

# **Personal perspectives of protracted displacement: an ethnographic insight into the isolation and coping mechanisms of Syrian women and girls living as urban refugees in northern Jordan**

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*The ongoing conflict in Syria has provoked mass exodus on an unprecedented scale, with over four million Syrian refugees now registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Most of these refugees fled across the borders to Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq and Turkey, where the vast majority of Syrian refugees now live outside of the camps, their priorities and coping mechanisms shifting due to their protracted displacement. The ethnographic study presented here focuses on the experiences and emotions of the women and adolescent girls living in continued and uncertain displacement in the Jordanian border towns of Irbid and Ramtha. Presented within a historical and cultural context, and drawing on the refugees own personal narratives, this paper offers an insight into the perspectives of Syrian women of different ages and social backgrounds as they share some of their thoughts and feelings around their prolonged separation, and different levels of hardship, vulnerability and isolation.*

**Keywords:** refugees, Syria, women and girls

## **Introduction**

*'We left our country in the hope of finding a safe haven in Jordan. We are free from immediate danger here, but not from pain and insecurity. Each Syrian family has a lot to cry for. Those of us who left their home found mostly humiliation' (Amal, September 2014).*

Amal is a 32-year-old Syrian woman who lives in one of Irbid's poorer suburbs. Her psychological pain and insecurity reflects that of many Syrian refugee women living in Jordan. The impact of war and displacement is putting enormous psychological strains on Syrian families living in the country, with '*high levels of stress*' being reported by a large part of the refugee community (Care International in Jordan Amman, 2015). A number of policy changes made in 2014 and 2015 by the Jordanian Government, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have had additionally devastating, financial, consequences for the urban refugee population in Jordan<sup>1</sup>. Eight-six percent of Syrian refugee families in Jordan are thought to be living below the national poverty line, and the cost of housing, food and health services is creating increasing concern (ibid). Continued financial insecurity has led to greater emotional pressure on families, and incidents of gender based violence, in particular early marriages and intimate partner violence have increased. Despite efforts of those working with refugees in the region, extreme levels of isolation of many women and girls affected by the Syrian conflict continue to be a concern throughout the region (International Rescue Committee, 2014). Additional strains are put on refugee families due to fundamental changes in composition as a result of displacement and war, with about a third of refugee households in Jordan headed by women. The social fabric of the families, pre displacement, was embedded in reciprocal gendered

roles and responsibilities. This established social schema offered robust coping mechanisms relying on support networks of extended families and communities, without which the women and girls are rendered further vulnerable and isolated. This research collates a sample of first hand narratives of the women's perspectives on their lives and the radical changes they have lived through. It includes some of the particularly challenging situations they have encountered since the beginning of the crisis, the decision making processes associated with them and some coping mechanisms developed in exile. This paper also highlights specific historical and cultural characteristics of the refugees settling in this particular region of Jordan, which informs much of their behaviour, and identifies some of the evolving culturally specific coping mechanisms. Further, some recommendations as to how these can be strengthened and supported, as the displacement becomes more protracted, are included.

## **Historical and cultural context**

### **The Syrian refugee crisis (2011 - 2015) and its impact on Northern Jordan**

The first anti-government demonstrations took place in March 2011 in the city of Dara'a, in the south of Syria close to the Jordanian border. Eleven children were killed by the Syrian military, and the townsfolk (including the women) took to the streets in protest. The response of the military to quell the uprising was brutal. Many of the men and boys of Dara'a, and those in surrounding towns and villages, were imprisoned, tortured and executed, with many more subsequently killed in battle. By early 2012, the population of the Jordanian border town of Irbid was swelling with refugees from across the border, and in July 2012 the United Nations opened three refugee camps in the area. Two small camps provided refuge to the most vulnerable, while a third (Al Za'atari) grew at an unprecedented rate, housing over 200,000 refugees by April 2013 (UNHCR, 2015). At this time, it was estimated that 6,000 Syrians were fleeing the country every day (Hummer, 2013) and the situation was becoming one of the largest refugee crises in recent history. By July 2015, with the crisis in its fifth year, over four million refugees were living as refugees outside their country, with over half of the 629,000 in Jordan from Dara'a (UNHCR, 2015). One of the later waves of refugees came from the besieged and destroyed city of Homs, a city that became known in the media as '*the capital of the revolution*' (BBC, 7<sup>th</sup> May, 2014). As the refugee camps grew, relief agencies were unable to keep up with the growing demand for shelter and water. Winter came with freezing snow, then summer with unbearable heat. Conditions in the camps were public and cramped, and not suitable to the private living habits of most of the women living there. Many families began to look for ways to leave. Despite government efforts to keep refugees in the camps<sup>2</sup>, the population of Zata'ari has reduced by more than half since April 2013, while the numbers of Syrian refugees living in the Jordanian towns of Irbid, Mafrq and Ramtha continues to grow.

