

PASC WG Brief – Child Protection and SGBV

This brief has been produced by the Persons Affected by the Syrian Crisis Working Group (PASC WG) ahead of the Brussels V Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region. The PASC WG is a network of 26 local Non-Governmental Organizations supporting vulnerable Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians. It aims to amplify the capacity and influence of its members, increasing their ability to monitor, advocate, and discuss research findings on key national and international trends and issues pertaining to human rights and protection in Lebanon. As part of its mandate to advocate for a future anchored in human rights, the PASC WG has been advocating and researching on a series of issues to shed a light on the most important and pressing protection challenges pertaining to child protection, forced evictions, the right to work, and deportations.

This year, due to the economic depression and change of country circumstances, the PASC WG expanded its research focus to include information on attempts at migration, restrictions on freedom of movement, the rise in social tensions, and sexual and gender-based violence. As such, the PASC WG's briefs for the Brussels V Conference are set out as follows: (1) Evictions and Social Tensions; (2) Documentation and Deportations; (3) Child Protection and SGBV; and (4) Migration and Freedom of Movement.

Progress Since Brussels IV

By the end of 2020, more than half of all Syrian refugees seeking asylum in Lebanon were children (14.42% were aged between 0 and 4 years; 25.1% were aged between 5 and 11 years; and 16.1% were aged between 12 and 17 years).¹ With no change since last year, the rate of Syrian refugee youth in need of education, employment, or training remains at a high 67%. The percentage of married Syrian girls aged between 15 and 19 dropped only slightly from 27% to 24% in 2020. However, child labour has been becoming a more common phenomenon, especially in the agricultural sector within the Bekaa region, with a rise from 2.6% of all Syrian children aged between 5 and 17 years engaged in child labour in 2019 to 4.4% in 2020.² It is thus self-evident that the commitments made by the Government of Lebanon (GoL) and international partners at Brussels IV to educate all children and reduce child marriage and child labour have not been achieved.

Gravely, these commitments will become even harder to realize as Lebanon's economic crisis, which has been accelerated by the repetitive lockdowns and closure measures in response to COVID-19, devastates livelihoods and leads to an increase in poverty. Self-isolation and staying home are a luxury that thousands of families cannot afford. The World Bank expects poverty in Lebanon to continue to worsen and surpass 50% of the entire population by 2021.³ Refugee families from Syria are becoming increasingly vulnerable

¹ UNHCR: "Operational Portal Refugees Situation", <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>.

² UNHCR: "VASyR Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (2020)", <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/VASyR%202020.pdf>.

³ Reliefweb: "What next for livelihoods programs in Lebanon? Responding during economic crisis and COVID-19", <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/What%20Next%20for%20Livelihoods%20Programs%20Lebanon.pdf>.

economically, with 89% currently living in extreme poverty.⁴ The situation has become one of survival, not development, as refugees struggle to put food on the table.⁵

Access to Education

There was a slight decrease from 69% of children of primary school age enrolled in the academic year 2018-2019 to 67% in 2019-2020. However, the percentage of enrolled pre-primary school aged children increased slightly from 13% in 2019 to 16% in 2020 and those of secondary school age from 22% to 29%.⁶ However, the majority of child refugees did not attend classes whatsoever during COVID-19 lockdowns, as many lacked the tools needed for online learning such as electronic devices, especially access to an internet connection,⁷ or the financial ability to recharge data bundles in the absence of Wi-Fi.

Child Labour

Two interrelated reasons are the main causes driving child labour: lack of access to educational opportunities and family economic hardship. Indeed, the deteriorating economic situation of refugee families in Lebanon has led to a rise in child labour, most notably among young boys, but also among young girls who are often sent to sell items in the streets placing them in an extremely vulnerable situation.⁸ While legal livelihood opportunities for Syrian refugees are limited to the agriculture, construction, and cleaning sectors, access to livelihood opportunities in these three sectors has been further constrained by the COVID-19 lockdown and restrictive measures. Moreover, Lebanese struggling without jobs are increasingly seeking lower paid jobs traditionally filled by migrants or Syrians. These reasons, in conjunction with the barriers related to legal residency, and the 2019 crackdowns on undocumented labour by the Ministry of Labour and with curfews that affect Syrians travelling to work, have led to an even sharper increase in the number of families without a regular income. Under these desperate circumstances, parents have been increasingly turning to their children to bolster family income for necessities.

