

Occasional Paper Series



Women's Economic Participation in Conflict-Affected and Fragile Settings



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ABOUT GIWPS

The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security examines and highlights the roles and experiences of women in peace and security worldwide through cutting edge research, timely global convenings, and strategic partnerships. The Institute is led by Melanne Verveer, who previously served as the inaugural U.S. Ambassador for Global Women's Issues. Former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton serves as its honorary founding chair. The Institute is also home to the International Council on Women's Business Leadership, which is a part of the Women & Economy Project launched in October 2014. Located in Washington, D.C., the Institute leverages Georgetown University's global reach to connect academia and practice, pioneer evidence-based and policy-oriented analysis, and inspire the next generation of leaders. To learn more, visit <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/>.



Occasional Paper Series: Women's Economic Participation in Post-Conflict and Fragile Settings

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction by Roslyn Warren and Alexandra Z. Safir.....	3
Protecting Spaces for Women’s Economic Participation in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States by Ann Hudock.....	6
Women’s Economic Empowerment and the Future of South Sudan by Karen Sherman.....	16
Syrian Women in Crisis: Obstacles and Opportunities by Sarah Williamson.....	26
About the Authors.....	41
Acknowledgements.....	43

INTRODUCTION

The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security seeks to enhance global security by examining and highlighting the effect of women’s participation to improve peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peace-building, to strengthen conflict prevention and resolution initiatives, to mitigate humanitarian emergencies, to foster democratic political transitions, and to reconstruct war-torn societies. To accomplish this, the Institute aims to produce and disseminate a constant stream of sharp analysis on the role and impact of women in these varied but intersecting arenas. In doing so, we hope to serve as a repository of knowledge that can inform the building of best practices for gender mainstreaming through a worldwide network of students, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. Our ultimate goal is to help build a world where women’s contributions to peace and security are better reported, understood, valued, and promoted.

As a Georgetown University institute, we emphasize the essential role research plays in fulfilling the vision of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and furthering the status of women as agents of peace. Yet, we also recognize that if research is not attuned to the practical challenges in the field it is unlikely to have its intended impact. With this understanding, one of our primary goals is to equip practitioners and policymakers with the evidence-based research they need to make informed decisions about global peace and security processes. To do so, the Institute makes every effort to convene stakeholders from the U.S. and international governments, representatives from the military sector, grassroots organizations, thought leaders, and global trailblazers for invigorating and forward-looking discussions. The hope is that improved communication and closer ties between scholars and practitioners could lead to more innovative strategies, sharper and more impactful research, better allocated resources, and tangible results on the ground.

It is with this intention that the Bridging Theory and Practice Series, one of the Institute’s signature initiatives, was born. The Series facilitates in-depth conversations and collaboration between “thinkers” and “doers” who are working on issues related to women, peace and security. Following an annual Bridging Theory and Practice symposium in 2013 and 2014, the Institute launched a thematic workshop series in 2015 to focus on key issues, in accordance with the Institute’s research priorities and the implementation of UNSCR 1325. Each workshop aims to result in a paper series that can inform policy and practice, highlight new thinking or important trends, identify challenges, and map solutions. Through this *Occasional Paper Series*, the Institute will explore the critical and unique ways

women contribute to and participate in a multitude of activities under its larger research framework, which includes conflict prevention, peacemaking, humanitarian emergencies, political transitions and statebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction.

One such subtopic within the women, peace and security field is the vital role women's economic participation plays in achieving gender equality and rebuilding fragile states. Globally, women continue to face significant cultural, institutional, and structural barriers to meaningful economic participation. These challenges are intensified for women living in or coming from countries embroiled in conflict. Yet, we know that women's economic empowerment strengthens women's rights and grants them increased control over their own lives, allows them to better provide for their families, and contributes to the advancement of their communities and societies. When women are empowered economically, they are safer and less likely to fall victim to domestic violence and sexually transmitted diseases, their children are more likely to go to school and stay in school longer, their daughters marry at later ages, their families are healthier, more sustainable, and more stable. As research clearly shows, women's increased participation in the economy confers universal benefits. However, failure to analyze and understand how women uniquely contribute to the political, social, and economic environment hampers these societies' abilities to codify viable peace and promote lasting prosperity. Recognizing the integral link between economic participation, peace, and security, the Institute has undertaken the Women & Economy Project to fill these critical research gaps and develop actionable recommendations for increasing women's economic empowerment.

The inaugural volume of the Institute's *Occasional Paper Series* is rooted in the dual, complementing frameworks of its Bridging Theory and Practice initiative and its Women & Economy Project. As such, the pages that follow reflect the Institute's recent thematic workshop on women's economic participation in post-conflict and fragile settings held at Georgetown University in December 2015. As part of Bridging Theory and Practice, this recent symposium brought together leading practitioners and academics to problematize the varied ways women's full economic participation in fragile settings can and does contribute to more viable peace and lasting prosperity, as well as the myriad political, cultural, and structural barriers that hamper the realization of women's agency in such contexts. At the conference, practitioners and scholars compared cases from across the globe, gained valuable insights from successful approaches, and uncovered lessons on how to overcome remaining barriers. Presenters covered a range of issues within the field, from gendered resiliency programming during humanitarian crises to the security and

developmental implications of women's land tenure, from the economic status of Syrian refugee women to protecting spaces for women's economic participation in post-conflict settings. There was also significant discussion on the data that is missing and still needed, particularly surrounding women's economic participation in conflict-affected areas, how that research can be pursued in the future, and how integral these missing pieces are to fully understanding the economic challenges that women face during conflict, as well as the opportunities that arise out of these difficult times.

While it would be impossible to detail the entirety of the thought-provoking discussions that occurred, this volume attempts to share some of the ideas outlined in that symposium. In the following pages, Ann Hudock identifies the key spaces women need safeguarded in fragile contexts if they are to unleash their economic potential. Subsequently, Karen Sherman and Sarah Williamson dive deeply into case studies on South Sudanese women and Syrian refugee women, respectively. Sherman elucidates the obstacles South Sudanese women face in achieving any semblance of economic stability, the methods they employ to overcome such obstacles, and the perils of not facilitating women's full economic participation in this fragile setting. Williamson unpacks detailed data surrounding the limited employment and economic opportunities Syrian women enjoy both in Syria and across the larger Middle East and North Africa region as refugees. In doing so, she not only unveils the coping mechanisms families in crisis must deploy to meet the challenges of living in protracted crisis and how those mechanisms uniquely and adversely impact women and girls, but she also paints a way forward. Each article provides a rich and nuanced story of how women participate in the economies of war-torn and fragile states.

In the end, we hope this volume gives policy makers, practitioners, and academics a unique understanding of and head start in the continued work to implement successful programming to economically empower women in post-conflict and fragile settings.



Roslyn Warren
Series Editor



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Protecting Spaces for Women's Economic Participation in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States

Ann Hudock

Introduction¹

The inability to put women entrepreneurs at the center of post-conflict reconstruction is one of development's greatest failures. Addressing this issue requires more than gender lenses on post-conflict assessments or consultations with women's groups when experts design macroeconomic development frameworks. Practitioners must fundamentally overhaul the way in which reconstruction assistance gets shaped and delivered. Such assistance must recognize the various ways women cope during conflict and promote how these new wartime-roles set them up to lead in post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

New roles and opportunities often open up to women when conflict upends the existing social order. This article looks at how reconstruction assistance can support women to build upon their wartime resiliency and capitalize on these new roles, and, in doing so, help define the post-conflict environment.

This article proposes five core areas of support that reconstruction programming must include for women to thrive in the post-conflict context: land rights, political representation, savings groups, leadership training, and psychosocial support. It also highlights the role of the private sector in guaranteeing women's economic participation in post-conflict settings. Focusing on these five areas in the reconstruction period can help women protect and secure the economic openings they often achieve during wartime. The article begins by unveiling how women's opportunities expand during wartime and then contract in the reconstruction period. Here, the article explains how little is known on this issue and how more pointed research is needed in this key arena. The sections that follow then discuss each of these five core areas in turn, drawing on the body of evidence that exists, both in literature and in lived experience. In each section, the article identifies key examples and extrapolates upon them to show how women's wartime gains can be secured and promoted in the reconstruction process. The conclusion is a call to action for more focused and deliberate research and investment in these five areas as a way of fostering women's economic participation post-conflict.

¹ This article benefited from peer review by Carrie Turk, Country Manager, World Bank Rwanda. Dr. Mohamed Kanja Sesay, Political Affairs Officer, United Nations Department of Political Affairs, contributed his first-hand experience of conflict in Sierra Leone, as well as his peer review. Staff at Kate Spade & Company offered their insights into the Rwanda work that is profiled here. Colleagues at Plan International USA and Plan International Inc. provided valuable case examples of youth savings groups and comments on earlier drafts. Mayesha Alam, Roslyn Warren, Alexandra Safir, and Tricia Correia from the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security provided editorial assistance. Anita Botti offered rich insights that contributed to the final draft. I am indebted to all, but any errors are my own.

Experiences of Women in Conflict

Economic life does not die out during conflict, but it does change. Gender norms that previously hindered women's economic participation become more lax in times of upheaval. When men take up arms, women fill the economic roles that are otherwise unavailable to them. In some cases, women engage more deeply in informal income-generating activities, either in arenas that existed before the war or in new forays created by the violence. In other cases, such as in the United States during World War II, women enter new sectors of the formal economy, replacing male workers who are in the military or engaged in conflict.

