Working Paper

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC



Documentation for Syrian Refugees in Jordan:
Good practices and Challenges





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2020

Table of Contents

I.	Introduction	3
	Note on Data Collection	4
II.	Documentation as a Tool for Achieving Protection	4
	Women's Access to Justice and Civil Documentation	5
	Normative Framework for Civil Status Documentation in Jordan	6
III.	Affixing Marriage and Kinship among Refugees	
	A Brief Overview of Past Challenges and Efforts Undertaken	7
	The 2018-2019 Campaign to Rectify Legal Status Documentation	8
	of Refugees and New Challenges	
IV.	The Impact of COVID-19 on Civil Documentation	10
	Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Access to Justice	11
V.	Recommendations	12
VI.	References	13
VI.	Footnotes	15



I. Introduction

The Syrian crisis resulted in the largest population displacement in the world, with over 5.6 million registered refugees and over 6 million people displaced within Syria. Jordan, like most of the Middle East, is facing the growing problem of vulnerable groups at risk because they lack legal status. Even if a final settlement were to be declared tomorrow, the resolution of the conflict, post-war recovery and rehabilitation would take decades. It is estimated that between 400,000 and 500,000 refugees will stay in Jordan long term.²

Within the framework of the "Enhancing Protection" project funded by the Swiss Agency for Cooperation and Development in Jordan (SDC), ARDD has continued to address the legal needs of Syrian refugees and the local community across the Kingdom. As a result, **6,242 refugees** (Table 1) have benefited from a range of legal services delivered with the purpose of strengthening refugees' documentation in Jordan. Among the services provided: legal consultation, mediation, representation in court and legal awareness campaigns, along with ARDD's signature psycho-social sessions to better identify and address the legal issues faced by refugees and vulnerable population.

As a national human rights legal aid organization providing legal services to refugees since 2008, ARDD has provided legal aid services through day-to-day cooperation with various official governmental and international entities. A key partner in the humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis and UNHCR's legal implementing partner in Jordan since 2009, ARDD has been at the forefront of the advocacy efforts leading to two key amnesty campaigns by the GoJ that had great impact on securing legal status for refugees in Jordan, namely: the national exemption of the fines for affixing marriages in 2014 and 2015, which covered over 3,000 refugees, and the yearlong campaign of rectification of documentation from March 2018 to March 2019 that has benefited over 24,257 Syrian refugees. These efforts have been led by UNHCR, in cooperation with ARDD and GoJ.

Type of legal service	Number of beneficiaries
Legal consultation	4,708
Legal mediation	796
Legal awareness	412
PSS sessions	220
Legal representation of cases in court	106
Total:	6,242

TABLE 1. Legal Services and Beneficiaries

Registration and securing the legal status of refugees is a cornerstone in the protection of refugees worldwide. Without updated documentation, Syrian refugees in Jordan, as refugees elsewhere in the world, are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse and are prevented from accessing humanitarian services, such as health and education. To amend this situation, and in an effort to help refugees claim their rights, the project aimed to meet the civil documentation needs of a large number of refugee families lacking relevant documents.



Through its extensive fieldwork and legal aid practice among refugees in the Kingdom, and as part of the Syria crisis response, ARDD has constantly contributed to the identification of needs and gaps that obstruct refugees' rights in Jordan. The topic of this Working Paper stems from the legal aid services that have been conducted over the course of the most recent rectification campaign that ended over a year ago, and the work afterwards. Legal aid lawyers working with ARDD have reported a high level of complexity in some of the cases, which necessitates extended amounts of time, dedication and technical skills to address. As part of its commitment to enhance and strengthen the rights of Syrian refugees, through this Working Paper, ARDD hopes to contribute to enhanced community knowledge and awareness of the complexities surrounding procedural aspects of providing refugees with civil status documentation.

This Working Paper concentrates on a key aspect of civil documentation, namely **affixing marriage and kinship in the Kingdom**. It provides analysis of key obstacles preventing individuals from successfully regularizing their stay in the country. As the paper was prepared during the quarantine period imposed by COVID-19, it provides some **preliminary analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the legal system**, as well as some reflections on the possible impact of COVID-19 and future obstacles to documenting marriages and civil status.

