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**THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND DISPLACEMENT  
IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

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## INTRODUCTION

While gender is an often-neglected variable in studies of migration, migration is a largely gendered phenomenon — women comprise almost half of international migrants (48%) and registered refugees (46%).<sup>1</sup> The experience of displacement can create gender-specific hardships or exacerbate existing gender inequalities, but it can also create new opportunities and transform gender relations. When gender is considered in the context of displacement — whether by host country governments or humanitarian organizations — there are many assumptions of how women’s experiences differ from men, with women frequently viewed as vulnerable and agentless actors. In reality, migrant women are not inherently vulnerable; it is the circumstances in which they find themselves and the policies they live under that produce precarity.<sup>2</sup>

To explore and understand the experiences of women migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in the context of the Middle East and North Africa, the following briefs consider how gender impacts displacement and migration, and how gender succeeds — or fails — to inform policies toward displaced individuals. Using detailed case studies of specific populations and host countries, the contributing authors — who include scholars from Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, Palestine, Tunisia, and Lebanon — examine how women experience displacement differently from men. They ask whether and how gender has been integrated into humanitarian or state-led programming, and to what effect. They also consider innovative and community-based strategies that women use to ensure they have the necessary support for themselves and their families. Finally, they explore how these narratives counter stereotypes of women migrants and refugees as lacking agency, instead revealing their resiliency and self-sufficiency.

In the first brief, Dina Taha examines how Syrian women have used marriage as a self-resettlement strategy in Egypt, a practice she calls “marriage for refuge.” These marriages are often unregistered, religious, and polygamous — aspects that have led to heavy criticism from women advocacy groups. However, contrary to narratives of these marriages as exploitative, Taha finds that many women have used “marriage for refuge” as a social, economic, and legal survival tool that can offer a form of protection. Ultimately, she challenges stereotypes about the meaning and the option of marriage, reframing “marriage for refuge” as a tool for self-resettlement, self-protection, and self-empowerment.

In the Turkish context, Saniye Dedeoğlu explores how Turkish employers have benefitted from — and in some cases exploited — the labor of Syrian refugee women in the Turkish agricultural sector. After assessing the increased workload that Syrian women experience in agriculture and domestic activities in Turkey, Dedeoğlu argues that the survival of Syrian refugees relies not only on the longer hours that women work, but also on imposing stricter control by men over women and their labor. In some cases, women do not receive their wages, which are instead paid to their husbands, reinforcing patriarchal practices. Dedeoğlu argues that women refugees’ work must be formalized in order to prevent this type of exploitation.

Jasmin Lilian Diab focuses on the intersection of migration, gender, health, and economic insecurity in Lebanon during the COVID-19 pandemic. The prevalent and systemic gender inequalities that particularly affect refugee and migrant women in Lebanon have been exacerbated by the pandemic, translating into diminished access to resources, services, and opportunities. Women and girls continue to have insufficient access to social and legal protection, which is reflected in the sharp increases in sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and child marriage in refugee settlements across the country. Diab concludes that to combat these intersecting gender inequalities, it is necessary to develop a comprehensive approach that involves community-based organizations and local governments working together to provide these women with legal and social resources as well as health services.

Reem Ladadwa, Rula Ghandour, and Wee'am Hammoudeh explore the health challenges that refugee girl adolescents experience in Palestinian camps in Jordan and the West Bank. They examine how factors like overcrowding, lack of infrastructure, and insufficient recreational activities impact both the physical and mental health of young Palestinian refugee women. Their health is also affected by the reduced mobility caused by their social environment; as girls reach puberty, families and communities often closely monitor their movement within the camp. To address these challenges, the authors propose several solutions: creating centers that offer culturally sensitive activities for girls, working with camp families to increase awareness about the transitions that girls experience, and increasing the integration of camp residents into host communities.

With a focus on Morocco, Mohamed Khalis, Laila Acharai, Oumnia Bouaddi, Aasmaa Chaoui, Sanae Elomrani, Abdelhakim Yahyane, and Bouchra Assarag also consider the topic of health among migrant women through a survey they conducted with sub-Saharan African migrants in Rabat. Their research shows a high prevalence of SGBV, poor utilization of support services, and significant sexual and reproductive health issues. To address these issues, they recommend expanding access to information about existing protection and support services, improving research and data collection on SGBV, and developing coordination mechanisms between stakeholders focused on migrant health and protection.

Iman El-Mahdi examines Sudanese refugee and migrant women on the move in Egypt, a population that has a long history of migration to the country. While women on the move are often portrayed as helpless and voiceless victims, her research shows the opportunities that Sudanese women on the move in Egypt create for themselves through community-making. El-Mahdi argues that by creating associations, improvised schools, and monetary savings groups, Sudanese women establish networks of reciprocity and community that serve as coping mechanisms to navigate their everyday hardships in Cairo. El-Mahdi also argues that women on the move should have a leading say in how they are represented and in developing the policies that impact them.

Also looking at Egypt, Adam Eddouss assesses the experiences of Egyptian migrant women and questions why women have been comparatively absent from narratives and statistics on Egyptian emigration. For decades, migrant women have served as an important form of Egyptian state-building and have generated significant remittances, he writes. He argues that even if women constitute a smaller percentage of Egyptian emigrants, it is critical to include their perspectives and analyze their experiences in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Egyptian migration and the dynamics that shape it. Ultimately, Eddouss argues that the Egyptian state can do more to raise awareness about the existing and future contributions that migrant women make to Egyptian society, and can also take greater steps to gain the confidence of migrants abroad, including women, to enhance their transnational ties to Egypt and their contributions to its development.

Finally, Merve Erdilmen examines the way in which women-refugee-led organizations in Turkey interpret gender mainstreaming, a concept that has been largely defined by international organizations. She argues that gender mainstreaming policies often rely on Western conceptions of women's empowerment — e.g., developing economic agency — instead of focusing on the context-specific experiences of refugee communities. According to Erdilmen, a holistic approach that amplifies the voices of refugee women and takes into account other aspects of their social lives — for instance, their religious identities — is necessary to develop more sustainable and ethical gender policies within the global refugee regime.

This compilation is based on “The Intersection of Gender and Displacement in the Middle East and North Africa” workshop held in Cairo, Egypt, in October 2022. Thank you to the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies (CMRS) at The American University in Cairo (AUC) for hosting the workshop, especially Naseem Hashim, outreach coordinator at CMRS. In addition to the authors and hosts, we would like to thank Sarah Sadek, adjunct professor at CMRS, and Gerda Heck, assistant professor of sociology at AUC’s Department of Sociology, Egyptology, and Anthropology, for participating as discussants and providing feedback at the workshop, which greatly contributed to the discussion around these critical topics. Emilia Gauch, an undergraduate student at Rice University, also provided invaluable assistance in the editing of the briefs. The workshop was funded with the generous support of the Qatar Fund for Development.

<sup>1</sup> The Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), “International Migrant Stock 2020,” <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>; UNHCR, “Refugee Data Finder,” 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=pP3jVO>.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Hyndman, “Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism,” *Borderlines* 16, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

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# POLICY BRIEF **03.16.23**

## **Marriage as a Durable Solution? How Syrian Refugee Women Use Marriage for Self-resettlement**

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It is estimated that Egypt has hosted about 500,000 Syrian refugees since 2011. However, most of these refugees are not included in official UNHCR statistics, which only count 119,665 registered Syrian refugees.<sup>1</sup> Limited awareness of registration opportunities, concerns over potential social stigmatization, and fear of being recorded in government databases are among the reasons why there is a discrepancy in the numbers of Syrians in Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Syrians who came to Egypt arrived in an economically troubled country and a politically polarized atmosphere, where they faced a lack of opportunities and a high cost of living.<sup>3</sup>

The phenomena of Syrian women marrying Egyptian men whom they barely knew soon after their arrival has drawn the attention of media and advocacy groups.<sup>4</sup> Such marriages have been facilitated and encouraged through different channels, including marriage brokers, social media, and religious groups.<sup>5</sup> This brief is based on fieldwork conducted in Egypt during the summer of 2017 investigating Syrian refugee women's strategies of self-resettlement, mainly through such marriages, a practice I call "marriage for refuge." In contrast to existing narratives that view this type of marriage as exploitative, I demonstrate how the concept of "marriage for refuge" offers a better lens through which to analyze the relationship between forced migration and marriage.

### **METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTIC APPROACH**

This brief presents results from 42 in-depth interviews conducted with Syrian refugee women and some of their Egyptian husbands.

Most of the women claimed that shortly after arriving in Egypt, regardless of their marital status — divorced, widowed, single mother, or never married — they were bombarded with marriage proposals from Egyptian men of different social classes. Informants described three types of marriage:

1. Quick, taking place within a few weeks or even a few days of the initial proposal.
2. Polygamous, where the man already has a wife and is seeking a second wife.
3. Customary or *Urfi* marriages, which are limited to the religious ceremony and hence are not officially registered.

When asked to elaborate on why they thought Egyptian men were seeking to marry Syrian refugee women in particular, almost all of the women made reference to the reputation of Syrian women in terms of physical beauty, femininity, self-care, and their high quality as housewives (compared to Egyptian women). However, some of the Egyptian husbands interviewed also complained about the financial burden of getting married to an Egyptian woman,



**For some of the women, marriage was regarded as a way to regain their lost social status and social network.**



**Displacement has dismantled persistent social structures surrounding both the meaning and the option of marriage.**

including ongoing and increasing requests for material support from her family that, they said, would likely follow. Some men said that with limited financial resources, they have a better chance of finding a “higher quality” Syrian partner — referring to intellectual qualities and social class — who might have fewer options to choose from compared to a potential Egyptian partner.

These results seem to reinforce the exploitative narrative presented by several advocacy groups and social media campaigns, which reduce Egyptian men's motivations for such marriages to the idea that “Syrian refugees are cheaper, prettier, better cooks and easier to marry.”<sup>6</sup> However, using a decolonizing lens,<sup>7</sup> this brief demonstrates how “marriage for refuge,” while not a justification of patriarchy and oppression, better analyzes the relationship between forced migration, marriage, and durable solutions to displacement.

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**MARRIAGE, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND SELF-RESETTLEMENT**

Many female respondents described marriage to an Egyptian man as a social, economic, and legal survival tool. They commonly referred to marriage as *sotra*, an Arabic word meaning “to cover,” often used to mean protection or sheltering. This should not be regarded as necessarily indicating a lack of affection and companionship in these marriages. Instead, marriage, in such cases, often serves a dual purpose of intimacy and protection. In this sense, marriage functions as a tool for economic support by providing financial security to the household. It also offers protection from other social pressures, including attempts to take advantage of these women due to their refugee status and their difficulties in managing cultural differences and day-to-day interactions. This includes a certain degree of shielding from verbal and sexual harassment, in particular, although this is still a serious issue affecting numerous women in Egypt.

When asked about the meaning of *sotra*, Marwa, a widow in her early thirties with two children and currently a second wife to an Egyptian man, said:

*“In my opinion, sotra means a man ... when you say: ‘that’s it!’ no one is going to harass me, no one is going to impose themselves on me. That’s it! I am with this man and so I can rest mentally.”*

Mona, a 45-year-old divorced woman from a well-off family in Syria, agreed with Marwa. Despite her financial stability, Mona still felt the importance of getting married upon arrival in Egypt and compared “a woman without a husband to a tree without leaves.”<sup>8</sup>

Some women also used marriage to a local person as a legal survival tool to secure legal residency status for themselves and their children, which is especially useful in an unpredictable political environment.

For some of the women, marriage was regarded as a way to regain their lost social status and social network. Nazira, a 45-year-old divorced woman who is currently happily married to an Egyptian man five years younger than her, dismissed the idea of marrying if she were back in Syria: “I would be among my family and my people ... I would have more than one man to take care of me.”

The respondents’ narratives reflect a strong awareness of social position, risks, and restrictions. Such restrictions are often a product of the respondents’ gender, their displacement, and their location in a foreign country where they lack social capital and cultural maneuverability.

That said, they were also able to identify options that suited their needs and made the best of their situations. For instance, Nouran was convinced that a woman’s “natural path is to get married eventually.” Her refugee status turned what she had already seen as her natural path — although now in a context of more limited and somewhat different options — into a solution, an opportunity, and even an advantage: Nouran’s gender and ethnicity gave her more choices than some other asylum-seekers in Egypt.<sup>9</sup> Based on Nouran’s rationale, other solutions like working as a hairdresser (her job before she married her first Syrian husband) would keep her away from her daughter during the work day, which could expose the daughter

to a relatively foreign culture and make her prone to exploitation and “humiliation.” Since Nouran’s child was her first priority, marriage was the safe or “decent,” if not the obvious, option in her situation.

## MARRIAGE AND SELF-EMPOWERMENT

The interviewed women also demonstrated resourcefulness in leveraging many cultural and legal rules to make the best of their situations. For instance, some respondents explained that they preferred — in fact insisted — on keeping their marriages unregistered, i.e., an *Urfi* marriage, which is limited to a private religious ceremony. While many women sought to register their marriages to preserve their martial rights and legal status in the country, some preferred the precarious status created by the *Urfi* or customary marriage. They justified their choice in several ways. First, some women, like Nazira, said that marrying an Egyptian would entail the woman losing her legal refugee status with the UNHCR. Thus, by not disclosing their marriage, they could keep their yellow refugee card denoting their legal refugee status and therefore remain eligible for humanitarian financial assistance and food rations for themselves and their children. Second, by not registering their marriage with the Egyptian government, they hold onto a higher level of autonomy if they later decide that the marriage was a mistake, choose to leave the country, or want to go back to Syria. A customary marriage simplifies the separation process and makes it possible to legally claim single status outside Egypt if needed at a later date.

Similarly, some respondents emphasized their preference to be second wives, regardless of whether the marriage was registered or not. This was because many of them arrived in Egypt as single mothers after being divorced or widowed, and many did not want to be a “full-time” wife, which might distract them from their children. Being a second wife means that they only have a “part-time” husband who splits his time between two wives and two households (or more in very rare cases), allowing them more time for their children.

In humanitarian and economic development discussions, women’s empowerment is frequently translated as economic and financial independence or defined in terms of emancipation and subversion.<sup>10</sup> Growing evidence, however, suggests that economic empowerment or autonomy is not enough and, in some cases, not necessarily coupled with progressive outcomes for women.<sup>11</sup> For instance, there are mixed reports about how access to microfinance services impacts women’s empowerment, especially since involvement in such initiatives does not always translate into participation in household decision-making, control over assets, women’s physical mobility, and political and legal awareness.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, some Syrian refugee women in Jordan have reported needing to fulfill traditional gender roles while providing for their families, leading to increased responsibility, doubling their burden, and creating a less-than-ideal situation for some of the respondents who prefer not to work outside of their homes.<sup>13</sup> The examples in this case study demonstrate how women can leverage socially prescribed roles and practices for self-empowerment and to maximize self-interest.