For the most part, women make ends meet during wartime as entrepreneurs in the informal sector rather than as wage-earning employees in the formal economy. As an example, in Sierra Leone, where civil war tore the country apart for more than a decade, men actively recruited women into breadwinning roles, so men were free to fight and women could financially support their efforts. These women participated in the shadow economy by exchanging supplies with rebels or by providing basic foodstuffs to the suffering population.² Regardless of the sector, women often provide the hardscrabble entrepreneurship that supports families during conflict.³

A study from International Alert and EASSI on Northern Uganda illuminates this clearly.⁴ Looking at women's economic enterprise in post-conflict Gulu and Lira, the research surveyed 200 women in November 2009, asking them about their involvement in economic activity in times of war. It found that women's involvement in income-generating activities grew during the conflict. Beyond the war itself, the dire situation inside refugee camps allowed women to develop and expand new kinds of economic activities. The informal nature of daily life inside the camps enabled women to develop a host of cottage enterprises to fulfill their new roles as family providers. They sold fruits and vegetables that were in high demand inside the camps. Where possible, they expanded their businesses to include goods not previously on the market. They brewed and sold local beer. Some began catering businesses, while others sold humanitarian aid. Informal women-to-women loan programs made possible re-investment in fledgling businesses. The evidence captured in this study clearly shows the myriad ways women contribute to life-sustaining enterprise during conflict.

² Solomon, Christiana. "The Role of Women in Economic Transformation: Market Women in Sierra Leone." 2005. Draft Paper Prepared for the Transformation of War Economies – Experts Conference at Plymouth.

³ USAID. "Livelihoods & Conflict." 2005, p. 13. Web.

⁴ Sow, Ndeye. "Women's political participation and economic empowerment in post-conflict countries: Lessons from the Great Lakes region in Africa." 2012. Web.

The challenge, however, comes after the cessation of violent conflict, during reconstruction and peacetime. During this period, husbands returning from war and demobilized soldiers often assume the roles women relied upon during the conflict. Moreover, male heads of household may be deceased or imprisoned, leaving women to fend for themselves financially at the same time that their economic opportunities contract. Also at this time, women often have added children as the products of rape or from taking in extended family members who were orphaned during the conflict.⁵ In these circumstances, many women migrate to capital cities to escape the stigma of rape in their small communities. As a result, they observe roles that other women play in politics and enterprise, which further expand their horizons.

In one of a few studies to focus expressly on this issue, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) examined the effects of conflict and reconstruction on women's economic empowerment.⁶ Collecting data from six distinct cases (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, El Salvador, Georgia, Guatemala, and Rwanda), the study found:

Women could work for many industries and in many occupations during the conflict, which were closed to them earlier... As economies shrank during the early phases of post-conflict transition, female workers in the organized sector were generally the first to lose their jobs.⁷

The two studies outlined in this section reveal the little that is known on women's economic participation in wartime and in the transition from war to peace. Expressly because women's entrepreneurial economic participation happens largely informally and during conflict it remains for the most part unmeasured, and thus almost always goes ignored during reconstruction. More data is needed to measure women's contributions in this field and better understand the conditions that could protect and promote women's economic participation.

What is unmeasured is unseen, and yet, women's economic empowerment could be the linchpin to lasting change.⁸ If harnessed, women's economic power can drive the growth that countries need to remain stable and peaceful.⁹ According to a recent report by McKinsey Global Institute (MGI), if women participated in the economy at the same rate as men, this could add up to \$28 trillion or 26 percent of incremental

⁵ Comment from Dr. Mohamed Kanja Sesay, correspondence 1 Aug. 2015.

⁶ Kumar, Krishna. *Women and Women's Organization in Post-Conflict Societies: The Role of International Assistance*. 2000. Web.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Buvinic, Mayra; Furst-Nichols, Rebecca; Courey Pryor, Emily. "A Roadmap for Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment." United Nations Foundation. 2015. Web.

⁹ *Ibid.*

global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) into the world economy by 2025.¹⁰ As countries emerge from conflict and begin to rebuild, reconstruction efforts must tap women's economic potential, not ignore it.

Importantly, however, such research can only inform interventions, not offer a pre-fabricated solution to every conflict. While countries and contexts differ, the following sections illustrate how focusing in on five core areas can contribute to enhancing women's economic participation in post-conflict transitions.

Securing Land Rights

Land rights represent the most foundational level of security people need to invest in their own economic development. However, securing land tenure is an extremely difficult and complicated process from which women are largely excluded.¹¹ Failure to formally recognize women's land rights bars them from obtaining access to credit or controlling the sale of crops they produce, all of which detracts from both micro- and macro-economic growth. For example, in Sierra Leone, discriminatory formal and customary laws limit women's ability to inherit or own land. Because most marriages fall within the customary system, as opposed to the statutory one, women find themselves without any form of documentation through which they can begin to secure their rights. Recently, however, Sierra Leone has taken steps to legally register customary marriages, thereby lowering the barriers of entry for women seeking to secure their property rights. While significant, women still face other unique hurdles in owning and inheriting land that fall into various legal frameworks. This leaves men largely in control of the land required for economic enterprise despite the fact that women dominate small-scale agricultural farming.¹² Although reconstruction offered a ripe opportunity to align these legal frameworks and protect women rights more comprehensively, Sierra Leone did the reverse.

Instead of injecting equity into Sierra Leone's legal regime, reconstruction efforts failed to codify a clear policy on land rights protection and land acquisition. A large percentage of Sierra Leone's arable land reportedly has been granted to foreign investors with long-term leases for the purposes of large-scale agribusiness. As foreign investors stake their claims on the majority of the country's arable land, women find themselves at an even greater disadvantage, unable to build on their small-scale economic endeavors.

¹⁰ McKinsey & Company. "How advancing women's equality can add \$12 trillion to global growth." 2015. Web.

¹¹ Warren, Roslyn. "Building Sustainable Peace and Prosperity through Women's Land Tenure Security: A Zambian Case Study." Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security. 2013, p. 3-4.

¹² In the World Bank's publication "Leveling the Field: Improving Opportunities for Women Farmers in Africa," the authors state that women are largely locked out of land ownership even though women make up a large share of Africa's farmers. This combined with other constraints such as access to credit and productive farm inputs means that women farmers produce less per hectare than men, which "adversely affects their families, communities, and -- in the long term -- entire countries."

By contrast, following the genocide in 1994, the Rwandan government immediately recognized the importance of land tenure in promoting stability. Expressly because women represented such a large percentage of the remaining Rwandan population, the government elevated women's property rights as a key aspect in its formalization policy.¹³ By 1999, both daughters and sons could equally inherit parental property and legally married women's property was protected under the law, significant breakthroughs for the transfer of security and opportunity from generation to generation.¹⁴ These legal protections are critical for moving families beyond subsistence farming and for promoting countrywide growth.

Fostering Political Representation

Political participation at all levels allows women to shape development agendas to include a broad set of human security indicators (e.g., health, nutrition, education, food security, etc.). Considered essential for building strong societies, these indicators generally go ignored when policy is the purview of only men. As an empowerment tool, electoral quotas are commonly used during reconstruction to increase women's representation in government. Importantly, women's political empowerment also confers benefits on society-at-large. A recent study, based on the models set forth by Doyle and Sambanis in 2000 and Nilsson's use of Uppsala's conflict database, found that implementing gender quotas for national legislatures could increase the likelihood of ending violence within five years by 27 percent.¹⁵

With vast benefits, electoral quotas can be effectively implemented in varied ways depending on the context. In Nepal, the constitution requires that at least 33 percent of candidates put forward by a political party are women, which has resulted in 29 percent female representation in parliament.¹⁶ Using a different structure, Rwanda's constitution requires that women make up at least 30 percent of all decision-making bodies.¹⁷ Now, Rwanda has the most female parliamentarians in the world. More than 60 percent of Rwanda's parliamentarians are women.¹⁸ In Rwanda, women's political leadership does not stop at the parliamentary level; many other government institutions have women in top posts. For example, women comprise 37.5 percent of the leadership positions in the

¹³ Ali, Daniel Ayalew; Deininger, Klaus; Goldstein, Markus. "Environmental and gender impacts of land tenure regularization in Africa: Pilot evidence from Rwanda." *Journal of Development Economics* 110. Sep. (2014): 262-275.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Stone, Laurel Ann. "Women Transforming Conflict: A Quantitative Analysis of Female Peacemaking." 13 May 2014. Available at SSRN <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2485242>

¹⁶ "Nepal." Quota Project. 2015. Web.

¹⁷ "Rwanda." Quota Project. 2014. Web.

¹⁸ Gogineni, Roopa. "Rwandan Parliament's Female Majority Focuses on Equality." *Voice of America*. 26 Sep. 2013.

Rwanda National Police Service (NPS).¹⁹ Across implementation methods, the quota system creates new space for women in the highest levels of public life.

By contrast, Sierra Leone has no formal quotas in place for women's political participation, due in large part to strong resistance from the country's political elite. While women make up 52 percent of Sierra Leoneans, they occupy less than 20 percent of all elected positions.²⁰ Overall, quotas help support women's socio-economic advancement, which in turn, promotes stability and economic growth. While no research has yet expounded on this, Rwanda and Sierra Leone's divergent paths on core issues, such as land tenure and electoral quotas, could help explain their very different levels of success in their post-conflict reconstruction processes.

