

WOMAN ALONE

The fight for survival
by Syria's refugee
women




UNHCR
The UN
Refugee Agency

CONTENTS

4	Foreword
6	Methodology
8	Introduction
15	Home and well-being
30	Work and money
44	Isolation and anxiety
68	The way forward

FOREWORD

“This report is a wake-up call. Life for Syria’s refugee women did not stop when they crossed the border; rather, it was the beginning of a new, deeply traumatic experience – filled with misery, anxiety, isolation and hardship. If it makes you uncomfortable to read it, it should.”



António Guterres
UN High Commissioner for Refugees

“Syrian refugee women are the glue holding together a broken society. Their strength is extraordinary, but they are struggling alone. Their voices are an appeal for help and protection which cannot be ignored”



Angelina Jolie
UNHCR Special Envoy

“When left alone, you have to push boundaries and make things happen. When you are weak, you are done. You have to be strong to defend yourself, your kids, and the household.”

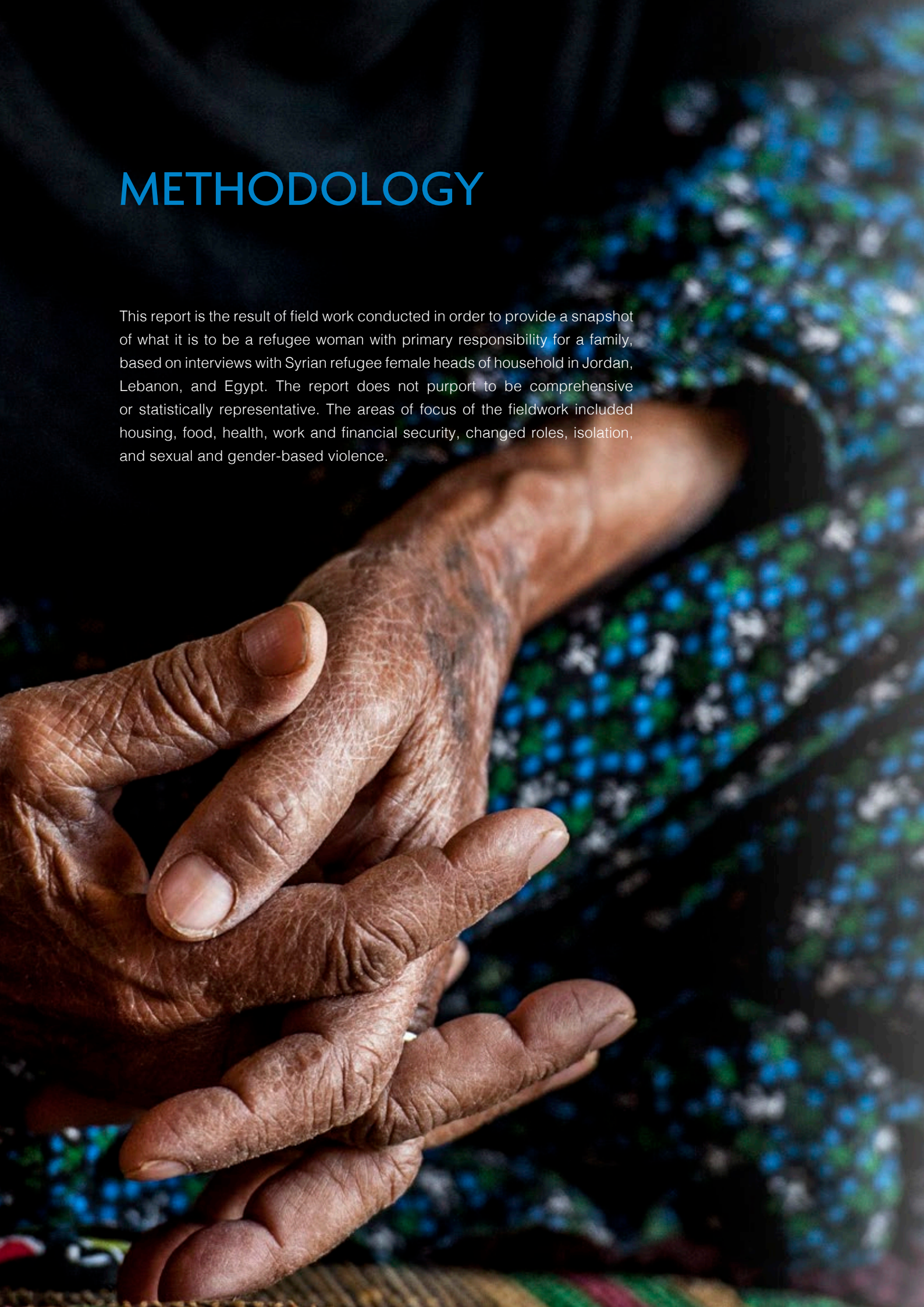
Lina
Syrian refugee in Lebanon

PHOTO: Syrian refugee Lina carries her daughter from the washroom to their shelter at a settlement in Lebanon. UNHCR/A.McConnell



METHODOLOGY

This report is the result of field work conducted in order to provide a snapshot of what it is to be a refugee woman with primary responsibility for a family, based on interviews with Syrian refugee female heads of household in Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt. The report does not purport to be comprehensive or statistically representative. The areas of focus of the fieldwork included housing, food, health, work and financial security, changed roles, isolation, and sexual and gender-based violence.



Fieldwork was conducted between February and April 2014. One hundred and thirty-five female heads of household were interviewed: 48 in Egypt, 48 in Jordan (including 9 in Za'atari camp), and 39 in Lebanon. This was not intended to be a representative sample. The names of refugees interviewed have been changed to protect their identity. In compiling this report, the team also referenced UNHCR data from ProGres, which is the standardized system for refugee registration.

The primary source of information, both quantitative and qualitative, was in-depth interviews with women about the difficulties they face, how they are coping, and what the refugee, host, and international communities are doing to help. The research team used some set questions during interviews to obtain quantitative data, but for the most part adopted an unstructured interview style to allow the women to freely discuss their main issues of concern.

UNHCR offices were asked to select women who were heading the household in which they lived. The criteria required that the interviewee had assumed primary responsibility for the people under their care, as well as household finances and decision-making. The research team arranged to speak with a diverse range of women living in rural and urban settings across the three countries, as well as in Za'atari camp in Jordan. This included older female heads of household; child female heads of household; female heads of household with disabilities and/or caring for persons with disabilities; and women who were heading the household although they were accompanied by an adult male. Those women who were living with other adults – including adult males – still identified themselves as the heads of the household.

Offices were requested to select women of different age groups. The age distribution of female heads of household interviewed ranged from 17 years to 85 years. Eighty-five per cent were between the ages of 26 and 59.

The research team interviewed staff from a variety of organisations in all three countries, including UN agencies and local and international non-governmental organisations. This helped clarify the situation faced by female heads of household and provided insight into how the refugee community, the host community, and international and local organisations are addressing their needs.

PHOTO: A Syrian woman in a settlement near Irbid, Jordan. UNHCR/S.Rich

INTRODUCTION⁹

In charge of a new life

What happens when life as you know it changes overnight? When your role as a mother, wife, sister, or daughter, suddenly switches to that of the main provider and head of the household? How do you cope when thrust into an uncertain terrain that leaves you exposed to unfamiliar risks, and struggling just to make it through the day?

Over the past three years, 2.8 million people have had to flee the civil war in Syria – nearly four in five of them women and children.¹ They have faced dramatic changes to every part of their lives, with a direct effect on the structure of Syrian communities in exile.

This report tells the story of one group – women who head their households alone – who face a particularly difficult challenge. They now account for over 145,000 Syrian refugee households, more than a quarter of the half a million households overall.

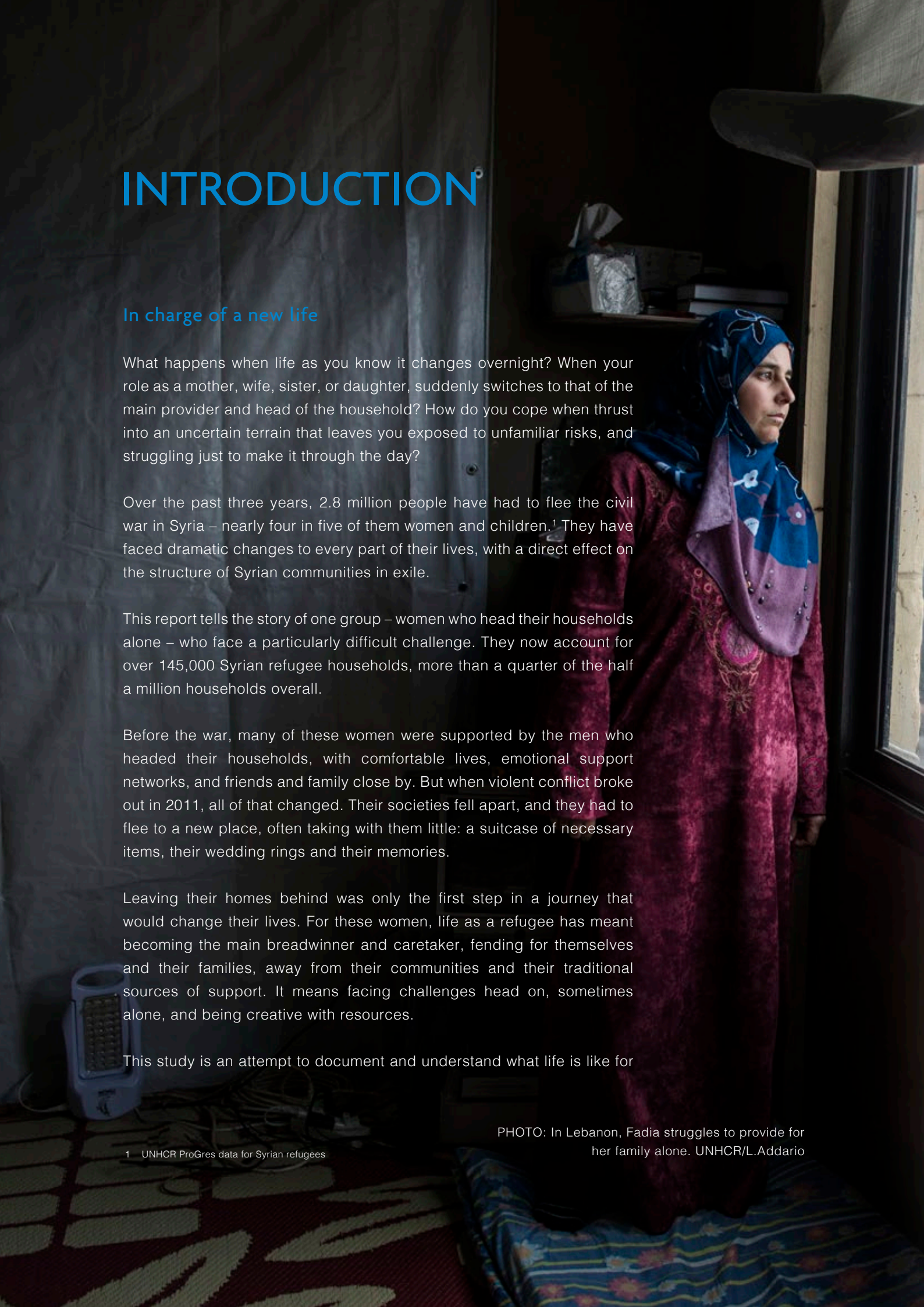
Before the war, many of these women were supported by the men who headed their households, with comfortable lives, emotional support networks, and friends and family close by. But when violent conflict broke out in 2011, all of that changed. Their societies fell apart, and they had to flee to a new place, often taking with them little: a suitcase of necessary items, their wedding rings and their memories.

