

SHIFTING SANDS

Changing gender roles among refugees in Lebanon



A family sit in a temporary shelter in an abandoned shopping centre, Tripoli, May 2013. Oxfam / Sam Tarling

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The conflict in Syria has created a humanitarian crisis, with almost two million people having fled to neighbouring countries in the hope of escaping the violence. Thousands of Syrian refugees continue to enter Lebanon each week, putting increasing pressure on the ability of host communities and aid agencies to provide them with support. The situation has created intense levels of stress for refugees, as in many cases they are forced to take on new responsibilities at odds with their traditional gendered social roles. In order to understand these changing roles, Oxfam and the ABAAD – Resource Centre for Gender Equality conducted a gender situation and vulnerability assessment among Syrian refugees and Palestinian refugees from Syria now living in Lebanon. The findings are presented in this report, which aims to contribute to an improved understanding of the gendered impact of the Syrian conflict and subsequent displacement on refugees now in Lebanon. The report concludes with detailed recommendations for development and humanitarian practitioners and donor agencies, to help them design and implement gender-sensitive programming that addresses these shifting gender roles and helps to minimize stress and tensions among refugee populations (at individual, household and community levels) and between refugee and host communities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Syrian conflict has resulted in approximately a million people fleeing to Lebanon¹ – equivalent to nearly 25 per cent of the Lebanese population of 4.2 million.² Despite the efforts of the Lebanese authorities, generous Lebanese citizens, UN agencies, and international and national aid organizations, this overwhelming influx of refugees has created intense stresses, as refugees find themselves having to take on new roles and responsibilities that are often at odds with their traditional gendered social roles. Many refugee men are experiencing severe stress and feelings of powerlessness because they are unable to fulfil their traditional role as family provider and protector, while many refugee women and girls no longer have access to the resources and services they used to have in Syria before the conflict began, which enabled them to fulfil their traditional gender role.

In order to understand these changing gender roles, Oxfam and ABAAD – Resource Center for Gender Equality carried out a gender situation and vulnerability assessment among Syrian refugees and Palestinian refugees from Syria now living in Lebanon, which involved over 150 people. Qualitative research was conducted using focus group discussions and individual interviews with key people and individual refugees in March and April 2013. The aim was to explore people's experiences of how their gendered social and economic roles are changing, and the negative and positive effects these changes are having on their lives. The areas investigated included: changes to gendered norms, values and identities; changes in people's physical safety and emotional well-being; changing gendered control over resources; and gendered access to aid and basic services.

Although the research provides useful insights into their experiences, the limited number of interviewees means that it is not a comprehensive picture and offers only a snapshot of the situation for Syrian refugees or Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon. Being a rapid impact assessment, the fieldwork was conducted in less than ten days. While this research did not address the problems faced by host communities, many poor Lebanese men, women and children are also feeling the effects of the Syria crisis, which has had a devastating impact on the Lebanese economy.

This report presents the findings and analysis from the assessment. It aims to contribute to an improved understanding of the gendered impact of the Syrian conflict on refugee women and men, girls and boys. It concludes with detailed recommendations for development and humanitarian practitioners and donor agencies to help them design and implement gender-sensitive programming that addresses these shifting gender roles and helps to minimize stress and tensions among refugee populations (at individual, household and community levels) and between refugee and host communities. The recommendations look at the ways that those involved in the humanitarian response can work more effectively together on programmes that focus on gendered identity, gender-based violence and protection, employment and income generation, housing and rent payments, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), health and education, and children's rights.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Changes in gendered norms, values and identities

Patterns of mobility and life styles have changed, and, in part as a result of this, both women and men have been forced to redefine core aspects of their identities. As well as losing their traditional role as breadwinner, men seeking jobs and services also often face threats and discrimination from some members of host communities. Many women reported feeling that they have lost their femininity as, in addition to caring for their families, they now have to support them by going to the market, running errands, making decisions, and working in paid informal employment. However, for some other women this has created an increased sense of empowerment.

Changes in levels of gender-based violence, protection, and emotional stress

Families fled Syria because they feared for their lives, yet for many, their safety and security remain under threat. Despite generous assistance from most Lebanese communities, many respondents reported experiencing xenophobia, discrimination and hostility.

Protection and security

Lower self-esteem among refugee men because of the crisis has, in some cases, led to a negative expression of masculinity. Violence towards women and children has increased as some men vent their frustration and abuse their power within the household.