## MARRIAGE IMMOBILITY

Nonetheless, it is essential to acknowledge that for some women “marriage for refuge” results in increased vulnerability — more so than before they fled the war zone. Despite marrying voluntarily, some respondents feel they have no real choice but to stay in the marriage and the country for reasons that, in their assessment, outweigh caring for their mental health.

Mohra, a 26-year-old Syrian mother of two who was lured to Egypt by her current Egyptian husband, is an example of this. Mohra’s husband offered to marry her and take her and her children out of war-burdened Syria, so she married him while she was still in Syria by mailing him a power of attorney form, which he used to legalize the marriage in Egypt. She traveled to him alone, hoping her children would follow soon, only to be shocked by the dire social

and economic situation in which he was living. Although her Syrian children followed her a little over a year after her arrival, after giving birth to a daughter in Egypt, she is now forced to choose between leaving her Egyptian child behind or suffering every day with her Syrian children in Egypt. Despite her complete dissatisfaction with her marriage, Mohra explained that saving her kids from the war zone was worth the initial risk of the marriage and even her current situation.

This means that some respondents are neither in a forced nor a voluntary marriage. They experience “marriage immobility,” a term I coin building on Lubkemann’s<sup>14</sup> notion of involuntary immobility. In this sense, marriage immobility refers to an “in-between” marriage status — neither forced nor voluntary. Mohra was convinced that she would eventually end up separating from her husband. However, when I followed up with her two years after our initial encounter, she was still “frustratingly” married to him. This reinforces the marriage immobility status that I argue describes her experience and has compounded her precarity as a young woman, a mother, and a refugee. Significantly, her experience cannot be accurately described by the voluntary/forced marriage dichotomy.

I submit that the notion of marriage immobility offers a useful analytical tool for understanding deeper layers of gendered refugee experiences, and it better characterizes the obstacles and causes of vulnerability. In other words, by decolonizing the binary relation between forced and voluntary marriage, and by capturing the state of in-betweenness, I seek to generate an analytical category that renders more visible the lives, experiences, and challenges facing some refugee women. This conceptualization, I argue, is more nuanced than current exploitation and humanitarian sexual and gender-based violence frameworks. We need a more holistic way to view and understand the multiple elements that inform marriage experiences for women in displacement.

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## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

By challenging the image of refugee women as mere victims, policymakers and practitioners could find innovative ways to engage them as experts in designing and leading local initiatives and solutions at the grassroots level. I recommend:

- Co-developing culturally relevant definitions and indicators to measure humanitarian notions such as empowerment and resettlement that go beyond economic and financial independence to include social and psychological integration.
- Centering local initiatives and solutions that are culturally informed about norms of social protection, particularly those focused on strengthening women’s social capital and enhancing family reunification.
- Training grassroots agencies to provide culturally relevant legal and mental health counseling as well as championing innovative solutions that engage refugee women in identifying challenges and designing solutions.
- Incorporating decolonizing frameworks<sup>15</sup> to change practices around humanitarian aid and justice, engaging people with lived experiences to understand and co-create solutions for the (overwhelmingly) non-Western refugee experience. This includes “othered” social experiences and arrangements such as: What defines a real marriage? What role can the extended family play in creating a more robust resettlement experience? How can we acknowledge the spectrum between voluntary and non-voluntary marriage to better understand and address gendered displacement?



## CONCLUSION

“Marriage for refuge” demonstrates the varied effects displacement has on the gendered refugee experience. The uprootedness caused by displacement imposes complex limits, often dictated by patriarchal patterns, on displaced women’s survival tools and options, that lead to marriage being considered as an obvious or “decent” option. However, that displacement has also offered some refugee women a social advantage available only to their specific gendered and ethnicized group — not to other social groups within the refugee community, e.g., male refugees. More importantly, displacement has dismantled persistent social structures surrounding both the meaning and the option of marriage (and remarriage) in many cases. Marriage can now be framed as a tool for self-resettlement, self-protection, and self-empowerment.

Durable solutions for refugees are often shaped by a victim-savior paradigm that reinforces a power imbalance between refugees and the global humanitarian system.<sup>16</sup> In this brief, I sought to center gendered, self-initiated, and innovative resettlement options that pose critical questions to refugee studies and gender studies by shifting the discourse toward “self-authorized modes of protection”<sup>17</sup> and “self-rescue” resettlement options.<sup>18</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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7. I understand “decolonizing” as theoretical and methodological strategies that strive to offer alternative world views to the hegemonic Western interpretations of history and social order. In essence, decolonizing posits that notions such as emancipation, empowerment, and victimhood are social constructs, allowing more room and imagination to understand diverse refugee experiences. Decolonization, thus, helps question the “either/or” binaries constructed among notions such as privilege/disadvantage, oppression/emancipation, empowerment/exploitation, voluntary/involuntary, and agency/victimhood.

8. More details about Sutra marriage can be found at Dina Taha, “‘Seeking a Widow with Orphaned Children’: Understanding Sutra Marriage Amongst Syrian Refugee Women in Egypt,” in *Migration and Islamic Ethics* Volume 2 (Brill, 2019) 67–91.

9. This includes other sub-Saharan refugees such as Sudanese, Eritreans, and Somalis who due to their ethnic background might not have the same appeal to Egyptians. For detailed discussion about race and shadeism or discrimination against darker skin tones and how it often derives from the privilege given to whiteness, anti-blackness, and desire for whiteness see Amrit Kaur Dhillon, “Lighten up: Exploring Skin Lightening Practices among Canadian South Asian Woman.” (November 2016) Masters thesis, York University, <https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/33448>.

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# POLICY BRIEF **03.17.23**

## Intersecting Vulnerabilities: Syrian Refugee Women and Turkey's Agricultural Workforce

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### INTRODUCTION: SYRIAN REFUGEES ARE CHANGING THE FACE OF TURKEY'S AGRICULTURAL WORKFORCE

In recent years, political events and attempts to integrate migrants into domestic labor forces globally have increased the number of people forced to live on the margins of society without stable social or economic systems. Turkey's labor market, with its growing Syrian refugee and migrant population, is no exception. The number of Syrians now under temporary protection in Turkey totals around 3.6 million, making Syrians Turkey's largest refugee sector.

Available data shows that these Syrian refugees are 54% male and 46% female. Additionally, 47% of all Syrian refugees are children under the age of 18. The majority of registered Syrians are women and children, indicating a family-based migration pattern. Furthermore, it is estimated that around 1 million Syrians now work informally in Turkey since the number of work permits issued to Syrians is quite low. Seasonal agricultural work comprises one of the largest informal labor markets that Syrians have started to populate in recent years.

This brief explores how Syrian refugees who are women and children gain access to employment and how their vulnerabilities influence their integration into Turkish labor markets, specifically the agricultural

sector. This analysis incorporates the concept of "intersectional vulnerabilities," or the interconnected disadvantages created by social categorizations such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and social status. It also highlights the interconnectedness between women's activities in the realms of production-paid work and unpaid domestic responsibilities by focusing on how the feminization of Syria's agricultural labor force in Turkey is built on the intersectional vulnerabilities of women and children.

Finally, this brief examines how Syrian female labor is institutionalized through paid and unpaid activities that are directly related to production of low-cost crops that can compete in international markets or that support lower wages for domestic consumers.

### BACKGROUND: A HIGHLY VULNERABLE LABOR FORCE

An increasing demand for manual labor in Turkey's agricultural sector, mainly for hoeing and harvesting, has inevitably boosted the demand for seasonal agricultural wage labor in recent years. Especially during peak production periods, seasonal workers usually travel with their families, farming different products and creating a migration cycle that takes six to nine months a year. Due to harsh working and living conditions — characterized by low daily wages and the insecurities



**Syrian female labor is institutionalized through paid and unpaid activities that are directly related to production of low-cost crops that can compete in international markets or that support lower wages for domestic consumers.**

**The imposition of patriarchal control over female labor and earnings is mostly the result of how agricultural work is managed and controlled by a group of men who together form a patriarchal solidarity.**

involved in seasonal agricultural work — this work is mostly carried out by the most economically-disadvantaged groups in Turkey as a survival strategy.

The source of workers has historically shifted from one poverty-stricken group to another as the agricultural industry continues to rely on vulnerable populations for low-cost labor. Over the years, different groups have dominated the pool of available farm workers in Turkey. In the 1990s, it was internally displaced Kurds, followed by ethnically Arab Turkish citizens living in Urfa, Mardin, and Adiyaman, and, lastly, international migrants, particularly today's Syrian migrant population.

### METHODOLOGY

The findings in this brief are based on fieldwork carried out by a team in the rural tent areas of the Adana Plain in Turkey between April 2017 and January 2018. Survey work was conducted in Arabic and included 905 people from 112 worker households, using a questionnaire with both open-ended and multiple-choice questions. Fieldwork also included in-depth interviews with a total of 50 people, including 25 Syrian refugees, 10 local agricultural workers, 10 landowners, and five agricultural labor intermediaries. The sample of 905 people was distributed equally between men and women, and almost half (45.2%) were under the age of 18.

Owing to the young age composition and mostly rural background of Syrian agricultural workers, educational attainment was extremely low. Almost half of the population (47%) was illiterate and primary school graduates made up only 22.5%. Dropouts from primary school (9.8%) and secondary education (4.6%) were also high. More than half of the sample (53.6%) were agricultural workers back in Syria and 18.8% were farmers.

Data reveals distinctive characteristics of Syrian households: The average length of stay was 3.5 years, a typical household was composed of eight people, and 80% of all families were from Halep and Haseke. All of the families had stayed in refugee camps, and 17% were not registered with Turkish authorities and had no identification cards.

### HOW VULNERABILITIES AFFECT WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN THE WORKFORCE

The recent addition of female Syrian refugees to the agricultural labor force in Turkey has diversified the labor pool and served as a major supply-side strategy used by Syrians to compete for agricultural jobs. However, the fact that women and children comprise the majority of this workforce indicates that this labor pool has thrived primarily because of the intersecting vulnerabilities of women and children.

Feminization is now visible in the number of women who work in agriculture as well as in discourse surrounding the “best worker” debate. In our sample of 112 Syrian households surveyed, 56% of women were engaged in agricultural work (254 out of 453 women). The rate for girls aged 6–14 was 49.3% and increased to 89.7% for girls aged 15–17. Girls tend to work in high numbers until the age of marriage. This may be due, in part, to how agriculture is believed to be women's work within the Turkish culture. For example, one *dayıbaşı*<sup>1</sup> (a labor intermediary) in Adana, (53 years old with 20 years of experience) explained how he forms his worker teams, showing a preference for female workers:

*“Everyone knows that women are the main workers. When forming our worker teams, we always seek to have women. Otherwise, when there are no women, no work gets done at all. They work hard and fast. They are diligent at what they do. Young men can be troublemakers from time to time, but women and girls are easily controlled!”*

As this labor intermediary noted, women are perceived as ideal workers because of their hard work ethic and the ease with which they can be managed.

Notably, Syrian women continuously maintained that their lives back in Syria were radically different. For example, a mother of five discussed her changing work pattern and roles as follows:

*“Back in Syria, only men worked, and one income was enough to support a family. My husband was a butcher and we had a small plot of land in the village we lived in. I used to do the work in our garden and look after my family. ... Here the whole family has to work, but it is still not enough to support us. Men, women, boys and girls, all work!”*

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### ONE IMPACT: WAGES ARE DECREASING WHILE PROFITS ARE RISING

Competition for existing jobs between Syrian and Turkish workers mostly results in decreased wages and increased profits for farm owners and traders. Decreasing workers' wages, however, mean that workers have to work longer hours and more members of a family have to work to meet their subsistence level. In a work regime where workers are already working up to their physical limits, the only strategy is to draw on the labor of almost all family members as much as possible. An 18-year-old girl explains her situation:

*“I would have never worked if we were back in Syria. Only my father would go to work. Here, life is so expensive and we have nothing. We all have to work. My brother who is 12 years old started to go to the fields this year. We all need to work. My father has a heart condition and is too old to work in a field.”*

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### ANOTHER IMPACT: DOUBLED RESPONSIBILITIES FOR WOMEN

Migrant women face the double burden of juggling agricultural work and domestic responsibilities at home even as their workloads have increased as a result of deteriorating living conditions and longer wage work times. Living in tent camps (usually made of nylon and pitched on bare ground in open air with no access

to refrigeration) makes the tasks women must undertake even harder. All the typical activities of a household — such as cooking, doing laundry, taking care of children, gathering wood for fuel, carrying water, taking care of oneself, and ensuring basic hygiene — are more exhausting and take more time. These responsibilities fall unevenly on the shoulders of women and girls. A 25-year-old Syrian mother of three described her situation:

*“We used to have a nice house with a garden. Now, look at us: We live in this dust and mud. I have to carry water to cook and other things. ... It is hard to adapt living in these conditions. It is difficult to protect ourselves from all sorts of dangers, such as floods, insects, snakes.”*

Women's unpaid domestic responsibilities are as vital to seasonal agricultural work as the activities done in the fields and on farms. Worker family movement from one province to another — which involves carrying all household possessions so that they can construct a home in a new tent camp — requires women to mobilize their domestic duties so that workers can be released to toil in the fields. Therefore, domestic responsibilities can be seen as the main engine of seasonal agricultural work based on a low-cost labor pool.

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### PATRIARCHAL SOLIDARITY HELPS CONTROL FEMALE LABOR

Even though the time Syrian women spend on paid and unpaid work increased greatly after migrating to Turkey, their labor is controlled by both the patriarchal and capitalistic realities operating in their new communities. The result is that women exert little control over their income or labor.

The imposition of patriarchal control over female labor and earnings is mostly the result of how agricultural work is managed and controlled by a group of men who together form a patriarchal solidarity. This patriarch includes the male heads of households, labor intermediaries, and landowners. For example, the decision of



who will work in a given family is made by male family heads and labor intermediaries. Even if adult men are not working, and the livelihood of the household is provided by women and children, the matter of how many and which individuals from a household will work outside the home is decided in male-dominated settings.

Furthermore, intermediaries pay wages directly to the heads of households, bypassing female and child workers. Women's labor also serves as the invisible foundation of the negotiation process between the male heads of households, male labor intermediaries, and male landowners. In short, patriarchal solidarity between men controls the work of Syrian women and demands their submission, even as men benefit from the fruits of women's labor.

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### CONTROLLING FEMALE WORKERS THROUGH PAYMENT METHODS

The wage payment system used by the Turkish agricultural system is also a way to exert control over primarily female workers. Wages are determined daily, and workers are entitled to wages based on each day of work completed. However, workers never see this cash. Instead, agricultural labor intermediaries agree to pay families a certain wage at the beginning of the season before they even travel. When the work commences, the intermediaries give each worker a wage card (a card with the intermediary's name and picture) for each completed work day. After a day's work, the male head of their household collects the wage cards from the women and children in their families and keeps track of the wage system. Meanwhile, the intermediary tallies expenses for each family including charges for electricity, water, food, and more.