Leaving their homes behind was only the first step in a journey that would change their lives. For these women, life as a refugee has meant becoming the main breadwinner and caretaker, fending for themselves and their families, away from their communities and their traditional sources of support. It means facing challenges head on, sometimes alone, and being creative with resources.

This study is an attempt to document and understand what life is like for

PHOTO: In Lebanon, Fadia struggles to provide for her family alone. UNHCR/L.Addario

1 UNHCR ProGres data for Syrian refugees



these women, and to understand the specific challenges they face.

Between February and April 2014, researchers interviewed 135 women in Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt, to put a human face on their experience. Why did these women leave? Where did they go? How do they earn a living? Who do they talk to when their day is too hard to handle? What do they fear the most?

The 135 women that researchers spoke to spanned the ages of 17 to 85, but most were between 26 and 59. All of them identified themselves as the primary decision-maker of their household, responsible for the people living there.

This report does not purport to be comprehensive or statistically representative, but it does offer a unique look at their trials and challenges, as well as the work underway to help them cope. It is an attempt to get to the heart of how difficult these women's lives can be – how they live, what they face on a day to day basis given the protected backgrounds some of them had, and for a number being thrust into a role without the support they were accustomed to.

A rapid change in circumstances

Nearly all of the women interviewed for this study became the head of household after the war in Syria began in March 2011. Most of them say they fled when the violence escalated, realising the devastating effect it would have on their families.

Before the conflict forced them into exile, many of the women interviewed managed their households, but depended heavily on the financial security and protection provided by the men in their families.

In some cases, their lifestyles were such that they did not even go shopping alone. Often they lived in areas where other members of their extended family were close by – Syrian families are traditionally very tight-knit.

The war changed all of that, tearing families and communities apart. Men were killed, imprisoned or badly injured. Fear, as a constant, entered into their lives.

Many of the women were too frightened to remain alone in the midst of a war zone. Sixteen per cent of those interviewed pointed to the absence of

their former head of household as the main reason for their decision to leave Syria, that crucial moment when they said: now is time to leave.

For some of these women, there is still the hope of returning to their old lives once peace is restored in Syria. Twenty-two per cent said their former head of household was alive in Syria, and that they were still in contact. Their men may have stayed behind while their families left, or they may have fled with their families but later returned.

There are many reasons why these men might have stayed in Syria. Some stayed to care for relatives or protect their property. Others were detained or went missing. Some may simply not have wanted to leave their country. The majority who returned to Syria after fleeing went back to care for sick, injured or elderly family members, or to collect loved ones and bring them to their country of refuge.

Almost one in five of the women interviewed said their former heads of household were unable to find refuge because of visa or other entry restrictions.

Whatever their circumstances, all the women interviewed had to navigate an unfamiliar and often unnerving new environment. Most faced a daily struggle to find enough money to pay the rent, buy food and basic items, or access services such as health care. Their stories were often heartbreaking: mothers having to spend hours getting their sick children to a hospital for treatment; mothers having no choice but to let their children work, or leaving their children alone to go find a way to make money.

Two-thirds of the women interviewed for this report had moved house at least once since arriving in their host country, mainly due to poor living conditions, safety concerns, an inability to pay the rent, or moving to their own place after living with relatives or friends.

Some women said their new role had enabled them to interact more with the community around them, but nearly half said they left the house less than they did in Syria. Many were isolated – living alone, without someone to share their concerns. One in three women said they left the house never, rarely, or only when necessary, due to unfamiliarity, insecurity, or increased responsibilities. Feelings of isolation and anxiety





In Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, 70 families live by the shell of an abandoned onion-processing factory. UNHCR/L.Addario

were widespread. However, for those women with other family members in their country of asylum, they often lived close by to provide each other with support.

Three in five were worried for their own or their children's security. They mainly expressed fears of sexual harassment, but in some cases also spoke of being afraid of direct physical violence.

A number attributed their feelings of insecurity, or their experiences of harassment or exploitation, to the fact that they were living without an adult male, who would ordinarily provide social and physical protection.

Many also worried about how their children's lives had changed, and the emotional distress they had suffered. Without regular income, female-headed families were at risk of relying on 'negative coping mechanisms' such as child labour, which prevents children, especially boys, from attending school.

Some found their children were growing up too fast: that they had seen too much and taken too much weight on their shoulders. They said their boys, in particular, had taken to acting like "little men," trying to help their mothers by getting jobs, running errands, or assuming the protective demeanour of an adult. Girls were forced to assume additional responsibilities too, such as taking care of siblings, and doing more chores at home.

But even faced with these worrying circumstances, many Syrian women were demonstrating remarkable resourcefulness in the countries where they have sought refuge. The stories in this report highlight people making the best of a difficult situation, and adapting to their new roles. Refugees and host communities, as well as UNHCR and partners, are pulling together to provide them with support and assistance.

Pressures on host communities

Many of the communities hosting Syrian refugees face serious difficulties of their own. The influx of such high numbers of refugees has placed pressure on limited resources and infrastructure, such as water,

electricity, health, and education systems. This is often destabilising already fragile political and economic situations.

Syria's refugee women have therefore not only had to confront their own personal challenges, but the tensions within host communities too.

Lebanon, a country of only 4 million, recently marked the arrival of the one millionth Syrian refugee. Syrians reside throughout the country, dispersed in more than 1,700 locations. With the highest number of Syrian refugees in the region, Lebanon has seen an increase in pressure on its resources and, consequently, in tensions within its own borders.

Jordan hosts nearly 600,000 refugees, 80 per cent of whom live in urban settings. This has placed significant pressure on the country's scarce resources and labour market, sometimes fueling resentment against the growing number of Syrians.

In Jordan's camps, where 20 per cent of the refugee population resides, services and shelter are provided by aid agencies, which pay close attention to security issues raised by women.

Egypt has witnessed enormous political change over the last three years. This has had significant implications for the protection of the country's 137,000 Syrian refugees. A change in visa restrictions in 2013 meant borders were closed to many Syrians fleeing the conflict, separating some families.

Difficult socio-economic conditions and an unstable political environment have made it complicated for humanitarian agencies to carve out a safe space for vulnerable people, and refugees face mounting tensions with host communities. Harassment against women in Egypt has been a great source of anxiety for Syrians.



Syrian refugees live in a derelict building in Tyre, Lebanon. UNHCR/L. Addario

HOME & WELL-BEING

Setting up home

Maha is a 32-year-old mother of two whose house in Daraa was destroyed by a bomb in December 2012. She fled to Beirut, Lebanon, where she now lives in a concrete room with a dirt floor near a motorway underpass.

She works intermittently as a housekeeper, but the cost of living surpasses her ability to keep up with what her family needs: she struggles to find enough money to pay the \$200 rent, and is already \$400 in debt. Meanwhile, she lives in difficult conditions. "There is the dirt, the noise, everything," she says. "It's like living on the street."

Arriving in their countries of exile, the first challenge facing refugee women like Maha is to find a new home. Putting a roof over their children's heads, and finding a place that will provide security in a new and unfamiliar environment is the priority. But there are fundamental issues that make this a challenge: a lack of housing and limited resources mean they often face a dramatic drop in living conditions. Many recall longingly what their old homes looked like: the gardens, the space, and the furniture.

In Za'atari camp in Jordan, refugees reside in tents and caravans, while in Lebanon some live in collective shelters and informal tented settlements. There are apartments and houses too, but many are in poor condition. Some refugees find their new home is a damp garage, others find they are in a room without light, or far from even the most basic services. Often, women and their children are forced to live in poor and overcrowded conditions, without basic necessities.

Female heads of household often have many people under their care – predominantly children, but also other family members, such as their siblings, mother, or mother-in-law. Several of the women interviewed live with an adult son or other male relative, but still assume the role of head of the household. The average number of people living in Syrian female-headed households across the three countries is 5.6, but the number can be higher – in one case, 23 people lived under the same roof.

Despite the overcrowding, some of the women interviewed demonstrate incredible generosity by welcoming others into their home. Hala, 32, from Baba Amr, has seven children, one of whom was born during the crossing from Syria to Lebanon.

Her journey alone is one of endurance. But once she arrived and settled down in an informal settlement in Lebanon, Hala decided to open her already crowded home to two other Syrian refugees, sisters aged 21 and 14.

They share a space that barely holds a few mattresses on the floor. There is almost no room to stand up, none to play and hardly any space to cook. But for Hala, there is solace in caring for someone else, and sharing experiences.

“We all understand each other’s circumstances, and try to support each other as much as possible,” Hala says. The two sisters also give her some much-needed companionship. “We discuss how beautiful life was in Homs.”

As a young woman herself who feels preyed on by many men outside her tent, Hala wants to shield the sisters. “I was here alone, without a male figure. The girls can’t stay at any other place and I host them,” she says. Many homes are bare, with little furniture or basic items. Some women, however, have been given furniture, carpets and other forms of support from mosques, local organisations, neighbours, landlords and people in the local community.

There are other stories of kindness. Forty-one-year-old Rasha lives with her eight children and two grandchildren in a house in Zarqa, Jordan. Her husband is in Syria. Before, they stayed in a mosque for five days. Then she met a Jordanian man who helped them to find a house nearby and gave them some of his old belongings: a television, a cupboard, a washing machine, and a fridge. Rasha has never forgotten his generosity.

Some other landlords have provided accommodation free of charge.

In response to the housing issue, UNHCR and partners are improving shelter conditions for Syrian refugees. In Lebanon, for example, they are easing the situation in informal settlements in flood prone areas.

Previously, UNHCR has offered assistance to female heads of household so they were able to get through the recent cold winter, providing heating, fuel, stoves, blankets, and clothes.

Constantly on the move

Many female heads of household say they have moved frequently since leaving Syria, causing an ongoing feeling of being unsettled and uprooted. Some moved to their own place after initially living with relatives or friends; others moved due to poor living conditions, rent costs and safety concerns.

Finding a new place to live is not easy: landlords are sometimes more reluctant to let to female heads of household than other refugees, worried that they will pose a financial risk.

In Lebanon, female-headed households are amongst the most vulnerable group in terms of shelter. A UNHCR shelter survey conducted in March 2014 found that 40 per cent of refugees lived in sub-standard shelters (25 per cent in unfinished houses or garages, and 15 per cent in informal settlements) and up to 42 per cent of refugees shared accommodation.

Vincent Dupin, UNHCR Senior Shelter Officer in Lebanon, says: "Such difficult living conditions, where there is little privacy and protection from the elements, are exposing women and their families to health and physical safety risks, not to mention adding to their emotional burden."

