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H.S. Batainah and M.A. de Percy

# Syrian Women in Transition

## The landscape

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## Introduction

*It's just so tough. It's a very difficult work environment for us as a registered organisation. So imagine your average Joe who's a Syrian, who wants to make a living and just live, it's very hard. It's very, very hard.* (NGO, Lebanon)

The Syrian conflict that began in 2011 generated unprecedented movement of people, resulting in millions of Syrians being internally displaced and millions seeking asylum in the region and beyond. The protracted nature of the conflict means that the presence of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries now appears to be a constant (UNHCR, 2021). Policy responses initially focused on providing humanitarian assistance and limiting the number of refugees reaching Europe, through containing the majority within Syria's neighbouring countries – mainly Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. Since 2011, policy solutions have evolved to simultaneously contain the refugee crisis and bolster humanitarian capabilities in host countries, while also refocusing on investment in broader development and resilience strategies for host countries. For Syrian nationals in these countries, the dynamic nature of politics and policy in each state, as well as in the region, means that the context continues to change while they wait for a political solution to the conflict.

This paper – the second in a series of three – is part of a research project on Syrian refugee women. It focuses on findings from the fieldwork conducted by the primary author on the experiences of Syrian women in Jordan and Lebanon. Our wider research focus was on understanding the status of Syrian women refugees in two host countries (Jordan and Lebanon) and one settlement country (Australia), and how their experiences of forced migration may influence their political participation – meaning their ability to participate in processes that advance their immediate rights – in a post-conflict Syria.

Between November 2018 and November 2019, we conducted semi-structured interviews in Jordan and Lebanon, primarily in Arabic, with 100 women between the ages of 18 and 63 (most in their 30s and 40s). Our previous paper provides a snapshot of their personal experiences, showing the multi-faceted reality and diverse situations Syrian women face. The focus here is on situating the women in their wider context by looking at the policy landscape that shapes their lives as refugees. In this paper we also draw on our interviews with people from government, non-government and community organisations working with Syrian refugee women in Jordan and Lebanon. Due to the political context of the research, we choose not to disclose the identities of any of these people.

### Key findings

In researching the lived experience of Syrian women residing in Jordan and Lebanon we encountered a complex and dynamic landscape. We expected to find, in line with the results of our desk research, an organised and connected policy landscape. What we found instead when speaking to officials from government, non-government and community-based organisations and with individual Syrian women was a series of loosely connected networks revolving around an ambiguous and nebulous concept of the Syrian refugee. We found that these networks operate in ways that narrowly define the

refugee experience and as a result greatly affect the women's sense of self and agency, their everyday experiences and their ability to assess risks and opportunities.

## Policy landscape

The protracted nature of the conflict in Syria has challenged the temporary nature of protection. The situation of Syrian populations in the host countries and their potential 'permanence' constantly recalls that of the Palestinian refugees residing in Jordan and Lebanon.

Policy activities linked to the refugee crisis generated new or expanded agencies in the public sector and civil society in many countries involved in temporary accommodation of refugees and permanent settlement for some. Syria's neighbouring countries, mainly Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, accommodate the largest numbers of Syrian nationals and are also part of the wider network of states involved in organising, deterring and, to a much lesser degree, settling refugees. Approaches to the accommodation of Syrian refugees differ between states in accordance with their political stance on the reception and settlement of refugee populations – not in accordance with their ability to absorb population disruptions. The global policy landscape in relation to Syrian refugees greatly impacts on the relationships between host states and donor states and therefore on the lives of Syrian nationals outside of Syria.

The conflict in Syria and the resultant humanitarian crises must also be contextualised within the wider cultural, political and religious frames in the region. Tensions in many states have led to both opportunities and obstacles for refugees. The ongoing turmoil associated with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict remains the primary backdrop of refugee politics in the region. At the same time, dramatic changes in politics and culture in many countries – the 'Arab Spring' of 2010 to 2012 – have exposed divisions and emboldened various activities in civil society. The emergence of Islamic State (IS), together with the sectarian nature of the Syrian crisis, has created a security paradigm which further complicates the humanitarian landscape. This means that policies focused on humanitarian interventions intersect with policies to identify and contain security threats, counter violent extremism within communities and meet various other security needs of states.

The political and cultural upheaval in the region over the last decade has further fragmented the social fabric. The repercussions from changes in the political, cultural, social and religious landscape continue to impact on the lives of those living in the region, particularly in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon (Fraihat and Yaseen, 2020). This includes changes in the role of women in the public sphere.

