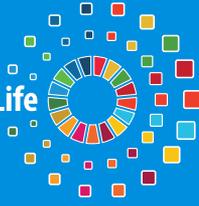


# The status of Syrian refugee women in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon and their priorities for voluntary repatriation





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## **The status of Syrian refugee women in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon and their priorities for voluntary repatriation**

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United Nations publication issued by ESCWA, United Nations House, Riad El Solh Square, P.O. Box: 11-8575, Beirut, Lebanon.

Website: [www.unescwa.org](http://www.unescwa.org).

22-00957

# Key messages



United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda call for women's increased participation in decision-making processes. This includes taking into consideration Syrian women's views and perspectives on the future of the Syrian Arab Republic and priorities for voluntary repatriation.



Socioeconomic shocks related to the COVID-19 pandemic have severely affected Syrian refugee women and host communities in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. Many refugee families experience heightened vulnerability to food insecurity, negative impacts on livelihoods and difficulties in meeting their basic needs.



The voluntary return of Syrian refugee women living in Lebanon and Egypt to the Syrian Arab Republic is only an option for some refugees, while those living in Jordan said they hope to return to the Syrian Arab Republic one day.



Syrian refugee women stressed that fear and the lack of accountability for crimes and abuses committed by all warring parties serve as a primary deterrent for their return. This is further compounded by limited economic opportunities, which affect their ability to afford basic needs, education and health-care services for themselves and their families. Safety and security concerns, including those related to gender and gender-based violence as well as legal discrimination, make the return to the Syrian Arab Republic nearly impossible at the present time.

# Acknowledgements

Field research for the present technical paper was conducted by Nada Darwazeh, Chief of the Centre for Women at the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), Nadya Khalife, Regional Advisor for Gender Equality, and Manar Zeiter, Consultant for Gender Equality at ESCWA. The brief was written by Nadya Khalife under the supervision of Mehrinaz el-Awady, Director of the Gender Justice, Population and Inclusive Development cluster. The document benefitted from revisions provided by Dina Melhem, Programme Manager for the National Agenda for the Future of Syria (NAFS), Dina Danif Richani, Research Assistant for the NAFS Programme, Nada Darwazeh and Manar Zeiter, in addition to independent experts.

ESCWA would like to thank women's organizations in Jordan and Lebanon that helped facilitate field research. It would also like to thank the agencies of the United Nations and international and local non-governmental organizations in Egypt for sharing their expertise, knowledge and experiences in responding to the needs of Syrian refugee women and girls.

Lastly, ESCWA is indebted to Syrian refugee women in Lebanon and Jordan who contributed immensely to the findings and recommendations of the present paper. ESCWA is also grateful for the generous contributions of the Government of Italy for supporting the work by ESCWA on women, peace and security in the Arab region.

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# Abbreviations and acronyms

<b>CBE</b>	Central Bank of Egypt
<b>GBV</b>	gender-based violence
<b>ISIL</b>	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
<b>OCHA</b>	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>SGBV</b>	sexual and gender-based violence
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>EGP</b>	Egyptian pound
<b>ERP</b>	Emergency Response Plan
<b>ESCWA</b>	Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
<b>GPI</b>	Global Peace Index
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>LBP</b>	Lebanese pound
<b>LCRP</b>	Lebanon Crisis Response Plan
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organization
<b>SYP</b>	Syrian pound
<b>UNHCR</b>	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>WPS</b>	Women, Peace and Security
<b>3RP</b>	Regional Refugee Response Plan

# Introduction



In 2022, the Global Peace Index (GPI) ranked the Syrian Arab Republic as the third least peaceful country in the world. The Syrian Arab Republic was ranked 161 out of 163 countries, coming in slightly ahead of Yemen and Afghanistan. The GPI measures the peacefulness of countries against 23 qualitative and quantitative indicators. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the most peaceful, the Syrian Arab Republic scored 5 or close to 5 on indicators such as organized internal conflict, displaced people, relations with neighbouring countries, terrorist activity, violent crime, deaths from conflict, and political instability.<sup>1</sup>

The crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic, well into its twelfth year, has resulted in more than 350,000 deaths, internally displaced approximately six million people and led to more than five million refugees in neighbouring countries.<sup>2</sup> The infrastructure of the Syrian Arab Republic has been severely damaged; this includes homes, schools, hospitals and health centres, power plants, and water systems.<sup>3</sup> The country's economy has continued to deteriorate amid currency

depreciation and soaring prices for food and basic goods and commodities. The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 further aggravated an already fragile context resulting in the depreciation of the Syrian pound (SYP) by about 36 per cent and increasing food insecurities. Compounding these deteriorating conditions are the economic costs of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have seriously impacted conflict-affected countries, such as the Syrian Arab Republic and the neighbouring countries that have played host to millions of Syrian refugees since 2011.<sup>4</sup>

Since 2020, hostilities inside the Syrian Arab Republic have somewhat subsided with the Government regaining control of the largest area within Syrian territory. In the north-east and north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic, de facto powers are in control. In the north-east, especially in the areas bordering the Euphrates River, the Syrian Democratic Forces have control.<sup>5</sup> The United Nations has called on international aid partners to invest in the Syrian Arab Republic by scaling up early recovery efforts and providing humanitarian aid to help ease the suffering of millions of

1 Vision of Humanity, 2022.

2 United Nations General Assembly, 2022.

3 Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 2020. Syria At War: Eight Years On.

4 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2022a.

5 Jusoor for Studies, 2021.

people inside the Syrian Arab Republic and refugees in neighbouring countries.<sup>6</sup>

United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) points to the disproportionate effects of conflict on the lives of women and girls. It reaffirms the vital roles women can play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and calls for the participation of women in peacebuilding efforts, humanitarian response and post-conflict reconstruction. Resolution 1325 and the nine subsequent resolutions that make up the WPS Agenda call for protective and preventive measures to address and respond to sexual and gender-based violence. They also call for women's increased participation in decision-making processes at all levels.<sup>7</sup> This includes women's views and perspectives on the future of the Syrian Arab Republic and the necessary conditions for repatriation.

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) supports member States in the Arab region to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Among its priorities is working with Arab Governments to advance the WPS Agenda through policy development. In 2021, ESCWA published two policy briefs on the social and legal status of Syrian refugee women and their developmental needs in Lebanon and Jordan to support advocacy efforts with host countries.<sup>8</sup>

The present document is an extension of the 2021 policy briefs and presents findings from fieldwork undertaken in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon to ascertain Syrian refugee women's challenges following the COVID-19 global pandemic.<sup>9</sup> It also seeks to better understand their perspectives on voluntary repatriation and their concerns and needs should they wish to return to the Syrian Arab Republic. This document also highlights the intersectional needs of elderly women and women with disabilities. Two in-depth knowledge products on elderly women and women with disabilities accompany this document and serve as a complete package of knowledge products on Syrian refugee women.

The present paper includes policy recommendations to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to inform and mainstream gender-related provisions in early recovery and reconstruction policies and programmes. These include increased support for women's representation and participation in decision-making processes, increasing women's economic participation and livelihood provisions, accelerated efforts to address and respond to all forms of violence against women, and increased access to girls' education especially in rural areas and to health and reproductive health services.

6 United Nations, 2002.

7 Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), n.d. Resolution Texts and Translations.

8 ESCWA, 2021a. ESCWA, 2021b.

9 Ibid.



# Methodology

The present technical paper is based on secondary research related to the status of Syrian refugee women in the countries of Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. Desk-based research was complemented with first-hand consultations with more than 200 Syrian refugee women in Jordan and Lebanon to better understand their current circumstances and needs for repatriation. Focus group discussions were held with Syrian refugee women in northern Lebanon, specifically in Akkar and Tripoli and in the cities of Bebnine and Chtoura in the Bekaa region. Similar focus group discussions were held in the Karak region, located in the southern part of Jordan. The discussions centred on women's thoughts and perspectives around voluntary repatriation with the aim of documenting their concerns and needs should they wish to return.

In June 2022, ESCWA held key stakeholder interviews in Cairo, Egypt, with United Nations agencies and international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in order to complement the secondary research with the first-hand knowledge and experiences of agencies working on the ground in Cairo and

other governorates in Egypt. Two advocacy meetings were also held in 2022 with the Syrian Constitutional Committee to present findings related to Syrian women's needs in Jordan and Lebanon and women's concerns and priorities for their return.

