



Tool

Capacity strengthening | Community protection structures | Empowerment of women
Gender-based violence | Risk analysis | Safe spaces | Social cohesion

 Lebanon

Women's groups in refugee communities

Strategy

By Oxfam's protection team¹

1. Background and rationale

As of 31 December 2020, 865,531 Syrian refugees were registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Lebanon; more than half were women and girls.² With a continuously shrinking protection environment, refugees face immense pressures in their daily lives. Women are disproportionately affected, as the environments they have to navigate are unsafe, their mobility is restricted, and they face increased threats of exploitation and harassment, and high levels of normalized gender-based violence.

Women's roles, ascribed by patriarchal social norms, usually confine them to the private sphere. This worsens in times of conflict and displacement, when gendered inequalities and power imbalances are exacerbated.³ Additionally, women have very different experiences of public spaces, as their access is more restricted and less safe. Even when women are present in decision-making or discussion spaces, their voices are less heard. There is also a significant lack of public spaces that are exclusive for women to come together to share experiences, skills or knowledge – or provide support for each other – without fearing reprisal, stigma or dismissal. As a result, women, and refugee women in particular, are often separated and isolated from each other.

This is reflected in some of the findings from Oxfam in Lebanon's most recent protection research,⁴ which indicates that Syrian refugee women in the country report feelings of isolation and a lack of available support networks in Lebanon to turn to, should they need to leave abusive households or take action in the face of oppression and injustice.

Literature highlights the importance of spaces where women can build solidarity, understand that their struggles are shared, develop common goals, and possibly mobilize to challenge inequalities.

1 This document is a first draft developed by Oxfam teams in Lebanon. It was intended to include inputs from members of women's groups themselves; however, largely due to contextual changes linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, this had not been completed when the document was included in this resource pack.

2 See the UNHCR's Syria Regional Refugee Response data on Lebanon, available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71> (accessed in February 2021).

3 F. El Asmar, N. Shawaf and D. Mikdashi. "No one asked..." *Amplifying the voices of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon on their power to decide*, Oxfam, 2019, available at: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/no-one-asked-amplifying-the-voices-of-syrian-refugee-women-in-lebanon-on-their-620906/> (accessed in February 2021).

4 Ibid.

Building collective power (or ‘power with’) refers to developing an understanding that struggles are shared and interlinked, and mobilizing and creating solidarity and mutual support systems, with the aim of engaging in common efforts to challenge injustice.

By regularly coming together, women can start building collective power, through which they can challenge the oppression and inequalities that they face. Through collective association, women are able to draw on their shared knowledge and resources and take courses of action in the face of injustice that may not be available to them as individuals. Such groups also provide women with alternative forms of social and support networks, beyond traditional ones founded on kinship.⁵

‘Collective association and sharing of experience challenges women’s isolation, “outs” women’s sense of injustice, and raises hopes that gender relations can, and should, change.’ (C. Sweetman, 2013)⁵

2. Objective and theory of change

Building on Oxfam in Lebanon’s strength and track record in outreach, community engagement, and solid and trusting relationships with communities, we facilitated space for refugee women to come together through women-only structures and address shared threats and concerns.

This work draws on elements from two of Oxfam’s approaches:

2.1 Community-based protection

Oxfam has adopted a community-based protection approach with the aim of supporting individuals and groups within communities to take action on protection threats. At the basis of this approach is the establishment of protection community structures, which are trained on relevant topics and supported in identifying and responding to protection threats.

2.2 Transformative leadership for women’s rights (TLWR)

As part of its gender justice work, Oxfam has invested in the TLWR approach and strategy, which addresses the root causes of inequalities and aims to transform power relations and structures. Building on a gender power analysis, this approach starts with building leadership at the individual level and facilitates spaces for collective efforts to challenge inequalities and for collective power in the form of mutual support, solidarity and collaboration.⁶

Transformative change is change that is fundamental, lasting and challenges existing power imbalances and structural inequality.

Oxfam’s work with women’s groups in refugee settings in Lebanon is situated at the intersection of those two approaches, as the aim is to challenge existing power imbalances and achieve transformative change in refugee women’s lives. This involves facilitating a collective process of support, solidarity and capacity strengthening towards the establishment of women-only community structures in refugee communities. Accordingly, the overall objective of establishing

5 C. Sweetman, “Introduction, Feminist Solidarity and Collective Action”, *Gender & Development*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 217–229, July 2013, available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13552074.2013.819176> (accessed in February 2021).

