



**OXFAM**



# UNHEARD VOICES: SYRIAN WOMEN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

In 2020 alone, Lebanon has been hit by a devastating economic crisis, an overwhelming coronavirus outbreak, a paralyzing political deadlock, and a massive explosion that destroyed one third of the country's capital, Beirut. These interlinked crises affect all populations within the country, but for Syrian refugee women in particular, the impact is multiplied. Refugee women's voices and needs remain overlooked as they continue to be excluded from decision-making spaces at the political, communal, family, and personal level.

Drawing on existing reports and recent data collected by Oxfam in Lebanon, this brief explores refugee women's views and perceptions regarding their right to a life with dignity, their decision-making power, and their hopes for the future. It argues that the voices of Syrian refugee women need to be amplified, as their needs, perceptions, and hopes are unique to their experiences. Only when the multiplicity of their voices is fully taken into consideration will programs and policies be able to effectively respond to the myriad of needs of the Syrian refugee community in Lebanon during these unparalleled circumstances that the country is facing.

## **OVERVIEW**

An estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees are currently living in Lebanon, making it the country with the highest number of refugees per capita in the world<sup>1</sup>. Although families and individuals fleeing Syria were hoping for better conditions in comparison to those in their war-torn home, life for Syrian refugees has been extremely difficult since their arrival to Lebanon.

Following their displacement, the quality of life for refugees in Lebanon has become significantly worse compared to life in pre-war Syria, and many lost the communities and safety-nets on which they had relied at home<sup>2</sup>. Before the war, Syrian women generally felt secure in their country with access to basic needs and reported not having to worry about safety for themselves, their children or their husbands<sup>3</sup>. Today, as refugees in Lebanon, they face a multitude of challenges not only related to safety and accessing basic services, including food, work, education, and healthcare, but also a growing domestic political narrative that is anti-refugee.

1. UNHCR Lebanon at a glance: <https://www.unhcr.org/lb/at-a-glance>

2. Shawaf N and El Asmar F (2017) 'We're Not There Yet...' Voices of Refugees from Syria in Lebanon, Oxfam <http://oxf.am/ZaoC>

3. El Asmar F, Shawaf N and Mikdashi D (2019). 'No one asked...' Amplifying the voices of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon on their power to decide, Oxfam <https://bit.ly/2NNyUz7>

The compound domestic crises have led to a dramatic rise polarization between refugee and host communities. Surging unemployment due to the economic collapse and strict COVID-19 lockdown measures have left Lebanese citizens and Syrian refugees alike struggling to support their families and access basic services.

One consequence has been a significant escalation in social tensions across Lebanon. Safety and security for Syrian refugees is far from guaranteed, and violent clashes have erupted between members of both communities more and more frequently<sup>4</sup>. Refugee homes have been vandalized or entirely destroyed<sup>5</sup>, and individuals have been subject to growing harassment and abuse<sup>6</sup>.

Women face the repercussions of the crises in different and more nuanced ways. Over the past four years, Oxfam has carried out a range of interviews with Syrian refugee women living in Lebanon in an effort to better understand their needs, their perceptions, their participation in decision making spaces, and their hopes for the future.

## WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF A DIGNIFIED LIFE

It is evident that both men and women displaced from Syria consistently aim for a life with dignity in Lebanon. In most cases, this continues to mean fulfilling their basic needs, such as security, food, work, education, and healthcare. However, lack of access to such services has been exacerbated by the multiple crises that have hit the country in recent years. Approximately 89% of Syrian refugees currently live below the poverty line in Lebanon, compared to 55% in 2019.

Food prices have almost tripled since October 2019, increasing by about 174%<sup>7</sup>. And at the same time, income opportunities have drastically shrunk due to the sharp economic slowdown the country has seen over the past twelve months and the ongoing COVID-19 lockdown measures. Oxfam's Protection Monitoring has found that these circumstances have pushed families and individuals into negative coping mechanisms, such as selling belongings and jewellery, cutting down on the number of daily meals, and child labour. The difficulty for refugees to access jobs has proven even more significant for refugee women. In 2020, 25% of men were unemployed and 86% of women were outside the labour force<sup>8</sup>. Even those women with previous professional training, such as nurses, cannot access jobs and have reported feeling humiliated when seeking one.

Refugee women are not only disproportionately impacted by the challenges facing their communities, but they also tend to have a broader understanding of safety and dignity when compared to their male counterparts.

## WORRYING NUMBERS FROM LEBANON:

*According to VaSyR (2020)*

Syrian refugees have been hit hard by the multitude of crises in Lebanon and they continue to live in conditions below humanitarian standards.

