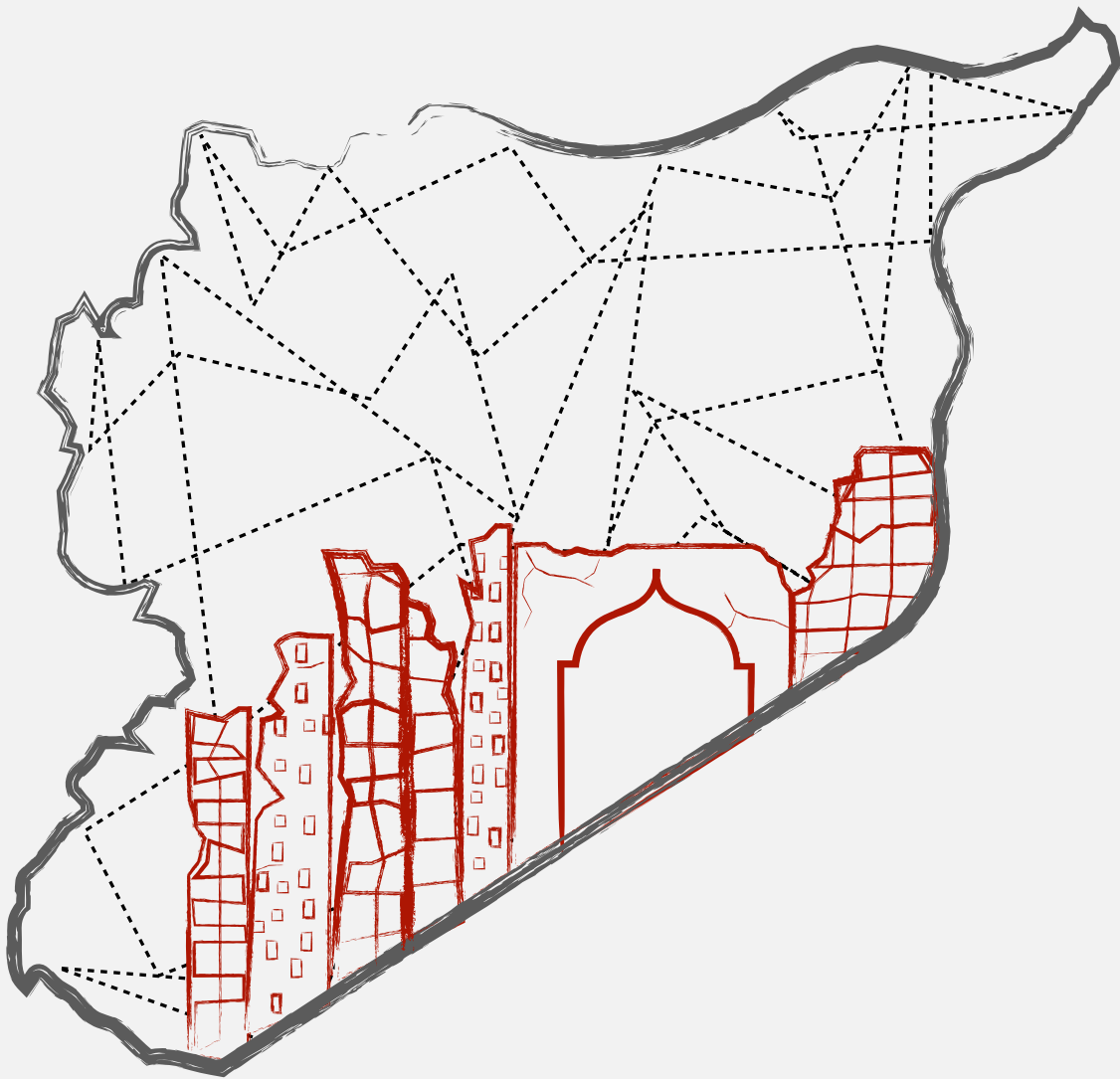# Experiences of Syrian Refugee Families Living in Northern Lebanon

Preliminary Research Brief

Bree Akesson, Wilfrid Laurier University
Dena Badawi, University of Waterloo

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Introduction

The ongoing conflict in Syria has resulted in 6.3 million Syrians internally displaced and 4.8 million displaced in neighboring countries such as Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey (UNHCR, 2017). In Lebanon, this staggering influx has added strain on an already overstretched system leaving Syrians more vulnerable. Lebanon has taken in 1.1 million registered refugees, with many more that remain unregistered. With a population of about 4.5 million, it is estimated that 1 in 4 people in Lebanon is a Syrian refugee (Sobelman, 2015).

