

World Vision



ROBBED OF CHILDHOOD, RUNNING FROM WAR



Preface

As winter closes in on us, and the number of Syrians in Lebanon surpasses 150,000, the needs of the more than 75,000 displaced Syrian children are urgent and growing. In the past 20 months, thousands of children have lost homes, witnessed or experienced violence, missed out on education, and now face the onset of winter in poor accommodation.

Through our work, we hear sobering and disturbing accounts from Syrian refugee children about how much responsibility they place on themselves since they fled the war. Children tell us about their deep desire to protect their families from feelings of loss and grief. They speak about wanting to shield loved ones from hunger and the biting winter cold. And, they tell us stories of how they try to be a source of joy and happiness for their loved ones, even in the darkest of hours. Syrian children in Lebanon are shouldering a burden that is not theirs to carry.

The arrival of winter is compounding the problems of unmet needs for these children and their families. Temporary housing means many homes are ill prepared for the cold weather, with walls made of sugar sacks and roofs of plastic sheeting. With temperatures as low as two degrees, and snow already falling in some areas, families are in need of blankets, stoves to heat their homes, adequate winter clothing and home insulation. In the words of 12-year-old Hala: "I just want clothes. All mine were burned. I just have the ones I have on." Lebanon's mountainous climate means that children are worried about how they will cope with the cold winter rain and snow. Mothers tell World Vision their children are ill, but doctors' fees are often prohibitive and information about health care clinics is not easy to access. "There's no one there to help us. We are isolated," 11-year-old Samer told us.

There are no official refugee camps for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Many families are being hosted by Lebanese families, however there are some who have no other option but to seek refuge in abandoned buildings and temporary shelters. Some refugee families have been able to rent accommodation, but children living like this talk of overcrowding, some are living with 45 people in a five-room house, or living with 11 people in one room.

This report places the spotlight on children, hearing from them the biggest challenges they face each day. We visited with 100 Syrian children, aged 7-13 in Central and West Bekaa. Through focus group discussions with 60 children and key informant interviews with 40 children and 12 households, we heard their stories. We asked questions and we listened. The information contained in the following pages captures their experiences. We have changed the names of the children quoted, as requested by their parents.

We heard from children that every day they deal with:

- **No sense of stability** because of the uncertainty surrounding their social and physical environment, and the very real sense of wanting to return home.
- **Education upheaval** caused by enrolment problems, language barriers, transportation costs and feelings of exclusion.
- **Anxiety and exposure** as a result of being separated from families, witnessing violence, and feeling pressure to go to work to support their families.

As time passes, and with so many children affected by ongoing uncertainty, many of these issues will become even more crucial to address. We hope the information in this report will be used to advocate for children's needs, and guide international and local actors in responding to the refugee crisis in Lebanon.

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Robbed of childhood: No sense of stability

"From the outside we don't let people know what we are going through. From the inside I'm very bothered. I miss my friends."

Ahmad, 10

Before the war in Syria began, Lebanon was already home to as many as 455,000 registered refugees from across the region. With a weakened economy and shrinking job market, Lebanon's economic climate mirrors that of current global trends. The arrival of more than 150,000 refugees¹ brings with it greater competition in unofficial job markets, increased demand in the rental market and further pressure on public school infrastructure, already straining from overuse and underinvestment. More than a quarter of people in Lebanon are living below the poverty line² and this number, worryingly, does not include groups such as migrant workers and refugees, who often face harsher conditions.

The paradox of invisibility sits at the heart of the vulnerability faced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The real number is believed to be as much as 30 per cent higher than the official registered number. By registering, families can access food, clothing, shelter and health care assistance, among other things. Registration also helps the local government and humanitarian community keep track of aid and identify emerging needs.

Despite this, many families do not register as refugees. There are several reasons for this, the most common being that to be known and identified as a Syrian refugee is perceived as a safety risk. Families worry their registration details may be leaked, resulting in retribution against family members in Syria, or personal retribution when they return home.

¹ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>

² UNDP and *Profiles of Poverty: The human face of poverty in Lebanon*, Rupen Das and Julie Davidson

Yet, to be nameless and unregistered is to live a life of uncertainty and worry. World Vision found that in cases where children and their families did not register, access to information and support for basic services was significantly diminished or

almost non-existent. Unregistered children lack access to food, medicine, adequate shelter, health and social services. Registration explains why some children have more access than others, greater protection and more of their basic needs met.