This paper is divided into five main parts. Part 1 serves as a brief background on the status of Syrian refugees in the three countries. Part 2 provides information on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises and the challenges for Syrian refugees living in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. Part 3 examines the status and experiences of Syrian women specifically within the three examined host countries. Part 4 explores women's wishes in relation to voluntary repatriation and their main concerns around their potential or eventual return to the Syrian Arab Republic. Finally, Part 5 offers policy recommendations around refugee women's repatriation needs to support advocacy for policy initiatives aimed at the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and international and national stakeholders responsible for relief, recovery and reconstruction efforts in the Syrian Arab Republic.

# Terminology

The present document uses the term repatriation as defined by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme to mean the voluntary repatriation of refugees that reflects basic principles of international law and practice.<sup>10</sup> According to paragraph (b) of the conclusion endorsed at the 36th Executive Committee session, "the

repatriation of refugees should only take place at their freely expressed wish...and the need for it to be carried out under conditions of absolute safety, preferably to the place of residence of the refugee in his country of origin, should always be respected."<sup>11</sup> The terms "repatriation" and "return" are used interchangeably in this document.

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<sup>10</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 1985.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

# 1. Background



The United Nations estimates that since the onset of the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic in March 2011, more than 350,000 people have lost their lives and more than six million Syrians are internally displaced. More than five million Syrians have sought refuge, mostly in the neighbouring countries of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Türkiye.<sup>12</sup>

Türkiye hosts the largest portion of Syrian refugees estimated to be about 65 per cent of the share, followed by Lebanon at 15 per cent

and Jordan at 12 per cent. Egypt hosts 2.5 per cent of the share of Syrian refugees estimated to be about 141,303 individuals.<sup>13</sup>

For all these countries, the numbers only reflect official registrations with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and do not take into account the number of refugees who are not registered with UNHCR and who are residing in the country legally or illegally.

## A. Syrian refugees in Egypt



Out of the three countries featured in this paper, Egypt hosts the least number of Syrian refugees, which make up more than half of the country's refugees.<sup>14</sup> According to UNHCR, Egypt is a transit and destination country for Syrian refugees, but, according to agencies of the United Nations and international organizations, the majority of refugees within Egypt wishes to migrate elsewhere. For some, Egypt was not their initial destination to seek refuge. Some families have entered Egypt through the southern border with the

Sudan and remain in the country illegally. Nonetheless, interlocutors explained that Egypt is more desirable for Syrian refugees because the country has a lower vulnerability due to its political and economic stability compared to Jordan and Lebanon.<sup>15</sup>

According to UNHCR data, more than 67,000 Syrian refugees are women, compared to about 42,000 men. Anecdotal evidence from civil society organizations that provide services to refugees notes that the number

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2021.

<sup>13</sup> UNHCR, 2022a.

<sup>14</sup> Egypt hosts refugees and migrants from 65 nationalities including from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iraq, South Sudan, and Yemen. ESCWA interview with UNHCR, Egypt.

<sup>15</sup> ESCWA interview with agencies of the United Nations and civil society organizations, Egypt.

of Syrian refugees in Egypt far exceeds United Nations figures and is estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands, while others suggest that the actual number is in the millions. One community worker suggests that there are about 450,000 Syrian refugees in Cairo only; that's three times the official number for all of Egypt.<sup>16</sup>

Most Syrian families from Homs have settled in Damietta and those from Aleppo and Rural Damascus (Rif Dimashq) reside in Alexandria, while those from Damascus live in the October District of Cairo.<sup>17</sup>

Egypt is one of the few countries in the Arab region that is party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, having acceded to the Convention in May 1981.<sup>18</sup> The State of Egypt provides education and health-care services to all refugees on par with Egyptians.<sup>19</sup> However, it maintains reservations to Articles 20, 22(1), 23, and 24, which

consider refugees as equal to nationals. The Government of Egypt cites that it made these general reservations to “avoid any obstacles which might affect the discretionary authority of Egypt in granting privileges to refugees on a case-by-case basis.”<sup>20</sup> The application of this clause is certainly evident in the economic sector that makes it difficult for refugees to participate in the formal labour market as employers must ensure that refugees have better qualifications than Egyptians to facilitate their employment.<sup>21</sup>

The Government of Egypt is committed to the non-refoulement principle.<sup>22</sup> It introduced visa requirements for Syrians to enter Egypt in 2013 but continues to allow a small number of Syrian refugees to enter the country, especially on the basis of family repatriation. The Government of Egypt allows refugees who are registered with UNHCR to regulate their residency and grants six-month renewable residence permits.<sup>23</sup>

## B. Syrian refugees in Jordan



As at June 2022, the official number of Syrian refugees in Jordan was recorded as 675,433 individuals.<sup>24</sup> Other sources estimate that the Syrian refugee population in Jordan stands at about 1.3 million, which is close to double the official figures. Only 18 per cent of all Syrian refugees live in the refugee camps of Zaatari and Azraq, located in the northern part of the country in the governorates of Marfaq and Amman, respectively. The majority of Syrian refugees reside in urban areas.<sup>25</sup>

Most Syrian refugees arrived in Jordan at the onset of the crisis in 2011. Though the

Jordanian Government is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, it provides welfare services to Syrian refugees including access to education and health-care services, including for COVID-19 health-related needs.<sup>26</sup>

The official stance of the Jordanian Government in terms of pressure on Syrians to return has been described as “modest”; with the country’s leadership acknowledging that Syrians still require safety and security measures put in place before they can return safely to the Syrian Arab Republic.<sup>27</sup>

16 Ibid.

17 ESCWA interview with UNHCR, Egypt.

18 Five countries in the ESCWA region are party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, namely, Algeria, Djibouti, Somalia, Tunisia, and Yemen. See UNHCR, n.d.a.

19 OHCHR, 2020.

20 UNHCR, n.d.a.

21 ESCWA interview with agencies of the United Nations and civil society organizations, Egypt.

22 The principle of non-refoulement guarantees that no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, or punishment and other irreparable harm. OHCHR, n.d.

23 UNHCR, 2020.

24 UNHCR, 2022a.

25 According to UNHCR, 80,000 refugees live in the Zaatari Camp and 38,000 live in the Azraq Camp. See UNHCR, n.d.b.

26 Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) Middle East Centre, 2021.

27 Ibid.



The number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is estimated to be about 1.5 million even though the official numbers account for only 839,086 individuals.<sup>28</sup> Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees per capita in the world.<sup>29</sup> In addition to the number of Syrian refugees, Lebanon also hosts close to 479,000 Palestine refugees who live in 12 designated camps around the country and in large cities and urban areas.<sup>30</sup> Three quarters of all Syrian refugees in Lebanon are women and children. Many families live in makeshift shelters, rundown apartments and abandoned buildings.<sup>31</sup>

Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and therefore does not render itself obligated to provide services for refugees.<sup>32</sup>

The Government refers to all refugees as “displaced” persons.<sup>33</sup> Government institutions, UNHCR and other international and local organizations provide basic necessities for refugees although the demand for services is far greater than the supply.

For more than six years, the Lebanese Government has called for the return of refugees to the Syrian Arab Republic. The Government argues that Syrian refugees pose an economic burden on Lebanon, which has intensified over the past few years with the financial crisis. They also suggest that the long-term stay of Syrian refugees, who are mostly Sunni Muslims, will disrupt the rather fragile sectarian balance in Lebanon.<sup>34</sup> They also fear radicalization and security threats, given previous spillovers of violence between 2013 and 2017 that led to clashes between the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Lebanese Army in the northeast part of the country among other security concerns.<sup>35</sup>

On July 6, 2022, the Lebanese caretaker Minister for the Displaced announced that the country will begin sending back Syrian refugees at a rate of 15,000 individuals per month. UNHCR and other rights groups in the country have decried this move as a forced repatriation of Syrians.<sup>36</sup>

28 UNHCR, 2022a.

29 UNHCR, n.d.c.

30 United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), n.d.

31 UNHCR, 2018.

32 UNHCR, n.d.a.

33 For a terminology list, see Government of Lebanon and the United Nations, 2020.

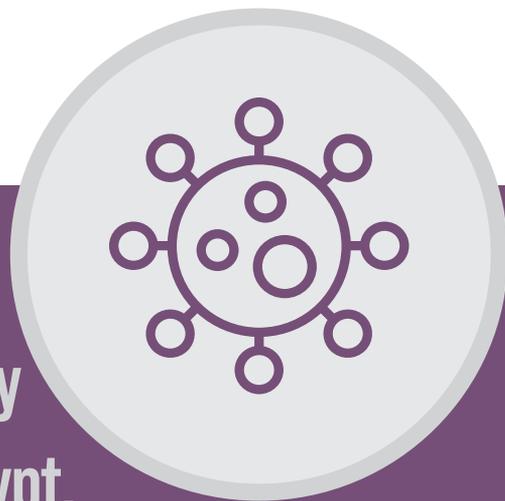
34 Refugees International, 2020.