When the time comes for a cash payment, a deduction for tallied expenses is made, and the remaining sum is paid. Male heads of households usually receive their families' wages from the agricultural intermediary after the employers have sold their product and received payment due. With almost no exception — even in cases where mostly women and children work —

“the father” receives the wage cards and, eventually, the payment. In this manner, male agricultural intermediaries reinforce the patriarchal hegemony.

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### CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The work of female Syrian refugees in the realms of production, domestic responsibilities, and other unpaid labor are vital to the production of low-cost agricultural products in Turkey and are at the center of survival strategies for Syrian families. The participation of women and children in Turkish agricultural labor markets is easily controlled by cooperation between patriarchal relations and capitalist exploitation. All of these factors have led to the intensification of women's gendered subordination.

The increased workload for Syrian women — both in paid and unpaid labor sectors during the post-migration process — has illustrated that the survival of Syrian families relies not only on the longer hours that women work in agriculture and domestic activities, but also on the exertion of stricter control over women and their labor. Therefore, improving the status of women is crucial for enhancing the resilience of migrant groups. However, creating policy recommendations to accomplish this goal is a complex and multifaceted endeavor that requires significant structural changes. Here are some Turkey-specific recommendations:

- Create decent work conditions for refugees through the formalization and regularization of informal sectors in Turkey.
- Allow easier access to work permits so that refugees can benefit from formal employment conditions.
- Provide women and worker families with access to more facilities and utilities that lighten their unpaid workload, such as childcare facilities, soup kitchens, laundry, running water, and electricity.
- Mandate decent accommodation conditions in workers camps, reduce

allowable working hours within national legal limits, and improve working conditions for workers engaged in seasonal agricultural work.

- Furnish workers, especially women, with protective equipment and clothes to reduce the dangers of agricultural work, such as heat, dust, pesticides, and other chemicals.
- Formalize individualized wage payments to secure women's access to cash payments.

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1. This is the local Turkish name given to labor intermediaries organizing labor supply and demand in agricultural labor markets. Dayıbaşı is usually a person commanding a large group of workers and allocating them to different work in the fields.

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# POLICY BRIEF **03.18.23**

## **Gender and Security in Lebanon During and Post-COVID-19: The Case of Migrant and Refugee Women**

**Jasmin Lilian Diab, Ph.D.**, Director, Institute for Migration Studies; Assistant Professor and Coordinator of Migration Studies, Lebanese American University

### **INTRODUCTION**

Lebanon continues to navigate the country's most devastating political, economic, and financial crisis in its post-independence history.<sup>1</sup> The layered and intersectional implications of this crisis have been felt hardest by the country's most vulnerable and marginalized communities — predominantly the country's millions of refugees and migrants.<sup>2</sup> Whether in the areas of social inequality, unemployment, statelessness, homelessness, or food insecurity, Lebanon's refugee and migrant communities have been struggling to attain basic human rights.<sup>3</sup>

Following an explosion in the Beirut Port in August 2020, as well as the devaluation of the country's currency by over 90%, an estimated 80% of Lebanon's population currently lives below the poverty line, according to Human Rights Watch.<sup>4</sup> Lebanon serves as a host country to approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees,<sup>5</sup> 192,000 Palestinian refugees,<sup>6</sup> and 250,000 migrant domestic workers.<sup>7</sup> These migrant and refugee communities have undeniably felt the brunt of the nation's crisis.

The challenges faced by Lebanon's most vulnerable groups cannot be viewed in isolation. Instead they stem from layered and intersectional factors — everything from the use of the kafala system, which gives private citizens and companies almost total control over migrant workers' labor rights,<sup>8</sup> to the misinterpretation of articles in the Lebanese

penal code used to prosecute women from the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>9</sup> All of these factors, combined with the effects of Lebanon's economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and recovery from the Beirut explosion, have amplified the difficulties faced by refugee and migrant women in Lebanon.

This brief examines how these intersectional factors exacerbate the insecurity and inequalities experienced by migrant and refugee women in Lebanon. It also looks at how the country's economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic are compounding matters for this vulnerable population. Finally, it offers recommendations for a comprehensive approach to combat gender inequalities that equips women in conflict settings with the health care and economic support they need.

### **LEBANON'S GENDER GAP: A REALITY LONG BEFORE THE CRISIS**

Even before the country's political, economic, and health hardships, Lebanon suffered from protracted, deep, and widely entrenched gender inequalities at all levels of public and private life. According to the World Economic Forum's 2022 "Global Gender Gap Report," Lebanon ranks 119 out of 146 on the Gender Gap Index, and 135 out of 146 in the area of women's economic participation.<sup>10</sup>

Lebanon's legal frameworks continue to be vague and lacking when it comes to the provision of all forms of protection to women



**The challenges faced by Lebanon's most vulnerable groups cannot be viewed in isolation. Instead they stem from layered and intersectional factors.**

**Gender-blind responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Beirut explosion, and the ongoing economic crisis have failed to adequately address the needs of intersectional communities and gender minorities.**

and girls. These include gender-specific legal frameworks that protect them from marital rape, child marriage, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).<sup>11</sup> Even when the laws themselves are in place, their applicability remains a challenge amid patriarchal, cultural, social, sectarian, and political narratives.<sup>12</sup>

Barriers to accessing justice are also prevalent among refugee and migrant women.<sup>13</sup> Amid the ongoing Lebanese crisis, refugee camps across the country have witnessed sharp increases in SGBV and child marriage.<sup>14</sup> Multiple reports attribute the increase in child marriage to the country's economic crisis — as families who marry off their young girls assume that they are now the legal and economic responsibility of their husbands.<sup>15</sup>

**WOMEN' LIMITED POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND LACK OF SOCIAL & LEGAL PROTECTIONS**

Women's representation is absent in many decision-making positions and processes in Lebanon. This is most tangibly witnessed when it comes to leadership during and after conflicts and crises. Gender-blind responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Beirut explosion, and the ongoing economic crisis have failed to adequately address the needs of intersectional communities and gender minorities. Although rates of SGBV and child marriage have increased dramatically throughout the COVID-19 quarantine and lockdown periods, the emergency humanitarian response to the pandemic itself (and the Beirut explosion) pushed women's issues far down on the long list of state "priorities."<sup>16</sup>

According to ABAAD, Legal Action Worldwide, and GAPS UK, women, migrants, refugees, and trans people feel less safe in public spaces due to increased militarism in response to the explosion and enforced lockdowns.<sup>17</sup> Lebanon's social protection frameworks have historically left women, migrant domestic workers, refugees, and members of the LGBTQ+ community to fend for themselves.<sup>18</sup> Gaps in national protection legislation as well as adequate service provisions have widened as the

country shows no signs of ending the intersectional crises experienced by people within its borders.<sup>19</sup>

For refugee women, migrant women, and women from vulnerable communities, a lack of access to quality information about rights and services has reinforced gender inequalities across health, safety, and legal realms for decades.<sup>20</sup>

**COVID-19'S IMPACT ON LEBANON'S PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a drastic impact on an already-weakened public health system in Lebanon. The nation's containment measures — including restrictions on mobility and nationwide lockdowns — have raised substantial challenges for the humanitarian community trying to assist refugees and migrant domestic workers.<sup>21</sup> Relief services in Lebanon have been significantly reduced, and aid programs have had to swiftly adapt and readjust their delivery methods and activities according to immediate, protracted, and unforeseen needs. In already struggling refugee settings, the pandemic has limited access to basic services and goods, legal and social protections, health services, educational opportunities, and economic security. It has also highlighted that universal approaches to COVID-19 prevention — such as social distancing, mask-wearing, hand washing, and sanitation — are often not possible in refugee settings.<sup>22</sup>

**INCREASED SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE DURING PANDEMIC**

Syrian refugee and migrant women and girls across Lebanon continue to endure prevalent and systemic gender inequality, tainted with diminished access to resources, services, and opportunities, as well as higher risks of violence and abuse.<sup>23</sup> Refugee and migrant women are also at a greater risk of experiencing SGBV throughout their lifetimes — a vulnerability that has been heightened by the pandemic.<sup>24</sup> Syrian refugee women report domestic violence, gender-based violence (GBV), and intimate partner violence

(IPV) as common issues, and insist that incidents are increasing because of the restrictions on movement and the quarantine imposed by the pandemic.<sup>25</sup> A significant number of women from the Syrian refugee community further state that incidents of GBV are generally not reported, and that a very limited percentage of women from these communities have access to the services and support they need.<sup>26</sup>

A study from 2020 published in *BMC Women's Health* highlights that sexual exploitation, trafficking, and abuse remain major concerns for Syrian refugee women and girls in Lebanon and that even local and international aid workers are potential perpetrators.<sup>27</sup> On another note, the reliance on “survival sex” is a prevalent practice amongst Syrian refugee transwomen due to severe legal, social, and economic discrimination against them.<sup>28</sup>

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### WOMEN'S ECONOMIC AND LEGAL CHALLENGES EXACERBATED BY PANDEMIC

According to a report by UN Women from 2020, Syrian women are 18% less likely to have legal residency in Lebanon than their male counterparts, and residency via sponsorship is less likely to be granted to refugee women (19%) than men (46%).<sup>29</sup> Women make up an estimated 76% of all migrant workers and 99% of migrant domestic workers who come to Lebanon for employment.<sup>30</sup> Despite coming to the country as workers, they are excluded from labor protections according to Article 7 of the Labor Law — ultimately pushing many of the women who flee abusive working environments to live without documentation or paperwork.<sup>31</sup> Living without legal residency has resulted in insecurity on almost every level, including the right to work, access to formal and informal educational opportunities, and access to health care. Their residency status has also resulted in the heightened risk of arrests, arbitrary detention, or, in severe cases, deportation.<sup>32</sup>

Challenges that women face such as access to employment and access to social and health services have been exacerbated by

the pandemic. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), 61% of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon reported losing their jobs due to COVID-19, compared to 46% of Syrian men.<sup>33</sup> Migrant workers in Beirut have been left “destitute and in dire need of assistance” as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating 2020 explosion, according to the International Organization for Migration.<sup>34</sup> According to a joint report published by ABAAD, Legal Action Worldwide (LAW), and GAPS UK, LAW's protection hotline witnessed a 1,425% increase in calls between April and September 2020.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to being home to millions of refugees, Lebanon also hosts more than 250,000 migrant domestic workers — the majority of whom are women.<sup>36</sup> In a rapid needs assessment completed in April 2020, the Anti-Racism Movement found upwards of 40% of Lebanon's migrant domestic workers had lost their jobs after the COVID-19 outbreak, in addition to the 58% that had lost their jobs since the beginning of the economic crisis and protests that took place in late 2019.<sup>37</sup>

The situation for migrant women in domestic work continues to be increasingly dangerous as well. The kafala system forces all migrant domestic workers to live with their employers, which drastically increases their exploitation and abuse.<sup>38</sup> The kafala system protects abusive employers who exercise control over workers' lives. Employers may choose not to pay wages or offer days off for their workers, and they may refuse to pay for their workers' medical treatment if they contract the COVID-19 virus.<sup>39</sup>

The majority of women in refugee and migrant communities survive on daily wages, odd jobs, and other sources of non-stable income, which means the COVID-19 pandemic has only added to their physical and mental insecurity.<sup>40</sup>

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### LIMITED ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

The consequences of the pandemic on refugee and migrant women carry profound psychological impacts and constraints on their mental health. Exposure to exploitation



and being isolated with perpetrators in close quarters is known to result in major depressive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and suicidal tendencies.<sup>41</sup> These mental health constraints can have significant social implications across family and community groups, and can lead to discrimination, unwanted pregnancies, stigmatization, ostracism, and, in many instances, death threats from the community and family.<sup>42</sup>

Additionally, access to prevention, response services, mental health support, and community support is exceptionally difficult for women and girls with physical and mental disabilities. These women and girls constitute an estimated 21.4% of female Syrian refugees in Lebanon, according to UN Women.<sup>43</sup>

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### LIMITED ACCESS TO HYGIENIC NECESSITIES

Women and girls continue to encounter challenges in accessing hygiene, sanitation, and reproductive health services as a result of rising prices for these products and services following Lebanon's economic crisis. Plan International reports that women and girls from Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon have been struggling to acquire basic necessities such as sanitary pads or menstrual supplies.<sup>44</sup> Syrian refugee girls constitute the largest group of women in Lebanon currently facing period poverty,<sup>45</sup> and they have limited support in the areas of sexual and reproductive health.<sup>46</sup>

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### RISING RATES OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Negative coping mechanisms to combat the economic realities of poverty-stricken families have been witnessed across the country, particularly among migrant and refugee groups. UN agencies, international governmental organizations, and human rights groups on the ground report that between 2020 and 2021, child marriage among refugee populations increased at an alarming rate since the COVID-19 outbreak.<sup>47</sup> This could have dire economic implications, and UNICEF's Child Protection

Programme in Lebanon insists that child marriage and child labor are only two of the most harmful strategies to which refugees are resorting.

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### A PATH FORWARD: DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO ADDRESS GENDER INEQUALITY

It is critical to address the underlying causes of gender inequality across the entire gender spectrum if a durable health response plan capable of encompassing migrant and refugee women is to be successful. Equipping women in conflict settings with the necessary health care and economic support they need not only challenges the social and cultural constructions that have placed them there, but also permits their upward social mobility and development.

A comprehensive approach to combat gender inequalities (especially for Lebanon's refugee women) must entail the mobilization of community-based organizations to provide legal and social protection and health services in close coordination with local governmental bodies and agencies. Lobbying international funding agencies to provide urgent, targeted, and needs-based financial support that takes into account the intersecting and overlapping social identities of refugee women is necessary while Lebanon continues to struggle with overcoming its mismanaged crises.

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# POLICY BRIEF **03.19.23**

## Health, Place, and Space: Adolescent Female Refugees in Palestinian Camps

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### INTRODUCTION

The health of adolescent refugees is an important yet often overlooked aspect of research and policy in the Arab world. This gap is a missed opportunity: Addressing young refugees' health needs in adolescence can prevent negative health outcomes in the transition to adulthood and affirms their rights to equitable health access and dignified lives. For girls, this is especially important in light of their weakened social position. Adolescent girls face many challenges related to their health and well-being as they move to adulthood in the confined space of refugee camps. Among particularly vulnerable girls, health issues can multiply due to the rise of social and economic constraints inside refugee camps. Growing evidence highlights the importance of studying the health needs of refugee girls, including their physical and mental health.<sup>1</sup>

Female Palestinian refugee adolescents living in camps face enormous challenges that influence their health. Studies have shown the spatial and physical contexts of people's lives — where and how they live — determine their health, meaning that refugee health cannot be fully understood in isolation from the spatial and physical contexts that shape and sustain health conditions and community environment. Chronic disease, mental health issues, health conditions, and behavior are all affected by spatial

and physical factors such as neighborhood socioeconomics, social environment, and the physical (built) environment, all of which are amplified inside refugee camps, including Palestinian camps. Place and space take into account the social relations and social construction of a community as well as the personal experience of spatiality, temporality, and materiality that influence the process of shaping the health status of individuals, especially refugees.

