



Enjoying a weekly meeting of the *Women's Committee of the Future* in Gaziantep, Turkey. © UNHCR / Emrah Gürel / 2016

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URBAN REFUGEE WOMEN'S NETWORK – TURKEY

Population Group:

Urban Syrian refugee women.

Project Objective:

To support urban refugee women's initiative to create a network for mutual support, empowerment and volunteer work to increase Syrian refugees' access to protection, services and assistance.

Implementing Partner:

Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants

1. Project overview

In 2015, Syrian refugee women in the Turkish city of Gaziantep established the *Women's Committee of the Future*, with ongoing support from the national non-governmental organization (NGO) Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM). It is the first urban network of Syrian women asylum-seekers and refugees in the city. The 15 members of the network serve each other as a support group, as well as engaging in volunteer work to empower refugee women, increase Syrian refugees' access to services and enhance their protection through advocacy, rights education and community-based campaigns. After its establishment, UNHCR began providing capacity building to the network members as well as supporting their activities.

2. Context and needs

In mid-2016, Turkey was hosting 3,005,434 refugees and asylum-seekers, 91 per cent of whom are Syrians who were forced to flee the armed conflict in their country.¹ Gaziantep, which is located close to Syria, has seen the arrival of more than 350,000 Syrians, bringing its total population close to two million.²

Refugees in urban settings in Turkey face a number of challenges: lack of access to information; language barriers; obstacles to registration, which in turn hinder their access to health and education; a dearth of livelihoods opportunities; and occasional social tension between refugees and host communities. Women and girls also face gender-specific barriers to accessing education and the labour market as well as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), including child marriage and domestic violence.³

Despite the prevalence of committees or networks for women in refugee camps, prior to this initiative there was no network of female Syrian refugees in Gaziantep. This is also the case for other urban contexts, where there may be less opportunities for refugee women to establish and participate in committees and networks.

3. Process and activities

In response to Syrian refugee women's lack of a forum to discuss needs, share information and exercise community leadership, ASAM began hosting weekly tea hours in Gaziantep in 2015. The tea hours were informal gatherings that took place after the Turkish language classes provided at the ASAM Multi-Service Refugee Support Centre (community centre). Some 10 women attended the first gathering, but that number soon increased as women spread the word about the tea hour. Syrian women began to use the tea hour to get to know each other in an informal setting and discuss the issues they faced as female refugees in Gaziantep.

In addition to a female Arabic-Turkish translator, a female psychologist from ASAM's community centre was assigned to support the tea hours to provide psychosocial support and assist with facilitating the discussions. The facilitator supports communication both with ASAM and the host community. She also observes group dynamics, ensuring that all members participate in the discussions.

At the request of the now 15 Syrian women participating in the group, ASAM organized a number of activities which enabled them to bond and build trust, including drawing, watching movies related to women's rights, engaging in outdoor activities, and photography classes. As members of the group began to feel comfortable discussing problems faced within the Syrian refugee community, including child marriage and domestic violence, they reached out for more information and training.

The Syrian women participated in training on SGBV and volunteerism provided by ASAM and training on community protection mechanisms, codes of conduct and humanitarian principles provided by UNHCR. The facilitator also shared information and fostered awareness-raising discussions on volunteerism and child marriage.

The refugee women began to recognize their own ability to organize and take steps to tackle problems within their families and the broader Syrian refugee community in Gaziantep. For this reason, in March 2016, they decided to establish the *Women's Committee of the Future*, with a registration process that entailed developing

¹ UNHCR, [Population Statistics – Midyear 2016 Stats](#).

² [Megan O'Toole, "The Changing Face of Gaziantep"](#) (Aljazeera: 2 October 2016).

³ Kemal Kirişçi, [Syrian Refugees and Turkey's Challenges: Going beyond hospitality](#) (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, May 2014).

and signing their own terms of reference and code of conduct. This process of organizational development from the initial informal tea hours to establishing a network took place over a period of three months.