Note on Data Collection

This Working Paper has been primarily informed by the long view of lawyers working with ARDD, resulting from years of experience in the provision of legal aid to Syrian refugees in response to the Syria crisis. In addition, and specific to this project, several focus-group discussions were conducted with beneficiaries after the sessions intended to raise legal awareness, with one focus-group discussion on affixing marriage and kinship conducted with eight beneficiaries in the Amman office in the presence of a staff member of the SDC, as part of the implementation of the "Enhancing Protection" project, funded by SDC.³

Due to the current COVID-19 circumstances, face-to-face interviews with Syrian refugees were replaced by phone interviews of 31 (13 male and 18 female) Syrian refugees in five governorates who had been served by ARDD legal aid department.

II. Documentation as a Tool for Achieving Protection

Registration of and provision of documentation to refugees is a cornerstone in the protection of refugees worldwide.⁴ Without up-to-date documentation and verified legal status, Syrian refugees in Jordan are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Lack of documentation, furthermore, prevents refugees from enjoying freedom of movement, entering the labor market safely, and accessing basic humanitarian services such as education and healthcare. From the point of view of mental health, a growing number of studies highlights how insecure residency status, challenging refugee determination procedures, restricted access to services and general lack of opportunities to work or study compound the past traumas effects, exacerbating symptoms of PTSD and depression.⁵





Syrian refugees living both outside and in refugee camps in Jordan require Ministry of Interior Service Cards (MoI cards) as well as the Asylum Seeker Certificate (issued in Jordan by UNHCR to households) so that they can access a range of humanitarian and social services. In order to strengthen the documentation of Syrian refugees in Jordan, from March 2018 until March 2019, the GoJ and UNHCR (along with national and international partners) completed a year-long exercise of rectification of documents that regularized the status of 24,257 Syrian refugees living in urban areas.⁶ Although this included some individuals who had entered Jordan through informal borders and had never registered with UNHCR, the majority of cases consisted of rectification documentation regarding individuals who had exited camps without authorization before July 1,2017, and were living informally in urban areas.⁷.

This process of rectification of documentation is paramount for the completion of civil status documentation of all Syrian refugees, who, regardless of their location, experience life events (births, deaths, marriages, divorce) that also require constant documentation efforts in order to complete the regularization of their legal status in Jordan. While UNCHR does not require this documentation to register persons of concern, this civil status documentation is essential for securing the legal identity of individuals and families, preventing statelessness and protecting a range of human rights that are linked to the protection of individual wellbeing. Furthermore, this documentation of refugees' civil status is of critical importance as it influences how refugees access key humanitarian and social assistance.

Women's Access to Justice and Civil Documentation

Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to lack of documentation. As highlighted by UNHCR, "women who are not registered and/or have no individual identity documents are either dependent upon male family members for access to food, assistance or essential services or have no such access."

In the case of Syrian refugee women in Jordan, the patriarchal nature of normative frameworks places women in an enhanced situation of vulnerability. This vulnerability is particularly critical in divorce cases. If women have informally divorced, they face hurdles, as UNHCR requests a divorce certificate issued by the GoJ Civil Status Department prior to issuing a separate Asylum Seeker Certificate. In these situations, informally divorced women often can only obtain a separate certificate if they can prove that their husbands had left Jordan. As a result, reportedly, women fear leaving their marriage due to concerns about their ability to access benefits. In

Furthermore, divorce certificates entitles the beneficiaries to certain rights and helps them avoids problems in the future, in case they wish to marry again. If a couple does not register its marriage and a woman seeks a divorce or her husband divorces her later, there is little recourse that can be taken with regards to her *dowry*, her *alimony* and her *right of custody* of her children, because there is no documentation that she was married in the first place or that the children are actually hers.



"

"I needed to prove my marriage, because I was divorced and my husband was refusing to follow the procedures to formalize this. The lawyer helped me finalize all the procedures and eventually got a divorce document." – Syrian female beneficiary from Mafraq

Normative framework for civil status documentation in Jordan

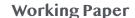
Civil status documentation has been described as the "the continuous, permanent, compulsory and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of events, including vital events, pertaining to the population." In Jordan, the Civil Status Law (No. 9 of 2001) provides primary responsibility for birth and death registration with the Civil Status Department, which has 74 offices across Jordan, ¹³while marriage, divorce and inheritance is regulated by the Personal Status Law No. 36 of 2010 and its amendments.

The release of birth certificate by the Civil Status Department is contingent upon two key documents, among other documents: a. proof that the parents are lawfully married; b. an identity document of the person registering the child. Also important in the case of Syrian refugees in case families did not register a birth or death more than one year after it occurred, is for them to obtain a positive judgment from the magistrates' courts – which are civil courts – before they can register that birth or death with the Civil Status Department. According to Article 102 of the Jordanian Constitution, "civil courts have jurisdiction over all persons in all matters, civil and criminal ... except those matters in respect of which jurisdiction is vested in Religious or Special Courts".

Unlike birth and death certificates, marriage registration for Muslims are handled by the Sharia courts and governed by the Personal Status Law No. 36 of 2010. In order to register a marriage, the Sharia courts require:

- Proof of identity for the bride, groom, the bride's guardian, and two witnesses.
- Health certificate from the Jordanian Ministry of Health (MoH).
- Petition for a marriage contract.
- Approval letter from the Ministry of Interior (MoI).

While there are no costs associated with the MoI approval or health certificates, Jordanian law requires that the bride and groom pay a court fee for issuing a marriage certificate. According to Article 23 of Court Fees Regulation No. 61 of 2015, this fee ranges between JD29 and JD90. According to Jordanian law, informal marriages conducted in Jordan (for instance, by a religious "sheikh") are illegal and need to be ratified by the Sharia Court. Under Article 36(c) of the Personal Status Law, illegal marriages also incur a fine of JD1,000, which must be paid in order to obtain a marriage ratification certificate. According to a 2013 ruling by the Supreme Sharia Court of Jordan, this fine is not to be applied to couples who have concluded informal marriages outside of Jordan. In addition, there is another penalty, under the Penal Law Article 279, which states that "whoever conducts a marriage ceremony in a manner inconsistent with the provisions of the Personal Status Law or any other legislation in force, or is a party thereof, shall be convicted with imprisonment from one to six months".





III. Affixing Marriage and Kinship among Refugees

Brief overview of Past Challenges and Efforts Undertaken

Over the course of the Syrian refugee crisis, in Jordan, a set of challenges has characterized the civil documentation process of refugees. The many legal situations encountered over the past years have been amply documented by humanitarian actors in the protection sector, ¹⁴ and could be grouped in the following five main categories:

- Lack of awareness about Jordanian registration process among Syrian refugee community.
- Inability to produce the required documentation in order to obtain a given certificate.
- Inconsistencies with court practices (Sharia courts regarding marriage) and civil status department (for birth certificates).
- Burdensome costs to obtain marriage certificates.
- Fear that initiating a registration process might endanger one's legal status in the country.

"I will certainly follow up on the procedures for issuing the marriage and birth certificates for my children for the opportunity of resettlement, but I need a lawyer because the procedures are difficult and expensive."- Syrian beneficiary from Zarqa

Recognizing the paramount importance of civil status documentation among Syrian refugees, and the challenges mentioned above, **the GoJ, in cooperation with UNHCR and international and national humanitarian actors** working in response to the Syrian crisis, has been introducing new provisions that makes it easier for refugees, mostly through the help of legal professionals, to obtain official marriage and birth registration documents.

Among the most relevant efforts have been:15

- Establishing official Sharia courts and mobile judicial services in all camps, in consultation with the Supreme Judge Department.
- Assigning a Civil Status Department employee in a camp for the purposes of receiving and issuing birth certificates and papers for other transactions.
- Assigning a Ministry of the Interior employee for the purposes of granting marriage approvals inside a camp.
- Having Sharia courts and the authorities legalize informal ("urfi") marriages.
- Instituting two governmental waiver periods (in 2014 and 2015), during which Syrian refugees could regularize their marriages free of charge and without paying the penalty fees stipulated by law, as a result of which around 3,000 refugee families benefited and were able to register their marriages as well as new births
- Establishing flexible evidentiary rules to facilitate the registration of undocumented marriages. These allow an individual who knows a married couple to give evidence on their behalf, even if the individual was not an official witness to their wedding.



- Easing restriction on document requirements for registering new births. Photocopies of documents be tendered, for instance, if parents no longer possess the originals. This is a significant change because under Jordan's Personal Status Law, only original identity documents or notarized copies were recognized when registering a birth.
- Starting, in July 2020, to conduct pre-marital medical examination (thalassemia examination) in the camps.