35 Ibid; Karasapan, O. and S. Shah, 2021.

36 Chehayeb, K., 2022.



## 2. COVID-19 and the fragility of host communities in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon



The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in severe health and socioeconomic consequences across the globe and the Arab region. The pandemic was gendered in many ways, resulting in more job losses and decreased salaries for women, an increase in their unpaid care work, and gender-based violence. These shocks severely affected host communities in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon.

Although the response of Egypt to the COVID-19 pandemic was more relaxed than that of neighbouring countries, the Government still imposed shorter working hours and restricted movements. This led to income disruptions for many vulnerable Egyptians and refugees and has led to low growth in the Egyptian economy and increasing unemployment. Today, Egypt is experiencing high inflation rates, which jumped exponentially from 4.8 per cent in 2021 to 12.1 per cent in March 2022. The Central Bank of Egypt also took steps to devalue the Egyptian pound (EGP) by 15 per cent, which increased prices for many common goods and services.<sup>37</sup>

In Jordan, the global pandemic impacted refugees' access to job opportunities. Most households were unable to meet their

basic needs. Today, Jordan is facing several economic challenges resulting from the impact of COVID-19, which were further compounded by global economic factors. These challenges have resulted in sluggish economic growth and increased poverty and unemployment, especially among youth and women. Many vulnerable communities, especially refugees, rely on cash assistance, informal employment and seasonal labour.<sup>38</sup>

Prior to 2021, Syrian refugees only had access to formal employment in selected sectors open to non-Jordanians including in agriculture, construction and manufacturing. In July 2021, the Government of Jordan issued 62,000 work permits to Syrian refugees and expanded the range of employment sectors to include services, sales, crafts, skilled agriculture, forestry, fishery, plant and machine workers, and other basic industries.<sup>39</sup> In 2022, Jordan appealed for \$1.3 billion to support refugees with sustainable livelihood opportunities and access to social security mechanisms, while promoting private-sector development, job growth and decent work.<sup>40</sup>

37 Dawoud, K., 2022.

38 Ibid.

39 UNHCR, 2022b.

40 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UNHCR, 2022.

In Lebanon, the COVID-19 pandemic and the financial and economic crisis have had devastating consequences for host communities and refugees. Prior to the multidimensional crisis, the vast majority of refugees was living in poor conditions and with limited resources. The current crisis was exacerbated by the Beirut Port explosion in August 2020, which left thousands homeless and strained humanitarian organizations, rendering them unable to meet the staggering demands of host communities and refugees.

Service provision has decreased because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the financial and economic crisis ensuing in the country, placing vulnerable Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian and other refugees in precarious situations unable to meet their basic needs. To help alleviate some of the burdens, the United

Nations launched the Lebanon Emergency Response Plan (ERP) in August 2021 to support 1.9 million individuals, including Lebanese, Palestinian refugees and migrants of different nationalities. The ERP sought to raise \$383 million, of which 47 per cent was funded by April 2022.<sup>41</sup> The emergency plan for Lebanon is complemented by the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), which caters exclusively to Syrian and Palestinian refugees and host communities, targeting 3.2 million people. In June 2022, LCRP stakeholders appealed for \$3.2 billion.<sup>42</sup>

In 2022, the Regional Refugee Response Plan (3RP) appealed for more than \$137 million to extend protections to all refugees, in addition to promoting their access to livelihoods, food, housing, education, and health services.<sup>43</sup>

41 OCHA, 2022b.

42 UNHCR, 2022c.

43 UNDP and UNHCR, 2022.





### 3. The status and experiences of Syrian refugee women in host countries

#### A. Syrian refugee women in Egypt



According to key stakeholder interviews, the majority of Syrians work in the informal sector and those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds own and operate their own businesses, mostly in the food industry. While most Syrian refugee women are homemakers with no prior experience in the labour market, some women have started home businesses such as preparing meals and homemade products and selling them to neighbours to make a living for themselves and their families. Other women sew clothes for Syrian women and market their products within their communities.<sup>44</sup>

Civil society organizations offer Syrian women vocational training in traditional sectors such as hairdressing, sewing, embroidery, and handicrafts and support women to market their services and products online and through production unions. However, marketing through online channels was difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic as most women had difficulties with Internet connectivity and the use of technology.

Syrian refugee women experience physical, verbal and sexual harassment in public. Although they have the lowest reporting levels

among all refugees in Egypt, Syrian women experience domestic violence in terms of restrictions on movement, and emotional and economic abuse. Economic abuse was described as men forcing women to work and sell their products in the streets, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The marriage of Syrian girls as young as 15 and 16 years of age continues unabated, and anecdotal evidence suggests that these rates increased during the pandemic.

UNHCR provides monthly education grants, cash assistance and socioeconomic protections including health services, shelter, legal support for violence, legal support for cases of violence against women and child protection services to those who are registered. Other agencies of the United Nations provide livelihood assistance including food vouchers and cash assistance, which according to interviews with local activists, discourage some refugees from working.

Civil society organizations provide vocational training and community outreach. Through Government-run

<sup>44</sup> Information in this section is, unless otherwise stated, primarily drawn from ESCWA interviews with agencies of the United Nations as well as international and civil society organizations in Egypt.

community centres, they offer women survivors of violence, Syrian refugees and others, and host communities services such as gender-based violence referral services, psychosocial support, case management, and legal assistance. They also offer awareness-raising on sexual and reproductive health. Syrian refugee

men also receive legal assistance and psychosocial support.

In May 2021, a new wave of Syrian refugees arrived in Egypt. Some came to reunite with their families while others came to escape the deteriorating conditions back home.<sup>45</sup>

## B. Syrian refugee women in Jordan



Jordan is globally classified as the second-largest host to Syrian refugees per capita after Lebanon.<sup>46</sup> About 83 per cent of Syrian refugees live in urban areas and in impoverished conditions. Women and girls represent half of the refugee population.<sup>47</sup> The majority of Syrian refugees suffers from or is vulnerable to food insecurity and has limited participation in economic life. The Jordanian Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation developed the Jordan Response Plan for the Syria Crisis 2020-2022. The Plan focuses on primary areas such as access to public services, health, education, economic empowerment, social protection, and justice, including legal aid and psychosocial support services for women and children.<sup>48</sup>

Syrian refugee women in Jordan face legal and socioeconomic challenges and, in particular, barriers in accessing paid work.<sup>49</sup> Only 6 per cent of Syrian refugee women participate in the workforce.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, Syrian norms and traditions delegate men as heads of households who are financially responsible for the family, while women are responsible for raising their children and maintaining the home. Such sociocultural constraints limit women's abilities to work outside the home and to contribute to their families' livelihoods. Some refugee women expressed the desire to work inside the home to avoid being in contact with men.<sup>51</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Syrian refugee women discussed the low quality of Government health services, mentioning a lack of competence among doctors, low quality of medicines, difficulties in obtaining treatment, and, in some cases, mistreatment by some health service providers. Many Syrian refugee women in Jordan have poor knowledge of reproductive and sexual health as well as limited education in relation to health care generally, different stages of life and disease prevention.<sup>52</sup>

Girls' education among Syrian refugee families is low despite the provision of free education to Syrian refugees in Jordan. This is mainly due to some families' lack of awareness in relation to the importance of girls' education, long distances to and from school and lack of transportation, which was either expensive or risky for young girls travelling alone. Syrian refugee women also face increasing difficulties in accessing quality education in Jordan due to the inability to pay tuition fees and lack of legal documents for admission procedures.<sup>53</sup>

The most frequently reported type of violence among Syrian refugee women is sexual violence, followed by emotional and psychological abuse, and physical abuse.<sup>54</sup> Confinement measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic in Jordan have

45 ESCWA interview with UNHCR, Egypt.

46 UNHCR, 2022b.

47 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNHCR, 2021. Gender Based Violence Sub Working Group Jordan - Terms of Reference.