Encouraging Savings Groups

Savings groups are member-owned institutions that provide financial services to the poor, particularly in rural areas. They usually comprise small numbers of people who save together and issue loans from their collective savings. This section looks at Plan International's experiences with savings groups in conflict and post-conflict settings and how these groups can provide resources for survival and reconstruction. It showcases how for women entrepreneurs, savings groups can offer money management functions and allow women to balance their expenses. For example, by taking loans for school fees from a savings group women can avoid taking money out of their businesses. Savings groups also offer a platform for other development services that support women such as sexual and reproductive rights awareness, countering domestic violence, and informal education and skills training.

Savings groups can also address a detrimental side effect that women's economic advancement has on adolescent girls. As women begin to participate in the formal economy, domestic burdens shift to adolescent girls, because boys are often not considered for household chores. Plan International invests in youth savings groups as a mechanism to mitigate this unintended outcome of women's economic empowerment. By implementing the Youth Microfinance Project, Plan International Canada formed savings groups with youth from Niger, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. Through the Youth Microfinance Project, a total of 89,721 young people formed 4,149 youth savings groups. Young women comprised 85 percent of the members.

In another example, Plan International's "A Working Future" program supports employment and economic empowerment of 12,000 youth in Tororo and Kamuli

¹⁹ Correspondence with Carrie Turk, Country Manager, World Bank Rwanda, 22 Jul. 2015.

²⁰ The National Democratic Institute. "Sierra Leone." Web.

districts of Eastern Uganda. In its third year of implementation, the program has trained more than 7,000 youth on the village savings and loan methodology with 54 percent female participation. The testimonials collected through the project illustrate its impact, particularly for adolescent girls. Theresa from Sierra Leone said:

In the past, I was not able to take care of my children. I had to beg for work with my neighbors, or give myself to men just to get my daily bread. Since joining the project, the quality of my life has improved. Now I make sure that my family eats a balanced diet because I know it is important for the growth of my boys. I can also afford to send my children to a private school, which is not an easy thing to do in Sierra Leone because of the cost involved. But most important of all is my self-esteem. I had lost hope as well as my self-esteem, but this project brought them back.

Aissatou from Senegal said:

My brother would normally be responsible for the family. But being able to take out loans means that I can take the place of my brother, who is in Dakar, when it comes to taking care of our everyday expenses. This is significant because before, I never used to leave the house. I never saw anybody... It's also significant because I can help my mother and contribute to our family expenses, even though I have a disability.

As Plan International's experiences elucidate, savings groups serve as another development tool that can secure and advance women's economic participation in conflict-affected settings. Capitalizing on this would confer benefits upon these women, their families, their communities, and the societies they help reconstruct.

Promoting Women's Leadership

The private sector plays an important role in post-war reconstruction and development efforts generally, and many companies offer programs that address women's economic empowerment specifically. The next two sections outline how companies working in the post-conflict context play meaningful roles in fostering women's economic potential by providing leadership training and psychosocial support.

Women need leadership training to nurture the skills they employ during conflict and translate them into post-conflict reconstruction roles. To address this need, since 2005, the ExxonMobil Foundation has invested in the Global Women in Management (GWIM) program, managed by Plan International USA, through its

Women's Economic Opportunity Initiative. GWIM is a global effort to help equip women with education and training, as well as access to key resources and support structures, needed to meet their economic potential and help drive development in their communities. Since its founding in 1978, GWIM has thousands of women graduates worldwide. These graduates form a global network of astute women leaders, and, as they reinvest in their communities, they impact the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.²¹

Providing Psychosocial Support

Providing psychosocial support is also a key component to supporting women's empowerment, particularly in a post-conflict context. Beginning in 2013, Kate Spade & Company's *on purpose* label established a social enterprise in Masoro (Rulindo District of Rwanda), with an intent focus on empowering women in a post-conflict setting. The social enterprise model applies commercial strategies to maximize improvements in human and environmental well-being rather than focusing solely on shareholder profits. As established, the enterprise erected in Masoro also ensured that all employees had an ownership share of the business.

As Kate Spade & Company began work in Rwanda, the team found that developing the human capacity of its personnel proved the most challenging component of building a profitable enterprise. Many of the Rwandan women at the company still suffered from the trauma they had experienced during the genocide. To foster a productive work environment, Kate Spade & Company invested time and resources into psychosocial support for women suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. Although the local enterprise is still in its nascent stages, the investment has paid off both for Kate Spade & Company in the products they now receive, and for the 160 Rwandan women who now have a steady income and can begin to plan their futures. With the success of the social enterprise in Masoro, women involved now have greater access to healthcare, their families have a consistently reliable and healthier food supply, and more of their children attend school. Financial benefits also reverberate out into the community, as some of the women must employ others to manage their household duties while they are at work. This important learning suggests that economic empowerment programs and profitable social enterprises in post-conflict situations need to provide psychosocial support in order to realize the economic potential of their burgeoning enterprise.

²¹ Plan International Success Stories. "GWIM: Investing in Women's Leadership." 4 Jun. 2014. Web.

Conclusion

The UN Foundation's "A Roadmap for Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment" calls for "interventions that take advantage of new economic spaces for women opened up by missing men."²² However, a United Nations Development Programme report reveals that just three percent of post-conflict budgets target women's empowerment or gender equality.²³ This is clearly a missed opportunity not just for women, but also for their families, their communities, and the societies they could play meaningful roles in rebuilding. To ensure that women's new economic spaces, which are defined during conflict, are protected during transition and reconstruction, assistance programs need to invest in all five of the priority areas highlighted in this paper: land rights, political representation, savings groups, leadership training, and psychosocial support. Importantly, this work should not solely be the priority of governments and development organizations, but the private sector also has a significant role to play. Lastly, qualitative research and longitudinal studies are needed in conflict settings to better understand how women cope during conflict, how these newly opened economic spaces can be preserved during transition, and how these resiliency strategies can form the basis of reconstruction efforts.

²² Buvinic, Mayra; Furst-Nichols, Rebecca; Courey Pryor, Emily. "A Roadmap for Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment." United Nations Foundation. 2015. Web.

²³ True, Jacqui. "Women, peace and security in post-conflict and peacebuilding contexts." Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center. Mar. 2013, p. 4. Web.

Women's Economic Empowerment and the Future of South Sudan

Karen Sherman

Introduction

South Sudan, home to the longest civil war on the African continent at a cost of more than 1.5 million lives,²⁴ is a country ravaged by war and conflict. In 2005, a peace treaty backed by the United States finally ended the war and guaranteed the South's right to secede from Sudan. However, the latest outbreak of violence, which began in late 2013, shows that little has changed for the population. For the last two years, the world's newest country has been plagued by "rampant inflation, civil war, and food shortages."²⁵ Security and rule of law are virtually non-existent, and food and medicine are scarce. More than 2 million people have fled their homes in search of safety.

Within this context, this paper examines the status of women in South Sudan and how the legacy of protracted war and conflict, combined with traditional norms and cultural practices, place women and their families at heightened risk of marginalization and destitution. At the same time, this paper also reveals that women's participation in the economy can improve their standing in the home and community, with a ripple effect that extends well beyond those circles, helping to spur economic growth and mitigate future conflicts. As such, this paper argues that failure to capitalize on the multifaceted benefits of women's economic empowerment represents a missed opportunity for contributing to lasting peace and development in South Sudan.

This paper first provides a brief background of Sudan and South Sudan as well as a contextual framework for where the research for this article was gathered. The bulk of the data contained herein comes from focus groups and key informant interviews with participants in Women for Women International's program in Yei, South Sudan, where the organization has worked since 2013. Drawing on this research, the article then details the hardships South Sudanese women face generally, followed by an exploration of how protracted conflict compounds their marginalization. In focusing on firsthand accounts of South Sudanese women's experiences during conflict, the article hopes to show not only the unique challenges these women face but also their resiliency. Finally, the article presents the macro-benefits of women's economic empowerment and suggests how failure to capitalize on this represents a missed opportunity to build a more stable and prosperous South Sudan.

²⁴ "South Sudan country profile." *BBC News*. 27 Aug. 2015. Web.

²⁵ Vogt, Heidi. "World's Newest Country Struggles to Survive." *The Wall Street Journal*. 10 Jun. 2015. Web.

Background

Sudan has largely been embroiled in civil war since it gained independence in the 1950s. Immediately following independence, the first civil war (1955-1972)²⁶ culminated in a peace agreement that protected the autonomy of southern Sudan but kept the borders of the pre-existing Sudanese nation state intact.²⁷ After a relatively peaceful period of coexistence, the discovery of oil in southern Sudan in 1978 prompted the government in Khartoum to flout the autonomy agreement, ushering in a new wave of civil unrest.²⁸ A second civil war, which erupted in 1983 and lasted nearly 20 years, pitted the Sudanese government against southern Sudanese rebel forces, including the Sudanese People's Movement/Army (SPLM/A). The Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005) ended with the signing of the North/South Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005. This agreement established a permanent ceasefire, restored southern autonomy, created a power-sharing government, and promised a referendum on independence in six years' time.²⁹

When South Sudan formally gained its independence in July 2011, the South Sudanese people were ecstatic, celebrating on packed streets and town squares across the country.³⁰ Despite this optimism, the opportunity for renewed conflict was ripe.³¹ Just two years later in 2013, the country was nearly bankrupt and in a standoff with Sudan over oil revenue, security, and other long-standing issues. Since that time, South Sudan has been engulfed in its own civil war, with rival political factions vying for control of the government.