The 2018-2019 campaign to rectify legal status documentation of refugees and new challenges

The most recent effort toward strengthening documentation of refugees in Jordan was the year-long campaign, from March 2018 to March 2019, to rectify refugee documentation. The campaign is the result of constant advocacy on behalf of refugees by UNHCR and other humanitarian actors on the ground, including ARDD. The criteria of inclusion in this campaign were:

- 1. Refugees who exited illegally the camps prior to July 1, 2017.
- 2. Refugees who after July 1, 2017: a) entered illegally the country; b) had not registered with UNHCR; c) had forged or falsified official documents.

As part of the year-long campaign, GoJ formulated anex novo [annex?? Please make sure "anex novo" is correct] Special Committee (SC), consisting of high-level professionals from five different security departments, which was dissolved at the end of the campaign. During their twice-a-month meetings, SC members met with refugees individually to reach decisions regarding the rectification of their legal status in the country. After each interview, refugees were provided with verbal notifications of the committee's decision (positive or negative), while the committee proceeded to elaborate confidential assessments, signed by all members, in which they provided details regarding their decision to grant the new rectified status. After the refugee received verbal communication and before the police stations received electronic notification about the new rectified status, there was usually a time lapse of seven to 10 days. The confidential files constituted evidence in Sharia courts for the purpose of affixing marriage and kinship.

It has often been the case that once refugees were verbally granted approval of their new status, many proceeded to rectify their civil documentation in order to complete the regularization of their situation in the country.

Over the past months, since the rectification campaign, as the legal implementing partner of UNHCR in Jordan, **ARDD** has been referred over 160 cases in order to proceed with the rectification of their civil documentation. During its work on these cases, ARDD encountered two scenarios that require different protection protocols:

Scenario 1: Refugees who have been granted rectification of their legal status

After meeting with the referred client, **ARDD lawyers conducted an independent verification process** with Jordanian authorities and UNHCR in order to establish the veracity of the refugee's statement that he/she had indeed been granted approval for the rectification of his/her legal





status in the country. This step is critical in order to ensure the safety of the refugees, as once the case has been initiated in court, the use of forged documents could lead the judge to stop the lawsuit and refer the refugee to the district attorney for forgery or using forged documentation.

Once this has been positively verified, lawyers proceeded to personally contact Sharia judges to ask them to initiate a petition to SRAD (Syrian Refugee Affairs Department) in order to obtain the confidential dossier of the refugee as part of the file to build evidence for his/her case. These dossiers, as explained earlier, contain important detailed information that can ease the process of rectification of marriage and/or birth documentation and avoid the possibility of having the refugee referred to the District Attorney for forgery or using forged documents in the first place, as this would be another legal case that requires legal representation and has negative consequences that can include imprisonment of the refugee.

"I got married to a girl who is under 16 years old, and I was afraid to conclude the contract in court because I heard that it was illegal and that I could be imprisoned or expelled. The lawyer helped me understand the solution for this situation, so I followed all the procedures and eventually the marriage contract was issued. Now, once my wife gives birth, I will follow up to ensure that the child will obtain a birth certificate."

- Syrian male beneficiary from Amman

Among the challenges encountered by ARDD lawyers is the fact that the process is extremely lengthy (taking from 8 to months to be finished, if there are no further complications) and requires an extreme level of dedication on the part of the lawyer, which is time consuming, as he/she needs to personally communicate with the different parties and actors involved in this legal case. Furthermore, given the sensitive nature of these dossiers and their relevance to ensuring the legality of the refugee, the involvement of ARDD lawyers is critical to ensure trust in the confidentiality of the process.

Scenario 2: Refugees who have NOT had their legal status rectified

Among the cases referred by UNHCR to rectify their civil documentation, ARDD encountered a critical situation that needs to be address, namely: 25% of the cases related to refugees did not have their legal status rectified during the campaign for falling out of the criteria of the campaign. After the independent verification process by ARDD has pointed out this legal situation, the case has been identified as legally impossible to proceed with for ARDD and other organizations providing legal aid services, in order not to further risk the safety of the refugee. Forgery of official documents places the refugee at a substantial risk of imprisonment for months, which can be replaced by a monetary fine in the best cases, or up to 6 months in jail which, in some cases can reach up to 5 years. 16

In this scenario, ARDD advocates for establishing another pardon mechanism, in the form of a smaller version of the Special Committee that can look after cases that did not fall under the previous criteria.



