



# ‘NO ONE ASKED...’

Amplifying the voices of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon on their power to decide

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*‘No one asked me about my role as a woman, no one asked me about my political opinions and the peace process. Both are linked, but no one asked.’*

A woman in north Lebanon

Contributing to existing efforts to amplify women’s voices, this study focuses on the decision-making power of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon and explores the extent to which they are able to make and/or shape decisions that have direct implications for their lives and futures. Constraints to women’s decision making at the personal level translate into further restrictions at the familial or communal levels and continue to materialize at the national and international levels. This cycle has direct implications for women’s lives. By highlighting women’s voices and distinct priorities, the research argues that if these continue to be overlooked and excluded from decision-making platforms – from domestic and international politics, to personal, familial and communal spaces – then policy and programmatic interventions will fail to address women’s needs and concerns and to deliver real and lasting impact on their lives and futures. This research project informs Oxfam’s current and future programming in Lebanon, and its policy and influencing strategies.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to every one of the 40 women who opened their homes to us and agreed to share their time and their stories. We would like to thank all of those who contributed to the research process in one way or another, especially Ahmad Azzam, Fatima Masri, Jihan Takla, Lara El Bekaii, Ryanna Chouman, Sahar El Bachir, Suha Allouche and all the Oxfam teams and partners in Lebanon.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

GBV	Gender-based violence
INGO	International non-government organization
IPV	Intimate partner violence
MEAL	Monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Globally, slow progress has been made in the past 30 years towards narrowing the gender gap in women's decision-making power, though social norms and the highly gendered and patriarchal spaces where decisions and policies are formed continue to constrain women's ability to voice their priorities (Domingo et al., 2015). As refugees, the limited influence that women have over decisions about their lives and futures is further constrained, as existing inequalities are exacerbated by conflict and displacement (Lafrenière et al., 2019).

In 2017, Oxfam in Lebanon published a protection research report (Shawaf and El Asmar, 2017) on Syrian refugees' perceptions and expectations around their past, present and future. Building on the understanding that life experiences – and specifically those of displacement and of being a refugee – are highly gendered, the research team identified a clear gap in knowledge around refugee women's distinct experiences, expectations and decision-making power. This reflects a wider structural issue in humanitarian crises and responses, whereby women's specific experiences are often overlooked, and their needs inadequately addressed.

Contributing to existing efforts to amplify women's voices, this study focuses on the decision-making power of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon and explores the extent to which they are able to make and/or shape decisions that have direct implications for their lives and futures. **By highlighting women's voices and distinct priorities, the research argues that if these continue to be overlooked and excluded from decision-making platforms – from domestic and international politics, to personal, familial and communal spaces – then policy and programmatic interventions will fail to address women's needs and concerns and to deliver real and lasting impact on their lives and futures.**

Drawing on 40 in-depth qualitative interviews with Syrian refugee women in North Bekaa and Tripoli, the research findings explore different levels of decision making and unpack gendered social norms and power dynamics that shape the women's ability to influence decisions about their lives and futures.

## Decisions around daily life

Women's descriptions of their daily lives in Syria prior to the war indicate that their main responsibilities related to care and domestic labour, and despite their sizeable contributions to agricultural work, this would only be considered an extension of those responsibilities. This **gendered division of roles had direct implications on women's decision-making power at all levels, and particularly within the family or community.** In Lebanon, the same social norms are sustained. While their previous care and domestic role remains intact, displacement has imposed new responsibilities on women, such as generating income for their families. However, this has not translated into increased decision-making power, and women remain stripped of the power to make decisions about their own lives.

## Decisions around safety and protection

For all 40 women interviewed, safety remains the priority, indicating that the decisions that are most important for them are intrinsically related to leaving or returning to Syria. **In times of conflict, constraints to women's decision making are exacerbated, and social norms continue to dictate set roles and take power away from women.** Exploring the gendered dynamics behind the decision to leave Syria reveals that the final decision was always made by the man heading the household, though in some cases women did have some influence.

Initiating discussions around decision making for the future was challenging, as **most women believe that any return to Syria at present would be very dangerous, and perceive return to a country that offers safety and the conditions for a dignified life to be a distant dream.** Information received from inside Syria – from friends and relatives – most heavily influences women's expectations regarding return, and almost always highlights the situation as unsafe.

As with the process of deciding to leave Syria, gendered power imbalances continue to shape decision making affecting Syrian women's lives. The voices, opinions and concerns of men remain at the centre, leaving little to no space for women to voice their own priorities. **Women have expressed fears about being forced to return to an unsafe Syria by a male authority figure in their household.**

The Government of Lebanon's political discourse continues to press for the premature return of refugees. While the refugee women interviewed were aware of these calls, they had little information about how this translated into practice, though this is often brought up in conversations with refugee men. **Women's decision-making power is thus twice restricted: first by the pressure for premature return placed on refugees in the country, and second by information and decision-making being concentrated with men in their households.**

Though decision making around returns is often perceived to be an individual or family process, interviews revealed that communities and community leaders also have power over such decisions. As patriarchal norms are embedded within communal decision-making processes, women are often excluded from these and compelled to comply with the ensuing decisions. **Communal decision-making processes therefore pose an added threat to women resulting in their premature or involuntary return.**

The women interviewed highlighted their own exclusion from national, regional and international platforms that discuss the future of Syria, explaining that these fail to reflect their realities and priorities. They are calling for their increased participation in all decision-making platforms so that their voices can be heard, as these processes have direct implications for their lives and futures. While efforts by Syrian women to be involved and engaged in such platforms do exist, they are very limited and the space for women's participation remains extremely narrow.

### **Syrian refugee women's conditions for return**

**Returns must be voluntary, safe, dignified and founded on informed decisions.** Current conditions in Syria are not conducive for return. Syrian refugee women interviewed for this study identified a wide range of conditions necessary for their return. These can be divided into three main categories: safety, which accounts for the majority of their conditions; safe and sustainable access to services, livelihoods and infrastructure; and conditions related to border control both in Lebanon and in Syria. **Interviewees made clear distinctions between what needs to be in place before they return, and what can be worked on if and when they return. All of the women interviewed insisted that the preconditions for return remain unfulfilled.**

Syrian refugee women face layered and complex threats of forced return, at all levels where their decision-making power is constrained. Their experiences of displacement are highly gendered, and this has direct implications for the voluntariness (or otherwise) of their return – a fact that is often overlooked when power dynamics at all levels remain unexplored and when refugees' experiences and needs are conflated. **Constraints to women's decision making at the personal level translate into further restrictions at the familial or communal levels and continue to materialize at the national and international levels. This cycle has direct implications for women's lives.**

# 1 INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Globally, slow progress has been made in the past 30 years towards narrowing the gender gap in women's decision-making power and representation at political, economic and social levels. This has largely been credited to women's and feminist movements. Women's individual and collective actions around the world have been instrumental to social change, and their mobilization and organization efforts have increased their ability to make demands and achieve gains for gender justice. Nevertheless, social norms and the highly gendered and patriarchal spaces where decisions and policies are formed continue to constrain women's ability to voice their priorities. They are less likely to reach key decision-making positions and are systematically excluded from platforms and the often-invisible pathways through which negotiations take place (Domingo et al., 2015).