Importantly, women have made some significant political gains as a result of independence, much of which has not been matched in the economic sphere. The Transitional Constitution of South Sudan, ratified in 2011, formally recognizes women's rights and gender equality, including the principles of equal pay for equal work, the right to own property, and equal participation in public life.³² Within government, the constitution calls for quotas of at least 25 percent women's representation across legislative and executive bodies.³³ As of 2014, women hold 27 percent of seats in the National Legislative Assembly.³⁴ However, this commitment has not been reflected in the post-independence cabinet, where women hold only 5

²⁶ "South Sudan profile – Timeline." *BBC News*. 27 Aug. 2015. Web.

²⁷ United Nations. "The Addis Ababa Agreement on the Problem of South Sudan." 20 Jan. 2016. Web.

²⁸ Institute for Justice and Reconciliation. "Peace in the Balance: The Crisis in Sudan." 2006. Web.

²⁹ "South Sudan profile – Timeline." *BBC News*. 27 Aug. 2015. Web.

³⁰ Gettleman, Jeffrey. "After Years of Struggle, South Sudan Becomes a New Nation." *The New York Times*. 9 Jul. 2011. Web.

³¹ Santora, Marc. "As South Sudan Crisis Worsens, 'There Is No More Country'." *The New York Times*. 22 Jun. 2015. Web.

³² *The Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan*. 2011.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ "Global Database of Quotas for Women." Quota Project. 2014. Web.

out of 29 ministerial positions and are even less represented at sub-national levels.³⁵ Similarly, the economic realities do not match the commitments outlined in the Constitution. Only 12 percent of women are formally employed, and at all levels, women earn lower wages than men.³⁶

Map of South Sudan³⁷



Yei

Yei is the second largest urban center in Central Equatoria State (CES), with a population of around 172,000. The war between the Sudanese government and the SPLM/A reached Yei in 1985, and for much of the next decade, the Sudanese government controlled Yei. In 1997, the SPLM/A retook Yei and turned the city into a center for “military and international humanitarian relief operations.”³⁸ After its “liberation” in 1997, Yei saw an influx of persons, including soldiers and their

³⁵ Mabor, Beny Gideon. “Women and Political Leadership in Africa: A Demand in South Sudan Transitional Democracy.” *Sudan Tribune*. 22 Apr. 2013.

³⁶ “South Sudan Country Profile.” Oxfam Canada. 2013. Web.

³⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica. 2011.

³⁸ Humanitarian Policy Group. “Sanctuary in the city? Urban displacement and vulnerability in Yei, South Sudan.” 2011. Web.

families, internally displaced persons, Congolese refugees, economic migrants, and those fleeing the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), an armed rebel group formed in Uganda and later supported by the Sudanese government.³⁹ Since 2013, Yei has operated under relatively stable conditions, but local conflicts do persist.

Today, women in Yei, like the rest of the country, bear the brunt of the nation's challenges. Yei is still recovering from decades of civil war and inter-tribal violence. Here, almost half the population lives below the poverty line, with an average income the equivalent of \$8 per month.⁴⁰ As a result, the majority of households depend on crop farming or animal husbandry for subsistence as well as livelihoods. The women in Yei, just like the women across South Sudan, continue to face general hardships that result from traditional discriminatory practices.

The Status of Women in South Sudan

In South Sudan, women represent the majority of those living below the poverty line and have limited access to economic opportunities that could better their lives. Women still comprise the largest source of unpaid domestic labor, and when women do work outside the home, they are more likely to be informally employed, and as a result are paid less and experience greater job insecurity. According to South Sudan's Minister of Gender, Child, and Social Welfare, the devaluation of women and girls is one of the key contributing obstacles to the country's stability and forward development.⁴¹

In particular, norms and cultural practices impede such progress. According to tradition, marriage is essentially a business transaction where women and girls are bought and sold in negotiations between families. Women's preferences regarding when and whom to marry are rarely taken into account.⁴² The "bride price," paid by a man in order to receive a wife, typically involves the gifting of cows (the equivalent of gold in South Sudanese culture), cash, or other assets to the woman's family, and varies according to her perceived value. Her height, age, and beauty are all determining factors, while her level of education, particularly in rural areas, is not.⁴³ The bride price system exacerbates the already fundamental disparities that exist between men and women, creating an implicit sense of entitlement that allows for men to "manage" their property, often through violence and abuse. Access to things like food, shelter, and education become negotiable, with men exercising all

³⁹ Humanitarian Policy Group. "Sanctuary in the city? Urban displacement and vulnerability in Yei, South Sudan." 2011. Web.

⁴⁰ The Republic of South Sudan National Bureau of Statistics. "Key Indicators for Central Equatoria." 2010. Web.

⁴¹ United Nations. Interview with South Sudan's Minister of Gender, Child and Social Welfare on Africa's Newest Nation and its Women. Web.

⁴² Based on the personal observation of the author while in South Sudan.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

the levers of control over women's lives. Moreover, if a wife is unable to produce children (especially boys), or is considered lazy or too old, the husband is entitled to find himself another, often younger, wife, or several of them, as long as he can afford the bride price.

As a result, families view their daughters as a tradable commodity not as a valuable investment. This makes a daughter unworthy of an education because she will eventually leave to live with her husband's family, and thus delivers no added value to her natal family once she marries. These cultural norms create a recurring cycle of marginalization whereby girls continually lack access to educational opportunities and early marriage remains common practice. The result: UNICEF estimates that 52 percent of girls in South Sudan are married when they are still children, some as young as 9 years old.⁴⁴ Although South Sudan has laws in place that protect children, including setting the legal age of marriage at 18 years old, enforcement of these laws is weak and traditional norms usually prevail.⁴⁵

These cultural systems disadvantage women in multi-faceted ways. Female-headed households represent the majority of the urban and rural poor in South Sudan. Women account for 76 percent of the population who are unable to read and write.⁴⁶ Health and education indicators for women and girls in Central Equatoria, where Yei is located, are among the lowest in the world. The maternal mortality rate in this region of the country is just below South Sudan's national average at 1,867 deaths per 100,000 live births.⁴⁷ According to the United Nation's *Central Equatoria State Profile* from 2010, only 44 percent of girls are enrolled in primary school, and the percentages are worse for school completion.⁴⁸ School fees, early marriage, and family decisions are cited for the high incidences of girls dropping out.⁴⁹

Customary laws and discriminatory cultural practices such as land access, ownership, and inheritance rights, combined with household food production and domestic responsibilities, limit women's participation in both the formal and informal economy. "Generally, women have only limited access to more productive income-earning activities, not only because they lack access to many resources, but also because of cultural obstacles."⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Press Centre. "Child Marriages: 39,000 Every Day." UNICEF. 7 Mar. 2013. Web.

⁴⁵ The African Child Policy Forum. "Minimum Age of Marriage in Africa." Mar. 2013. Web.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ "Central Equatoria State Profile." United Nations. Jun. 2010. Web.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ International Organization for Migration. "Central Equatoria Village Assessment Survey County Profiles." 2013. Web.

⁵⁰ Duany, Julia A.; Duany, Wal. "War and Women in the Sudan: Role Change and Adjustment to New Responsibilities." *Northeast African Studies* 8.2 (2001): 63-82.

War exacerbates the many challenges South Sudanese women face. Conflict places added pressure on families to marry off their daughters at younger ages.⁵¹ Insecurity due to violence further restricts women's economic opportunities and their freedom of movement, making it difficult to leave the house without being vulnerable to rape and other forms of sexual violence.⁵² In the context of the South Sudanese conflict, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is endemic. Warring factions strategically target women and girls for rape and assault as a means of destroying families and communities. Thus, as the violence mounts, women are made more vulnerable when they flee their homes, try to access essential life-saving services, and even when they seek refuge in camps.⁵³ According to UNICEF Director Anthony Lake, "Girls as young as 8 have been gang raped and murdered."⁵⁴ A deeper look into the lived experiences of women within South Sudan reveals their increased vulnerabilities as a result of war, but also their perseverance and ingenuity.

Women's Lived Experiences in Conflict

In 2013, Women for Women International conducted a focus group in Yei with several self-appointed leaders in a loose coalition of women's organizations⁵⁵ during which the women spoke of the hardships and humiliations that come with daily life.⁵⁶ According to several in the group, men frequently attack women on the road to and from the market, taking their produce or animals by force, or stealing money from their pockets to buy alcohol. Most of the women are war widows, acting as heads of households, raising children on their own, and struggling to survive on the paltriest of means. Most have experienced domestic or sexual-based violence firsthand. When asked to describe their economic situation, the women explained:

"We have no money for medicine," said Susan,⁵⁷ one of the leaders, "and have to buy our own things like bandages if we go to the hospital."

"Women end up selling the clothes on their bodies to buy medicine for the sick child," added Christine.

"No one thinks about the women," said Janice, who grew up in Uganda. She used to teach tailoring and agriculture to other women until the supplies ran

⁵¹ Alfred, Charlotte. "How South Sudan's Conflict Is Killing Women Far From the Battlefield." *Huffington Post*. 7 Oct. 2015.

⁵² Kuehnast, Kathleen R.; De, Jonge Oudraat Chantal; Hernes, Helga Maria. *Women and War: Power and Protection in the 21st Century*. 2011.

⁵³ International Rescue Committee. *Violence against Women and Girls in South Sudan*. 2012.

⁵⁴ UNICEF. Press Centre. "Unspeakable Violence against Children in South Sudan." UNICEF. 17 Jun. 2015. Web.

⁵⁵ The focus group was conducted in Mugwo Payam in Yei County.

⁵⁶ Focus group interview with coalition members from eleven women's groups from the Mugwo Payam in Yei County. 16 Feb. 2013.