48 Jordan, Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, 2020.

49 ODI, 2017.

50 UN-Women, 2017.

51 ESCWA, 2021c.

52 Ibid.

53 World Refugee and Migration Council, 2020.

54 UNFPA and UNHCR, 2015.

increased the risk of sexual and gender-based violence in the household, and Syrian women in camp and non-camp settings within rural areas have struggled to access services and information.<sup>55</sup>

The Government of Jordan provides women and children survivors of gender-based violence with protection systems, psychological support, and awareness and empowerment services. However, 83 per cent of Syrian females declared that they are “very

often unaware of any services available for survivors of GBV [gender-based violence] in their community, or do not feel comfortable accessing services due to feelings of insecurity or a limited ability to leave the home.”<sup>56</sup> Semi-governmental organizations and NGOs provide nationals, refugee women and girls who are survivors of gender-based violence with free legal aid, mediation and court representation, referral to social and psychological assistance and rehabilitation services, awareness-raising and information-sharing.

### C. Syrian refugee women in Lebanon



The economic and financial crisis has undoubtedly increased the financial burdens on many Syrian refugee families in Lebanon. The devaluation of the Lebanese pound (LBP) has had a severe impact on families in meeting their basic needs. Women who took part in focus group discussions in Lebanon said that living expenses in the country are very high. Syrian refugee women said there is no electricity and no medicine. One woman noted that she needs to keep insulin refrigerated for her son, but there is no electricity to do so.

Women who participated in focus group discussions said that medical needs such as pre- and post-natal care as well as reproductive health care in terms of access to contraceptives and sanitary hygiene products are no longer as readily available as in previous years. Syrian refugee women noted that UNHCR only covers expenses related to natural childbirth; birthing women with special circumstances must search for and pay for alternative care. They pointed to the sharp decline in services provided by the United Nations and said that, oftentimes, these services, if available, are very slow.

Women and their families were also severely impacted by the closing of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. They say that while schools were shut, their children were not able to learn at home. They mentioned their dissatisfaction with the Lebanese education

system and the isolationist approach of the Ministry of Education to learning even before the COVID-19 pandemic. During the onslaught of the humanitarian crisis back in 2011, the Lebanese Government separated learning for Lebanese students from learning for Syrian children by holding school for Syrian children in the afternoon.

Syrian refugee women pointed to the increasing costs of school transportation. One woman said that she must pay for two different busses to transport her children to two different schools in two different directions. Women from the Bekaa region mentioned an increase in school withdrawals because parents could not afford to pay transportation costs. They also said that teachers' low wages deeply affected their state of emotional and mental health, leading to them sometimes being violent towards refugee children. In addition, public school teachers were on strike for lengthy periods during the school year, and children were unable to attend classes online due to weak Internet connection or, in some areas, a lack of equipment and Internet connection altogether.

The harsh conditions and financial burdens for Syrian refugee women are severely aggravated by limited working opportunities for women. One woman in Akkar said: “I make 6,000 LBP per hour. This wage is not enough and not decent and it is tied to my living arrangements.

55 UN-Women, 2020.

56 UN-Women, 2013.

If I don't work, I have no roof over my head."<sup>57</sup> Another woman from Akkar said that she works for merely 2,000 LBP an hour. She must work seven hours a day to buy a loaf of bread. Many of the women remarked that they feel exploited and discriminated against in earning a fair wage and they feel taken advantage of in their rental payments by their landlords. Syrian refugee women from the Bekaa region spoke about the socioeconomic circumstances that gave rise to increasing tensions between Syrian refugee and host communities. They say that landlords increased their rent exponentially and used hate speech to force rent payments in United States dollars.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an increase in cases of violence against women. Women were emotionally and mentally impacted by the lockdown, which was further reinforced by the financial pressures they were living under. As a result, women's responsibilities inside and outside the home

increased especially with men's decreased job opportunities, wage cuts and, in some cases, job losses. Women in the Bekaa region referred to an increase in sexual exploitation against Syrian refugee women and pointed to the "widows' refugee tents". Other women noted an increase in child marriage as a coping mechanism to offset financial burdens despite heightened awareness against this harmful practice.

Despite the unsurmountable challenges facing Syrian refugee women in Lebanon, women pointed to more positive circumstances and opportunities over the past two years. They spoke about more pronounced shifts in gender roles inside their homes whereby husbands and fathers were playing a role in taking on additional household responsibilities during the lockdown. Some women also had increased opportunities to volunteer with community-based organizations and take up leadership roles with their local communities.<sup>58</sup>

57 At the time of the focus group discussion in May 2022, the exchange rate was about LBP28,000 to \$1.

58 ESCWA focus group discussions, Lebanon.



## 4. Repatriation: Not in the cards for everyone



### A. Repatriation of Syrian refugees in numbers



Available data from UNHCR confirms the official repatriation of Syrian refugees from 3RP countries since 2014. UNHCR received the largest number of resettlement submissions, about 75,000, back in 2016. This number has drastically decreased over the years. In 2021, resettlement submissions decreased to 25,000 and, for the first half of 2022, the submissions stand at 6,000 official applications.<sup>59</sup>

UNHCR also tracks self-organized repatriation. The largest wave of returnees took place in 2019 with more than 94,000 individuals returning to the Syrian Arab Republic. This number decreased by more than half in 2020 and 2021, when the numbers of returnees were 38,235 and 35,680, respectively. By May 2022, less than 17,000 Syrians have voluntarily returned through self-organized repatriation.<sup>60</sup>

### B. Syrian refugee women's perspectives on repatriation



Syrian refugee women in Jordan and Lebanon spoke candidly about repatriation. They said that the voluntary return to the Syrian Arab Republic is an option for some, but not in the cards for everyone. Refugee women in Jordan said they hope to return to the Syrian Arab Republic one day. However, the lack of accountability for crimes committed by all warring parties remains a harsh reality and compounds an already complex political and security situation. This is further complicated by particular security concerns for Syrians who left the Syrian Arab Republic during the onset

of the crisis and have been living abroad for extensive periods of time.<sup>61</sup>

Refugee women spoke about fear as a major deterrent for their return. One woman from Karak said, "fear remains a major obstacle due to what we witnessed before we left Syria, the news we follow in the media, and what we hear from people we know back in Syria. This makes it difficult for us to take such decisions."<sup>62</sup> The fear of refugee women is also related to the fate of the missing and forcibly

<sup>59</sup> Information in this section is, unless otherwise stated, primarily drawn from ESCWA interviews with Syrian refugee women living in Lebanon and Jordan and from the United Nations as well as international and civil society organizations in Egypt.

<sup>60</sup> UNHCR, 2022a.

<sup>61</sup> ESCWA focus group discussions with Syrian refugee women, Jordan.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

disappeared, which places psychological and social pressures on families who have the right to know the whereabouts of their relatives. These fears and apprehensions are directly linked to confidence-building measures referenced in Security Council resolution 2254 (2015) to help build a new social contract that paves way for peace and stability.<sup>63</sup>

Some women became heads of households after the death or imprisonment of their husbands in the Syrian Arab Republic. The idea of having to start again, to find work and financially provide for their families serves as an additional struggle they must contend with. One woman from Idlib remarked, “I don’t want to return because I don’t want to start from zero.”<sup>64</sup> For other women, their families, parents or relatives remain internally displaced or have migrated elsewhere making it difficult to even begin thinking about returning without a support network to facilitate their return.