Entitled to a home – recommendations

To give Syrian refugee children a sense of stability and certainty, international donors, governments, aid agencies, and supporters can:

- Focus on meeting the basic needs of children and their families so that children do not have to work for food or money.
- Increase funding for non-registered children and their families, and improve publicly available information about registration.
- Ensure that all relief programmes for Syrian refugees take into account conflict sensitivity. Build upon connectors that exist between Syrian refugees and host families in order to foster understanding, trust and social cohesion.



Robbed of childhood: Education upheaval

"I hear my parents talk about war, that they are bombing houses. Instead, my friends and I talk about how much we love school."

Soha, 9



Almost every child talks about the importance and value of education. Many see it as a basic need, key to their identity. However, going to school in Lebanon is met by a number of challenges for Syrian refugee children.

Enrolling in school is one of the first hurdles. The Lebanon Ministry of Education has authorised its public schools to accept Syrian refugee children, but space is limited, and many are facing legal challenges in the registration process. An estimated 20 per cent of Syrian refugee children are enrolled in school in Lebanon. Hiba, aged 9, echoes the comments made by many children out of school: "My mom says, inshallah, things will work out with the school." This uncertainty, and continuing blockages in the process, contributes to ongoing disruption and unsettled feelings in children.

For those lucky enough to get a place in school, the next challenge is to keep them there. A UNICEF education assessment in July 2012³ found that Syrian dropout rates are twice the national average in Lebanon. Children attribute the reasons to language barriers, difficulty finding transportation and feelings of exclusion. Many children have already missed out on one year of school as a result of the conflict and as a second year looms, the effects threaten long-term consequences. As 11-year-old Rouba said: "I started to forget the shape of some letters."

The longer a child is out of school, the larger the gap grows between age and level of education; the greater the need and difficulty for catch-up; and the harder it is to re-integrate into formal schools. Refugee children can easily fall behind their peers, socially and educationally, and later struggle to flourish in society.

³ UNICEF and Save the Children (2012). *Education Rapid Needs Assessment for Displaced Syrian Children: In Schools, Community and Safe Spaces* – July 2012. UNICEF [Online]. Available at: data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=535

Children struggle with language difficulties because the Syrian educational curriculum is in Arabic, while the Lebanese system includes English and French. Yazan, 9, said: "I prefer school in Syria because it's easier for me to learn. I only know how to speak Arabic." Eleven-year-old Abdallah: "I don't go to school here anymore because I don't understand the languages."

The costs of school materials and transportation are prohibitively high for many refugees, and very few families are capable of covering them. For some, lack of transportation prevents them from making it to school. "I don't go to school now because my dad told me the bus does not come by our house anymore," said 7-year-old Zahra. For others, it is the cost of the books that force them to drop out: "We went [to school] for 20 days only and then they took us out because we don't have money for the books."

Children talk about feeling discriminated and excluded at school by their peers and teachers. Omar, 12, said: "I heard children saying I should be hated because I am Syrian." Others speak about seeing children shot in school while back in Syria, and the fear they now associate with school as a result.

Formal education gives children the structure and skills to deal with the challenges of being a refugee and contributes to their wellbeing. With the right training and skills, schools can help mitigate and manage discrimination. Schools often provide an enabling environment for children, and help to build support networks, maintain a sense of stability through a predictable and 'normal' routine, and secure a future by being rooted in education. "I take care of my books. I love to study. I also write letters and do my homework," 9-year-old Mayssa told us. Education is a right that belongs to all children. When children are displaced, education is "essential to help children and youngsters to live a normal life, and to prepare them for adulthood in what will hopefully be a more peaceful environment"⁴.

Entitled to education – recommendations

To help Syrian refugee children access education, and the vital long-term healing this brings them, international donors, governments, aid agencies, and supporters can:

- Support and enable the Ministry of Education and Higher Education to ensure access to education facilities through:
 - a. Monitoring registration in public schools, as well as the capacity of schools to enrol more children
 - b. Rehabilitating classrooms, to compensate for overuse
 - c. Increasing the availability of classes to accommodate student influx
- Provide remedial schooling for children who are facing language difficulties.
- Provide educational materials and school transportation.
- Build the awareness and capacity of teachers and caregivers to support children presenting with psychosocial concerns or risks of school dropout.