### **Hauran and the impact of shared memory on cross border relations**

Only 30 kilometres of farmland separate Jordan's second largest city, Irbid, from Syria's southern capital, Dara'a. Both are on the Hauran plain, one of the most fertile regions in Syria. Known for its culture of farming and herding, the Hauran Plain is made up of three Syrian provinces: Dara'a, Sweida and Quneitra, and three Jordanian districts: Ramtha, Irbid and Ajloun. Following the creation of a physical border between Syria and Jordan after WW1, trade, marriage and movement between the two populations remained commonplace. When the conflict first began, many Syrians moved to Jordan to stay with relatives, not as refugees, but as visitors. The initial hospitality deteriorated as the numbers of Syrians crossing the border continued to increase, putting pressures on jobs, water and housing. Tensions began to manifest, and it was feared violence might erupt. However, contrary to expectations,

understanding developed between the visitors and their hosts, and when 1,300 Syrian families were interviewed by CARE International in Jordan between January and March 2015, most respondents stated that relationships had improved with their Jordanian neighbours once they learned more about their living conditions, with two out of three families describing the relationships as *'mostly positive'*, the other third as *'neutral'* (CARE, 2015, p.7). Perhaps without the shared historic connection, northern Jordan would not have seen the four years of relative peace that it continues to sustain, despite all the seemingly insurmountable challenges.

### **Impact of the changing composition of Syrian families on women in exile**

The working and farming communities surrounding Dara'a were traditional and composed of large extended families, which provided women with a strong sense of identity and belonging. The women we met during this research process depicted life in Syria as extremely social, structured around the multiple homes of nearby extended family members and characterised by female sociality. Clear delineations of private and public spaces, entwined with particular conceptualisations and delineations of gendered behaviour, were embedded in the practice and coherence of everyday existence. Much has been written on the gendering of space and modesty requirements in Islamic contexts (for example, Abu-Lughod (1986; 1993), Deeb (2006), and Mahmood (2005)); what is relevant here is the radical disruption to established ways of being, living and socialising that the conflict has inflicted on respondents. Initially, in the Jordanian camps, women were stripped of their private, safely segregated spaces and associated social opportunities, furthermore, once out of the camps the social life (and clear delineation of gendered space which it depended upon) was missing for women. Unsurprisingly, this rupture in established social behaviour has resulted in increased isolation, anxiety and loneliness.

The changing composition of Syrian families in Jordan has also limited the physical movement of the women, as without available men to accompany them, many women interviewed stayed home for months at a time, exacerbating their isolation. As a consequence of both reduced physical movement and limited number of safely segregated meeting places, women's access to, and engagement with, wider social spaces and social groups is limited. This has huge ramifications for the development of new ways to deal with anxiety, loneliness and trauma. It further limits and restricts their opportunities to find employment, or to join other activities or projects outside of the home related to income generation, education and/or general wellbeing. Relatedly, the increased physical and social isolation that characterise the current lives of many respondents shapes levels of trust and intimacy with all outsiders, including the researchers of this paper. Our methodological approach sought to take this into account.