Once the network became independent, its members continued to build their own internal capacity. They invited women activists working on domestic violence and child marriage to share their experiences, and they attended various relevant training sessions. Today, ASAM continues to support the network through the provision of a facilitator and venue for meetings. To guide its work, the network drafts six-month plans of action and uses the WhatsApp messaging application to communicate outside of the weekly meetings. Communication happens in both Arabic and Turkish.

As part of its formalization, the network defined its principal objectives as to:

- Empower refugee women and the wider Syrian refugee community.
- Act as a bridge between the refugee community and humanitarian organizations.
- Undertake protection activities through information dissemination, advocacy and case referral.

Although the network's activities change, depending on the needs that arise, it regularly organizes the following activities:

- Advocacy for the rights of refugees, including access to health and education for refugee children.
- Information distribution and education sessions to raise the awareness of Syrian refugees of their rights and entitlement to basic services.
- Community-based campaigns against early marriage, domestic violence and sexual harassment.
- Direct protection support to Syrian community members, including SGBV case referrals, and assistance with registration and access to health services.
- A day of solidarity and peaceful coexistence between Syrian and Turkish children through the exchange of drawings and paintings.
- Participation in the organization of activities on International Women's Day, World Refugee Day, Human Rights Day and 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence.

The women in the network are currently exchanging ideas on how to pass on beautiful/positive memories of Syria to the children of their community so they do not remember their homeland only as a place of war. The network is also preparing to implement a project that targets adolescent girls and teaches them to sew clothes as a way of promoting their social and economic empowerment and thereby providing some protection against child marriage.

In addition, the network has conducted a survey on Syrian refugees' access to health services and education in Gaziantep. Network members designed the questionnaire, with support from ASAM, and collected the data from 158 refugees. ASAM is currently analysing the data and will issue a report soon.

4. Partners and resources

The establishment of a network for urban Syrian refugee women was supported by a female professional psychologist to provide facilitation and psychosocial support and a female Arabic interpreter, as well as a safe and convenient venue for regular meetings. ASAM has provided for these needs at its Multi-Service Refugee Support Centre. This community centre also offers non-food items and vouchers, health care, mental health and psychosocial support, legal counselling, case management, language classes, vocational

training, art and music courses and other much needed services.⁴ ASAM has also paid for minor costs, such as for transportation to outdoor activities and for lunch, which has enabled network members to enjoy their time together and build trust. The community centre is supported by the International Medical Corps and UNHCR, with funding from Japan.

The network implements independent activities, such as community awareness raising on child marriage, as well as activities in collaboration with, and funded by, ASAM and UNHCR. To date, the women's network has not received external funding for the organization itself, only financial and in-kind support from ASAM and UNHCR to undertake specific activities.

5. Participation and accountability

The network is now independent and run with the participation of all its members. ASAM's provision of a professional facilitator has helped encourage all members to feel comfortable in expressing their views.

UNHCR provided training for the network members to help them develop their own code of conduct – including information on the principle of “do no harm”. After this participatory process, each member signed the code of conduct – which serves as a key organizational document and accountability mechanism for the network.

Prospective members are encouraged to attend network meetings as guests and, if their contribution is seen as positive, may be invited to join the network. An open voting system is established to facilitate this membership process.

The network members also discussed and collectively created their own terms of reference, which include the responsibilities and roles of the network members. When preparing to implement activities, members vote to assign specific members to oversee each planned activity.

To ensure continuous improvement of the network, members are encouraged to share any complaints or feedback with the facilitator and ASAM Multi-Service Refugee Support Centre managers for action. ASAM and UNHCR are responsible for taking action on any complaints raised and can call a meeting with the network to discuss any misconduct issues.

Age, Gender and Diversity Approach

The network is open to all women aged 18 years and older living in Gaziantep who wish to work for the benefit of the Syrian community, no matter what their background. Network members have varying levels of education. In spite of the age requirement, the network also accepts adolescent girls aged 16-18 as voluntary members, though they cannot become formal members until they are 18, which is when they can sign the code of conduct. There is currently one adolescent girl who is part of the network. The meeting venue is not fully accessible for women with disabilities, but they can still access the meeting room with help from members and/or ASAM staff.

⁴ ASAM, “[Multi-Service Refugee Support Centres](#)” (2016).