Robbed of childhood: Anxiety and exposure

"My three brothers died in Syria. They were younger than me. They shot my brothers when they were playing with their friends on the street."

Alaa', 7



Children speak about feeling anxious, frightened and burdened. In Syria, before fleeing, they witnessed violence. Now in Lebanon, they hear their families discussing it. They sense the tension: family members arguing, host communities who do not fully accept them, while at the same time they feel the burden to help support their loved ones.

Children talk at length about violence, death and the politics of war. Some children have directly witnessed violence and death. "I saw my cousin dying in front of me, so I always see this scene in front of my eyes," said 8-year-old Layla. Others talk about images of their homes and schools burning, people getting shot and tanks roving their neighbourhoods. Even indirect exposure to violence such as images of dead bodies on the news, continues to haunt them.

Adult conversations about politics and kidnapping are vividly recounted by children, indicating that they are influenced by the adult discussions and attitudes surrounding them. Children say they value when their parents try to create an environment of safety and security. Ten-year-old Nizar: "My parents speak calmly to each other. They try not to do anything in front of us to make us sad."

For other children, the effects on their parents are more disturbing. Many children say a happy child would not have parents that "scream" or "shout". They tell World Vision that the parents of a happy child would not argue with one another or hit children. "The way people talk to each other now is not good. Here, in Lebanon the whole extended family is living together and not everyone gets along well with the others, so this creates problems," said 13-year-old Seif.

Anxiety over separation from family members frequently comes up as something that plays on children's minds. Doha, aged 12, speaks of sadness about being separated from family members who were in Syria: "I'm living here with my Aunt," she said. "This problem [of being separated from family] is always on my mind, always bothering me." Hiba, 12, said: "I miss my cousins. They went to Jordan. My other cousins are in Syria still." Even though children say they feel safe in Lebanon, they worry about the security of loved ones in Syria: "There's bombing in Syria and it bothers us that others are there in the bombing," and "we are bothered because we are here and other people are at home being bombed and under attack".

For many, bullying, particularly in host families, is a big concern. The dynamics of acceptance and exclusion feature heavily in conversations. Some children speak of extraordinary kindness: "The neighbour takes us to her house. She gives us food and sweets." However, more often than not children talk about tension: "There are only two families from Syria where I live. Sometimes people throw dirt and sand under the door. Sometimes children throw stones at me."

Many children manage with neighbourhood conflict by disengaging. Omar said: "I'm not playing with Lebanese children because they are saying things that I do want to hear about me. They do things and then accuse us of doing them. So we stay away from them and go inside." Some children say they don't play at all anymore. Others say they've changed the way they play by doing indoor activities such as reading stories, listening to music or traditional dancing. They even suggest activities that they would like to do with Lebanese children to help them get on better, like joining in celebrations together or making crafts.

“My 15-year-old brother used to go to school but now works in a bakery.”

“My brother is 13 and used to go to school in Syria. Here he works with steel.”

“My sister, 15, used to go to school but here she works at a laundry shop.”

“My 12-year-old sister works in a garden.”

“I’m happy here but I want to go back to Syria.”

Children who work almost unanimously say they do it “because we have to”. Male children express a responsibility to help support their family. Fourteen-year-old Yazan describes himself as an adult and sees it as his duty to put aside his education in order to go to work. Commonly mentioned types of work included selling vegetables, working in gardens or the local service industry. Younger children speak about helping their parents around the house. Older children speak about going to work on their own outside of the house in exchange for food or money, depending on the arrangement.

Children working in the informal labour market are at greater risk of exploitation and abuse. Given the protracted nature of the crisis in Syria, refugees may not be able to return home any time soon. Without the chance to make a living, parents cannot see any choice but to allow their children to leave school to work. Providing livelihood opportunities lessens feelings of social isolation, disempowerment and frustration, mitigating the risk of tension and violence in host communities.