## **Box 1: Decision-making power**

'Decision-making power is the ability to influence decisions that affect one's life – both private and public. Formal access to positions of authority and to decision-making processes is an important, if insufficient, condition for women to have decision-making power in the public domain. In fact, decision-making power is a composite of access, capabilities and actions that shape whether women have influence over the polity or decisions about their private life. Having influence with, over and through people and processes is therefore central to both leadership and decision-making power.'

O'Neil and Domingo (2015). The power to decide. Women, decision-making and gender equality. ODI

As refugees, women face additional constraints to their decision-making power, stemming from existing inequalities and exacerbated by conflict and displacement. They find themselves disproportionately affected by those challenges as they usually have to navigate unsafe environments where their mobility and access to basic services is restricted and protection concerns increase, particularly the risks of exploitation, harassment and abuse. This also adds significant strain on their already compromised livelihoods. As a result, the limited influence that women have over decisions about their lives and futures is further constrained, and this is particularly true of decision making around durable solutions (Lafrenière et al., 2019).

In 2017, Oxfam in Lebanon published a protection research report on Syrian refugees' perceptions and expectations around their past, present and future (Shawaf and El Asmar, 2017). It argues that refugees' perceptions, lived experiences and expectations about their own futures should form the building blocks of durable solutions, whereby freedom to make choices is a fundamental component of dignity. Building on the understanding that life experiences – specifically those of displacement and being a refugee – are highly gendered, the research team identified a limitation for the report, and a clear gap in information and knowledge around refugee women's distinct experiences, expectations and influence over decisions that concern their lives and futures. This reflects a wider structural issue in humanitarian crises and responses, whereby women's specific experiences are often overlooked, and their needs inadequately addressed. It is also the result of common assumptions that refugees have shared priorities and concerns, thereby conflating their experiences. Though efforts have been made to address those gaps, the mainstream discourse around 'what refugees want and need' fails to capture the nuanced experiences of different groups of people and blurs the gendered differences that shape their lived realities. As the needs, challenges and concerns that are most often captured are those of men – particularly men who are the least marginalized and the most visible – women's subjective experiences go unheard and ignored, and as a result, their priorities continue to be overlooked.

This study contributes to existing efforts to amplify women's voices and constitutes a small step towards capturing and addressing women's priorities and concerns and ensuring that these inform programmes and policy making. We focus on the decision-making power of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon, and through our analysis, explore the extent to which they are able to make and/or shape those decisions that have direct implications for their lives and futures.

By highlighting women's voices and distinct priorities, the research argues that if these continue to be overlooked and excluded from decision-making platforms – from domestic and international politics, to personal, familial and communal spaces – then policy and programmatic interventions will fail to address women's needs and concerns and to deliver real and lasting impact on their lives and futures.

## CONTEXT

Lebanon hosts 1.5 million Syrian refugees, of whom 926,717 (UNHCR, July 2019) are registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), making it the country with the highest concentration of refugees per capita. Women and girls make up more than half of the refugee population in the country. In 2015, the Government of Lebanon suspended the UNHCR registration of Syrians in Lebanon; thus, the official figures of registered refugees do not adequately reflect the number of Syrians seeking refuge in Lebanon. Lebanon is not a signatory to the Geneva 1951 Refugee Convention and has no national legislation dealing with refugees and refugee status. Although people fleeing Syria are considered 'de-facto refugees', the Government of Lebanon refers to them as 'displaced' (Janmyr, 2016).

In the current environment, refugees have limited access to legal status, no access to refugee status, restricted access to a decent and dignified life, and no prospects for safe and sustainable solutions. With a continuously shrinking protection environment, Syrian men and women who sought refuge in Lebanon face immense pressures just to survive day to day, let alone think about and plan for their future.

Syrian refugees in Lebanon are subject to residency regulations that are usually required for foreigners residing in Lebanon. The two common residency renewal pathways for those refugees are either on the basis of UNHCR registration or through the sponsorship system, which requires a yearly payment of a \$200 fee and increases the risk of exploitation.<sup>1</sup> Since men are more commonly arrested at checkpoints and during raids than women, families often prioritize renewing men's residency permits over women's. Many families have no permits at all: the 2018 Vulnerability Assessment for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon indicates that around 73% of Syrian refugees have not obtained a residency permit or regularized their status in the country. As a result, women have had to be the main actors outside of their homes and immediate circles – from having to generate income to accompanying relatives on hospital visits, all the way to 'go and see visits' to check the situation in Syria. Though women are less likely than men to be stopped at checkpoints, arrested or detained, this situation nevertheless places them at higher risk of exploitation and harassment. Most literature focuses on refugee men's vulnerabilities, mainly due to their inability to obtain legal status and their exposure to arrest and detention. Yet Syrian women who have sought refuge in Lebanon are disproportionately affected by this reality, as they must carry double the burden it creates.

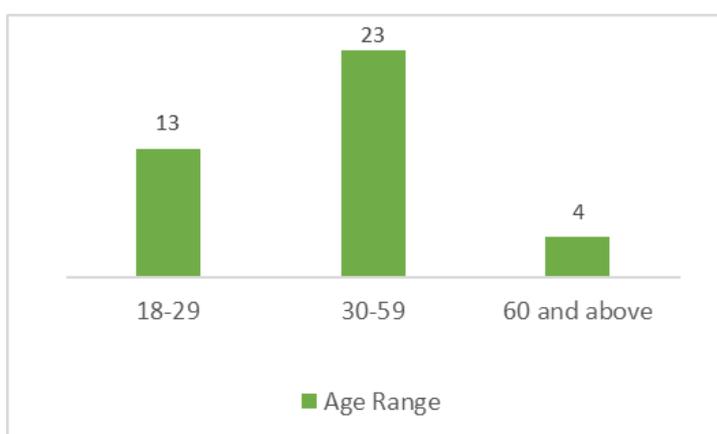
Protection and human dignity should be the central pillars of any effort intended to end displacement. Yet the current political discourse in Lebanon is framed by calls for the premature return of Syrian refugees to their country of origin, clearly undermining safety and adding significant pressures on refugees. Since the formation of a new government in January 2019, efforts have been renewed in developing plans to initiate the return of refugees to Syria. This is reflected in government policies and institutional decisions that impede refugees' ability to make safe, dignified, voluntary and informed decisions about their futures and instead encourage premature repatriation.

## METHODOLOGY

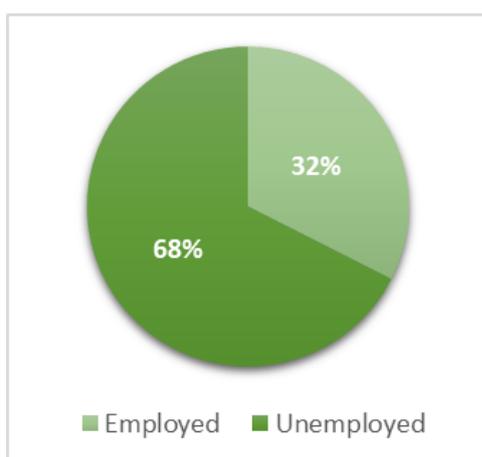
The findings in this paper are based on a qualitative research methodology. A total of 40 **in-depth semi-structured interviews** were carried out with Syrian refugee women living in different areas in North Bekaa and North Lebanon in January and February 2019. The sample for this research is purposive, and interviewees were selected by Oxfam in North Bekaa and by Oxfam's partner organization Utopia in North Lebanon, using a snowball approach. The selection criteria included age, gender, family status, residence within Oxfam's areas of operations – in informal settlements in the Bekaa and the poorest neighbourhoods in the Tripoli district – and self-identified employment status.<sup>2</sup>

It is worth noting that the majority of women interviewed come from rural areas in Syria. Although area of origin did not constitute a selection criterion for interviewees, most came from rural areas of Idlib, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Daraa, Deir Ez-Zor and Raqqa, therefore reflecting a wide geographic reach. Further details about the women interviewed are shown in the charts below.