This study investigates the construct of space in Palestinian camps in Jordan and the West Bank, and its effect on the health of female adolescents living in these camps. We examine how place and space influence and shape the health status of refugees. To do this, we consider the social relations and social construction of these refugee communities as well as individual refugees' personal experiences of spatiality, temporality, and materiality.

### METHODS

This study draws on thematic analysis<sup>2</sup> and consists primarily of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with adolescent girls aged 15–18 years old. There was a total of 39 interviews and 23 focus group discussions, taking place in all 19 of the Palestinian refugee camps of the West Bank as well as in the 10 camps in Jordan. In addition, 225 interviews with stakeholders — including



**“We live in the camp; all houses are close to each other. Sometimes, I know my neighbors can see me as I am sitting in my house through our windows.”**

health and education service providers and staff at women's centers and camp youth centers — were conducted in the West Bank and Jordan (respectively, 158 and 67 interviews).

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## POLICY CONTEXT

Participants reported significant health challenges, including mental health issues. These were influenced by:

- the *physical space* characterized by overcrowding and lack of infrastructure;
- the *social construct of space* as a source of restriction, monitoring, and surveillance; and
- the *materiality of space* in the form of deteriorating financial conditions.

Observations and experiences shared by participants point alarmingly to the consequences of the spatial context of camps: It is shown in their alienation, disempowerment, and placelessness, which have serious negative implications for refugee health, especially vulnerable girl adolescents. It is important to consider these findings in the design of future policies related to health in camp populations.

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## CAMP ENVIRONMENT: FEMALE ADOLESCENTS' PERSPECTIVES

Participants reported low levels of health — including mental well-being — characterized by chronic daily uncertainty, insecurity, and heightened vulnerability, leading to stress, reduced well-being, and somatization<sup>3</sup> of stress and distress. Participants discussed a wide variety of factors that affect their physical and mental health. Based on their responses, these negative determinants of health and mental well-being were related to the social, physical, and economic environment. The social environment was a source of restriction and surveillance, while the physical environment was characterized by overcrowding and a lack of infrastructure. Further, many girls noted the difficult financial circumstances of camp families.

These three inseparable environments (physical, social, and economic) result from the prolonged displacement of Palestinians for more than 70 years along with the continuous stigmatization of refugees, the deteriorating conditions of camps, and the lack of legal authority over the camps in Palestine and other host countries such as Jordan. These conditions and environments influence the girls' physical health and their emotions, mood, self-esteem, and perceived well-being. The girls feel a lack of control over their own destinies, which has a negative effect on their health and mental well-being.

This issue brief focuses only on the physical and social environments.

### Physical Environment and the Adolescence Transition

Many girls spoke about the physical environment in Palestinian camps, characterized by overcrowding and a lack of infrastructure. Most participants discussed the experience of living in small houses of one or two rooms, and the proximity of houses to one another, which severely limits privacy. One girl from the Arroub camp south of the West Bank highlighted this:

*"We live in the camp; all houses are close to each other. Sometimes, I know my neighbors can see me as I am sitting in my house through our windows. Our life is live-streaming to our neighbors and people in the camp."*

There is also very little space for girls to relax and get a change of scenery. Some girls said that they go up on the roof (if they have access to it) when they feel like they need to get away. The lack of privacy due to the infrastructure of the camps increases girls' feelings of suffocation, all the more so as they are often confined to their homes.

Another key feature of the physical environment is the lack of infrastructure for girls to take part in activities, which was highlighted in both Jordan and the West Bank. They have very little space to take part in activities, especially those they consider a form of positive release like exercise. Despite the presence of women's programming centers in the camps,

**"It's miserable here, there's no security or personal safety, people are neglected, there are no services, everything is missing."**



activities for 15–18-year-olds are limited. In addition, girls' movement is severely monitored and restricted, particularly in the southern and northern camps of the West Bank as well as in Jordan.

It is worth noting that in a few camps, mainly in the central West Bank — for example, the Dheisheh and Aida camps — the infrastructure and programming opportunities appear to be better than others. However, even in better-serviced camps, girls noted that there were not many opportunities for their age group since they were not considered young children. In more remote or isolated camps, the effects of the lack of infrastructure for girls were more pronounced.

The lack of public services, such as waste collection and management, was another factor reiterated by participants as a key predictor of physical and mental health. They said that poor waste collection resulted in the spread of diseases, and the view of compiled trash and waste affected their mental well-being. Participants wondered what kind of health or well-being they could have while living in such conditions. As one participant from Jenin camp in the north of West Bank noted, “It’s miserable here, there’s no security or personal safety, people are neglected, there are no services, everything is missing.”

### **Social Environment: Gendered Experiences**

The social environment includes encounters with family and members of the wider camp community. These encounters occur in a spatial context and are subject to the general camp culture that has resulted from years of social and political exclusion of camps and camp residents from the communities surrounding them.

For many adolescent girls, in both Jordan and the West Bank, the social environment was a source of restriction and surveillance. As girls reach puberty, they are much more closely monitored by their families and communities. Girls are very cognizant of the fact that their actions will be closely monitored and that society will not be very forgiving if they make mistakes, especially within such a confined and tight-knit

place. This was especially the case with relationships outside of marriage, which are highly stigmatized in camps' conservative environments. Yet, their relationships with their immediate family members, as well as their wider family group, are critical to their health and well-being. Some participants noted that problems in the family can be a source of stress and can consequently have an adverse effect on their health.

Families played an important role in how the girls interacted with space around them — both inside homes and in the public spaces of the camp. They had a significant impact on the girls' enrollment in school and involvement in social activities, and often determined how much mobility the girls had within the camp space.

It was important for girls to feel they were encouraged, understood, and trusted by their families and to have freedom of mobility to interact with the spaces around them. Girls who were given a greater degree of freedom by their families appeared to be well adjusted and generally had a better health status. When girls felt they were not understood by their families or did not have the space to express themselves, this had negative effects on their health and well-being, as one girl from the Baqa'a camp in Jordan explained:

*“My family is strict with me, and a lot of time they tell me what to do and then outside of the house, you are forced not to go out a lot, and if I go out today then I can't go again for a long time. You feel like they are very strict.”*

The larger camp community also had a sizable influence on girls' lives and health. While many girls spoke of positive relationships within the family, they generally had less trust in the larger community and often felt that they were under heavy scrutiny and surveillance. As one girl living in the Amman New camp expressed:

*“For me, it [society] affects my mental health and I am worn out, it is possible that society can have a negative or positive effect on a person, but [our society imposes] a lot of responsibilities and pressures on us.”*

The broader camp community limited the movement and mobility of girls including attending social activities, and even from playing, as one girl from the Suf camp in Jordan highlighted:

*“Right, I am a child and I would like to play and would like to live my life, it’s the childhood phase let me live it, but your family, your family may understand this that you are a child and want to live your life, but the people outside influence your family and limit you.”*

The public space of camps is a relational one, which means that it reflects the personal and collective belonging and identity and affects the health of individuals and communities. The experiences and encounters girls had with this public, shared space created a sense of exclusion from the camp community and space. This feeling particularly influenced their mental health, as the girls were unable to identify with any group of people that understood and supported them.

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## PARTICIPANT ACTION POINTS

During interviews, as well as focus group discussions, participants pointed to areas where they sought change in relation to their health and life inside refugee camps — action items that they desired to have as part of interventions, recommendations, or policy reforms.

**Gaps in Services.** There was a gap between stakeholders and girls in terms of the services offered, as services speaking to the needs of this age group were delivered but were not reaching the target group. For example, mental health support and reproductive health services were offered, but only inside health clinics, which are generally not accessible to girls due to mobility restrictions. These services could be part of the school system, which is accessible to most girls and part of their everyday lives. Girls explained that institutions within the camps — including health centers, schools, women’s programming centers, and youth centers — rarely offered them the specific services they needed or the spaces they desired

for recreational and other activities. They wanted to have summer camps, volunteering opportunities, cultural and intellectual activities, or simply school activities such as craft workshops that offered them an escape from the physical and social constraints of camps.

**Gaps in Perceptions.** During the in-depth interviews with stakeholders, individual girls and focus group discussions with girls, we found that there was a gap in the perceptions of stakeholders and girls, as well as communication gaps: Stakeholders’ understandings were often limited or based on minimal interactions with the girls themselves.

**Fragmented Services.** In addition, participants pointed out the fragmented services offered inside camps. They recommended collective and mutual activities and services be offered by all service providers inside camps. For example, health clinics and women centers could plan activities in collaboration with schools (which are accessible to most girls). This also means that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency’s (UNRWA) health, education, and relief programs, as well as local initiatives and centers, should work together in planning and implementing services and interventions that are coherent and complementary. Participants specifically wanted to have activities targeting them and their needs, as well as recreational activities that allow them to grow, learn, and interact with the larger camp community. This was a key priority.

**Family Education.** Girls also recommended having educational and informational sessions for their families, primarily their mothers, to better accommodate their needs and to gain some privacy inside the home. They sought improved mobility and interaction in the broader camp space so they could take part in social and recreational activities.

## OTHER FACTORS TO CONSIDER

**Social Isolation of Camps.** There is also a broader issue to confront: Although camps are not physically isolated from their surrounding neighborhoods, they are socially isolated. This has resulted in the formation of tight-knit social clusters inside camps, which over time became stereotyped as spaces of illegitimacy, rebellion, and resistance. To counter this isolation and stereotyping, we recommend planning and implementing activities that integrate camp residents with the surrounding communities — for example, policies to encourage participation of camp residents in work outside the camp and in public spaces such as public schools.

**No Body with Legal Authority.** Another significant factor is that there is no body with legal authority over the camps. This means there is no body legally responsible for the protection of rights and basic infrastructure services inside camps including paved streets, supply of water and electricity, waste management, and the establishment of public spaces that host youth, including female adolescents. While the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East is currently providing a number of these services, they are not legally obliged to do so, and camps are generally excluded from public reforms or infrastructural projects. This has resulted in the continuing deterioration of camp infrastructure.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Table 1 presents the main recommendations and includes details about the advantages, disadvantages, and feasibility of each recommendation.

**IMAGE 1 — JARASH PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMP IN JORDAN IN 2018**



**SOURCE** Institute of Community and Public Health – Birzeit University.

**IMAGE 2 — IRBID PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMP IN JORDAN IN 2018**



**SOURCE** Institute of Community and Public Health – Birzeit University.

**TABLE 1 — POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE HEALTH OF PALESTINIAN REFUGEE GIRLS**

	Policy Option 1*	Policy Option 2*	Policy Option 3*	Policy Option 4	Policy Option 5
<b>Description</b>	Create centers and community spaces that adopt culturally sensitive activities for girls in refugee camps	Work with camp families to increase levels of awareness and ensure better social accommodation of transitions girls go through	Enhance collaboration between clinics, schools, and women's programs, centers and, youth centers in refugee camps	Increase integration of camp residents in host community, which results in better employment and less stereotyping of refugees	Identify a legal authority that is responsible for rights, services, and physical conditions of Palestinian camps in Jordan and the West Bank
<b>Identified Stakeholders (leading, potential)</b>	UNRWA, community centers, women's, school, health clinics, Palestinian Popular Committees	UNRWA, community centers, women's, Schools, health clinics, Palestinian Popular Committees	UNRWA, community centers, women's, schools, health clinics, Palestinian Popular Committees	Governors of host countries local and international non-profit organizations (NGOs)	The Palestinian Authority, refugees, camp residents, local and international NGOs
<b>Main Advantages</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quick and large impact</li> <li>• Utilizes available resources, centers, and services</li> <li>• Offers opportunities for girls to grow and debrief outside their homes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low cost</li> <li>• Utilizes available resources, centers, and services present at camps</li> <li>• Requires minimum time to implement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low cost</li> <li>• Efficient and utilizes available resources and services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High impact and efficient</li> <li>• Long-term impact</li> <li>• Solves root causes of poor conditions of camps</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High impact</li> <li>• Long-term impact</li> <li>• Efficient</li> <li>• Solves root causes of the bad conditions of camps</li> </ul>
<b>Main Disadvantages</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusivity: Some girls might not be able to join due to parental rejection</li> <li>• Community might not be accepting of social activities involving girls or focusing on females</li> <li>• Requires sustained attention and funding to maintain facilities and activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slow impact</li> <li>• Requires reiterative visits, workshops, and continuous follow-ups with families</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires communication and collaboration between multiple offices or centers, which requires extra time and efforts by stakeholders</li> <li>• Does not speak to the need for changing the physical environment Requires identifying leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slow impact</li> <li>• High cost</li> <li>• Requires identifying leadership to be held accountable and to perform evaluation and monitoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complex and requires a long time and legal procedures to identify a legal authority</li> <li>• High cost</li> <li>• Requires collective community organization</li> <li>• Requires identifying leadership to be held accountable and to perform evaluation and monitoring</li> </ul>
<b>Feasibility of Implementation</b>	Feasible given the availability of funds and resources and community acceptance	Feasible given the available teams and program schedule	Feasible given the willingness and availability of resources	Complex and requires planning and allocation of resources from host government and camp community	Feasible given willingness to proceed with legal procedures
<b>Stakeholders' Responsibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify a space for such centers</li> <li>• Collect funds to establish centers and support sustainability of activities</li> <li>• Identify list of potential activities and their structures</li> <li>• Call for community acceptance (importance of building relationships with community)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify working agenda and focus areas of work</li> <li>• Establish implementation procedures and activities</li> <li>• Identify and allocate funds to plan and implement policy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify working procedures and collaborative plan</li> <li>• Establish implementation procedures and activities</li> <li>• Identify and allocate funds to plan and implement the policy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and allocate funds</li> <li>• Identify a responsible party or organization</li> <li>• Plan and implement relevant activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify a collective community group in charge of Palestinian camps</li> <li>• Identify a legal team to proceed with case</li> <li>• Identify and allocate funds</li> </ul>

**NOTE** \*Denotes an action or policy recommended by study participants.

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## ENDNOTES

1. See Hani Mowafi, "Conflict, displacement and health in the Middle East," *Global Public Health*, 6 no. 5 (2011): 472–487, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2011.570358>; Maren M. Hawkins, et al. "Promoting the health of refugee women: a scoping literature review incorporating the social ecological model," *International Journal for Equity in Health* 20, no. 45 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-021-01387-5>; Selcuk R. Sirin, and Lauren Rogers–Sirin, *The Educational and Mental Health Needs of Syrian Refugee Children*, Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2015, <https://www.migrationpolicyinstitute-europe.com/sites/default/files/publications/FCD-Sirin-Rogers-FINAL.pdf>; World Health Organization "Common Health Needs of Refugees and Migrants: Literature Review," 2021, <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/346743>.