### Jordan and Lebanon

As forced migration is a whole of life change, host countries' policies relating to Syrian refugees have encompassed all aspects of material conditions, including access to food and shelter, economic opportunities, education and legal advice, and attempts at offering psycho-social support (Jordan Response Plan for the Syrian Crisis 2020–2022). The available resources and approaches have been in constant flux, changing in accordance with changes

in political will, donor priorities, host population needs and behaviours, and local challenges (including host country preferences for refugees to return to Syria or be resettled in a third country). The temporary settlement of Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon has transformed the host country policy context to focus on both the humanitarian crisis and opportunities for local development activities, generating new opportunities for donor-backed policy interventions in a variety of areas not limited to direct humanitarian interventions for refugees (UN, 2018).

In Jordan and Lebanon, the humanitarian/development approach to accommodating Syrian refugees has resulted in a complex policy landscape where host country government policies connect and/or compete with donor-backed policy initiatives. The dispersal of funds and the fragmented nature of governance structures has resulted in the emergence of thousands of organisations that purport to work on behalf of, for, or in helping Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. Host country government departments have worked in conjunction with, and in some instances in parallel with, international non-government organisations (INGOs) and local community organisations. The reformulation of refugee policy towards a focus on development and resilience for the host country has further expanded and complicated the policy landscape (Jordan Response Plan for the Syrian Crisis 2020–2022; UN, 2018). This has added to the complexity of understanding the opportunities for Syrian refugees, who are by definition non-nationals and therefore subject to a parallel, yet interconnected, policy stream.

**Forced migration and the 1951 Refugee Convention**

Forced migration is necessarily an international problem, and the principles outlined by the United Nations inform the global framework in relation to refugees. However, the framework is fragmented by various levels of governance and only applies (at international law) to signatories to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol (UNHCR, 2021b). The three countries principally hosting Syrian nationals forced to flee the conflict are Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. All three states have translated their obligations differently, presenting three very different sets of conditions for Syrian nationals. Of the three, only Turkey is a signatory to the Refugee Convention. The conditions for Syrians in Turkey are thought to be the most in line with the essence of the convention, even though Turkey's translation of the convention only applies to refugees from Europe (UNHCR, 2021c). Unlike Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon are not countries of permanent settlement for refugees. The Jordanian and Lebanese governments continuously declare this, even though they have made many exceptions to allow the entry and temporary settlement of Syrian refugees within their borders.

As Jordan and Lebanon are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the global institutional arrangements do not apply as a matter of course (UNHCR, 2015). In May 2015 the Lebanese Government suspended United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) registration of Syrian refugees and announced that Syrians would only be accepted if they could provide documentation that proved they had a legitimate reason for being in the country (fleeing from Syria not being a legitimate reason) (UNHCR Lebanon, 2020). Yet both Lebanon and Jordan

continue to host refugees under agreements with the EU, the UN and other donor entities and countries (European Council, 2016a; European Council, 2016b).

The protracted nature of the conflict in Syria, together with the fact that Jordan and Lebanon are not signatories to the Refugee Convention, has led to a situation that challenges many of the notions set out in the convention. National and local arrangements to deal with Syrian refugees differ not just procedurally but also culturally in determining who is and who is not a refugee, residency and work permits, freedom of movement, access to resources, fears of refoulement (forcible return to Syria), and the overall terminal or temporary nature of settlement outside of Syria for Syrian refugees.

**Beyond the Refugee Convention**

Forced migration, broadly understood, is multi-jurisdictional and highly politicised, and is not adequately addressed by traditional policy frameworks. Refugee status typically requires the individual to be outside of their home country. However, whether they are recognised or officially recorded as refugees differs in accordance with national policies. When people seek refugee status in a host country (or multiple countries over a period of time) they encounter a variety of overlapping, intersecting and sometimes unrelated social and political structures that direct or restrain their individual choices and behaviours. While global responses to refugees appear to have a certain logic and coherence, refugee populations are not bound to distinct jurisdictions and are often subject to competing policy rules and norms. The international conventions relating to refugees are overarching reference points and become a primary negotiating tool with regard to international law and refugee rights in all policies, regardless of whether the host country is a signatory. Through intervention and funding, the UN and other international NGOs can impose conditions on host nations to comply with international human rights law and norms in relation to the treatment of refugees. However, the ways in which nations translate their obligations into local action, and their willingness to comply, differ in line with their own political agendas and interests. A long history of conflict in the region resulting in various patterns of forced migration and resettlement, as well as a decade of policy directed at Syrian refugees, has created a sedimented structure that is difficult to navigate.

*National crisis response plans*

Both Jordan and Lebanon initiated crisis response plans to coordinate donor support, funding and implementation of programs as a way to address the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis domestically and coordinate international and local humanitarian interventions. In the various iterations of the Jordan Response Plan for the Syria Crisis since 2015, Jordan has continuously highlighted the impact of the refugee presence and the Syrian crisis in general on the local landscape, including the strain on infrastructure, services, environment and local population needs. The first iteration of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, in 2015/2016 (UNOCHA, 2014), highlights Lebanon's stance as a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol. It clearly identifies that Lebanon implements aspects

of the convention at its discretion and that Lebanon is not a country of asylum, a final destination for refugees or a country of settlement. While it acknowledges that the UN and the international community identify Syrian nationals seeking refuge in Lebanon as refugees in accordance with the convention, Lebanon identifies them as 'displaced from Syria' and only acknowledges those who have registered with UNHCR as refugees. It has since suspended UNHCR registration.