Paying for the basics

Shaden is close to tears. Five months pregnant, the 25-year-old from Aleppo sits in the corner of a bare room in a Beirut suburb trying to quiet her three small children. She is painfully aware that she is alone in Lebanon. Her husband, parents and other relatives are back in Syria; she has no one to care for her children when she goes out for food.

Sometimes, she confesses, she leaves them alone in the apartment while rushing out to buy necessary items. She is haunted by the constant

struggle for money.

"I already sold my gold to try to help us live," she says, wiping her eyes and pulling one of her young children onto her lap. "I told the landlord, I am alone with three children! Whatever happens, please – I can't live on the street."

Emotionally, she feels isolated. There is no one to talk to, as she doesn't know anybody in her new neighborhood. Most of all, she is fearful of giving birth alone. Anxious about her impending labour, she asks: "Who will take care of my children when I am at the hospital?"

Finding somewhere to live is only the beginning of the difficulties facing Syria's refugee women. The biggest challenge for most of the women interviewed was to find enough money to pay their way.

Rent is the main worry, and in times of hardship, many are forced to make do without even basic household items. The decision about what to buy – whether it is medicine, food or washing powder – often becomes critical.

Shaden points to the almost bare shelf in the hallway of her apartment, where she keeps a few basic food items: a sack of beans, some tinned goods and rice. "I worry about food, I worry about safety, I worry if the war comes to Lebanon," she says. "I'm all alone! If something happens to me, what will happen to my children?" It is a line she repeats over and over, like a mantra: "If something happens to me, what will happen to my children?"

The vast majority of female heads of household interviewed said they were receiving food vouchers from the World Food Programme (WFP), and two thirds said they had enough to eat.

But a third said they did not. Those who said they did not have enough food mostly spoke in comparison to what they were used to before the conflict. They worried about a lack of variety, and some mothers with growing children were concerned about the impact on their health. However, very few said they were actually going hungry.

The women who said they did not have enough food took different approaches to their situation. Some said the family ate less overall, while





New arrivals at Lebanon's northern border. UNHCR/L.Addario

a small number said they ate less individually, so that others could have enough.

Seventy-year-old Faten, who lives in Imbaba, Cairo, with her nine-year-old and eleven-year-old granddaughters, was willing to sacrifice her own well-being to let the children eat.

"I don't eat until they're full," she says. "I'm happy to eat a toasted piece of bread to make sure they get enough to eat."

Some women said they borrowed money from friends, relatives or neighbours, or bought food on credit from local shops. Others accepted donations from family or friends. Many described this as humiliating, and vastly different from their former lives.

"What can we do?" says 62-year-old Zainab, who lives in Cairo. "Nothing. We rely on the mercy of people."

Others said they had to sell their food vouchers in order to buy other essential items or pay the rent.

"Rent is more important than food," says 42-year-old Shireen, who lives in Amman with her seven children.

Choice was also a problem. "We don't remember what meat or fruit tastes like," says Dunya, in Giza, Cairo, who lives in a house of nine. Wafa, who lives in Salt, Jordan, with her four children, similarly explains: "The food coupons are only for basic food. We haven't eaten fruit for four months."

For many of the women, their situation stands in stark contrast to the comfortable lives they led in Syria before the war. That in itself is a source of distress. One woman in Jordan remembers woefully the fruit trees that lined her old property, the abundance of food they once had compared to what she now feeds her family. What her children yearn for, she says, is roast chicken, which is simply out of her budget.

"My biggest problem in life is that I spend a lot of time comparing what my life was like, how we were, and how we are now," says Dina, 33, from Daraa. A mother of six, whose husband is still back in Syria, Dina has been a refugee in Damietta, Egypt, for eight months. She had to sell her possessions to cover her family's needs. Once they were exhausted, she

registered with UNHCR in order to get help.

Finding a safe place to live

A lack of money can force refugees to live in unsafe overcrowded environments, without basic amenities or security. Women living without a male head of household reported feeling particularly at risk, especially if their homes lacked electricity, a locking door, or a private bathroom. These conditions could create stress and fuel tensions within the household. Several women attempted to hide the fact that they were living without an adult male from the people around them.

Reema, 47, who lives with her three children in an apartment in Mount Lebanon, is subject to frequent verbal harassment from men in the neighbourhood. She attributes feelings of insecurity to the absence of her husband. She tries to make sure her sons are seen on the balcony, to make it clear to the people around that there are males in the household.

Ghada, 24, used to live in an informal tented settlement outside of Tripoli, Lebanon. Her husband is missing in Syria. One night a man entered her tent and tried to persuade her to be with him, saying, "I hope your husband doesn't come back." She fought back and he left.

She moved to another tent near Tripoli, under a bridge where there were sporadic clashes in the area. Her children were terrified by the shooting. The Danish Refugee Council (DRC), funded by UNHCR, helped her to move to a safer house and paid her rent for three months.

Almost three in four women interviewed reported positive treatment by landlords – with some speaking out about the protective role landlords assumed. But others indicated that their situation made them vulnerable to exploitation. Case workers with UNHCR and partner organisations who come across cases of exploitation by landlords against refugees note that the power dynamic is particularly imbalanced for female heads of household, and are endeavouring to monitor living conditions through home visits. Where urgent protection issues arise, they seek solutions including alternative housing arrangements.

Several women spoke out about harassment by landlords. They reported instances in which they offered free accommodation and money in exchange for sexual favours.

Rawan, a woman in her forties who lives with her elderly mother in Alexandria, Egypt, has moved house four times as a result of sexual harassment by landlords. Abuse and sexual exploitation by landlords were also raised as concerns by female heads of household in Lebanon during focus group discussions held by UNHCR in 2013.

UNHCR and partner organisations in all three host countries run programmes to provide refugees with accommodation or rental assistance to improve their safety and living conditions.

In Jordan, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) runs a shelter programme that targets families in need of housing. Most of their beneficiaries are female heads of household. NRC identifies landlords who have incomplete apartment buildings and don't have the money to complete them, and provides them with funding to bring the housing to a minimum standard. In return for the investment, the landlords provide accommodation for Syrian refugees free of charge.

In Za'atari camp, UNHCR has provided nearly all refugees with shelter, an estimated 85,000 to 90,000 people. Female heads of household are considered a priority group.

The local community can also help. Dina has lived in an apartment in Damietta, Egypt, with her six children for eight months. Her landlord is away, but she says his wife is very kind and protective. "She makes me feel like she's my mother. She always looks out for me and my children. She makes sure that everyone around us knows that we are under her care and that they would have to answer to her for any bad treatment."

In the Obour District of Cairo, a group of Syrian refugees, with support from Egyptians, founded an organisation called Syria Tomorrow. It runs a housing project specifically for female heads of household. Priority is given to women who face imminent eviction or serious health problems. At the most recent count, 21 families were living there free of charge. Syria Tomorrow also helps children register in local schools, and has established its own community school run by Syrian teachers.

Hiba, 32, lives in the accommodation provided by Syria Tomorrow with her two children. She says she feels protected, and has made friends with other Syrians. There are no men, so she "can sleep with a clear head."

PHOTO: A Syrian refugee child looks out of his home in Lebanon. UNHCR/L.Addario





Syrian refugee Lina with her children in Lebanon. Three of them have psoriasis. UNHCR/L.Addario

Lina – A year in a tent in Lebanon

Lina has lived in an informal tented settlement in Lebanon for almost a year. She has seven children, three of whom have psoriasis, which has dramatically affected their health. Medicine is expensive and Lina barely has enough to buy the children food. Meals are cooked on a stove in the middle of the tent: she worries constantly that it will catch fire.

Lina has not heard from her husband since he was detained in Syria two years ago. On top of her worries about him, she struggles to make the best of limited resources at her disposal. With the help of her brothers, she built her own tent, collecting wood for the structure and fashioning makeshift walls out of pieces of fabric.

Lina says she tried to make the tent more like a home – a mirror is hung on the wall, constructed from broken glass, and the interior is decorated with the children's drawings. She sews dolls for her children, and dresses them in scraps of cloth. She wants them to have something to play with.

"People develop. I develop. When left alone, you have to push boundaries and make things happen. When you are weak, you are done. You have to be strong to defend yourself, your kids, and the household."

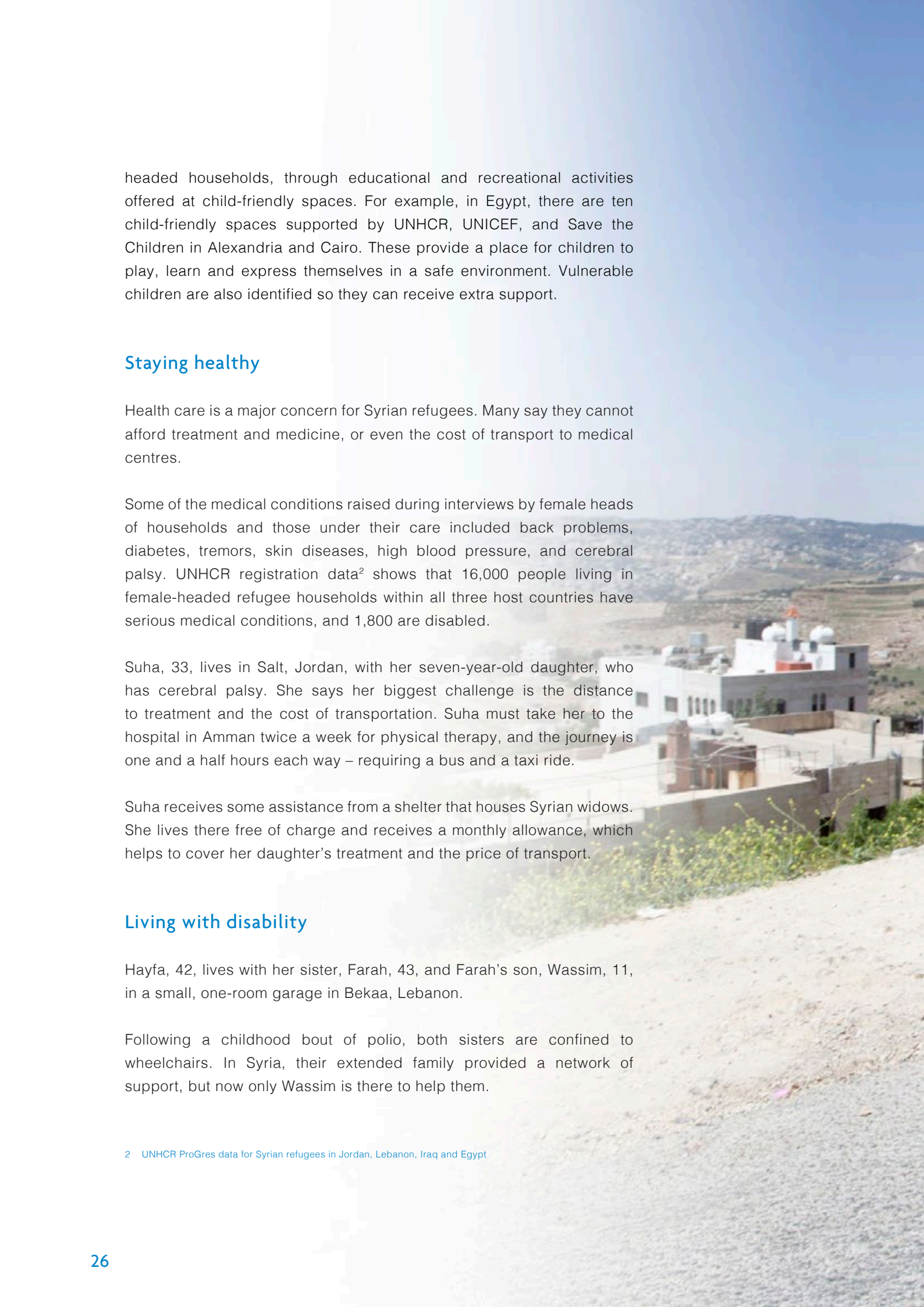
Supporting the children

Financial difficulties have made life increasingly difficult for children living in households headed by women.