**Figure 1: Interviewees' age range**



**Figure 2: Interviewees' self-identified employment status**



Our findings are indicative of the lived experiences, priorities and expectations of the 40 Syrian women who sought refuge in Lebanon and who were interviewed for the purposes of this research. This report seeks to highlight their views and experiences, recognizing that each woman has her own story, and also that this story may not necessarily represent those of other Syrian women. Our analysis is grounded in the common characteristics that have emerged from the different interviews but gives equal weight to the singularities of each of those stories.

It is relevant to note that the research draws general conclusions from informal discussions with refugee communities that occurred during Oxfam's regular protection activities. It also builds on data from participatory community-based exercises conducted between February and April 2019, with five groups in North Bekaa and seven groups in North Lebanon involving 132 refugees, 61 of whom were men. The exercises included informal discussions, individual and communal checklists, and two matrices designed with each group around life in Lebanon and life in Syria. We explicitly state that this data supports the analysis but is not meant to validate the stories of the women interviewed for this research.

As researchers, we do not claim to speak for any of the communities that participated in the study; rather we seek to amplify their voices and improve their visibility. We acknowledge the implications of our own experiences and positionality on the analysis, as researchers working within an international organization.

## 2 THE POWER TO MAKE DECISIONS

Holding a gendered lens to the analysis means acknowledging that women have experiences of displacement that are distinct and individual to them, from the time they flee their homes to when they attain their durable solution. Building on that understanding, we seek to highlight the experiences of the 40 Syrian women we interviewed in an effort to amplify their voices, improve their visibility and ensure their priorities are properly captured and addressed. Our findings explore different levels of decision making and unpack the gendered social norms and power dynamics that shape the women's ability to influence decisions about their lives and futures.

### DECISIONS AROUND DAILY LIFE

#### Daily life in Syria

Looking at the past from the perspective of displacement, the women used lively depictions and warm words to describe life in Syria before the onset of the war. Echoing the sentiments of the refugees interviewed in 2017, they referred to stark contrasts between conditions in Syria before the war, during the war, and their present situation in Lebanon (Shawaf and El Asmar, 2017). Most reminisced about beautiful landscapes, emphasizing the safety, stability and comfort of their lives before the war. Those memories are often romanticized, reflecting the harsh and deplorable realities of women's daily lives in displacement and the degrading conditions in Lebanon.

Descriptions of daily life in Syria also indicated that the women's care work and reproductive role took most of their time and constituted their main responsibilities. Care, as defined by Susan Himmelweit (2007), relates to the 'provision of personal services to meet those basic physical and mental needs that allow a person to function at a socially determined acceptable level of capability, comfort and safety', and therefore encompasses any domestic and caring activity done for oneself and for others. Many of the women explained that their typical day included domestic work, preparing meals for their families and taking care of children, while some added that they would go to the market and visit friends and relatives. A third of the women interviewed also described working in agriculture, though in their view those activities did not qualify as 'work'. This is based on the fact that they were usually working on their own land or land owned by their families, and that this was unpaid (Kelly and Breslin, 2010; Galiè et al., 2013). It could also be argued that women's agricultural labour is considered an extension of their care responsibilities, and as care is often unpaid and invisible, it is socially perceived as falling outside the realm of work.

One woman did refer to having been previously employed as a teacher at the local school, while another younger woman recounted moving to Damascus and then abroad to complete her higher education. Nevertheless, the gendered division of roles had direct implications for women's decision-making power, particularly within households and communities. Accordingly, their ability to decide on family matters, such as how income would be spent, was considerably constrained.

Women's age and family status were also perceived to significantly affect their power to make decisions. Reflecting on their lives as girls, most interviewees explained that they were expected to go to school and support housework, and all decisions affecting their lives were made by the father figure in their households. Marriage decisions were highly influenced by the mothers of the bride and groom, though the final decision was still generally made by the fathers and men in the families. Many described having a say in marriage decisions, yet similarly to other personal, familial and communal decisions, men would hold the most sway in

the process. It is interesting to note that older women seem to have a bigger influence over decision making than younger women. While this power is in no case comprehensive or total, in many cases it creates intergenerational divisions between women. One woman in Mina explained: 'My husband consulted his mother on everything and they both sidelined me whenever possible. They took decisions together, while I just followed.' Nevertheless, older women's status in Syrian society could open up possibilities for collective power among Syrian women, whereby solidarity despite and across structural and generational divides could increase women's influence over decision-making processes.

### **Daily life in Lebanon**

Similarities can be drawn between the women's daily lives in Syria and their lives in Lebanon, as the same social norms and expectations are sustained in Lebanon. The women's responsibilities continue to encompass all aspects of care and reproductive work, and their decision-making power at personal, household and communal levels remains limited. Interviewees spoke of the harshness of their current lives as refugees, both in rural and urban settings, discussing for example the reduced quantity, quality and type of food items they use to prepare meals: 'It is no longer what we feel like, it is what we can afford, in very small quantities.' Some used the words 'rushed breakfast' or 'whatever breakfast', contrasting this with family breakfast rituals they had in Syria prior to the war. The current reality was further depicted as one where basic needs, employment opportunities and access to education and health services are extremely limited or non-existent. Across a number of interviews, women used breakfast as a metaphor to describe their current lives, and also their roles and decision-making power. Responsibilities and constraints to decision making are very clearly illustrated by the words of a woman in the Bekaa:

*'I work, I earn, I buy, I cook, I prepare, I feed, WE decide, but if he wants eggs... it should be eggs.'*

**Displacement has imposed new responsibilities on women, while their previous responsibilities remain intact.** Women's primary role of caregiver is sustained and their responsibility for the wellbeing of their families, particularly their children, is extended and has become more challenging. Valid residency continues to be a direct obstacle to Syrian refugee men's mobility, which is often more restricted than women's – as women are less likely to be stopped or arrested at checkpoints. As a result, and due to the high unemployment rates among men or the absence in many households of adult men who are able to work, many of the women interviewed have had to take on the added responsibility of generating income for their household. Interviews further indicated that this double burden women now carry continues to be perceived as an extension of their responsibility for the wellbeing of the family. Indeed, when discussing their role and decision-making power in displacement, interviewees explained a rather layered situation in which the additional roles and responsibilities women have taken on are at odds with the continuing perception of their role solely as caregiver. The latter reflects and sustains patriarchal social norms, whereby women's ability to make or influence decisions that directly affect their daily lives, including decisions over managing the income they generate, remains constrained. Though women have had to take on additional responsibilities outside the home, this has not translated into increased decision-making power.

