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Contacts:Media: christian.jepsen@nrc.noPolicy: erin.weir@nrc.no

SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS:

Syrian Refugee Youth: Drivers of change – ignored and marginalized

Summary

There are nearly 500,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan, and more than 54 per cent are children under the age of 18, according to UNHCR. After witnessing extreme violence in Syria, and surviving multiple displacements, young refugees are coping with depression, fear and – increasingly – anger that their situation is not improving. In Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan family dynamics are changing and youth have been charged with new responsibilities, including tremendous pressure to earn a living and provide care for their families. However, insecurity and a lack of mobility are compounding these challenges, and a lack of quality training and education options is constraining their future prospects. Youth feel helpless and excluded from the policy decisions that affect them

It is critical that the Government of Jordan and the international community work together to provide young refugees with quality training and education, as well as economic opportunities within the camp. There is a need for youth involvement in camp decision making processes, and the day-to-day running of Zaatari camp.

Finally, the psychological effects of violence, insecurity and displacement must be addressed in a comprehensive way to allow this generation of Syrians to recover from the brutal effects of war. Armed conflicts and natural disasters cause significant psychological and social suffering to affected populations. The psychological and social impacts of emergencies may be acute in the short term, but they can also undermine the long-term mental health and psycho-social well-being of the affected population. These impacts may threaten peace, human rights and development .¹

¹ the IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support In Emergencies



NRC and other organisations in Zaatari camp are approaching the refugee youth to engage them in training and recreational activities. But the available funding and capacity does not meet the need.
Photo: NRC/Christian Jepsen

“Here we cannot find solutions for our situation, because whenever we come up with something, some people will say ‘forbidden,’ others will say ‘this cannot be done.’ In other words, we cannot do anything.” (Imtinan, 16 years old)

What they are coming from: Impact of the war in Syria on children and youth

The intense and often indiscriminate violence in Syria has plagued the Syrian people for over two years now. Children and youth are daily witnesses to extreme violence, including the death of family members and the wholesale destruction of their homes and communities. Children are being killed, maimed, held for ransom and used as human shields. There are reports of detention and torture of boys as young as 14.

In addition to fighting, children and youth have been regularly exposed to car bombings, as well as heavy aerial and artillery bombardments in civilian areas, experiences that make every place feel unsafe. Many youth that NRC has met in Zaatari refugee camp have relocated several times before seeking safety in Jordan. Expressions of grief and fear, as well as anger and depression are commonplace among refugee children and youth. Youth feel powerless and invisible. If these feelings go unaddressed it will have far reaching implications for the future of Syrian society.

What they are escaping to: Protection threats and other challenges in Zaatari refugee camp:

“At first I refused to leave (Syria), but eventually ... I was convinced. I came to Zaatari with my father and we have been suffering here ever since. We live in the desert, and there is no work for young people. Morale in the camp is very low.” (Abdullah, 20 years old)

Insecurity in Zaatari camp is an on-going concern, which has caused many refugees to limit their movement within the site out of concern for their personal safety or due to harassment. This has impacted particularly on young women in Zaatari. UNHCR has reported that “gangs control access to important resources such as



Some humanitarian organisations offer recreational activities such as football in Zaatari camp in Jordan. But the need is far greater than the capacity.

Photo: NRC/Christian Jepsen

caravans, play a role in determining who gets access to the vendors' area and dictate prices on the black market. According to Syrian men in a local child protection committee, gang members physically threaten those who challenge their authority.” This has reduced access to goods and services, as well as livelihood opportunities for many refugees, including youth.

Protests over living conditions and the level of assistance inside Zaatari are commonplace. Many young men have told NRC that frustration over the lack of services, coupled with their own sense of exclusion from the camp planning processes has led to a perception that mass mobilization and violent protest is the only way to make themselves heard.

In addition to the frustrations associated with camp living, this uprooted community is experiencing serious social shifts, including changes in family and community power dynamics and in the way that the refugees relate to each other. Domestic violence is on the rise. Female-headed households are increasingly prevalent, as many Syrian men are engaged in the fighting or unable to leave Syria. This has implications on individual households, and for the wider community, where traditional social structures are being challenged and adapted to the new circumstances.



Refugee girl doing her homework.

Photo: NRC/Christian Jepsen

Within this context youth have told NRC that they feel helpless and excluded from the discussions and decisions that most affect their lives. “Negative stereotyping of youth, including by the international donor community, limits the extent to which youth are asked to volunteer or participate in camp planning efforts,” in spite of their desire to play an active role and take action to improve the quality of life in Zaatari. (p. 40 – Shattered Lives)

The education of young refugees has been seriously disrupted. Roughly 78 per cent of children in Zaatari are not currently in school. The immediate need to contribute to household income has left many young people with no choice but to work, at the expense of their education and other training opportunities. In other cases, youth simply do not believe that the education available will be useful to them in their new circumstances. Inadequate, overcrowded school facilities, inexperienced teachers, and a lack of necessary supplies have all contributed to a feeling that the education available in Zaatari is of a low quality and that certificates won’t be recognized when youth return to Syria.