Outside the household, there are also examples of women and girls who are vulnerable to physical and verbal harassment, including sexual harassment, and in many areas they fear kidnap, robbery, and attacks. Widowed or other women on their own are particularly vulnerable, with some pretending in public to receive phone calls from their former husbands, to protect themselves from male harassment.

Early marriage

Although early marriage of daughters was common practice in Syria before the conflict began, this is reportedly also being increasingly resorted to as a new coping strategy, either as a way of protecting young girls or easing pressures on family finances.

Freedom of movement

For many women respondents, mobility in Syria before the conflict was very limited, as they were only allowed to leave the house with the male head of the household's permission and when accompanied by men. As refugees in Lebanon, their movement is still restricted, though principally because of insecurity and fears of harassment or attack. Living in overcrowded conditions means that many women are no longer able to go into a different room whenever men who are not relatives come to visit male family members, as they would have done before. Now, if an unrelated man visits the household, women go to their female neighbour's house until a man separates the room with bedsheets. Women can then stay behind these bedsheets so that they are not seen by the visitors.

Stress and anxiety

Stress and anxiety will inevitably affect all refugees who fled the conflict in Syria. However, how this manifests itself, and how refugees express and deal with these anxieties, is highly gendered. Many are suffering because they have no one to talk to about their worries. Many men feel they cannot meet society's expectations of them as men.

Women are still expected to fulfil their traditional roles, but have lost the resources they used to depend upon. They cope by prioritizing the needs of their husbands and children, often to the detriment of their own health and well-being. Living in overcrowded and poor accommodation has increased the feelings of anxiety for men and women alike, as the lack of privacy can undermine their own sense of dignity.

Male respondents also talked about feelings of guilt over choosing to leave Syria with their families rather than stay and fulfil their role as protectors and defenders of their land, which has added to their feelings of low self-worth and powerlessness.

Many refugees (both women and men) are also extremely worried about family members and others who remain in Syria and would like to help the people still there. In addition men reported feeling that they needed to protect and provide for their own families.

Changes in gendered control over resources

Employment and income

Refugees, whether women or men, have very limited opportunities for work in Lebanon. Even if they do find work, wages are low, working conditions generally poor, and refugees often face discrimination or harassment. Despite this, many wish to work, as unemployment means they can no longer provide for their families (which also further lowers self-esteem, particularly for men).

Despite some shifting gender roles, refugee men generally retain control over household income, and as the head of household are often the primary recipients of income-generating activities or cash transfers. Men decide how cash is spent, although women are often responsible for receiving distributions of food or other (e.g. blankets, jerry cans etc.) items. Widowed and other women on their own frequently lose out, and are often excluded from receiving aid as there is no male member of the household to be registered with humanitarian agencies and cultural norms often prevent them from going to register by themselves.

Access to food

Most refugees (whether Syrians or Palestinian refugees who were living in Syria before the conflict) participating in this research reported eating less since they arrived in Lebanon. Bearing the brunt of financial hardship, women sometimes resort to harmful coping strategies. Many have cut down on their own food intake so that children and men in the household can eat. Respondents reported that certain types of aid (specifically food vouchers) are insufficient; some respondents reported selling their vouchers at lower than face value to get cash to pay rent and other expenses

Housing and accommodation

Without outside assistance, the capacity of local communities to host more refugees will become exhausted. The majority of refugees interviewed owned their own houses in Syria and so had no rent costs, but in Lebanon, many are paying high rents for poor-quality accommodation, sometimes in garages or shacks. In some cases, boys are having to work to pay the rent when their fathers are unable to find employment. Respondents reported renting rooms with no electricity or sanitary facilities; in one instance 20 people were reported to be sharing one room, further depriving individuals of their privacy and sense of dignity. Some respondents reported receiving temporary support from aid agencies for rent costs but lack long-term means of support. Women are still the main care-givers and are responsible for their families' wellbeing, but living in poor quality accommodation makes it much harder for them to fulfil this role.

Gendered access to aid and basic services

One of the biggest changes that refugees have to cope with is the sudden reduction in their access to basic services since fleeing their homes in Syria. Previously, Syrian families had good access to education (in 2009, 93 per cent of girls and 94 per cent of boys were enrolled in primary school, for example³) and health care (in 2009, 96 per cent of pregnant women gave birth in the presence of a skilled health attendant⁴), as well as other basic services. Now they are coping with a drastically different reality.