*Humanitarian interventions alongside domestic policies*

While there are government backed/led support strategies to accommodate the needs of refugees, other laws and initiatives appear to tighten controls and make life for refugees difficult. Attempts by Jordan and Lebanon to coordinate humanitarian aid and to bolster the needs of their vulnerable populations have led to some policies that appear to be at odds with promoting the safety, needs and aspirations of the Syrian community. Policies on labour laws, residency permits and security have local populations and host country sovereignty in mind and can appear contradictory, complicating matters for Syrians wishing to comply with local laws and policies. There is evident frustration about the ways local laws are enacted to ease local pressures while global policy interventions attempt to aid in the fulfilment of obligations to Syrians in host countries as refugees. A co-founder of one of the bigger community-based NGOs in Lebanon explained to us that the increasing pressure on residency permits does not necessarily achieve the government's aims but rather forces Syrian nationals into remaining illegally:

> *Because the Lebanese government has a target or a strategy to remove half of the refugees that it has. So, the way that they're doing it is they're doing it through the paperwork. But this is backfiring on them because the people who they want to get rid of, who are the highly disadvantaged people, these people don't even have the money for the paperwork, so they don't apply. They're staying illegally. And the people… so now they're getting rid of the people who actually have the means, are renting the houses, are paying for electricity, are paying for water, they have car. So, they're participating in the economy. Actually, there's a study that was done at the AUB, it's a very valuable study and it showed how the influx of Syrians into Lebanon helped the economy. But of course, there's all this propaganda about Syrians.*

This interviewee also informed us that changes in employment laws (and changing levels of enforcement) meant that Syrians cannot be legally employed in the aid sector:

> *So, this is what's happening to us. A lot of these young Syrians who came out of Syria, who had some skills, we were training them for grant writing… things like that within the programs. These people can find immigration to Europe or the US, and [are] staying [to help] people who don't have the skill. If the Lebanese government wants to do it in a smart way, they would retain these people. And these people would service the people who are disadvantaged, you know what I mean. That's all we want to do. And now there's a new law where us as an NGO, we're not allowed to employ Syrians anymore. We're supposed to employ Lebanese. So now an initiative that was started by Syrians and was run by Syrians is turning into a Lebanese organisation because more and more of our employees are becoming Lebanese. I don't have a problem with Lebanese, but a Lebanese will never understand.*

*Community-based organisations*

While the institutional policy landscape in Jordan and Lebanon appears to be vibrant and proactive in delivering on the humanitarian needs of Syrian nationals, there is a distinctly hierarchical and highly networked policy landscape that the larger institutions appear capable of navigating but is increasingly impossible to navigate closer to the ground. The way funding structures are organised means that there is much overlap and repetition in services and activities, and the circulating norms and values force an apolitical approach that does not attempt to disrupt the status quo of the larger organisations or of the host country.

Because of the way power is concentrated in particular areas and with particular institutions (government or non-government), organisations in Jordan and Lebanon tend to remain focused on narrowly defined measurable outcomes and are very careful not to highlight politically sensitive issues. Smaller, community-based organisations are better situated to directly interact with the lives of individuals. As they are more closely connected to the communities, community-based organisations are more aware of the difficulties for refugees in host societies. However, funding structures and state bureaucratic control regularly disrupt their programs and services that require long-term application and sometimes efforts to lobby local governments for changes in policies and laws.

Many community-based efforts to assist Syrian refugees have evolved to helping vulnerable people more generally. Some of these organisations have been created and led by Syrian nationals. However, national policies in the host countries create a level of bureaucracy that can make it difficult to bring much-needed services to vulnerable people. One Syrian woman explained:

> *We applied for a grant from the EU. We made a consortium of five small Syrian NGOs. It was for five community centres, including schools. It was great, we got it and everything. Then when it was time… or after we signed, when it was time to start transferring and setting up they said, no, as an INGO we need the approval of the Lebanese Ministries. Like no, no, no, we don't want to go through the Lebanese Ministries. Yes, yes, yes, we want to go through the Lebanese Ministries. And so the Lebanese Ministries decided to dictate who the organisations that will do the actual proposal will be, how the money will be split and the money has to go through them. Of course nobody saw that money. What I tell people, knowing Lebanon and knowing… because, OK, so we started working only with Syrians but now we work with Syrians, Palestinians and disadvantaged Lebanese. So I know exactly the situation of even a lot of Lebanese areas that are like… it's just beyond. So in Tripoli, in areas like Naba and Baaq, where they're kind of like host communities to the Syrian refugees, but the host community suffering. It is extremely disadvantaged. I told them if that money had gone to the ministry and the Minister had used it for Lebanese schools, I really, really would've been very happy. But it didn't reach the Lebanese students and it didn't reach the Syrian students. It went into the deep pockets of the politicians. Which is very, very, very sad. And this happens all the time. All the time. Like they keep cracking down on us, even when we get grants…* [1]