"The difference in their lives is the difference between earth and sky," says Rula, in Sadat City, Egypt. "I can't provide them with anything that is like the life they used to have; even the food they like, I can't afford to make it." Affording essentials, such as food and rent, is hard enough; finding enough for the extras such as outings or toys is often impossible.

Some are forced to make painful choices. Noor, 42, from Homs who lives in Akkar, Lebanon, could only afford to send one of her two children to school – forcing her to decide between her son and daughter. She chose the girl. "A girl needs her education," says Noor. "If I had been educated, I'd be able to provide for my family in this situation. A boy can find work in places a girl can't. To work, she needs to have her education."

UNHCR and partners support children, including those living in female-



headed households, through educational and recreational activities offered at child-friendly spaces. For example, in Egypt, there are ten child-friendly spaces supported by UNHCR, UNICEF, and Save the Children in Alexandria and Cairo. These provide a place for children to play, learn and express themselves in a safe environment. Vulnerable children are also identified so they can receive extra support.

Staying healthy

Health care is a major concern for Syrian refugees. Many say they cannot afford treatment and medicine, or even the cost of transport to medical centres.

Some of the medical conditions raised during interviews by female heads of households and those under their care included back problems, diabetes, tremors, skin diseases, high blood pressure, and cerebral palsy. UNHCR registration data² shows that 16,000 people living in female-headed refugee households within all three host countries have serious medical conditions, and 1,800 are disabled.

Suha, 33, lives in Salt, Jordan, with her seven-year-old daughter, who has cerebral palsy. She says her biggest challenge is the distance to treatment and the cost of transportation. Suha must take her to the hospital in Amman twice a week for physical therapy, and the journey is one and a half hours each way – requiring a bus and a taxi ride.

Suha receives some assistance from a shelter that houses Syrian widows. She lives there free of charge and receives a monthly allowance, which helps to cover her daughter's treatment and the price of transport.

Living with disability

Hayfa, 42, lives with her sister, Farah, 43, and Farah's son, Wassim, 11, in a small, one-room garage in Bekaa, Lebanon.

Following a childhood bout of polio, both sisters are confined to wheelchairs. In Syria, their extended family provided a network of support, but now only Wassim is there to help them.

² UNHCR ProGres data for Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt



Syrian refugee Suha carries her daughter, who has cerebral palsy, during one of their long and frequent journeys to a physical therapist. UNHCR/E.Dorfman



Syrian refugee sisters Hayfa and Farah are disabled and rarely able to leave their home in Lebanon. UNHCR/L.Addario

Getting outside is a rare thing. It is difficult to move their wheelchairs, particularly on their neighbourhood's hilly, unpaved roads. When it rains, the wheels get stuck in the mud, and Wassim says that he is not strong enough to push the heavy chairs. As a result, the three rarely leave the house. In Syria, the sisters say, they took frequent outings. Now their life is confined to four walls.

Their host community and friends have done their best to ease this difficulty. One woman provided help with their rent, and Wassim's Koran teacher brings bread. Friends and neighbours frequently look in on them.

But Wassim is not going to school as he needs to stay home and care for the sisters. The sisters tend to treat him as a man rather than a child; he feels the weight of the responsibility.

UN agencies and partner organisations are working to improve Syrian refugees' access to health services, such as through the provision of transportation and financial support in emergency medical situations. Handicap International in Jordan supports Syrian refugees with disabilities, as well as women who have become heads of household because their husbands have been injured or have disabilities.

Handicap International started providing financial assistance in October 2013, and a mobile team helps people with low mobility with psychosocial support, occupational therapy, prosthesis fitting, and physical therapy.

Frank Tyler, UNHCR Senior Public Health Coordinator in Lebanon, says: "The provision of secondary health care remains a significant challenge. High numbers of refugees requiring specialized health care far outnumber the available funds to support such patients. With over 1 million refugees, and numbers increasing every day, UNHCR and partners have had to make many difficult choices about who can be assisted. With limited resources available, the health sector has prioritized life threatening emergency cases for patients with positive prognoses so as to ensure that health interventions can reach and benefit the greatest numbers of patients."

WORK & MONEY

Finding work

Almost four in five of the women interviewed said they were not in paid employment. This was due to a variety of reasons, including having small children at home, caring for family members, or being unable to find work. Many did not work in Syria.

A fifth of the women interviewed worked part time or intermittently, often depending on the availability of jobs. Domestic workers, for example, worked whenever they could find a job; agricultural workers were largely dependent on the seasons.

A UNHCR survey³ in Jordan, conducted between January and mid-October 2013, looked at more than 15,000 Syrian female-headed households. It found that those headed by women had less access to work opportunities than those headed by men. While 26 per cent of Syrian refugee households reported some income from work, that was only the case in 9 per cent of female-headed households.

The women interviewed found work in education, childcare, sewing, handicrafts, agriculture, and hairdressing. Restrictions on the right to work in all three host countries limited formal employment opportunities for Syrian refugees, and the vast majority of women who did work were engaged in the informal sector.

In order to promote resilience and offer some respite from the isolation and loneliness of life in exile, UNHCR and its partners offer training to equip Syrian refugee women with practical life skills, although prospects for economic empowerment are limited, given legal restrictions and over-stretched labour markets. In Lebanon, activities are provided to both refugee and local women through 32 community development centres,

³ UNHCR/International Relief and Development, Home survey on Syrian urban refugees in Jordan. <http://unhcr.org/urban/>

Syrian refugee Lina lives in a tented settlement in Lebanon with her seven children. "I don't have money to buy toys so I make them for my kids." UNHCR/L.Addario





Tahani helps out in the UNHCR restaurant in Beirut, Lebanon.
UNHCR/A.McConnell

as well as women resource centres. UNHCR also supports three livelihood centres run by the Lebanese NGO al Majmoua, which provide training, job-seeking assistance and group lending for women.

In Jordan, the Jordanian Women's Union provides vocational training and raw materials in cooking, beauty, computing and handicrafts. In Egypt, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) provides refugees with training in computer literacy, hospitality, language, and other technical skills, and coaches them in business planning. In some cases, it gives grants to kickstart businesses. CRS aims for at least 50 per cent of participants to be women, including female heads of household. It is part of the Safe from the Start initiative in Egypt, which promotes innovative project design and enhances UNHCR's capacity to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence.

Aid agencies are also a source of direct work opportunities. Lara, 29, from Homs, arrived in Egypt in January 2013, and began volunteering at CRS. She eventually progressed to a position within their training programme.

Lara believes refugee women should take part in training programmes to play a role in the rebuilding of Syria. "They are the ones who will have to go back and rebuild our country from zero," she says.

"Don't wait for people to help you," says Lara. "You have to go out and take care of yourself."

Tahani, 50, who lives in Beirut, participated in a programme run by Caritas, which provided training on catering and food hygiene. She now helps out in a UNHCR cafeteria. Her days are spent in a light, sun-filled room, working with other Syrians and finding solace in preparing and serving food. "I am doing something I love," she says. "And I am also finding a way to support my family."

Some of the women interviewed were highly skilled professionals back in Syria, such as pharmacists, lawyers, architectural engineers, and office managers. They said it was difficult to find a job in exile that reflected their level of skill.

Reema, who was a pharmacist in Syria, is unable to find work in her field in Lebanon. She and her daughter, also a pharmacist, attend training and awareness-raising sessions at Amel Association in Mount Lebanon to

develop other skills. Additionally, her daughter is taking an accessories-making programme. It is a different career-path, but both women feel that the training will open new doors for them.

"If I hadn't started coming to Amel," says Reema. "I would have given up long ago."

Some women said the responsibility of being the primary caregiver for the children was a major obstacle to work. Childcare, working from home or taking their children to work would make working more feasible. Age and disability, or providing care for aged or dependent family members, also have an impact on women's capacity to work. To ease this strain, UNHCR provides financial assistance on the basis of vulnerability criteria, prioritizing those who are not able to make ends meet.

"You need to work if you can," says Zainab, 62, who lives in Cairo. "If a woman is elderly and ill like me, then there is no advice to give her. What can you do?"

Several women felt there were gender barriers to working. Dalal, who lives in Halba, Lebanon, works in agriculture every day. She believes that work is more difficult to find as a woman, but is determined to be strong and provide for her mother, niece, and two nephews. "As a woman, my ability to work is more limited than a man," she says. "I can't work in all the places a man can, but I try. For a time, I worked in a sawmill."

Making ends meet

For Fadia, money is so tight, sometimes she can only cook one meal a day. "We see meat once a month, when we get food vouchers," she says. "Every now and then I might buy it, so the children don't miss it too much." Even vegetables are often out of her reach.

She wants to work, but there are no opportunities. "Once I worked in the field here, in a village nearby," says Fadia. She pauses to wipe a tear from her right eye. "I was picking vegetables. I got \$10 a day, for a few days. Then the work dried up."



Like many Syrian refugee women living alone, Fadia struggles to earn enough money to feed her family. UNHCR/L.Addario

Other sources of income

With most women not working, they must find alternative means of supporting their households. Very few said they received financial support from their former head of household, and only one in five said they were receiving financial support from another adult relative, including their adult children.

A third said they did not have any steady source of financial support at all: no one was working, no one was providing them with money regularly, and they did not receive regular financial assistance.

Selling family treasures

Women with no means of financial support have had to rely on their savings, or sell their belongings to make ends meet. Many women talked about having to sell their jewellery.

Souad, in Jordan, shows a white mark on her left ring finger where her wedding band had been. She says the fear of not being able to pay rent and feed her children forced her to sell it. "I had to," she says. "But it does not mean I am not still married, even though I am alone." Shortly after she sold the ring, she discovered that her husband, who was missing in Syria, had in fact been killed.

Local generosity

A number of women said landlords, friends, neighbours, or even unknown strangers have helped pay the rent. Mounira, who lives in Alexandria with her children, says an Egyptian whom she does not even know covers her accommodation.

