality of interaction among scholars, officials and civil society actors in and about the Arab world;*

. *Disseminating knowledge that is accessible to policy-makers, media, research communities and the general public.*