Child Marriage

In Lebanon, as child marriage is “regulated by the 15 personal status laws that govern Lebanon’s 18 officially recognized religious sects”, there has been no agreement to codify a nationwide minimum age for marriage.⁹ There was a slight decrease in the frequency of child marriage - from 27% down to 24% -

⁴ UNHCR: “VASyR Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (2020)”,

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/VASyR%202020.pdf>;

Inter-Agency Coordination: “Inter-Agency Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) Situation Update, Current Operational Environment in Lebanon (Dec 2020)”.

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/LCRP%20IA%20Situation%20Update%20-%20DEC%202020.pdf>.

⁵ Reliefweb: “What next for livelihoods programs in Lebanon? Responding during economic crisis and COVID-19”,

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/What%20Next%20for%20Livelihoods%20Programs%20Lebanon.pdf>.

⁶ UNHCR: “VASyR Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (2020)”,

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/VASyR%202020.pdf>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Bilateral discussion between ALEF and Caritas, February 4, 2021, <https://www.caritas.org/>.

⁹ Save the Children: “No, I don’t”: Abolishing Child Marriage in Lebanon”,

<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/no-i-dont-abolishing-child-marriage-lebanon>.

however, the economic crisis, deteriorating living conditions, and failure to ensure adequate education for the majority of refugees, has substantially increased the risk of child marriage going forward.¹⁰

Abolishing child marriage in Lebanon is contingent upon raising the minimum age for marriage across the country, enhancing civic engagement, and increasing the responsibility of communities to intervene if they identify a case of child marriage by approaching local religious leaders. Nevertheless, this requires local authorities to increase their capacity and competence in responding to cases of child marriage and in fostering trust in NGOs, communities, and individuals to report cases of child marriage.¹¹ This cannot be achieved without advocating for the end of child marriage with local religious leaders to sensitize on the dangers related to child marriage. At the same time, in order to protect as many children as possible, it is also crucial to raise awareness at the local level on the impact of child marriage on children, especially within vulnerable communities who resort to child marriage to deal with financial struggles. Previous efforts in 2017 to set the legal minimum age of marriage at 18 did not lead to the passage of a law. The absence of a unified minimum marriage age is due in part to the complex legal framework governing matters of personal status in Lebanon: each religion and sect governs its own members' statuses.¹² As a result, the minimum age for marriage varies between religious communities.

SGBV: Sexual and Gender Based Violence

Since the COVID-19 outbreak across Lebanon and its accompanying lockdowns, women's rights and child protection organizations have been reporting worrying trends, especially among refugees. A leading child protection agency in Lebanon, noted that although the factors and drivers of child abuse, such as the heavy psychosocial impact of the pandemic and the financial crisis in Lebanon are heavily present, it is easier for these abuses to be kept hidden within the household due to a lack of visibility, as community-based and on-site activities have been put on hold and schools closed. Nevertheless, judicial protection actors have become aware of the alarming new trends that emerged in late 2020, of serious and violent crimes against children, including murders and attempted murders of children and domestic abuses so severe that children required hospitalization.¹³

Although domestic violence is a worldwide problem, refugees are at higher risk of domestic violence, due to perpetual trauma, financial strain, and other quality of life factors. NGOs that offer protection to women and girls reported that cases of domestic violence have increased rapidly, with one hotline receiving triple the number of calls in 2020 to their national helpline for victims of SGBV.¹⁴ Among Syrian families, the use of violent discipline (including corporal punishment and psychological aggression) at home is widespread, with 65% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and 77% of Palestinian refugee children from

¹⁰ UNHCR: "VASyR Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (2020)", <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/VASyR%202020.pdf>.

¹¹ PASC WG Survey Result, <https://pascwg.com/>.

¹² 7D News: "Lack of Legislation fails to end Child Marriage in Lebanon", <https://7dnews.com/news/lack-of-legislation-fails-to-end-child-marriage-in-lebanon>.

¹³ Bilateral discussion between ALEF and Himaya, February 17, 2021, <https://www.himaya.org/>.

¹⁴ Bilateral discussion between ALEF and ABAAD, February 26, 2021, <https://www.abaadmena.org/>;

"Our Response to GBV During the COVID-19 Pandemic", <https://www.abaadmena.org/documents/ebook.1590737262.pdf>;

"ABAAD's Response to GBV During the Crises in Lebanon", <https://www.abaadmena.org/documents/ebook.1601377248.pdf>.