Thirty-one-year-old Sulayma lives with her eight children in East Amman, after coming to Jordan from Daraa in February 2013. Her husband is still in Syria. She became very close friends with some of her neighbours, and one Palestinian woman gave her mattresses, bread, water, a heater in winter, and paid her rent several times. Sulayma insisted she would pay her back, but she knows she would never accept it. "I don't know how to repay her," she says. "Even a sister wouldn't do that."

Sulayma says that her Palestinian friend was able to relate to her

experience as a refugee. “I’ve been there,” she told her.

Andrew Harper, UNHCR’s representative in Jordan, says: “While recognising the enormous challenges faced by female Syrian refugees, it is difficult to imagine how much worse it could be were it not for the tremendous generosity shown by countries in the region like Jordan.”

Desperate measures

UNHCR partners in Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt list child labour and survival sex⁴ as some of the most damaging negative coping mechanisms women resort to.

Syrian refugee women who are alone without an adult male can be particularly vulnerable. Though there is limited information on prevalence, survival sex is especially a problem in underserved and overcrowded communities, where women often bear the brunt of abuse and marginalization in the competition for assistance.

Shurouq – Facing danger to feed the children

Shurouq, 34, lives with her eight children and mother-in-law in an apartment in Jordan. She asks her daughter and mother-in-law to leave the room when she tells her story. Her situation has become so desperate that she sometimes has dark, suicidal thoughts.

Shurouq’s husband is still in Syria, and she works when she can – cleaning, selling vegetables, or working in stores. However, she has no source of regular income and the lack of money is constantly on her mind.

Her most difficult night came when her children were crying with hunger. They had hardly eaten anything for two days, and Shurouq was at a loss. “I left the house and told myself I want to work doing anything, I don’t

⁴ Survival sex is a term used to describe the exchange of sex for material goods or protection, or the sale of sex in order to survive. Survival sex is frequently a direct consequence of gaps in assistance, failures of registration systems or family separations, and affects men, women, boys and girls.



Syrian refugee children line up for work at Za'atari camp in Jordan. UNHCR/G.Beals

care, so long as I can get money for my children." She got in a taxi and the driver said he would help her. "I'm going to take you to a place where everyone will give you money," he said, handing her a veil to cover her face.

It was dark when they arrived at a street full of men. Shurouq panicked. "I was so afraid. The taxi driver left me there. It was very far away. I was walking and crying. As I walked, I fell twice." Two men grabbed her, and she screamed. Another came to help. He drove her home and gave her money to feed her children. The stranger warned her not to go out at night again. He told her she had been in "a dirty place and nobody goes there."

UNHCR is now following up on Shurouq's case to provide her with financial assistance and she regularly visits an International Relief and Development (IRD) community centre to speak with staff, providing her with an avenue of psychosocial support.

Children at work

Thirty-nine-year-old Nahla from Idlib lives in Sidon, Lebanon, with her seven children. Her husband died five years ago after a long illness. Although she had worked in Syria, being forced to shoulder additional responsibility in displacement was a sudden and difficult adjustment, and she suffers from anxiety.

Nahla is already two months behind in rent, and although it pains her, she relies on two of her children to work. Her eight-year-old son works at a grocery shop, and her 16-year-old works at a patisserie, where he earns \$5 a day.

"I feel really sad for him," she says. "But every time I talk to him he says, 'What do you want me to do, sit around and do nothing? Working 7am-10pm is better than nothing.'" Nahla wishes it was she who was out there working, and that she did not have to depend on her children. "Psychologically they are tired and it shows," she says. "They don't know how to deal with the situation."

In 13 per cent of the female-headed households visited, at least one child was working. In some cases, they provided the only source of income. Only one woman interviewed for this report had a daughter who was

working – a 14-year-old housekeeper in Halba, Lebanon. The rest were boys, mostly in retail and the service industry.

A recent assessment of the Syrian Refugee Response in Jordan found that households headed by women were more likely to have children engaged in labour, due to their reduced economic capacity and reduced movements outside the home.⁵

Some women felt they had no choice but for their children to work, while others refused to allow their children to sacrifice their education in order to support the family. UNHCR and partners help families find alternatives, so their children can enroll in school. They promote children's rights and encourage female heads of household to find alternative sources of income.

Cash assistance

Financial assistance provided by UNHCR and partners to Syrian refugees is crucial. Cash is either provided on a regular basis or to address specific needs. However, finite resources require UNHCR to prioritize, targeting those most in need.

As of end February 2014, just above 40 per cent of refugee households in Jordan that received regular cash assistance were headed by women. In Egypt, 16.5 per cent of the beneficiaries of UNHCR's regular financial assistance programme were female heads of household. In Lebanon, the financial assistance programme focuses mainly on cash for rent or other short-term needs, targeting those most vulnerable.

Overall, a quarter of the women interviewed for this study were receiving financial assistance from UNHCR or through other local organisations. A further 13 per cent had received some form of financial assistance in the past. A UNHCR survey⁶ in Jordan, which was conducted between January and mid-October 2013, suggests that female heads of household rely more on humanitarian assistance than other households.

UNHCR's financial assistance programme provides a vital lifeline for

5 UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP, *Joint Assessment Review of the Syrian Refugee Response in Jordan*, January 2014, p.10.

6 UNHCR/International Relief and Development, *Home survey on Syrian urban refugees in Jordan*. <http://unhcr.org/urban/>

refugees. Sixty-four per cent of women household heads receiving financial assistance said they were entirely dependent on it as their only source of income.⁷

Dr. Uma Kandalayeva, Country Director of International Relief and Development (IRD) in Jordan, says: "Cash assistance provided to female-headed households is making significant difference to their every-day life. It gives them some financial stability and reduces risks of exploitation."

Ghada, a 24-year-old in Halba, Lebanon, cannot work because she needs to look after her four children, particularly her daughter who has disabilities. Her husband is missing in Syria. She worked in a clothes shop for a brief period, but did not like the separation from her daughter. She now goes to a community centre four times a week to take classes in nursing and aesthetics, and takes her daughter with her. She lives in a garage and relies completely on cash assistance to pay the rent, provided by UNHCR through the Danish Refugee Council.

Many of these women reported feeling humiliated by having to ask for help. This was particularly difficult since most said they used to live comfortable lives – with houses, cars, clothes, and plenty of toys for their children.

Early marriage

Although early marriage existed in Syria before the crisis, financial challenges faced by refugees can lead to a growing reliance on it, with some families perceiving it as a protective measure.

Despite the fact that early marriage is a known issue among the Syrian refugee population⁸, none of the women interviewed for this report said they had resorted to, or would choose to resort to, this practice to relieve

⁷ This does not include occasional donations from individuals or charities.

⁸ This has been reported in Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt. For example, see UN Women Inter-Agency Assessment of Gender-based Violence and Child Protection among Urban Syrian Refugees in Jordan, with a Focus on Early Marriage. July 2013. Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Sub-Working Group Jordan, Findings from the Inter-Agency Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Assessment in the Zaatari Refugee Camp. March 2013. International Rescue Committee. Syrian women and girls – fleeing death, facing ongoing threats and humiliation. A GBV rapid assessment Syrian refugee populations. Lebanon, August 2012. Save the Children, Syrian refugees emergency needs assessment report. Cairo, February 2013. UNHCR, Comprehensive Assessment and Action Plans for SGBV in the Syrian Refugee Crisis. October 2013.

their financial and social stress. Thirteen women reported receiving proposals for their underage daughters, but all refused, saying their daughters were too young, that they were not willing to make such a serious decision in the absence of their husbands, that they wanted their daughters to complete their education, or that they were concerned for the family's reputation. Women said they resented the image being perpetuated of Syrian girls as "easy and cheap."

Women reported marriage proposals for girls as young as 12. Majida, 36, living in East Amman, Jordan, has received five different marriage proposals for her 14-year-old daughter.

One man, coming from abroad, visited Majida's house multiple times, bringing money, rice, meat, and other foods in an attempt to convince her to let him marry her daughter. She objected, insisting her daughter had to get an education.

Despite their struggle to make ends meet, the women interviewed fiercely rejected the idea of marrying their daughters to relieve their own stress. Noor, a 42-year-old mother living in Akkar, Lebanon, has more than she can handle in her current life. She must provide for two children and her ill mother-in-law, and her financial assistance from UNHCR only goes so far. Despite her struggle, she spoke out clearly against early marriage. "God forbid! I would never marry her off to relieve my financial stress. I would feed her my eyes before I did that."

UNHCR and partners identify and monitor early marriage cases, provide counselling to families on its negative effects, and undertake advocacy and awareness raising campaigns in all three host countries. The International Rescue Committee also has mobile teams that conduct outreach and counselling in Jordan and Lebanon.



A 14-year-old Syrian refugee holds out a photograph of her fiancé. UNHCR/L.Addario

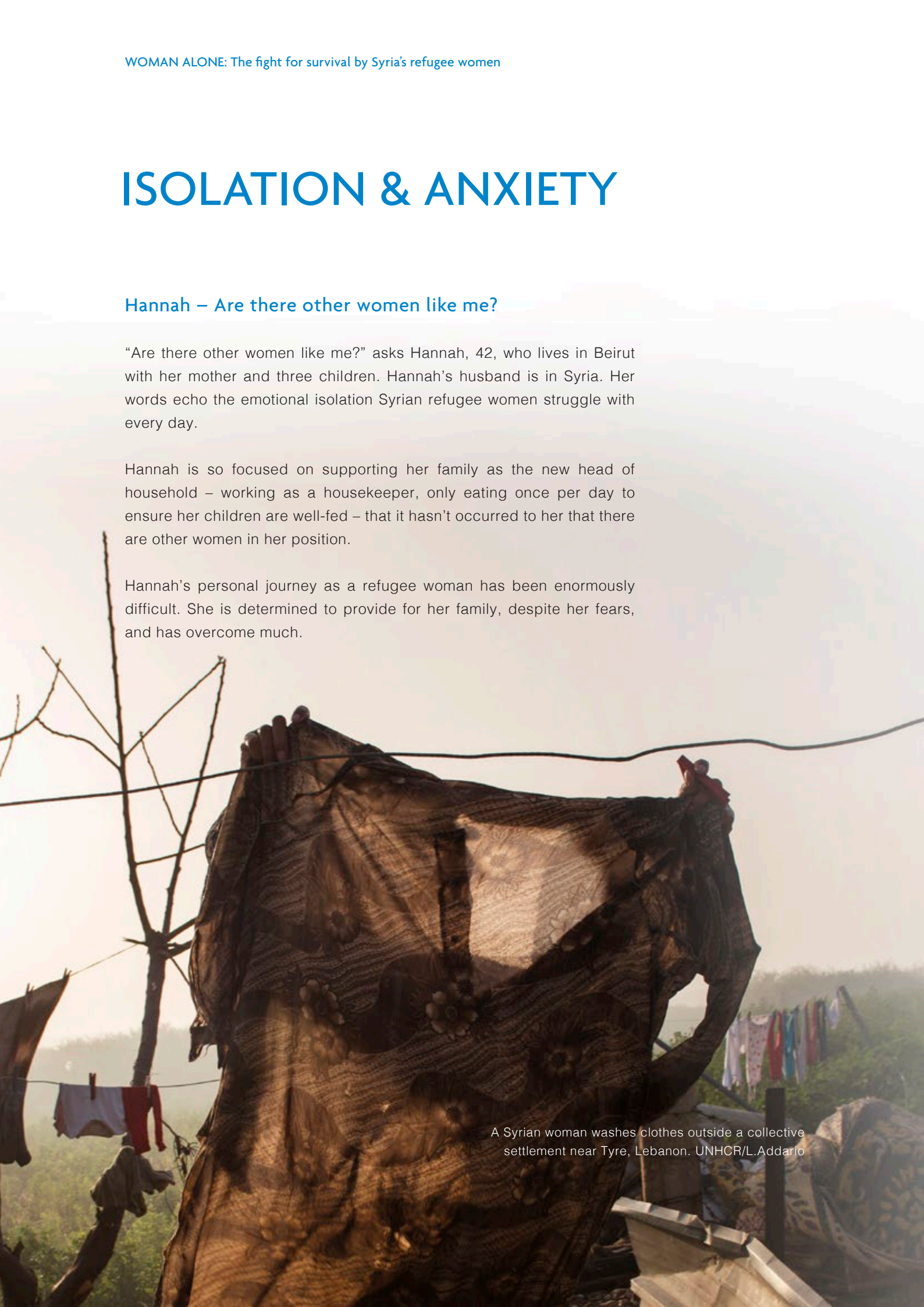
ISOLATION & ANXIETY

Hannah – Are there other women like me?