[1]. The extent of corruption in Lebanon is beyond the scope of this research. The comments presented here are quoted from the source and do not represent the views of the authors, the University of Canberra or the Australian Civil-Military Centre. The Corruption Perceptions Index published by Transparency International ranks Lebanon in the top quarter of the most corrupt countries in the world, although significantly better than our interviewee suggested.

The Corruption Perceptions Index for 2019 is available at https://www.transparency.org/cpi2019?/news/feature/cpi-2019.

### Organised chaos

Much has changed in the policy landscape since the start of the conflict in Syria and the movement of Syrian nationals escaping the conflict. For example, where once organisations actively competed to provide similar services and resources, there is more collaboration; and where humanitarian organisations focused only on basic needs, there is more emphasis on community-wide resilience and empowerment strategies. However, the context for refugees in host countries still appears to be one of organised chaos.

There are attempts by the global community to intervene to structure resources for Syrian refugees, and many host countries, including Jordan and Lebanon, rely heavily on global interventions to boost resources and to share ideas on how to manage refugees and what to focus on. This creates a lot of activity in these host societies, yet the interventions are fragmented, short term, susceptible to trends, and highly sensitive to both policy changes in the host country and politically-driven changes in donor countries' foreign policies. Interviewees working with NGOs and community-based organisations told us that one of the most frustrating aspects of their work is dealing with donors' ideas on what to focus on and the constantly shifting interests and priorities of donor countries/governments.

## Women, Peace and Security agenda

Policies have often focused on the humanitarian, economic, legal or security dimensions of the refugee experience, with insufficient attention paid to the social, political and cultural aspects or the behaviours and aspirations of Syrian nationals who find themselves in a state of permanent transition. However, due to the overarching security paradigm and the shift towards a focus on development and resilience of host countries in general, the policy scope in these countries has broadened to include refugee populations in policies on matters that are considered much more narrowly in other countries. The United Nations Women, Peace and Security agenda is one of these.

Operating in conjunction and at times overlapping with the humanitarian policy framework is UN Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (UN Women, 2019b). Our wider research focused on the 'Participation' pillar of the Women, Peace and Security agenda (UN Women, 2019a) and the ways in which Syrian refugee women are able to participate in peacebuilding initiatives. Our research began with the idea that the material aims of the humanitarian framework may complement the aspirational aims of expanding the focus on women and their participation in processes that directly affect them.

Some aspects of women's personal experiences of forced migration have been well documented (UNHCR, 2021d), but not as much attention has focused on the overlap between the Women Peace and Security agenda and the experiences of refugee women. This connection is important for at least two key reasons. First, the United Nations and its various organisations continue to act as policy formulators, brokers and implementers in the region. This engagement has manifested in a variety of policies implemented by funds, programs and specialised agencies aiming to bolster cooperation in

areas central to issues of peace and security (UN, 2018). In this way the UN and partner states and agencies are actively engaged in setting the policy direction in host societies – including in relation to the gender progressive policies embedded in UNSCR 1325 and the ways in which they are actualised in government departments and civil society (United Nations Security Council, 2012).

Second, UNHCR is the primary mechanism through which aid is administered and delivered to refugee populations, through which refugees can defend their rights, and through which refugees are resettled in third countries. The conventions, activities and aspirations of the United Nations continue to shape policies and activities affecting refugees. This institutional context is highly centralised in many respects but is decentralised in practice – most evidently in the ways resources are distributed and whether and how UN mandates are adhered to. This aspect of the policy landscape is particularly important in light of the extreme vulnerability of refugee women, who must contend with and constantly negotiate both the challenges and hardships associated with war, displacement and forced migration, and the highly patriarchal family, legal, cultural, religious and social contexts in various host societies.

**Refugee women's participation in host countries**

The Syrian crisis and the resultant refugee emergency can be contextualised within the wider frame of events referred to as the Arab Spring. A decade since those events, some enduring changes are evident in women's participation in the public sphere. In researching what the Participation pillar of UNSCR 1325 might mean for Syrian refugee women, we found that the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) National Action Plans in Jordan and Lebanon both included Syrian refugee women but that there was little actual overlap between the principles guiding the humanitarian policy framework and the ability to promote the inclusion of Syrian refugee women in ways that strengthen their agency.