Syria being subjected to at least one form of violent discipline.¹⁵ Indeed, refugee children confront physical and sexual abuse more than Lebanese children do.¹⁶ Moreover, while there were few reports of cases of sexual and physical violence against refugee children by Lebanese perpetrators in 2020, at least two cases were dropped by the family of the victims because of fears of jeopardizing their legal status.¹⁷

Refugees who are also LGBTQ+ are especially vulnerable to abuse and mistreatment, and are even less likely to find employment.¹⁸ There has been a noted rise in LGBTQ+ refugees resorting to drug dealing and consumption as a result.¹⁹ An organization that provides support to Lebanese and refugees who identify as LGBTQ+ has noted that it is exceptionally difficult to protect members of this community, who often face threats from strangers as well as their own family members if their sexuality or gender identity is discovered. There are no shelters available specifically for those persecuted because of their sexuality or gender identity, they can access general shelters until they are deemed “safe”, however, it is very difficult for members of this group to attain safety once they have been outed. Yet, while LGBTQ+ refugees are considered highly vulnerable and a priority for resettlement, in practice, very few are actually chosen for resettlement, leaving them in a perpetually dangerous situation in Lebanon.²⁰

Recommendations

To the Lebanese authorities

- The GoL must adopt a collaborative participatory approach to consult with the various education stakeholders including UN agencies, civil society organizations, the private sector, representatives from the regional districts, municipalities, and parents in developing the national education strategy to increase access to education and coordinate efforts related to education service deliveries (such as equipment, materials, transportation, etc.) to make sure all children are scholarised.
- The GoL must increase cooperation between the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Transport, and Ministry of Education to identify solutions to reduce barriers to accessing education, including access to digital infrastructure but also the cost of school transport and materials such as books and equipment.
- The GoL and Municipalities must increase access to information on child labour laws and the enforcement of child labour laws. This should involve a modification of Article 22 on child labour to raise the minimum age for work to 15 years old to meet international standards. Further, it is necessary to introduce a monitoring mechanism or oversight body to ensure the application of

¹⁵ Reliefweb: “Lebanon Crisis Response 2017-2020”, <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-crisis-response-plan-2017-2020-2019-update>.

¹⁶ Reliefweb: “Mapping responses to Child Marriage in Lebanon: Reflections from practitioners and policy makers” <https://bit.ly/2Zsz9BR>;

Al-Fanar Media: “Pandemic Will Force Thousands of Refugee Girls to Become Brides Instead of Students”, <https://bit.ly/2M0tRKG>.

¹⁷ URDA - Position Paper on Assaults Against Children, November 2020.

¹⁸ Advocate: “LGBTQ+ People In Beirut Are Suffering As Lebanon Continues to Bleed”, <https://bit.ly/3dqfgni>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Bilateral discussion between ALEF and Helem, February 16, 2021.

the law, the identification of child labour cases and sanctioning businesses engaged in child labour.

- MEHE must clearly monitor private schools' non-fee restrictions, such as discriminatory enrolment practices, on access to education for Syrian refugees.
- The Lebanese Parliament should legislate to raise the minimum age required to be married to 18 years old to protect boys and girls from early marriage and pave the way for the general public, local authorities and civil society to provide protection services to children victim of child marriage.
- The GoL must reinforce systems and policies related to the rights and protection of those vulnerable to violations of SGBV. The GoL to implement a participatory process to develop a strategy towards gender equity in Lebanon bringing in wider legal framework as well as inter-personal relations and concepts of gender in Lebanon.
- The GoL, in coordination with UNDP, UNHCR and the Civil Society to map the sectors' tools, approaches and opportunities for building community relations, response and prevention opportunities (roles in identification, referral and awareness raising) regarding SGBV.
- The GoL to adopt a Do-No-Harm approach and equip the Internal Security Forces with the necessary mechanisms, tools, and spaces, to collect testimonies, support and protect victims of SGBV whether Lebanese, refugees, children or members of the LGBTQ+ communities.

To Civil Society

- Religious leaders should ensure they play their full role in ending child marriage and enrol in prevention campaigns and refusing to conduct child marriages.

To Donors

- Donors should meet their funding obligations, ensure that RACE II is fully funded, and honor past pledges and the Global Compact on Refugees.
- Donors should continue to and increase funding to provide and cover transportation and school materials' costs for vulnerable communities.
- Donors should also increase their funding in terms of capacity building and trainings to support vulnerable parents contracting a job to ensure children are not victim of child labour.
- Donors should pressure and engage with the Government of Lebanon to ensure that the Lebanese commitments are respected and implemented such as improving the quality of education, access to education and setting up a national strategy regarding vocational and technical education.



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