

## Background Paper

### Promoting women's employment in the context of the Syria crisis

#### The employment situation of female refugees, IDPs and women in host communities

Among IDPs and refugees, as well as in host communities, female labour market participation rates are still low. Women who work outside the home are often confronted with discrimination and poor working conditions. Working outside the home is frequently even more challenging for refugee and IDP women than for their counterparts in the host communities due to care commitments for family members, cultural norms, and **gender-based violence**. Therefore, labour market participation rates and participation in cash-for-work activities are low. Activities usually take place in the informal sector, particularly agriculture and services. Furthermore, there is a huge **gender pay gap**: Refugee women who work are active almost the same amount of time as men, but they earn much less. For example, refugee women in Lebanon earned on average 115 USD per month, in comparison with their male counterparts, who earned 215 USD per month (WFP 2016).

Due to the absence or death of a disproportionate number of men as a consequence of war and displacement, women even head a considerable number of refugee and IDP households; in Lebanon, the figure is seventeen per cent. Though refugees and IDP families face difficult lives in general, **female-headed households** are often more vulnerable than those with a male breadwinner: The former have lower incomes, consume less, and suffer from higher food insecurity, lower dietary diversity, and pressure to develop negative coping strategies such as selling off assets or sexual services. The influx of refugees also affects the employment situation of **working women in the host communities**. For example, there is widespread crowding-out in the Turkish informal labour market by informal refugee workers, and women are predominantly affected (Del Carpio, Wagner, and Triebe, 2015; IZA 2017).

Therefore, additional employment for women is crucial in the region. Female employment **increases household incomes** which benefits the entire household, whether male or female headed. Employment programmes for women should be implemented in a culturally and gender-sensitive way, then they can also decrease gender-based violence against women. Female employment increases self-determination for women and in aggregate, can significantly boost economic growth in the host communities and countries.

#### Barriers to safe and decent employment for women

Gender-based discrimination and social norms hinder women around the globe from participating equally in the world of work. Moreover, the context of displacement comes with some additional constraints to employment, such as a lack of work permits in host countries. However, women also face additional gender-related challenges in these contexts, and female refugees and IDPs refer to **sexual harassment at the work place as well as gender-based violence** as primary reasons for not taking up work. Many refugees report to have been harassed in buses, on the streets, and in markets. Consequently, they are willing to travel only moderate distances (IRC 2017).

Cultural factors that define women as the designated caretakers of children and the elderly, combined with separation from grandparents and other family members and a **lack of affordable childcare** in refugee and IDP camps and host communities, are further barriers to women's employment. As the number of children is usually high by European standards, and many households are headed by women, refugee mothers are burdened with a tremendous amount of unpaid work.

These conditions of vulnerability often lead to **women developing undesirable coping strategies**. For example, even though women are eligible for cash-for-work activities, it has been observed that they often send an acquaintance to work in their place. Since the women have to share the payment as a consequence, their income is extremely low (Oxfam 2016). Another corrosive coping strategy that has been observed in displacement contexts around Syria is **early marriage**. While it existed before the conflict, it became more prevalent in displacement, where it is used as a coping mechanism either to protect women from abuse or to relieve households from financial pressures. Early marriage affects women's development in the long term, as girls are often required to terminate their education when they wed (Norwegian Refugee Council 2016).

### **Approaches to promoting female employment**

To apply the '**do no harm**' concept in all settings of conflict, fragility, and violence (CFV), exclusion of women should be avoided. Instead of regarding women as a group with deficits, it is important to emphasise the fact that women can play a positive role in the community and contribute to a household's income. This generates better acceptance and ownership of employment-promotion projects for women. If implemented in a sensitive way, employment promotion and economic empowerment of women in CFV contexts can strengthen their self-esteem and confidence and add to economic and social stabilisation in these regions (GIZ 2015). Programmes that aim at increasing women's employment opportunities should therefore explore options for activities that are socially accepted for women in the context and set the right **framework for safe and decent work** for women.

**Female-only cash-for-work activities**, in consultation with communities, are one promising option. Therefore, in consultation with communities, Oxfam tailored female-only cash-for-work activities to the requirements of female-headed households, single women, and widows. The women usually chose the following activities: cleaning schools, performing childcare, painting damaged houses, and cooking for male labourers (Oxfam 2016).

Childcare activities are of particular importance because they enable other women to work. Other culturally accepted tasks are maternal and child health, health-related awareness activities (UNDP 2015), tailoring, crafts making, and teaching (UN Women 2015), as well as performing other social services.

In addition to cash-for-work programmes, enabling women to work together in partnerships and cooperatives, and assisting them with their business plans, may offer strong potential for safe income-generating activities (Oxfam 2016). It is recommended that all programmes be

planned and implemented with the full **engagement of men and adolescent boys**, in order to guarantee the support of male family members.

Additionally, community-based initiatives for women's empowerment that encompass aspects aimed at mitigating gender-based violence could have positive influences on issues related to social norms in a community (Norwegian Refugee Council 2016). Despite possible benefits of employment promotion for women in these contexts, **unconditional cash transfers** and general women-oriented services, such as in the fields of psychosocial support and prevention of early marriage, could be further options to support women.

### **Literature**

**GIZ (2015):** Employment Promotion of Women in Contexts of Conflict, Fragility and Violence

**IRC (2017):** Solving the refugee employment problem in Jordan: A survey of Syrian refugees  
Solving the refugee employment problem in Jordan: A survey of Syrian refugees

**IZA (2017):** The impact of Syrian refugees on natives' labor market outcomes in Turkey:  
evidence from a quasi-experimental design

**Norwegian Refugee Council (2016a):** A Future in the Balance: Lebanon

**Norwegian Refugee Council (2016b):** A Future in the Balance: Syria

**Oxfam (2016):** Case study Including Women in Livelihoods Programming in Iraq: Influencing communities and other agencies in a fragile context

**The World Bank (2015):** Turkey's Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis and the Road Ahead

**World Food Programme (2016):** Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon  
2016

**Ximena V. Del Carpio, Mathis Wagner (2015):** The Impact of Syrian Refugees on the  
Turkish Labor Market