

Syrian refugees in Uruguay – Background consideration and the importance of a gender approach

Summary: Uruguay has been one of the first countries to respond to the call of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to address Syrian refugees' needs. The Uruguayan government announced that 120 Syrian refugees would be welcomed starting in September 2014.



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Uruguay is a land of migrants. In the 19th and 20th century, people fleeing wars, destructions, hunger and poverty came from various parts of the world to start a new life in Uruguay. In comparison to its South American neighbours, Uruguay is a very small country, yet it presents interesting migration patterns which are reflected in its multi-cultural population coming from Europe, the Middle-East, the Caucasus region, native indigenous people... Uruguayans have also emigrated to other countries to escape the dictatorship and economic crises. As such, it may not come as a surprise that Uruguay was one of the first countries to respond to the UNHCR's call to address Syrian refugees' needs. Early 2014, the Uruguayan President, José Mujica, contacted the United Nations to offer hosting orphan Syrian refugees. The proposal was not judged feasible by the international community, yet it represented a starting point to find a better solution. Following this path, Uruguayan authorities and the international community finally agreed, at the end of June 2014, on offering the opportunity of a new life in Uruguay for 120 Syrian refugees, including 60% of children in each family. According to the government, the objective is for those families to fully integrate in Uruguayan society. This implies access to education, job opportunities, and the rights and duties regular Uruguayan citizens enjoy. To facilitate the transition, the Uruguayan government will take care of the families' accommodation (in the Marist Family Care of San Jose), food, education, and Spanish courses upon arrival and for the first few weeks. Forty refugees are expected to arrive in September 2014, and the remaining eighty in February 2015. The Syrian families that can voluntarily decide to travel to Uruguay won't come directly from Syria, they will be chosen (primarily by UNHCR experts, then by a Uruguayan delegation) among those already present as refugees in Lebanon. This is because: 1. the Uruguayan proposal is an offer of resettlement; 2. Uruguay has a diplomatic representation in Lebanon; 3. there is a history of Lebanese migrants installed in Uruguay. Due to the refugees' conditions, the type of families admitted to travel is varied. In addition to the traditional family group composed of parents and children, there will be groups composed of widows and their children, grandchildren accompanied by their grandparents, uncles and aunts. It is most likely that each family include a masculine referent, to respect the Syrian social tradition.



Notwithstanding the number of experts that are working on the program's organisation, the collaboration with a range of specialised stakeholders (the Uruguayan government, United Nations agencies and nongovernmental organisations), and despite the history of Uruguay as land of immigration, this action is not without challenges.

Firstly, the refugees arriving in Uruguay will not be a homogenous entity; rather, they will be composed of women, men, children and elders of different ages and sexes, each with specific needs and problems. In addition, these people will likely suffer from traumas for they have experienced the violence of a war. Uruguay needs to be prepared to offer adequate assistance to each group and individual, in order to facilitate the start of their new lives:

- Medical assistance: Syrian men, women, and children may have suffered physical and mental violence, such as torture, sexual violence, mutilations, malnutrition... As such, they need specific care, which can differ from women to men. At times, it is difficult to identify the very traumas, for they are not always voiced by the victims. Yet these may cause severe physical and psychological sufferings, which is why they need to be addressed, bearing in mind the principles of confidentiality, sensitivity, and cultural differences. In 2012, ABAAD, a recognised Lebanese NGO specialised in gender issues, published, alongside with the NGO International Rescue Committee, a study that showed how rape and sexual violence constituted major risks for women and girls, especially while on Syrian soil (*Syrian Women & Girls: Fleeing death, facing ongoing threats and humiliation - A Gender-based Violence Rapid Assessment. From Harm to Home, IRC • WPE Emergency Rapid Assessment, Lebanon, August 2012*). Almost all focus groups interviewed included women, girls, men, and services providers, and identified rape as a main feature of the conflict in Syria. In addition, cases of torture, humiliation, and kidnapping were perpetrated by "armed actors breaking into the homes of families and specifically targeting women and girls in the households in an effort to 'dishonor' or coerce the men in the family" (same study). Women detainees in prisons appear to have suffered from similar abuses.

It is very likely that the families newly installed in Uruguay have directly suffered or witnessed such violations, and it is vital to properly assist them.