In 2020

**89% OF SYRIAN REFUGEE HOUSEHOLDS** LIVING IN EXTREME POVERTY IN 2020 (compared to 55% in 2019)

**58% OF SYRIAN REFUGEE FAMILIES** LIVING IN OVERCROWDED SHELTERS, SHELTERS BELOW HUMANITARIAN STANDARDS AND/OR SHELTERS IN DANGER OF COLLAPSE




**1 OUT OF 4 MEN** UNEMPLOYED



**86% OF WOMEN** OUTSIDE THE LABOUR FORCE

Fadia\* is 28 and lives with her family in a tent in a refugee camp in the Bekaa valley. She identified her most urgent needs as food, water, and access to healthcare, and emphasized that an improvement in the quality of life and stability for her and her children would allow them to live in dignity. She shared:



**I WANT TO SEE MYSELF AND MY FAMILY IN A HOUSE NOT IN A TENT - LIVING IN GOOD HYGIENE CONDITIONS AND MY CHILDREN HAVE ACCESS TO EDUCATION.** 

*\*Names have been changed to protect the identity of the women*

4. Al-Jazeera: "Lebanon's Deir el-Ahmar: How an incident displaced 600 refugees", <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/9/6/2019/lebanons-deir-al-ahmar-how-an-incident-displaced-600-refugees>.

5. Nahar Net: "Syrian refugee camp burnt to ground in Northern Lebanon", <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/278016>.

6. The New Arab: "Locals riot in Lebanese town demanding eviction of Syrians", <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/24/11/2020/locals-riot-in-lebanese-town-demanding-eviction-of-syrians>.

7. UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP (2020). The Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR) <https://bit.ly/3bUHIAM>

Shawaf N and El Asmar F (2017) 'We're Not There Yet...' Voices of Refugees from Syria in Lebanon, Oxfam <http://oxf.am/ZaoC>

8. Ibid.

More women than men report relief assistance from UN agencies and NGOs as essential towards living with dignity. Refugee women's more multifaceted perception of the conditions necessary to live a dignified life are also often influenced by their gendered roles – as primary caretakers for children and family members, as they regularly report that the wellbeing of children and their families is also at the heart of their concerns<sup>9</sup>.

Obtaining legal status in the country is also consistently referenced as essential for the safety and dignity of most refugees. This is why both the cancellation of the sponsorship system and the fees required for residency have been identified by refugees as the main obstacles for achieving a dignified life in Lebanon. According to the 2020 UN Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, only 20% of refugees over the age of 15 possess legal residency in country. Not having valid residency is a criminal offence in Lebanon, which puts refugees without legal residency at risk of detention or deportation. Women are particularly deprioritized, as more men have been able to achieve legal status compared to women<sup>10,11</sup>. In today's circumstances, emphasizing the need to waive fees for legal residency is more important than ever, with refugees struggling to cope with the record-levels of inflation in country.

## **WOMEN'S DECISION-MAKING POWER**



Gendered power imbalances continue to shape decision-making processes affecting Syrian women's lives. Undoubtedly, the circumstances that forced refugees to flee Syria were out of their hands. Yet, refugee women feel that their voices are not being heard, particularly at high-level political decision-making spaces with respect to the situation in Syria, but also on the domestic and household levels.

There are mixed reports about women's decision-making power within their households, more so recently due to high unemployment rates among men or the absence in many households of adult men who are able to work. As a result, many women have taken on the added responsibility of generating income for their household. However, despite taking on additional responsibilities, this has not translated into an increase in their decision-making power at home. Women report having limited input in everyday household decisions, and men are largely making the most important and life-changing decisions unilaterally. For example, leaving Syria was described as one of the most significant decisions that has affected women's lives, and it was mostly made by men. Returning to the country would similarly have a life-changing impact, and women have expressed fears of being forced to return to an unsafe Syria by a male authority figure in their household. As the living conditions continue to worsen in Lebanon, women are at an increased risk of facing forced returns, whether imposed by the deteriorating situation in Lebanon or by the men in their families.

Refugee voices are also routinely excluded from decisions made at the national and international levels, including those both by the Lebanese government that decidedly impact the lives of refugees, and by Syrian and international stakeholders regarding the peace process in Syria.

Although this is largely true for both men and women refugees, the impact for women has often been felt more acutely, as the majority of decisions regarding Syrian refugees in Lebanon are made without applying a gender lens. Gender-blind decisions pose a direct threat to the lives and security of refugee women, who continue to find themselves marginalized from key policy and program conversations. While many women reported to Oxfam that they think their voices are being taken into consideration more often by NGOs – which tend to ask for their input on programs and in research, for example – they did not feel this has translated into a comprehensive improvement in living conditions<sup>12</sup>.