“Are there other women like me?” asks Hannah, 42, who lives in Beirut with her mother and three children. Hannah’s husband is in Syria. Her words echo the emotional isolation Syrian refugee women struggle with every day.

Hannah is so focused on supporting her family as the new head of household – working as a housekeeper, only eating once per day to ensure her children are well-fed – that it hasn’t occurred to her that there are other women in her position.

Hannah’s personal journey as a refugee woman has been enormously difficult. She is determined to provide for her family, despite her fears, and has overcome much.

A photograph showing a woman in a red headscarf washing clothes on a line. A large, dark, patterned cloth is draped over the line, and other clothes are hanging nearby. The background shows a hazy, mountainous landscape.

A Syrian woman washes clothes outside a collective settlement near Tyre, Lebanon. UNHCR/L.Addario

The stress of changing roles

One of the most significant implications of assuming the role of head of household has been how the role of women – both within their family and in their community – has drastically changed.

Ninety-four per cent of the women interviewed felt their responsibilities had shifted since becoming the head of household, with a small number of the opinion that this was empowering and positive. But most – 95 per cent – indicated that the role change was a negative one.

Dina, in Egypt, is looking after her six children alone as her husband is still in Syria. “I am filling the role of mother and father,” she says. “I have to worry about the finances and school. I have to protect them, provide for them, and give them a mother’s love all at the same time. My life is exhausting. I feel pummelled.”

Many women say the stress of exile has been exacerbated by assuming new burdens of responsibility. Many previously relied on men to provide for the family, handle business outside the house, and make family decisions.

Hadeel, from Baba Amr, fled to Mafraq, Jordan, 19 months ago after losing her nine-year-old son and her husband. She struggles with her grief, and with her new amount of responsibility, and says it is difficult to assume this new and unfamiliar role.

“A man carries the heaviest weight of responsibility,” says Hadeel. “This world has been built in a way that makes it easier for a man to cope. It’s difficult for a woman to do it.”

Suraya, 33, says she has to go to extreme measures to ensure the safety of her seven children in the absence of a male family member. When they first arrived in Jordan, her family lived in a tent in Za’atari camp. “I wasn’t living inside the tent; I was guarding it,” she says. “I would dress and act like a man so that my children could sleep in peace and feel safe.”

Iman, 42, was a working mother, living a comfortable life in Aleppo until it was destroyed by the war. She left her home and business when she fled to Egypt. “My role as a woman has completely changed. I was independent and strong in Syria,” she says. “I was free. When I got here my life went down to below zero.”

The Psycho-Social Training Institute in Cairo (PSTIC), in Egypt, reports that

female heads of household face an increased risk of depression and psychological distress. It provides counselling and a 24-hour hotline in order to mitigate and manage the pressures of displacement, and trains Syrian refugees to provide this psychosocial support. It has 30 Syrian case workers, some of whom are female heads of household themselves.

Dr. Nancy Baron, the director of PSTIC, says: "Women heading households in Egypt have many challenges. They stand out against a cultural norm in which women are dependent on men to lead the family, which makes them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and harassment. This is particularly difficult in a context in which there are limited resources from humanitarian organisations and few opportunities for employment."

Living with insecurity

In addition to their previous roles as homemaker and mother, many women are now also taking on the tasks that had previously been managed by their husbands: paying the bills, running errands, going to the market, and earning money. Most women interviewed reported that they do not like the change.

"Before the situation in Syria, most women were pampered, everything was delivered to the house. Their dignity was preserved," says Khawla, a 27-year-old mother from Homs. "If a woman's husband was here, she wouldn't have to talk to strangers, fight for food aid. She would have been able to stay at home." Khawla left Syria with her three children after her husband was killed. She is now responsible for providing for her family, and needs to leave the house more than she used to.

With this new role came new fears. Sixty per cent of the women interviewed expressed feelings of insecurity. Some feared violence or harassment, others worried about the political situation – particularly in Egypt and Lebanon. Women reported being subjected to verbal harassment by taxi drivers, bus drivers, landlords, and service providers, as well as men in shops, at the market, on public transport, at distribution points and on the street. A 2013 assessment in Egypt found that a quarter of households interviewed felt that the country was not safe for Syrian women and children, mainly because of harassment.⁹

⁹ Interagency Joint Assessment for Syrian Refugees in Egypt, November 2013





A Syrian refugee mother and her child walk into an unfinished university building in southern Lebanon, now housing hundreds of Syrian refugees. UNHCR/S.Baldwin

A Syrian woman and her baby take a bus near the Jordanian border to Za'atari refugee camp, Jordan. UNHCR/O.Laban-Mattei



A number of women attributed their experiences specifically to the fact that they were living without an adult male, and some said men made inappropriate proposals for intimate relationships, or asked for their telephone number in an attempt to be “friends”. Several women in Lebanon had even been approached for temporary marriages.

Hala, 32, a mother, lives with seven others in an informal tented settlement in Lebanon. Her husband is missing in Syria. She feels uneasy because, knowing that she is without her husband, men have made unwelcome marriage proposals.

“Many men told me, ‘Why don’t you leave your kids and I’ll take care of you?’” Hala says.

Diala, living in Alexandria, Egypt, states the point even more strongly: “A woman alone in Egypt is prey to all men.” She feels particularly vulnerable on public transport. While trying to enroll her son in school, an administrator told her: “I will enroll him because of your beautiful face.”

In Jordan, Zahwa, 31, spoke of being harassed by other refugees while seeking assistance, reinforcing her feelings of humiliation and insecurity. She said that when collecting her food coupons in East Amman, men judge her for being a woman on her own. “I was living in dignity, but now no one respects me because I’m not with a man.”

Women interviewed for a Women’s Refugee Commission report in March 2014 echo her story, having been sexually harassed by passers-by or humiliated by comments referring to the lack of a man who can take care of their needs.¹⁰

Living in fear of sexual violence

According to UNHCR ProGres report of March 2014, 347 out of 6,991 registered single heads of households reported experiencing sexual and gender-based violence related incidents either in Syria or during flight. Additionally, 1,050 persons at risk were identified and assisted in

¹⁰ Women’s Refugee Commission, “Unpacking Gender: The Humanitarian Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Jordan,” March 2014, p.9

in Lebanon to access specialized services including case management and safe spaces across the country through UNHCR and partners.

Several women also said they experienced harassment or received exploitative offers from people at local charity associations that provide services and assistance to Syrian refugees. Some attributed this to being women on their own, explaining that men in a position of authority would make them feel as though they had to give something in return for services.

UNHCR Deputy Representative in Cairo, Elizabeth Tan, says: "Women affected by the conflict in Syria continue to be easy targets of sexual violence and harassment in the countries of asylum, in addition to the plight of leaving your own country and being dispossessed of everything."

Zaina, 44, lives in Bekaa, Lebanon, in a small, freezing room with no bathroom. Her 14-year-old daughter has cerebral palsy, and is completely dependent upon her.

Zaina's husband disappeared in Syria two years ago, and her other children are still there. Her life revolves around caring for her daughter, who can barely move and lies in bed all day.

Although Zaina does not feel threatened in her home, she avoids interacting with other people for fear of what might happen without a man to protect her. One of her biggest concerns is that as a female head of household, she could be badly treated by the local charity associations which provide assistance to refugees. A 2013 UN Women report from Jordan found that women did indeed report harassment from service providers – particularly if the woman was single, if she came alone, or if she had a marriageable daughter.¹¹

Some organisations, Zaina says, will only help women if they provide "something in return." The men working at such associations, she says, think these women's "wall is low," so they try to take advantage of them. If they like a woman who approaches them, they will ask if she wants to "go for a ride."

"When there is no man, people are like animals," Zaina says. She knows of women who have gone with men, and let go of their dignity. "If I wasn't

¹¹ UN Women, *Inter-Agency Assessment of Gender-based Violence and Child Protection among Urban Syrian Refugees in Jordan, with a Focus on Early Marriage*, July 2013, pp. 40-1.

strong enough, things would have been different and I would have a bad reputation. Thank God I didn't have to humiliate myself.”

In an area near Qubayat in northern Lebanon, where there have been a number of complaints about exploitation from local charity associations, the municipality set up a distribution point in a public space so that refugees could collect aid in a safer environment. Staff of the municipality sometimes accompany women to other distribution points, or to visit potential housing, to ensure they are safe and not subject to harassment or exploitation. To minimise exploitation by service providers and combat impunity, UNHCR and partners consult with refugees to understand their concerns. In addition, UNHCR provides training to staff to ensure their humanitarian assistance activities follow international standards, including those relating to sexual and gender-based violence. The organisation also follows up on complaints made by refugees with the organisations involved.

Preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence are key priorities for UNHCR. For women who have suffered sexual and gender-based violence, UN agencies and partner organisations in all three countries provide psychosocial support, medical services, and legal advice and support, as well as shelters and mid-way houses for survivors who need a safe place to live.

In Lebanon, KAFA Listening Centres provide both Syrian and Lebanese women with psychosocial support through group activities and therapy. Women and girls learn to cope with their stress and frustration through art therapy, drama therapy, and sewing. Through outreach, the centres identify cases, promote education, and increase awareness on a range of issues, including sexual and gender-based violence.

Knowledge among female heads of household of available services for survivors, and willingness to access them, is low. Few of the women interviewed knew of somewhere they could go for help if subjected to sexual or gender-based violence. Most listed local or international organisations, including UNHCR, while several mentioned the police, a medical clinic, or their refugee camp leader.

Several women explained that owing to the stigma associated with sexual and gender-based violence, they would be unlikely to speak out about incidents. Noor, a 42-year-old living in Akkar, Lebanon, says: “I would never turn to an organisation for help. I would put salt on the wound and

stay quiet, but I'd never ever say anything to anyone. That would cause more harm than good."