Returning home is a desire expressed by many of the children. Overall, children see their lives in Lebanon as temporary. Some reassure each other by saying: "Don't be sad. You will go back home safe and sound." Appreciating the memories Lebanon has given the children, Omar reflects: "I want to go back to Syria but I would like to come back and visit Lebanon someday." Many speak about returning home to see their friends and play with cousins. Memories of peaceful times in Syria are easily recalled. When asked how they deal with the longing to return to Syria, 10-year-old Samar said: "I would tell children to keep hope that one day we will all go back home to our family." Recalling a dress she never had the chance to wear, 7-year-old Rama told us: "I want to go back to Syria to wear my new dress and play with my toy, even for one day. I can die the next day."

Being present and investing in a sense of home is a key theme that children talk about as a solution until a return to Syria is possible. While many speak about missing home, it is easy for children to draw up lists of things they like about Lebanon, and how their environment has a great influence on their happiness. For example, those living near a public garden in central Bekaa speak about the garden as their favourite place. They love its beauty and the fact it is a safe public place to play because other people from mixed backgrounds, ethnicity and faiths are also enjoying the garden. Others love going to the mountains to be among nature with their parents. In places where a mosque is close by, children say they like to pray; similarly, when a mosque is not within walking distance, children say they miss going to the mosque.

Entitled to innocence – recommendations

To help keep Syrian refugee children safe, secure, free from exploitation and abuse, and to give them a chance to enjoy their childhood, international donors, governments, aid agencies, and supporters can:

- Prioritise and provide child protection services including psychosocial support, reporting and referral mechanisms for children subject to exploitation or abuse, in school, out of school, at work. Early identification mitigates long-term effects of violence and exploitation on children.
- Establish a parent support network and provide parents with techniques to better support their children. Encourage parents to find ways to reduce their own stress and be encouraging and supportive to their children.
- Ensure there are enough Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) to accommodate children from both host and refugee families. Avoid operating CFS as a replacement for schools, but ensure CFS operate with regular hours, in appropriate spaces and provide safe places for children to play and address their emotional well-being needs.

The daily scars of Syria's war

Raed, a 10-year-old Syrian refugee, is scared. The lightning and storms that winter brings remind him of all the sounds of bombing he heard when he was back in Syria.



"Even the fireworks scare him every time there is a wedding ceremony in town," says Raed's mother, Leila, who fled the violence in Syria with her family six months ago.

Raed recalls his school in Syria, before it was bombed just minutes after he and his friends had left their class. "My school was big and had blue walls." He never saw it again after the bombing.

Ahmad, Raed's father, hoped that life in Syria would improve. But, it didn't. "Every minute in Syria posed a threat to the lives of my family," says Ahmad. "Massacres happened in front of our eyes. I had to get them out of there."

When their house in Syria was bombed, leaving nothing but rubble, they were forced to face the inevitable. It was time to leave their country.

The family pay US\$40 a month to live in a quasi-garage, measuring less than 20 square metres. It has two rooms and a small bathroom. There is no kitchen and everything the family owns is either on the floor or piled on to the one shelf in the room. The shelter is home to Ahmad, his children and seven other relatives.

The walls are made of old bricks barely pasted to each other. The first rains of the season found their way through the cracks in the walls. Every item was wet. The dirty torn sheets decorating the walls, the thick mattresses on which the family members are sleeping, the summer clothes that Raed was wearing because it was all he had.

Raed brought his geography book with him from Syria. It is his most precious possession. He flips through its pages every now and then and dreams that one day he will return with it to his home to finish his education.

World Vision's response

World Vision has worked in Lebanon since 1975, providing shelter, food, and medicine for people affected by the civil and regional wars at the time. Our work spans emergency relief to sustainable community development programmes, which are planned, designed, and executed with the communities World Vision partners with.

World Vision has launched a US\$12 million appeal to help more than 40,000 Syrian refugees this winter, after reaching more than 17,000 people in the past few months. Our response will prioritise meeting basic needs such as food, fuel, stoves and other winter supplies, child protection activities, child-friendly spaces, and psychosocial and education support for children. We work with both registered and unregistered refugees throughout Lebanon, aiming to reach the most vulnerable children and families as winter approaches.

More information, and ways to contribute to World Vision's work in Lebanon, can be found at www.wvi.org

This report has been compiled by Pamela Sitko and Patricia Mouamar, in conjunction with teams from World Vision Lebanon and World Vision International. All photos were taken by Patricia Mouamar. Design by Alice Contreras.

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World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families and communities worldwide to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice.