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Where life begins: reducing risky births in a refugee camp

By Elizabeth Wang

New Security Beat (06.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2UjcBzi> - Zaatari camp, the largest Syrian refugee camp in the world, sits less than 12 kilometers away from the border between Syria and northern Jordan. Rows of houses disappear into the desert, making it hard to tell where the camp begins and ends. Metal containers pieced together like patchwork are home to around 80,000 refugees. The remnants of tattered UNHCR tents cover holes in the walls. Almost seven years after the camp opened, this dusty sea of tin roofs has evolved into a permanent settlement.

When I entered Zaatari camp to begin my internship with the Women and Girls Comprehensive Center, I saw signs of resilience and humanity everywhere—colorful murals of smiling children, barefoot boys playing soccer, a wedding dress shop. Perhaps the greatest proof that life goes on can be found in the camp's maternity wards, which see an average of 80 births per week, along with 14,000 consultations per week for expecting mothers. About 1 in 4 of the Syrian refugees living in Zaatari are women of reproductive age. According to UNFPA, 2,300 women and girls in Zaatari are pregnant at any one time. The extremely high fertility rate demonstrates how vital it is to facilitate access to quality reproductive and maternal health services during complex emergencies.

At the Women and Girls Comprehensive Center in Zaatari camp, which is run by the Jordan Health Aid Society and supported by UNFPA, refugee women of all ages receive services such as family planning, pre- and post-natal care, vaccinations, gynecological check-ups, and culturally sensitive information sessions. Every day, the clinic delivers five to seven babies. As of September 27, 2018, the clinic has had 10,089 safe deliveries and zero maternal mortalities, a stunning achievement that remains posted on a scoreboard outside the clinic's gates.

Risky Pregnancies, Dangerous Deliveries

Despite this success, giving birth in Zaatari is not without dangers. The high prevalence of non-communicable diseases (such as anemia, diabetes, and hypertension) among Syrian refugees—and especially the inadequate management of these chronic conditions when they are fleeing conflict—increases health risks during and after pregnancy.

Domestic and gender-based violence, which spike during complex emergencies, also cause extreme harm to women and girls.

One of the greatest challenges facing the Women and Girls Comprehensive Center involves caring for pregnant adolescent girls and young women under 20 years old. Due to instability, displacement, and poverty, the rate of child marriage among Syrian refugees is more than four times what it was in pre-crisis Syria. For Syrian refugees in Jordan specifically, the rate has doubled in the last four years. Consequently, many of these girls have multiple children before they even reach adulthood.

Seeing girls 16 years old and younger, in pain and alone in the delivery room, was one of the most difficult experiences of my time in Zaatari. As adolescents, they are much more likely to experience risky pregnancies, as well as premature birth and children with low birth weight, than women over the age of 20. Most of these girls are not aware of the risks of early marriage and pregnancy, and often do not feel safe during delivery.

At the center, refugees can access various forms of family planning, including birth control pills or IUDs. The midwives and doctors also host informational sessions on reproductive health topics, such as healthy prenatal behaviors and the risks of child marriage. The center's oldest midwife, who everyone fondly refers to as "Mama," makes home visits around the camp to discuss family planning and women's health with families.

Despite the clinic's efforts to encourage postponing and spacing pregnancies, the family planning services offered are not always used. Some women and girls are pressured by their husbands and families to avoid contraceptives and continue producing children without adequate time for recovery in between births. One patient I met at the clinic was famous in Zaatari, the midwife told me in a hushed voice, for having 12 children, all by cesarean section, over the course of 12 years. Women and girls who had IUDs placed often came back soon after to get them removed, per their husbands' demands. Many Syrians feel obligated to have a lot of children to compensate for the family and friends killed in the war or to increase the likelihood that their children will survive.

Cultural Sensitivity Saves Lives

To save lives, we need to not only offer reproductive health services, but ensure they are culturally sensitive as well. Unlike other host countries, Jordan does not face large language or cultural barriers when providing care to Syrian refugees. Jordanians and Syrians speak similar Arabic and come from predominantly Muslim societies with shared values. This is an advantage for healthcare providers in Zaatari because they already have a good understanding of their patient population, which facilitates patient-provider trust and overall better quality care.