To improve awareness of available services and encourage survivors to come forward, UNHCR and partners provide refugees with information about related services at registration and help desks, during home visits, and through telephone help lines and information leaflets. UNFPA helps security and law enforcement officers improve the way in which they receive complaints about sexual and gender-based violence and treat survivors, and ensure they are well-informed about how to refer survivors to the appropriate services.

In Lebanon, UNHCR has established a network of over 300 refugee outreach volunteers – more than half of whom are women – who inform refugees about available services and brief UNHCR and partners about protection issues within the community. Community support committees in urban areas throughout Jordan, run by IRD, conduct outreach and awareness-raising activities, and refer particularly vulnerable cases to UNHCR for follow up. A community-based protection network in Za'atari camp helps information flow between the refugees and aid groups.

Lorenza Trulli, UNHCR Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Protection Officer, says: "Women and girls who have experienced sexual and gender-based violence can seek support from trained specialists and from each other in a number of safe spaces supported by UNHCR in Lebanon. Here, they can access counselling, legal assistance and training opportunities. In these safe spaces experts help women to help themselves get back on their feet, to work through their trauma and pain, and to regain their strength to move forward."

Najwa – Raising awareness of sexual violence

In a meeting of refugee outreach volunteers at a UNHCR registration centre in Lebanon, Najwa, 32, stands out. Thirty other Syrian volunteers, men and women, are in the midst of a heated discussion about transportation for Syrian children at a nearby school. But Najwa is a woman who likes to make herself heard above the crowd – and demands attention.

In private, Najwa describes the horrific struggles she has endured since coming to Lebanon from Syria in 2013. "I am being abused because I am living on my own," Najwa says. "Any person who's offering me help wants a sexual service in return. Even the simplest help means that I have to





Washing hangs to dry outside an underground shelter housing Syrian refugees in El Akbiya, Lebanon. UNHCR/S.Baldwin



A Syrian refugee hides her face behind a glass door for fear of being recognised back home. UNHCR/E.Dorfman

offer a sexual service.”

Najwa came to Lebanon with her husband, from whom she has since separated. For her own security, she tells people that he still visits from time to time, although she is unaware of his whereabouts.

She has experienced sexual harassment frequently during her displacement. “I have moved three times – all within Tripoli, from village to village, all because of harassment,” she explains. “Each time I move, men are trying to make me do something I don’t agree with. Any free movement I take might be seen as consenting to sex.”

Najwa reveals that she was raped months earlier. The perpetrator was a neighbour who first proposed that, in exchange for her taking care of his children, he would pay the rent for her house. “He came into the house, and met my kids and husband,” she says. “But I decided that it was too much stress and refused the deal.”

Najwa was living with her husband before the separation. Then, she recounts, “when he knew my husband had left, he knocked on the door and then attacked me.”

Following the attack, Najwa says that she “fell apart.” Initially, she did not inform anyone about what happened; she only took a blood test to make sure she had not contracted a disease.

A UNHCR social worker later visited Najwa in her home after she revealed she had been raped and provided her with counselling. The social worker also explained the services that were available to her.

Najwa agreed to have her case referred to the Danish Refugee Council for follow up support. She was referred to International Medical Corps for psychosocial support, and undertook a medical exam. She was told of a collective shelter where she could live in a safe space, but did not want to move as her children would have to change schools.

Today, Najwa takes solace in her work with UNHCR, supporting women who have also been through difficult situations. Najwa conducts home visits and follows up with issues when they arise, such as education, children’s health, and detention or injury. Najwa says she is proud of “how strong I am proving to be. This makes me happy.”

Isolation

Almost half of the women interviewed said they left the house less in their host country than they did in Syria. A third said they left the house never, rarely, or only when necessary. Some said this was because of insecurity, others because they could not find the time with all the responsibilities they now carried, or because they did not feel comfortable going out without a man. Still others said they could not afford to go anywhere.

“We are imprisoned by finances and not knowing anyone,” says Yusra, who lives with her two grandchildren in Cairo.

Nuha, 45, arrived in Cairo from Aleppo with her husband and three young children. For the first few months they were in Egypt, Nuha's husband worked as a tuk-tuk driver. He took the family to register with UNHCR, took care of the bills, and did the family's shopping, while Nuha took care of family life at home. She cooked, cleaned, helped the children with schoolwork, and cared for her youngest son during the day.

Everything changed when Nuha's husband was attacked and killed while working. “We left death in Syria only to find it waiting for us here in Egypt,” she says.

Now, she leaves the house much less than she did in Syria. “I don't want to leave the house because of the sadness in my heart,” she says. She is also terrified, and not used to leaving the house alone; her husband always took care of business outside the home. Instead, she retreats and depends on the generosity of neighbours and charities to make it through the day.

Some female heads of household also have people with disabilities under their care, which makes leaving the house even more difficult. Sayeda, 55, lives on a crowded market street in a remote neighbourhood of Cairo. She left Yarmouk Camp, in Damascus, ten months ago with her three grandchildren. Her husband and her daughter, the children's mother, were left trapped in the besieged camp.

Sayeda now struggles to get herself and the children out of the house because she has no one to help her. She worries about Farid, her nine-year-old grandson, who is autistic and can be unpredictable. She fears he might run off, or that people on the street will be abusive to him. She

relies on his younger brother to go to the market or to pick up Farid's medication so she can stay in and look after him.

In order to combat feelings of insecurity or isolation, female heads of household often turn to support networks within their local and refugee communities. These networks provide solidarity and sometimes material support, as well as an avenue to share information about services and assistance.

Women often rely on pre-existing connections from Syria for support; many live near family members or friends, so they can visit each other regularly. Female heads of household also organize informal gatherings for women in their communities. Noura, 47, who has been living in Cairo since June 2013, organizes a regular social gathering for women to drink tea and talk, which brings together Syrian and Egyptian women in the neighbourhood, and promotes friendship and cohesion between the two communities.

A number of women said that they feel more protected by the people around them because they do not have a male head of household. People look out for them, and treat them with more kindness.

Sawsan, an 85-year-old woman from Aleppo, is blind and immobile, and was brought to an informal tented settlement in Lebanon by a group of Syrians who found her in her house in Syria. The community took her into their care and agreed to take turns looking after her. She does not have a tent of her own, but moves from tent to tent daily, so different people can take care of her. Although she admits she doesn't have the life she expected or hoped for, she feels safe and is well supported.

Without men to support and protect them, some women have called on friends and relatives to visit them and ensure their safety and well-being, or to accompany them in public spaces. Ghada, 24, living in Halba, Lebanon, sometimes turns to her Syrian friend and her husband for friendship and support. "When I feel like I'm suffocating, she makes me feel better." Ghada sees her friend often, and the husband sometimes accompanies her for protection.

The INTERSOS centre in Zahle, Lebanon, started a knitting group to help women overcome their sense of isolation. About 35-40 women, including female heads of household, come to make baby booties and hats for pregnant Syrian refugees. The centre is a source of inspiration for the women, as well as a chance to gather and compare what can be done

to make their lives better. “When I create something with my hands,” one said, “I do not think about the past.”

The knitting group functions as a support group for the women. They talk about their children, their husbands, and their former lives. Despite the age diversity – some are as young as 18, others in their 40s – many say the advice and experience of other women helps them find answers to everyday problems.

In Mafraq, Jordan, the International Catholic Migration Commission runs a women's centre which offers rental assistance and household goods, as well as group discussions on gender-based violence, child care, trauma, health, and activities for children. The centre conducts outreach through a team of Syrian and Jordanian volunteers.

Tadamon Centre in Faysal, Egypt, provides a safe space for women and children. In an old villa, painted in soft colors and full of sunlight, there is a spacious garden where women can bring their children, attend classes and socialize. There is an ambiance of hope inside the building, of activity, as well as fun.

Tadamon serves about 200 to 250 women each month, of whom 47 are registered as female heads of household. It runs a range of programmes on education, jobs, psychosocial support, and health. They also hold weekly support group discussions where women select topics of interest to them: Arabic dialects, financial affairs, and the emotional effects of being separated from their husbands. In addition, the centre offers activities for children, encouraging mothers who cannot leave their children at home to attend.

Fadia – This tower is like a prison

High on a remote hill outside of Tripoli, Lebanon, Fadia lives in an isolated tower. The stairways are dark, electricity is infrequent, and a puddle of water leaks into the entrance of her flat.

The tower is a menacing place, even if Fadia is grateful that it shelters her and her four children. “I am glad we have a roof,” she says, “but this tower is like a prison.”

PHOTO: Syrian refugee Fadia with her daughter outside their home in an isolated tower near Tripoli, Lebanon. UNHCR/A.McConnell





A Syrian woman crosses the Jordanian border with her child. UNHCR/O.Laban-Mattei

Fadia, a former nurse in Syria, survived a massacre in which her husband was killed. In many ways, she and her children are still recovering from the shock of having their house bombed and seeing so many people killed.

In the tower in Lebanon, she feels that her every move is scrutinised by neighbours and local people.

“There are a lot of windows here, they make me nervous,” she says. “People watch and gossip. If a woman goes out, they say she is a prostitute. If I need to go anywhere, I have to take a taxi.”

As a result, Fadia feels constantly anxious – not just on the rare trips to buy food at the market, but even in her own home.

The psychological impact on children

Dina, a mother of six in Egypt, says that becoming the head of household and assuming the role of both a nurturing mother and disciplinarian father has changed her relationship with her children for the worse.

“I used to be their mother, the one they turned to for comfort and affection,” she explains. “Now I have to be that and their father, who was stricter and disciplined them. It’s a huge contradiction for them to deal with. I can tell they don’t see me the same way anymore.”

One of the primary concerns women expressed about their changing roles was the effect on their children’s lives. Their dual roles have added to confusion at a time of already enormous change, disrupting the family structure.

Mothers say their children are also compensating for the adults’ stress. Najwa, who lives in Tripoli, Lebanon, tries to hide it, but has not managed to shield them entirely. “I noticed that they are much more aware of the problems I’m having,” she says. “They are taking on too many problems for their age.”

These stresses add to the struggle children face to overcome the trauma of war. Women reported being particularly worried about emotional distress in their children and the impact of living without their father.

The most difficult thing about her life in Egypt, says Haya – a 29-year-old



mother of two sons and a daughter, all under the age of ten – is that her nine-year-old son Shadi tries to act like a grown man.

“They carry more responsibility than a child should,” she says. “I want them to be children, not to worry like adults, but they’ve become little decision makers, as if they are men.”

The two sit close together, and Shadi’s posture, next to his mother, is that of a man with grave responsibilities. “They are suffering displacement more than the adults,” Haya says. “They hide their grief to lighten the burden of responsibility on me, but the things they say are torture.”

Then Shadi’s brother accidentally hits him on the head with a spoon. The child crawls into his mother’s lap – not a man, after all, but a little boy.

Hala, a 32-year-old mother in Lebanon, has been propositioned by men several times and is afraid to leave the tent where she now lives with her family. Her son Rami, who is only six years old, is acutely aware of her vulnerability, and she often has to physically remove him from her side.