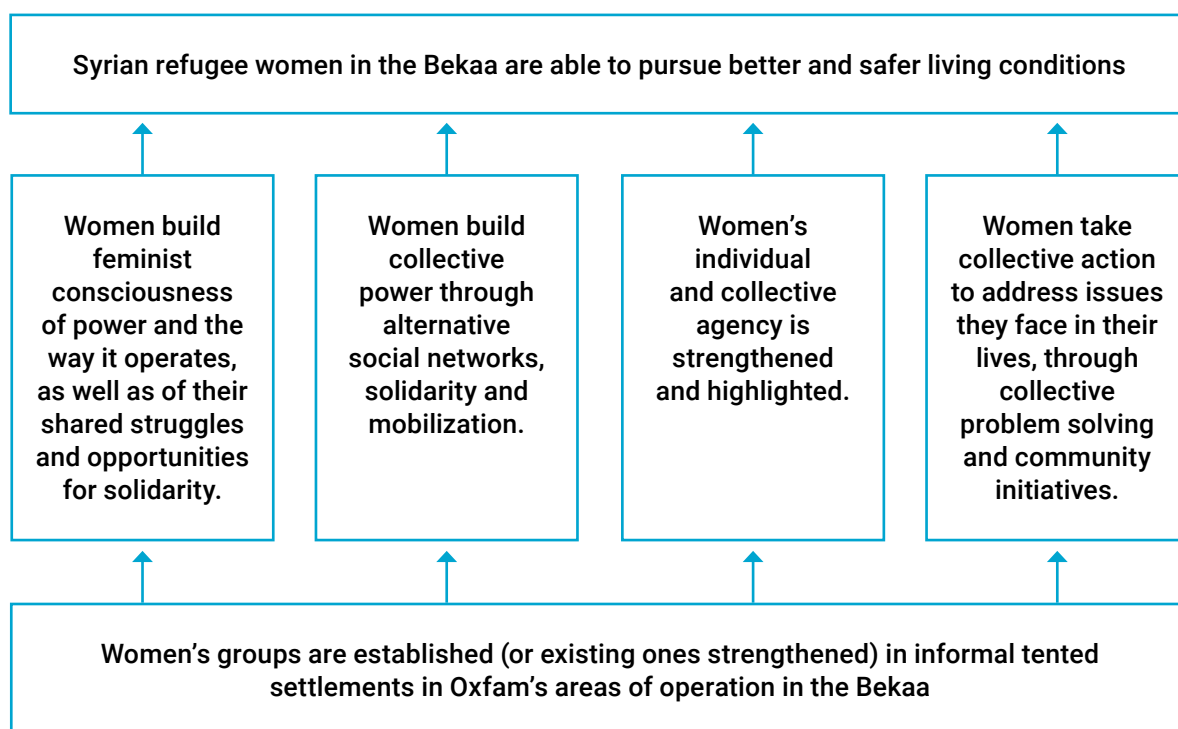
6 J. Kloosterman, *Transformative Leadership for Women’s Rights: An Oxfam guide*, Oxfam, 2014, available at: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/transformative-leadership-for-womens-rights-an-oxfam-guide-317242/> (accessed in February 2021).

(or strengthening) women’s groups is to support refugee women in their pursuit of better and safer living conditions. Supporting women’s participation and leadership is therefore both a goal in itself and a means to address structural inequalities and shift power imbalances.

Feminist consciousness is an understanding of power and the way it operates, as well as of a transformed awareness of structural inequalities and the way those play out in daily lives. Through feminist consciousness, problems that may be perceived as personal or individual are understood to be shared, common and interlinked struggles stemming from a wider patriarchal system. Feminist consciousness often translates into an amplified determination to engage in collective efforts against injustice and systemic inequalities.

Agency relates to the capacity and ability to act, to negotiate one’s position in society and to navigate relationships of power. Though social norms and structures constrain individuals’ actions, agency is exercised even in situations of oppression and injustice. It is the capacity and power to resist oppression and injustice, and to negotiate and transform relations of power.

Figure 1: The project’s pathways to change 3



3. The process

A flexible framework was used. The process was tailored to each group and led by group members themselves.

3.1 Essential criteria

It was essential for the below criteria to be in place before work began:

3.1.1 Exclusivity

The groups are only open to refugee women, specifically those committed to shared values and prepared to engage in a long-term process.

The groups are divided into age groups, with priority is given to women between the ages of 18 and 25. Though older women may have added influence in their communities, it is crucial to make room for younger women to increase their leadership and influence in their communities, as they are often the least heard. This is also necessary to allow for a more comfortable environment in which essential and intimate conversations can occur – something that would be constrained if their mothers or older relatives were in the room.

Women in different age ranges should therefore be in separate groups that follow the same process in parallel.

3.1.2 Self-motivation

Prospective group members must be consulted prior to their establishment and must have expressed motivation and commitment to engage in the process.

3.1.3 Trust and common values

It is essential for the women to agree on and commit to common values among themselves – as well as towards their community, Oxfam and partner organizations – as the foundation on which their collective efforts will be built.

3.1.4 'Safe' space

The women's groups constitute a 'safe' (i.e. as safe as possible) space for women to come together, share their experiences, provide support for each other and take collective initiative against injustice. Gatherings and discussions are held in intimate and comfortable settings, allowing women to freely share their stories.

3.2 Ways of working

3.2.1 Collective action

The groups are supported through capacity strengthening activities aimed at better enabling them to take collective action in preventing, mitigating or responding to issues they face in their lives, as well as to protection threats in their communities.

