

Struggling to survive: Slavery and exploitation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon



The Freedom Fund plays a critical role to identify and invest in the most effective front line efforts to end slavery and human trafficking, bringing together a wide range of partners committed to this cause. Commissioned by the Freedom Fund, this report examines the manifestations of slavery and human trafficking among Syrian refugees in Lebanon. It draws on interviews with Syrian refugees in Lebanon, representatives from Lebanese and international NGOs, Syrian organisations, UN bodies and Lebanese government officials. The study, which was conducted during January and February 2016, also reviews other recent research and vulnerability assessments.

“ [Slavery] is happening everywhere... ”

Lebanese municipality official

“ I know a 12 year old girl who has packed her toys in a bag because she has to work. She doesn't want people in the camp to see her play with her toys and think she is young and unfit to work. ”

Lebanese municipality official

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Acknowledgement

We are grateful and humbled by the time and willingness that women, men and children showed in accepting to share their experience with us. We would also like to thank individuals and organisations working on the Syrian refugees crisis for taking time from their busy schedules to share their knowledge and analysis.

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Executive Summary

Since it began in 2011, the conflict in Syria has devastated the lives of millions of men, women and children. Fearing violence and persecution, families have fled their homes to seek safety in other countries in the region and around the globe. Many crossed the border into neighbouring Lebanon. Few would have expected to find themselves forced into slavery.

While there are a large number of organisations in Lebanon providing services and support to Syrian refugees, including Palestinian Syrians, efforts to curb the growing incidence of slavery and human trafficking are often uncoordinated, limited in their focus and do not always target those most at risk.

This report sets out a pathway to deliver tangible and lasting change. It examines the different ways in which slavery is occurring among Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the multiple factors that combine to force people into situations of slavery. Addressing these risk factors will require the commitment of a broad range of stakeholders, including the Lebanese government, international governments, international organisations, NGOs and donors.

Lebanon, which borders Syria to the west, has been at the front line in responding to the humanitarian

crisis that has unfolded over the past five years. Given the extensive social, economic and historical ties between the countries, the Lebanese government initially operated an 'open door' policy for those fleeing the conflict.

Today, one in five people in Lebanon is a refugee from Syria. With more than 1.2 million refugees living within its borders, no other country in the world hosts more refugees on a per capita basis. Such an influx has, however, placed significant stress on the country.

As a consequence, the Lebanese government has taken steps to effectively close its borders and, in May 2015, instructed the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to stop registering new refugees from Syria. It has established a sponsorship system to limit the numbers arriving from Syria and has imposed stringent residency renewal regulations. This has left Syrian refugees open to detention and deportation for entering, working and staying in Lebanon without the correct paperwork.

These policies have simply exacerbated an already dire humanitarian crisis for Syrian refugees, many



The Beyond Association safety zone in Zahle. Image © The Freedom Fund.

of whom live in abject poverty. With no opportunity to work legally, and with children unable to go to school, refugees are forced into desperate situations to simply survive.

Syrian refugees often find themselves working in hard, dangerous or exploitative jobs for little or no money. However, with the ever-present risk of detection and deportation, families are increasingly sending their children out to work, as they can pass more freely through the security check points operated by Lebanese authorities.

Our study found that slavery of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is a rapidly growing concern, which manifests in the following ways:

- **Child labour** has increased significantly in Lebanon since the start of the conflict in Syria. One leading NGO estimated that between 60 and 70 percent of Syrian refugee children are working, with child labour rates even higher in the Bekaa Valley. There is strong demand among Lebanese employers for child workers and many are pressed into the worst forms of child labour.
- Syrian refugee girls are increasingly forced into **early marriages**, especially in Bekaa Valley, Akkar (north Lebanon). While the family's decision is commonly made to secure the girl's economic future, there is a genuine risk that entering a marriage at such a vulnerable age could result in slavery.
- Evidence strongly suggests that **'survival sex' and sexual exploitation** is a growing issue for Syrian and Palestinian Syrian female refugees. Women can be forced or coerced into prostitution or providing 'sexual favours' to order to provide food and shelter for their families.
- **Forced labour** is increasingly common as Syrian refugees become more desperate, so much so that it may even constitute the 'new norm'. With surging prices for food and rent, coupled with the heavy costs associated with residency renewals, refugee families can quickly fall into debt. This leaves them even more vulnerable to exploitation.

Despite highly sensational media coverage, we did not find any evidence of organ trafficking. Further, despite several high profile arrests by Lebanese authorities, our study did not find evidence of the facilitation of Syrian refugees across the border into Lebanon for the purpose of exploitation.

Slavery and human trafficking should never be condoned or accepted as 'the norm'. However, unless we act decisively, this is the grave risk facing Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Without significant and determined intervention, the situation will only worsen.

This report provides a set of targeted and integrated recommendations to counter slavery and human trafficking of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

The starting point is to ensure that Syrians fleeing conflict and persecution are properly recognised in Lebanon as refugees, that they can legally work and their children can go to school. It is also vital that tackling slavery and human trafficking is a shared priority among every organisation with a responsibility to assist Syrian refugees in the country.

There is a paucity of data currently being collected to document slavery and trafficking of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. It is imperative that we improve data collection systems so that reliable information is available to guide the development of effective interventions.

By taking concerted steps to address the factors that contribute to slavery and human trafficking, Lebanon will be better placed to manage the prolonged humanitarian crisis. It will also develop institutions, laws and policies that are more closely aligned with international human rights standards. This will deliver benefits for everyone within its borders and make it an example to other countries responding to the current refugee crisis.