Some women said they will never return to the Syrian Arab Republic. Their children have become accustomed to life in Lebanon. This was also a prominent response among younger women who grew up as refugees in Lebanon and do not know what life is like back in the Syrian Arab Republic. Other women explained that Lebanon is merely a transit country for them, and they plan to travel elsewhere in the future.<sup>65</sup>

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) suggests there has been a large increase in spontaneous returns from Lebanon, which is largely due to the socioeconomic circumstances in the country.<sup>66</sup> One woman noted that the living conditions in the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon are similar, and, in this case, she would rather go back to the Syrian Arab Republic. Others said they would return for the mere convenience of meeting their health-care needs as they have access to free health care in the Syrian Arab

Republic. One woman from Akkar said that she must pay LBP25 million (equivalent to \$1,000) to access health services. Other women who have given birth to children in Lebanon and who have not registered the birth of their children in the Syrian Arab Republic would return for the sole purpose of registering their children and receiving identity documents. The lack of formal documentation for children affects their rights in accessing education; health care; housing, land and property rights; and employment in the future. This also makes undocumented children vulnerable to becoming stateless.<sup>67</sup>

The thoughts of Syrian refugee women living in Lebanon and Jordan about repatriation are similar to the information received through stakeholder interviews in Egypt. Some Syrian refugees view Egypt as a transit country while they prepare for migration to Europe. Other Syrian refugees who have established businesses in Cairo and other urban areas have made a life for themselves in Egypt and plan to stay. What was more striking in Egypt is that questions and discussions around repatriation were rarely open, unlike in Lebanon and Jordan.

UNHCR notes that perception surveys are held regularly with refugees where questions about repatriation are asked, but almost all Syrian refugees respond with hesitation and apprehension. UNHCR suggests that males have no intention to return and most Syrian refugees in Egypt require specific political and economic conditions in the Syrian Arab Republic to even begin thinking about returning. An activist working in Egypt noted that most Syrians want to leave Egypt to return home. She says, “the majority will go back”. However, she also articulated that most refugees are concerned about starting from zero. They worry about access to education, housing and work opportunities.<sup>68</sup>

63 United Nations, 2015.

64 ESCWA focus group discussions with Syrian refugee women, Lebanon.

65 Ibid.

66 ESCWA interview with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Egypt.

67 German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), 2021.

68 ESCWA interview with civil society activist, Egypt.

According to IOM, there is a current suspension of returns due to the political and security conditions in the Syrian Arab Republic. However, IOM facilitates voluntary returns of Syrians only after they undergo a reintegration process that informs individuals about the current conditions and examines their security, education and employment needs and options. IOM supports returnees with pre-departure training prior to leaving the host country.<sup>69</sup>

The discussions around repatriation focused on several issues including safety and security, lack of economic opportunities to afford basic needs, education and health-care services. The discussions also underscored additional gendered concerns related to gender-based violence and legal discrimination, which, for many girls and women, make the return to the Syrian Arab Republic nearly impossible at the present time.

**“I would love to return, but my family is dead...I have no one to return to.”**

Interview with Syrian refugee woman living in Akkar, Lebanon

### C. Safety and security concerns for women and their families



One of the main concerns for Syrian refugee women is their safety and security and that of their families. Many refugee women who participated in focus group discussions in Jordan and Lebanon said that while some areas of the Syrian Arab Republic are safe, other regions, especially the ones they are originally from, are still not secure. One woman from Idlib said, “there are harsh conditions in Idlib. It is not yet safe to go back.”<sup>70</sup>

Most women from these areas, if voluntarily repatriated, would not go back to their original hometowns as they are mostly destroyed. They fear that there is limited freedom of movement from one region to another and that this will result in additional challenges in terms of repatriating as well as re-establishing and maintaining connections with family members and relatives.

Safety and security are also very much tied to the lived experiences of women who fled the war. Some experienced first-hand the death of family members and the destruction and damage of their homes and neighbourhoods. But many of the women contend that the damage is not only in terms of infrastructure, but also the long-term physical, psychological and emotional scars they still live with. One woman from the city of Homs said that she lived through two massacres. She says, “I don’t want to remember the past.”<sup>71</sup>

Most women reflected on the safety of their children, male and female. Many mothers fear that if their sons return, they will be forcibly conscripted into the army. Others fear for the physical safety of their children in terms of violence, threats and kidnapping. Some women noted that they fear their daughters would be raped, harassed or exploited.

### D. Lack of basic necessities



The second-most cited reason for non-repatriation focused on the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions as a result of the conflict, exemplified by increased poverty; unemployment; and the lack of basic needs and services, including housing, food and livelihoods. Syrian refugee women in Jordan and Lebanon said that they have

no homes to go back to and no access to livelihood opportunities to be able to pay for rent, electricity and other basic commodities. Some of these necessities also encompass communications tools and transportation costs for women to be able to move freely across towns and regions to meet their needs.

69 ESCWA interview with IOM, Egypt.

70 ESCWA focus group discussions with Syrian refugee women, Lebanon.

71 Ibid.

According to the World Bank, the social and economic impact of the crisis is very significant. The gross domestic product and gross national income per capita of the Syrian Arab Republic have significantly decreased, prompting the World Bank to reclassify the Syrian Arab Republic as a low-income country.<sup>72</sup> In 2020, average food prices in the Syrian Arab Republic increased by 236 per cent. Food insecurity has caused families to resort to negative coping mechanisms including eating fewer and smaller meals.<sup>73</sup> Extreme poverty, defined as living on less than \$1.90 per day, now affects more than half of the population. Access to livelihoods, shelter, health, education, water, and sanitation has dramatically worsened.<sup>74</sup>

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs found that more than 40 per cent of homes in the governorates of Duma, Rural Damascus, Deir Ezzor, and Al-Raqqa are uninhabitable. The situation is similar in Dar'a, Aleppo and Idlib, where up to 15 per cent of homes are uninhabitable.<sup>75</sup> During the onslaught of hostilities, six out of the seven largest drinking water systems in the Syrian Arab Republic that supply 80 per cent of water to 9.5 million people were severely damaged. These water systems are expensive to fix and replace. Even if finances were available, materials and the number of workers with adequate skills to preform repairs and maintenance are limited.<sup>76</sup>

## E. Lack of economic opportunities for women



**“Syria and Lebanon are almost the same. At least here [in Lebanon], I am renting [a home] and I can work.”**

*Interview with Syrian refugee woman living in Tripoli, Lebanon*

Conflict and displacement have changed the lives of Syrian women in profound ways. Prior to the crisis, the vast majority of women now living as refugees in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon took on traditional roles, such as maintaining their households and caring for their families. In the Syrian Arab Republic, only about 22 per cent of women were in the labour force compared to 80 per cent of men. Today, approximately 22 per cent of Syrian households are headed by women.<sup>77</sup>

Syrian refugee women in Jordan and Lebanon noted that the conflict has affected the economy of the Syrian Arab Republic and people's daily lives. They spoke candidly about the social and economic hardships and highlighted the additional burdens facing many women in taking on the primary role of providing for their families. These additional responsibilities extend beyond women whose

husbands have died or are absent, but also to women whose husbands are facing limited opportunities. Today, women are expected to secure livelihoods alongside men to offset expenses associated with rising living costs and low wages. They stressed that these drastic changes to people's lives, especially for women who are heads of household, require more innovative thinking around strategic ways to leverage women's participation in economic life.

Many Syrian families living in host countries face harsh living conditions and are unable to meet their basic daily needs. These circumstances have forced Syrian women to learn vocational skills to pursue employment opportunities. Agencies of the United Nations and local organizations in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon provide capacity-building programmes and vocational training for Syrian refugee women

<sup>72</sup> World Bank, 2022.

<sup>73</sup> CARE Middle East and North Africa, 2021.

<sup>74</sup> World Bank, 2022.

<sup>75</sup> OCHA, 2022a.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

and vulnerable women from host communities. The majority of women works in the informal sector and is either self-employed or participates in cash-for-work programmes.

Despite efforts to encourage Syrian women's participation in the labour market in Egypt, they continue to face limited opportunities because they do not have the required vocational skills, access to markets or adequate support networks. Women's illiteracy rates also play a crucial role in employment prospects and opportunities.<sup>78</sup> Most women, whether in the Syrian Arab Republic or living in host communities, are only able to work in the informal sector and earn meagre wages.