### **Methodology**

This paper was born out of a belief that an in depth ethnography of a group of women for whom decisions and policies are being made, often by those who have not had a chance to engage with them directly, will both create a platform for the voices of the women refugees from Syria and form a bridge between them and practitioners and policy makers. We spoke to around 50 women, over a period of a year, in conversations with 17 families, 12 one-to-one interviews, and eight focus groups, totalling over 120 hours of discussions with participants. We developed close relationships with some of the women, meeting them three or four times over the course of the year. We asked these women to form the focus groups. The women were aged between 14 and 66, and from a variety of social backgrounds. Their levels of education ranged from those whose university and secondary education had been brought to a

halt by the conflict, to women who had married at a very young age, prior to completing primary education. All the women self-identified as religious Muslims.

Speech based participation, through focus groups, interviews, conversations and consultations with users is now widely recognised as an indispensable *modus operandi* of participatory practise; or as Cecile Jackson describes it; '*the sine qua non of progressive change*' (Jackson, 2012, p.1000) Our challenge in this research was to be careful not to confuse the notions of '*voice*' and '*speech*' (Parpart & Kabeer, 2010), recognising the importance of gesture, tone and even silence within the interviews, thereby using our ability as ethnographers to '*listen and hear*', while avoiding the trap of '*ventriloquizing*' the aspirations and needs of the women we met (Jackson, 2012). To do this we focussed on three key elements; an understanding of the historical and cultural context, empathy with the subjects, and plenty of time. Women brought their children and time was spent drinking tea and getting to know one another before formally introducing the research questions. Sometimes, icebreakers were used, such as arriving with cakes, as is the custom in family gatherings, singing and playing with the children, or taking photographs together and sharing them. The two researchers and authors of this paper, also shared information around their own lives. Where appropriate, audio recordings and/or video recordings of the interviews were made<sup>3</sup>.

A semi structured interview technique was used, with the objectives for each interview, conversation or focus group clearly defined. The opening initial questions were structured in order to develop a trusting relationship and ascertain the key elements of each woman's initial experience of exile. Each woman was happy to share when, why and how they left Syria and began life in Jordan. Discussing emotions, decisions and coping mechanisms was unstructured, responsive and intuitive, while ensuring that the identified themes were covered. Recognising the importance of the nature of the initial point of contact, and the impact this can have on eventual research findings, a selection process was designed to speak to a variety of women who's lives reflect the majority of refugees still outside the support network of the international donor community. We chose, therefore, not to make contact through the larger international organisations, but to approach Syrian refugees more informally using personal connections. In Irbid these were largely residents or caretakers of buildings known to house refugees. In Ramtha, where there are no large buildings, a small local food and clothing distribution charity was our initial point of contact<sup>4</sup>

The ethnographic approach was characterised by the different perspectives of the two authors of this paper; a Jordanian anthropologist and a British documentary filmmaker. Although the authors recognise that due to differences in experience, education, nationality and class, both were clearly '*outsiders*', the common cultural codes and values shared between northern Jordan and Syria enabled an element of '*insider*' perspective on the part of the Jordanian ethnographer. The British documentary filmmaker, on the other hand, was new to Islamic teachings and other cultural practises of the region, and was able to observe and listen from an unformed and fresh perspective.

## **Findings from the research**

Although the day-to-day coping mechanisms of the participants varied, most respondents described spending some part of each day in tears. There were also common feelings of isolation and sadness among a great many of the women.

The events prior to leaving Syria, the experiences in the refugee camps, the relationships with their Jordanian neighbours and their living conditions were all identified as extremely challenging to manage by all those interviewed. Although the individual narratives in the study are unique, the harrowing nature of each woman's experience, the challenges they continue to face and the impact this is having on their wellbeing is all too common. A small selection of the women's personal narratives and testimonies are presented below.

### **Decisions around leaving Syria and difficult departures**

The decision to leave Syria was usually the result of extremely difficult experiences that many of the women interviewed were still deeply troubled about. Setting out for the unknown was generally only undertaken after an extreme event catalysed a need to protect family members from death, rape, imprisonment and/or torture.