6. Results

“ We think that the positive side of our displacement is that this Committee has empowered us as women to realize our rights and our capacity to make changes that affect our lives as women here and when we return home.”

Member of Women's Committee of the Future

Though no independent evaluation has been conducted, according to interviews with network members and the ASAM facilitator, along with participant observation, the work of the network has had a positive impact on the lives of members, their families and communities, including:

- Strengthening network members' empowerment, including self-confidence and understanding of their rights through mental health and psychosocial support, training sessions and other activities. This had led to women taking action to address the various daily challenges they face, including convincing their husbands and fathers of the value of their participation in the network.
- Supporting positive change related to gender equality in families and the community, as the network has become a strong voice for Syrian women in Gaziantep.
- Increasing advocacy for the rights of Syrians, leading to a positive impact on the lives of their families, relatives and neighbours, including greater access to health and education and prevention of child marriages.
- Creating an active, participatory, and effective network that is achieving its goals.

Although the impact on the wider community has not yet been assessed, activities conducted by the network seem to be contributing to bridging the divides between the refugee and host community. For instance, feedback from Turkish children showed that they were moved by the drawings and texts of their Syrian counterparts when both groups participated in activities to encourage peaceful coexistence.

Although at its start the network did not plan to become involved in case referrals, over time members began making referrals to ASAM and UNHCR for cases in their neighbourhoods which they believed required protection or medical assistance. As noted by one member:

“ Most of us on the Committee are victims of early marriage. So it is both a community issue and a personal issue as well for us. Knowing about the negative impact of early marriage in our lives helped us a lot in leading awareness-raising campaigns against early marriage. We succeeded on many occasions in preventing such acts from happening.”

Sustainability

ASAM is gradually decreasing its facilitation role in the network in order to encourage the members to lead its meetings and activities independently. ASAM has observed the network's capacity to manage some of its activities successfully in the absence of the facilitator. Nonetheless, ASAM views this process as a long-term transition that should be undertaken gradually.

Both ASAM and UNHCR are developing an exit strategy for their involvement with the network, ensuring that the process is carried out progressively in order to prepare the members for independent leadership without the two organizations' technical support. In order to achieve this goal, however, the network requires a physical place and financial resources to build its capacity and manage its work autonomously.

In the future, to expand its role and related activities, it may be useful for the network to collaborate with, and to obtain support from, local governmental authorities and other host community organizations.

7. Lessons learned

The concept of volunteerism is challenging, especially in the socio-economic context of urban refugee settings. The women who are members of the network have encountered significant resistance from their husbands regarding their participation and their voluntary status. However, women have developed bargaining strategies and techniques to counteract this resistance by, for example, engaging their husbands in friendly discussions before meetings are held on the challenges facing Syrian refugees in Gaziantep and how the network is assisting them. One member describes her experience:

“ Our participation in the Committee is full of challenges for some of us. The new realities that women are taking new gender roles and going out and participating in public life, like Committee meetings, pose a challenge to our culture. As for me, I have to engage continuously in negotiation and bargaining games with my husband in order to attend the Committee meetings. Other women on the Committee have the same problem.”

A lesson learned is that since participation in the network (which adds to refugee women’s existing workload inside and outside the home) is voluntary and members receive no compensation or payment, there is a need to prioritize social interaction and recreation through organizing regular social events.

8. Recommendations

This model of providing support to a refugee women’s network that is in the process of being established can be replicated in similar urban settings. In particular, tea hours or another form of informal space for interaction is a good practice for building the trust and open communication needed to support the creation of associations or networks. In addition, ensuring that the process of establishing the network was driven by the women themselves encourages both empowerment and sustainability.

It might be beneficial to link the network to existing local structures or organizations to strengthen connections between refugee and host community women and to ensure sustainability. Before initiating this type of process, it is always important to consult directly with diverse refugee women and to assess whether or not there are existing informal women’s networks already in place.

9. More information

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ASAM

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Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/asamsgdd/>

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/sgdd_asam/

ASAM has developed a short video and other materials on the network and its activities, which will be used to boost the visibility of the group and can be shared upon request.