2. Thematic analysis is "a qualitative research strategy for identifying, analyzing, and reporting identifiable patterns or themes within data." See APA Dictionary, <https://dictionary.apa.org/thematic-analysis>.

3. Somatization is the "conversion of a mental state (such as depression or anxiety) into physical symptoms, also the existence of physical bodily complaints in the absence of a known medical condition." See Merriam Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/somatization>.

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# POLICY BRIEF **03.20.23**

## **Migrant Women in Morocco: Improving Sexual Health and Tackling Gender-based Violence**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Migration can expose women and girls to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in countries of transit and destination. SGBV has several repercussions on the physical, psychosocial, and economic well-being of those who experience it. In addition, migrant women can also experience significant sexual and reproductive health (SRH) problems due to inadequate access to care, harsh circumstances during their migratory journey, stigma, lack of information on support services, and lack of coordination between civil society and institutional structures.

In this policy brief, we summarize our research on the sexual and reproductive health of women migrants in Morocco, as well as their history of violence and utilization of support services. Our findings show a high prevalence of SGBV among women migrants in Morocco, poor utilization of support services, as well as significant SRH issues. We recommend improving access to adequate information about existing protection and support services, establishing and strengthening support networks, improving research and data collection on SGBV and the barriers to access services, improving coordination mechanisms between actors in migrant health and protection, and promoting transparency and accountability.

### **CONTEXT**

Over the last decade, Morocco has experienced significant growth in the numbers of migrants arriving in the country. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) 2022 Interactive Report, more than 102,000 migrants live in Morocco as of 2020, which accounts for 0.3% of the total population.<sup>1</sup> The majority of the migrant population living in Morocco comes from sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>2</sup> In 2013, a study conducted by the United Nations AIDS Agency and the Global Fund indicated that migrants in Morocco face a multitude of health issues, such as skin and pulmonary infections, digestive problems, and psychological disorders.<sup>3</sup> In addition, migrants' access to health care services is hampered by numerous barriers, including a shortage of health care personnel, lack of information about services, and migrant-specific issues such as discrimination, language difficulties, and cultural barriers.<sup>4</sup>

Recognizing the needs of the migrant population, Morocco has ratified several human rights instruments to ensure their protection and integration.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the Moroccan government has put in place policies, measures, and multidisciplinary actions to ensure the protection of migrants' rights, and to improve their living and working conditions.<sup>6</sup>



**Migration can expose women and girls to SGBV in countries of transit and destination. ... In addition, migrant women can also experience significant SRH problems.**

**The Moroccan government has put in place policies, measures, and multidisciplinary actions to ensure the protection of migrants' rights, and to improve their living and working conditions.**

### Regularization Campaigns

Two regularization<sup>7</sup> campaigns were launched in Morocco in 2014 and 2016. About 17,916 migrants were regularized as a result of the first campaign in 2014.<sup>8</sup> In 2016, a second campaign chaired by the National Council for Human Rights (CNDH) received more than 28,000 applications.<sup>9</sup> In total, the two campaigns led to the regularization of more than 49,000 migrants. Concurrently, the Moroccan government launched the National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum (SNIA), which included several health-related objectives such as standardizing care procedures for all immigrants in need of emergency care; raising awareness about health care services; and increasing the cultural competency of health care providers and their sensitivity toward migrant health issues.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Article 57 of the Moroccan hospital regulations stipulates that “non-Moroccan patients or wounded are admitted, regardless of their status, under the same conditions as nationals.”<sup>11</sup>

These regularization campaigns were a turning point in Morocco's efforts to better integrate migrants and increase their access to and utilization of public health care services. Regularized migrants can benefit from a wide range of care offered by a network of health services as part of the Régime d'Assistance Médicale insurance scheme. Known as RAMED, it was first established to ensure access to public health services among Moroccans living in precarious conditions.<sup>12</sup>

Since its latest regularization campaign, Morocco has taken additional steps to improve migrant health. Recently, the Moroccan Ministry of Health, in partnership with the IOM, developed a National Strategic Plan for Health and Immigration (PSNSI) for the period 2021 to 2025.<sup>13</sup> The PSNSI includes a reference document and an instrument that coordinates efforts geared toward improving migrant health.

Despite the many public policies aimed at improving migrants' health and well-being, the use of existing services is low due to several cultural, communication, and structural barriers. These barriers mean that poor health continues to be a challenge within the migrant population.

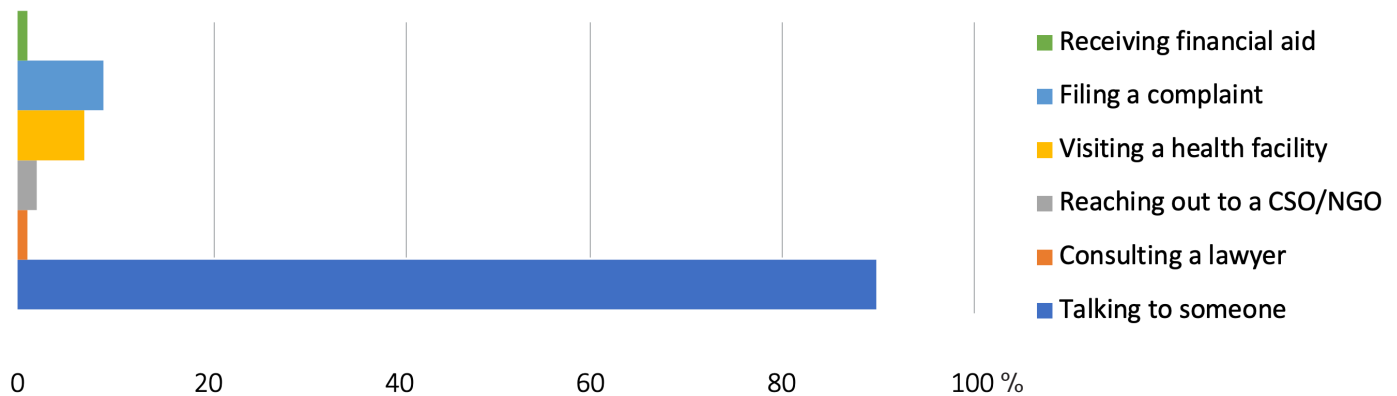
### MIGRANT HEALTH IN MOROCCO

During their migratory journeys and even while living in host countries, migrants may be victims of human rights violations. These include SGBV, abuse, sexual and labor exploitation, and precarious living conditions. We note that victims of SGBV are more prone to negative SRH outcomes — including, but not limited to, sexually-transmissible infections and unintended pregnancies.<sup>14</sup> In addition, access to health care services by migrant women and girls in host countries is often impaired by various structural, contextual, legal, and organizational barriers.<sup>15</sup> In Morocco, the data on SGBV against migrant women and girls is scarce, so the scale of the problem is unclear.

### Methodology

To gain an in-depth understanding of SGBV against migrant women in Morocco, we conducted a study in the capital city of Rabat using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Our study explored the forms of SGBV experienced by the female migrant population in Morocco, as well as how they made use of support services. To conduct the survey, we developed a questionnaire that was distributed to participants recruited from public health care facilities. Face-to-face interviews were also conducted with study participants to gain deeper insights into their experiences. Ultimately, we interviewed 151 female migrants over the course of six months in 2021.

**FIGURE 1 — USE OF SUPPORT SERVICES AMONG VICTIMS OF SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**



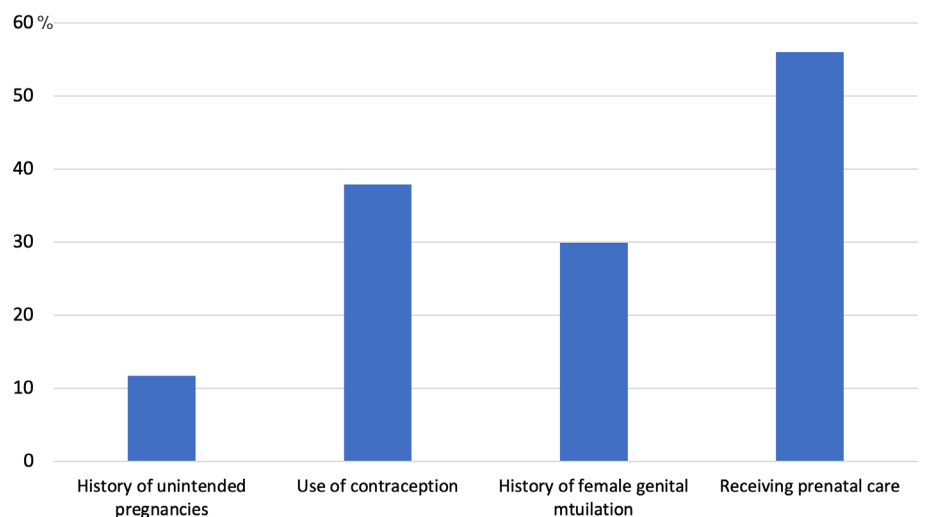
SOURCE Authors.

**Findings**

Our findings revealed that the majority of female migrants (76%) in Morocco have experienced one or more forms of SGBV during migration. Additionally, only a minority have sought social, health, or legal support services after being exposed to some form of SGBV (Figure 1). In terms of the SRH of migrants, we found that over half of pregnant migrant women were receiving antenatal care, and almost 30% had experienced female genital mutilation. In addition, moderate contraception coverage among sexually active migrant women (37.9%) was reported (Figure 2).

Our study indicates a high prevalence of SGBV against migrant women in Morocco, as well as poor utilization of support systems. While diverse support services are provided to migrants by multiple institutional and civil society<sup>16</sup> actors in Morocco, it appears that these services remain under-used by migrants impacted by SGBV. Our findings shed light on important unmet psychosocial needs of SGBV survivors and show that there is abundant room for further research on the determinants of uptake of support services by migrant SGBV survivors.

**FIGURE 2 — SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH OF MIGRANT WOMEN**



SOURCE Authors.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To reduce the risk of SGBV, support victims, and improve access to essential SRH services, we propose the following recommendations:

### Raise Awareness

- Provide adequate and culturally sensitive information to migrant women in Morocco about the risks of SGBV as well as the available health care, psychosocial support, and protection services, irrespective of migration status.
- Emphasize the role of civil society organizations in providing information about the availability of free health care services, adequate referral and support cells for the victims of SGBV, and HIV screening and treatment services.

### Establish Adequate Support Networks

- Support the establishment of networks for and by migrant women.
- Provide funding for existing civil society organizations that offer psychosocial support to survivors of SGBV.
- Support civil society organizations that offer essential quality SRH services to migrant women.

### Improve Data Collection and Data Sharing Between Different Stakeholders

- Collect more specific and comparable data, and invest in research to investigate SGBV against the female migrant population in Morocco.
- Investigate the barriers — structural and otherwise — that prevent access to essential SRH and psychosocial support services among migrants and migrant victims of SGBV.
- Strengthen community-based participatory research to improve understanding of the needs of migrant women and girls.

### Increase Resilience and Empowerment

- Prioritize resilience measures to ensure the socioeconomic inclusion and empowerment of the migrant

community, especially women, who make up half of the migrant population in Morocco.

### Improve Access to Quality SRH Services

- Ensure access to quality SRH services adapted to the real needs of migrant women, taking into consideration the diversity of migrant women's cultural backgrounds, as these affect their SRH beliefs and attitudes.

### Improve Coordination Mechanisms

- Ensure complementarity of health and psychosocial rehabilitation services offered by different actors by improving coordination between civil society organizations and other institutions providing support to migrants.

### Promote Transparency and Accountability

- Develop multidisciplinary, evidence-based initiatives that consider accountability and transparency with reference to the human rights approach, in order to improve the safety and gender-sensitivity of complaint mechanisms and the victims' access to the judicial system.

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## CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION: BARRIERS AND STRATEGIES

In conclusion we summarize the known barriers to effective implementation of these recommendations and then provide strategies to overcome these barriers.

- Underreporting of SGBV is common worldwide due to fear of slander, stigma, and risk of deportation. There is insufficient information on available services, and low uptake of services among undocumented migrants due to fear of deportation. To overcome these challenges, we recommend the development of a non-punitive reporting culture and policies through the separation of immigration enforcement activities from the provision of essential services. We also recommend improving



the dissemination of these policies in migrant communities through appropriate communication channels.

- Inadequate training of health care professionals and social workers in the delivery of culturally appropriate and gender-sensitive care may shape the health care experiences of migrants. To overcome this challenge, we propose the embedding of gender and culture in the training of health professionals.
- Insufficient coordination with various stakeholders, and scarcity of data and monitoring can prevent the development and dissemination of adequate resources. To overcome this barrier, we recommend improving coordination with stakeholders, enhancing data collection, and monitoring migrant treatment and health outcomes.

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# POLICY BRIEF **03.21.23**

## **Sudanese Women on the Move in Cairo Defy Stereotypes**

Iman El-Mahdi, Child Protection Officer, UNICEF Egypt

The media often presents a misleading picture of people on the move, depicting them as vulnerable: arriving at borders, drowning in the sea, or lining up in front of an organization for assistance. This stereotypical visual representation frames people on the move as the poor and helpless “other.” As observers, we assume we understand their narratives and can sympathize with them, though we do this from afar. Women on the move, in particular, are often considered fragile, as their vulnerabilities within and outside the household are exacerbated by the situations in which they are seen.

This stereotype<sup>1</sup> is furthered by the humanitarian–development complex consisting of the international community (governments, donors, United Nations agencies, and non-governmental organizations), public discourse, and the private sector. Since World War II, this complex has assisted during emergencies, such as armed conflicts (the humanitarian agenda) or with structural issues, such as systemic poverty (the development agenda). But the stereotypes created by this complex do not account for the human capital, knowledge, experiences, and opportunities that people build for themselves. As a result, people on the move are often perceived as passive victims and anonymous, agentless bodies with no known faces, voices, or stories. This brief seeks to present a more realistic view of people on the move, specifically Sudanese women living in Cairo.

It is important to note that the humanitarian–development complex distinguishes between different groups of people on the move, including refugees and migrants. Refugees flee their habitual residences and cannot return due to fear of persecution.<sup>2</sup> Migrants, such as migrant workers, choose to move away from their residences, either temporarily or permanently.<sup>3</sup> However, both categories are often blurred when conducting fieldwork, as these distinctions do not align with how people on the move perceive themselves. Therefore, this brief uses the term “on the move” not to box people into legal categories, especially as their journeys from their home countries as well as within or beyond Cairo are often not pre-planned. In a globalized world, where events are often unanticipated, many people, including refugees and migrants, are constantly moving within and across cities and borders. Through mobility, people do not move between fixed land points nor in pre-planned journeys but, instead, move through trajectories, navigating their surroundings and negotiating sets of possibilities for their lives.<sup>4</sup>

Against the perception of people on the move as helpless and passive, this brief draws on the stories of 12 Sudanese females residing in Ard El-Lewa, a densely populated informal urban area in Cairo with a substantial presence of Sudanese. This ethnographic fieldwork was conducted between January and June 2021. Admittedly,



**People on the move should have a leading say regarding the contexts and conditions that affect them, as well as how they are represented.**

**IMAGE 1 — SUDANESE SHOP NAMED OMDURMAN CENTRE**

**SOURCE** Third Participant Observation. June 2021. *Narrating Sudanese-ness in Cairo* [Personal communication – Sandoog].