Recommendations

To the Lebanese government

1.

Ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, and develop an asylum system compatible with international law. As an interim step, introduce and implement a two-year temporary protection scheme for all Syrian refugees, including Palestinian Syrian refugees, to be co-managed by UNHCR and UNWRA, with financial support from the international community. The scheme should allow Syrian refugees to work and their children to access primary education, and allow UNHCR and UNWRA to restart registering refugees.

2.

Support the urgent adoption by the Lebanese Parliament of the draft Bill presented to it by the Lebanese National Women's Commission, which introduces a requirement for a civil judge to approve a marriage of a minor in addition to a religious tribunal.

3.

Improve the anti-trafficking legislation by:

- a. Amending the Penal Code so that victims of trafficking cannot be prosecuted for engagement in sex work.
- b. Amending Law 164 so that identified victims of trafficking are not referred to General Security for breaches of immigration law, are protected from prosecution for offences associated with being trafficked, and that the burden of proof is lifted from the victim of trafficking.
- c. Taking a human rights-based approach to go beyond identifying and prosecuting the perpetrators and instigate measures to address the protection needs of victims or individuals at risk of being trafficked.

4.

Make the strongest possible case against a downgrading to Tier 3 in the forthcoming 2016 US State Department Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP Report) by, in advance of the report, preparing a robust action plan with timetable for implementation in the next 12 months demonstrating progress against the recommendations set out above, as well as the recommendations set out in the 2015 TIP Report.

To the Lebanese government, international governments, international organisations and donors

5.

Include tackling slavery and all its manifestations as a strategic objective in the 2017-2020 Lebanon Crisis Response Plan and mainstream awareness and response to forced labour into their programming.

To international donors

6.

Support the establishment and running of a Slavery Data Monitoring Centre. The Centre should:

- a. Continuously collate evidence from Lebanese and international NGOs, international organisations and the media on slavery and trafficking cases, in particular child labour, child marriage, sexual slavery and forced labour.
- b. Work with those organisations that already collate vulnerability assessment data, including but not restricted to UNHCR, World Food Programme, UNICEF and UNWRA, to include indicators of slavery and trafficking in these assessments so that data on slavery and trafficking among refugee populations is collected nationwide and on a systematic basis.
- c. Collate information about sectors and businesses relying on children in the worst forms of child labour and (adult) forced labour, with the purpose of collating a publicly-available list for international donors active in funding in Lebanon.

Syrian refugees in Lebanon: the growing risk of slavery and trafficking

In 2011, Syria “burst into speech – not in one voice, but in millions.”¹ Five years on, Syria’s Arab Spring has mutated into a murderous civil war marked by attacks by President Assad against civilian communities, interventions by foreign powers and the rise of ISIS.

In its wake, half the Syrian population – 11 million people – has been killed or forced to flee their homes. According to UN estimates, 6.6 million people are still internally displaced within Syria and 4.8 million have left the country.² Syrian people now constitute the largest refugee population in the world.

Since the start of the conflict, at least 1.2 million women, men and children from Syria, including Palestinian Syrians – refugees from Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories – have sought protection across the border in Lebanon.³ The vast majority are now living in abject poverty, in precarious accommodation and scraping by with the barest of means.⁴

Out of this humanitarian crisis, shocking stories of slavery and exploitation have emerged.⁵

Refugees are entitled to seek protection, including the right to work, the right to primary education and access to justice, and the provision of travel documentation, as set out in the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol.⁶ Under the Convention, host states must not expel refugees to places where their lives or freedom are at risk.

However, Lebanon is not a signatory to the Convention and does not offer protection status to Syrians or any guarantees of non-expulsion. And while initially maintaining an ‘open door’ policy towards those fleeing the conflict, Lebanese authorities have from mid-2013 sought to close their land border, first to Palestinian Syrians and then to all Syrians.

With the exception of a small number of people who hold a valid work permit, Syrian refugees in Lebanon are largely prevented from legally working to support themselves. Their lack of legal status also

means they are unable to access to even life-saving healthcare, while hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugee children are denied access to education. Syrian refugees can also be prosecuted, detained and deported for entering and staying in Lebanon without the correct paperwork.⁷

Syrian refugees in Lebanon find themselves in an increasingly desperate situation, struggling to survive and vulnerable to myriad forms of exploitation, including slavery and trafficking.

The U.S. State Department’s Trafficking in Persons Report has placed Lebanon on its Tier 2 Watchlist for the fourth consecutive year. In 2015, despite some measures of progress – including establishing an anti-trafficking bureau within the Internal Security Forces and a written plan of action – the Lebanese government was assessed as failing to make significant improvement.⁸

In 2016, the Department of State must either upgrade Lebanon to Tier 2 or downgrade it to Tier 3. A downgrade may mean Lebanon is subject to restrictions on bilateral assistance and trade sanctions. It may also mean that Lebanon could face U.S. opposition to assistance from international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. This could have potentially calamitous consequences for the people of Lebanon, including Syrian refugees.⁹ This report includes recommendations to support the Lebanese government avoid such a downgrade.