The WPS agenda operates in an interconnected global policy domain concerned with the advancement of gender progressive policies. While it aspires to codify international principles of gender equality, it is largely administered through action plans that are limited to national jurisdictions. The WPS agenda in Lebanon and Jordan has included refugee women to some extent but has largely focused on Lebanese and Jordanian women. Jordan has focused on women in the security sector, while Lebanon has taken a broader approach in focusing on women's rights in the public sphere. In contrast to the Lebanese National Action Plan, Jordan's National Action Plan directly focuses on the inclusion of Syrian women in aspects of the agenda focused on combating violent extremism and protecting women and girls.

Our fieldwork in Lebanon and Jordan revealed that the relationship between the WPS agenda and Syrian refugee women needs to be seen in the wider context for women in the Middle East, to understand the impacts of the refugee experience on Syrian women's agency and the ways in which they can participate in peacebuilding. Our interviews with representatives from various international and local organisations (including some government

officials) suggested that being a refugee exacerbated the vulnerability of Syrian women in already patriarchal and restrictive cultural contexts. Those working in the legal sector were most aware of the legal frameworks and patriarchal structures and mechanisms that affect women and their experience of the law. As non-nationals, refugee women have the added hardship of navigating foreign, male-controlled legal structures that are both civil and religious in nature. As well as increasing the difficulty of obtaining much-needed civil documentation for life events, this affects their understanding of their rights and obligations within the law and their ability to successfully act on their own behalf.

Historically, societal change is instigated from within civil society (OECD 2009, p. 7). However, in relation to the WPS agenda, states and institutions are viewed as having a primary role in creating conditions where women-centred policies are funded and supported in order to attempt to initiate change. Institutionalising WPS can create or reclaim spaces where conversations about how to enact change can happen. While the WPS agenda is an effective mechanism in general and has created a useful policy language, our interviews suggest that the implementation and funding aspects of the agenda are politicised and used as a vehicle to advance other agendas in ways which often obscure the WPS agenda's intended purpose. For example, one of the interviewees involved in the creation of the Jordanian National Action Plan suggested that many sub-agendas, including a feminist agenda (rejected by many states), have piggybacked on the WPS agenda and therefore made it less clear what WPS is and what it is not.

Decades of work implementing UN Resolution 1325 continuously points to the need to take a locally informed and grassroots approach to the WPS agenda for it to work effectively in responding to specific local preoccupations. An ongoing challenge in adopting a locally nuanced approach is understanding how the complex web of institutional arrangements at the national, regional and local levels meaningfully connects to the experiences of target refugee/displaced populations. Our interviews with Syrian refugee women and practitioners working with them highlighted a need to understand how the institutional arrangements of various jurisdictions coincided with the societal, familial and cultural arrangements that refugees navigate in their day-to-day lives.

## Complex networks of refugee populations

Understanding the long-term options available for Syrian nationals outside of Syria requires understanding both historical network patterns in the region and the ways in which state, regional and international policy agendas have come to define and attempt to manage and control the movement of people. The layers of humanitarian crises in Jordan and Lebanon are not simply tidy groups consisting of Palestinian refugees, Iraqi refugees, Sudanese and Somali refugees (Murphy, Todman, Taylor and Davis, 2016), Syrian refugees and vulnerable Jordanians and Lebanese. There are many Palestinian refugees who fled conflict in Lebanon and now reside in Jordan, Syrian refugees who fled initially to Jordan and then to Lebanon, and a variety of combinations that defy the idea of a typical individual experience. We found this also to be the case with personnel working for NGOs in the

host countries, including Syrian refugees (and some Syrians who were in the host country and remained there when the conflict began) who had married Jordanian or Lebanese citizens and then worked with organisations that provided services to Syrian refugees and other groups of vulnerable people.

The porous nature of the cultural and legal borders between Syria and neighbouring countries has facilitated the movement of Syrian nationals into host communities, depending on networks connected to wider family, economic, social, religious and community ties. Cross-border flow between Syria and its neighbours, for reasons of tourism, pilgrimage, trade, labour movement, political activities and broader social connections and networks, has ebbed and flowed in accordance with population demands and at times political will. As a result, the legal status and entry and residency/stay requirements of Syrian nationals in Jordan and Lebanon have changed over time (Migration Policy Institute, 2021). Since the start of the conflict in Syria, Syrian nationals have been broadly redefined as refugees and as a particular target population for refugee management systems and the allocation of resources.

**Identifying who is and is not a Syrian refugee**

While Syrians leaving Syria have been and continue to be recognised as refugees by the international community, the legality of their status as refugees in the host nation depends on the local context. Our research found that the Syrian refugee population is often identified in the aggregate, with little consideration for the ways in which refugee populations are defined locally. Distinctions often focus on which host country they are in or their geographical location within a country (urban/rural, inside/outside refugee camps). This results in stark differences between the ways in which refugee populations are defined by governments, key international organisations and small/community-based organisations. This has vast implications for the way data is collected to satisfy needs for evidence-based policymaking and the governance requirements of donor countries, and for the ways in which this data is interpreted to create policies and programs that are central to long-term humanitarian efforts.