Yasmine\*, a refugee woman aged 55 and living in the Informal Tented Settlements of the Bekaa Valley with her family, said:

 **I DON'T THINK WE, AS WOMEN, HAVE OUR VOICES HEARD. THIS IS HOW OUR COMMUNITY WORKS. ALL DECISIONS ARE MADE BY MEN: FROM THE SMALLEST ONE LIKE WHAT TO COOK TO THE BIGGEST DECISIONS. AND IF MY VOICE IS NOT HEARD INSIDE THE HOUSEHOLD, IT WILL SURELY NOT BE HEARD REGARDING DECISIONS ABOUT SYRIA'S FUTURE.** 

*\*Names have been changed to protect the identity of the women*

9. Shawaf N and El Asmar F (2017) 'We're Not There Yet...' Voices of Refugees from Syria in Lebanon, Oxfam <http://oxf.am/ZaoC>

10. According to Oxfam's protection monitoring reports over the years 2021 – 2019

11. The fees associated with obtaining residency are relatively high, as a result, families prioritize putting men forward in the residency process, as they are the more likely to be detained at checkpoints and potentially suffer criminal charges or deportation. However, this has led refugee men to achieve legal status at rates higher than women, who are routinely deprioritized and therefore more vulnerable.

12. El Asmar F, Shawaf N and Mikdashi D (2019). 'No one asked...' Amplifying the voices of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon on their power to decide, Oxfam <https://bit.ly/2NNyUz7>



## REFUGEE WOMEN ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

Most refugee women do not imagine their long-term future in Lebanon due to their negative experiences in the country since their arrival, as well as the multiple layers of difficulties they have faced throughout the past year that have made their lives even worse. Refugee women's hopes for the future centre largely on getting access to the basic needs they have thus far continuously been denied: food, security, healthcare, and education. The latter, in particular, is considered essential by women for accessing better opportunities and securing a dignified future for their children. Refugees have expressed the sentiment that generations to come have lost key opportunities through not having received a quality education.

Many women expect to go back to Syria, but only when they feel the circumstances are safe for their family to do so. Despite everything they have lost, they wish to reunite with family members and safety networks. Some women noted that they would prefer to relocate to a third country where they would have better access to the opportunities that have been denied them in Lebanon. In general, very few women are optimistic about their futures after experiencing displacement in Lebanon.

Fatima\* is a refugee woman who lives in Tripoli, the poorest city in Lebanon. She has reported the lack of employment opportunities as one of her main concerns. When discussing her hopes for the future, she said:



**THERE IS NOT A LOT OF HOPE FOR THE FUTURE AS THINGS ARE ONLY GETTING WORSE BY THE DAY, AND THERE IS A LOT OF UNCERTAINTY. BUT I SURELY WILL NOT GO BACK TO SYRIA AS MY HUSBAND WILL BE TAKEN TO SERVE IN THE MILITARY AND IT IS NOT SAFE FOR MY FOUR DAUGHTERS THERE.**

*\*Names have been changed to protect the identity of the women*

## PUTTING WOMEN AT THE CORE OF RESPONSES AND POLICIES: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Most Syrian women displaced to Lebanon feel their voices have been silenced, their specific needs overlooked, and their decisions disregarded. As a result, government and civil society programs and policies have not effectively met the wide variety of needs of the Syrian refugee community, in particular given the unparalleled circumstances facing Lebanon at present. Humanitarian organizations, the Government of Lebanon, and international stakeholders, including donors, all have an important role to play in amplifying and heeding the voices of these women and addressing their concerns in a gender-sensitive and inclusive manner. In this regard, Oxfam recommends the following:

### FOR HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS AND AGENCIES:

- Humanitarian interventions should better address gender inequalities and power imbalances within the refugee community and ensure all voices are heard and included in program design. Humanitarian actors must recognize that Syrian refugee women themselves have the most intricate understanding of their own contexts and needs, and as such humanitarian responses must be designed in partnership with those women, centring their perspectives and ensuring meaningful participation and consultation in all stages of program design and implementation.
- Intentions to return to Syria should be considered at the individual level to ensure that women's distinct priorities are captured and highlighted. Any and all returns to Syria must be safe, voluntary, informed and dignified. Women in particular face layered and complex threats of forced returns, at all levels where their decision-making power is constrained.

### FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF LEBANON:

- With a window to reform as the Lebanese political systems are in collapse, any new Lebanese social affairs and civic legislation or decision should incorporate universal social protection schemes that not only include refugee protection, but specifically take into consideration women's needs as well, including access to legal channels for renewing residency, reporting violations and seeking support, and ensuring access to healthcare, food security, and feminine hygiene. Such legislation and policies should be developed on the basis of consultations with the affected communities.

### FOR INTERNATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS:

- The international and donor community should invest greater resources towards gender justice in emergencies and gender-sensitive humanitarian program design. Local women's rights and women-led organizations play an immense role in responding to community needs and priorities, and further funding should go directly to these organizations.
- Donor countries must increase opportunities for resettlement of Syrian refugees in third countries, while recognizing that the decision to resettle should be an informed and voluntary. Refugees should be made aware of the challenges and opportunities presented by resettlement, as well as of any information relating to integration in a third country.