For example, when treating a woman who insisted on fasting for the religious holiday of Ramadan while pregnant, the Jordanian midwives were the best people for the job. As Muslim women themselves, they had a deep understanding of the woman's motivations and could explain the serious health consequences of her decisions while still respecting the significance of the religious practice. By practicing empathy and non-judgment, they were able to help this woman find a balance between health and faith without alienating the patient and discouraging her from seeking care in the future.

New Beginnings

Early in my internship, we transported a woman in premature labor to a bigger hospital in Mafraq, the next closest city. As we all tried to maintain our balance in the back of the

bumpy ambulance, the baby's head began crowning. We pulled over to the side of the road and safely delivered her baby right there.

This is where life begins in Zaatari: in the back of dusty ambulances with missing windows, in delivery rooms with flies buzzing, in clinics where Jordanians and Syrians work together to protect women and children. Despite the enormous challenges facing these refugees and the healthcare workers seeking to help them, every day is the first day for another new life.

Committee on the Rights of the Child reviews the situation of Children in Syria

Reliefweb (16.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2sHkFNX> - Report from [UN Committee on the Rights of the Child](#)

The Committee on the Rights of the Child today concluded its examination of the fifth periodic report of Syria on measures taken to implement the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Hussam Edin Aala, Permanent Representative of Syria to the United Nations Office at Geneva, presenting the report, said that the reporting period covered an exceptional period in Syria during which it had suffered from a multifaceted war, whose main victims were children. All necessary measures were being taken to protect the citizens and defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity, he said, reaffirming Syria's openness to any true effort towards a political solution where the people would decide on their future without any foreign interference. Numerous child protection mechanisms and institutions had been created, such as the Unit for Family Protection set up in 2017, and laws that aimed at implementing the national vision and the provisions of the Convention had been adopted. The law on juveniles aimed at correcting the behaviour of children and protecting their best interests, steps had been taken to promote the care for children with disabilities and their families, and serious efforts had been invested in continuing the educational process that was disrupted by the activities of terrorist groups. The civil status law had been amended to facilitate registration for Syrians inside the country and abroad. In closing, Mr. Aala decried unilateral coercive measures imposed on Syria by some countries, which had had a detrimental impact on children in particular; the continued politicization of the humanitarian situation in Syria which rejected terrorism as the cause of suffering in the country; and the lack of humanitarian funding and support for the rehabilitation and return of displaced persons to Syria.

During the dialogue, Committee Experts referred to United Nations sources and reports that had identified thousands of Syrian children who had been killed and maimed, noting with concern that more than half of those had been victims of the Government's aerial attacks. There were verified reports of the turning off of water and electricity supplies to several besieged towns by the Government, and the systematic denial of aid, particularly in hard-to-reach areas, with devastating impact on civilians and children in particular. There were also widespread and consistent reports on torture and inhuman treatment of children, such as mutilation, sexual violence, and the death of children in detention. The delegation was asked to comment on how those actions related to Syria's obligations under the Convention, explain how the best interest of the child was integrated in military operations, and outline measures in place to render the prohibition of torture and inhuman treatment effective and identify and prosecute perpetrators. Experts recognized the devastating impact of the conflict on the health system and on the mental health of children in particular, and asked about concrete steps taken to protect budgetary

allocations for children – especially health and education - and ensure that all children, including displaced ones, realized their right to education. Experts expressed concern about the upsurge in child marriages as a result of the crisis and about the legal age of marriage that differed for girls and boys, and inquired about concrete steps to close the gaps in the legal framework which discriminated against certain groups of children in inheritance, nationality, and parental recognition.

Amal Aldoseri, Member of the Committee's Task Force on Syria, concluded by recognizing the challenging situation in Syria caused by the crisis and the resulting difficulties in delivering on its international commitments, and stressed that such a situation could not waive Syria's responsibilities towards its children.

Mr. Aala, in his concluding remarks, said that Syria was in the final phases of the war and was intent on liberating all of its territory from terrorists and invaders. Syria was aware that the next period would pose a new set of challenges.

The delegation of Syria consisted of representatives of the Syrian Commission of Family Affairs and Population, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Interior, and the Permanent Mission of Syria to the United Nations Office at Geneva.