*'Everywhere there are differences between men and women. My husband takes all the decisions, I have taken no decisions. My husband's decisions are mostly affected by the money I earn. Money is playing a major role.'*

Interviewee in Tripoli

Furthermore, the women we interviewed do not perceive their work outside of the home as an empowering activity. They believe that the number of responsibilities they have had to take on would be reduced when or if they go back to Syria, if conditions become conducive. As has been seen in similar contexts, Syrian women who have sought refuge in Lebanon have had to place more importance on the wellbeing of their family than on their own protection and financial

agency, while their decision-making power remains restricted (Kaya and Luchtenberg, 2018). Interviewees described feeling overwhelmed and tired, and said that taking care of their children's basic needs, domestic work, the reputation of the family and generating income have become too heavy a load. Not only is their domestic work heavier, as they must accomplish the same tasks in less time as a result of working outside of the home, but work outside the home often comes at a risk to their safety as well.

Many interviewees reported feelings of isolation, stemming from the added responsibilities and pressures they face, but also from high levels of normalized gender-based violence (GBV) and abuse. The women we interviewed described living in a situation in which their dreams and prospects for the future, including their wellbeing or career development, had been shattered by the harshness of their current reality. Coupled with tensions with their host community and the pressures imposed on all refugees in the country, women commonly face high rates of violence and harassment. Challenges to social norms, particularly as a result of the additional responsibilities women have taken on outside of the home, inadvertently challenge men's hold on power, and therefore often translate into their increased control over women's mobility and personal choices.

With the culmination of these factors and the lack of support networks, the women are denied the power to make or influence the decisions that are most important to them. Overall, they expressed feeling paralysed by the restrictions on their power to make those decisions.

*'Ever since I came to Lebanon, I did not take any decision. Only the decision to send [my son] Mohammad [to continue his education in Turkey]. I took this decision even before telling him. The decisions that I do not compromise on are the decisions related to the educational status of my children. I am always hesitant when there are decisions related to me. I say I want to do something but then I hesitate, but if the decision is related to others, I directly decide. I am afraid to leave the house because I have a lot of responsibilities. I am afraid that [my leaving] will have an impact on my children. I am afraid that my children will get lost. All other decisions are taken by [my husband]. He does not consult me on anything. Whether I am satisfied or not, this is the reality. If I discuss this with him, it will be a useless discussion. What can I do? Drop everything and leave?'*

Interviewee in Tripoli

As explained above, the women we spoke to perceived the added responsibilities of generating income for their households as a burden. While many of them may fit the common definition of a 'female head of household', they do not necessarily perceive themselves, nor are they perceived by others, as such. They have to juggle all of their responsibilities and new roles, yet the decisions that matter most to them are not theirs to make.

The concept of 'female head of household' has been commonly used to describe women who have become breadwinners as a result of varying factors, including war or displacement. This is usually following the absence of an adult 'male figure' for several possible reasons, ranging in this case from a choice to stay in Syria to having gone missing or having been detained. Women may also take up this role if men in their households are unable to generate income (ILO, 2007). Although it is widely acknowledged that women who fit this definition face added protection concerns, it is also often implied that the situation creates a positive shift in gender roles whereby women have increased decision-making power at the personal, household and sometimes communal levels. **We believe it is necessary to unpack the concept of 'female head of household' to avoid making false assumptions about women's status. Indeed, such definitions must be first and foremost informed by women's self-perceptions and understanding of their own experiences.** A 'female head of household' in a refugee setting may have had to take on new roles, such as that of breadwinner, but households and communities remain patriarchal structures in which social norms constrain women's power to make decisions.

Our interviews indicated that in households which included adult men, women who described themselves as ‘primary breadwinners’ and/or who had taken on the additional role of generating income as a result of displacement did not see an increase in their power to influence or make decisions about their lives or their households. Even in cases where there were no adult men in the household, women did not necessarily identify as head of household, and still found their decision making to be constrained by other men in their family or community. What was common across all interviews were those continuous restrictions on women’s ability to make or influence decisions at the personal, familial and communal levels. We therefore chose not to use the ‘head of household’ classification, to avoid making false assumptions about the experiences of the women we spoke to.

## DECISIONS AROUND SAFETY AND PROTECTION

The women we interviewed placed extensive importance on safety and protection, especially that of their families and children, in line with a recurring discourse among Syrian refugees in Lebanon (Shawaf and El Asmar, 2017; Keith and Shawaf, 2018). Prioritizing safety indicates that for them, the decisions that are most important are intrinsically related to leaving or returning to Syria, and the ability (or lack of it) to make those decisions directly affects their power to make life decisions in the future. Feelings of powerlessness and insecurity, in addition to the dire conditions of displacement in Lebanon, make it difficult for women to think about the future. Given the escalation in the political narrative around premature returns to Syria and the fear that is seeping through refugee communities, the topic of returns was discussed most thoroughly when addressing the future and possible durable solutions. Below we explore the gendered dynamics underlying decision making around safety and protection, with a particular emphasis on the decision to return.

### Leaving Syria

Among the women interviewed, the decision to leave Syria was described as one of if not the most significant decision that has affected their lives. Common to all accounts were vivid descriptions of the highly insecure situation in Syria, which translated into a high level of fear and a sense of loss and precariousness. Mothers particularly described a high level of fear for and among children, and most women explained that their responsibility to protect their family increased their sense of urgency to leave.

Available research and literature that explore reasons behind the decision to leave home tend to regard the decision-making process as a familial one, and do not delve into the gendered dynamics embedded in this process. One such study (Akesson and Coupland, 2018), for example, found that while some families had immediately decided to leave their country, an initial reluctance prevailed among many Syrian families, who remained hopeful that the situation would rapidly improve. With increased violence and hostilities, many families decided to leave.

However, across the interviews, a more nuanced picture emerged about the process undertaken to reach a decision. The women interviewed explained that in fact the decision for them and/or their families to leave had to be made by the man heading their household (i.e. husband, father and sometimes brother), though each had their own experience regarding their influence on this decision. For some, the decision to leave was made promptly, by or jointly with the man heading their household. Others said it took months of persuading the man heading the household before he consented to leave the country, with or without their family. Our interviews indicate that in times of conflict and insecurity, constraints on women’s decision making are exacerbated, while social norms continue to dictate set roles and take power away from them.

## Waed's story

Waed is a 27-year-old Syrian woman who sought refuge in Lebanon with her family. She currently resides with her husband and two children in a small room in North Lebanon. Waed and her husband fled Homs over seven years ago. They had been married for two weeks when the war started. It took Waed months of persuading her husband before he agreed that they should flee Syria, even though their house had been destroyed and they had to stay with his parents. She had never worked in Syria, but due to financial constraints she is now forced to take up a job whenever possible.