We found when conducting interviews that understanding who is or what constitutes being a Syrian refugee was highly dependent on who was speaking. For example:

> *… when people started leaving Yarmouk and other Palestinian camps in Syria, they… gravitated to possible relatives or acquaintances who were Palestinian living in Lebanon. That's how it started. And then people who were… I wouldn't say Syrian Syrian, it sounds really bad but, yeah, they started moving in. Mind you, the rent in the camp is not cheap at all. But there's this feeling of security that they get… there's a unity in their situation. Because also the Palestinians are very disadvantaged by Lebanese law, so they understand each other and they support each other. Because usually like the Syrians who are of lesser means of course, if they're in a Lebanese environment it's very hostile. Even for people who are of, I'm going to say medium class, like my friends who I established the organisation with, a lot of employees are Syrians. They're people who… I mean they have money, it's not like… but still they're at a disadvantage, they're not treated well, they're ostracised, they can't get work permits. Even now we're facing a lot of problems with residencies. So these people, they want to pay to have legal residency, et cetera, and they're denied. They're denied.* (NGO in Lebanon)

Syrian nationals, regardless of their legal status, were automatically presumed to be refugees from the perspective of local populations but were not automatically considered by governments to be refugees with any substantial rights to access humanitarian resources nor to be considered for third country settlement. Many interviewees told us that they were given resources by humanitarian organisations when they first entered Jordan and Lebanon but it had been years since they received any material assistance.

The primary mechanism through which to identify a Syrian refugee is their registration with UNHCR (or UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, in the case of Palestinian refugees forced to flee Syria). Refugees can also be identified, organised and managed materially – as people who register with UNHCR, access resources meant for refugees, and/or live in camps or informal tented settlements. They are also identified by others as refugees from their appearance or accent, through their attempts at securing aid and resources, or through their answers to questions about their journey from Syria. We were told that locals in Lebanon assumed that people, especially women, were Syrian and hence refugees from the way they dressed and/or their Syrian accent.

Many Syrian nationals living in Jordan and Lebanon have not registered with UNHCR, have not accessed humanitarian resources, and live in the wider community rather than in camps or in tented settlements. Others have continuously changed their location and access to humanitarian resources many times while in the host country. When speaking to Syrian nationals, we found that wider expectations of what it means to be a refugee also influenced behaviour. Some individuals' and some families' physical and material characteristics clearly coincided with the broadly defined characteristics of what it means to be a Syrian refugee, while others muted or accentuated aspects of their identities to fit institutional requirements or to become indistinguishable from the general population. One interviewee explained that her extended Lebanese family taught her to change her Syrian accent to a Lebanese accent in order to secure employment.

When we critically evaluated the refugee label and looked at people's individual experiences, we found a marked variation in individual characteristics such as class, place and context of origin, ethnic identification, education level, access to financial resources, age, gender, religion, family make up, and political affiliation. This variation is not only indicative of the diversity behind the refugee label but also has implications for the ways policies are created and implemented with particular target refugee populations in mind. Individual attributes, characteristics and access to networks give refugees a different, more nuanced relationship with the refugee label and, as a result, in some cases an entirely different experience.

## Expectations of self-sufficiency

Syrian refugee women occupy many grey areas in terms of welfare policies, governance, responsibility, protection and return. These are contained within the boundaries of the nation-state, while the refugee experience transcends national boundaries. Access to resources and choice highly depend on the quality of an individual's wider community networks.

The humanitarian aid regime exists in parallel with country-specific formal approaches to refugee settlement (refugee camps in Jordan and tented settlements in Lebanon) and informal expectations of self-sufficiency for Syrians living in the broader communities in host countries. Syrians' social and economic networks were frequently mentioned during interviews, both with Syrian women and with people working with Syrian nationals. People's own resources and resourcefulness have been key to survival. This includes economic support from the wider family network, such as relatives living in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, or Europe and beyond.

### Pre-existing social, cultural and religious networks

Like other women forced to flee violent conflict, the women we interviewed were subject first to forced displacement within their own country and then to forced migration across the border into neighbouring countries. Before and during the move, they navigated multiple hierarchies to secure their livelihoods. Our interview participants highlighted their different individual experiences of navigating various systems separately but also in a highly networked fashion. All the women we spoke to had relied at one time or another on their social, familial and, for some, religious networks to find accommodation and for continued support for a variety of needs.