Poverty for Syrian refugees could push children to marry and work

The Gulf Today (10.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2EsiYb6> - BEIRUT: Nearly seven years into Syria's civil war, Syrian refugees in neighbouring Lebanon are becoming poorer, leaving children at risk of child labour and early marriage, aid organisations said on Tuesday.

A recent survey by the United Nations children's agency UNICEF, UN's World Food Programme, and refugee agency, UNHCR showed that Syrian refugees in Lebanon are more vulnerable now than they have been since the beginning of the crisis.

Struggling to survive, more than three quarters of the refugees in Lebanon now live on less than \$4 per day, according to the survey which was based on data collected last year.

"The situation for Syrian refugees in Lebanon is actually getting worse - they are getting poorer. They are barely staying afloat," Scott Craig, UNHCR spokesman in Lebanon, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Around 1.5 million refugees who fled Syria's violence account for a quarter of Lebanon's population.

The Lebanese government has long avoided setting up official refugee camps. So, many Syrians live in tented settlements, languishing in poverty and facing restrictions on legal residence or work.

"Child labour and early marriage are direct consequences of poverty," Tanya Chapuisat, UNICEF spokeswoman in Lebanon said in a statement to the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"We fear this (poverty) will lead to more children being married away or becoming breadwinners instead of attending school," she said.

According to UNICEF, 5 percent of Syrian refugee children between 5-17 are working,

and one in five Syrian girls and women aged between 15 and 25 is married.

Mike Bruce, a spokesman for the Norwegian Refugee Council, said without sufficient humanitarian aid and proper work Syrian families would increasingly fall into debt and more could turn to "negative coping mechanisms" like child labour and marriage.

Cold winter temperatures in Lebanon would also hurt refugees, he said. "Refugees are less and less able to deal with each shock that they face and severe weather could be one of those shocks," said Bruce.

Male rape and sexual torture in the Syrian war: 'It is everywhere'

When Sarah Chynoweth was asked to report on sexual violence against men and boys in the Syria crisis, she had no idea of the scale of the problem

By Sarah Chynoweth

The Guardian (21.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2jbNXze> - Last year I agreed to undertake a fact-finding mission for the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, on sexual violence against men and boys in the Syrian crisis. We knew that many women and girls were being targeted for rape and other sexualised violence, but we didn't know much about what was happening to men and boys. Drawing on a few existing reports, I assumed some boys were being victimised, as well as some men in detention centres, but that sexual violence against males was not common. I worried that few refugees would have heard of any accounts and that they wouldn't talk to me about such a taboo topic anyway. I couldn't have been more wrong.

In October 2016, I landed in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, where more than 200,000 Syrian refugees had fled. The UNHCR arranged for a translator and discussions with refugees at a nearby camp. I met with the first group, eight Syrian men who had fled the war. I asked them about their lives in the camp, how they were getting by, and what their main concerns were. Once we had established some rapport, I tentatively probed whether they had heard of any reports of sexual violence against men or boys in Syria. They looked at me incredulously, as if they couldn't believe that I was asking such a basic question, saying: "Yes, of course. It is everywhere. It is happening [from] all sides."

I was surprised at their response and their candour. I was also sceptical: rumours are rampant in war zones. Had they heard any accounts from someone they knew personally? Again, resounding replies of "yes" from the men. As I met with more and more refugees – almost 200 across Iraqi Kurdistan, Jordan and Lebanon – I received similar responses, and was inundated with heartbreaking stories.

In Lebanon, a Palestinian man who had lived his entire life in Syria asked to speak with me after the group discussion. He told me how armed men had entered his village and raped him. The experience had left him devastated, and he was too emotionally distraught to work, even though he had to care for his younger sister.

In Jordan, one young Syrian man told me about his uncle, who had been randomly detained. While in detention, his captors sexually tortured him. After his release, he stopped eating and became an alcoholic, dying from liver failure soon after.

A number of women described how men changed after these experiences – isolating themselves, no longer interested in sex, and at times becoming violent. Some were not able to work because of the physical and mental impact of the violence, putting their families at risk of poverty.

I met one man who suffered from painful and debilitating injuries as a result of sexual torture, and a few aid workers said anal injuries were not uncommon for men who had been detained.