Although international donor pledges to Lebanon to support Syrian refugees have been significant, money has been slow to follow commitments and humanitarian responses insufficient.¹⁰ Little thought has been given thus far by donors to identifying and tackling slavery and trafficking. The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2015-2016, through which the Lebanese government and the UN coordinate their humanitarian responses to the Syria crisis, barely mentions these human rights violations.¹¹

With limited resettlement options and fear of persecution preventing a return home, it is likely that most Syrian refugees will remain in Lebanon for the foreseeable future. Denied legal status and with the humanitarian situation continuing to worsen, their situation is likely to become ever more desperate and place them at greater risk of trafficking and slavery.¹²

Human trafficking is defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. The consent of the victim to the intended exploitation is irrelevant.¹³

Someone is in **slavery** if s/he is forced to work through mental or physical threat; owned or controlled by an 'employer', usually through mental or physical abuse or the threat of abuse; dehumanised, treated as a commodity or bought and sold as 'property'; physically constrained or has restrictions placed on his/her freedom of movement. Slavery may include forced/bonded labour, child slavery, early and forced marriage, forced labour and trafficking.¹⁴

Someone is a **refugee** if s/he is outside his or her country of origin and owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, and who is unable to avail her/himself of protection of that country.¹⁵ Although Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the term 'refugee' is used by all international organisations in relation to Syrians and Palestinian Syrians in Lebanon.

According to UNHCR, **some victims or potential victims of trafficking may fall within the definition of a refugee** and may therefore be entitled to international refugee protection.¹⁶

Child labour among Syrian refugees

Child labour has increased significantly in Lebanon since the start of the conflict in Syria. According to those we interviewed, there is high demand among Lebanese employers for Syrian and Palestinian children, as they are far cheaper to employ than adults and also more compliant.

One leading NGO estimated that between 60 and 70 percent of Syrian refugee children are working, with child labour rates even higher in the Bekaa Valley, where they pick beans, figs and potatoes in terrible conditions.

In urban areas, Syrian refugee children commonly work on the streets, either begging, selling flowers or tissues, shining shoes or cleaning car windscreens. They also work in markets, factories, auto repair shops, aluminum factories, grocery and coffee shops, in construction and running deliveries. Young girls often peel garlic for restaurants (earning US\$1 per day) or clean apartments as occasional domestic workers.

Some people alleged that Syrian refugee children are being forced to work in the sex industry. However, as sexual exploitation of children is generally well hidden, it is difficult to collect reliable information to verify these claims.

In the vast majority of cases, the decision by Syrian refugee families to send their children to work is a result of the desperate situation in which they find themselves. It is driven by the simple necessity to survive, rather than to exploit children. Very often, refugee children will work alongside other family members, contributing their wages to support the household.

Child labour is defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines the **worst forms of child labour**¹⁷ as all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom, forced or compulsory labour, and the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution. A 2012 Government of Lebanon Decree identified the worst forms of child labour in the country as employment in auto repair shops, carpentry, welding and filling cylinders with gas, and street labour.¹⁸

“Their conditions are very bad ... 100 percent of children in the camps have to work in agriculture, picking potatoes or whatever the vegetable for that season is.”

Syrian male refugee

“It takes all day and all night to do 3 to 4kgs [of garlic]. This is a type of worst form of child labour, because the girl is bent over, her hands in water ... It’s winter time so it’s cold ... They do this every day throughout the garlic season.”

CEO of Lebanese NGO active in supporting Syrian refugees in Bekaa Valley.

“Someone seeking labourers might go to the ‘mayor’ (shawish) and ask for labourers, who then selects who he will send to work from the camp he is running. By practice, each tent should give one labourer ... The shawish/ mayor can take anyone from eight years and up.”

CEO, Lebanese NGO working in Bekaa Valley

“In one particular example in Jounieh, there is a big Syrian family of around 30 members. The oldest of the male family member, makes the children work on the streets to beg or sell roses. Every two hours a man on a scooter comes to take the money. This is a classic example of how kids are organised to work on the streets.”

Director, NGO working with Syrian children

However, our study also identified cases of exploitation and coercion involving children. Across informal tented settlements, the individual who coordinates the camp – known as the ‘shawish’ – will line up work for children, often in the fields of the farmer hosting the camp. It is almost impossible for parents to refuse this request. According to an ILO interviewee, the shawish will then receive the child’s wages from the employer before returning a portion to the child.

Shawish may also ‘hire out’ children living in their camp to nearby farmers, restaurants, auto repair shops or other employers. In this sense, the shawish operates as a ‘gangmaster’ profiting from the supply of child labour. Although commonly associated with rural areas, shawish – and sometimes family members – have been known to force children into child labour in towns and cities.

A number of Lebanese and international NGOs are working to address child labour among Syrian refugees. Their goal is to create incentives for employers that prioritise the employment of adults over children, as well as to raise the minimum age at which children can work.

Legislative efforts by the Lebanese government have resulted in a national action plan to eliminate the worst forms of child labour, including among Syrian refugees, by 2016. However, the plan has failed to address the demand for child labour and provides no penalties for employers who hire children.¹⁹

Worst forms of child labour

In 2012, the ILO estimated that 85 percent of working children in Lebanon – mainly, but not all, Syrian refugee children – were employed in the ‘worst forms of child labour’.²⁰ This included working in dangerous environments without protective gear, being overworked, and being exposed to the sun from three years old and above.²¹ The ILO also reported that children were employed in places with inadequate infrastructure or unsafe machinery, as well as being exposed to inflammable and explosive materials.²² Children working in the agriculture sector were commonly exposed to serious health risks, especially from the use of pesticides and fertilisers.²³



Child marriage among Syrian refugees

Syrian refugee girls are increasingly entering into early marriages, especially in Bekaa Valley, Akkar (north Lebanon) and among Palestinian Syrians.²⁴

While reliable data is not available to determine the number of child marriages, national and international organisations working in Lebanon confirmed to us the growing trend. Increases in early marriages are known to be a major risk in emergency humanitarian situations.²⁵

Child marriages in Lebanon are not usually brokered for the purpose of exploitation or for commercial profit, as has been alleged to occur among Syrian refugees in Jordan.²⁶

More usually, the decision is made by refugee families to protect their teenage daughters from sexual harassment and abuse, to provide for her future economic security and to reduce the 'economic burden' on the family. Interviewees also emphasised that early marriage among Syrian and Palestinian Syrian girls has traditionally occurred in rural parts of Syria for the same reasons.