Families in more stable locations were able to provide temporary safe havens for many who left their family home in Syria and many who then left Syria altogether. Family networks helped individuals make decisions about where to go. For example, some families have long established intermarital relations between Syrians and the Lebanese population, and similarly between Jordanians and Syrians. This is especially the case in towns and cities close to the border with Syria but can be found throughout the region. For the women we spoke to who had long-established ties with their local host communities, the refugee label was contentious because of the risks of return to Syria and the perceived wider anti-refugee rhetoric rather than in relation to the uncertainty of residency and belonging, as these issues did not apply to them.

### Ethnic and religious identities

Settlement in host countries is highly dependent on new networks, and different communities have different experiences of settlement. While the majority of the Syrian population is Arab and Sunni Muslim, Syria is historically multi-ethnic and multifaith (Carnegie Europe, 2012). In attempting to include as much diversity in our research as was possible within the limitations of our time in the field, accessing interviewees from minority ethnic and religious communities was challenging, with many reluctant to take part in formal interviews. Members of the Circassian and Shia communities either did not wish to participate in the research or did not wish to disclose their ethnic/religious identities to the interviewer. We did, however, speak to women from some of the larger religious and ethnic communities, including Sunni Muslims, Kurds, Alawites, Assyrians from Syria and Syrian Druze, and various Christian sects.

We found that in some instances Syrian nationals live as communities within communities in host societies and that these communities tend to be

ethnically and/or religiously homogenous and clustered around religious/ethnic origin. We saw this to be the case in refugee camps in Jordan and in some areas and neighbourhoods in Lebanon. Many of the women we spoke to in Lebanon who were not living in informal tented settlements chose to live in neighbourhoods that most closely coincided with their religious/ethnic identity. This is significant for a number of reasons, especially outside formal refugee camps, as faith-based organisations are very active in the humanitarian space not only in providing material and spiritual aid but also in actively directing and influencing community members.

Our interviews with Syrian women and with those working with them pointed to noticeable homogeneity and/or conformity of political and religious affiliation, and to some extent class within communities. Programs delivered by NGOs and community-based organisations have also taken on a community focus, as community influence can mean the difference between a successful program and one that is frustrated by community antagonism. For example, a project officer with one of the larger NGOs explained that the community dictates things like the permissibility of underage marriage for girls and that the local religious authority will decree fatwas (rulings on Islamic law) on what is permissible or not. She told us, in relation to early marriages for girls:

> *It doesn't matter what you do in the end it is what the father or the community wants...* (NGO, Lebanon)

**Pressure on family connections**

Social, familial, and religious networks also facilitated ties between families living in various host countries as well as those who remained in Syria. Officials from government departments and personnel in organisations working with Syrian nationals told us that one of the biggest challenges for Syrians residing in host countries was access to civil documentation. Civil documentation is needed for identification, which is required to access essential services (health and education), humanitarian assistance and the labour market, and to facilitate freedom of movement. Civil documentation is also required for the numerous legal procedures that are part of life (including birth, death, marriage and divorce). Due to the complexity of obtaining civil documentation, including high costs and drawn-out times frames, Syrian nationals residing in Jordan and Lebanon have resorted to returning to Syria temporarily to obtain documents or using their family/social networks to acquire/retrieve documents, which exposes them to risks associated with fraudulent documents, financial loss, loss of documents, and the physical and emotional risks associated with return to Syria .

Because of the protracted nature of the conflict in Syria and refugees' prolonged stay in host societies, networks within Syria and those in host societies and beyond have experienced the burden that comes with the long-drawn-out process to personal recovery and regained independence associated with stable and relatively predictable life experience. The women who spoke to us talked about the intense pressure on social and family networks, with some ties terminating in resentment because of the nature of the prolonged crisis and the ongoing strain on limited resources. Others

spoke about how humanitarian interventions targeting Syrian refugee women in Jordan and Lebanon focused on individual/immediate family access to resources and did not consider the broader and more expansive familial obligations that are central to family structures in the region. One Syrian national heading an NGO in Lebanon described the tensions inherent in family members outside Syria at once sympathising with the situation of Syrians and resenting the encroachment of yet another war on an already beleaguered population:

> *[T]he way that the conflict has evolved has not helped because the cause kind of got diluted, if you know what I mean. Like it was a revolution, and the regime was cracking down on people and then people started carrying arms. So now there's this, oh but who's the Syrian Army and [who] are the terrorists?... I understand and then I understand also because my in-laws are Lebanese, I understand their stance that we lived through 25 years of war, we want to move beyond this, overcrowding, et cetera, so you kind of understand.*

### Effects of risk and vulnerability on choice

We found that the nature of the humanitarian framework and the risks to individuals may limit individual agency in response to programs or services. Choices presented to individuals by some formal or informal authority, such as a national government or an individual's immediate community or family, may often be in conflict with those presented by another. It is important to understand these conflicting priorities, as they have consequences for the ability of Syrian refugee women to participate in education or work opportunities, return or resettlement, and ultimately peace processes.