The accounts were heart-rending and horrific. They were also abundant. At a large refugee camp in Jordan, I met a group of women who were eager to talk about the issue. According to them, men and boys are routinely sexually abused during detention in Syria, a comment echoed by other refugees, and scores of men had been detained by different armed groups. I asked them to guesstimate how many men in the camp had undergone sexual violence while in detention. They said, "Between 30% and 40%. We cannot think of any family who doesn't have someone [who was detained and sexually abused]."

Other refugees told me how armed groups would conduct raids on homes, during which "they raped everyone" – both women and men. I heard that phrase a number of times from refugees across the three countries.

People said that after having fled to neighbouring countries, some younger boys were being sexually victimised by older boys and men, who lured them with promises of food or money. A few women said that their sons were too scared to go to school, afraid of being sexually assaulted on the way or at the school by their peers.

What surprised me most were accounts of sexual exploitation at work. An 18-year-old Syrian man who was working two jobs was the first person to tell me about it. He described how his boss demanded sexual favours before paying his wages. He felt he couldn't refuse because he had to care for his mother and two sisters; his despair and shame were palpable. It was a story I would hear from other refugee men and boys, many of whom were working without a legal permit. Faced with grinding poverty, diminishing aid and intense pressures to provide for their families, they felt they had no choice but to submit.

I also met with a group of gay and transgender refugees who faced the double stigma of being both refugees and sexual and gender minorities. One gay man told me how, in Syria, he had been detained for four months, during which he and other male detainees were raped anally with sticks and bottles. He still experiences pain when sitting. He had fled to a neighbouring country, but didn't find safety there. He was again sexually assaulted by a local gang as well as by a security guard. He knew he was still at risk.

Other members of the group shared disturbing accounts of sexual assault by taxi drivers, neighbours, landlords and military personnel. They were too afraid to report these to the police, who could assault them again, or even arrest them under laws addressing "public morality" or "unnatural practices".

In Jordan I met a group of psychotherapists who specialised in treating torture survivors, and asked them why sexual torture was being used in this conflict. They said torture was designed to inflict deep psychological pain that disrupts one's sense of self. In places

such as Syria, where same-sex sexual activity is strictly forbidden and traditional gender roles are entrenched, the use of sexualised torture against men and boys is unsurprising.

Studies from other wars where sexual violence was documented – such as in Liberia, northern Uganda and the former Yugoslavia – also show that men and boys are targeted for a range of sexualised violence. Wartime sexual violence is a complex issue, but it can also be a very effective way to humiliate, terrorise and subjugate women and men.

And though women and girls are the main victims during conflict and displacement – with an estimated one out of five forcibly displaced women having suffered sexual violence, and this is likely to be an underestimate – it doesn't mean the number of male survivors is small. For example, a 2010 study in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo found that almost one-quarter of men in selected conflict-affected territories had experienced sexual violence: an estimated 760,000 men. LGBTI people are particularly at risk of sexual violence in detention and as refugees.

The good news is that some humanitarian organisations are beginning to recognise the issue and are providing basic services for male survivors. But much more is needed to prevent this violence and to provide support and care to the men and boys who have been sexually victimised. This work should complement and, where possible, reinforce, programmes for women and girls, who bear the brunt of sexual violence and who face myriad forms of violence, discrimination, and subjugation.

In our report we ask for improved advocacy and staffing, and more data. But we also ask donors to fund desperately needed programmes in this area. Key to preventing and responding to sexual violence against men and boys is raising awareness, sensitising aid personnel, and working with communities to establish targeted programmes. This cannot be achieved without funding. Money for programmes addressing violence against women and girls is already scarce, and additional targeted funding for men, boys, and sexual and gender minorities is needed. The US is one of the few donor governments that has provided funding to address sexual violence against men and boys in humanitarian settings.

The Trump administration has proposed steep cuts to the 2018 international affairs budget, which would impact overseas development aid and support for UN agencies. This would be devastating not just for Syrians, but for the 65 million people worldwide grappling with the horrors of war, disaster and displacement – and, in some cases, sexual violence.

