النهضة العربية للديمقراطية والتنمية
Arab Renaissance for Democracy & Development

Looking towards ARDD's opportunities in the future:

Gendering decision-making in mobility and insecurity; the necessity for including Syrian women and girls in discussions on potential return

ARDD

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Perspectives series – Part 3

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"Looking towards ARDD's opportunities in the future"
Perspectives Series

"Looking towards ARDD's opportunities in the future "three-part Series, which Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development launched based on the research findings of the "Women`s Access to Economic Justice Through Legal Empowerment" project supported by Ford Foundation, looks into perspectives going forward to address three themes that reflect some of the most important concerns of Jordanian youth, Syrian refugee women and recently arrived Arab diaspora/Shataat to Europe.

The Series reviews the importance of these themes and their implications for our Arab societies in the region and in the Shataat/ Diaspora and questions the solutions and prospects available to them in the current situations. It also highlights the perceptions of the current situation of youth and refugees' choices in the light of the difficulties of economic empowerment, as demonstrated by Ford Foundation Project›s research on the obstacles to obtaining suitable work opportunities and the impact of poverty faced by large segments of our societies. In conclusion, the Series proposes studies› directions with the goal to ultimately develop evidence-based policies that could contribute to solutions and alternatives towards more empowered, secure and coherent societies.

The first part of the series "Regional Responses regarding the Integration of Europe's Recently Arrived Arab Diaspora/Shataat". It examines the potential of civil society organizations in the MENA region to contribute positively to the ongoing European dialogue on the integration of the recent Arab Shataat/diaspora.

The second part "Jordanian youth and their decision-making processes regarding their futures" addresses the issue of out-migration of Jordanian youth, which has consistently been noteworthy. This paper addresses the factors that affect the decision-making processes of Jordanian youth regarding migration and all the relevant dimensions, it suggests further studies and analysis needed to bridge the gap between what young people want and lack.

The third part entitled "Gendering decision-making in mobility and insecurity; the necessity for including Syrian women and girls in discussions on potential return" highlights the importance of giving more attention to the inclusion of Syrian refugee women and girls in the ongoing dialogue on return.

Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD)

Founded in 2008 in Amman-Jordan, Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD) is a Civil Society Organization seeking to foster transformative change towards an empowered, resilient and just society in Jordan and the Arab World. ARDD supports marginalized individuals and communities—including refugees and migrants— in acquiring and enjoying their social, political and economic rights, through legal aid, psychosocial support, media and grassroots mobilization, and research and advocacy to raise stakeholders' awareness locally, regionally and internationally about the challenges that vulnerable persons face in Jordan and the Arab Region.

Abstract

So far, research on the potentiality of return and decision-making for potential return among Syrian refugees in Jordan has not yet fully considered how these potentials and perceptions around return are gendered. In this paper we stress the importance for more specific attention for and inclusion of Syrian refugee women and girls in discussions about return. We consider what reporting on the situation in Syria already tells us and explore other prolonged refugee situations, to make the argument that constructive reporting on return requires thorough gender analysis.

Problem Statement

There are no signs for large-scale return from Syrian refugees to Syria: concerns regarding insecurity are ongoing and prevalent. Especially the potential repercussions that return can have in the lives of Syrian young and middle-aged men – forced conscription, imprisonment persecution and/or disappearance – are severe. Other often cited barriers include the seizure of property including land, limited employment opportunities and the shortage of basic services (The World Bank, 2019).

In line with UNHCR, ARDD wants to emphasize that return requires conditions for a safe, dignified and sustainable life upon return and refugees to decide upon a voluntary basis. Despite the persistence of concerns about safety and dignity, several western countries such as Germany and Denmark, and non-western countries like Lebanon are increasingly discussing and pushing for potential and forceful return of Syrian refugees.

There has been valuable critical and constructive research on the potentiality and difficulties for return of Syrian refugees. This includes the in-depth report of The World Bank on the mobility of Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, frequent updates of UNHCR on perceptions on return, and WANA's report on the potential consequences this can have for Jordan's economy (2019). But whereas there has been increased humanitarian attention for gender, there is a lack of in-depth attention for gendered perceptions on return. For instance, UNHCR's (2019) most recent regional survey on refugees' return (63 % male, 37 % female) does not consider if perceptions on return differ across men and women – and ARDD intends to highlight

the importance of this lens of analysis. Since its inception in 2008, ARDD has been pushing for the inclusion of women and girls in humanitarian programming and for the importance of listening to women's and girls' needs in order to foster adequate responses. In this paper, we want to further analyze and advocate for women and girls' inclusion in the return-to-Syria discussion. ARDD is against any policies and wrongful practices in support of forced repatriation, but also is aware that any constructive critique requires thorough gender analysis. We therefore pose the following questions:

1. If hosting countries want Syrian refugees to return, what needs to happen to guarantee the voluntariness of return and the safety of men, as well as foster the well-being of women?
2. If they do decide to return, what are the obstacles that can jeopardize the rights of Syrian refugee women and girls?