**NOTE** The shop is named after Sudan's major city, Omdurman.

these stories do not represent whole communities of people on the move. But they are a glimpse into the lives of the Sudanese women I collaborated with, interviewed, and observed through fieldwork. More importantly, these stories showcase how people on the move are not mute victims. This brief demonstrates that the stories and voices of people on the move should be noticed and reflected, and that people on the move should have a leading say regarding the contexts and conditions that affect them, as well as how they are represented.

### **UNDERSTANDING SUDANESE ON THE MOVE IN EGYPT**

This brief focuses on Sudanese individuals because they have a long history of movement/migration to Egypt and are one of the primary groups of people on the move in Cairo. Egypt is home to more than 100 million Egyptians and has a history

of hosting migrants and refugees. As of December 31, 2022, Egypt was home to 288,524 registered refugees with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), including 58,237 Sudanese.<sup>5</sup> As for migrants, no official data is available. However, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah ElSisi, claimed in 2018 that there were more than 5 million migrants living in Egypt<sup>6</sup> and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) echoed this number soon after.

### **SUDANESE IN CAIRO FACE SIGNIFICANT SOCIAL AND SAFETY CHALLENGES**

Sudanese on the move in Cairo often live in populated informal urban areas, including Ard El-Lewa, where they face social and protection challenges, including discrimination and verbal, physical, and sexual violence. For example, women are often subject to sexual assault and harassment. Furthermore, racism is an uncontrollable stressor for Sudanese living in Cairo. Fieldwork shows that forbearance and avoidance, in terms of ignoring racism and racial slurs, or applying positive racial identity dimensions that can buffer the psychological effects of racism, have become coping mechanisms that Sudanese adopt to navigate their everyday lives. In addition, many Sudanese children do not enroll in Egyptian schools, despite their legal rights, because of bullying and bureaucratic impediments, including a lack of required documentation.<sup>7</sup> Discrimination and economic barriers also obstruct their access to health care services in Egypt.<sup>8</sup> And even though Sudanese can access formal jobs, the Egyptian Labor Law requires an employer to provide extensive legal and medical documents and to pay higher taxes to hire non-Egyptians for formal jobs.<sup>9</sup> This lengthy bureaucratic process to land jobs in Egypt leads many Sudanese — as well as 63% of all Egyptians — into the informal economy.

### **CHRONICLING THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF 12 SUDANESE WOMEN**

Through ethnographic fieldwork, my research looked into Sudanese women who are considered on the move in Cairo. As part



of this research, I accompanied them to community events and shared Sudanese customs through participant observation. The 12 Sudanese women participating were in their 20s to mid-50s, exemplifying the diversity within Cairo's larger Sudanese on-the-move population. Most of them were middle-class single mothers from different areas in Sudan, each with unique aspirations ranging from seeking refuge to finding work opportunities and accessing education. Their stay in Cairo varied between a few months to 20 years.

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### TEMPORARY COMMUNITY-MAKING PROVIDES PROTECTION AND ESSENTIAL RESOURCES

The fieldwork presented in this brief demonstrates the importance of interdependency and protection spaces among these Sudanese women in Cairo. These spaces emerged as the women hosted each other in times of distress and maneuvered around the failures of institutions that should have protected them. For example, the Sudanese community served as the family support system for Samia (one of the participants) when a group of Egyptians stabbed her ex-husband and threatened to attack their home.<sup>10</sup> The Sudanese community secured Samia's safe exit from her home after the police failed to show up, demonstrating their ability to operate independently of formal institutions.

This study also illustrates how community-making unfolds when Sudanese women carve out spaces based on commonalities and create support networks in order to come together and endure everyday challenges. It predominantly focuses on community associations, community schooling, and *sanadiq* (monetary savings groups), which bring seemingly heterogeneous people into a state of temporary togetherness against Cairo's hardships. While community associations and schools are not gender-specific, women exclusively come together through these informal savings groups that are created by and for women to generate opportunities for togetherness and financial support. Men, alternatively, come together through visits to the *qahwa*.<sup>11</sup>

Even though associations and schools are structures that both Sudanese women and men establish, the ones specifically formed by women illustrate how Sudanese women on the move are not necessarily vulnerable, but instead lead diversified lives both within and outside the household. Sudanese women in Cairo also showcase how women on the move can create better prospects for themselves through various improvisational efforts.

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### SELF-ORGANIZING COMMUNITY STRUCTURES SERVE AS PARALLEL GOVERNANCE

In addition to the individual women-driven activities detailed above, Sudanese community associations in Cairo act as structured alternative support systems for Sudanese women on the move in place of formal services or assistance provided by international service providers such as the UNHCR.

Mona, one of the participants interviewed and observed in this study, leads the Women's Center association, an example of a Sudanese community structure created by and for women in Cairo. The Egyptian state does not register non-Egyptian community associations, which makes obtaining funding or opening a bank account very challenging. As a community leader, Mona initiated her association through a UNHCR program, which trained, certified, and granted her 15,000 Egyptian pounds (EGP) in 2017 (equivalent to US\$842 in 2017).<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the association has since been running independently through its resources and networks, providing services for refugee or migrant women and children, including parenting and vocational courses for mothers. It also offers indirect services, such as housing and medical support, through diverse partnerships established with other organizations and individuals. Through her efforts, Mona, who is also co-experiencing hardships with her community members, has created a support system where Sudanese women represent and voice themselves. Her association helps Sudanese women gain accessibility to the city — aside from

**Community-making unfolds when Sudanese women carve out spaces based on commonalities and create support networks in order to come together and endure everyday challenges.**



## IMAGE 2 — A COMMUNITY SCHOOL THAT IS RUN BY SUDANESE WOMEN IN ARD EL-LEWA.



**SOURCE** First Participant Observation. April 2021. *Narrating Sudanese in Cairo* [Personal communication – Sudanese Community School].

residency and legal rights and services — despite a backdrop of physical and social barriers.

The Women's Center currently has more than 300 members who pay a monthly membership fee of 20 EGP (US\$1.27 in 2021) to finance the association's activities.<sup>13</sup> Even though Mona lost the association's premises due to her inability to afford rent, she has been funding and running the association from her small makeshift Sudanese restaurant. She also uses other spaces around the community to host community events, as witnessed during the 2021 Ramadan food distribution at a Sudanese community school.<sup>14</sup> During the food distribution, Mona knew the details of each community member's situation, greeting them by name and asking about their work and children's school.<sup>15</sup> For example, when a sick woman walked in, Mona asked her why she had come as she was planning to bring a food bag to her.

The event overall seemed like a safe space, where community members shared their struggles in Cairo, including their difficulties making a living, as well as the protection issues they face. This shows that community structures are more than platforms for alternate services. They are spaces where individuals can share a sense of belonging and relate to each other's circumstances.

## EDUCATING THEIR CHILDREN THROUGH IMPROVISED COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

There are many Sudanese community schools in Cairo, per an agreement between the Sudanese and Egyptian governments on how to establish Sudanese schools and teach Sudanese curricula in Egypt. Some schools accommodate either refugees or migrants while others serve both groups. Unlike refugee schools, schools that cater to migrants must obtain the Sudanese Embassy's approval to teach Sudanese curricula.

Sudanese community schools are parallel, alternate schooling structures formed by and for the community to maneuver the Egyptian public school system's problems. My fieldwork indicated that community leaders mobilize networks around their communities in order to obtain resources and provide assets that help establish and support community schools, including human assets such as teachers and other staff. This process demonstrates the creativity of Sudanese people on the move when it comes to maximizing resources within their community to generate opportunities, come together, and proceed with building different prospects for their lives.

The participants in this study stressed that Sudanese community schools psychologically benefit children by providing them with spaces to meet other children with similar experiences, allowing them to navigate trauma together. Sudanese children attending Egyptian schools often struggle, as seen in the interview with Hanan, one of the participants. Adel, her youngest child, cried at the nursery when he was 3 years old and often refused to go because he was the only Sudanese and "Asmarani" (dark person) there.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast, another participant, Elham, reflected that her children were able to begin overcoming their pain — after losing their father and moving from Darfur to Cairo — when a Sudanese community school welcomed them, even allowing them to forego the deposit and pay the required fees in installments.<sup>17</sup> That helped Elham to avoid being held captive to past trauma, embrace both parental roles, land a teaching job, and

find better alternatives for her family. Her narrative illustrates how Sudanese women attempt to keep living while also defying stereotypical gender roles at the family and community levels.

### SUDANESE SCHOOLS PROVIDE A SENSE OF NORMALCY

During my fieldwork, I visited a community school run by Sudanese women, where I witnessed a sense of safety and community.<sup>18</sup> Students' laughter and their talkativeness felt like signs of well-being that created a sense of normalcy brought into their uncertain lives. There were also open dialogues between students, teachers, and the school's superintendent. While I was seated in the superintendent's office with the door open, teachers casually came in to discuss schedules and student circumstances. As a result, the school felt like more than just a place that granted children their universal right to education. It also felt like a community where its members listened, understood, and supported one another, allowing both individuals and the collective group to progress.

Nonetheless, Sudanese community schools do face internal and external challenges. There are ongoing discussions by the Egyptian government on closing refugee community schools, including Sudanese schools, and integrating refugee/migrant children into the Egyptian educational system. Furthermore, teachers do not receive adequate salaries and occasionally go on strike, which hinders the ability of students to learn. For example, Elham and Ibtesam — employed respectively as English and religion teachers by Sudanese community schools — are paid a mere 1,200 EGP monthly (US\$76 in 2021) for morning and evening shifts.<sup>19</sup> In addition, fees for Sudanese children to take the Sudanese exams in the last year of preparatory school and throughout secondary school at the Sudanese Embassy are costly. But passing these exams is necessary for students to receive accredited certificates from the Sudanese and Egyptian Ministries of Education and proceed to higher education.

### IMAGE 3 — A COMMUNITY SCHOOL THAT IS RUN BY SUDANESE WOMEN IN ARD EL-LEWA.



**SOURCE** First Participant Observation. April 2021. *Narrating Sudanese-ness in Cairo* [Personal communication – Sudanese Community School].

### SANADIQ GROUPS PROVIDE ESSENTIAL SUPPORT

Sudanese women on the move often financially support each other to deal with Cairo's economic difficulties. An example is the *sanadiq* — the monetary savings groups previously mentioned — which are formed by Sudanese women to collectively save money to support their families financially. These groups also challenge the commonly held notion of men as sole financial providers. Through these groups, women can take out loans to meet family needs, including rent, school fees, and medical services. However, *sanadiq* are more than savings schemes. They also allow Sudanese women to gather and practice their customs, including sharing Sudanese meals and singing Sudanese songs.

Accompanying Mona to a *sandoog*<sup>20</sup> in Ard El-Lewa, I met many Sudanese women at the *sandoog*'s host's home where the smell of Sudanese *bokhoor* (incense) prevailed, and *tobes* (Sudanese dress wear) embellished the setting.<sup>21</sup> The *sandoog* had 13 members meeting every Thursday. However, there were 18 women present at the gathering I attended, because even those who are not part of a *sandoog* can join it as a social event without financially contributing to it. Invitees brought along

**IMAGE 4 — SUDANESE WOMEN AT A SANDOOQ IN ARD EL-LEWA WHERE THEY SHARED FOOD AND DRINKS, SOCIALIZED, AND SANG.**



**SOURCE** Third Participant Observation. June 2021. Narrating Sudanese-ness in Cairo [Personal communication – *Sandooq*].

families and friends to exchange information, talk, and laugh, as exceptional hospitality is a custom that they have brought to Cairo and continue to practice. At the *sandooq*, women also sold Sudanese products, creating parallel markets and providing financial support for one another. It is important to note that through these *sanadiq*, Sudanese women on the move are not waiting for the cash assistance offered by international aid organizations, nor are they confined by their circumstances. Even though formal employment is scarce, work is fashioned everywhere through human capital and social networks.

Information sharing was an important part of the get-together. For example, Mona pitched her community association (as detailed earlier), emphasizing the pride of Sudanese women establishing an association and collectively enduring Cairo's everyday challenges. The gathering then became a social event where the host served Sudanese food and drinks, and women played the *dalouka* (Sudanese drums), sang, and danced in a room full of laughter.

The women I spoke to indicated that *sanadiq* are not only about saving money, but also about *wanasa* (companionship). In the end, the women passed around

an envelope with a notebook for each member to put money in and to write down how many memberships they had paid for — with each membership worth 50 EGP (US\$3.19 in 2021). Overall, the *sanadiq* are a coping strategy that Sudanese women have adopted to circumvent economic barriers, planting the seeds for community-making and social capital in Cairo.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Sudanese community associations, schools, and *sanadiq* groups in Cairo demonstrate how the narrative that people on the move are helpless and voiceless fails to reflect the human and social capital, skills, and resources of Sudanese individuals and communities. Importantly, this brief does not discount the horrors and abuses of structural issues that Sudanese migrants and refugees face in Cairo, but rather shows how Sudanese women create different opportunities in their everyday lives. Their stories showcase how people on the move carve out their own networks of information, slowly build trust, and create communities by pooling resources and exchanging experiences. Community spaces created by women allow them to navigate hardships in Cairo together, even if this togetherness is unstructured or temporary. This sense of community serves as a survival coping mechanism for cultivating endurance demonstrated through women on the move's improvisational acts.

Thus, in order to protect these community strengths, this brief recommends the following:

1. It is vital for the international community, including governments, donors, United Nations agencies, and non-governmental organizations, to understand the stories of people on the move without drawing conclusions and generalizations that do not account for their contexts. The international community should reconsider the universal and stereotypical approach when dealing with people on the move or forming perceptions of them. This rhetoric often silences and, at times,



dehumanizes people. Understanding and recognizing the stories of people on the move will allow the international community to engage with refugees and migrants on what they need rather than on what the international community assumes they need.

2. Donors should pool their resources toward funding and supporting efforts to strengthen the community structures of people on the move in partnership with the communities, rather than on their behalf.
3. The international community, donors, and the Egyptian government should support community schools and help them navigate their challenges instead of working toward higher enrollment of refugee and migrant children, including Sudanese in Egyptian schools. Community schools provide more than access to education. They give children a community that is difficult to find in other settings.
4. The international community should advocate with the Egyptian government for registering non-Egyptian community associations, including Sudanese, to facilitate their role in supporting their communities.
5. The media should improve its representation of people on the move by promoting their right to have their voices and stories heard and represented with identifiable faces.
6. Finally, the international community should participate with communities on the move to represent and voice themselves.

