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Issue 15: Economic Precarity among Syrian Refugee Families Living in Lebanon: Policy Recommendations to Restore Hope in the Context of Displacement

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Economic Precarity among Syrian Refugee Families Living in Lebanon: Policy Recommendations to Restore Hope in the Context of Displacement¹

Bree Akesson and Dena Badawi²



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Housing for Syrian Refugee Families in Northern Lebanon. Photo by Bree Akesson, 2016.

Introduction

The conflict in Syria has been described as the largest humanitarian crisis to date. Ongoing for over eight years, the conflict has resulted in over five million refugees and 6.6 million people internally displaced within the borders of Syria. Most refugees from Syria have been displaced to neighbouring countries such

¹ A longer version of this report appears as a book chapter in the forthcoming edited collection: Akesson, B. & Badawi, D. (in press). "My heart feels chained": The effects of economic precarity on Syrian refugee parents living in Lebanon. In C.W. Greenbaum, M.M. Haj-Yahia, & C. Hamilton (Eds.), *Political violence toward children: Psychological effects, intervention and prevention policy*. Oxford University Press. More information about this research can also be found on the website: www.outofplaceresearch.com

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as Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Lebanon. Lebanon is host to over one million Syrian refugees. Prior to the Syrian crisis, Lebanon was struggling economically, which has since exacerbated anti-refugee sentiment and government policies that aim to discourage Syrians from seeking refuge in Lebanon. Within Lebanon, Syrian families are challenged with high rates of poverty, restrictive governmental policies and regulations, a lack of affordable housing and health care, food insecurity, and family violence. These challenges have a destabilizing effect on Syrian families, impacting the mental health of parents as well as their ability to meet their families' basic needs. This policy brief draws on research conducted with Syrian families in Lebanon to highlight policy points to address the impacts of economic precarity on the health and well-being of Syrian families. The lessons drawn from this research can be applied both within areas of displacement and in post-resettlement settings where issues of economic precarity can often persist.

Background

The conflict in Syria has resulted in over 5.6 million refugees displaced to the neighbouring countries of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2019). Lebanon has surpassed all countries globally in hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees proportionate to its size (Kelley, 2017). It is an often-cited statistic that one in four people in Lebanon is a Syrian refugee (Boustani, Carpi, Gebera & Mourad, 2016). Lebanon was economically struggling prior to the conflict, a condition which has only deepened with the large numbers of Syrian families seeking refuge in Lebanon (Government of Lebanon [GoL] & United Nations [UN], 2017). Public services and institutions are overstretched, with the demand far exceeding the capacity of the system and infrastructure to adequately meet the needs of Syrian families (GoL & UN, 2017). The conflict in Syria has also impacted Lebanon's social and economic growth, contributing to increasing levels of poverty and unemployment and further compounding pre-existing barriers to Lebanon developing its systems and infrastructure (GoL & UN, 2017). Pre-existing high levels of unemployment and informal labour have grown, contributing to deepening social tensions over the competition for employment and perceived inequalities within both Syrian and Lebanese communities (GoL & UN, 2017). Unemployment levels are particularly high in Lebanon's poorest localities, where 87% of Syrian families reside (GoL & UN, 2017).

Economic precarity is one of the biggest challenges facing Syrian families in Lebanon, with over 70% of them living below the poverty line (UNHCR, United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], & World Food Programme [WFP], 2016). Government restrictions and burdensome policies further restrict families' ability to escape poverty and participate in the workforce (Dionigi, 2016). For example, to be officially registered as a Syrian refugee by the Government of Lebanon—and therefore afforded the protections that this designation offers—one must find a Lebanese sponsor and pay an annual fee. Obtaining civil documentation within Lebanon is a difficult and often financially inaccessible process for Syrians; but the absence of documentation also further restricts Syrians' access to resources and livelihood opportunities (GoL & UN, 2017). UNHCR registration does not provide legal and civil rights to refugees in Lebanon (Verme et al., 2016).