Om Abdullah<sup>5</sup> fled when her husband Hassan's body was delivered to her family home. We met this 25-year-old widow in a small dark apartment in Irbid clutching her nine-month old son in one hand, and a well worn photograph of her husband's brutalised corpse in the other. Her brother took the picture before Hassan was buried in the hope it could be used in a case against the Syrian government. Hassan had been participating in anti government protests in Dara'a when he was arrested. Om Abdullah was unaware of his whereabouts for a month, until the unforgettable day when his body was eventually returned. Throughout the interview she stared at the photograph in disbelief. Fearing her 19-year-old brother would share the same fate, her parents encouraged them to flee to Jordan with her baby and six-year-old sister. A 15-year-old girl, Rahaf, whose brother had recently married, had joined their small family group. The young bride sat quietly, her sadness palpable. When asked about her decision to leave Syria her eyes welled up and no words came. She spoke once during the interview to share her greatest fear, that her husband would take them back to Syria as he had been found working illegally and was hiding from the authorities. She had lost her family in the bombing and had travelled to Jordan with neighbours.

In the same building we found Om Mohammed in tears, drained of all hope as she waited for news of her son who was arrested many months before. Her husband had stayed in Syria to continue searching for him while she left Dara'a with her three daughters aged 8, 17 and 20 and her other two sons. They talked of their friends and family being arrested and killed. They didn't want to leave, but felt they had no other choice.

Yasmin left the city of Homs after her father and his brother defected from the Syrian army. After her uncle was publicly decapitated, his family helped smuggle the six daughters, mother and father out of Homs. Yasmin was in her final year of medical school at the time.

*'When we left the house, I couldn't look back. We tried to keep one another's spirits up as we looked for new places to sleep each night. The biggest problem was finding water. We would return to our University in Homs to drain water from the radiators. It was difficult to think of how much our lives had changed in such a short space of time' (Yasmin, September 2014).*

### **Life in the camps and the decision to leave**

Most of those we met had started their lives as refugees in Al Za'atari camp and left during a period of extreme overcrowding and shortages in 2013, or after the tough winter of 2014. With some of the last remaining money or possessions, they bought their way out of the camp<sup>6</sup> and despite the subsequent difficulties and hardships, did not envisage returning.

### **Sharing public spaces with strangers, including men**

Living communally with strangers is challenging for all refugees adapting to camp life, but particularly so for those for whom public and private life is so distinct, especially women and girls. Om Ibrahim was from Homs. She lived with her sister, her sister's three small children and her 12-year-old stepson Mohammed.

*'It was summer. It was so hot. I had to remain covered. I was suffocating. We needed our own place'*  
(Om Ibrahim, September 2014)

In their two-room home in Irbid, Om Ibrahim and her sister had not been out of the house for four months. Mohammed was their link with the outside world. His father and three older brothers remained in Syria. He was the head of the household and out all day; collecting the food coupons, converting them into cash back in Za'atari in order to pay the rent, and shining shoes to supplement their income. On the rare occasion the women went outside, he would accompany them. They were lonely, with only their small children and one another's company, but were in no doubt they would rather be there with Mohammed looking after them than back in the camps.

Bara'a had less luck. We met her in her sister and husband's Abu Nour's home. They had 13 small children between them. Bara'a had arrived with her six children that morning. She had travelled without her husband who, she explained, wouldn't have passed the checkpoints. She had been smuggled out of Za'atari.

*'All of my children are young. I had no one to support me. I couldn't leave my family alone while I collected water for them. And the toilets were very far from the tent, and so dirty. They told me not to go there alone, but I had no choice. I couldn't live there. I got out of the camp and came here.'* (Bara'a, March 2014)

With no 'buy out' documents, no income, no husband and unable to stay with her sister and her husband, Bara'a reluctantly went back to Al Za'atari before returning to Syria. She is in touch with her sister and says she wishes she had stayed in Jordan.

### **Protecting the honour of unmarried girls**

With the virginity of unmarried girls particularly important for their future marriage prospects, many parents believed their daughters to be safer outside the camp where they could be kept at home away from strangers<sup>7</sup>. Abu Nour explained his reason to agree to the marriage of his daughter Nasreen while they were still living in Al Za'atari.

*'I couldn't bear the risk of seeing my daughter raped in front of my eyes. Especially if I wanted to go back to Syria, I couldn't live with this shame'* (Abu Nour, January 2014).