First, we explore what we already 'know' from other reporting, very preliminary findings and stories-on-the ground.

Second, we consider if and what lessons can be learned from other prolonged refugee situations. This results in the argument for more specific attention and research on AND inclusion of Syrian refugee women and girls in discussions about return. We want to emphasize that this is a work-in-progress, and welcome additional sources and insights in order to enhance our understanding of the situation and our ability to respond to it.

Limited knowledge on gender and return to Syria

According to the World Bank, "absence of fighting is rarely a singular trigger for return (Worldbank, 2019, p. 11)." Overall, refugees make their own estimations of whether it is safe or not to go back to their country of origin. The Report Mobility of Displaced Syrians by the World Bank provides crucial information on the complexity of Syrian refugees and we echo its key message: the wellbeing of refugees and their hosts need to be foregrounded in any policy on return.

Relatedly, the World Bank identifies four interrelated categories of factors that influence decision-making towards mobility:

1. Security, peace and protection;
2. Livelihoods and economic opportunities;
3. Housing, land and property;
4. Services and infrastructure.

Regarding the security and safety of women and girls specifically, UN OCHA (2017) stated that gender-based violence pervades the lives of Syrian refugee women and girls. Effective protection of women and girls against violence is an especially dire priority, as situations and violations such as domestic violence, forced marriage, sexual enslavement and trafficking have all increased (The Worldbank, 2019, p. 20).

Women have increasingly become main providers of their households, and struggle with securing livelihoods. Moreover, access to infrastructures and services also affect men and women differently. For instance, the presence in Syria of the number of physicians per 1.000 individuals has halved (p. 16), potentially further deteriorating maternal health care.

In line with the World Bank we emphasize that refugees are active sense-making human beings, yet we want to move beyond a highly rational, somewhat individualized calculation of push- and pull-factors: decisions around mobility are very much linked to the wellbeing of family members and, the often gendered, patterns within one's family, community and society. This also became evident in ARDD's research on debt in the lives of Syrian refugee women: whereby

ARDD (2019) found that the potential dangers of return for their male family members influence women and girls' thought on return. This is not to say that we aim to foreground women's roles as mothers, daughters and sisters only, or that women are passive or reactionary in their decision making. Rather, we seek to highlight that the decisions – of women and girls, but also of men and boys - happen amidst familial relationships, social networks, and moral values.

Gender and return within another prolonged refugee situation

War tends to produce crises in which old social orders - for instance regarding gender, class and age - are renegotiated (Branch, 2008). Conflict often gives women (within and beyond the conflicted area) greater responsibility and with it greater leverage in decision-making processes (El-Bushra, 2003). For instance, within Kakuma Refugee camp, Sudanese refugee women have gained prominence in regards to decision making (Grabska, 2011).

A comparative study on gender relationships in post-conflict countries – bearing in mind that it is important to question when and under which con-

ditions Syria can be regarded as such –showed that patriarchal role patterns are, often violently, reinforced (McKay, 2004). For example, consequent to 21 years of civil war, elderly Ugandan men were prone to use violence towards women, youth and children in order to reconstitute their male authority (Branch, 2008). The reversal to male dominated social and family structures also put tremendous pressure upon Chilean refugee women who were returning upon the end of Pinochet's dictatorship.

In 2011, in regards perceptions on potential 'repatriation' to the then newly established 'South Sudan', young people – girls and boys – residing in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya showed reluctance to return to a place they had no active recollection of. Women showed reluctance about returning to poor material and infrastructural conditions (Jansen, 2011, p. 188).

Moreover, given the insecurity around return, return movement in prolonged conflict settings – as was the case for Afghani refugees in Pakistan, Sri Lankan IDPs, South Sudanese and Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Syria around 2010 – is most often an iterative, cyclical process.

The lack of transparent information about what is going on in the areas where people come from and/or want to return often necessitates the need for acquiring additional information, often in person. Equally securing property ownership and/or selling material assets often require that at least one person in the household travels back to Syria. Research conducted among Syrian Kurdish refugees who sought refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan found that there was more circular mobility among women – back and forth between Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan – just because of the serious implications that potential return could have for their male family members (Hayes, 2019). Moreover, smartphones and digital connectivity play an important role in understanding what is going on and assessing potentials and implications of return.

Conclusion

A debate about the return of refugees is neither new, nor neutral. UNHCR has to navigate within hosting countries. In Jordan, discussions around return are for instance deeply linked to the Palestinian Question and the legal foundations around Right to Return, and concerns about the reduced capacities of NGOs to cater the needs of Syrian refugees and the host populations. Decisions for return also depend on the legal, social and economic opportunities within the host society. The increasing difficulties among Syrian refugees and the host population also became evident in the earlier presented report on Women-in-Debt. If policies are put in place towards return, we need to safeguard that the returns of women, men, girls and boys do happen as voluntary as possible and result in safe and dignified lives. This requires more in-depth research, policies and projects that further foster these principles.

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