Poverty and economic precarity heavily influence the types of living conditions Syrian families experience as well as the prevalence of food insecurity in these homes. Many Syrian families are living in unsuitable housing conditions that include unfinished buildings and informal tented settlements (UNHCR, UNICEF, & WFP, 2016). These areas are often void of basic utilities (e.g., water, sanitation) and bear dangerous structural problems (UNHCR, UNICEF, & WFP, 2016). Additionally, 93% of Syrian families report some degree of food insecurity (UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, 2016), which is correlated with economic precarity. Food insecurity impacts family health, and particularly children in their growth and development (see, for example, Jensen, Berens, & Nelson, 2017; Johnson & Markowitz, 2017). Economic

precarity also affects the ability of children to participate in the education system. Families are often forced to prioritize household survival over children's education, with children working outside the home. As a result, half of school-age (3-17 years old) Syrian children in Lebanon are not attending school (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

This context of extreme poverty, burdensome governmental regulations, lack of affordable housing, food insecurity, and decreased participation in the education system results in experiences of economic precarity within Syrian families. Economic precarity can cause family stress and influence parenting practices, ultimately affecting child development and health as well as the overall health and functioning of the family. Insufficient material environments, combined with the stress and insecurities that accompany a struggle for survival, destabilize family systems and their ability to serve as protective social systems. This policy brief describes a research project that explored Syrian families' experiences with economic precarity and the resulting impact on their well-being in Lebanon. The brief concludes with several recommendations for policy change.

Methodology

This policy brief is based on findings from a 2016 research study aimed at generating knowledge of experiences of displacement within Syrian refugee families in Lebanon. Collaborative family interviews were conducted with 351 individuals from 46 families, including parents, extended family caregivers, and children. Members of the extended family, neighbours, and friends often contributed to the interviews. Collaborative family interviews were semi-structured in nature, covering experiences of the flight from Syria, journey to Lebanon, displacement in Lebanon, and dreams for the future. Children participated through discussion as well as drawing and mapmaking. After the collaborative family interview, children were invited to take the research team on a walk of their neighborhood community, which was recorded using GPS and photographs. For one week following the interview, families carried GPS trackers to document their everyday experiences living in Lebanon. In addition, two focus groups and three semi-structured interviews with nine key informants working with Syrian refugee communities were conducted. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data were analyzed by reviewing and coding interviews line-by-line to develop themes.

Findings

The following four findings revealed the ways in which economic precarity impacts Syrian families in Lebanon.

Finding #1: Impact on parental roles

Parents' financial limitations challenge their ability to provide for their children's physical and emotional needs. The inability to provide for their children has resulted in emotionally painful experiences for parents, adding to the frustration and hopelessness that parents feel in the context of displacement. One mother explained:

Here we have a lot of pressure and stress, because we are not able to provide a better life to our children.

In Lebanon, parents were consistently focused on the survival and wellbeing of their children, citing it as a main source of worry and stress. One father emphasized this feeling of parental inadequacy when he stated:

It's affected us psychologically, because our child comes to us saying he want 1000 Lebanese pounds [less than \$1], and I can't provide it to him. He goes to school and tells me he wants a thousand... honestly, I feel frustrated, my heart feels chained, I don't have it to give it to him.

This father's words were similar to comments from other parents, who often detailed feelings of inadequacy and distress over their inability to adequately provide for their children.

Finding #2: Impact on family mobility

The data demonstrated that economic precarity influences how parents manage the mobility of their children. Parents described feeling the need to avoid taking their children outside the home, because children might see something they want, which would then cause the parents distress at not being able to purchase it. This inability to purchase even basic items contributes to children feeling inadequate as compared to their peers. One father described the emotions he experienced when faced with accompanying his children outside the home:

I don't have the guts to get outside.... I wish to provide for them as much as I can. [If they ask, "Why are you not taking us out?"] I would find excuses like I am busy, I have work to do." ... If I take them outside they would want more things.

The inability to provide for children influenced the decision of parents to take their children outside the home, leading many to restrict their own mobility and the mobility of their children. Combined with other factors, such as fear of not having official registration documents and the potential for harassment from Lebanese residents and officials, economic precarity severely restricted families' overall mobility (Akersson & Coupland, 2018).

Finding #3: Impact on children's rights

Parents perceived the war and subsequent displacement as a violation of the rights of their children. Poverty and war have both been shown to deny children their right to basic needs such as safety, food, shelter, and stability. At the same time, parents also recognize that—as an extension of war and displacement—economic precarity also denies their children basic rights. One father described his experience with his children:

When a child comes to you and asks you for something, and you don't have it, what would you do? You either need to tell him something that will bother him or you'll either depress him. There is nothing such as telling your child you can do whatever you want. There is pressure on us and on them. The child would wonder, "Why aren't my parents providing me with what I want?" He'll be confused. "Why aren't they getting me [things] like the rest of the children? *It is my right* to get dressed, to be happy, to go out, and to go to school."