*'I am not working, but if I could find work at home, I would work. I worked in peeling garlic before, but my daughter got sick and the doctor said she can't be near strong smells, so I had to stop.'*

*'I started working when I was nine months pregnant [...] I was shocked to learn that my surgery would cost 900,000 Lebanese pounds (LBP), and my husband was not working. I would sit there until three in the morning peeling garlic, over 20 or 30 kilos. Half my tears were from the garlic and the other half were from my miserable life.'*

*'When I delivered, my daughter had to be put in an incubator, which cost 1,700,000 LBP. I was doomed. We had decided not to bring children into this miserable world, but then it happened the first and the second time. I love my children, but they are suffering. I should not have brought them to this world, I blame myself and cry.'*

Waed described a difference in her relationship with her husband before and after displacement. She explained how he had always made the decisions for their household, but he was also respectful. Today, she explains: *'The pressure we are under is not helping our relationship. He beats me, he yells and screams about things I cannot control, it is not my fault. Now my son is like that. I am afraid of my son because he is imitating his father. I told my husband to beat me or kill me, but not in front of the kids. Imagine the other day, my daughter asked him to buy her something. He did not have the money so when she asked again, he beat her. My daughter told my neighbour that her mum and dad don't like her. After he beat me, she told me: "Don't talk to dad anymore, remember yesterday, he wanted to kill you."*

*'I can't go back to Syria and I have no family here. The last time I had a big fight with my husband, I left the house and went to throw myself in the sea, I had no other choice.'*

*'I do not want anything for myself, just my kids. I just want to wait for them to grow and get educated, and then I will leave. I started begging on the street to get money to feed them. When we used to get assistance, we were a bit better off. Now we have nothing.'*

Waed has lost hope in her future. She feels paralysed by the restrictions stopping her from making decisions that would improve her children's and her own future. This is exacerbated by her family's financial constraints. She says she will not be forced to go back to Syria but when conditions allow, she will take her children and go on her own.

## WOMEN'S EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Initiating discussions around decision making for the future was challenging. The ongoing war in Syria, the dire, restrictive and deteriorating protection environment in which Syrian refugee women live in Lebanon, and the added burdens they now have to carry, all have a significant bearing on their ability to have any aspirations and hope for a better future. One woman in the Bekaa even said, *'The future died. I don't think of the future, it is completely destroyed...'*

Only three out of the 40 women interviewed expressed being hopeful about the future. Others either chose not to think about it at all or were expecting worse days to come. Two of these three women are younger and single, and they hope to some day work in a profession they love. One of them, a young woman in Tripoli, told us about her dreams for the future: 'I imagine having a job. A hairdresser. Own a salon, maybe? I dream about this. Even if it is here in Lebanon, why not?' **Indeed, the younger women interviewed seemed slightly more hopeful about their future and placed more importance on what they would be doing and what their role would be, rather than where they would be.** They discussed a wide range of ambitions and aspirations, including continuing their education, owning a small business or gaining certain skills.

It is important to note that while these colourful dreams are inspiring in times of despair, the reality is bitter; those two hopeful young women's dreams fall outside the 'three sectors' in which Syrians are legally allowed to work in Lebanon. As long as they are in Lebanon they will be unable to fulfil their dreams, given the Ministry of Labour's recent plan, *Action against Illegal Foreign Employment on the Lebanese Territory*. The plan enforces the implementation of existing labour restrictions on Syrian refugees to work only within the agriculture, cleaning services and construction sectors; this is conditional upon their receiving work and residency permits, and not being registered with UNHCR.<sup>3</sup>

The topic of returns did come up recurrently in interviews, revealing different expectations and opinions. While some women trust that they will return to Syria eventually, others believe this to be impossible. As a result, they express frustration and desperation at the idea of being 'stuck' in Lebanon, and some have even given up hope of surviving in their country of refuge. With extremely low chances of being resettled, women are tormented by an apparent schism between their hopes and aspirations, and the harsh reality of protracted displacement. Mothers with young children were mostly concerned about their children's future rather than their own. What they feared most was that this future would be just as devastating. Most women also tied their future to the ability of the men in the family, usually husbands or sons, to return to Syria.

It is interesting to note that the information women reported receiving from inside Syria heavily influenced their expectations of and decisions regarding return, and that it almost always highlighted the situation as unsafe. Interviewees explained being more trusting of the information shared by friends and family inside Syria than of media or other reports. When asked how this information is affecting their decisions about the future, a woman in North Bekaa said: 'It is funny you ask this. If someone tells you "We are in hell and envy you for what you have. Don't you think of setting foot here", would you consider going back?'

Three of the women interviewed said their families had decided to return a few months ago due to their dire conditions in Lebanon, despite the lack of safety in Syria. However, this did not materialize because relatives inside Syria relayed information of family members being kidnapped and detained, and of bombings in their neighbourhood as they were about to return.

*'We are receiving calls from there saying that life is terrible, there is no safety, no electricity and no bread.'*

Interviewee in North Bekaa

# 3 THE DECISION TO RETURN

## 1. Women's experiences at the personal and household levels

*'I imagine going back to Syria and walking on a mine that would explode and kill me. It has happened to others. It's terrifying. Even if Isis is no longer in our area, the war is still ongoing and there are mines.'*

Interviewee in North Bekaa

Memories of the war and information about returnee friends' and relatives' struggles have instilled fear among the women, making guaranteed sustainable safety a priority for them and a prerequisite to any consideration of return. Fear of being forced to return was prevalent among the women interviewed. They believe that any return to Syria at present is very dangerous and perceive return to a country that offers safety and the conditions for a dignified life to be a distant dream. One woman in Tripoli explained that any return now would be forced 'if it happens before the end of the war, before Syria goes back to the way it used to be, before the demining and the de-politicization of the conflict, [as] no one can survive this'.

As with the process of deciding to leave Syria, gendered power imbalances continue to shape decision making affecting Syrian women's lives and futures. Decision-making power remains primarily in the hands of men, specifically those who are heads of households, though it was noted that women are consulted and can have some leverage in certain cases. Nevertheless, the voices, opinions and concerns of men remain at the centre, leaving little to no space for women's own priorities in relation to returns or to other decisions that they deem important. It is therefore important to note that in our interviews, women expressed fears of being forced to return to Syria by a male authority figure in their household. A woman in Tripoli put it this way: 'Have you ever seen a man being forced to return by his wife? Of course not! But we have seen women being forced to return by their husbands.'

Anecdotal evidence does indeed point towards women being forced to return by their husbands. One interviewee, for example, said her sister-in-law was sent back to Syria by her husband, as they could no longer afford rent in Lebanon, but he still found it too risky to return there himself. Another told the story of her neighbour who suddenly disappeared. She was able to find refuge upon fleeing to Lebanon - a second time- only after she divorced her husband, who had forced her to go back to an unsafe Syria with her children.

Interviewees, and married women in particular, described having no support network in Lebanon to turn to should they need to leave their household, but being unable to choose to return to Syria either. A study on violence against Syrian refugee women in Lebanon has shown that those who face intimate partner violence (IPV) most often chose to keep quiet about it (Usta et al., 2016). While some attempt to justify this violence as a result of stress or frustration, IPV in refugee settings is an extension of pre-existing gendered inequalities and imbalances of power, and this is directly reflected in women's fear of speaking out. The same study has shown that women face threats of being forced to return to Syria should they choose to speak out against the abuse. The fact that this is used as a threat yet again points to women's fear of returning to an unsafe Syria. **However, women's safety in the face of IPV is threatened both by staying within their homes in Lebanon or by choosing to return, reflecting the complexity of their experiences and the desperation of their situation.**

## 2. Implications of national discourse and policies

It is interesting to note that the 40 women we interviewed were aware of the Government of Lebanon's rhetoric and wider calls for the return of Syrian refugees, but had very little information around how this translated into practice. Many of them had not heard of the

organized returns to Syria that are currently led by the General Security Office<sup>4</sup>, which are often brought up in conversations with Syrian refugee men. Though they are directly affected by these policies, women do not have access to the same kind of information as men. Their decision-making power is thus twice restricted: by the **pressures for premature return placed on refugees in the country**, and also by **information and decision making being concentrated with men in their households**.

