

Working with Syrian families in extreme conditions: Lessons for global immigration and refugee policy

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Introduction

The war in Syria is considered the largest humanitarian and protection crisis in the world (Amnesty International 2015; UNHCR, 2017). As the Syrian war enters its eighth year, the number of displaced Syrians now exceeds 11 million people, over five million of whom have sought safety in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon (UNHCR, 2017).

In Lebanon, there are approximately 1.5 million displaced Syrians (UNHCR, 2017). This means that one in four residents in Lebanon is a Syrian refugee (Boustani, Carpi, Gebara, & Mourad, 2016), making Lebanon the only country in the world to take in the most number of refugees in proportion to its size (Kelley, 2017).

Both Syria and Lebanon have a long history of hosting each other's displaced populations during wartime, as well as open borders that have encouraged commerce and livelihoods (Chatty, 2018). Nevertheless, as the Syrian war has become more protracted, the Government of Lebanon's (GoL's) refugee response has transitioned from hospitality and protection to restriction and containment. A major element of the GoL's response has been its refusal to officially recognize Syrians as refugees, which impacts the rights of Syrian children and families.

The growing number of Syrian families seeking safety in Lebanon has placed an increased burden on already strained government structures. Prior to the influx of Syrian refugees, Lebanon was limited in affordable housing options for its citizens (Fawaz, 2017). International aid has not been sufficient in addressing the critical public service and infrastructure needs of the country, putting pressure on the GoL and increasing tensions between the local Lebanese and Syrian populations (Human Rights Watch, 2016a). Humanitarian and non-governmental organizations have filled the gap left by the government, yet continue to struggle to meet the growing needs of the high numbers of displaced Syrian families. Funding gaps for humanitarian assistance also remain.

Policies Affecting Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

Prior to the conflict, Syrians and Lebanese moved freely across their shared border. But as the number of Syrian families seeking safety has grown, the GoL has changed their policies, from one of unrestricted movement to that which aims to contain Syrian refugees (Sanyal, 2017). Due to a shared history of strong economic ties and hosting one another's citizens during wartime, the GoL initially anticipated that displaced Syrians would self-settle and receive support from kin and community (Chatty, 2016). However, today, the country considers itself one of transit and

not asylum, prompting the development of policies to encourage temporary stays (Shawaf & El Asmar, 2017).

In January 2015, the GoL implemented regulations that made it significantly more restrictive for Syrians to renew residency (Human Rights Watch, 2016b). This created two categories of refugees: those officially registered with the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) and those not registered with UNHCR and therefore required to have a Lebanese sponsor (Human Rights Watch, 2016b). Syrians who register with the UNHCR are required to sign a declaration that they will not work, though their needs are often not met by the support given by the organization (Human Rights Watch 2016b).

Sponsorship has become the *de facto* pathway to legal status in Lebanon (Keith & Shawaf, 2018). In practice, this system has become exploitative. Sponsors can retract their sponsorship at any time and for any reason, creating a hierarchical power relation that can lead to Syrians providing free labour and paying additional fees to maintain their legal status in Lebanon (Human Rights Watch, 2016b; Keith & Shawaf, 2018). This has resulted in a large number of undocumented Syrian families (Human Rights Watch, 2016b; Keith & Shawaf, 2018; Shawaf & El Asmar, 2017).

In order to have official legal status in Lebanon, the latter group are required to find a Lebanese sponsor and pay a US\$200 annual fee (Human Rights Watch, 2016b). This is a challenge for Syrian families whose average monthly income is around US\$60 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), & World Food Program (WFP), 2016). Children over the age of 15 face risk of arrest and detention when they do not have the necessary required documents, which inhibits their mobility, education, and access to basic services such as health care and social services (El Daoi, 2017).

The GoL's policies to register Syrian families has also contributed to the perception by local communities that they must compete with Syrians for employment and services. A growing attitude of us-versus-them has led to increased incidents of harassment and discrimination of Syrians (Sanyal, 2017). In addition, the GoL's policies have prompted Syrians to self-impose curfews in a number of municipalities which restrict Syrian's ability to earn livelihoods and interact with the Lebanese population, further isolating and marginalizing them (Chatty, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2016b).

Under an international human rights framework, the GoL does not recognize the displaced populations of Syria as official *refugees*, refusing them legal protection and rights outlined in the 1951 Refugee Convention. The decision to not sign the Convention is influenced by Lebanon's history hosting a large number of Palestinian refugees. For nearly 70 years, Lebanon has been host to 12 UN camps for an estimated 500,000 Palestinian refugees (Sanyal, 2017; Thorleifsson, 2016). Since that time, the GoL has increasingly tried to restrict the entrance of additional Palestinians, including Palestinians from Syria, into the country (Santos, 2014). The GoL no-camp policy is intended to avoid another "Palestinian situation" (Sanyal, 2017).

Finding refuge therefore becomes reliant on the individual hospitality of locals, rather than as a universal right afforded to the displaced (Chatty, 2016). In addition, despite the large numbers of Syrian families seeking safety and shelter within Lebanon, the GoL has refused to create formal refugee camps, prompting the establishment of informal settlements across the country. Informal settlements are negotiated spaces "regulated, controlled and segregated like camps through private actors" (Sanyal, 2017, p.120) as response to the state's suspension of law. Even though

the GoL has given tacit approval for the development of informal refugee settlements in response to the crisis, the official no-camp policy in Lebanon removes the “burden of refugees” from the government (Sanyal, 2017, p. 120).

Methodology

The purpose of the research was to understand the experiences and mobility patterns of these families. The research was funded by the Canadian Social Sciences Research Council, with data collection taking place from 2016 to 2017. The project received human ethics approval from Wilfrid Laurier University's Research Ethics Board (#5013).