- Psychosocial assistance: the war's harsh conditions, coupled with the refugee's hardship create scars that are difficult to overcome to start a brand new life in a country so different from Syria. As such, the 120 beneficiaries of the program will likely need psychological support to adjust to their new lives. In the path towards Syrians' integration in Uruguayan society, one fundamental aspect to take into account is the difference between Syrian and Uruguayan understanding of gender relations, especially regarding public life. Syrian society is patriarchal and the way



in which men and women interact, and are expected to behave, is different from what may be observed in Uruguay. To tackle this issue, Syrian families will be dutifully informed on the type of society they will find upon arrival. By analysing the possible differences, but also highlighting common points, the aim is to smooth adaptation. Nonetheless, it is important to consider the shift within Syrian households that was triggered by war and forced migration. For society's order was shaken by disruption, men and women were obligated to adopt new roles to survive. A survey conducted among Syrian refugees in Lebanon in 2013 showed that the greatest source of frustration for men was the lack of job opportunities in their new conditions of refugees (Oxfam Shifting Sands: Changing Gender Roles Among Refugees In Lebanon, Joint Research Report, Roula El-Masri, Abaad-Resource Center For Gender Equality, Claire Harvey And Rosa Garwood, Oxfam Gb, Sept. 2013). Losing the status of breadwinner implies a lack of self-esteem and deep resentment, which, joined with the difficult living conditions, high promiscuity, concerns for the relatives still in Syria and consequent feeling of guilt, may explain some of the violent behaviours against family members that were reported. When allowed and feeling protected, women, in turn, have added to their traditional duties, looking for work and access to humanitarian aid outside of their homes. Indeed female refugees are often the ones seeking humanitarian food and non-food items, for men culturally feel uncomfortable with asking for assistance. Moreover, many times even children refugees find small occupations and may become economic pillars of the family – a situation exacerbating the feeling of failure for men. Such brutal shifts in the family dynamics can impact the future lives of Syrian refugees. As such they ought to be taken into account, along with the differences between Syrian and Uruguayan culture, to adequately prepare for the integration of Syrian refugee in their new country.

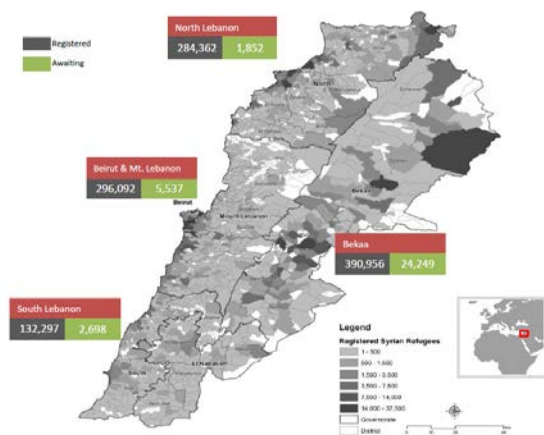
- Socio-economic and educational necessities: it will be crucial for the Uruguayan government to provide equal opportunities for girls and boys, and women and men, both at educational and job levels.


Furthermore, an aspect to consider regarding the arrival of Syrian refugees is the reaction of Uruguayan citizens. While Uruguay has received immigrants from the Middle-East, and although it was a much greater amount, the current context is different. It may be the case that the local population rejects the newcomers, or feel the Uruguay government is favouring Syrian refugees over themselves. An adequate communication strategy put forward by the government and that targets different groups of the society, will be necessary to tackle this issue.

The commitment of Uruguay in this program can be a positive example for other countries. It also contributes to the projection of Uruguay on the international scene and furthers the South-South cooperation. If well managed, this may become an example of solidarity and constitute a small, yet significant, contribution to the resolution of a conflict with

international repercussions. The presence of Syrian refugees in Uruguay is a move towards global security and protection and promotion of human rights.

Gender conditions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon



	1,138,043	Total
	1,103,707	Registered
	34,336	Awaiting

Age & Gender								
Age	0-4	5-11	12-17	18-59	60+	Total		
Female	104,514	115,827	67,732	274,183	17,147	579,403	52.5%	
Male	108,936	122,635	68,304	211,358	13,071	524,304	47.5%	
Total	213,450	238,462	136,036	485,541	30,218	1,103,707	100.0%	
	19.3%	21.6%	12.3%	44.0%	2.7%			

Registration Trends for Syrians in Lebanon
Statistics as of: 24 July 2014

Lebanon, a country of four million people, has demonstrated unfaltering solidarity towards displaced populations. It has received 36 per cent of the Syrian refugees in the region. Already severely economically impacted by the conflict, it now hosts over 880,000 refugees from Syria, adding to a pre-existing Palestine refugee population of 280,000. Refugees make up one fifth of the population and are spread over 1,700 localities with the majority in Bekaa and in the North, two of the most impoverished regions in Lebanon. In addition, over 1.5 million Lebanese have been affected by the crisis according to the government.