In discussing their wider fears of forced returns, particularly in relation to the recent political discourse – with government policies around refugees increasingly focusing on returns – some women expressed feeling more at ease after discussing the situation with UNHCR. The agency had provided them with reassurances and explained that no one is being forced to return. As per its mandate and role, ‘UNHCR promotes voluntary repatriation when conditions in the country of origin are safe and stable. When refugees nevertheless want to return home and minimum conditions have been met, UNHCR can facilitate their return’ (UNHCR, 2018). However, the Government of Lebanon has repeatedly put pressure on UNHCR through different methods, such as freezing expatriates’ visa applications in 2018, to push it to facilitate and promote returns to Syria before conditions are met (Barrington and McDowall, 2018). To date, the UNHCR has not facilitated returns, despite being under extreme pressure and with little public support from the international community. This is reflected, for example, in the recent government decision regarding deportations (Legal Agenda, 2019), against which no public stance was taken.

### **3. Women’s experiences at the communal level**

Given the many structural constraints that women face in making informed decisions about their futures, it is also important to unpack the dynamics of communal decision making. Most narratives about decisions relating to returns are either individualized or are perceived to be familial processes. In reality, communities, and especially community leaders – specifically the Shaweesh,<sup>5</sup> who is usually a man – also have power over decision making. As patriarchal norms are embedded in communal decision-making mechanisms, they are most often monopolized by men, and place women at an added disadvantage. In fact, it seems that **communities of refugees who fled the same areas of Syria together may be making key decisions collectively** – the most important of which is the decision to return. In several of our community-based exercises, Shaweeshes would make claims such as, ‘We came together, we settled together, and we will leave together.’ Separate discussions with individual women revealed that they did not feel comfortable with such decision-making mechanisms. Two women explained that they would not want to return, even if it was decided by their community leader that they should.<sup>6</sup> However, they felt compelled to support such decisions in public, to avoid retaliation. This corroborates the argument that communal decision-making processes may be dangerous and pose added threats of premature or involuntary returns, as women are often excluded from such mechanisms or compelled to comply with their outcomes.

### **4. Women’s participation in deciding on the future of Syria**

The women interviewed also highlighted their own exclusion from national, regional and international platforms that discuss the future of Syria. They believe that those platforms fail to reflect their realities, priorities and concerns, and that this is especially the case for women from villages and rural areas. The women are calling for their increased participation so that their voices can be heard, as those processes have direct implications on their lives, futures and possible decision to return. Interviewees further explained that they do engage in political discussions within their households and closed circles, where they feel more comfortable to discuss their thoughts about the future, but those discussions do not translate into meaningful political participation. Interestingly, most interviewees had not received an education, and they believed that educated women could or should have more of a role to play in political spaces, as they are more likely to be heard. Nevertheless, they yet again insisted that their own interests and priorities must be represented in those discussions. While efforts by Syrian women to be involved and engaged in such platforms do exist, they are very limited and the space for

women's participation remains extremely narrow. Indeed, Syrian women's priorities and concerns continue to be overlooked at the personal, familial and community levels, and this is reflected in national and international spaces.

### Em Abed's story

Em Abed is a 60-year-old grandmother of four. Her son returned to Syria seven months ago to seek medical care, and asked his mother to stay in Lebanon to look after his children. He hasn't come back, and his whereabouts remain unknown. Em Abed and her grandchildren live in dire conditions, in a kiosk in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Lebanon. She works occasionally in cooking and housekeeping. They are surviving with the little she earns and a few donations they receive, mainly food from neighbours.

*'I got divorced long ago. I have always had to bear responsibilities on my own, but at my age now, it is too much to handle. I want to show the world how I am living, how I have nothing. They have to help me secure food and medicine for my grandchildren. Their mother passed away, I have the death certificate.'*

*'Life is not being kind to us. My son went to Syria to check on the house, to see if we can have a better life there. They took him. He decided to go back on his own, it was his choice. He was sick. He got into an accident, and here we have no money for his treatment. He went to Syria to receive the treatment, but he was arrested at the border. My brother disappeared seven years ago, and we know nothing about him. Also my nephew, and my two cousins. Many young men have disappeared, and nobody knows their whereabouts.'*

The number of disappearances in the family is one of the main reasons preventing Em Abed from returning to Syria now. She says, *'Our country is better than anywhere else. We will eventually go back to Syria. If it were safe, we would go back now. We want men to go outside without feeling threatened that they'll be arrested. We do not want families to be separated. No one can force me to return. I will stay until I feel it is safe for the children to return. But if my son comes back and decides to take the children, I will be forced to go back with them.'*

Em Abed was not very hopeful about the future, but she still wished for a better life for her grandchildren. She explains that despite this being an added burden, especially at her age, she is doing everything she can to ensure her grandchildren are educated and have a better life: *'I want the situation to be calmer and better, so I can educate the children and bring them food. I only think about the kids. I want to ensure a beautiful life for them where they can study. I want them to be educated. I am starting to teach them from now. Education is the most important thing.'*

## SYRIAN REFUGEE WOMEN'S CONDITIONS FOR RETURN

***Any return to Syria must be voluntary, safe, dignified and founded on informed decisions. Yet, current conditions are not conducive for return.***

It is interesting to note, as shown in Table 1, how the dire conditions and restrictions on refugee protection in Lebanon translate into 'push' factors that are similar to the non-conducive conditions in Syria; hence we call them 'push-push' factors.<sup>7</sup> Interviewees all stressed that the most important factor remains safety. Some women initially identified the lack of financial means as an obstacle to return, but longer and deeper conversations indicated that even if financial barriers were removed, safety considerations remain the main obstacle impeding returns.

**Table 1: ‘Push-push’ factors for Syrian refugees in Lebanon**

Push factors from Lebanon	Push factors from Syria
Cost of living	Inflation
No access to work opportunities or income generation	No access to work opportunities or income generation
Reduced assistance or no access to basic needs	No access to basic needs and infrastructure
Restrictions by authorities	<b>Instability, insecurity and danger</b>

As noted above, there is a common perception among refugee communities that it is easier for women to cross the border, as men are more likely to be arrested or taken to the army should they attempt to go back. This means that women face the added threat of having to return to Syria if challenges arise that require their household to retrieve official papers or medical supplies, or to check the situation. The perception that it is easier for women to cross borders is also widespread in the mainstream humanitarian discourse, thereby ignoring the experiences of women who may be themselves at risk back in Syria due to their own activism. The scope of this research does not capture those women’s experiences. However, we recognize the importance of raising this concern, noting that it may also be impossible for Syrian women to return on political or other grounds which are not all highlighted in this report.

As shown in the table below, through our conversations, women identified a wide range of conditions for their return. These are divided into three main categories: safety, which accounts for the majority of their conditions and points to the need for a more comprehensive definition of the concept; safe and sustainable access to services, livelihoods and infrastructure; and conditions related to border control both in Lebanon and in Syria. Interviewees made clear distinctions between what needs to be in place *before* they return, and what can be worked on if and when they return. All of them insisted that the former remain unfulfilled.

Though some of the conditions for return are the same as those found in the mainstream, which usually relate to men, women’s lived experiences are very different and the implications for their lives of any of those conditions, or the lack of them, also significantly differ. Interestingly, our informal conversations and community-based exercises with refugee men revealed that the conditions they prioritize for return relate to their own immediate safety, i.e. cancelling the reserve military service. Women’s conditions, on the other hand, appear to be much more comprehensive and long term, and relate to the whole family; only two of the conditions they identified relate solely to women – namely freedom from harassment, and safe housing for women.

