

The Impact of COVID-19 on Precarious Livelihoods and Gender-Based Violence: Syrian Refugee Women in Lebanon

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(Summary)

While abundant research tackles GBV among refugee communities, few of them focus on domestic violence within refugee households and intimate partner violence (IPV). This research adopts real cases to examine domestic violence within refugee households during COVID-19. Individual interviews were conducted in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic through WhatsApp with twenty-five households for the male and female heads of each household in Bekaa Valley Syrian camps in Lebanon, in addition to several divorced women.

The Lebanese government issued restrictive COVID-19 policies against refugee communities, causing most Syrians to prefer to die in their camps rather than seeking support from COVID-19 clinics and risk getting deported to Syria due to their illegal status (restrictive policies on obtaining or renewing residency visas were in effect for Syrians in Lebanon). The Lebanese civil community considered those crowded camps as the virus generator of the pandemic, and that they should be isolated. Several lock downs were imposed on Syrian camps even before the public lockdown. Hence, the pandemic prohibited Syrians from working, leaving the camps, and children being able to play outside of their tents. Similarly, humanitarian organisations were prevented from entering many of Syrian camps by local municipalities, while those vulnerable communities mainly rely on such organisations to get food and in-kind aid. The combination of these policies and practices led to a deterioration of living standards, increased poverty and vulnerability, and added more pressure and stress upon Syrian refugees, significantly affecting their mental health. As a result, this led to increased domestic violence against women and children, with men beating women and children as a way to vent their anger. The research follows tragic cases about women being abused by their husbands. Some got divorced only to face other types of domestic violence by their fathers and brothers who could not tolerate their living expenditures and their children. Of the women we have interviewed who were worried about their children from their fathers' and the civil community violence, some were forced to leave their children for a new forced marriage.

This research found that domestic violence was common among some of those communities before the pandemic, yet as Lebanese policies limit men's mobility and work opportunities, new gender norms are imposed where many women became the breadwinners of their households, undermining the sense of masculinity of their menfolk. Yet, the analysis shows that COVID-19 significantly increased this phenomenon while women still lack access to organisations and authorities that secure their protection. Therefore this research sheds light on the importance of refugee protection and recognition by the host country -at the national and local level-s in line with the humanitarian organisation and NGOs and the international conventions and compacts, in particular during pandemics and crises.