The evidence we collected found that child marriage among Syrian refugees is a survival strategy. It is also a decision based on patriarchal and conservative gender norms.

Nevertheless, young girls entering a marriage face a number of risks. Slavery can be an outcome of child marriage, even when it is not the initial intent.

Child marriage is for life. Girls may not have given informed and full consent to the marriage and may not be able to leave the marriage. They may also not be able to control what happens within the marriage, including in relation to sexual intercourse or domestic work. Further, girls who marry early also face a greater risk of domestic violence.²⁷

A number of Lebanese and international NGOs are seeking to tackle child marriage through a broad range of interventions. They are engaging in

“Child marriage is done as a coping strategy. But not only for financial security; also because they perceive the threat of their daughter getting raped if single. The threat comes from living in an environment of abandoned buildings and in tented settlements.”

Beirut-based journalist

dialogue with religious leaders; educating families using peer education approaches, promoting positive community-based role models, encouraging experimental learning activities; and raising awareness of the potentially fatal health impacts of marrying girls early.²⁸

Others are more actively campaigning on the streets and lobbying parliamentarians to encourage Lebanon to sign the international conventions which outlaw child marriage. These include the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages.

They are also trying to persuade parliamentarians to lift Lebanon's reservations to Article 16 of the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which protects women's and girls' choice in marriage.

Slavery in marriage

Many marriages involving children will not amount to slavery, especially those between couples aged 16 to 18 years. However, child marriage can obscure what are actually cases of slavery or slavery-like practices.

Child marriage can be referred to as slavery if the following three elements are present:²⁹

- The child has not genuinely given their free and informed consent to enter the marriage;
- The child is subjected to control and a sense of “ownership” in the marriage itself, particularly through abuse and threats, and is exploited by

Below: A Syrian girl waves from the balcony of an unfinished apartment block in northern Lebanon. Most of the Syrian refugees are living in makeshift shelters and tents, but some families are renting apartments like this if they can afford to. Conditions are still basic though, as the buildings are unfinished and unfurnished. Many apartments are shared by two or three families. Image © DFID



being forced to undertake domestic chores within the marital home or labour outside it, and/or engage in non-consensual sexual relations;

- The child cannot realistically leave or end the marriage, potentially leading to a lifetime of slavery.

One Lebanese NGO reported it was aware of two cases of child marriage that had been an entry point to the sex industry. Both marriages were arranged because the family needed money to pay rent and enrol children in school. However, the men who married the young girls paid for neither. Instead, they took the girls to a compound where they joined more than 20 women working in the sex industry.

Given the growing number of early marriages, it is vital that Syrian refugee families are aware of the potential serious risks to child brides.

Marriage in Lebanon is carried out under the confessional system; civil marriage is not available under the law. The age at which marriage can be conducted varies according to decisions made by 15 different religious courts. Generally speaking, children can marry from as young as 14 years. However, we were told that exceptions can be made to allow marriage at an even younger age.

Sexual exploitation of Syrian refugee women

Sexual exploitation is specifically addressed as a form of trafficking under the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons.³⁰ Sexual exploitation may include 'prostitution' and/or forced marriage.

"There is a pimp who is a powerful man with political connections ... who will provide Syrian refugees with a place to stay in. If they can't pay up, he will suggest sexual slavery or to sell drugs ... Houses there used to cost around US\$200 max. This pimp could charge around US\$700 for rent."

Director, Beirut-based NGO working with Syrian refugees

"I know a Syrian man around 35 years old that pimp around five women for example, that are usually 19-23 years old. You can call him, he then will send you a driver that will pick the customer up and take him to the house where the girl is."

Syrian male refugee

Refugee women and girls in all parts of the world face a heightened risk of gender-based and sexual violence during emergency humanitarian situations, both at the time they flee their homes and after they have settled into their new living environment.

The situation facing Syrian and Palestinian Syrian refugee women in Lebanon is no different. We heard from many different sources that their precarious situation makes them vulnerable to different forms of sexual exploitation.

One interviewee told us that some Syrian women are being trafficked into the sex industry in Beirut, Tripoli, Daher el Ein and Bekaa by Syrian men. However, in 2015, the Lebanese Internal Security Force only identified 19 alleged female victims of sex trafficking, down from the 40 to 50 identified cases in 2012 and 2013.

Without reliable data, it is difficult to determine the full extent to which Syrian refugee women are being sexually trafficked or held in sexual slavery. However, our study collected evidence which strongly suggests that sexual exploitation, including through the use of force and coercion, is a growing issue for Syrian and Palestinian Syrian refugees in Lebanon. We heard that Syrian and Lebanese men were playing the role of pimps.

Representatives from international organisations and international NGOs told us that the dire financial circumstances facing Syrian refugee women led some to engage in 'survival sex' to earn money for themselves and their families. Depending on their working arrangements, these women can earn between anywhere between US\$13 - US\$450 per client.

However, we know little about the level of coercion that may be imposed on Syrian refugee women to engage in survival sex, whether they are able to negotiate the terms and conditions under which they might agree to sell sex, or whether they are likely to end up in an increasingly exploitative situation.