**Table 2: Women’s conditions for return**

<b>Safety</b>	End of war
	Stability and rule of law
	Safety from mines (demining)
	Safety from armed groups
	Safe housing for women
	Safety for women from harassment
	Freedom of movement
	Ending reserve conscription
	Amnesty for all and release of detainees
	Guarantees from: UNHCR, the Russians
	Return to preferred area
	No family separation, including ability of men to return
	<b>Safe and sustainable access to services and infrastructure</b>
Access to healthcare	
Access to shelter	
Access to clean water and sanitation	
Power supply	
Job opportunities with decent salaries	
Waiver of accumulated service bills and taxes	
<b>Border control</b>	Cancelling the security clearance on the Syrian borders
	Cancelling exit bans and fees on the Lebanese borders

The question that remains unanswered is: *When will these conditions be in place for women and their families to return?* Most Syrian women interviewed for the purposes of this research believed there is very little hope that these conditions will be in place in the near future, if at all. Returning home remains their dream and fills their imagination, as observed through their romanticizing of Syria and their vivid descriptions of its landscapes. However, before the conditions they have identified are in place, any return to Syria would be unsafe and involuntary.

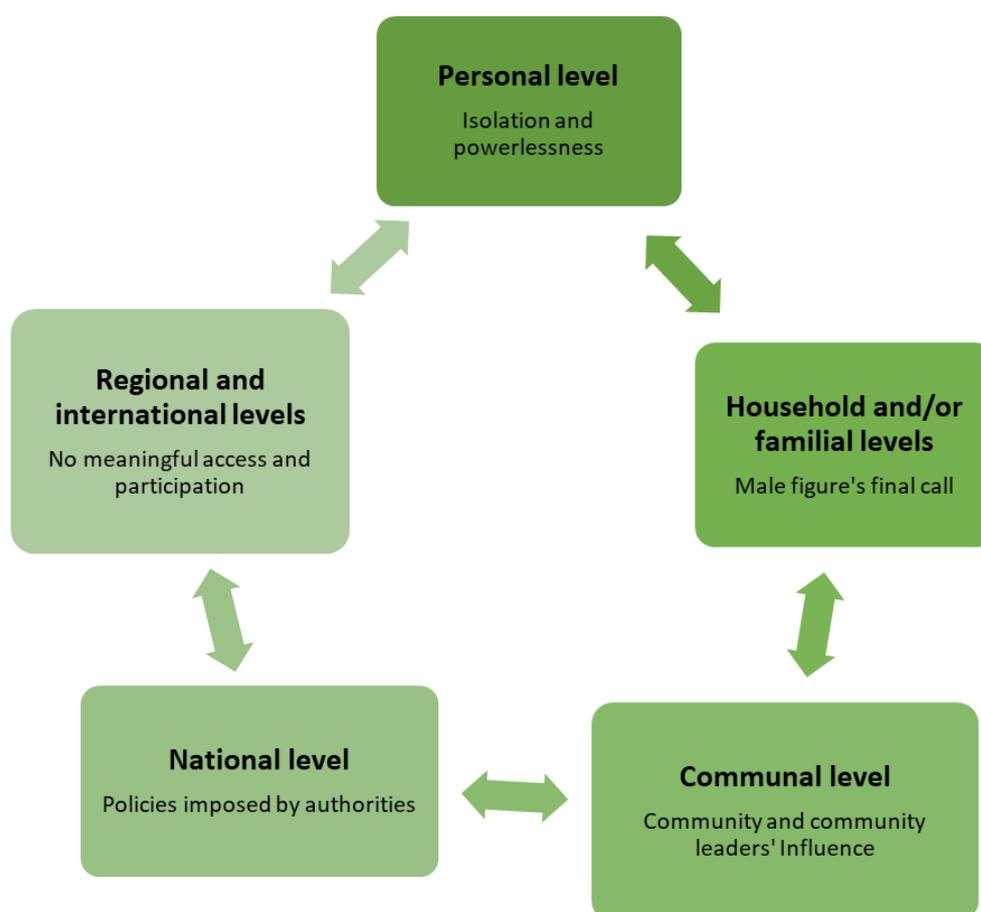
# CONCLUSION

## Looking at the bigger picture

This research project highlights the way refugee women are disproportionately affected by conflict and displacement, as existing gendered power imbalances are sustained and exacerbated in such contexts. Our findings show that despite the added responsibilities that women have had to take on, patriarchal social norms and structures have been sustained. As a result, women remain systemically excluded from decision-making platforms at all levels, and this has direct implications for their lives and futures. In amplifying Syrian refugee women's voices and concerns, we have attempted to show that they face multi-layered and complex threats of forced return, at all levels where their decision-making power is constrained. Their experiences of displacement are highly gendered, and this has direct implications for the voluntariness (or otherwise) of their return – a fact that is often overlooked when power dynamics within households, communities and national and international decision-making platforms remain unexplored and when refugees' experiences and needs are conflated.

The figure below simplifies the bigger picture by outlining the different levels of decision making, from which women are continuously and systemically excluded. Constraints to women's decision making at the personal level translates into further restrictions at the familial or communal levels and continue to materialize at the national and international levels. This cycle has direct implications for women's lives. As one woman in North Lebanon put it, 'No one asked me about my role as a woman, no one asked me about my political opinions and the peace process. Both are linked, but no one asked.'

**Figure 3: Decision-making levels where Syrian refugee women are constrained**



## WHAT DO THE WOMEN INTERVIEWED WANT FOR THEIR FUTURES?

Most of the women interviewed expressed frustration and desperation as they felt unable to imagine a future for themselves. From the obstacles to a safe return to Syria to the deteriorating protection environment in Lebanon, and to limited to no resettlement options, Syrian women who have sought refuge in Lebanon have no durable solutions available.

The interviewees believe that Syria is not currently safe, nor does it offer the basis for dignified life, and have identified a set of conditions that would need to be in place for them to choose to go back to their country. Any return to Syria must be voluntary, safe, dignified and founded on informed decision making. However, our analysis indicates that women face layered and complex threats of forced return, at all levels where their decision-making power is constrained. Their experiences of displacement are highly gendered, and this has direct implications for the voluntariness (or otherwise) of their return – a fact that is often overlooked when power dynamics within households and communities remain unexplored and when refugees' experiences and needs are conflated.

Narratives about return among refugee communities are multiple and diverse. However, what does clearly emerge is that decisions have not matured and are yet to be conclusive. Some refugees express wanting to return but change their minds when remembering or receiving concerning information. This uncertainty was true for the women interviewed as well, and indicates yet again the instability and insecurity of war and displacement.