Nasreen told us of her decision to marry:

*'When we were in Al Za'atari, we were so depressed and unhappy. My family were starving and we lived with 11 people in one tent. A Syrian woman visited us many times. After three visits, she told my mother that there is a groom for your daughter. In the beginning, I refused, but later I thought that this man would save the whole family. He promised to take us out of the camp and give us a lot of money. I married him and he took us all out of the camp to this home where we live now'* (Nasreen, January 2014).

Nasreen left the camp for Saudi Arabia with her cousin, and their new grooms. Both were 14 years old. Nasreen's husband was 32 years old. After four months of marriage, she begged to

be sent home, despite the shame this brought to her family. She does not want to talk of her experience. Nasreen is not pregnant, but unlike her younger siblings, she does not attend the local school and her father is now looking for another groom. So far he has received two offers: the first a disabled man, the second an old widower in need of care. He and his wife are considering their options. Nasreen wants to go to school. The subject of early divorce is in need of further analysis. In addition to Nasreen, two other young girls shared tales of being married and subsequently abandoned by men from Saudi Arabia. All of these girls live with the shame, no longer attending school and rarely leaving home.

### **Life outside of the camps and the decision to find grooms for young daughters**

When we arrived in their small home in Irbid, Om Kuteiba was preparing her 15-year-old daughter Majed for marriage with tales of her own marriage when she was even younger than her daughter. The wedding was imminent and Majed knew very little of her future husband. He was 19 and lived in the same building. He saw her on the stairwell and proposed the union to her family.

*'I am marrying next week, but I feel I'm not in a position of responsibility. I am aware of how to treat my husband, how I am going to be pregnant and raise children, but I am afraid I can't cook'*  
(Majed, January 2014).

Om Kuteiba explained her decision to us, rather apologetically:

*'There are nine people sharing these two rooms, including my 19-year-old son and his 16-year-old wife. Rent just increased to 270 JD's (€350.00) a month. I have to marry Majed so she can be fed by her husband's family.'*  
(Om Kuteiba, January 2014)

In another apartment in the building we met Om Adel. Her son found his 16-year-old wife soon after he got a job in an electronic shop.

*'Her parents told us that if you want to take our daughter as your son's wife we don't mind because we don't have enough money to feed her. We have this tradition in Dara'a. Even my daughters, if a good man proposes to them, I would not mind them marrying at this early age. Girls are a big responsibility. A family with a lot of girls is paralysed. The girls' life is bitter, from the beginning of life to the death'* (Om Adel, January 2014).

No conclusive evidence has been found that Syrian refugees were marrying early at a higher rate in Jordan than in Syria. However, recent reports confirm our findings that although it is not unusual for girls to marry soon after puberty in Syria, the financial pressures of living in Jordan are certainly influencing decisions. The decisions are often made in haste, and with little knowledge of the families to which the girls are moving. This increases the risk, both to the girls' security and isolation within the new home after marriage, and in cases of future abandonment due to the absence of formal registration or traditional mechanisms that would provide some protection to a girl in the event of divorce (IRC, 2014).

### **Solitude and isolation**

In 2013 it was found that nearly half the women and girls living out of camps in Jordan very rarely left their home, which breaks down to over 20% of girls under the age of 16, and nearly 19% of women (UNWOMEN, 2013). On the whole, our research reflected these statistics. Many of the respondents, especially in households headed by men, had no support networks outside of the home, with many families describing how they remained on cautious and formal terms with neighbours down the hall. Om Wissam lived with her 11 children in a two-room apartment in Irbid. Her explanation reflects the sentiments of many of the women interviewed.

*'We don't gather with any one in this building, not even the Syrian people. We don't want trouble. It is more comfortable to be alone, we say 'with no eyes to see and no hearts to be sad'. In Dara'a the whole village was one family, but here I live alone in fear'*  
(Om Wissam, January 2014).

Om Wissam's 16-year-old daughter-in-law Aba also lives with the family. The couple initially moved to a cheap room in a village outside of Irbid, but the isolation she felt there was unbearable, so they recently returned to her husband's cramped home in Irbid. She referred to her home as a prison, as did many of the women we spoke to.