We also heard that Syrian refugee women may be coerced into providing 'sexual favours' in return for rent, food or employment. In these cases, the perpetrator is commonly the woman's landlord or shawish, who might broker a 'deal' or himself be the recipient.³³ Especially disturbingly, such 'deals' may involve the coercion and exploitation of children.

In recent years, the Lebanese government has begun to make progress in tackling cases of sex trafficking, some of which has been achieved in partnership with NGOs.



Left: Informal tented settlement, Zahle. Image © The Freedom Fund

An anti-trafficking law was adopted in 2011, and the IOM and Lebanese NGOs have delivered training to judicial officials and to Internal Security Force and General Security officials.³⁴ Public awareness campaigns have also been run, including distributing information booklets at Beirut airport.

However, more needs to be done to support and inform Syrian and Palestinian Syrian refugees. Despite a Memorandum of Understanding between IOM and UNHCR on identifying and protecting victims of trafficking, almost no anti-trafficking activities have been specifically developed for the refugee population in Lebanon.

Further, while there are a number of interventions targeting sexual and gender-based violence among Syrian refugees, we did not find any interventions specifically designed to counter exploitation in the sex industry. More needs to be done to address this growing problem.

Inside Lebanon's 'super nightclubs'

Lebanon's 'high end' sex industry, which includes around 130 'super night clubs', has long been a destination for migrant women from Eastern Europe, Russia and Ukraine who arrive in the country on an 'artist visa'. Many migrant workers are severely exploited, including being deceived about the nature of the job and having their passports confiscated by the club owner on arrival.³⁵ Some NGOs suspect that an increasing number of Syrian refugee women are joining the industry, helping to fill the gap left by a reduction in the number of 'artist visas' being issued for Eastern European, Russian and Ukrainian women. However, no reliable evidence has so far been collected to confirm that this is the case.

"It's not that they are always standing on the streets. For example, if she comes to work at someone's house to even get the job she may have to do sexual favours and then to keep the job she may have to get her 13 year old child involved." "

Lebanese municipality official

Forced labour and other forms of slavery and trafficking

Forced labour refers to situations in which persons are coerced to work through the use of violence or intimidation, physical restrictions on movement or by more subtle means such as accumulated debt, confiscation of identity papers or threats of denunciation to immigration authorities. Forced labour, contemporary forms of slavery, debt bondage and human trafficking are closely related terms though not identical in a legal sense. Most situations of slavery or human trafficking are, however, covered by the ILO's definition of forced labour.³⁶

No systematic data has been collected on the extent of forced labour among adult Syrian and Palestinian Syrian refugees in Lebanon.³⁷ However, our findings indicate that it is becoming increasingly common as refugees become more desperate. According to two interviewees, **forced labour is now so widespread as to constitute 'the norm'.**

Forced labour commonly takes the form of Syrian refugees being required to work - often for little or no money - as a condition of their rent. We heard that refugees living in tented settlements are often required to work in the surrounding fields owned by the landlord. As with child labour, the shawish takes a large proportion of their pay in lieu of rent. In other words, working in the fields is a condition of living on that land and the refugee has no choice but to participate.

While this type of forced labour is commonly associated with refugees living in tented settlements, respondents told us that landlords of apartment buildings, garages and warehouses in towns and cities as well as rural areas, are also implicated. It means that in any places where Syrians live, landlords can require Syrian refugees to work, for little or no pay, in return for staying in the building.

In addition, we heard that shawish operate as 'gangmasters' in towns and cities, supplying Syrian refugees to meet the demands of local employers. A number of people were keen to note that shawish are not always 'bad people' and can themselves be subject to forced labour by the landlord.

Interviewees also said that forced labour can occur within sponsorship arrangements, where Syrian refugees are 'tied' to an employer by means of a work permit. Several refugees interviewed by Human Rights Watch said their sponsors had threatened to cancel their sponsorship if they refused to undertake certain tasks.³⁸ This leaves refugees highly vulnerable to exploitation by their employers, who may threaten to report them to the authorities at any time for not having legal status. Furthermore, refugees and aid workers said that employers can get away with paying lower wages, harassing employees in the workplace, or forcing employees to work in unsafe conditions because they lack legal redress.³⁹

Despite their extreme vulnerability, we did not find any interventions which aim to end situations of forced labour among Syrian refugees, beyond some general calls within Lebanon to allow refugees to work legally in the country. We also did not find evidence of strategies to engage employers on the issue or to work with Syrian refugees to mitigate the risks they face.

“The shawish and the landlord will ask that the whole family work. The child gets paid US\$3.33, woman US\$5, man US\$12-15.”

Syrian refugee woman, Bekaa Valley



Image © Tabitha Ross

Migrant domestic workers

Forced labour has most commonly been reported in Lebanon in relation to migrant domestic workers from South and South East Asian, and increasingly African, countries. These women have been held in private households with their movements severely restricted. Many are often abused.⁴⁰ We did not hear any evidence that Syrian or Palestinians refugees were employed as live-in domestic works and kept in situations of domestic servitude. Interviewees told us that Syrian women are not replacing women from Africa and Asia in private households. This is because of the difficulties of sponsorship and because the long history between Syria and Lebanon meant that Lebanese families did not want Syrian women working in their homes.

Organ harvesting

In 2013, the German tabloid, Der Spiegel, published a sensational news story alleging that illegal organ harvesting involving vulnerable Syrian refugees was rife in Lebanon.⁴¹ Our research has found no evidence to substantiate these claims or that organ trafficking

is occurring in any significant way in Lebanon. Some interviewees referred to a small number of cases where Syrian refugees had sold their organs in return for money. However, they believed that no coercion was involved and felt it was a minor issue in comparison to others, such as early marriage and child labour.