The cuts would be catastrophic for smaller and often local organisations, which provide life-saving services in dangerous settings where few if any international humanitarian agencies operate. Most of the organisations providing care to male sexual violence survivors in the areas I visited were local women's, LGBTI and human rights groups, many of which relied on funding from the UN and other international agencies supported by the US government.

Stories of the refugees I met remind us that the proposed cuts would affect the life chances of some of the world's most vulnerable people. These men and boys – like all those surviving war and disaster – deserve and have a right to protection, support and good quality care.

Syrian women rise above differences and forge a statement of unity

UN Women (23.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/27TRrd8> - In an effort to build consensus to end the Syrian crisis, a diverse group of over 130 Syrian women political and civil society activists met in Beirut, Lebanon from 20-22 May and forged a [statement of unity](#), overcoming significant political divides.

The group met for a conference entitled “Syrian Women Peacemakers”, building on three years of UN Women’s advocacy and coalition-building work with Syrian women peace activists. Participants included members of the [Syrian Women Initiative for Peace and Democracy](#)—a network supported by UN Women since 2014—and members of the Women Advisory Board, a committee of Syrian women advisors to Steffan de Mistura, UN Special Envoy for Syria, and many other women leaders and gender advocates from inside Syria.

“You are making a historic move. One day in Syria, it will be remembered that there was a time before this coalition existed and a time after this coalition existed and the difference will be clear,” said UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, at the closing session. “Standing here among you, I see the future presidents, ministers, judges and rulers of Syria. Go out there and take the leadership, it belongs to you.”

Conference participants discussed the role of the [Women Advisory Board](#) and ways to increase women’s representation in the formal peace process. Discussions also tackled key issues including the refugee crisis, the status of education, food security, healthcare services and infrastructure inside Syria, the impact of economic sanctions on Syrians inside and the issue of detainees and the kidnapped. Throughout the sessions, the women’s rights agenda and the mutual suffering and personal loss of women from across the political spectrum served as unifying factors among the participants, even as political debates intensified.

“UN Women also supports women peace activists in Libya and Yemen. And every time, I stand before women’s amazing ability to rise above differences with a sense of regret for the time that passed with the Arab world missing out on the opportunity of giving women their equal share of leadership,” said Mohammad Naciri, UN Women Regional Director for Arab States, at the closing session.

After three days of emotionally charged exchanges, conference participants issued a unified statement for peace, demanding more representation of women in the formal peace process (women are currently around 20 per cent of delegates, but they want at least 30 per cent representation) and supporting the role of the Women Advisory Board. Attendees also expressed a willingness to engage in coalition-building groups in support of sustainable peace and a better response to humanitarian crises.

“Syrian women showed that they are a strong constituency for peace, rising above their differences and uniting in their common desire to work together for an end to the bloodshed, for a lasting political solution and for forming a strong coalition to this end,” said Hiba Qasas, UN Women Head of Arab States Section.

Messages for the World Humanitarian Summit:

On the eve of the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul on 23 May, conference participants sent messages to world leaders who will attend the Summit and asked UN Women’s Executive Director to deliver them. These are some of their messages:



Photo: UN Women/Emad Karim

“The women of Aleppo are suffering greatly because of the economic sanctions. We have all these women who used to own or run small factories and workshops and now I see them begging on the streets. Water is scarce, so much that we only use water three times a day. We have been without electricity for the past three months. We grind pasta to make bread because there is no flour. We are not beggars and we do not want aid. Lift the economic sanctions and we will manage on our own.” —Marina El Hanash, Aleppo



Photo: UN Women/Emad Karim

“The first step to ending the humanitarian suffering of Syrians is to end the war. You must find a way to end the war, otherwise the suffering will never end. I’m a theatre artist and I would like to tell everyone working on peacebuilding in Syria: never tell us this is not the time for theatre or a short film. This is the time for it because our need to express ourselves is at its highest when the situation is most difficult.” —Rawan El Takriri, Jozoor (youth CSO), Damascus



Photo: UN Women/Emad Karim

"If educational facilities [close], Syria will collapse. In order to save the educational process in Syria, terrorism must end. My students at Damascus University face danger on their way to campus and sometimes on campus. Also, the poor do not invest in education. Lift the economic sanctions so Syrians can continue to learn." —Rima Al Hakimi, Professor at Damascus University, Damascus