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# POLICY BRIEF **03.22.23**

## **Gender and Migration in Egypt: Searching for the Independent Migrant Woman's Voice**

Adam Eddouss, M.A. Candidate, The Center for Migration and Refugee Studies, The American University in Cairo

### **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

International migration literature has historically focused more on men than women. When early migration scholars began theorizing about the migrant subject, they generally disregarded gender as an analytical tool. Their main subject of focus in the field was the male migrant. Interestingly enough, Ernst Ravenstein, the founder of migration theory, gave considerable attention in his migration laws to the participation of women in migration. He wrote that “woman is a greater migrant than man,” noting that women “migrate quite as frequently [as men] into certain manufacturing districts.”<sup>1</sup> Despite Ravenstein’s reflection on gender in migration, the majority of scholars in the field have neglected the presence of women in migration theory and practice. This history of gender-blindness continues in the study of certain migration contexts today.

In criticism of traditional migration theory, some scholars have agreed that mainstream migration scholarship has been “gender blind or even overtly sexist.”<sup>2</sup> Before the 1980s and 1970s, it either neglected migrant women’s experiences or rendered them visible only as a secondary category dependent on the migrant man. When depicted in the literature, women (and children) were often studied as subjects that mainly migrated to accompany and reunite with the breadwinner migrant husband.<sup>3</sup> However, as “women played an

increasing role in all regions and all types of migration,” the field gradually began to incorporate the study of migrant women.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, there was a rise in the migration of independent and single women, rather than just wives, mothers, or daughters.<sup>5</sup> From the 1980s onward, scholars began to not only highlight the presence of women in migration but also to criticize the idea that women only migrate to join their husbands, explaining that women also take the initiative to migrate.”<sup>6</sup> By 2000, about half of the world’s migrants were women<sup>7</sup> — making it increasingly necessary to employ gender as an analytical tool in understanding international migration.

Still, a gendered approach has not been adopted fully in migration studies. In the library on migration in the Middle East and North Africa, such an approach is still uncommon. With the exception of some examples from the Maghreb countries, particularly Morocco, migration literature on the region remains predominantly focused on the migrant man’s experience.<sup>8</sup> And, despite the “increasing feminization of international migration in the past decades,” the migration of women still lacks attention, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>9</sup> The Egyptian context attests to this reality; independent Egyptian migrant women are underrepresented in both theory and practice.

This policy brief draws attention to the limited representation of independent Egyptian migrant women and discusses



**In the context of Egyptian migration, numbers fall short of explaining why women appear to migrate less often than men, and they seldom help in understanding the phenomenon in depth.**

the likely factors behind the absence of women's voices in the field. It also highlights the positive impacts that can stem from Egyptian women's migration, including higher remittance flows and the empowerment of women in Egyptian society. Finally, the brief concludes with a number of recommendations for both researchers and Egyptian policymakers.

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### GENDER AND EGYPTIAN MIGRATION: THE ISSUE OF NUMBERS AND DATA

The literature on Egyptian migration reflects a male-centric research interest, where the majority of the knowledge produced is about migrant men, particularly those residing in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This literature, grounded in the numbers, reflects the reality of men's dominance in terms of migration participation. The result is that men are the standard subject of study, and men's migration is the principal experience investigated in the field. For example, according to a 2019 bulletin published by the Egyptian government, women held only 2.7% of the total work permits issued for Egyptians to work abroad that year.<sup>10</sup> That being said, the reliance on numbers and statistics has entrenched a false perception that, compared to men, women do not participate greatly in international migration. According to Laura Ferrero, "the Egyptian migration practice and interpretative discourse that emerge create a dichotomy between the image of a 'mobile' man — entitled to act in the transnational sphere — and an 'immobile' woman."<sup>11</sup>

To further illustrate the gap represented in the country's numbers, a sample of Egyptian migrants included in a 2013 Egypt Household International Migration Survey (HIMS) comprised only 2% women out of 5,847 migrants in total.<sup>12</sup> Other studies in the literature have also highlighted the existence of a significant gap between men and women in their intentions to migrate; approximately 6.7% of young Egyptian women intended to migrate in 2009, compared to 29.7% of young men.<sup>13</sup>

While these numbers appear to indicate a lack of participation among women in Egyptian migration, migration statistics should not be taken at face value. They do not fully capture everyone who is on the move, leaving many individuals and groups unaccounted for. In addition, in the context of Egyptian migration, numbers fall short of explaining why women appear to migrate less often than men, and they seldom help in understanding the phenomenon in depth. Thus, there is a need for more research that highlights women's experiences and employs gender as an analytical tool in the study of Egyptian migration.

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### SHIFTING THE FOCUS FROM DEPENDENT TO INDEPENDENT EGYPTIAN MIGRANT WOMEN

In the context of Egypt and, more broadly, the Middle East, scholars have explained that gender and family dimensions have not been common tools in the study of migration because of "the lack of independent female migration from the Arab world."<sup>14</sup> With regard to Egypt, the majority of the literature focuses on women who are left behind by migrant husbands and woman-headed households of migrant men living abroad. Only a few studies have focused on unmarried Egyptian migrant women. In addition, single migrant women from the Arab world — and particularly Egypt — who seek work do not form a major category of migration.<sup>15</sup>

Local customs and traditions — often rooted in patriarchal norms brought forth by post-colonialism and the project of modernity<sup>16</sup> — may play an important role in limiting the migration of women. As Swati Parashar writes, "the postcolonial state is gendered in its constitution and practices, historically privileging men and hegemonic masculinity."<sup>17</sup> The result is the distinction between men and women in different spheres, including migration.

With this in mind, I emphasize the idea that, in the knowledge produced about Egyptian migration, independent and single migrant women's experiences remain sidelined, thus deserving greater

**Local customs and traditions — often rooted in patriarchal norms brought forth by post-colonialism and the project of modernity — may play an important role in limiting the migration of women.**

attention and interest from the part of scholars. The inclusion of their voices is of great significance, for their experiences can contribute to a better understanding of Egyptian migration, the dynamics that shape it, and the role that factors such as social norms play in decisions about migration.

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### **SOCIAL STIGMA AND 'HONOR' DRIVING IMMOBILITY AMONG WOMEN**

In the Egyptian context, a woman migrating is seldom a mere individual or economic decision. The migration of women needs to be understood within a larger framework that takes into consideration family and society. These two influence migration decisions through social norms and traditions that can stigmatize the mobility of women's bodies. In the words of Ferrero, "not only women's mobility but also women's aspirations to mobility have to be considered within the family framework."<sup>18</sup> This framework takes social standards and norms into consideration in the study of migration.

Families tend to abide by social norms in order to fit in and to be perceived as "good" or "honorable." This applies to the case of migration; mobility, especially, that of women, can be subject to social stigma from family members, relatives, neighbors, or friends. This stigma toward the mobility of women is not a surprise when we investigate migration within the structure of patriarchy, which often excludes women from the public sphere and limits their role to the confines of the home and family. In the literature on women's migration, we find examples that attest to this reality. In the case of Bangladesh, for example, "social stigma is strong enough to discourage the vast majority of lower-middle and middle-class women from leaving the country."<sup>19</sup>

In this context, patriarchal morality also plays a role in dictating women's confinement to the private sphere and the fixation on their principal role as mothers and wives. It justifies the control over their freedom and right to seek opportunities away from the home, where they may interact with foreign men. As such, it is important to study women's migration in

Egypt in light of the social structures that can influence their imagination, decisions, and mobility. As Ferrero writes, "female ambitions of mobility in a country like Egypt can be expressed in accordance with the roles assigned to women by their society,"<sup>20</sup> meaning that, when deciding to migrate, women do not simply make individual decisions, but rather perform and abide by the social norms that supposedly apply to them.

While this is important to emphasize, it is equally important to highlight that women often challenge social norms and move beyond what society and their families expect of them, oftentimes choosing to participate in international migration. Moreover, it is essential to note that migrant women need not be considered as one homogenous category; rather, we should pay attention to the differences and similarities that exist among them — including their education level, skills, social class, religion, and geographic background, among other things — which all can be important elements influencing their prospects of mobility.

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### **WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT EGYPTIAN MIGRANT WOMEN**

Due to limited gender-disaggregated data on Egyptian migration, it remains difficult to provide a comprehensive description and categorization of Egyptian women's migration. Indeed, as established earlier in this brief, the single migrant woman has not historically been the common profile of migration among Arab, and especially Egyptian, women.<sup>21</sup> However, several studies have presented some numbers and data from surveys that included Egyptian migrant women in their research samples.

One of the main characteristics of Egyptian migrant women presented in the literature is a greater level of education in comparison with their men counterparts. In a study about Egyptian returnees, the European Training Foundation (ETF) found that "although few females migrate, those who do are better educated than male migrants."<sup>22</sup> According to the ETF,

approximately 80% of Egyptian migrant women who returned to Egypt were highly skilled. In terms of language skills, for example, “87.6% of women spoke at least one foreign language besides Arabic, while 43.4% of male returning migrants said they did not speak any foreign languages.”<sup>23</sup> When it came to their primary field of study or expertise, the ETF showed that the major field of study was educational science, followed by health and the humanities.<sup>24</sup> However, to learn more about the current trends and characteristics of Egyptian migrant women, it remains important to conduct new and thorough research.

Another characteristic to underscore in this section is that, while Egyptian men most often migrate to the countries of the GCC, where family reunification is not allowed, most Egyptian migrant women follow their husbands to countries in the West or migrate independently to seek economic opportunities or education. More than half of this population has a university-level education.<sup>25</sup>

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### **POSITIVE IMPACTS ON THE HOME COUNTRY AND THE INDIVIDUAL MIGRANT**

Also important to highlight are the potential positive impacts of women’s migration. The limited literature regarding this theme suggests that there is a weak link between Egyptian women’s migration and development in the home country.<sup>26</sup> In the broader literature on women’s migration, however, there is a relative consensus that the “migration of women within and from developing countries affects the development process itself for those countries.”<sup>27</sup> This belief stems from claims that, for example, migrant women seem to remit more money to their families than migrant men do, which may contribute to the improvement of their families’ living standards and alleviate poverty.<sup>28</sup> The literature also suggests the existence of a social value to women’s migration, since “the empowerment of women will affect subsequent generations, providing children with different female role models

and helping to influence ratios of girls to boys in primary, secondary, and tertiary education.”<sup>29</sup> Not only that, but regarding gender and migration, “achieving greater gender equality, or developing gender-specific migration policies, would not only benefit individual migrants, but also enhance the development effects of migration.”<sup>30</sup>

This is why, Nadine Sika suggests that there needs to be an implementation of “positive migration policies” for Egyptian migrant women to contribute to development in the country as a whole.<sup>31</sup> For Sika, the patriarchal Egyptian context, as well as government policies, impedes the right to free movement and mobility of Egyptian women, which, in turn, impedes development.<sup>32</sup> Middle Eastern and North African countries in particular tend to be “protective of their female migrants,” in that the state in some of these countries can be strict about issuing passports to women. The issuing of passports can be “dependent on the agreement of either the spouse or the father of the female concerned.”<sup>33</sup> These restrictions, according to Sika, also exist in Egypt, where the government enables mostly those women who want to join their families abroad to get a passport, whereas “females who want to migrate alone and attain a work permit abroad find the government far more restrictive.”<sup>34</sup>

By 2010, the Egyptian government had become even stricter with the issuing of working permits to migrant women abroad, especially in the Gulf.<sup>35</sup> Sika argues that these policies and approaches are restrictive of women’s rights and equality as required by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, while these are important arguments to highlight, state policies toward women’s migration in Egypt and how they translate into reality remains an important subject for further research, hence the following recommendations for researchers and policymakers.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reduce the social stigma and shunning of women's migration through campaigning (media, education, and awareness campaigns) and highlighting success stories and achievements of migrant women abroad and the value they add to their home countries and communities.
- Raise awareness about the potential contributions of women's migration to society. This could be, for example, through acknowledging the impact that their remittances have on alleviating poverty for their families and increasing investments in human capital back home.
- Engage migrant women living abroad with their home countries' consulates and embassies to strengthen their transnational ties and keep them informed about national matters.<sup>36</sup>
- Promote good governance in order to gain the confidence of migrants abroad, including women, to enhance their transnational ties to their home countries and their contributions to the countries' development.<sup>37</sup>
- Raise awareness about investment programs and incentives for migrant women. For example, provide information for migrant women abroad, as well as pre-departure guidance and training, and give them resources that they can use to help manage their remittances.<sup>38</sup>

## RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encourage more studies to provide gender-disaggregated migration data and promote both qualitative and quantitative research on Egyptian women's migration to develop a better understanding of the subfield.
- Focus on the role that the Egyptian state plays in encouraging or discouraging women's migration, as well as policies related to migration and their implementation.

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# POLICY BRIEF **03.23.23**

## **Mainstreaming Gender to Remedy Inequality: Refugee Groups in Turkey Show the Way**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The number of forcibly displaced people in the world has recently reached a record high: 89.3 million.<sup>1</sup> Women and girls make up almost half of the world's forcibly displaced populations, while lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or queer (LGBTIQ+) persons are increasingly seeking refuge outside of their countries of origin.<sup>2</sup> Displaced individuals' sexual and gender identities shape their experiences of and strategies for access to rights and services in their countries of origin, during their flight and its aftermath. Research and policy work have pointed out the desirability of contextualized and local-led humanitarian operations, while also recently emphasizing that diverse gender identities need to be catered for as part of that context.<sup>3</sup>

Against a backdrop of the increasing prominence of the impact of gender dynamics on displacement and discussions around the ethics and efficiency of localized refugee response, humanitarian aid to refugees has increasingly pushed two ideas into the global agenda in recent decades: i) enhancing displaced individuals and communities' meaningful inclusion in all steps of humanitarian decision-making processes, i.e., *localization*, and ii) redressing gender inequalities in humanitarian response through gender mainstreaming policies. Broadly speaking, gender mainstreaming is an approach

that focuses on integrating different gender identity-driven experiences, needs, and approaches into policymaking and execution processes.

Humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations (IOs), policymakers, and donors have devoted significant attention to mainstreaming gender in refugee response, further amplifying the gender-sensitive work of local actors such as refugee-led organizations (RLOs).<sup>4</sup> Goals of gender equality are now widely codified in international policy instruments, including the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the Global Compact on Refugees.<sup>5</sup> Yet, despite these promising policy discussions on gender equality in the context of localized humanitarian assistance, policymakers have paid limited attention to how refugee communities understand gender mainstreaming. Their neglect has been detrimental to gender-sensitive policymaking, as shown in this brief. Enacting gender equality within Turkey's refugee response remains an elusive goal for women refugee-led organizations.<sup>6</sup>

Drawing on 60 in-depth interviews with self-identified women members of women refugee-led organizations in Turkey from 2021 to 2023, this brief focuses on how women refugee-led organizations make sense of gender mainstreaming. Using the words of refugee women,<sup>7</sup> "developing gender mainstreaming plans



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that are more sensitive to definitions of forcibly displaced persons” and “centralizing RLOs’ strategies of addressing gender inequality in [the] humanitarian policymaking field” are important steps for turning gender mainstreaming into reality.<sup>8</sup>

### GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Gender mainstreaming eludes an easy definition. Widespread contradiction and confusion exist about the meaning of gender mainstreaming, its content, and how it should be realized.<sup>9</sup> For some, gender mainstreaming is a beacon for producing policies that take into consideration various gender-driven interests. But others see gender mainstreaming as a form of governmentality around which certain subjects are rendered worthy of protection. In this view, gender mainstreaming remains part of neo-colonial power relations and Eurocentric definitions of gender equality.<sup>10</sup> However, despite disagreements over its definition, most policymakers agree that the concept of gender mainstreaming is a context-specific step forward in addressing gender injustices within any community.<sup>11</sup>

Putting aside the contested and varied definitions, I use gender mainstreaming in reference to the promotion of gender equality and fighting gender-driven marginalization through the integration of gender perspectives into the preparation, design, implementation, and monitoring of a wide range of policies.<sup>12</sup> Gender mainstreaming for refugee communities includes (but is not limited to) recognizing how gender plays a role in:

- the processes of claiming asylum and determining refugee status;
- approaches to and practices of traditional durable solutions, namely voluntary return, local integration, and resettlement;
- inequalities in access to rights, services, and justice;

- vulnerability to gender-specific forms of violence;— changing definitions of family and family dynamics; and
- shifting notions of masculinity and femininity in displacement.<sup>13</sup>

### LOCALIZING REFUGEE RESPONSE AND MAINSTREAMING GENDER IN TURKEY

In Turkey, which is now the largest refugee-hosting country in the world, gender mainstreaming policies for refugees have recently received increased attention from policymakers.<sup>14</sup> Despite the sheer number of refugees and the considerable presence of women and LGBTIQ+ refugees in the country, these groups still face a number of challenges. Lack of access to information, legal rights, and registration; language barriers; obstacles preventing access to health, education, and livelihood opportunities; and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are some of the most common challenges that women refugees experience in Turkey. Research participants from UNHCR and UN Women in Turkey noted that Turkey has received extensive funding for projects that integrate gender-sensitive components into refugee response programming, reflecting the hopes that increasing support for mainstreaming gender in refugee protection could help tackle gender injustices among refugee communities.

Refugees are allowed to register and become members of non-governmental organizations in Turkey, and Afghan and Iranian refugees have long exercised this right. Refugee-led organizations grew in number and capacity with the arrival of Syrian refugees and after the passing of UNSC Resolution 2585, which authorizes humanitarian aid to be delivered to northern Syria through the border crossing from Turkey.

RLOs vary in their composition, outreach, funding, and survival strategies according to the constellation of actors and interests at the local level. Often, they facilitate labor-market integration; shelter and livelihood support; SGBV response;

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access to registration, health, and education; vocational training; and advocacy work against impunity for war crimes.

Despite the diverse services that women refugee-led organizations offer and an increasing number of projects that set gender mainstreaming as a precondition for structured humanitarian funding to organizations operating in the country, my research shows that gender mainstreaming remains a contentious concept and a hard-to-attain policy framework for many women refugee-led organizations. This is an ironic outcome as one of the central goals of these policies is to ensure refugee women's ownership of gender mainstreaming norms.<sup>15</sup>

This observation is in line with earlier findings on the limits of localization efforts in refugee responses.<sup>16</sup> However, barriers to localization and challenges to integrating a gender mainstreaming approach into humanitarian policy are a closely knit but separate phenomena in Turkey. The success of localization efforts falls short of expectations due to limited direct funding for local NGOs and RLOs, international actors' self-propagated suspicion about the capacities of RLOs, and the lack of dialogue between IOs and NGOs as well as RLOs. Although these challenges do have negative impacts on gender mainstreaming efforts, two practices in particular hinder efforts to mainstream gender in refugee response: 1) The use of gender-mainstreaming strategies that rely on the secular Western script of humanitarianism can marginalize some refugee communities' faith-based practices of addressing gender inequality, and 2) a reliance on binary and cisnormative understanding of gender in formulating policies of gender mainstreaming isolates trans women refugee-led organizations.

### **Contesting Gender Mainstreaming: "It is not ours, if it does not speak to our realities"**

In conventional IO-led strategies of gender mainstreaming for refugees, the displaced groups' gender-driven experiences are considered in a limited way.<sup>17</sup> Many refugee participants in this study emphasized

that although ongoing efforts to enhance gender justice and address various forms of gender inequality in refugee communities in Turkey are to be applauded, these policies are "externally imposed" on them and remain distant to realities of how their gender shapes their everyday lives. When asked about how she approaches gender mainstreaming, a women-refugee leader in Gaziantep stated:

*"It is their gender mainstreaming, not ours. It is not ours if it does not speak to our realities. Of course, we want to improve the condition of women in our communities, yet we cannot turn a blind eye to the realities of our lives. Yes, we support the idea of gender equality, but for us, gender mainstreaming as NGOs and UNHCR do it is not a way to better our condition."*

Similarly, a member of an organization led by trans women refugees echoed other refugees' concerns around the gulf between gender mainstreaming efforts led by international actors and the realities of refugees' experiences on the ground. She emphasized how transgender refugee-led collectivities were not included in structured humanitarian platforms and collaborations, such as protection working groups and GBV sub-working groups. They added that when gender is talked about in humanitarian circles, it is often treated as a binary concept that turns a blind eye to experiences of gender fluid refugees.

What is striking here is how often refugee women have a similar cynical take on gender mainstreaming. They have repeatedly found that these policies "pay only lip service" to the difficulties they face and "silence various ways refugee women navigate the refugee system in Turkey and define [their] own solutions." Also noteworthy is their emphasis on the gulf between IO-driven gender mainstreaming strategies and the "realities of [their] lives." When asked if they could give an example of these realities, one woman immediately pointed out the difficulty of spending time outside the home due to the heavy domestic workload and values associated



with the domestic sphere and femininity. In response, RLOs have devised novel gender mainstreaming practices that do respond to the marginalization of women, by tailoring conventional mainstreaming activities to their everyday realities. For example, they use scheduled hospital appointments for women refugees who are survivors of domestic violence to also arrange meetings with a psychologist and the police. This allows a woman to be “filing a complaint claim and getting psychosocial support while her husband is not suspicious of her going to the police as she is at the hospital for her hurting throat.” This is an important reminder for policymakers that sometimes gender mainstreaming is most effectively achieved by operating in a clandestine way; not everything has to be visible or public.

### **Women Refugee-led Organizations Address Gender Inequality**

As my interlocutors expressed poignantly over and over again, gender mainstreaming policies in refugee response in Turkey often use strategies that rely on Western female stereotypes and therefore do not take account of the experiences of refugee communities. Many NGO and IO workers, for instance, believe that economic empowerment of women refugees is the panacea for achieving gender equality — a belief that directly aligns with notions deeply-rooted in their European experience. Economic independence itself is assumed to yield improvements in other aspects of women’s lives, meaning that other ways to amplify refugee women’s voices and strategies to achieve their aims are viewed as secondary concerns.

This approach is now largely criticized. Instead, the need for a holistic approach to attaining gender equality and utilizing gender mainstreaming has been highlighted. Echoing this, refugee women-led organizations have aimed at adopting “a gender mainstreaming strategy that does not prioritize only one domain of social life” and “address[es] women refugees’ needs by using what is most relevant to their everyday lives,” as noted by participants. This does not mean that women’s economic

needs and difficulties accessing the labor market are sidelined. For many refugee women, economic concerns are quite central and shape their short- and long-term life plans. However, they criticize the assumption that improving their conditions in one realm will “magically solve [their] problems,” as one interlocutor expressed at length. This includes faith-based notions that inform how to overcome the challenges at hand. An RLO representative explained how they incorporate gender mainstreaming into their services:

*“When we consider ways to mainstream gender in our work, we start with what is the most basic tool of recovery for us. Religion is something important in our people’s lives. If we turn a blind eye to the role of spirituality in our recovery processes, we are detached from reality. That is why we provide vocational training, foster connections with employers, and offer training on SGBV prevention in tandem. When we do this, we try to connect the rights of women with the Hadiths and Qur’an. We tell them that you have rights, so you do not deserve this treatment.”*

Another RLO representative emphasized the importance of religion as a bridge between UN-led humanitarian action, which is often seen as foreign intervention by refugee communities, and local values.<sup>18</sup>

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## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The current approach to mainstreaming gender in humanitarian responses has focused mostly on policies that are led and defined by international actors, leaving out the refugee-led organizations as entities whose capacities are to be strengthened by those international actors. My research has demonstrated that, for many forcibly displaced women in Turkey, gender mainstreaming policies remain a top-down policy process. There are, however, some strategies that policymakers can adopt to redress the imbalance between

refugee experiences and the way gender mainstreaming has recently been promoted. The following policy recommendations are drawn from the interviews I conducted with refugee women:

**Recognize the Role of Religion.** It is vital to understand the context in which gender, gender roles, performances, and relations take place. For some refugee women, their pious identity is an integral way of advancing their position within their communities. Religion shapes their strategies for demanding their rights and expressing their needs and desires. The first step in this process is to question the Western bias in international agencies' current practices. Policymakers should then engage in deeper dialogue about humanitarian ideals and faith-driven values, acknowledging that religion plays an important role in how refugee women exert their agency in everyday interactions with other humanitarians.

**Recognize the Gender-sensitive Work of Refugee Women-led Organizations.** The gender-sensitive work carried out by refugee women-led organizations and their role in advancing gender equality on their own terms is often disregarded by other humanitarian actors. Platforms where various humanitarian actors can share their approaches to central policy toolkits, such as gender mainstreaming, as well as explain how and why different refugee-led organizations have varying understandings of gender mainstreaming can be a fruitful start for an open dialogue between RLOs, NGOs, and IOs.

**Integrate a Non-binary Approach to Gender.** Because of deep-seated biases in favor of heteronormativity and cisnormativity, trans women-led organizations are often the most marginalized entities within structured humanitarian policy platforms, such as gender-based violence and protection working groups. To be all-inclusive and non-discriminatory in execution, a non-binary approach must be integrated into gender mainstreaming policies.

**Credit and Incorporate the Work of RLOs.**

Women refugee-led organizations provide a range of services to their communities, and tailor their responses to refugees' gender identities, but their work is not credited and incorporated into national and global gender mainstreaming frameworks. Not only must IOs, NGOs, states, and donors better recognize the RLOs' vital contributions to advancing a more gender-sensitive humanitarian response, but RLOs also need to gradually assume a leading role in gender-sensitive protection responses. This requires broadening sustainable mechanisms to finance RLOs, as structured humanitarian funding often remains inaccessible to women refugee-led organizations.

**ENDNOTES**

1. UNHCR, *Figures at a Glance*, June 16, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>.
2. UNHCR, *Women*, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/women.html>; UNHCR, *LGBTIQ+ Persons*, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/lgbtiq-persons.html>.
3. UNHCR, *UNHCR Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity*, 2018; Kerrie Holloway, Maria Stavropoulou and Megan Daigle, "Gender in Displacement: The State of Play," *Humanitarian Policy Group*, 2019; Veronique Barbelet, "As Local as Possible, As International as Necessary: Understanding Capacity and Complementarity in Humanitarian Action," *Humanitarian Policy Group*, 2018.
4. Within the context of this brief, the term refugee-led organizations encompasses two actors: 1) formal refugee-initiated associations that are registered with the government and/or UNHCR, and 2) refugee self-help groups that are often informal. On refugee-led organizations in Turkey see: Zeynep Sahin Mencutek, "Refugee Community Organisations: Capabilities, Interactions and Limitations," *Third World Quarterly*, 2021, 42 (1): 181-99.

5. UNHCR, *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants*, September 19, 2016, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/new-york-declaration-for-refugees-and-migrants.html>; UNHCR, *The Global Compact on Refugees*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html>.

6. While some RLO members have expressed their support for gender equality to better provide refugees with rights, services and solutions, other refugee participants have approached gender equality as a Western norm, unattached from their everyday realities. This critical approach to gender equality brings to mind postcolonial feminist critiques of the notion of policy-driven focus on gender equality and gender mainstreaming as part of the Western episteme that constructs itself as a global ideal.

7. All unattributed quotations are taken from my field notes of the interviews.

8. Gender is neither a binary (women/men) nor a static concept. It is rather a relational concept which goes beyond a singular focus on women and girls. Similarly, gender mainstreaming in humanitarian assistance is not within the purview of women refugees and their organizations only. In fact, my ongoing dissertation fieldwork investigates a diverse group of refugee-led organizations' perspectives on gender mainstreaming, ranging from LGBTIQ+ refugee-led organizations, refugee women-led organizations, and other refugee-led organizations. I also study the ways in which gender mainstreaming policies shift and respond to various masculinities. However, considering the diversity of these groups, this paper focuses only a subset of my overall research and addresses women refugee-led organizations' perspectives on gender mainstreaming.

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10. Suzanne Clisby and Athena-Maria Enderstein, "Caught between the Orientalist–Occidental Polemic: Gender Mainstreaming as Feminist Transformation or Neocolonial Subversion?," *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 2017, 19 (2): 231–246.

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13. Eileen Pittaway and Linda Bartolomei, "From Rhetoric to Reality: Achieving Gender Equality for Refugee Women and Girls," WRC Research Paper, 2018, no. 3: 28; Jane Freedman, "Mainstreaming Gender in Refugee Protection," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 2010, 23 (4), 589–607.

14. UNHCR Turkey, *Turkey Fact Sheet February 2022*, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2022/03/UNHCR-Turkey-Factsheet-February-2022.pdf>.

15. Elisabeth Olivius, "(Un)Governable Subjects: The Limits of Refugee Participation in the Promotion of Gender Equality in Humanitarian Aid," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2014, 27 (1): 42–61.

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17. Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi de Alwis, "Reconstituting the Subject: Feminist Politics of Humanitarian Assistance" in *Not Born a Refugee Woman: Contesting Identities, Rethinking Practices*, edited by Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Nazilla Khanlou, and Helene Moussa, 83–96 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009).

18. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, *The Ideal Refugees: Islam, Gender, and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival*, Syracuse University Press, 2014; Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Chloé Lewis, and Georgia Cole, “‘Faithing’ Gender and Responses to Violence in Refugee Communities” in *Gender, Violence, Refugees*, edited by Susanne Buckley-Zistel and Ulrike Krause, 127–151 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017).

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