Human trafficking

In February 2016, the Lebanese Army arrested two members of what they called a ‘human trafficking network’ in the al-Swairi area of the Eastern Bekaa. The alleged crimes included transporting Syrians across the border into Lebanon and forging documents.⁴² No further evidence was provided of how these people were being ‘trafficked’ rather than ‘smuggled’. In recent months, Lebanese authorities also reported arrests under anti-trafficking legislation of individuals selling fake documents for Europe through a fake travel agency. In addition, a van driver was arrested for ‘smuggling’ 13 Syrian adults and children in east Lebanon.⁴³

Factors contributing to slavery and trafficking of Syrian refugees

Despite growing acknowledgement of the problem of slavery and trafficking of Syrian and Palestinian Syrian refugees in Lebanon, insufficient effort is being directed towards addressing its causes. While there is a large number of UN bodies, international organisations and NGOs who are directly and indirectly tackling slavery and trafficking among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, these efforts are often uncoordinated and do not always target those most at risk.

Foreign donor funds are being channelled through the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, which brings together 95 organisations under the coordination of UNHCR and Ministry of Social Affairs. This money is directed at emergency humanitarian responses and does not include efforts to tackle slavery and trafficking. The funding requirement projected as of December 2015 is at US\$2.48 billion. In the previous year, the funding requirement as of July 2015 was at US\$1.87 billion dollars; however, only 53% had been funded by the end of 2015, leaving a significant shortfall that hampers humanitarian efforts.

The second Plan (2015-2016) is currently being implemented, and will support the transition to a longer-term strategic framework for 2017-2020. Interventions are set according to agreed priorities, targets and geographical focus, with a focus on food security, shelter, sexual and gender-based violence and protection. However, the lack of a strategic focus to combat slavery and trafficking only compounds the difficulty in addressing the risk factors that place Syrian refugees in situations of extreme vulnerability.⁴⁴

Our study found the key risk factors contributing factors to slavery and trafficking among Syrian refugees include:

- Lack of legal protection status as refugees
- Lack of right to work
- Sponsorship arrangements for refugees
- Harassment by Lebanese security forces
- Insecure and substandard housing
- Cuts in food aid and cash transfer programs
- Personal status laws regarding child marriage
- Lack of implementation of anti-trafficking legislation

Identifying risk

Vulnerability assessments are commonly utilised by humanitarian organisations to planning purposes, programme design and to target and channel calls for international donor money. While not specifically aimed at identifying incidences of or risk of slavery and trafficking among refugees, these assessments do, to some extent, offer indicators of risks.

In Lebanon, UNHCR conducts a vulnerability assessment among Syrian refugees jointly with World Food Programme and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).⁴⁵ The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNWRA) conducts its own of assessment of Palestinian Syrians in Lebanon.⁴⁶ Assessments cover issues such as household expenditure, whether a household has stable and safe housing, access to clean water and healthcare, and whether it faces any protection risks, especially in relation to children and women.

Addressing these risk factors should be the focus of coordinated and sustained efforts by all organisations contributing to the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan.

1. Lack of legal protection status as refugees

Lebanese authorities have imposed a series of deliberately – and highly – restrictive residency requirements on refugees which have been identified by leading international human rights and refugee organisations – including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Norwegian Refugee Council – as a key factor contributing to human rights violations. All Syrians, including Palestinian Syrians, who have not managed to successfully meet these requirements are considered by the Lebanese authorities to be in the country illegally. Refugees without valid paperwork are at constant risk of arrest, detention and potential mistreatment in detention. It also means that Syrian and

Palestinian refugees are prevented from accessing vital social services, including health care and education for their children. With deliberate intent, the Lebanese authorities refer to Syrians as 'displaced persons' rather than 'refugees', with the legal implication that they can be repatriated to Syria at any time.

After maintaining a relatively 'open door' since 2011, the Lebanese government imposed restrictions on the entry of Palestinian refugees from Syria in August 2013, including the need for a valid pre-approved visa, which required an application made by a sponsor in Lebanon. In May 2014, the Lebanese government effectively closed the border to all Palestinian refugees from Syria, with a small number of exceptions. According to Amnesty International, there is evidence of a policy to deny Palestinian refugees from Syria entry altogether, regardless of whether they meet the new conditions of entry.⁴⁷

In January 2015, new entry and residency criteria for established for all Syrian nationals applying for and renewing residence permits. Syrians are required to pay an annual renewal fee of US\$200 per person, present a valid ID and an entry slip obtained at the border, submit a housing pledge confirming their place of residence, and provide two photographs stamped by a notary. According to UNHCR, the total cost for a family of five, including notary fees, will amount to about US\$1,375 dollars per year.⁴⁸ Refugees living in informal tented settlements are required to provide a residency statement from the local municipality. These restrictions make it almost impossible for the vast majority of refugees to successfully apply for residency.

These restrictions were followed by an announcement in May 2015 that UNHCR stop registering new refugees from Syria. Registration is a process whereby UNHCR is able to provide protection and assistance to refugees, and provides the paperwork by which refugees can access various services and assistance, including healthcare, education and legal counseling.⁴⁹

2. Lack of right to work

Syrian refugees in Lebanon are denied the right to legally work and, consequently, support themselves. This leaves them vulnerable to exploitative jobs which do not require any formal paperwork, including forced labour and sexual exploitation. Refugees who have previously registered with UNHCR (as a refugee) have been specifically required by the Lebanese authorities to provide a signed, notarised pledge to not work in Lebanon. Those who have not registered with UNHCR (as a refugee) are required to find a Lebanese sponsor in order to legally remain in the country. The Norwegian Refugee Council describes this as a 'Catch 22' situation; refugees from Syria require access to work to afford the residence permits to obtain legal stay in Lebanon, but with limited legal status they are less likely to access work.