There are no formal refugee camps for Syrian refugees within Lebanon and therefore families are scattered across the country in various living arrangements that include rented apartments, informal settlements, and Palestinian refugee communities. These living arrangements add to the complexity of targeting services for refugees.

This research aimed to examine the diverse experiences of refugee families living in northern Lebanon—with a particular focus on mothers' and fathers' parenting practices. This brief highlights these experiences and suggests implications for those working with Syrian families in Lebanon.

Methodology

In February 2016, pilot interviews were conducted with 6 Syrian refugee families in northern Lebanon for a total of 45 participants (n=45), including 7 mothers, 4 fathers, 14 daughters, and 20 sons. Interviews were targeted towards the immediate family, but often participants from the extended family also contributed to the research process. In addition, 2 focus groups and 3 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key community informants including refugee outreach volunteers and other community workers assisting Syrian refugees. The experiences of these key community informants helped to paint a multi-layered picture of the experiences of refugee families.

Top to bottom: Informal settlement, child friendly space

Reflecting an applied ethnographic approach, various refugee spaces including informal settlements, apartments, homes, and child-friendly spaces were visited as part of the data-gathering process.

Research Findings

Data were organized into the four stages of the refugee experience: "pre-flight", "flight", "displacement", and "resettlement". Within these brand categories, several sub-themes were developed, which will be described in the following pages.

| PRE-FLIGHT in Syria | FLIGHT from Syria to Lebanon | DISPLACEMENT in Lebanon | RESETTLEMENT from Lebanon |

Pre-flight

The "pre-flight" stage of the refugee experience describes families' experiences of home in Syria as well as the multiple factors that contributed to their decision to flee.

• Life in Syria

Families tended to remember Syria fondly and described an intense desire to return. Families frequently mentioned that *services in Syria were more accessible*. For example, families built relationships and had a familiarity with formal (e.g., medical care, schools, etc.) and informal services (e.g. their community members, etc.) which they feel are less present in Lebanon.

• Connections to Home

In reflecting on their lives in Syria, families often expressed *a strong nostalgia for the place of Syria*, despite there also being challenges there. Families and children expressed a deep connection to both the physical structure of the home, as well as the nation-state of Syria as home. Findings indicate that this connection to Syria has led to challenges with birth registration. For example, some families do not want to register their children's birth in Lebanon, because they prefer that their children be registered in Syria in order to maintain the family's strong connection to their home.

> "Because of this relation(ship) with Syria,…they tend to..ask someone in Syria to register the child on the family booklet in Syria. And this is a problem, because the child is registered in Syria, and there's no proof that he entered the Lebanese territory…, and then when he moves [back] to Syria, they will think that, 'Oh, this child is born of Lebanon.' …So, he cannot go back with his family because they will say it's not the same child."
> — humanitarian aid worker

Flight

The "flight" phase of the refugee experience describes the physical, and often dangerous, journey from home to the place of temporary settlement in Lebanon.

• Journey from Home to Lebanon

Families spoke about *deciding to leave Syria*. Oftentimes, a direct fear of violence or death pushed families to flee their home. Parents often referred to their children's safety as a catalyst for leaving Syria and seeking a safer place. Some families told stories of growing violence in their home communities, while others feared direct persecution.

> "They [armed group] walking in to our house. They went upstairs to me. They found a box with [gold] jewelry. They told us we were nice people, took the jewelry box, and left. That saved us. All the other people were slaughtered." — Syrian father

• Flight

Hazardous journeys across informal borders were a part of the flight experiences of some

families. In this stage, parents were forced to manage their own fears, as well as those of their children.

> 66 *They reached the Koseir area on motorbikes, and then we crossed the borders walking, with my children and my sister. The area was dangerous due to checkpoints and bombings…. There were men who helped us by driving us on the motorbikes. We were afraid that we would be bombed.* 99
>
> — Syrian mother

Displacement

"Displacement" describes the experiences of refugees in their place of temporary settlement, northern Lebanon.

• Living in Lebanon

When describing their experiences in Lebanon, families often spoke about key struggles they were facing. A significant struggle for most families was finances. An estimated 70% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon live below the poverty line (UNHCR, 2016); this economic struggle was a recurring theme throughout interviews. Their lack of financial capacity left them in precarious positions and is a root for negative coping mechanisms such as child labor and strained family relationships.