⁵⁷ The names of these participants have been changed for the purposes of the women's security.

out. “We had no more seeds to plant,” she said. “We used to save, but now it’s too hard.”

During a training session in Yei on the “Value of Women’s Work,” organized by Women for Women, a staff member reported the following: “Generally, it was felt that there is no appreciation of what women do, hence they face domestic violence if, for example, the food is cold.”⁵⁸ Women participants were asked to detail what they do each day, working from early morning until late at night, and reported that men spend significant amounts of time on leisure, playing cards, or drinking. Men typically come home late without anything for the family, while women take care of household expenses like school fees, clothes, food, and medicine.⁵⁹

Despite the circumstances, these women find diverse ways to cope. By forming social networks, the women in Yei support each other with basic necessities such as hut building, farming, and childcare. They create informal enterprises, such as making and selling local brew. Women reported that they consistently reinvest their income directly back into their families, especially to pay for their children’s school fees and medical needs. Overall, the informal sector plays a particularly important role for the women of Yei in their efforts to improve the wellbeing of their families.⁶⁰

Unfortunately, some unintended consequences surfaced as a result of women’s entrepreneurial efforts in the informal sector. In particular, making beer has contributed to widespread alcoholism and increases in violence. Some men steal money from their wives to buy the liquor, drink to excess, then sometimes beat their wives or rape other women.⁶¹ While the women of Yei recognize these second and third order effects, they also need the money, and thus must acquire another means of earning an income before they can break the cycle.

The women of Yei are clearly limited by the social and environmental constraints that demand they tend to the everyday needs and short-term necessities of their families. Where they can earn, their agency is also hampered by the informal nature of their economic activities. Yet, the potential their economic empowerment holds for building a more stable and prosperous South Sudan is vast.

⁵⁸ Women for Women International. “Life Skills and Sponsorship Program Update.” 6 May 2013.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Duany, Julia A.; Duany, Wal. “War and Women in the Sudan: Role Change and Adjustment to New Responsibilities.” *Northeast African Studies* 8.2 (2001): 63-82.

⁶¹ Focus group interview from Yei County. 16 Feb. 2013.

The Potential of Women's Economic Participation

The data on the potential of women's economic empowerment is clear: enhancing women's economic agency creates tangible benefits that reverberate outward to families and communities. Nearly fifty years ago, economist Ester Boserup was among the first to link economic independence to women's improved status in the family and community.⁶² When women earn, they gain both voice and choice, many for the first time in their lives. Winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economic Science, Amartya Sen, touts the benefits of investing in women in his seminal work on gender inequality, *Development as Freedom*.⁶³ According to Sen, income-producing women have healthier children with higher immunization rates and greater nutrition. Their daughters tend to stay in school longer, marry later, garner higher wages, and have fewer of their own children. A recent World Bank study across 20 developing countries concludes, "Women's ability to work for pay...may be one of the most visible and game-changing events in the life of modern households and communities."⁶⁴

The *Roadmap for Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment*, a report conducted by the UN Foundation on proven and high-potential economic empowerment interventions places primacy on the role of women. It finds, "Women in poor households, unlike men, are expected to invest any windfall cash into the family."⁶⁵ As evidenced by the women in Yei, this is exactly what they do. As South Sudan looks to build a peaceful and developed state, it must invest in its women.

The Future of South Sudan

In January 2016, the two warring political factions in South Sudan reached an agreement on the framework for a transitional government.⁶⁶ As negotiations continue over the composition of that transitional government, tensions remain high. Many fear that the peace agreement made earlier in the month may unravel and that violence will erupt once again.⁶⁷ Of the 20 peace negotiation delegates (ten each for the South Sudanese government and the opposition), three are women.⁶⁸ In the coming days and weeks, they and their male counterparts will likely continue to

⁶² Boserup, Ester. *Women's Role in Economic Development*. New York: St. Martin's, 1970. Print.

⁶³ Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Knopf, 1999. Print.

⁶⁴ Munoz Boudet, Ana Maria; Petesch, Patti; Turk, Carolyn. *On Norms and Agency: Conversations about Gender Equality with Women and Men in 20 Countries*. World Bank, 2012.

⁶⁵ Buvinic, Mayra; Furst-Nichols, Rebecca; Courey Pryor, Emily. "A Roadmap for Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment." United Nations Foundation, 2015. Web.

⁶⁶ Associated Press. "South Sudan rebels, government strike power-sharing pact." *CBS News*. 7 Jan. 2016. Web.

⁶⁷ Francis, Okech. "Fears Rise that South Sudan Peace Pact Unraveling, Group Says." *Bloomberg*. 25 Jan. 2016. Web.

⁶⁸ Harvard Law School. "Women Negotiators Break New Ground in South Sudan." 3 Dec. 2015. Web.

work towards a negotiated settlement, as neither side has the military supplies or the economic resources for more war.⁶⁹ Should the agreement hold, the transitional government would ultimately give way to new elections in three years' time.⁷⁰

Between now and then, the opportunity is ripe for South Sudan to capitalize on women's productive potential. The female peace negotiators must work with their male counterparts to secure spaces to advance women's agency. Women – over 65 percent of the population⁷¹ – must be included in the drafting and implementation of reconstruction and development policies and programs. In doing so, they can facilitate women and girls' access to the education and skills they need to participate in the economic and political life of the country. The government must also be held accountable for its constitutional commitment to women's rights and gender equality. Implementation and enforcement will be critical and difficult, at both state and local levels. This is exactly where the government has failed in the past, and there are few, if any, enforcement mechanisms currently in place. Failure to create and protect spaces for women's economic empowerment and agency, however, represents a missed opportunity for building sustainable growth and a viable peace. The very future of South Sudan is at stake.

⁶⁹ StratFor. "In South Sudan, an Insufficient Peace Deal." 1 Sept. 2015. Web.

⁷⁰ Associated Press. "South Sudan rebels, government strike power-sharing pact." *CBS News*. 7 Jan. 2016. Web.

⁷¹ Harvard Law School. "Women Negotiators Break New Ground in South Sudan." 3 Dec. 2015. Web.

Syrian Women in Crisis: Obstacles and Opportunities

Sarah Williamson

Introduction

What began as a pro-democracy movement to oust President Bashar al-Assad at the height of the Arab Spring in 2011 has since spiraled into the devastating Syrian civil war that has rocked countries across the region and the world. The vacuum of power left by the ongoing violence and the corresponding rise of militant groups, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), further dismantle any semblance of stability in the country and region.⁷² Raging for roughly five years, the Syrian civil war has resulted in more than 220,000 deaths and an estimated 4.6 million refugees pouring out of Syria into the larger Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, as well as into Europe.⁷³ As Syrians take refuge outside of Syria, they find themselves in precarious economic conditions, as many refugee-hosting countries in the region bar them from securing steady employment. This is especially challenging for Syrian women refugees.

Using the employment data available on Syrians, those living inside Syria and those living in exile in host countries across MENA, this paper sheds light on how Syrian women cope with the instability that has engulfed their daily lives as a result of the Syrian civil war. Focusing on where Syrian refugees are most concentrated (Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey), the data shows that host countries largely bar Syrian refugees from formal work opportunities, in part because these host countries' infrastructures cannot handle the current and ongoing influx of refugees pouring out of Syria, and also because of the corresponding social tensions over job competition between the host country population and Syrian refugees. Such legal barriers make it deeply challenging for Syrian refugees to establish themselves economically in countries they may reside in for decades.

Zooming in on the little gender-disaggregated data available, this article reveals that Syrian refugee women find themselves doubly disadvantaged under these conditions. As this article shows, in addition to the legal constraints all Syrian refugees face when seeking employment, the social norms that surround women working outside the home and the coping mechanisms of families in crisis compound the vulnerabilities of Syrian women refugees.

This article begins by reviewing the economic and social data on Syrian women, comparing the status of women still living inside Syria and Syrian refugee women living in neighboring host countries, as well as situating Syrian women's employment data within available labor statistics for the MENA region. It then

⁷² "Syria: The story of the conflict." *BBC News*. 27 Jan. 2016. Web.

⁷³ "Syria Regional Refugee Response." UNHCR. 28 Jan. 2016. Web.

focuses explicitly on the economic conditions of Syrian refugees living in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. In doing so, it shows that across MENA Syrian refugees face legal restrictions that bar them from becoming full, legal participants in their host country economies. Despite the very limited gender-disaggregated data available, this article unveils how Syrian women refugees are specifically affected in these host countries, focusing acutely on the compounding social challenges of their status as women and their status as refugees. Directly following, this article discusses the role of the international community in addressing the economic needs of the refugee population, with a particular focus on women. Finally, the article closes by highlighting the key issues that hamper Syrian refugees, and women in particular, from achieving gainful employment amidst this protracted crisis.

Women in the Syrian Workforce

Historically, Syrian women are not particularly active in the workforce. As of 2013, 13.5 percent of women were active in the Syrian labor force, compared to 72.7 percent of men, according to data collected by the United Nations (UN).⁷⁴ Earlier, pre-crisis data taken in 2005, showed both female and male participation in the labor force as slightly higher but similarly out of balance, at 16.3 percent and 76.1 percent respectively.⁷⁵ The reduction of women in the workforce between 2005 and 2013 aligns with increases in overall unemployment in Syria since the war began. Unemployment in Syria went from 9.2 percent in 2005 to 10.8 percent in 2013.⁷⁶ Unsurprisingly, for both men and women, the war has reduced economic activity and formal employment opportunities inside the country.