Refugee women from Rural Damascus and Homs now living in Jordan noted that

agriculture was previously their main source of livelihood. The agriculture sector suffered greatly during the crisis. This included the destruction of infrastructure such as machinery, buildings, cooperatives and farms, facilities used for storage and processing, and irrigation canals and wells.<sup>79</sup> They cited the importance of introducing reforms to the agricultural sector.

Still, for many refugee women, the ability to work in host communities remains an incentive for them to stay abroad and not risk losing out on livelihoods by returning to the Syrian Arab Republic. Many of the women noted that after their experiences in host communities, they now realize the importance of work and financial independence.

## F. Gender-based discrimination



According to the World Economic Forum 2021 Gender Gap Index, the Syrian Arab Republic ranks 152nd out of 156 countries. Although it fares relatively well on the dimensions of education (ranked 118th) and health and survival (ranked 118th), it ranks poorly on women's economic participation (ranked 153rd) and on women's political participation (ranked 142nd).<sup>80</sup>

The Syrian Constitution of 2012 provides that citizens shall be equal in rights and duties without discrimination among them on grounds of sex, origin, language, religion, or creed. Article 23 also notes that women shall be provided with opportunities to contribute politically, economically and socially and that the State has a duty to remove obstacles that restrict women from actively participating in their society.<sup>81</sup>

Despite the Government's commitments to gender equality, Syrian women still face discrimination in law and practice. Women

are unable to confer their nationality to their spouses or children. The Penal Code does not prohibit domestic violence or marital rape. Article 192 of the Penal Code still allows judges to use their discretion in handing down reduced sentences for so-called honour crimes.<sup>82</sup> The Labour Law places restrictions on women's work and prohibits women from working in harmful and arduous work.<sup>83</sup>

Although child marriage is prohibited, personal status law in the Syrian Arab Republic still gives judges the authority to marry children 15 years or older. Fathers are the guardians of their children. Mothers can request guardianship through the consent of a judge. Polygamy is still permitted.

Some women who divorced their husbands in Lebanon and Egypt say that their divorce is not registered in the Syrian Arab Republic. They fear that without documentation and a formal acknowledgement of the divorce,

78 ESCWA interview with civil society representative, Egypt.

79 Hassouna, J., 2020.

80 World Economic Forum, 2021.

81 International Labour Organization, n.d. The Syrian Arab Republic Constitution of 2012.

82 Article 192 of the Penal Code provides for the reduction of sentences if the judge finds that the motive was "honourable". ESCWA, UNFPA, UN-Women and UNDP, 2019.

83 Ibid.

they risk losing their children if they attempt the journey back. Syrian Personal Status Law grants mothers the custody of their children until the age of 15. However, the lack of formal recognition of the divorce places women in a precarious situation regarding their children's safety and well-being.<sup>84</sup>

Many Syrian refugee women living in Lebanon and Jordan are fully aware of their legal rights and adamantly say that they will not return to the current legal framework in the Syrian Arab Republic. They expressed that urgent and necessary legal reforms were among their top priorities.

## G. Violence against women and girls



Many women cite safety and security concerns in terms of their physical safety. They refer to violence against women as one of the main deterrents that prevents them from returning to the Syrian Arab Republic. Some women cited rape, exploitative practices and the abduction of women and girls as major safety concerns. They noted that sexual violence used to occur before the crisis, but new forms of sexual violence became a prominent feature of the conflict.<sup>85</sup> Women from Homs, Hama and Idlib shared their fears regarding their female children in terms of abductions. They also say that child marriage poses a serious risk for returning.

Syrian refugee women also cited challenges related to access to justice. They mentioned their weak trust in legal enforcement mechanisms to punish perpetrators of violence and seek redress for women survivors of violence. They also noted the lack of a protective environment for women survivors of violence. Some women are knowledgeable about service provision from Government and civil society organizations; however, they cite challenges for women reporting violence even to trustworthy parties.<sup>87</sup> Services are not accessible everywhere and extremely limited in rural areas.

Syrian refugee women said they have experienced domestic violence, forced marriage and forced pregnancy. Women from rural areas cited economic violence as a major concern noting that there were limited opportunities for women to work, except in agriculture. Some were never financially compensated for work; most wages are earned by the male head of household.<sup>86</sup>

Women noted that as long as violence against women remains unaddressed, women will continue to experience other forms of violence and harassment including trafficking in persons. They spoke about their concerns in terms of protection and prevention of violence against women and said there were weak protection measures against such egregious violations against women.

## H. Access to land and property



Women's access to land and property is a contentious issue in the Syrian Arab Republic. Throughout the crisis, many homes were destroyed along with land and civil registries, making it especially difficult to access documentation related to ownership of land and property. Most homes are in the names of women's husbands, who may have died or

remain in prison. According to the Norwegian Refugee Council, only 4 per cent of refugee women in Lebanon and Jordan had property registered in their names.<sup>88</sup> Women have no or limited knowledge about administrative issues to help them reclaim land and property that were once in their husbands' or male relatives' names. For many women, the

84 ESCWA focus group discussions with Syrian refugee women, Lebanon, and interviews with agencies of the United Nations, international and civil society organizations, Egypt.

85 ESCWA focus group discussions with Syrian refugee women, Lebanon.

86 ESCWA focus group discussions with Syrian refugee women, Jordan.

87 ESCWA focus group discussions with Syrian refugee women, Jordan and Lebanon.

88 Tabary, Z., 2019.

administrative and judicial process is too cumbersome and expensive.<sup>89</sup>

Women in Jordan and Lebanon also spoke about their concerns around Law No. 10 of 2018,<sup>90</sup> which allows the reconstruction of new areas across the country.<sup>91</sup> According to this law, real estate authorities and land registries must provide the Government with a list of property owners within a designated period of time. Land and property owners whose names do not appear on the list have one year to make a claim of ownership to receive compensation. If claims are not made on time, those lands are seized by the Government.<sup>92</sup>

Refugee women noted that the law does not take into consideration missing persons, women heads of households, obstacles to claiming land ownership from abroad, or the fact that a large number of displaced

persons and refugees do not possess civil documentation papers. Refugee women also said that they do not know which Government entities are responsible for documenting land ownership after the war.<sup>93</sup>

Some women who rented out their homes to neighbours say that the occupants now require compensation to break the lease and vacate the property. One woman from Akkar said, “I rented my house to my neighbour with all its furniture thinking that this would be better than to have strangers come and occupy the house. Now, I don’t know what to do. She wants compensation to leave my home and I simply cannot afford to pay her.”<sup>94</sup> This serves as another example of the complexities related to land and housing as well as of women’s limited knowledge in navigating through legal and administrative processes and overcoming hurdles.

## I. Access to health care and reproductive health



Women pointed to their health-care needs as a major concern for repatriation. One woman noted that there are no hospitals in Idlib and that movement between regions to receive care is nearly impossible due to the risks associated with domestic travel. Another woman from the city of Homs said that medicines are available in some areas, but they are rather expensive. Others pointed to the lack of health-care services for elderly persons and for orphaned children, despite the existence of specialized health-care services for persons with disabilities, including disabilities acquired as a result of the crisis.

Syrian health-care infrastructure has been severely damaged after more than a decade of war. As at June 2021, 35 per cent of the 211 available hospitals and 44 per cent of the 1,791 public health-care centres were characterized

as non-functioning or partially functioning. Notwithstanding the functionality of some hospitals, the health-care system faces chronic challenges such as shortages of medical personnel, power shortages and supply chain disruption that affect the availability, as well as the quality, of health services.<sup>95</sup> According to the World Health Organization, 50 per cent of experienced health-care workers have left the country.<sup>96</sup> Most women were concerned about access to reproductive health care and services.<sup>97</sup> Women said that they have little knowledge and awareness around reproductive health matters beginning from childhood, throughout their youth, and before and after marriage. They said that they have little information about pre- and post-natal health-care services. Women also pointed to the criminalization of the use of contraceptives according to Articles 523 and 524 of the Syrian Penal Code.

89 ESCWA focus group discussions with Syrian refugee women, Lebanon.

90 Syrian Arab Republic, 2018.

91 ESCWA focus group discussions with Syrian refugee women, Jordan and Lebanon.

92 Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 2018.