This, among other struggles, has resulted in *changing roles* within families. All roles within a family have seen adjustment in the challenging Lebanese environment. Children have taken on parental roles in working and adding to the family income. Mothers are also increasingly involved in income-generating activities. Fathers have a reduced ability to work as without a work permit they are more likely to be arrested. When they are able to work, fathers are often limited to close proximity jobs due to

this heightened fear of arrest. And parents as a unit feel limited in their ability to provide for their children.
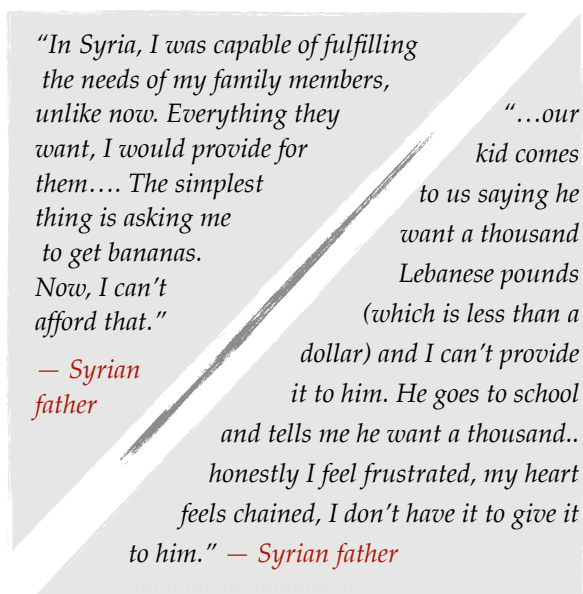
In this tense context, *coping mechanisms*—both positive and negative—have developed. Among the positive mechanisms are families who have maintained hope throughout their experience and, with that, honest and open relationships within the family which has reinforced strong family ties. Furthermore, some families feel as if they have *adapted to the Lebanese context* in that they are finding stability and purpose in their community, whether that is through participation in services or volunteering to provide peer services to other refugee families. For example, some mothers described how they are involved in community groups, while other refugees worked as refugee outreach volunteers (ROVs). Among the negative mechanisms are the rising rates of child labor and early marriage, often enacted as a survival strategy within the family.

• Parenting in Lebanon

This research explored the challenges of parenting within the context of displacement. Parents frequently cited a *feeling of losing control*. In Lebanon, Syrian parents reported that they feel as if they can not provide for their family nor raise their children as they like, and as they would have done in Syria before the war. Parents also expressed that they were troubled by their *inability to provide* for the material needs of their children.

Their limited finances and control over their situation has challenged their roles as parents and the ability to provide for the

needs of their children, which is emotionally painful for parents.

"In Syria, I was capable of fulfilling the needs of my family members, unlike now. Everything they want, I would provide for them…. The simplest thing is asking me to get bananas. Now, I can't afford that."
— *Syrian father*

"…our kid comes to us saying he want a thousand Lebanese pounds (which is less than a dollar) and I can't provide it to him. He goes to school and tells me he want a thousand.. honestly I feel frustrated, my heart feels chained, I don't have it to give it to him." — *Syrian father*

With that, some parents shared a common coping strategy to keep their children indoors and within sight.

" *I feel that I can protect them. No one leaves. Everyone stays inside the house.* "
— *38-year-old father*

In this way, parents were clinging to some semblance of control in an environment that they felt they are unable to control. However, this approach has consequences for how children explore, learn, and experience childhood.

Overall, the research revealed that Syrian parents have different ways of *protecting their children*. Mothers tended to be focused on the emotional protection of their children, managing their fears, whereas fathers took on the physical protection of their children (e.g. keeping them indoors to protect them from violence).

Despite these challenges, families were still developing ways of *maintaining family morals/values* throughout this experience. One father cited how he worked to lead by example, integrating himself within the community, to teach his children tolerance and acceptance.