As the World Bank data (below) indicates, Syrian women fall behind other women across the region when it comes to labor force participation.⁷⁷ In general, 22 percent of women are active in the labor force across MENA, the lowest regional average across the world. Within MENA, Syria has the lowest percentage of women participating in its economy.

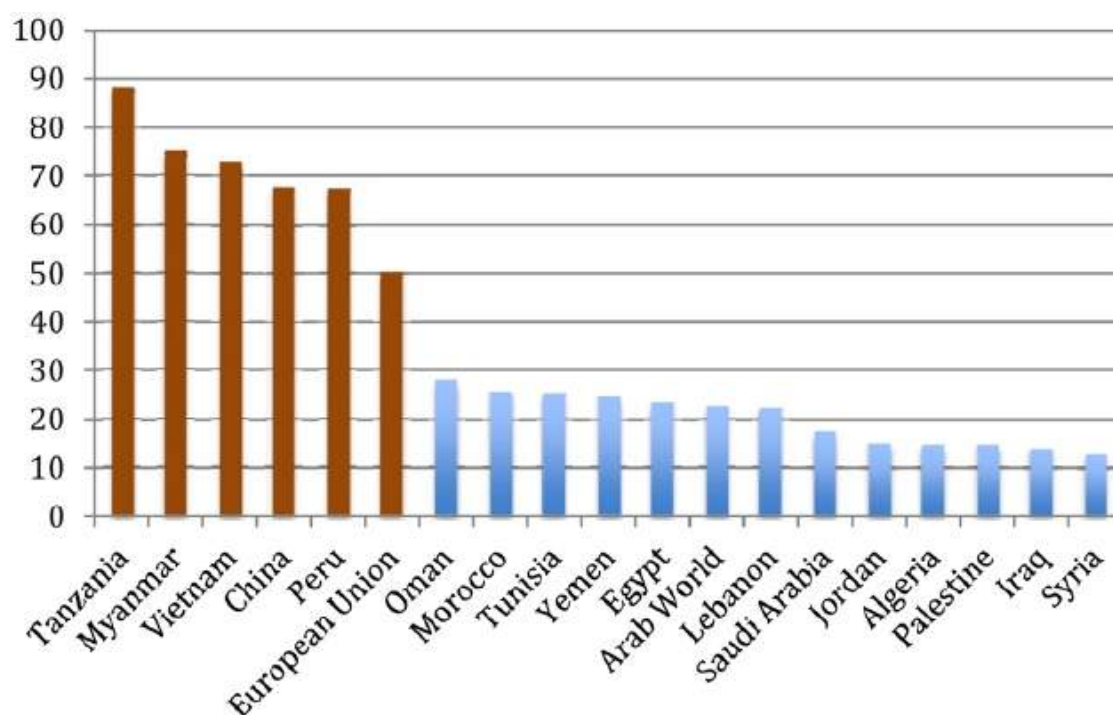
⁷⁴ "Syrian Arab Republic." UN Data. 8 Jan. 2016. Web.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Korotayev, Andrey V.; Issaev, Leonid M.; Shishkina, Alisa R. "Female Labor Force Participation Rate, Islam, and Arab Culture in Cross-Cultural Perspective," *Cross-Cultural Research* 49.1. (2015): 3-19.

Figure 1. Labor Force Participation, female (percentage of total population and ages 15+)⁷⁸



Research suggests social and political factors limit women’s participation in the Syrian economy. Despite the fact that Syrian women obtain high levels of education – 63.1 percent of girls attend secondary school, compared to 62.8 percent of boys – political and social barriers block them from entering the workforce.⁷⁹ Although the Syrian constitution calls for equality between all citizens, the penal code allows a husband to forbid his wife from working outside the home.⁸⁰ In addition, social norms dictate that Syrian men provide for their families, which relegate women’s work to the domestic sphere and limit their access to public life.⁸¹ Surveys conducted inside Syria show that people believe a woman should only work outside the home if her husband cannot support the family.⁸²

Due to these legal and social barriers, Syrian women who do work outside the home are limited to specific sectors of the economy. These women mainly work in

⁷⁸ Korotayev, Andrey V.; Issaev, Leonid M.; Shishkina, Alisa R. “Female Labor Force Participation Rate, Islam, and Arab Culture in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” *Cross-Cultural Research* 49.1. (2015): 3-19.

⁷⁹ “At a glance: Syrian Arab Republic.” UNICEF. 31 Dec. 2013. Web.

⁸⁰ “Syria.” *Women’s Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress Amid Resistance*. Ed. Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010. N. pag. Web.

⁸¹ Analysis based on author’s experience speaking with a number of NGOs running women’s programs in the region and reading project papers and news articles with testimony from Syrian women about barriers they face.

⁸² “Syria.” *Women’s Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress Amid Resistance*. Ed. Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010. N. pag. Web.

agriculture, education, textile, or clerical positions.⁸³ Their opportunities in the political, financial, and legal fields are limited. Syrian women comprise only 10 percent of ministerial positions, 11 percent of diplomatic posts, and 13 percent of all judgeships.⁸⁴

The restrictive political environment also limits their participation in civil society and the formation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). While these spaces are generally places where women actively participate in large numbers, formal participation in such organizations inside Syria are limited to those who are closely aligned with the Ba'ath party and the Assad regime. For example, First Lady Asma al-Assad has founded several organizations focusing on women's economic empowerment, including Modernizing and Activating Women's Role in Economic Development (MAWRED). However, women who can join or benefit from MAWRED and similar NGOs usually must have ties to the regime. Humanitarian organizations working inside Syria since the conflict began in 2011 report that more women are participating in the local governing councils and civil society organizations, but this varies by location depending on who is in control of the territory.⁸⁵

Over the course of the last five years, the civil war has placed new economic burdens on Syrian women. Because the majority of those who have died in the war are men,⁸⁶ Syrian women and children must play more active roles outside the home to meet the needs of their families. According to 2013 data, the number of women working inside Syria (13 percent) doubled the number of refugee women working in neighboring host countries, estimated at 6 percent in parts of Lebanon⁸⁷ and 7 percent in Jordan.⁸⁸ As the data suggests, women inside Syria are increasingly stepping outside their pre-established social roles to support their families, while Syrian refugees generally (and refugee women in particular) face unique challenges of securing gainful employment.

Syrian Refugees

Since 2011, refugees have steadily flowed out of Syria, generally settling across MENA and, more recently, migrating to Europe. According to January 2016 data, of the 4.6 million Syrian refugees, over 800,000 or 17.6 percent of all Syrian refugees

⁸³ "Syria." *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress Amid Resistance*. Ed. Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010. N. pag. Web.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Based on the author's experience speaking with NGO leaders operating inside Syria.

⁸⁶ Ormhaug, Chris. "Armed Conflict Deaths Disaggregated by Gender." PRIO Papers. 23. Nov. 2009. Web.

⁸⁷ "Livelihoods Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Akkar Governorate." UNHCR. Dec. 2014. Web.

⁸⁸ Stave, Svein Erik; Hillesund, Solveig. "Impact of Syrian refugees on the Jordanian labour market." International Labour Organization. 2015. Web.

sought asylum in Europe.⁸⁹ However, only 17 percent of these refugee arrivals to Europe are women.⁹⁰ This figure is alarming to refugee humanitarian agencies in the MENA region, who are seeing an increase in female-headed households as Syrian men leave the region to find work in Europe.⁹¹ Despite what appears to be a massive influx of refugees arriving to Europe, the vast majority of Syrian refugees remain scattered across the MENA region – in Lebanon (25.5 percent),⁹² Jordan (14.4 percent),⁹³ Turkey (40 percent),⁹⁴ and Iraq (6.3 percent).⁹⁵

These MENA host countries resist integrating refugees into the workforce for fear of how such integration will impact their own citizens economically.⁹⁶ For example, in Lebanon, the influx of refugees into the labor market has resulted in a 60 percent decrease in wages for Lebanese nationals, causing social tensions between refugees and the host community.⁹⁷ In Jordan, prior to the influx of Syrian refugees (2010-2013), the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that employment generation had not kept pace with labor force growth, resulting in especially high unemployment rates for women and youth.⁹⁸ Correspondingly, the ILO predicts that the Syrian refugee influx “has the potential to result in larger scale displacement of vulnerable Jordanians from the labour [*sic*] market.”⁹⁹ These host countries, thus, limit the extent to which refugees can legally participate in their economies. This constrained economic environment for refugees has directly led Syrian male refugees to migrate to Europe.¹⁰⁰

In Europe, the asylum process allows refugees to obtain a legal status, which theoretically would allow an individual, if recognized as a refugee, to legally work within the host country. A similar process is not in place in many of the host countries in the Middle East. For example, refugees cannot legally work in Lebanon, they have incredibly limited legal employment opportunities in Jordan, and they only obtained the legal right to work in Turkey in January 2016.¹⁰¹

⁸⁹ “Syria Regional Refugee Response.” UNHCR. 28 Jan. 2016. Web.

⁹⁰ “Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Europe.” UNHCR. Jan. - Dec. 2016. Web.

⁹¹ “Those Left Behind.” SaportaReport Global Health. 15. Jan. 2016. Web.

⁹² “2015 UNHCR country operations profile - Lebanon.” UNHCR. 28 Jan. 2016. Web.

⁹³ “2015 UNHCR country operations profile - Jordan.” UNHCR. 28 Jan. 2016. Web.

⁹⁴ “2015 UNHCR country operations profile - Turkey.” UNHCR. 28 Jan. 2016. Web.

⁹⁵ “2015 UNHCR country operations profile - Iraq.” UNHCR. 28 Jan. 2016. Web.