*'I was struggling. It was like I was in prison there. I did not know anybody and I couldn't go outside. I told my husband I want to live with your mother because I am worried if I get killed here no one will know. Now, here in Irbid I'm living the worst days of my life. I'm in agony. If I knew it would guarantee my death, I would commit suicide by throwing myself off this balcony'* (Aba, January 2014).

Many young girls told of their contented and sociable lives before exile, comparing this to their new enforced isolation. Fatima's description of life in exile reflected that of many of her young peers.

*'We are bored here. There is nothing to do. We are not allowed to go to school, we are not allowed to go out, and we are not allowed to mix with other people because we are girls. Death is better than this life. If we ask for anything, the answer is we can get it when we go back to Syria. Our day begins with working with our mother and then cleaning. After that we watch TV, cry for a while after watching the news and then sleep. That is our daily routine'* (Fatima, November, 2013).

Fatima's suicidal thoughts were reflected in many of the women interviewed, one woman, Om Mahmoud, talked of this in relation to the increased physical violence from her husband.

*'Before we came here, we got on well, now he has become angry and violent. Last week he beat me and left me on the doorstep. If I didn't have my children to think of, I would kill myself'* (Om Mahmoud, March, 2014).

## **Shared sadness**

The sadness felt by these women in exile is also due to their knowledge of the suffering of those close to them who remained in Syria. The women explained how they were in Jordan to protect their children, but this often meant being unable to support their husbands, elder sons, fathers and brothers. Communal activities offered by local and international charities with the objective of bringing relief from the sadness, creating opportunities for social networking and sometimes, with the added possibility of generating income, were considered inappropriate by many of the women interviewed, especially those with husbands and sons still in Syria. It was difficult for them to express their reasons for this, but it was clearly out of respect and consideration for those still suffering in Syria after they had fled. They did not want to find happiness in exile, they wanted to return to their families and in the meantime they remained connected to them by carrying the burden of sadness, connected through their prayers and their tears with those living in hardship and risking and losing their lives back at home.

*'We don't live a normal life. We are not happy. A lot of people from my family were killed in Syria, so how we can live a normal life? We live with sadness. We lost happiness, there is no space for it'*  
(Nadia, November 2013)

### **Coping with the solitude and sadness**

Fatima's mother suggested she read the Qur'an to get over her boredom. Her faith is the thing that keeps her going and she spends much of her time in prayer or listening to recitations on her phone, *'It makes you feel better and comforts all your pains'*, she told us. Prayer and reading, or listening to, the Qur'an was an activity described by many of the women interviewed as one of their most important and usual ways of finding comfort from the hardships of refugee life.

*'I listen to the Qur'an every morning as I clean the house. It makes the rest of the day pass more easily, with God's blessing'* (Riah, September 2015).

Another common practise to relieve some of the isolation and boredom is watching television. Televisions were permanently tuned to Syrian news at the beginning of our research period. By September 2014, this constant reminder of the death and destruction at home was being interspersed with films and children's cartoons.

*'We used to watch the news of the martyrs every day, looking for the names of our family and neighbours. Now we watch other things too. We can't keep crying all day any more, it was making us ill'*. (Om Haitham, September 2014)

Almost all respondents also listened to songs on their phones, describing how, although this generally made them cry, it was also a controlled way to release their emotions and they felt better afterwards. Older women and younger girls described spending some time each day listening to the same few songs from Syria. The songs narrated and commented on the Syrian experience of the revolution and subsequent exile. Some songs had regional significance, such as the martyrdom of the children of Dara'a and laments of the experience of exile and longing of its people. The songs were generally listened to alone, often after the children were asleep as a controlled trigger to deep emotions, and as a way of maintaining a strong connection with all they have left behind.<sup>8</sup>

Mobile phones and televisions were clearly seen as a necessity and not a luxury in most of the households visited. Most of the women had at least one smart phone in their home, preciously guarded and topped up with credit for both calls and data. Calls home were eagerly anticipated, despite almost invariably reducing the women to tears. Om Wissam, manages to speak to her mother and father in Syria every day. *'I have a daily programme of crying for at least two hours a day,'* she told us, *'I call my parents and when I hear the news from Syria I cry blood'* (Om Wissam January 2014).