An interesting study conducted by the NGO FAFO in the Sunni village of Bebnine, Akkar (one of the poorest regions in the North) examined the dynamics between Syrian refugees and the local population. Although Bebnine is an economically depressed spot, at the beginning Lebanese locals were welcoming towards Syrians refugees, hosting them for free or in exchange of the payment of a rent. Yet when the state of emergency became



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more permanent, and the flux of refugees reached massive dimensions, the impacts on local economy and daily life were more evident and perceptions started to change. The competition among Syrians to find rentable settlements (even if often only a space to build makeshift shelters) increased rent prices. Shortages and difficulties to access UN and humanitarian aid for refugees left no other option than find some way of income to afford the daily expenditures. That is why Syrians started to compete with local Lebanese for jobs. In addition, the fact that Syrians could count on humanitarian aid – though limited – allowed them to compete for minor salaries. As such they became threats for the locals, who were already confronted with the overall poverty of the region, the sharp GDP decrease (from 5% to less than 1% in two years), and a high unemployment rate. Prejudices and tensions are now increasing, with more than half of the Lebanese surveyed thinking that no more Syrians should be allowed to cross the border. They also express concerns over the Syrian crisis' capacity to destabilise the fragile Lebanese political order, which could potential drag the country into a new civil war.

What may constitute economic, political and social threats for the Lebanese population, can also have repercussions on gender dynamics. Syrian refugees remain very vulnerable, especially women and girls: specific data on gender based violence are not available, but survival sex and early marriage, especially with locals, have been identified as coping strategies, especially for families in extremely vulnerable situations (single women, widows), or under the justification of protecting daughters from sexual violence (as such protecting the girl and her family's honour). Cases of "marriage tourism" between Syrian women and Arab men also were reported. Lebanese men and women's perceptions of Syrian women is also changing: men reported to perceive Syrian women as provocatively approaching them, and women think Syrian women are stealing their husbands.

The cohabitation between locals and refugees, and the gender situation of Syrian refugees, can be even worse in urban and sub-urban areas. Syrian refugees settle in rural or urban locations depending on the living standards they had back in Syria. Those who were farmers usually choose rural settings once in Lebanon, seeing as they have some possibility of competing with locals for informal and agricultural jobs. On the other hand, the Syrian middle-class refugees tend to settle in urban or sub-urban areas. Once there, however, the difficult access to the job market and high living cost put them in a very difficult position.

As in every humanitarian crisis, the life of these people changes radically, which also implies changes in gender relations. Gender roles and statuses have repercussions on every dimension of life: at intimate and family levels, in the workplace etc. As such, the drastic change that results in a forced displacement deeply modifies gender norms and



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values, whether in the realm of physical and psychological safety, with regard to access and control over resources, and access to aid¹.

An important study conducted in 2013 by ABAAD and Oxfam focused on changes of gender reality among refugees. It highlighted that the average Syrian refugee reaching Lebanon comes from a middle income, urban and educated family. The gender relations they were used to in Syria were based on a patriarchal culture, in which men were the household's heads and breadwinners. Their masculinity was defined according to their capacities to protect their families, especially their wives and daughters, who represent the family's honour. According to many female refugees interviewed, their femininity indeed was developed and recognised thanks to male protection. Their responsibilities included caring for the family and managing the resources provided by men. Women fleeing Syria were usually educated, even if only a few worked outside their homes (mainly in health and education sectors). Regarding education, access to school was usually granted for both boys and girls, even if in separate schools in order to respect religious beliefs (in 2009, 93 per cent of girls and 94 per cent of boys were enrolled in primary school)². However, even before the crisis, women in Syria were subject to discrimination. Legal marital age was 17 years old for women and 18 for men, yet child marriage prevailed seeing as judges authorised marriage at a younger age. The Personal Status Law disadvantaged women in the realm of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody, in addition to the fact that no legislation was in place to specifically address domestic violence. In spite of the scarcity of data, and due to the lack of reporting and response mechanisms, many female refugees made it quite clear that domestic and SGB violence were very common issues in Syria.