⁹⁶ Stave, Svein Erik; Hillesund, Solveig. “Impact of Syrian refugees on the Jordanian labour market.” International Labour Organization. 2015. Web.

⁹⁷ “Assessment of the impact of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon and their employment profile.” International Labour Organization. 2013, p. 36. Web.

⁹⁸ Ajluni, Salem; Kavar, Mary. “The Impact of the Syrian Refugee Crisis on the Labour Market in Jordan: A Preliminary Analysis.” International Labour Organization. 2014. Web.

⁹⁹ “Assessment of the impact of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon and their employment profile.” International Labour Organization. 2013. Web.

¹⁰⁰ “Those Left Behind.” SaportaReport Global Health. 15. Jan. 2016. Web.

¹⁰¹ Murray, Don. “High Commissioner welcomes Turkish work permits for Syrian refugees.” UNHCR. 18 Jan. 2016. Web.

Without the right to work, it is increasingly difficult for refugees to pay rent and meet their basic food needs. In the first years of exile, refugees generally rely on their savings and remittances from relatives living abroad. However, as these coping mechanisms dry up and the civil war persists, more refugees are likely to move to other countries in the region and beyond to look for work.

The policies denying men the right to work in countries of first asylum directly leads to increased migration of refugee men to Europe, placing women in increasingly difficult economic conditions. Humanitarian agencies that support refugees living in MENA host countries note a marked increase in women who have become the head of household due to a spouse or other male relatives going to Europe to look for work. Many female refugees stay behind to care for their families in hopes of receiving remittances from male relatives once they are established in Germany or other European countries. Enabling greater female participation in the workforce is a sustainable approach to helping Syrian women meet the needs of their families, especially as they wait for remittances that may never come.¹⁰²

Instead, however, Syrian refugee women face a series of social barriers that inhibit their economic advancement. This includes social perceptions around who is believed to be an appropriate person to work outside the home as well as the corresponding personal security implications around gender and work. Refugee women in neighboring host countries state that community perceptions of “working women” deter them from seeking employment.¹⁰³ Syrian refugee women also report that they fear leaving their home due to harassment and requests for sexual favors in place of rent and other commodities.¹⁰⁴

The data presented in the following section evidences the implications of the legal barriers affecting all Syrian refugees in MENA host countries as well as the social barriers that further prevent women from working.

Employment Data on Syrian Refugees in Host Countries

Data on refugee employment and livelihood varies by agency and location. While the ILO analyzed the impact of refugees on host economies, including Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

¹⁰² “Those Left Behind.” SaportaReport GlobalHealth. 15. Jan. 2016. Web.

¹⁰³ “Labour Market Assessment in Beirut and Mount Lebanon.” ACTED. 22 Jan. 2014. Web.

¹⁰⁴ “Are We Listening? Acting on our Commitment to Women and Girls Affected by the Syria Conflict.” International Rescue Committee. Sep. 2014. Web.

and NGOs working in the field also carefully assess the economic conditions of the refugee populations they aim to support. Overall, there is a fundamental lack of reliable, as well as sex- and age-disaggregated, data on the economic status of Syrian refugees. The following sections highlight what is known about the economic conditions of Syrian refugees generally, and women in particular, in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey.

Lebanon

Although Lebanon requires refugees to sign a document stating they will not work while living in the country, Syrians seeking refuge here find ways to subsist. In the Akkar region, from where the most comprehensive data is available, UNHCR reports that 32 percent of refugee households have at least one member who works, and only 6 percent of households report having at least one female member employed.¹⁰⁵ Overall, 90 percent of employed refugees report that they work within the informal sector.¹⁰⁶

Because of the situation in which they find themselves, many Syrian refugee women are entering the workforce for the first time. UNHCR reports:

Substantially more women than men appeared to have begun working: 11 percent of women were working for the first time ever at the time of assessment, compared to only 1 percent of men. This highlights the financial strain being placed on refugee households during extended displacement; data suggests that women were not previously working in Syria and have begun to enter the labour [*sic*] force in Lebanon in order to contribute to their household income.¹⁰⁷

Yet, these refugee women still earn significantly less than their male counterparts.¹⁰⁸ On average, men earn \$13 a day, compared to only \$6 a day for women. Many of these women work in the agricultural sector, where wages are lower. Smaller numbers of refugee women work in the hospitality sector for \$15 per day, cleaning for \$13 per day, and construction for \$10 per day.¹⁰⁹

Gender norms impede Syrian refugee women's ability to seek and obtain gainful employment. Some do not and cannot actively seek work because they bear the primary responsibility for home and childcare duties.¹¹⁰ According to UNHCR, 23

¹⁰⁵ "Livelihoods Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Akkar Governorate." UNHCR. Dec. 2014. Web.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ "Assessment of the impact of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon and their employment profile." International Labour Organization. 2013, p. 9. Web.

percent of women cite having dependents in the home as a reason for not working.¹¹¹ Employment-seeking behaviors amongst refugees may also play a role in the low number of refugee women able to access work. Because Lebanon bars refugees from working in the formal economy, refugees must go door-to-door asking for work as their main opportunity for securing a job.¹¹² This behavior is considered inappropriate for women.

Jordan

Bureaucratic barriers and mounting fear surround the legal parameters of refugees' right to work in Jordan, and this inhibits Syrian refugees' ability to find gainful employment. Jordan requires all foreign workers to obtain a one-year renewable work permit from the Ministry of Labour. The law also requires that an employer sponsor the foreign worker. Most permit applicants to work in the following sectors: construction services (32 percent), other services (30 percent), restaurants (17 percent), and agriculture (4 percent).¹¹³ In addition to dealing with bureaucratic barriers, many refugees also fear applying for a permit at all. The ILO reports that it is "a common conception amongst both Syrians and Jordanians that Syrian refugees might lose their UNHCR refugee status if they obtain a work permit."¹¹⁴ As a result, only 10 percent of all Syrian refugees have obtained the legal right to work.¹¹⁵ Instead, many Syrian refugees continue to search for work in the informal sector, mainly finding jobs through referrals from family or friends.¹¹⁶

Syrian refugees continued pursuit of low-skilled labor has negatively impacted Jordanian nationals. The ILO reports that between 2011 and 2014, unemployment increased for Jordanians, from 14.5 percent to 22 percent.¹¹⁷ Further, because refugees are willing to work for lower wages, authorities find it increasingly difficult to enforce the minimum wage for nationals.¹¹⁸

Like Lebanon, legal restrictions and social norms hamper Syrian refugee women's ability to find work. In Jordan, the ILO estimates that only 7 percent of all refugee women work.¹¹⁹ While both men and women cite the inability to obtain a work permit as a major obstacle to earning income, women also cite household responsibilities and family objections to working outside the home as key reasons

¹¹¹ "Livelihoods Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Akkar Governorate." UNHCR. Dec. 2014. Web.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Ajluni, Salem; Kawar, Mary. "The Impact of the Syrian Refugee Crisis on the Labour Market in Jordan: A Preliminary Analysis." International Labour Organization. 2014. Web.

¹¹⁴ Stave, Svein Erik; Hillesund, Solveig. "Impact of Syrian refugees on the Jordanian labour market." International Labour Organization. 2015, p. 64. Web.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, np.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, np.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, np.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, np.

for their unemployment.¹²⁰ Furthermore, the ILO also indicates that nearly every Syrian refugee child who is working in Jordan is male.¹²¹ Girls remain at home.

Turkey

Since 2011, an estimated 2.4 million Syrians have taken refuge in Turkey. As of the end of 2015, only 7,351 Syrian refugees had been granted work permits¹²² and only a small number had been granted Temporary Protection (TP) to work within the refugee community, usually as teachers or doctors in the refugee camps.¹²³ The majority of Syrian refugees work in the informal economy, a direct result of the Turkish government's ban on refugees' legal right to work, which was recently lifted in January 2016.¹²⁴ Now that the ban has been lifted, many of the Syrian refugees currently working in the informal economy have the opportunity to formalize their employment, meaning they can seek worker protections such as a minimum wage.

Initially, the Turkish government cited the high unemployment of Turkish nationals as the main factor for denying work permits for Syrian refugees.¹²⁵ Refugee participation in the informal economy is also of concern for the Turkish government, as Turkish communities complain that Syrian refugees working illegally accept lower wages and push Turks out of the labor market.¹²⁶ However, a 2015 study conducted by the Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies and the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation found that Syrian refugees actually do not compete with Turks for jobs. Instead, refugees meet a demand for unskilled labor that otherwise goes unfilled by Turks.¹²⁷ Additionally, the Government of Turkey has stated that one reason for granting refugees work permits was to stem the flow of the qualified workforce to European countries.

Syrian women enter the Turkish labor force in low numbers, comparable to Lebanon and Jordan. A 2014 study conducted by Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) found that only 13 percent of Syrian women surveyed had at some point held a form of income-generating employment.¹²⁸ 3.7 percent of Syrian women refugees reported they worked as teachers, 0.8 percent as garment makers, 0.7 percent as farmers or farm workers, 0.6 percent as beauticians, 0.3 percent as nurses or midwives, and 7.1 percent in another

¹²⁰ Stave, Svein Erik; Hillesund, Solveig. "Impact of Syrian refugees on the Jordanian labour market." International Labour Organization. 2015, p. 45. Web.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Cetingulec, Mehmet. "Turkey grants Syrians right to work, but is it too little, too late?" *Al-Monitor*. 25 Jan. 2016. Web.

¹²³ Afanasieva, Dasha. "Turkey will not give Syrian refugees right to work – labour minister." *Reuters*. 7 Aug. 2015. Web.