Water, sanitation and hygiene

Syrian refugees and Palestinian refugees, who were living in Syria but fled to Lebanon, interviewed for this research, reported a lack access to appropriate water and sanitation facilities. Inadequate water sources and sanitation facilities affects women disproportionately as they often prioritize their husbands and children's need above their own. Limited water supply also increases women's time and work burden given their gendered responsibility for washing and cleaning.

The rapidly increasing refugee population is putting pressure on the supply of safe water, and funds to expand water-tankering operations to areas without running water are insufficient. The lack of such services creates public health risks and greater vulnerability to sickness and infections.

Education

It has been estimated that only one in four refugee children are attending school, due to space limitations, language barriers given prevalence of English instruction, and difficulty of access (either because the schools are too far away and travel is unsafe – or perceived to be unsafe especially for girls - or because they thought they were not entitled to attend). Some girls who took part in the assessment were not allowed to go to school because parents, especially fathers, are reluctant to send them to mixed schools for cultural reasons. Additionally, the need for many young boys to work and support the household not only prevents them from studying, but also has disrupted the power dynamic within families, causing tensions within the family, because income generation was traditionally the father's role.

Health

A recent estimate suggests that half of all refugees in Lebanon are not receiving necessary medical treatment, mostly because they cannot afford it.⁵ Aid agencies are providing some services, but the scale of needs has exceeded their resources. Compounding this, many refugees do not know where to go to get help. Chronically ill people, pregnant and lactating women, and children are particularly in urgent need of affordable health services, while the needs of older people and people with disabilities have been largely ignored. One of the biggest gaps is for psychosocial support, particularly given the increased levels of fear, stress, and anxiety that many refugees are experiencing.

Access to and appropriateness of aid

Respondents reported significant problems with provision of appropriate food and non-food items, which are distributed (usually to women) through a voucher system. Cash payments for rent and health services are also being provided, although not consistently, and are often paid to men as heads of household – both conforming to, and perpetuating, traditional gender roles. There are concerns about single women or female-headed households not receiving assistance because gaps in targeting of cash or rent payments (focused on male head of households) and cultural norms around mobility. Refugee women also reported that the personal care and sanitary items they receive are not suitable or of poor quality, in some cases causing health problems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research findings indicate that humanitarian organizations need to manifest a clear organizational commitment to promoting gender equality, which must be embedded into all aspects of programming. Gender and social analysis must be conducted as part of all emergency responses. Sex and age-disaggregated data should be collected, analysed, and used in planning and implementation of aid projects. Refugee women and men's anxieties and fears about their changing gender roles need to be acknowledged and addressed. This can be used as an entry point for challenging attitudes that have traditionally limited women's participation in social, economic and political life, and also for changing long-established social norms, such as women's restricted freedom of movement. It is also an opportunity to give much greater attention to engaging men and boys on gender issues, and providing targeted counselling and mental health services for men who are struggling to cope with low self-esteem and help deal with their inability to fulfil their traditional gender roles.

Programme design should utilize refugees' existing skills and capacities, as well as meeting their needs. Access to income-generating programmes and other benefits and assistance should be equally available to women and men.

Donors need to hold implementing agencies accountable for delivery of programmes that are gender sensitive. Mechanisms should be in place so that feedback from women and men, and boys and girls, is channelled in the right direction and responded to promptly.

Detailed recommendations for development and humanitarian practitioners and donor agencies designing and implementing gender-sensitive programmes can be found in Section 3: Findings and Analysis.

NOTES

All URLs last accessed August 2013

- ¹ UNHCR (2013) 'Syrian Regional Refugee Response: Lebanon', <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122> – a million people estimated by the Lebanon government in March 2013
- ² UN Statistics Database, 'Lebanon', <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/pocketbook/PDF/2013/Lebanon.pdf>
- ³ World Bank data, 'School enrollment, primary (% net)', <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.NENR/countries/SY?display=graph>
- ⁴ World Bank data, 'Births attended by skilled health staff (% of total)', <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.STA.BRTC.ZS/countries/SY?display=graph>
- ⁵ MSF (2013) 'Misery Beyond the War Zone: Life for Syrian Refugees and Displaced Populations in Lebanon', Médecins Sans Frontières, p. 7, <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/reports/2013/Syria-Lebanon-Report-2013.pdf>

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