93 ESCWA focus group discussions with Syrian refugee women, Jordan and Lebanon.

94 ESCWA focus group discussions with Syrian refugee women, Lebanon.

95 OCHA, 2022a.

96 World Health Organization (WHO), 2022.

97 Ibid.



Children make up approximately 40 per cent of the population of the Syrian Arab Republic.<sup>98</sup> Approximately 1.75 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 do not attend school in the Syrian Arab Republic and more than 1.35 million children are at risk of dropping out of school. An additional 2.7 million children are out of school in host countries.<sup>99</sup> Internally displaced and refugee children who did not attend school or dropped out of school face obstacles with returning to school and adapting to a new environment. Girls who also dropped out of school will face challenges in continuing their education and entering higher education institutions. Many girls and women worry that school and university degrees received abroad will not be recognized by the Syrian Arab Republic.

The education system in the Syrian Arab Republic has been significantly fractured due to the more than a decade-long war and is severely underresourced, limiting the ability of children to access education services regularly. Many school buildings have been either damaged or destroyed. One in three schools have been used to house displaced families while others were used as military installations.<sup>100</sup> Tens of thousands of teachers have left the education sector, leaving a wide gap in terms of skills and qualifications among those who have remained. In fact, the crisis has brought about new challenges related to children's psychosocial needs, and great support is required to equip school personnel in dealing with children's new realities.

Across all governorates, schools are overcrowded and lack basic school supplies such as furniture, running water and electricity. There are also large discrepancies in education between cities and rural areas. Different education curricula are also used so that some diplomas are not recognized. Less than half of households with children in school feel their children are learning sufficiently. Other children have been taken out of school to help support their families economically.

In many rural areas, traditional gender roles reinforce inequalities and give rise to parents' resistance to educating their daughters. Refugee women noted that special care is needed to promote girls' education especially in rural areas. They said that girls' education affects their participation in social, economic and political matters later in life. The lack of education increases girls' risk of being subjected to violence and child marriage.<sup>101</sup>

Syrian refugee women interviewed in the Bekaa unanimously rejected repatriation and the idea of eventually returning to the Syrian Arab Republic. They summarized their concerns as follows:

The security and economic situation in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Fear of forced conscription for males.

No guarantees for the safe return of refugees.

Loss of or missing relatives from previous years.

Demographic shifts in some towns and villages as they are now occupied by strangers.

Weak protections for women in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Inability to accept traditional and cultural practices after knowing their rights and living in a different environment.

Weak sense of belonging after living as refugees.

Loss of homes for most families.

Fear of being subjected to revenge due to personal and political disputes.

The conflict has not ended and there is limited confidence in political solutions.

Fear of rejection or negative attitudes towards refugees from those who remained in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Fear of sectarian tensions and discrimination based on religious confessions and regions especially in areas where the conflict was most severe.

Weak civil society with limited resources to provide basic needs and protection services to women.

<sup>98</sup> OHCHR, 2018.

<sup>99</sup> No Lost Generation, n.d.

<sup>100</sup> Gavlak, 2021.

<sup>101</sup> ESCWA focus group discussions with Syrian refugee women, Jordan and Lebanon.

## K. Elderly women



Elderly women are a vulnerable population group and require considerable support in host countries as refugees, or as internally displaced persons or residents in the Syrian Arab Republic. Elderly women who have lost their husbands far outnumber widowed men and face significant challenges pertaining to sociocultural norms that expect male widows to remarry and female widows to maintain their homes and care for their families.

Most elderly men are educated compared to elderly women who did not have the opportunities to continue their education. In many parts of the Syrian Arab Republic, families did not encourage their female children to pursue schooling. Elderly men are more financially stable than elderly women because work opportunities favoured men rather than women and because male members of the family generally served as the main

breadwinners and were expected to work. Many elderly women had between five and nine children, often consecutively, which took a toll on their physical health as they aged and exposed them to illnesses including osteoporosis.

During the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic, relief and recovery efforts rarely took into consideration elderly people's needs including basic services such as nutrition and medicine. In addition, some elderly people were simultaneously burdened with providing financial and psychosocial support to their families in the absence of any systematic financial, psychological or social assistance.

Elderly people, including elderly women, should be provided with basic services including medicines for chronic diseases in addition to particular considerations for their health and psychosocial needs.<sup>102</sup>

## L. Women with disabilities



The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) defines persons with disabilities as "those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."<sup>103</sup> Close to four million people in the Syrian Arab Republic above the age of 12 have some type of functional disability, defined as an impairment or difficulty in mobility, hearing, vision, cognition, communication, or self-care.<sup>104</sup> This includes 26 per cent of residents, 25 per cent of returnees and 29 per cent of internally displaced persons.<sup>105</sup> Twenty-eight per cent of males have a disability compared to 25 per cent of females. Moreover,

20 per cent of widowed women are disabled, compared to only 4 per cent of widowed men.<sup>106</sup>

A 2018 study conducted on disability in Lebanon found that more than 22 per cent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon above the age of two are disabled. When broken down by sex, this relates to 21.4 per cent of refugee women compared to 23.9 per cent of refugee men. A more recent study conducted in Jordan in 2019 found that 22.9 per cent of surveyed Syrian refugees aged two years and above have disabilities. Approximately 14 per cent live in Azraq camp, 23 per cent in Irbid and 30 per cent in Zaatari camp. Approximately 24 per cent of female refugees are disabled, compared to 22 per cent of males.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>102</sup> This information is based on preliminary desk-based research undertaken by ESCWA to develop a policy brief on the needs of elderly men and women during repatriation.

<sup>103</sup> Eighteen out of 22 ESCWA member States are parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, with Egypt and Jordan ratifying it in 2008, and the Syrian Arab Republic ratifying it in 2009. Lebanon signed the Convention in 2007 but has yet to ratify it. See United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.

<sup>104</sup> United Nations Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP), 2020.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Australia, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018.

According to the Women’s Refugee Commission, persons with disabilities face different vulnerabilities that are reinforced by their type of disability, gender, access to education, and resources. Women and girls with disabilities are more likely to experience gender-based violence and sexual violence while men and boys with disabilities may face increased physical or psychological harassment.<sup>108</sup>

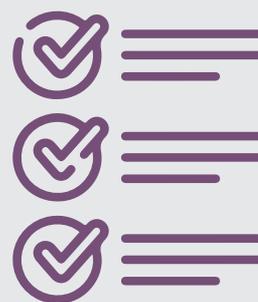
In displacement settings, women and girls with disabilities face additional hurdles in accessing basic services due to factors relating to their environment and communication barriers. Their perspectives on their needs and concerns are rarely taken into consideration, and they are often excluded from participating in programme planning. As a result, they have reduced access to essential services including reproductive health care as well as prevention and response programmes related to gender-based violence.<sup>109</sup>

108 Women’s Refugee Commission, 2020.

109 Ibid.



## 5. Conclusion and recommendations



### A. Conclusion



The crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic, well into its twelfth year, has left millions of people displaced internally and living as refugees in neighbouring host countries. The damage and destruction due to a decade of conflict has been further compounded by an economic crisis, COVID-19 and unilateral coercive measures resulting in soaring food prices and severely limiting people's access to livelihoods and basic commodities. This fragile and precarious environment adds more burdens on women, especially female heads of households and other vulnerable populations including the elderly and women with disabilities.

The circumstances of Syrian refugee women in the host countries of Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon are similar, with limited job opportunities, hardships in accessing livelihoods and basic needs such as health care and education. Discussions around women's needs in relation to voluntary repatriation are ongoing with some women wishing to return only to register their children as Syrians and to receive health care. The majority of Syrian refugee women obstinately rejects voluntary repatriation until their gendered concerns and needs are fulfilled and a conducive environment exists for their eventual return to the Syrian Arab Republic.

### B. Recommendations



This section highlights the main recommendations related to women's needs and concerns in relation to their eventual repatriation to the Syrian Arab Republic.

They are based on discussions through which women shared their wishes for an enabling environment and necessary conditions to facilitate their voluntary repatriation.