¹²⁴ Cetingulec, Mehmet. "Turkey grants Syrians right to work, but is it too little, too late?" *Al-Monitor*. 25 Jan. 2016. Web.

¹²⁵ Afanasieva, Dasha. "Turkey will not give Syrian refugees right to work – labour minister." *Reuters*. 7 Aug. 2015. Web.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ "Syrian Women in Turkey." AFAD. 2014, p. 24. Web.

industry.¹²⁹ 57.7 percent of Syrian women surveyed listed “housewife” as their primary, unpaid occupation. Additionally, nearly half of women said they would not want to seek employment even if they were provided the opportunity to do so.¹³⁰

Regarding those living in refugee camps, the Turkish AFAD determined that the patriarchal cultural structure was the biggest obstacle for women, preventing many women from leaving their tents, and therefore inhibiting access to many forms of income-generating employment.¹³¹ Various organizations and agencies working on the ground aim to address the economic challenges Syrian refugees face in varied ways.

Organizations on the Ground

Organizations on the ground engage in a litany of activities to help Syrian refugees generally, and women in particular, cope with their displacement. The following section details several types of programs that fall within this scope. While many of these programs have enjoyed some success, all organizations working in this space confront two pervasive challenges: host country legal restrictions on the right to work for refugees and social norms relating to women working outside the home.

Given the lack of formal opportunities for refugees, UN agencies and international NGOs frequently use livelihood programs to create opportunities for refugees to earn an income and provide for themselves.¹³² Yet, they often struggle to balance supporting the host states’ needs and offering solutions to refugees who are falling below basic, minimum standards of living. Large agencies affiliated with the UN and powerful donor countries are less willing to develop programs that promote “employment” opportunities for refugees because these organizations are required to follow the laws of the host countries, where they operate as guests.

For example, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) leads a consortium of agencies that have developed a Regional Refugee Resilience Plan (3RP) that supports all aspects of relief and recovery for the Syrian crisis, including improving livelihoods and work opportunities for refugees throughout the region. In June 2015, the 3RP update reported that 156 livelihood projects in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey have assisted 9,750 refugees with access to wage-earning opportunities, and 16,879 have been trained in a marketable skill or service.¹³³ However, these figures do not distinguish between refugees earning an

¹²⁹ “Syrian Women in Turkey.” AFAD. 2014, p. 24. Web.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹³² “What is a livelihood?” International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. 28 Jan. 2016. Web.

¹³³ “Syria Regional Refugee Response.” UNHCR. 28 Jan. 2016. Web.

income in the informal sector or the formal economy, nor does the data provide disaggregated figures vis-à-vis gender. These programs have had successful but minimal reach considering the number of refugees living in these host countries. One reason for this may be that these organizations struggle to maximize their impact while also working within host countries' legal parameters regarding refugees.

Rather than directly addressing refugee access to employment opportunities, the World Bank works to support refugees by addressing infrastructure challenges in host countries. To reduce the burden of welcoming refugees, the World Bank developed initiatives in Jordan and Lebanon to supplement the cost of providing refugees access to education, health care, and municipal services such as trash collection.

In many respects, small local organizations are better able to operate under the radar of national authorities, helping refugees obtain the skills necessary for employment and to make connections with small businesses willing to hire refugees. For example, in Turkey, a local NGO, Rizk, works on employing Syrian refugees in local businesses, placing 1,400 refugee men and women in jobs in 2014.¹³⁴ While these are positive developments, Rizk's success is still limited. There are thousands of outstanding applicants waiting in line likely due to the high number of refugees seeking employment and the low number of jobs available. Other NGOs working on livelihoods initiatives have tried a number of approaches to increasing refugee income, including giving cash grants and payments through debit cards and setting up vocational training classes.¹³⁵

Acknowledging the cultural barriers that prevent Syrian refugee women from working, some organizations train Syrian refugee women in economic activities they can conduct in their home, but these endeavors have also enjoyed only limited success. For example, the Italian NGO INTERSOS provides Syrian women in Lebanon with makeup kits and beauty skills that can be used in private in-home services or by working in salons. Yet, women participating in this program said their husbands still showed concern that their participation would put them in public contact with men outside their family, which was perceived as culturally problematic.¹³⁶ In Turkey, AFAD also acknowledged that it is essential to create

¹³⁴ Alami, Mona. "NGO finds work for Syrian refugees in Turkey." *Al-Monitor*. 7 Aug. 2015. Web.

¹³⁵ Battistin, Francesca. "IRC Cash and Livelihood Support Program in Lebanon." *Field Exchange*, International Rescue Committee. 28 Jan. 2016. Web.

¹³⁶ "Training Program Offers Syrian Refugee Women Hope, Albeit Temporarily." *Al-Akhbar*. 28 Jan. 2016. Web.

employment opportunities in the camps that do not require women to leave their tents.¹³⁷

In Lebanon, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) livelihoods program developed a training program to enhance financial literacy for women, covering topics such as household-level budgeting, debt management, negotiation, savings, and banking services.¹³⁸ Although this is a new and on-going initiative, initial reports from those on the ground show that women have more confidence to make decisions about the needs of their household. Financial training is an important tool to empower women who traditionally have not been allowed to control financial resources in the home. This type of empowerment could be a first step in shifting social conventions that relegate women to the domestic sphere.

Overall, there are various methods being used to support refugees, many of which are specifically tailored to address the needs of women. However, these programs face persistent barriers regarding refugees' legal right to work in each country, as well as pervasive social attitudes that constrain women's ability to work outside of the home. Changing negative perceptions of women's participation in the workforce, including having contact with men outside of their families, will be an important aspect of empowering Syrian women.

Addressing Legal Barriers to Syrian Refugees' Right to Work

A legal right to work would have a positive impact both on Syrian refugees and their host countries. Refugees would benefit from formal employment and the associated protections, while host countries would benefit from an increased tax base and a larger supply of workers to fill unmet labor demands, as evidenced in Turkey. Additionally, if refugees were able to pay taxes on their income to the host state, it could alter perceptions that the Syrian population has only created negative economic conditions for their neighbors. If refugees are shown to be contributing members of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, etc., then other nations in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait may also be willing to open their doors to this population. The ILO recommends that a formal migrant worker program be established to regularize the employment of refugees in host countries. Businesses in the host

¹³⁷ "Syrian Women in Turkey." AFAD. 2014, p. 74. Web.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

countries can hire refugees (where legal) and/or advocate for policies that are more refugee-friendly.

Importantly, there also exists a fear that providing refugees with a legal right to work incentivizes them not to return to Syria when the war ends. Whether or not refugees return home when the war concludes, the fact remains that the current average length of displacement due violent conflict is roughly 17 years.¹³⁹ Thus, there is an incredibly high likelihood that Syrian refugees will live in exile in these host countries for at least a decade or two, if not longer. Given this reality, host countries should find ways to better integrate refugees into their respective workforces.

Consequences of Social Barriers to Syrian Refugee Women's Ability to Work

As previously discussed, social norms and patriarchal culture prevent many Syrian refugee women from seeking income-earning employment, reducing the number of potential income earners in each household and thus limiting the economic stability that refugee families can achieve. Beyond this, the economic strain placed on refugee families force them to cope in ways that uniquely and adversely impact women and girls.

Under the precarious conditions of life in a refugee camp, many Syrian refugee families turn to early marriage practices as a coping mechanism to secure more financial support and protect their daughters' purity. This practice is well documented in Jordan, where UNICEF reports that 25 percent of all Syrian marriages registered in 2013 were with girls between the ages of 15-17, and this number increased to 31.7 percent of all marriages in 2014.¹⁴⁰

While often perceived as the best coping mechanisms for families in crisis, early marriage actually hurts the earning futures for the Syrian refugee population. A Save the Children study conducted in Jordan points out that child brides tend to come from poor families, and remain poor throughout their lives.¹⁴¹ The social norms that keep women from actively seeking gainful employment and that create conditions whereby girls are increasingly married off at younger ages pervade the situation in which Syrian women refugees find themselves. These conditions impede

¹³⁹ Strohmeyer, Hansoerg. "The forgotten millions." OCHA. 22 Jan. 2015. Web.

¹⁴⁰ "A study on early marriage in Jordan." UNICEF. 2014.

¹⁴¹ "Too Young to Wed: The growing problem of child marriage among Syrian girls in Jordan." Save the Children. 2014. Web.

these women's ability to participate as active agents in the economic health of their own and their families' futures.

Looking Ahead

The Syrian civil war is not expected to end anytime soon, and it is evident that for the foreseeable future there will be millions of Syrian refugees living in exile across MENA and in Europe. It is equally apparent that their inability to find gainful employment in host countries exacerbates the precarious situation in which they find themselves, and leaves more female refugees to fend for themselves while male relatives continue to migrate in search of work. Despite international and local humanitarian efforts to help refugees access employment, Syrian refugees still face a myriad of challenges in earning the income they need to meet their basic needs.

As this paper reveals, all Syrian refugees living across MENA confront legal barriers that impede their ability to find viable income-generating employment opportunities. Women are additionally disadvantaged, as they are becoming heads of household for the first time and also face social barriers that relate to gender and work. The status quo of leaving refugees to fend for themselves on limited humanitarian contributions is unsustainable, and leaves the economic potential of millions of people untapped. This is expressly the case when it comes to women. Improving female participation in the labor force is a key to strengthening the ability of Syrian women, both those living inside the country and those living outside the country as refugees, to chart a better future for themselves and their families.

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