We conducted collaborative family interviews with 268 individuals within 46 families who had fled Syria due to the ongoing conflict that has wracked the country. The families had "temporarily" resettled in three regions of Lebanon: northern Lebanon, Beirut, and Bekaa Valley. Families included index family members (e.g., the "nuclear" family, or mother, father, children) and extended family members (e.g., aunts, grandmothers, cousins, etc.).

To start each interview, the research team gathered demographic data about the family, which also included the research team's reflections on the research process. Discussions during the family interviews consisted of life in Syria before the war, making the decision to leave Syria, the journey from Syria to Lebanon, life in Lebanon, and dreams for the future. Interviews used place-based methods that sought to understand the research participants' connection with their social and physical environments. Children participated in the research through drawing, mapmaking, and narrative methods. During the family interview, we provided time and space for the participants—both adults and children—to ask us questions about our backgrounds, our interest in this topic, as well as more specific questions about the research design and goals. We also asked participants what they thought about certain questions and processes of the research design to ensure their feedback throughout the process.

Once the collaborative family interview was complete, we invited the children to take us on a walk of their neighborhood communities (with parental consent and child assent). During the walk, the children were asked to carry an activity logger, a small device that collects geographic information systems (GIS) data regarding physical movement. During the neighborhood walk, children were encouraged to show us the places where, for example, they were allowed to visit, places where their daily activities occur, and places where people they know are located. Children were also asked to indicate any important places that we should take a photo of. Throughout the course of the walk, the children had full control over the research process.

After the neighborhood walk, the research team asked three family members (one parent, one older child, and one younger child) to carry the activity logger for a period of one week. Like the use of the activity logger during the neighborhood walk, GIS technology registered the family members' movements over the course of a typical week, thereby serving as an ethnographic mechanism by which to better understand their experiences. To aid in recall, family members were asked to keep a simple diary of their daily activities while carrying the activity logger. In addition to observing the family members in environments of displacement, the GIS technology yielded quantitative data on elements such as time spent outside the home, distance travelled, etc.

At the end of the one-week period, the research team re-visited the family for a follow-up interview. During this final interview, the family were asked to reflect upon their experiences

over the past week and to share anything else that they did not get a chance to share during the first interview.

In addition to family interviews, we conducted three focus group discussions with Lebanese community workers and Syrian refugee outreach volunteers, as well as three semi-structured interviews with individuals who were working directly with Syrian families in Lebanon. The research also included elements of participant-observation of field agencies working with refugee families, attendance at meetings with aid organizations and local community-based organizations, and visits to informal settlements and other places refugee families were living. Finally, all members of the research team were all invited to participate in a semi-structured debrief interview to reflect upon their experiences and to provide recommendations for future research.

With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded, translated, and transcribed prior to data analysis. Data analysis was facilitated through Dedoose, an online research and evaluation data application. Data were analyzed through careful reading and collation of transcripts to ascertain meaning and significance that participants attributed to their experiences. In addition to the rich quantitative data gleaned from using GIS technology, qualitative transcripts were coded and concepts were generated and categorized into themes.

Findings

Experiencing Economic Precarity: The biggest challenges facing families were economic such as un(der)employment, precarious work, and food insecurity. Parental (in)adequacy was tied to parents (in)ability to provide material goods for their children. Economic precarity led to restricted mobility of children and parents.

Encountering Barriers to Services: Families also faced limited access to good and affordable social, health, and mental health services due to financial limitations, lack of documentation, and discrimination.

Facing Challenges to Parenting: Parents faced specific psychosocial challenges in the context of displacement. Mothers were concerned with their children's mental health and struggled to raise their children away from relatives who traditionally offer support. Fathers faced hopelessness due to low-paid and precarious work coupled with their responsibilities to care for the family and concern for the physical protection of their children.

Protecting Children by Limiting Mobility: Parents and children faced limited mobility that is tied to economic precarity, legal documentation, gender, age, family role, etc.

Dreaming of the Future: Despite all of these challenges, families still expressed dreams for the future. Their dreams emphasized the importance of education and their connection to their homes in Syria.

Recommendations

- *Provide families with cash so they can choose their own financial priorities and how to best address them.* Economic interventions such as cash transfers and food vouchers can help to temporarily support families, curb some of the harmful impacts of poverty, and economically

raise families to a place of self-sufficiency. Most importantly, economic support provides families with a sense of hope that will be able to address the extreme adversity they face in contexts of displacement. Rigorous evidence on the impact of these programs is lacking, but the little research conducted points to the effectiveness of these economic programs as an intervention (Verme et al., 2016). Though these are short-term measures, they may still support long-term solutions include addressing barriers to access in the labour market as well as barriers to necessary services (e.g. health care, education). Supporting integration into the labour market is also important in post-resettlement contexts when many refugee families continue to face barriers in securing stable employment.

- *Rethink mobility as a human right.*
- *Establish psychosocial support for parents emphasizing practices that foster positive coping mechanisms within families.* Many Syrian refugee parents are tasked with addressing not only the potential for past traumas but also the daily stressors of survival—such as economic precarity—in Lebanon. Psychosocial support includes trauma-focused support as well as building strategies within parents to address these daily economic stressors and help to support their children in managing the adversity that they experience (Betancourt, 2015; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Murphy, Maignant, Boone, & Smith, 2015). Psychosocial support is important both in areas of displacement and post-resettlement where past traumas often follow families and new or trailing stressors continue to impact family dynamics.
- *Understand families' diverse experiences of loss, adversity, and perseverance.*
- *Value and tap into families' capacities as contributing members of society.*
- *Recognize the benefits of "chain migration".*

For more information about the research, please see www.outofplaceresearch.com