• The Challenges of Pregnancy
The experience of *pregnancy* during flight was also explored through family interviews. Significantly, the strain in resources and control in the Lebanese context had an effect on the relationship between mother and baby both in the pre- and post-partum periods. Some mothers expressed that they no longer felt joy in pregnancy, a time usually characterized by excitement and anticipation. They didn't have their family and friends around for support and were overwhelmed with the stress of how to provide for this new member of their family. In addition, the financial and resource limitations that come with being a refugee in Lebanon prevented them from practicing cultural traditions and celebrations regarding the arrival of a baby.
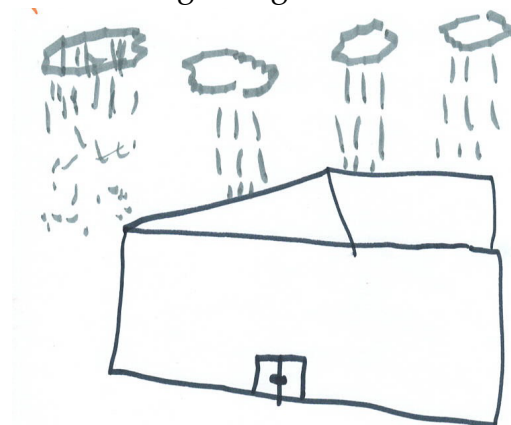
Q: What did you draw?
8-year-old boy: House, clouds, sun, rain.
Q: Is this Syria or here?
Boy: Here.
37-year-old mother: You can tell, because it is not colored or decorated.

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• Importance of Place
Children's drawings revealed their *connection to place*, often depicting physical spaces (e.g. school, house) that represent comfort and safety. Through their drawings, their connection to their beloved home of Syria was presented in contrast to their current circumstances in Lebanon.

• Describing Safety
Syrian families living in Lebanon experienced safety in different ways. Families spoke about safety through the lens of what they once had in Syria compared to what they felt was missing in Lebanon. Safety was described in three ways: (1) *safety in location*, (2) *safety in stability, community, and opportunity*, and (3) *safety in resources.*

‣ Safety in *location* implies a location away from the threat of violence. This often drove the decision to flee to other geographical locations, searching for a safer place.

‣ Families also described safety in *stability, community, and opportunity* in Syria, as compared to Lebanon. In other words, families felt safe when they had stability (steady income, jobs), community (shared understandings and familiarity with people around them), and opportunity (children were in school, had a hope for the future). This safety through community is not experienced to the same degree in Lebanon. In fact, there is a prevalent animosity between Syrian refugees and the host community. This is in part due to Lebanon's history with Syria, specifically the military occupation of Lebanon by the Syrian army following the civil war.

‣ Safety was also experienced when families felt they had *resources* available and the means to access them. Families expressed that resources and services where easier to access in Syria. This was a result of constructed relationships/familiarity with service providers as well as the financial ease of access.

• Identifying gaps in services
Importantly, from the experiences of Syrian families, gaps in services currently offered to refugees were identified. Gathering the feedback of families is important when informing how services should be developed and adapted. Families identified the following gaps in services:

‣ Families in Lebanon are often living in make-shift *shelters* in informal settlements or rented apartments in conditions which fail to protect them both physically (i.e. weather changes, public health) and psychosocially (i.e. lack of privacy). The instability of refugee housing is highlighted by the evictions that some families have been subject to. Evicted families have been moved to other settlements, apartments, and/or unfinished buildings made habitable by UNHCR.

‣ The *education* system for refugee children is exhausted, both in terms of resources and staff. Strikes disrupting school access were described as common. In addition, violence in schools prevented some children from accessing education. Parents also identified the Lebanese-based curriculum as being a difficult adjustment for Syrian children and their families.

‣ Community informants identified an increase in the rate of *early marriage and child labor* in Lebanon. Service providers were in discussions about the best way to address these two issues.

‣ *Psychosocial services for pregnant women*
Most services directed to pregnant women are focused on their physical health. The families—particularly mothers—indicated that the psychosocial health of pregnant women through the pre- and postpartum period is of equal importance for their overall health and the health of the baby.

‣ Gaps in *medical care* address both the availability of and access to health care. In many informal settlements, doctors are only available once per month. Families registered with UNHCR can access health care services through primary health care centres (PHCc) in social development centres (SDC's). Medical problems are funded by Medivisa, a UNHCR contracted insurance company. UNHCR can cover 80-90% of costs for certain individuals in designated health centres and hospitals. This includes children below the age of five, elderly individuals above 60 years of age, and pregnant women. Chronic cases, however, are not covered by UNHCR (UNHCR, 2016). These conditions of limited coverage leave many refugees struggling to cover the expenses of health care. Beyond the availability and cost, the distance to medical services, as well as lack of transportation further limits access for refugees.