IV. The Impact of COVID-19 on Civil Documentation

According to a 3RP update, as of May 4, 2020, over 450 Syrian refugees have been infected with COVID-19. Furthermore, "key findings from various assessments have shown a significant increase in signs of distress, the number of reported cases of domestic violence against women and girls and food insecurity, with most refugees having no food in stock. Gaps are also found in access to and quality of education as not all children have the necessary tools to access distance learning and quality online content; teacher training and parental engagement continue to remain challenging." ¹⁷⁷

With regards to legal protection services, cases that require legal representation before the court are currently on hold, until the judicial institutions resume their operations. Among the respondents whose cases had not been completed, 22 beneficiaries expressed the need to have their cases urgently resolved in order to avoid fines (whenever applicable) and be able to access social services (health and education).

Despite the closure of judicial institutions and suspension of litigation services until further notice, **ARDD** has continued to provide consultation and mediation services over the phone and online, while adhering to the imposed regulations. It is important to note that under the current situation, the Defense Law Order No. 5 waives legal consequences of delay in registration, preventing the accumulation of legal fines for delays in issuing birth and marriage certificates by the Civil Status Department.

During the closure of the judicial institutions, ARDD's Legal Aid Department has witnessed and, as a result, has been providing support, in myriad potential legal cases that need to be highlighted:

- 1. Syrian refugees in Jordan marry outside the official registration procedure and assume that due to the lockdown, the fines will not apply. Although the supreme judge announced that marriage registration procedures are halted until further notice, the JD1,000 fine remains applicable for marriages concluded outside the official registration procedures. ARDD predicts that the cases for affixing marriage and kinship will augment in the period after regular proceedings resume, as unofficially married couples will want to register their marriages to obtain official documents for their children, necessary for ensuring nationality, school enrollment, access to healthcare and aid services.
- 2. As a result of the enhanced fear and vulnerability caused by COVID-19, ARDD offices are currently experiencing a spike in cases pertaining to the rectification of civil documentation, as it is possible that refugees may consider returning to Syria, or simply fear that getting sick exposes them to further scrutiny from local authorities. ARDD fears that the number of refugees falling under the second scenario presented earlier could increase further.
- 3. Births outside of health facilities for families of all nationalities is another legal aspect of concern; accessing health facilities is more difficult because of the restrictions of movement. Women giving birth and other health emergency cases are advised to communicate with the





Civil Defense. As a consequence of restriction of movement, women are more likely to give birth at home, assisted by a midwife or a family member. This situation, especially if the midwife is not licensed, creates legal challenges to prove the birth of and kinship with the child. In these cases, **ARDD lawyers emphasize the importance of having credible witnesses from both sides of the families** present at the birth of a child, to ensure a smooth procedure once the kinship requires documentation, and encourage **clients to notify, if applicable, the** *mokhtar* – **the person closest to the sheikh of a tribe** – **of the birth of their child** and to obtain a birth notification from the hospital confirming the basic information as soon as possible.

In an effort to prevent difficulties in proceeding with the documentation of these life events, ARDD has produced materials to raise awareness concerning the issuance of marriage, divorce, birth and death certificates during COVID-19. These materials are widely disseminated and the Legal Aid Department exerts extra effort to provide clear information and advice during legal consultations over the phone.

Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Access to Justice

As a recent global report on the impact of COVID-19 on Women's Access to Justice has pointed out, "resources are being diverted away from the criminal justice system toward more immediate public health measures to deal with COVID-19, meaning that other services, such as hotlines, crisis centers, shelters, legal aid and social services are at risk of being scaled back in light of the new health emergency." Jordan cannot be expected to be an exception in this regard. Scaling back this services will have a negative impact on women's safety. As the socio-economic situation further aggravates, ARDD fears that the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse can increase while the mechanisms for detecting and pursuing such possibility may not be available.

Lastly, as a long-time provider of psycho-social support services, ARDD fears the psycho-social effect of the amplified uncertainties facing Syrian refugee women unable to proceed or finalize legal procedures, which are often already considered a mental burden. As time elapses lack of crucial documents to access aid services limits refugee protection mechanisms or the possibility of providing adults and children with their needs.