Unemployment among Palestinian refugees from Syria is even higher than among non-Palestinian Syrians. This is compounded by the fact that non-Syrian Palestinians are already subject to discriminatory restrictions on access to the labour market in Lebanon. Palestinians – including Palestinian Syrians with work permits – are denied access to 70 occupations. As a result, the majority of Palestinian Syrians have no possibility to earn an income in Lebanon.⁵⁰ The proportion of unemployment is highest inside camps in the north of the country, where, according to UNWRA, almost three-quarters of families do not have any working member.⁵¹ Female-headed Palestinian Syrian families face particularly grim livelihood conditions; four out of five female-headed families do not have any working member. This has severe impacts, both on the women and on their children, with the likelihood that their children will be required to support their families.

“Exploitation happens in either two ways. Either halfway into the year, the employer might threaten to undo the sponsorship unless the Syrian pays more money... Or when the second year comes along and it is time for the sponsor to renew the papers, he can ask for more money or threaten not to renew the sponsorship.”

Syrian male refugee

3. Sponsorship arrangements for refugees

Syrian refugees who do find a sponsor can still be at risk of slavery and trafficking. This is because they will remain ‘tied’ to their sponsor until they are released or until the end of the sponsorship contract. Sponsors therefore hold significant power over refugees and this can lead to situations of forced labour or sexual slavery. As sponsorship arrangements need to be renewed on an annual basis, refugees continue to be vulnerable beyond the expiry of the initial sponsorship contract. They are also legally required to return to Syria in order to re-apply for a new sponsorship, which can place them in even greater risk.

4. Harassment by Lebanese security forces

Raids on refugee settlements, arrests of refugees without legal status, and the establishment of checkpoints by Lebanese security forces have become commonplace since the August 2014 clashes between the Lebanese Army and the extremist group Islamic State (also known as ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra, and the subsequent executions of Lebanese soldiers by armed groups.⁵² Since mid-2014, at least 45 municipalities have imposed curfews on Syrians, severely restricting freedom of movement.⁵³

Numerous interviewees told us that these restrictions directly lead to an increase in child labour, as Syrian men face a greater risk of being stopped and therefore find it difficult to move around to take up employment. Children, however, are able to move around more freely without the risk of being stopped and, out of desperation, families are increasingly likely to require them to work.



“Yesterday one of my relatives went down from Tripoli to Beirut to get a plastic sheet for his parent’s shelter since a big storm is coming. He was wearing pants with pockets and had a beard.⁵⁴ They stopped him at a checkpoint and accused him of being part of ISIS. They hit him and got an electrical rod and electrocuted him four times. They told him that they were going to beat him before the Chief of Command comes.”

Syrian male refugee

Image: An 'informal tented settlement' in Lebanon's Bekaa valley. The mountains in the background form the border with Syria, just a few miles away. Image © DFID



“The shawish will charge around US\$60 - US\$100 per tent, which is six by eight metres and can fit one to two families. Thirty-three percent of tents have two families in one tent. Average children per family is five people. The shawish rents the land from the landlord for around US\$330. He becomes a big businessman.”

CEO of Lebanese NGO delivering services and support to camps in the Bekaa Valley

5. Insecure and sub-standard housing

Concerned about creating another Palestinian refugee situation in Lebanon, the Lebanese government has not allowed UNCHR or its sister agencies to construct refugee camps for Syrian refugees. Some Syrian refugees rent apartments, warehouses or garages with tenuous lease agreements, often with other Syrian families in 17,000 locations across Lebanon.⁵⁵ Over half are living in sub-standard accommodation, squeezed into small spaces with other families.⁵⁶ Newly-arrived Palestinians from Syria often joined existing camps, unable for financial and residency reasons to rent property. The camps are known to suffer serious problems, including poverty, overcrowding, unemployment, poor housing conditions and very limited infrastructure.⁵⁷

This creates a number of challenges. Firstly, delivering food aid and cash transfers is more difficult, forcing refugees to find some form of livelihood strategy. Secondly, refugees have to pay increasingly high rent - some areas have seen rises of up to 400% - resulting from the growth in demand for apartments, as well as rampant profiteering on the part of some Lebanese landlords. Thirdly, those who cannot afford to rent have to live in informal camps tented settlements (in the Bekaa Valley, there are currently anywhere between 1,800 and 2,600 camps).⁵⁸ However, rent is payable on tents and lands and refugees are vulnerable to exploitation by shawish and landlords, as well as raids by Lebanese security forces and harassment by local Lebanese communities.

6. Cuts in food aid and cash transfer programs

Forced cuts in food aid from international organisations to US\$13.50 per person per month mean that poverty among refugees is growing rapidly.⁵⁹ As with rent, the cost of food and services has surged.⁶⁰ To cope with their increasingly dire financial situation, Syrian refugees reduce the size and frequency of their meals, beg, go into debt and search for employment that is often dangerous or exploitative.

A recent assessment found that almost 80% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon had debts of more than US\$200, while 40% had debts of more than US\$600. As refugees go deeper into debt, the risk of slavery and trafficking rapidly escalate.

“Depending on the criteria, registered families with UNHCR get around US\$105 from UNHCR for five kids. This help is only given to maximum 40 percent of refugees. Each kid gets a voucher for US\$21. This money isn't even enough for renting a tent in a camp. They still haven't eaten, or secured any other needs. So child labour is high in demand.”