3.2.2 Sharing and exchange

The women's groups share and exchange stories, experiences and positive coping strategies, but also offer each other mutual support. Women exchange knowledge, networks, skills and resources that would support them individually and as a group in responding to the challenges and threats they face.

3.3 Practical considerations

3.3.1 Location

Meetings, gatherings and discussions are held in the informal tented settlements where refugee women reside, in a tent identified by the women in the group. This could be rotational and take place in their own homes, but there should always be enough physical space for everyone to sit comfortably.⁷

To allow for the space to be intimate and comfortable, the meetings should be made as secure from external interference as possible.

3.3.2 Childcare

Childcare should be funded and provided for every gathering in order to ensure the space is comfortable and that women are able to fully participate.

⁷ Where possible and safe, the option of holding occasional meetings or gatherings outside of informal settlements could be explored.

3.3.3 Timeframe

Working with women's groups is a long-term process in which physical presence is important to ensure proper communication and support.

The groups meet a minimum of once a month, with the number of gatherings depending on the people involved and their activities. To ensure a momentum, ideally the groups could meet once a month for a working session or discussion, and another time for a lighter gathering for leisure or well-being activities.

3.4 Required expertise from Oxfam and partner staff

Managing the process requires technical expertise, and experience in community organizing and supporting grassroots women's initiatives.

Specialized agencies deliver information sessions or facilitate discussions on topics in which in-house expertise is lacking, and at the request of women themselves.

It is necessary to note that only female staff engage with the women's groups, as they are women-exclusive structures.

3.5 Working with the groups

Women's groups are supported through a collective process of capacity strengthening and solidarity. This process is tailored and adapted depending on the context in which the groups are formed or strengthened, and on the women involved, their interests and needs.

In the initial stages of the process, group members agree on shared values and decision-making mechanisms. Through facilitated discussions, they gradually develop common goals and build feminist consciousness of power, injustice and shared oppression.

Through those discussions, but also through specialized sessions on topics identified by members themselves, women share their stories, experiences, and knowledge with each other. Critically, the process involves facilitated and peer-to-peer psychosocial and emotional support, through which women understand each other's' struggles and identify positive coping strategies and opportunities for solidarity.

The process further entails capacity strengthening around topics and skills identified by the women themselves and that would support them in responding to threats and concerns and in developing and implementing community initiatives.

Opportunities are also presented for members to receive training on delivering sessions to their communities themselves, thereby strengthening their leadership and supporting them in disseminating relevant information to their communities.

Once the group is solidified and trusting relationships are formed, women engage in collective problem-solving and decision-making. Group members then engage in collective action, such as designing and implementing community initiatives or campaigns aimed at reducing exposure to protection risks.

Community initiatives are designed and implemented by women's groups themselves, with support from Oxfam and partners as requested. Working with women's groups therefore involves a gradual and long-term accompaniment, with the purpose of strengthening their capacity and avoiding the creation of dependency. The groups can then choose to come together beyond this intervention and in different forms, to address other issues, engage in other types of collective action or for varying purposes. A detailed and tailored exit strategy for supporting humanitarian organizations could be developed in partnership with the groups and depending on their needs.

4. Risk analysis

Activity	Possible risk to Oxfam, partners, communities	How might the risks be reduced or managed?
<p>Supporting the establishment of women's groups in North Bekaa</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● May cause alarm among men, especially community leaders ● Men may obstruct or restrict the participation of women ● Women may face violence (questioning, verbal harassment, physical or emotional violence) at the family or communal level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Careful attention to the language used when explaining to the community what the groups are about, what their roles will be and why they are exclusive to women ● Identify solutions with the members themselves if needed
<p>Anticipated benefits</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Women may want to drop out of the group but continue participating fearing aid cuts or damaging their relationship with Oxfam 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Work closely and constantly with participants to ensure no retribution from communities or families is taking place ● Ensure participants are well informed of essential services available to them in addition to access to a focal point from Oxfam
<p>See sections 1, 2 and 3 above.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Summer season and seasonal work taking up women's time ● Local and national authorities could impose stricter regulations impeding NGOs from working with volunteers, groups and community structures ● The Ministry of Labour (MoL) might consider women's groups participants as 'volunteers' and include them in their ban on refugees volunteering with agencies and organizations ● Communities targeted may face a range of protection threats that cannot be addressed by Oxfam, such as deportations/ forced returns, evictions, arrests or raids 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Hold separate sessions with the community, including men, on gender-based violence and gender justice ● Make sure women are well informed of their rights and their ability to leave the group at any point without any repercussions ● Identify suitable times and ways of working with the group members, agree to check in with each other and take breaks when needed ● Reassess the situation in case new regulations on community-based work are issued to make sure women are protected against any harm that may be caused as a result of working with the groups ● Make sure communities, local authorities (where needed), participants and staff are well aware of the objectives of the group and do not provide any IDs or badges ● Make sure to continuously monitor the protection environment, refer and advocate where needed