V. Recommendations

To policymakers

1. Establish an alternative mechanism to rectify the legal status of Syrian refugees that did not meet the criteria of the 2018-2019 campaign and remain in need. As COVID-19 is an airborne virus, it is critical that all population be correctly identified for epidemiological purposes.

To official institutions

2. Consider the prolonged impact of COVID-19 on documentation and registration for Syrian refugees in the context of coordination with relevant stakeholders to uphold the integrity of refugee protection systems, with particular attention to particularly vulnerable groups such as women and children.

To legal aid service providers

- **3.** Abide by the "Do no harm" principle by verifying information provided by refugees prior to initiating a legal case in his/her name, to avoid the legal consequences of forgery and other punishable acts.
- **4.** Provide Syrian refugees with accurate and correct information on the legal consequences of forgery and other punishable acts.
- **5.** Anticipate the prolonged impact of COVID-19 on documentation and registration proceedings for Syrian refugees in the planning of legal aid programs.
- **6.** Create an effective and centralized complaint mechanism for Syrian refugees to foster an increased sense of accountability of service providers in Jordan.

To donors

- 7. Inspire accountability toward refugees on the part of the implementing partner by emphasizing the important role of service providers in providing correct and sufficient information on risks and responsibilities with regard to applicable laws and regulations.
- **8.** Provide sustained support to legal aid services and conduct legal awareness initiatives to ensure that documentation, registration and correction of marriage and kinship, within the available protection mechanisms, are understood.

To refugees

- **9.** Distinguish between rumors and reliable information regarding official and correct documentation and registration of marriage and kinship.
- **10.** Verify risks and responsibilities in relation to registration, documentation and correction of marriage and kinship with official service providers or entities with a credible reputation.
- 11. Ensure correct registration of marriages in order to avoid challenges in accessing assistance and protection services, or in the case of birth or death.



Working Paper

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Endnotes

- 1 Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan, accessed on 12 May 2020, http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/.
- P. 202 Amjed Rasheed et al.
- ARDD provides legal consultation services to document marriage and kinship to 1,544 female beneficiaries under the "Protection Program", https://ardd-jo.org/News-Room/ardd-provides-legal-consultation-services-for-cases-of-documenting-marriage.
- 4 UNHCR, Identity Documents for Refugees, EC/SCP/33, states that "Beginning with the Arrangement of 5 July 1922, several of the international agreements concerning refugees adopted prior to the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees provided for the issue to refugees of a certificate which served both as an identity and. a travel document." Accessed at https://www.unhcr.org/excom/scip/3ae68cce4/identity-documents-refugees.html
- 5 https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5428192/

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VII. Footnotes

UNHCR number as reported to ARDD, as implementing partner

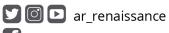
- 7 In my Own Hands: A Medium-Term Approach toward Self-Reliance and Resilience of Syrian Refugees and Host Communities in Jordan https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/73879
- 8 See ICMC report for an analysis of Syrian obstacles facing Syrian refugees in Mafraq to obtain legal documentation: Undocumented, Unseen, and at Risk: the situation of Syrian refugees lacking civil and legal documentation. https://www.icmc.net/sites/default/files/documents/resources/jordan-syrian-refugees-legal-documentation-final.pdf
- 9 UNHCR Handbook 2007 and UNDESA, 2017. *Integrating a Gender Perspective into Statistics*, p. 117.
- 10 Contrary to recommended practice by UNHCR, Asylum Seeker Certificates in Jordan are issued to households, not to individuals. See UNHCR Handbook 2007
- 11 In my Own Hands
- 12 United Nations, Principles and recommendations for a vital statistics system, Revision 2 (2001), p 4.
- 13 Technical report 2009 ESCWA vital statistics.
- 14 Registering Rights and UNCHR analysis regarding Jordan in Ensuring Birth Registration for the Prevention of Statelessness
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- 16 Legal implications that legal practitioners and refugees face in the context of marriage or kinship are based on the following provisions of Jordanian penal code: Articles (260 and 261) 266, 265 and 269 and 270, in addition article 153).
- 17 3RP COVID-19 Response Publication, http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/up-loads/2020/05/3RP.pdf
- 18 Justice for Women amidst COVID-19, P. 15





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