The fortunes of refugees in accessing resources have been subject to luck, to appetite for risk, and to time and place, as contexts differ widely. During our fieldwork, we noticed that the common thread for Syrian refugee women was the risks that they must take in their daily lives – risks that citizens living in an adequately functioning nation-state do not or rarely have to think about. For the Syrian refugee women we met, every interaction with the host country, the host community and their families presented risks that are beyond the scope of well-intentioned policies limited either to national policy domains or international organisations such as the UN working through nation-states.

Attitudes in the host community, in the diaspora and within the family unit, and individual exposure to new ideas (or social capital), also play a role in 'governing' the lives of Syrian refugee women. For example, one interviewee responded to a question about the refugee experience resulting in permanent changes to the old ways as follows:

> *It's hard to tell. I don't know. What I've seen... is that because these women get in contact also with so many foreigners, you know from [being] or working among them... meeting other ways of life, they see more self-confidence, which means women empowerment and stuff like that. I'm not so sure. I think the youngest, in younger girls how it creates tension. Because they start to see other ways of life than just getting married... [at] 18 and being in the house and doing what the woman has to do. So, I think, I don't know about the older generation. But like ... the younger generation, I see how tension was created. And I don't know where it's going to lead... I think it's really hard to tell.* (NGO in Jordan)

Refugee women's vulnerability at every stage cannot be understated, and their actions and behaviours are directly linked to both material and cultural/social risks. Refugee status and the new context brings with it the need to reframe ideas about risk mitigation strategies. One key example that came up in many of the interviews with government, non-government and community-based organisations and with individual Syrian women is child marriage, or 'early' marriage. The focus of many international donors was on the protection of women and girls, and to this end many resources were spent on broad campaigns, information sessions for families, and advocacy to change laws in order to halt marriage for girls under the legal age of marriage. While many people celebrated initial reductions in child marriages, focusing on the phenomenon from the perspective of protection of women and girls fails to take into account the connection between risk and perceived choice. Child marriage is once again on the rise (UNICEF, 2021), and while a focus on economic hardships and cultural customs within certain groups is seen as the primary reason for early marriage its use as a risk mitigation strategy by many families is often discounted.

## What this means for Syrians in the diaspora

While this report centres on the experience of women living in Jordan and Lebanon, the wider context transcends state boundaries. These women are part of a much wider network connecting them back to Syria and to the rest of the world through the diaspora network. We touch on the Syrians in Australia in the third paper in this series. The social, community, cultural, religious and family networks that link Syrian nationals across host societies and Syria extend beyond the region and link to networks in refugee-receiving countries and those providing permanent resettlement.

Because there are limited opportunities for resettlement, many in the wider diaspora continue to have immediate family members left in Syria and in Syria's neighbouring countries. While these networks can be gateways for immigration for some, and a source of remittances that help families living in precarious circumstances, they can also be political networks for those wanting to effect change from the outside. A long-term view of participation in peacebuilding and reconstruction in Syria should take into account the wider political network and activities taking place in countries of permanent settlement. While they may be fragmented and remote, they are part of the wider network that directly impacts on Syrian nationals.

## Conclusion

In our attempt to understand the context for Syrian women living outside of Syria we came to appreciate the extent of their vulnerability and the dramatic change in their life circumstances. Change is a constant variable for those living precariously outside their own nation state, and the lives of the Syrian women we spoke to do not conform to a linear chain of events. While the international legal structures outline minimum requirements for humanitarian assistance and legal rights, changing policies and fragmented governance structures in host states, municipalities and even neighbourhoods translate to notable variations in individual experiences of being a refugee. Depending on location and other factors there are marked differences in the availability

of resources, access to the labour market, experience of harassment and discrimination and, in some instances, risk of isolation and neglect.

Our fieldwork highlighted how complex and dynamic the environment for Syrian refugee women is and the many challenges they face in their day-to-day context, let alone their ability to participate in peace processes. These challenges range from typical economic and support issues, such as access to childcare, to more complex geopolitical and legal issues at the international and national levels. Outcomes for Syrian refugee women have shown some continuity and overlap but have been sensitive to context – not only the women's individual circumstances and the nature of their individual networks but also the conditions set by the receiving state.

Interactions between the systems of the UN and other international organisations and the various jurisdictions of individual countries make for a fragmented policy landscape in which interventions can be difficult to formulate, to implement and to assess in any substantive sense. Multiple policy solutions, interests, jurisdictions, aims and policy targets intersect and create a short-term cyclical effect that is difficult for many community-based organisations and individuals to navigate.

The material aims of humanitarian policy focus on immediate relief in the form of food, shelter, medicine, education, legal documentation, and other life necessities. These continue to be a priority. However, there are non-material aims that are not addressed in any meaningful sense because of a lack of policy engagement with the underlying political and cultural dimensions. This requires a well-crafted process, rather than an immediate win.

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