*'We would not go back now. But if my husband was to go back now, I would go with him... But actually, I wouldn't go back right now. Even if he divorced me! I want to go back, but to a safe and clean environment. The river is still full of blood. Maybe I would tell him to go check the situation, and if it is good, then I would follow... Either way, my husband can't go back now as he would be taken to the army.'*

Woman in North Bekaa

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Women interviewed for this research unanimously reported feeling hopeless and powerless over their future, due to the hardships they face in conflict and displacement and to the gendered power imbalances that shape their ability to make decisions. They nevertheless have ambitions and dreams for their future and that of their families. The tone of the report reflects all these sentiments, aiming to depict an accurate picture of reality. The purpose of this research, however, has also been to highlight the 40 women's distinct lived experiences, priorities and needs, and to stress the necessity of valuing and highlighting their agency. The recommendations below are premised on this aim, and on the belief that humanitarian interventions, programmes and policies should be gender-transformative and committed to challenging patriarchal structures and norms. We reiterate that Syrian women who have sought refuge in Lebanon face threats of involuntary return that are layered, gendered and complex. Accordingly, their priorities must be brought front and centre to inform programming and planning around returns as well as national and international policy making, as they are critical for any effort towards inclusive social justice and sustainable peace.

### Policy

- Policy messaging and products should amplify women's voices and highlight their distinct experiences, priorities and needs. Any decision at policy-making level should be informed by women's voices, and their active participation in decision-making platforms at all levels should be prioritized.

### Programme design

- Humanitarian interventions should address gender inequalities and power imbalances – including those between INGOs and affected communities, but also within those communities themselves – through their work towards meeting basic needs, and adopt more transformative approaches to achieve lasting change.
- Humanitarian actors must recognize that women themselves have the most intricate understanding of their own contexts, needs and concerns. Accordingly, humanitarian responses must be designed in partnership with those women, bringing them to the centre and ensuring their meaningful participation in all stages of programming.
- Pre-defined concepts – such as 'female head of household' – should draw on self-identified definitions, and be carefully examined, clarified and unpacked when designing programmes and monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) tools and frameworks. Targeting for assistance must take into account all considerations attached to such concepts; for example, recognizing that 'female heads of households' may not always be the decision makers in their own households.
- Programmes, including planning and MEAL processes, must avoid conflating the experiences of different groups or reproducing gendered power imbalances, and instead challenge existing inequalities. Accordingly, every humanitarian intervention must be informed by a gender analysis corresponding to its objectives, which explores gendered power dynamics and inequalities at the individual, household and community levels, as well as the different impacts that the programme can have on different groups of people.
- All humanitarian programmes must be 'safe programmes' and proactively ensure that they do not cause further harm to affected populations, particularly to refugee women and girls who are involved in the process.
- Humanitarian programmes should prioritize efforts to prevent, mitigate and respond to GBV as a cross-cutting issue affecting all aspects of women's lives. Investments must therefore be made in challenging and transforming social norms that normalize GBV, and providing support to survivors.

- Humanitarian programming must address and facilitate meaningful access to information for women in relation to programmes and available services. Efforts should also be undertaken to inform women of new laws and regulations, or changes to existing ones, that could affect them, to ensure that they are able to make informed decisions about their lives and futures.
- Humanitarian interventions should facilitate spaces for women to build support networks through which they can share and develop positive coping strategies and build collective power to challenge injustice and inequalities.

## **Livelihoods programmes and policies**

- The inclusion of women in livelihood programmes should not be through pre-identified sectors that reproduce traditional gender norms, particularly in employment and learning opportunities. Safeguards specific to women, and defined by them, should be in place to ensure their safe access to work.
- In addition to recognizing the added responsibilities of paid work that refugee women now have to carry, programmes must take account of women's additional unpaid care and domestic responsibilities resulting from the gap in services available to refugees.
- Policy making around labour should ensure that refugee women have access to decent work in all sectors, and that they are able to generate income to support themselves and their families.

## **Education**

- Women and girls should have unhindered and free access to education at all levels. Safeguards specific to women and girls, and defined by them, should be put in place to ensure their safe access to education.

## **Legal status**

- In the current context, women are the least prioritized in households when it comes to renewing residency permits, because they are perceived to be the least likely to be arrested or detained. Policy making around legal status should ensure that refugee women can easily access a form of legal status that protects their basic rights and enables them to support themselves and their families, regardless of their registration status or mode of entry.

## **Funding**

- The donor community should invest greater resources towards gender justice in emergencies and gender-sensitive humanitarian responses. As women's rights organizations continue to be chronically under-resourced, funding should go directly to these organizations, which play a critical role in responding to women's distinct priorities and needs.

## **Durable solutions**

- All intention surveys around durable solutions must be conducted at the individual level to ensure that women's distinct priorities are captured and highlighted. Examining gendered power dynamics in decision-making processes is crucial to ensure that women are making safe, informed and voluntary decisions.
- Any return must be safe, voluntary, informed and dignified. Women in particular face layered and complex threats of forced return, at all levels where their decision-making power is constrained. They have explained that the current conditions in Syria are not conducive for return. Returns should not happen before the conditions that women have identified as essential are in place.

- Opportunities for resettlement must increase, while recognizing that the decision to resettle should also be an informed one. Refugees must be aware of the challenges and opportunities presented by resettlement, as well as of any information relating to integration in a third country. It is also necessary to mention that women have identified family unification as an important condition in the decision to resettle.

## **Research gaps**

This research focuses on the decision-making power of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon, who come from different rural areas in Syria. It is necessary to undertake further research on some of the topics identified below, to ensure that Syrian women's voices are amplified, and their priorities are addressed.

- The experiences of other Syrian women who may not come from rural areas should be explored.
- Syrian refugee women's conditions for return must be further unpacked, recognizing that they are not a monolithic group and may have diverging priorities.
- The many different reasons why some women may not be able to return – such as those relating to their own political activism or participation – remain unexplored and should be examined.
- Further research should be undertaken on the gendered implications of current policy decisions, such as the Ministry of Labour plan restricting refugees' employment or the recent government decision on deportation.
- The various informal familial or communal information channels through which refugee communities are receiving information from inside Syria should be explored. This could provide insight into what information women receive, the accuracy of this information and the different ways in which it is influencing decision making.

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## NOTES

- 1 Oxfam (2017). *Syrian Refugee Women Talk about Sponsorship*. Oxfam in Lebanon Protection Monitoring Report
- 2 A longer reflection on definitions of employment as well as the paid versus unpaid work that Syrian women carry out can be found in the first section of this paper. Interviewees' employment status was strictly self-identified.
- 3 The Ministry of Labour plan was launched with the main focus of formalizing non-Lebanese labour, which would require refugees from Syria to apply for work permits in the three sectors. The plan has raised various protection concerns given the conditions required to receive a work permit, including the necessity to transfer sponsorship to the employer.
- 4 Since early 2018, the Directorate General of the General Security Office started organizing return movements to Syria from different areas across the country. Even though UNHCR is currently not facilitating returns, it is present at departure points to ensure refugees have required documentation (such as birth registration documents) and are assisted when possible and/or needed.
- 5 The Shaweesh is a community leader who usually acts as an intermediary between the landlord and the residents of informal settlements. Some NGOs and UN agencies have taken up the Shaweesh as their focal point/intermediary in the informal settlements; however, this could be problematic because it gives power-holders added power within their communities.
- 6 It is important to note that we did not propose a scenario where the Shaweesh or community leader would decide on returning to Syria. These findings are a by-product of the communal open discussions. The research team was very careful not to propose any potential scenarios, and the topic of return was only brought up by the communities themselves when discussions around the future took place.
- 7 The concept of 'push-push' factors was coined by the research team to challenge the mainstream 'push and pull factors' discussions. Read more on push factors in Oxfam (2018) *Pushing Back on Push Factors*.

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The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-1-78748-531-0 in November 2019. DOI: 10.21201/2019.5310

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