Apprenticeship systems are well established in Syria, and many young men interviewed by NRC were pursuing vocational training when they were displaced. Youth are acutely aware of the levels

of skill they will need to attain in order to be considered competent craftsmen in their chosen vocations (p. 10 – Syrian Refugee Market Assessment Study, NRC). Stop-gap vocational programs are not perceived to meet the high expectations that Syrian youth have for their skill development.

“The people who need us the most are the children. At this stage, no one should give up children. We must not give the street any chance of raising them at its leisure. No. We must remain beside them.”

(Ali, 25 years old)

Priority Concerns Among Young Women Refugees:

Many young women in Zaatari have seen their family responsibilities increase. They are expected to care for family members with special needs, but are not able to access the support systems and services necessary to care for them properly. In some cases these services simply do not exist in the camp setting.



A Syrian refugee family inside their home - a caravan - in Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. Many young girls face difficulties in moving around in the camp.

Photo: NRC/Christian Jepsen

Young women also face a lack of mobility within the camp, which affects their ability to fulfil family responsibilities, as well as their ability to make friends and have a normal social life. Many do not leave their tent, limiting social contact to family members and people living in the immediate vicinity of their family shelter. This is partly as a result of insecurity (or perceived insecurity) in the camp, but young women interviewed also described the limited mobility as a symptom of decreasing agency within their own families and homes. Girls have stated “We hear a lot of harassment on our way to school from the young men’ (p. 13 – Findings from the InterAgency Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Assessment in the Za’atari Refugee Camp)

Fear of forced marriage is another source of anxiety for young refugee women. While early marriage is relatively common in Syria, it has increased in prevalence. The age of marriage has also decreased as struggling parents seek to reduce their economic burden and protect their daughters in the face of difficult circumstances and a deeply uncertain future. Young women report that men from Jordan and other Arab countries take advantage of lax access controls to the camp and enter in search of marriage, or “temporary marriage” to Syrian girls. “They think that Syrian girls get married for free or for cheap” (p. 27 – Findings from the InterAgency Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Assessment in the Za’atari Refugee Camp)

Priority Concerns Among Young Men Refugees:

With older men involved in fighting, or unable to leave Syria, many young men have become heads of their households. Very young men, already suffering from their experiences in Syria, are being saddled with the tremendous responsibility of providing for their families, and yet the majority do not feel empowered to make the decisions that most affect them. Many young men feel excluded from the bodies and



Many young male Syrian refugees in Zaatari are frustrated. Photo: NRC/Christian Jepsen

processes that determine how life is lived in Zaatari.

Young men have also expressed tremendous frustration at the pace (or lack) of change in Zaatari. This is compounded by the lack of alternative activities – such as sports and other social activities – to channel their time and energy. Depression and despondency are widespread and boys are becoming increasingly aggressive in their behaviour. Protests and the commission of violence are seen to be the only way for young men to have their voices heard.

*“Only around 10 per cent of the Syrian youth are finding jobs. All the others are sitting around drinking tea. You feel as if their psyches have been destroyed, especially among the young people. Hope has been stolen from their hearts.”
(Imtinan, 16 years old)*

Addressing the Needs of Young Refugees:

Many of the issues that cause the greatest anxiety for young Syrians in Zaatari are rooted in economic insecurity and the pressure to provide income for their families. There is a need to create more opportunities for Syrian refugee youth to earn money while they continue to develop skills and hone a craft. There is also an urgent need to establish systems that allow refugees to access necessary goods and equipment from the Jordanian market in order to start up and maintain small businesses within the camps. This would have an immediate positive effect on the camp economy as well as the psychological and social well-being of refugee youth.

It is equally important to create an outlet for youth to participate in the discussions and decisions relating to the running of Zaatari and the distribution of scarce aid resources. Youth have the time, and the motivation to receive and orient newly arrived refugees, support the distribution of aid, and help their communities to access services in the large and often opaque camp system. The social networks of young refugees could also be leveraged to improve communication between camp management, aid organizations and the wider camp population, and to enhance awareness of available services. Putting this tremendous resource to better use will benefit young people and enhance the day to day functionality of the camp. It would also give young people an outlet to communicate grievances and bring about change without having to resort to violence and protest, enhancing the overall security and stability in Zaatari.

Finally, there is an urgent need to address the grief, depression, anger and fear experienced by many young refugees, and to develop a comprehensive approach to providing support to people suffering from their experiences. The need for effective psycho-social assistance is just as pressing as the need for food, shelter

and medical care. The failure to treat the psychological wounds of the Syrian conflict will have far reaching implications for Syria's youth, and for the future of the country.

Recommendations:

1. Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MoPIC) and UNHCR should approve and certify vocational trainings in the camp in order to provide high-quality vocational training for youth;
2. Aid organizations, including UN agencies, should systematically involve the Youth Task Force in decision making processes relating to camp and project management, and should establish systems to leverage the capacity and social networks of the youth in order to disseminate information and improve transparency. Likewise the Youth Task Force should continue linking and further strengthening communication linkages with other existing sector working groups in order to advocate systematically on behalf of youth needs;
3. The Government of Jordan (specifically the Ministry of Education) should support development of a country-wide strategy to systematically address the needs of Syrian refugee youth.