### **Sharing the burden with others**

Over the course of the year the research was conducted, some small social groups developed in a small number of the households. In one building, where women headed the majority of the households, a private communal area had been created on the rooftop where women took their children, smoked shisha and shared their troubles with one another. In another, two of the younger daughters had taken to volunteering at a small centre providing medical support to refugee women. In a third, one of the refugees had enrolled in an English class provided by a local charity and talked of discovering a new confidence as she started to leave the home more. Those who had taken these initiatives described this additional social contact as being extremely important, reducing their loneliness and isolation. It was noted that those who adapted their behaviour to suit the new circumstances were more likely to have had previous access to education in Syria. Many of those who had been taken out of primary school to marry early remained closed in the homes and were less likely to create new mechanisms for reducing their isolation. The signs of change in some households, however, provided an indication of some of the solutions and coping mechanisms created by the refugees themselves, and inform the conclusion and recommendations below.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

It is essential for those working with Syrian refugees in Jordan to have an understanding of the common traditional practices and cultural codes of the refugees, and how they conducted their lives prior to their displacement. An introduction to the social fabric of the families' pre displacement, and the reciprocal gendered roles and responsibilities, would enable them to work more effectively, both in the camps and within the urban population. This includes having a sensitivity towards the culture of arranged marriages and previous safety mechanisms within the social group, the nature of existing coping mechanisms relying largely on support networks of extended families and communities and the associated importance of private social space for women. This would enable the policy makers and practitioners to provide culturally sensitive support relief from the identified risks to women and young girls. Over the one-year research period, the refugee crisis notably shifted from a situation where the majority of the refugees were waiting for the emergency to end, in September 2013 to one in September 2014, where many were starting to accustom themselves to the idea of never returning to Syria. Some women and girls have started to develop new coping mechanisms and for some, their level of isolation was seen to reduce through the creation of new social networks in Jordan. However, many of the women and young girls are unable to develop their own effective coping mechanisms, and the financial and psychological implications of this protracted exile continues to profoundly diminish their wellbeing, both on a day-to-day basis and for their long term future.

The protracted displacement of Syrians in Jordan has also affected the education and schooling of many young Syrian girls and women. This has a profound long term impact on both their future and that of the local communities. Supporting access to education and the development of new skills for Syrian women and adolescent girls (both married and unmarried), may be one of the most effective long term solutions to diminishing their

isolation and economic hardship, and improving their physical and psychological wellbeing. It would also provide opportunities of self-cultivation by enabling them to spend time away from the domestic sphere and socially engage with others, contributing to what feminist scholar Saba Mahmood refers to as '*human flourishing*' (Mahmood, 2005, p. xxiv). Creative solutions need to be found to encourage more women and girls to take part. Providing culturally appropriate travel arrangements and child care at education facilities could resolve the problems cited by many of the women as factors in terms their ability to leave the house. Encouraging and facilitating smaller, more local facilities, created and run by members of the community would also limit the challenges cited by many women of engaging with large numbers of outsiders.

Financial uncertainty and the increasing difficulties in meeting their housing, food and health care needs is also contributing to the risk of domestic violence, both following hasty marriages to unknown men and within existing family units. Culturally sensitive activities facilitating income generation in appropriate physical environments would provide some relief, both from isolation and financial hardship. These could be developed in collaboration with members of the community. This would also require addressing issues of transport, child care and proximity, in addition to providing safe spaces where men and women are able to work and socialise independently of one another.

Cultural sensitivity is not only required in in terms of practical provision, but also emotional. Often living with traumatic memories of the events leading up to their flight, concern for loved ones still in Syria and in many cases still grieving for loved ones, many of the respondents were at the end of their tether, unable to see a way out of the situation, with tears and suicidal thoughts forming a part of daily life. It is often not possible, or necessary, to relieve this sadness however, but simply to recognise and respect it. The respondents of this study were all in regular contact with relatives and members of their community back in Syria, who are still suffering and at risk. This connection keeps the empathy and sadness alive, which for many is an important part of their own moral dignity while in exile. In recognising their own relative good fortune and sharing the pain of others who have remained, they are behaving both as good mothers and wives, as well as good Muslims. This essential connection with family in Syria reduces isolation and contributes to their wellbeing. Engagement with activities that might be considered joyful, however, may not be a culturally appropriate solution for many of the women refugees, in particular the older ones. Respondents favoured activities designed to provide both relief to their suffering while also benefitting others. Those providing humanitarian support need to take this into account when working with the refugee women from traditional or religious backgrounds, in particular recognising the importance of continued suffering, sadness and empathy with those still in Syria as an important part of their own morality and sense of identity as refugees.