● Support services
Both *formal and informal supports* exist in the refugee environment and often overlap. The formal services can help to erode divisions between groups and rebuild trust and community. Informal supports (i.e. community) were cited in multiple interviews as important for mediating the challenges of the refugee experience. A transition between the formal to informal support has been a strategy of some aid organizations. For example, a Lebanese aid organization is practicing this strategy to target child protection. In their approach, the community-based organization develops the child protection system and the community carries it out. Through the capacitation of the community to serve as valuable actors in child protection, formal services can transfer information and responsibility to the community.

> *"We used to notice that they were somehow divided, as in certain people from the same area would sit alone; [for example, people [from] Homs would only sit with others from Homs]. There was no agreement, and there were always conflicts. When [we] joined the women together for the gender-based violence (GBV) sessions and the children in the protection sessions, this all changed. They became more accepting and understanding to one another."*
> — key community informant

The context of Lebanon still presents unique *challenges in providing supports* and *building sustainable solutions*. For one, refugee families are geographically scattered throughout the country, complicating the logistics of service provision. In addition, each region where families are living has its own unique context and challenges. Nevertheless, refugee families coming from different backgrounds, supports, and experiences creates diversity in how they navigate these challenges. Therefore, building sustainable solutions requires

addressing these complexities and adapting resources to each region and each community. Most importantly, solutions which work and are sustainable must fit the context and meet the unique needs of the populations they aim to serve.

Interviews indicated that there were challenges in communication between the multiple aid organizations operating in Lebanon, with a long-term concern for sustainability. As one participant noted, "Sustainable solutions mean having sustainable systems in place." Therefore a key step forward in Lebanon is establishing a stronger coordination between service providers and a known referral pathway to ensure refugees know how and where they can get assistance.

"And any service you render, although you have a lot of things standardized and stuff, you have different target populations in each region, and each population has her own challenges, context, challenges, particularities, religious background, and beliefs. So any topic you are gonna tackle you have to take into consideration the sensitivities of this population."
— key community informant

Resettlement

In light of not being able to return to ones country of origin, "resettlement" tends to be the final stage of the refugee journey. Yet, as the data from participants highlighted, resettlement presents its own challenges.

Families spoke of their ultimate desire to leave Lebanon and return to Syria. However, in light of their understanding that the war in Syria was becoming protracted with no end in sight, families

acknowledged that a second-best option would be to resettle in another country, but not Lebanon. The reality of not being able to return to Syria and resettling in another country instilled a sense of *ambivalence about leaving*. This ambivalence is related to a realization that one must move away from a familiar and beloved place, and an understanding that one may never be able to return to that place.

Participants acknowledged the multiple *challenges associated with resettlement*, such as learning a new language, culture and context, and dealing with past stressful and traumatic experiences without familiar support systems. One community informant described, "trauma or … stigma of certain experiences that you've lived with accompany you wherever you go." In light of this, a top priority of service providers in both the pre- and post-resettlement periods should be efforts to support coping abilities, such as through the reinforcement of familiar support networks.

- Dreams for the future

The dreams families described often highlighted the significant *importance of education* for refugees. Parents frequently stated that earning a good education for their children was very important. Returning home to Syria was another dream expressed by participants.

Practice and Policy Recommendations

The research underscores four key areas for policy and practice. First, the concept of place is a useful lens through which to examine the everyday experiences and

psychosocial well-being of families affected by displacement. Second, policies and practice addressing child protection and well-being should consider the ever-changing roles of mothers and fathers and how these roles can be supported in order to keep children safe and well. Third, the harmonization of formal and informal mechanisms presents an opportunity to ultimately improve family experiences of displacement.

The unique context of Lebanon is important to consider when developing programs. Due to the lack of formal camps for Syrian refugees, refugees are spread out in varying arrangements throughout the country. Therefore, outreach is a particular issue for programs. Many refugee programs face the obstacle of reaching refugees in such a varied and geographically diffuse context.

Future Research

Drawing upon the findings from this pilot study, research is currently underway with Syrian families in Lebanon. Guided by the question, *What are families' mobility patterns when living in contexts of displacement?*, the research is engaging 36 Syrian families throughout different regions of Lebanon. Using a combination of collaborative family interviews, drawing and mapmaking, neighbourhood walks, and activity logging, the research hopes to learn more about the everyday experiences of Syrian families and explore the relationship between mobility and well-being.

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