1

#### Accelerate efforts to reach a political solution to end the crisis

- Promote national reconciliation and national unity efforts for a unified Syrian Arab Republic free from sectarianism and all forms of discrimination.
- Ensure a sustainable political transformation based on Security Council resolution 2254 that guarantees a culture of democracy, rule of law, accountability, and equality, with special attention to the role of women, as called for by Security Council resolution 1325.

2

#### Ensure the restoration of safety and security and uphold the rule of law

- Uphold the human rights of all civilians and the rights of women and girls.
- Place timeframes and age limits on conscription into the army.
- Develop and uphold guarantees for basic human rights and the physical security of all citizens to facilitate the safe return of refugees.
- Restore access and delivery of basic services including water, food, shelter, and health services to meet the basic needs of citizens.
- Develop and implement a relief and recovery plan that pays special attention to the gendered needs of men, women, boys, and girls.
- Ensure that citizens have access to physical and mental rehabilitative services.

3

#### Advance progress to eliminate gender-based discrimination and gender-based violence

- Amend legislation to ensure gender equality, including within Personal Status Law, the Penal Code, the Labour Law, and the Nationality Law.
- Adopt and implement a law to protect women from all forms of violence in the private and public spheres, including a law on sexual harassment.
- Ensure the implementation of the law banning child and forced marriages with no exceptions.
- Implement policies to address and respond to the grave consequences of child marriage on girls, women and their communities.
- Develop national strategies and policies to advance gender equality and eliminate all forms of gender-based violence.
- Raise awareness on women's human rights, including the right to live free from violence and exploitation.
- Ensure that Government institutions and civil society organizations provide services for women survivors of violence including 24-hour hotlines, shelters, psychosocial support, and empowerment programmes.
- Build the capacities of police, justice and health professionals to appropriately and collaboratively respond to gender-based violence.

4

#### Support women's representation and participation in decision-making

- Increase women's representation and participation in decision-making processes across all local and national levels including in relief and recovery plans and programmes.
- Adopt temporary special measures such as quotas to facilitate women's participation in political and public life.
- Support women members of the Constitutional Committee and ensure that gender equality provisions are included in the new Constitution.
- Support women's civil society organizations.

6

#### Facilitate women's access to land and housing

- Adopt a law to protect properties from seizure and appropriation.
- Provide compensation for loss or destruction of homes.
- Raise women's awareness on land and property rights, and facilitate their administrative needs to reclaim land and property.

8

#### Improve women's literacy and encourage girls' education

- Rebuild schools and ensure that they have adequate infrastructure and basic supplies such as running water and electricity.
- Enforce compulsory education and encourage girls to attend school and continue their studies especially in rural areas.
- Develop education curricula to strengthen children's educational attainment.
- Acknowledge school and college degrees from host countries.
- Develop programmes addressing illiteracy among women, especially for disadvantaged and vulnerable women.
- Ensure that children who dropped out of school while in host countries can continue their studies.

5

#### Increase women's economic participation and provision of livelihoods

- Ensure that women have equal access to the labour market and to economic opportunities.
- Strengthen and facilitate women entrepreneurs' access to loans.
- Build the capacities of women to enable them to undertake skilled employment and develop financial literacy.
- Raise awareness on the importance of women's participation in the economy and their financial contributions to their households and communities.
- Amend the law to extend maternity leave and provide childcare services for working women.

7

#### Protect women's health and provide access to reproductive health care

- Rebuild health-care infrastructure and ensure the availability of services in public and private hospitals and primary health-care facilities.
- Ensure availability and access to medical supplies and medicines, especially for chronic illnesses.
- Ensure that health care and reproductive health-care services are available and free of charge and that female doctors are available.
- Provide mental health and psychosocial support to women and all segments of society.

9

#### Pay special attention to the needs of rural women, elderly women, women heads of households and women with disabilities

- Ensure special considerations for rural women, elderly women, women heads of households, and women with disabilities to access basic services such as health care and education.
- Facilitate the access of women to livelihoods and employment opportunities.
- Pay special attention to and urgently address all types of abuse, exploitation and gender-based violence.

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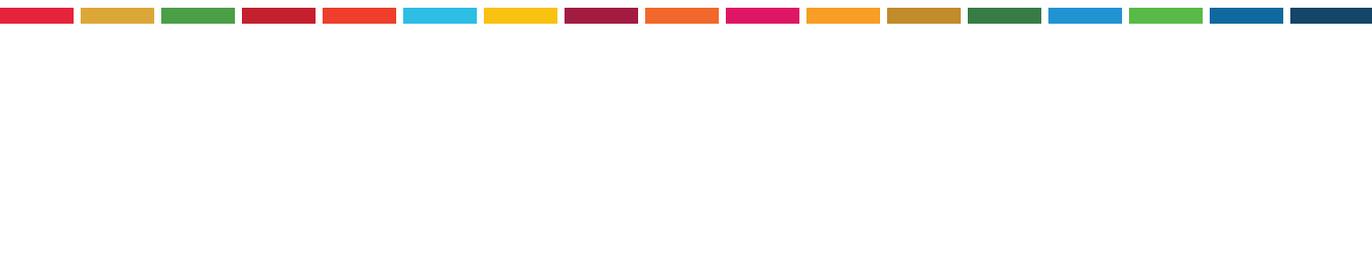
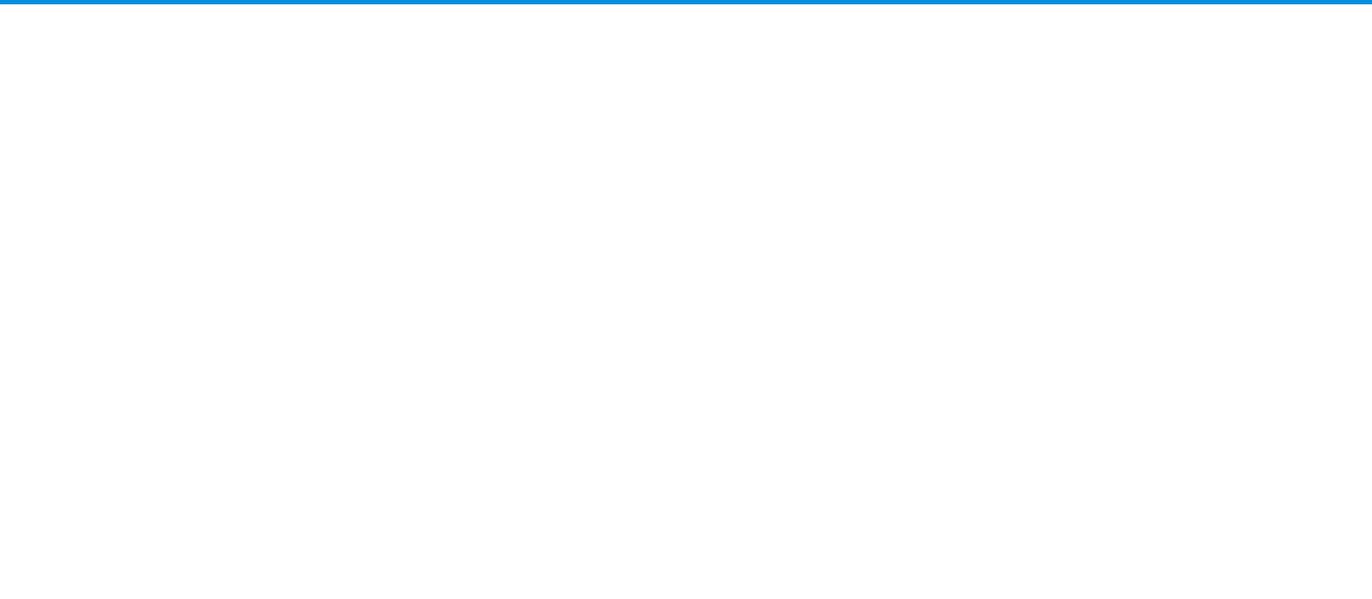
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This technical paper presents some of the challenges facing Syrian refugee women following the COVID-19 global pandemic and those of host communities in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. It also seeks to understand their perspectives on voluntary repatriation as well as their concerns, needs and priorities should they wish to return to the Syrian Arab Republic. This paper also includes policy recommendations to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to support the mainstreaming of gender-related provisions in early recovery and reconstruction policies and programmes.