This ethnographic research demonstrates how specific historical and cultural characteristics of refugees settling in northern Jordan informs much of their behaviour. The choice to leave the camps and opt for the increased isolation, vulnerability and financial pressures of urban life and their decision to remain outside of the public sphere, often for months at a time, requires a culturally specific response from practitioners and policy makers. Supporting the refugees to meet their financial and psychological needs will contribute to continued social cohesion for both the refugees and the host community.

With one third of refugee families headed by women, and many larger family groups headed by only one man, larger family groups and communities have become fragmented with the subsequent impact on all aspects of family life. Both men and women have had to develop new ways of functioning and coping. Coping mechanisms have developed over time. This includes the continued strong connection with family members remaining in Syria, both through prayer and tears, and through the use of mobile phones and digital media. Although

connections with (non kin) outsiders are slowly developing among some women, both through organised and informal arrangements, but these remain rare, limited on the whole to the more educated and younger women in the refugee community. Many women and girls remain in imposed, or at times self-imposed, confinement. With no political end to the crisis in sight, we hope the testimonies of the women and young girls presented in this paper serve to inform the work of those working with the women refugees in Jordan. In particular, to approach their decisions with cultural sensitivity, developing initiatives that meet the particular needs of this community of Syrian women and girls, developing their social networks and thereby reducing their vulnerability and isolation.

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1. In July 2014, urban refugees without official '*bailout*' documentation regarding their departure from the camp were no longer able to register with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in urban areas, preventing them access to services. In October 2014, the World Food Programme (WFP) excluded some refugee families from their food assistance services. The value of the food vouchers was also repeatedly reduced. In November 2014, Jordanian authorities introduced fees for Syrian refugees accessing public health centres, and in February 2015, a verification process was launched requiring Syrians residing outside the camps to re-register with the Jordanian authorities, providing a rental agreement and certificate of good health. (Five Years of Exile, 2015)

2. In July 2014, regulations that allowed a Jordanian to act as sponsor for Syrian refugees, in a system known colloquially as '*bailout*', was tightened requiring they be a close relative. In January 2015, the bailout process from all camps was temporarily suspended. (Five Years into Exile, 2015)

3. Most of the women decided against being filmed or photographed, some also preferred not to have their voices recorded. However, a small group welcomed us back into their homes following the initial research, allowing us into their lives with cameras and microphones. Some of their testimonies have been made publicly available, (Boswall, 2014), other have remained private archives.

4. It is recognised that no introduction made between researcher and their subject comes without a complex set of expectations and assumptions. In the case of the connection with the landlord, for example, it is possible that this may have created expectations around issues related to the rent. In Ramtha, it was later discovered that the relationship between the volunteer who introduced us to the women also came with complex power relationships. Some women said his power as a volunteer with the Red Crescent may have influenced their decision to attend, but once they were with us and understood the nature of our research they were happy to participate and share their lives with us.

5. The names of all those interviewed have been changed to protect the women's identity.

6. Sponsorship documents were negotiated on the black market. The sum varied, but it was often quoted at around 200 Jordanian Dinar (approx. £175) per person.

7. In November 2013, the Jordanian police working in Za'atari had only one recorded rape case on file in Za'atari since the camp opened (Hmoud & Shehab, 2013). Official statistics are considered unlikely to be representative for a number of reasons, not least due to the general mistrust the Syrians have for authority figures. Although none of the refugees in this study talked of any specific cases they were aware of, it was clear the perceived threat of rape is clearly very tangible.

8. See conference presentation of research pertaining to the listening habits of women and young girls living in Northern <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=injH8rfjMEs>

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