Lebanese NGO based in Bekaa

7. Personal status laws regarding child marriage

There is no civil marriage in Lebanon. Marriage of adults and children is arranged according to 15 different personal status laws which exist for the 18 recognised religions/sects in Lebanon. Fifteen different religious courts consequently establish the age at which minors can marry. The personal status laws variously stipulate ages between 14 and 18, although, with special dispensation from some religious courts, girls as young as nine can be married.⁶¹ Under some personal status laws, child marriage is legal. It is also considered culturally acceptable among certain segments of the population.

Previous attempts to overturn personal status laws and introduce civil marriage have so far been unsuccessful, in large part due to the power of religious leaders who view the laws as an important way of avoiding ceding control to a centralised civil state. In 2014, the Lebanese National Women's Commission presented a draft Bill to Parliament, which is yet to be adopted. Under the proposed law, a civil judge would be required to approve the marriage of a minor, in addition to a religious tribunal.

"It is the victim that has to prove that she is a victim of sexual trafficking, in front of the court and judge. This is unrealistic as it is too costly and is too difficult to speak in front of a judge, and becomes especially harder if she is viewed as a criminal because she doesn't have proper [residency] documentation."

IOM respondent

8. Lack of implementation of anti-trafficking law

In 2011, Lebanon adopted Law 164 Punishment for the Crime of Trafficking in Persons. As noted by NGOs and human rights activists, the legislation is an important first step to address human trafficking, although it does not fully comply with the 2000 UN Palermo Protocol.⁶²

Some of the main concerns include that:

- Protection of victims under the anti-trafficking law is at odds with provisions in the Penal Code, which requires women to be prosecuted for engaging in sex work. Until this provision in the Penal Code is amended, women will be reluctant to come forward to report trafficking. Those who do come forward will have their rights infringed.
- Victims of trafficking who lack residency papers are referred to General Security for prosecution for breach of immigration law.
- Victims of trafficking can be arrested and detained for crimes associated with being trafficked.
- The legal burden in court is on victims to prove through evidence that s/he is a victim of trafficking, rather than on the alleged perpetrator to prove that s/he is not guilty.

Other gaps in implementation of the law include the fact that trafficking cases in Lebanon are generally limited to matters involving sexual exploitation, which overlooks other forms of trafficking such as forced labour. There is also a lack of coordination between agencies and NGOs seeking to tackle the issue.

Conclusion

Five years on from the start of the Syrian conflict, half its population – 11 million people – has been killed or forced to flee their homes. Syrians now make up the largest refugee population in the world, and at least 1.2 million women, men and children have sought protection across their country's western border in Lebanon.⁶³

Human trafficking has been connected to conflicts and wars in all corners of the globe, from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cambodia and Afghanistan to the Balkans and Latin America.⁶⁴ The massive displacement of civilian populations that accompanies conflict is known to drive people into highly exploitative situations.⁶⁵

This has been the experience of Syrian refugees, including Palestinian Syrians, in Lebanon. Our study found that slavery and exploitation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is increasing. We gathered reliable evidence of child labour, child marriage, sexual exploitation and forced labour occurring in different parts of the country, which strip the dignity from already vulnerable men, women and children.

Our study identified eight key factors that are contributing to slavery and trafficking of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Some of these arise out of the emergency humanitarian situation. However, policy decisions by the Lebanese government have also contributed significantly. For example, Syrian refugees, and especially Palestinian Syrians, are at a substantially greater risk of exploitation as a direct result of restrictive residency requirements, as well as the decision of the Lebanese government to not comply with international law in offering protection status to them.

While there is a large number of UN bodies, international organisations and NGOs who are directly and indirectly tackling slavery and trafficking among

Syrian refugees in Lebanon, these efforts are often uncoordinated, limited in their focus and do not always target those most at risk. In addition, while international donor pledges to Lebanon to support Syrian refugees have been significant, money has been slow to follow and this has greatly hindered humanitarian responses.⁶⁶

Based on our findings, this report provides a set of targeted and integrated recommendations to counter slavery and human trafficking of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

The starting point is to ensure that Syrians fleeing conflict and persecution are properly recognised in Lebanon as refugees and are able to access employment and basic services. It is also vital that tackling slavery and human trafficking is a shared priority among every organisation with a responsibility to assist Syrian refugees in the country.

Legislative reform is needed to improve the content and implementation of existing anti-trafficking laws by ensuring that support – rather than punishment – is provided to victims of trafficking. In addition, legislation requiring a civil judge to approve the marriage of a minor, along with a religious tribunal, would help counter the growing incidence of child marriage.

Effective interventions to tackle slavery and human trafficking are based on solid, up-to-date data. It is therefore imperative that we establish a monitoring mechanism to systematically document slavery and human trafficking of Syrian refugees in Lebanon

Slavery and trafficking should never be condoned or accepted as 'the norm'. Unless we act decisively, this is the grave risk facing Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Without significant and determined intervention, their situation will only worsen.

Endnotes

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16. See UNHCR Guidelines on International Protection: The application of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and /or 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees to victims of trafficking and persons at risk of being trafficked; available at: www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?docid=443679fa4
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30. Available at: www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?docid=443679fa4
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 54. One interviewee noted the increased likelihood of men being stopped at checkpoints if they have beards. This is because in ISIS-controlled territories, men are not allowed to shave their beards. Lebanese security forces are alleged to make assumptions about Syrian refugees' political affiliations based on their facial hair.
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