“He tries to protect me, to keep me from harm,” Hala says, scooping the child up and carrying him outside.

But when she does, the boy begins to scream – he wants to stay near his mother. He does not want to leave her alone. He says he is afraid she will “get hurt.”

“Children should not feel like this,” Hala says, a worried expression on her face.

Some children are trying to compensate for the absence of their fathers by working, caring for siblings or running the family’s errands. Others have taken up the role of decision maker.

A participatory assessment conducted by UNHCR in Jordan found that as a result of their father’s absence, girls feel their roles have changed from schoolchildren to care providers. The report also found that boys saw their role changing from students to workers, in order to provide for the family. Both boys and girls often sacrifice school to support their mother.

PHOTO: Syrian refugee Haya with her protective son, Shadi. UNHCR/E.Dorfman

Nahid lives in Cairo, with her elderly mother and four children. Her husband is still in Syria. She is a principal at a school. But in order to work, her daughter has to stay at home to look after her elderly mother. Nahid explains that the need for income is more important than the girl's education.

Through individual case management and psychosocial support, UNHCR and partners work with families to mitigate the effects of the additional stress placed on children in female-headed households. Awareness-raising sessions with parents and back-to-school campaigns promote children's rights and encourage women to enroll their children in school.

Embracing empowerment

A small number of the women view their change as positive, even if the transition was not easy. "I used to be provided for, and now I am the provider," reflects Maysoon, 31, from Homs. She now lives in Halba, Lebanon, and cares for her brother's four children.

While Maysoon worries that she might not meet all the children's needs, she feels in control of her situation, and realizes she has been given a chance to do something she never could have before.

"I have been given the role of a mother without ever having given birth," Maysoon says. "I will do anything in my power to give them what they need. I am more active now; I work, I make decisions, and I take care of the family. It makes me happy."

Kholoud, whose husband stayed in Syria to care for his elderly mother, also embraces her new role. She started working for the first time in her life at the UN Women's Oasis in Za'atari camp in Jordan, teaching sewing to other women. The tailoring workshop provides 20 sewing machines and materials, while UN Women offers childcare so that women who work there can bring their children. "I never sewed back in Syria," Kholoud muses. "Now I am a manager." She finds, to her enormous satisfaction, that she is good at it.

Her new métier has transformed her. "My role changed for the better," she



Kholoud has embraced her new role and now teaches tailoring in Za'atari refugee camp, Jordan.
UNHCR/E.Dorfman

says, bending over to examine the work of another woman and pointing out what needs to be done to make it better. "I now have to work and provide for my children. I am their mother and provider."

The newfound work has also boosted her confidence. "People recognise that I am strong and worth the toughest man," she says proudly. "In Syria, my husband provided everything. My duty was to be a housewife and a mother. That didn't require that I go out of the house."

Life is so different now that she cannot imagine returning to her former life. "That has all changed, and I will never go back to that," she says. "When I go back to Syria I will have to work. I can't go back to being a housewife."

Strength in adversity

The responses compiled in this report show that female heads of household are living in an incredibly challenging form of exile. They struggle to cover basic costs, face enormous responsibility, and must adapt to unfamiliar environments.

Despite this, they demonstrate extraordinary resilience and dedication to protecting and providing for those under their care. When asked what they advise others in their situation, the women interviewed urged strength and pride.

"Be strong, and never be ashamed about whether you have a man or you don't – whatever your situation is," advises Fayzeh, 30, who lives in Tripoli on her own. "Nothing is perfect."

While many of the women use former skills to make ends meet, others have acquired new skills to support themselves in new ways. Their children's future is motivating them to look past hardships and insecurities and to move forward.

"Educate your children; it's the only real weapon you can give them," urges Nuha, 45, from Aleppo.

For Amal, who before the conflict lived a sheltered life in her hometown, war and exile have in many ways forged a transformation she never would have felt was possible.

She fled Syria two years ago with her two young daughters. Her story of exodus, of fleeing under bombardment, and of finding refuge in another part of Syria, only to have to flee again, is a testament to the resilience and the desire of a mother to protect her children under the most extreme conditions.

Amal has overcome poverty and was abused by her husband, accepting it only because she did not know where to go. Eventually, she found the strength to leave him. Her life alone and in exile was not easy, and she had many moments of insecurity and great pain. But she found salvation in helping other women because it gave her a chance to focus on a world outside her own needs.

Today, as a counselor working for Tadamon, Amal helps other refugee women struggling with harassment, emotional distress, and the raw feelings of being alone. Working has boosted her confidence, her independence and the sense of self she had lost somewhere on the journey out of Syria.

"I am passionate about my work," she says. Indeed, her passion is evident as she leads a group of women in a training session on a sunny morning, with her daughters playing nearby.

"When you are alone, you can be strong," Amal says.

There are still challenges every day as a refugee woman. Amal says she gets harassed often in the street and on public transport, and men approach her. "It's not safe here at all as a single woman. Life here is not easy. Be strong against exploitation. If you're not strong, you will lose yourself."

But she is proud to have come out stronger on the other side. "You must find a way to make yourself happy again," Amal concludes.

THE WAY FORWARD

Focusing the response

Local authorities and humanitarian agencies already have in place many programmes to help Syrian female heads of households, through targeted and general interventions that support them and other refugees in the region.

Across all three countries, WFP food vouchers reach the majority of female-headed households, and UNHCR offers direct financial assistance to the most vulnerable – particularly those unable to earn an income. In Jordan, for example, 40 per cent of financial assistance goes to households headed by women.

Specific initiatives are also underway in each country, led by UNHCR, UNICEF, UNFPA and over 150 other partners to support refugee women and their families. Some of these programmes aim to reduce the risks to children in female-headed households, and to get them into school. In addition, efforts are underway to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence, with UNHCR and partners offering help for survivors, such as shelters, psychosocial support and counselling.

But despite multiple sources of assistance, Syria's refugee women are struggling to make ends meet in an unfamiliar and sometimes hostile environment. Many face a double trauma: the pain of losing or being separated from their families, coupled with the distress of living in exile alone.

Governments, responders and citizens can do more to help.

PHOTO: Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan with mixed tent and caravan areas. UNHCR/J.Kohler





To host governments:

Respect the right to family unity. Governments in the region and beyond must keep their borders open, to ensure that Syrians seeking protection outside their country are able to do so in safety and dignity. Entry restrictions can increase the risk of family separation, forcing women to head their households alone under the difficult circumstances of exile.

Strengthen initiatives to support resilience. Many of the challenges facing female-headed refugee households stem from their increasing economic distress as life in exile continues year after year. Where possible, governments should ease restrictions on opportunities to work and support economic self-reliance initiatives.

Expand resettlement and humanitarian admissions. Host countries in the region have been overwhelmed by the large numbers of refugees fleeing Syria. International solidarity is crucial in responding to a crisis of this magnitude. Governments outside the region should expand opportunities for resettlement or other forms of humanitarian admission, particularly for extremely vulnerable people such as women at risk.

To humanitarian aid agencies:

Listen to the voices of female heads of household. Self-supporting refugee women face particular challenges. Their concerns and capacities need to be heard and taken into account when planning, implementing and monitoring programmes. Assessments and data analysis should capture the specific challenges faced by female-headed households.

Promote community-based protection. With adequate access to resources, refugee women are empowered to help address the needs that arise within their own communities. The humanitarian community should expand the network of community centres and safe spaces, in order to increase women's access to community-based programmes, thereby building on their skills and countering isolation.

PHOTO: Syrian refugees receive blankets and fuel in Aarsal, Lebanon. UNHCR/A.McConnell

To development agencies and local authorities:

Expand opportunities for women's economic self-reliance. The primary difficulty faced by Syrian female heads of household is a lack of income. Many are willing to work, but cannot. Initiatives are needed to enhance refugees' skills and promote self-reliance through the provision of vocational training.

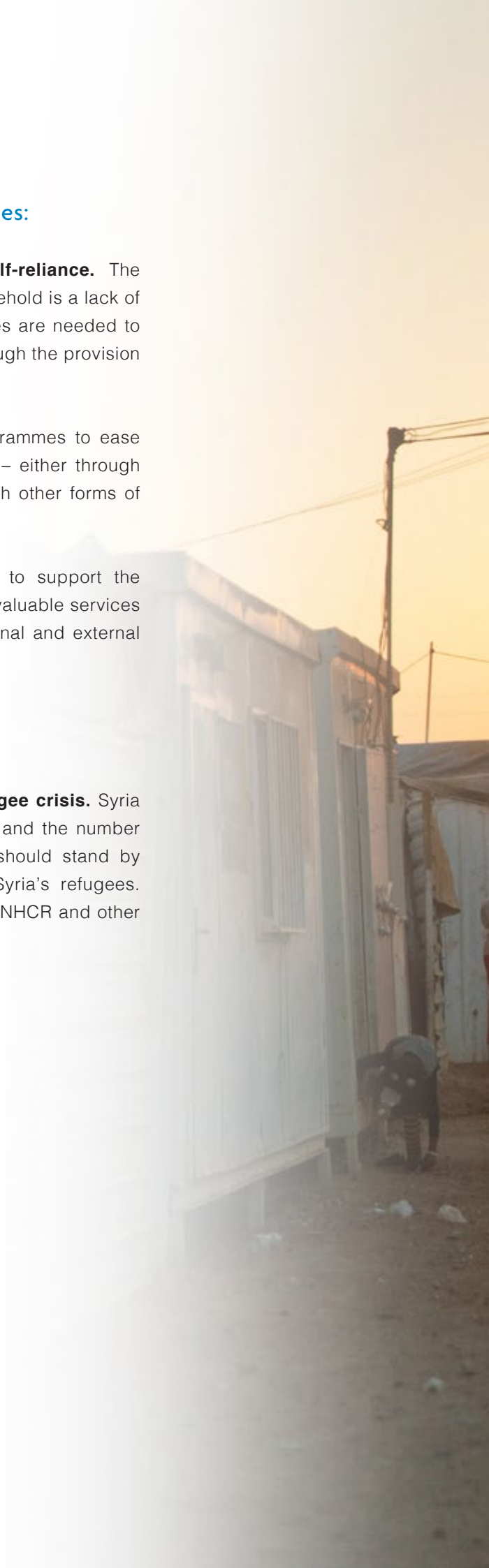
Provide childcare facilities. Also important are programmes to ease the burden of caring for children and relatives alone – either through workplaces that can accommodate children, or through other forms of support, such as childcare.

Support host communities. Agencies should work to support the efforts of host communities, who continue to provide invaluable services and shelter for refugees, in the face of mounting internal and external pressures.

To donors and citizens:

Increase funding and other support for Syria's refugee crisis. Syria is the largest forced displacement crisis in the world, and the number of refugees continues to grow. Donor governments should stand by and increase their financial commitments to assist Syria's refugees. Private citizens should consider making donations to UNHCR and other organisations dedicated to assisting refugees.

donate.unhcr.org/womanalone





The sun sets over Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan. UNHCR/J.Kohler



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