The right of a child to have basic material goods, to be happy, to have freedom of movement, and to attend school is something that parents recognize as a right and not a luxury. Yet, in the context of displacement, parents struggle to ensure that their children's rights are met.

Finding #4: Impact on access to services

Families experienced challenges to accessing services such as food, education, and health care in Lebanon due to financial restrictions. Though the UNHCR does subsidize costs for refugee families who are officially registered with UNHCR, the procedures and treatments covered are not universal. Furthermore, in a context of extreme poverty, families often struggle to produce the remaining money needed to cover the costs of treatments (UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, 2016; Médecins Sans Frontières [MSF], 2013). One father described his experience in attempting to access care for his sick two-year-old daughter, who has a heart condition:

[She] has two openings in her heart. Ever since we came here [to Lebanon], our financial status wasn't very good. We went to a doctor, and she referred us to a doctor in Beirut through the UN, and they ask me for \$200 for medical imaging, and I wasn't able to [afford] proper follow-up. One of the openings [in my daughter's heart] is five millimeters and the other is four millimeters.... When she gets tired her veins turn blue.

Without access to funds and within a system that does not provide services free of charge, families are faced with either going further into debt or being unable to attend to the needs of their children.

Policy Points

- **Provide families with cash so they can determine their own financial priorities and how to best address them.** Economic interventions such as cash transfers and food vouchers can help to temporarily support families, curb some of the harmful impacts of poverty, and economically raise families to a place of self-sufficiency. Most importantly, economic support provides families with a sense of hope that they will be able to address the extreme adversity they face in contexts of displacement. Rigorous evidence on the impact of these economic interventions is lacking, but the little research that has been conducted on them points to their effectiveness (Verme et al., 2016). Though these are short-term measures, they may still support long-term solutions, including addressing barriers to access in the labour market as well as barriers to necessary services (e.g., health care, education). Supporting integration into the labour market is also important in post-resettlement contexts when many refugee families continue to face barriers in securing stable employment. Organizations within Lebanon have begun employing these strategies (UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, 2018). Cash assistance through the provision of e-cards represents the majority of assistance provided to Syrians. Between 2017 and 2018, cash assistance cards were provided to more than 170,000 of the most vulnerable families (UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, 2018). Fifty-seven percent of families living in informal settlements report that they receive cash assistance (UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, 2018). However, this strategy has not yet reached all vulnerable families. Other cash assistance programs offer incentives to address other social issues such as school attendance. UNICEF launched a cash assistance program that provides families with \$20 per month per child enrolled in and attending school (UNICEF, 2018). School food programs have been used by WFP and organizations in the region. Providing food to students within schools has improved sustained enrollment of students in schools (WFP, 2016, 2018). These incentivizing initiatives require longitudinal monitoring and evaluation to assess both short- and long-term effectiveness.
- **Establish psychosocial support for parents emphasizing practices that foster positive coping mechanisms within families.** Many Syrian refugee parents are tasked with addressing not only past traumas but also the daily stressors of survival—such as economic precarity—in Lebanon. Psychosocial support includes trauma-focused support as well as building strategies within parents to

address these daily economic stressors and help to support their children in managing the adversity that they experience (Betancourt, 2015; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Murphy, Maignant, Boone, & Smith, 2015). Psychosocial support is important both in areas of displacement and post-resettlement where past traumas often follow families and new or trailing stressors continue to impact family dynamics. We therefore urge organizations working with refugees both in areas of displacement and post-resettlement to either establish and/or expand psychosocial support services. Particularly in areas of displacement, much of the focus in emergency responses is on the clinical health of refugee families (El-Khatib, 2013). However, families spoke of experiencing multiple ongoing stressors—exacerbated by economic precarity—and would therefore benefit from strong psychosocial support that addresses their specific everyday challenges beyond trauma.

- **Conduct further research to examine the long-term effects of economic precarity on refugee families.** Research in the field of program evaluation can help identify specific program models which can better address economic precarity amongst refugee families.

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