In 2012, ABAAD, a recognised Lebanese NGO specialised in gender issues, published, alongside with the NGO International Rescue Committee, a study that showed how rape and sexual violence constituted major risks for women and girls, especially while on Syrian soil. Almost all focus groups interviewed included women, girls, men, and services providers, and identified rape as a main feature of the conflict in Syria. In addition, cases of torture, humiliation, and kidnapping were perpetrated by "armed actors breaking into the homes of families and specifically targeting women and girls in the households in an effort to 'dishonor' or coerce the men in the family"³. Women detainees in prisons appear to have suffered from similar abuses.

¹ Oxfam Shifting Sands: Changing Gender Roles Among Refugees In Lebanon, Joint Research Report, Roula El-Masri, Abaad-Resource Center For Gender Equality , Claire Harvey And Rosa Garwood, Oxfam Gb, Sept. 2013

² Ibid

³ Syrian Women & Girls: Fleeing death, facing ongoing threats and humiliation - A Gender-based Violence Rapid Assessment. From Harm to Home, IRC • WPE Emergency Rapid Assessment, Lebanon, August 2012.



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Individuals and families arrive in Lebanon with deep traumas and in a new environment, often without personal belongings or official documents, for they fled Syria in a situation of emergency. Used to having a good access to services (for example, in 2009, 96 per cent of pregnant women gave birth in the presence of a skilled health attendant)⁴, they find themselves in a drastically different reality. Whether in urban, sub-urban, or rural settings, they live with host families, rent empty apartments or spaces such as garages (often with more than one family to share the cost), stay in empty public buildings (such as schools and mosques), or live in ad hoc shelters, with no water or sanitation services. This implies a deep change in daily intimacy: many women in Syria did not share rooms with men, but in their new refugee condition this often becomes impossible. This is one of the aspects, together with the lack of adequate habitat, hygiene, education and the overall insecurity, that create a change in gender relations, and engender stressful situations.

Nonetheless the main source of frustration identified by the majority of refugees is the lack of job opportunities. Losing the status of breadwinner implies a lack of self-esteem and deep resentment, which, joined with the difficult living conditions, high promiscuity, concerns for the relatives still in Syria and consequent feeling of guilt, may explain some of the violent behaviours against family members that were reported. When allowed and feeling protected, women, in turn, have added to their traditional duties, looking for work and access to humanitarian aid outside of their homes. Indeed female refugees are often the ones seeking humanitarian food and non-food items, for men culturally feel uncomfortable with asking for assistance. Often, also the fact that children find a small occupation exacerbates this sense of failure for men. In addition, for boys start working, they are forced to leave school, while girls abandon their studies because the roads are not safe enough for them to travel, or their families do not accept mixed schools.

Of the refugees in Lebanon, 49 per cent are men and 51 per cent are women; just over half (52.8 per cent) are under 18 years old. Rape and sexual violence were identified as the most common abuses against women and girls in Syria, while intimate partner violence, early marriage and survival sex appear to have increased specifically since arriving in Lebanon. Early marriage is a coping strategy in urban areas, a way to protect young girls, or a mean to alleviate the family's financial issues. Survival sex, on the other hand, is linked to women's and girls' desperate need to get an income to cover the increased cost of living in Lebanon. Outside the household, there also are examples of women and girls who are vulnerable to physical and verbal harassment, including sexual

⁴ OXFAM Shifting Sands: Changing gender roles among refugees in Lebanon, Joint Research Report, Roula El-Masri, Abaad-Resource Center For Gender Equality, Claire Harvey And Rosa Garwood, Oxfam Gb, Sept. 2013.



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harassment, and in many areas they fear kidnapping, robbery, and any form of attack. Widows, or women on their own, are particularly vulnerable, with some pretending in public to receive phone calls from their former husbands, to protect themselves from male harassment.

In addition to the threats mentioned previously, female Syrian refugees also have expressed particular difficulties with regard to access to the scarce humanitarian aid that is available. As a study carried out by IRC in 2012 argues, *when asked about barriers to accessing services for women and girls, key informants listed the following in order of frequency: fear of mistreatment by service providers; inconvenience of locations; most do not know about the services; it is not safe for women and girls to travel to the locations; girls and women are not permitted to access these services by their families; and the hours are not convenient. Focus group participants would report problems in accessing basic goods, particularly in food distributions led by men. Humiliation and verbal abuse were reported as key problems for Syrian women.*

Thus, the difficult conditions lived by Syrian refugees in Lebanon has deeply affected gender relations to the detriment of women and girls now victims of multiple and intertwined discriminations and abuses.