

**“My Heart Feels Chained”:  
The Effects of Economic Precarity of Syrian Refugee Parents Living in Lebanon**

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### **Abstract**

Since 2011, over half of Syria's population has been displaced both inside Syria and in neighboring countries such as Lebanon. Lebanon, is currently hosting approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees. Within this context, Syrian families face high rates of poverty, burdensome governmental policies and regulations, a lack of affordable housing, food insecurity, and family violence and harmful cultural practices. Exacerbated by displacement, these vulnerabilities have a destabilizing effect on parents, who are struggling to meet their individual and families' needs in a low-resource and inhospitable environment. This chapter aims at understanding how parents experience daily economic challenges that can significantly affect their ability to adequately care for their children. Data were collected from 46 families displaced by the war and living in Lebanon. The data revealed that parents' feelings of parental adequacy were tied to their ability to provide for their children. Parents mentioned that their inability to provide for their children was a violation of their children's rights. Their stress related to money was exacerbated by unexpected medical issues that children faced and that families were not able to afford. Parents described these experiences as emotionally painful, conjuring feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and ultimately stress, exemplified in the comment from one father that "My heart feels chained". Parents' negative feelings contributed to an ongoing cycle of poverty for families. In other words, increased stress upon family members manifested in negative mental/physical health consequences or family members not being able to work, thereby pushing families further into economic precarity.

*Keywords:* Syria, Lebanon, parenting, family, economic precarity, refugee

## **Introduction**

The conflict in Syria is considered to be one of the worst humanitarian crises in modern history. Since the start of the conflict in March 2011, over half of Syria's population has been displaced both inside Syria and in neighboring countries. Most Syrian families have sought refuge in neighboring countries, including Lebanon, a small country of just 4,000 square miles (Dionigi, 2016). As of October 2016, Lebanon was hosting approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees (Government of Lebanon & United Nations, 2017), with one of every four residents living as a Syrian refugee (Boustani, Carpi, Gebara, & Mourad, 2016). There is no country in the world that has taken in as many refugees in proportion to its size (Kelley, 2017).

Eighty six percent of the worlds refugees are hosted by countries that are struggling economically (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016), as is the case in Lebanon. Lebanon is not economically prosperous, and it has been battered by religious divisions and political violence. The large number of Syrian refugees has further strained Lebanon's already stressed infrastructure (World Food Program, 2017), increasing social tensions, while deepening the country's socioeconomic disparities (Government of Lebanon & United Nations, 2017). Within this context, high rates of poverty, burdensome governmental policies and regulations, a lack of affordable housing, food insecurity, decreased attendance in school, and family violence have all increased the vulnerability of families from Syria. Exacerbated by the war and subsequent displacement, these vulnerabilities have a destabilizing effect on Syrian parents, as they struggle to meet their families' needs in a low-resource and often inhospitable environment.

This chapter aims at exploring how Syrian refugee parents experience daily economic challenges that can significantly affect their ability to feel as if they are adequately caring for

their children. Families' experiences of financial precarity provide another means to better understand everyday parenthood in contexts of adversity such as war. For the purposes of this chapter, precarity refers to "life-worlds characterized by uncertainty and insecurity" (Waite, 2009, p. 412). Economic precarity refers to a state of uncertain and insecure financial welfare and is an essential element of poverty (Day, 1952). Identifying the ways that parents struggle and cope with economic precarity is the first step to creating relevant interventions to support parents in providing nurturing, consistent, and responsive care to their children. While the effects of poverty and economic precarity have been studied for a number of outcomes, there is still a need to study the effects of refugee status and economic precarity on parents and their children. Therefore, this study aims to add to our understanding of this relationship.

## **Background**

**Impact of conflict and displacement on Syrian families in Lebanon.** Displaced Syrian families in Lebanon continue to face a range of challenges to their survival and well-being, cumulatively pushing them further into destitution. The most striking vulnerability is the economic precarity within which many families experience everyday life. In 2016, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), & World Food Programme (2016) reported that over 70 percent of displaced Syrians in Lebanon are living below the poverty line. Poverty has led many families to sink deeper into debt and turn to negative financial coping mechanisms as they struggle to meet the needs of their families (Government of Lebanon & United Nations, 2017). For example, three-quarters of Syrian households have adopted survival mechanisms such as reduced food spending, purchasing food on credit, taking children out of school and sending them to work, reducing health expenditures,

selling productive assets, and selling houses or land (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees et al., 2016). As a result of these survival mechanisms, they are sinking deeper into debt; the average Syrian refugee family in Lebanon has an average debt of US\$857 per household (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees et al., 2016). This debt, combined with other economic factors, such as the high cost of living, rising unemployment rates, and declining income in Lebanon makes it difficult for Syrian families to survive financially (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2016). Furthermore, due to government restrictions and discrimination, Syrian families face a gradual shrinking of space for livelihoods and income-generation activities (Government of Lebanon & United Nations, 2017).

Overly burdensome policies and regulations imposed by the Lebanese government have added another level of economic precarity to Syrian families (Dionigi, 2016). Although most refugee families are registered with UNHCR, this does not confer legal rights or entitlements for assistance (Verme et al., 2016). Obtaining civil documentation to live in Lebanon is difficult and costly for most Syrians, and therefore limits their access to livelihood opportunities and essential services (Government of Lebanon & United Nations, 2017). In August 2016, 60% of Syrians over 15 years old were without legal residency in Lebanon, pushing the majority of Syrian refugees towards the margins of society (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees et al., 2016; Verme et al., 2016).

Pressures on the housing market mean that already vulnerable Syrian families have limited access to affordable and adequate housing and therefore tend to migrate towards poor urban areas (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees et al., 2016), which host 30% of the displaced Syrian population in Lebanon (Government of Lebanon & United Nations, 2017). Furthermore, 87% of Syrian refugees live in Lebanon's 251 poorest cadasters (out of a total

1,653 cadasters) (Government of Lebanon & United Nations, 2017). In these areas, living conditions have significantly deteriorated, with the cost of housing and basic utilities (e.g., water, energy, sanitation, and waste collection) increasing (Government of Lebanon & United Nations, 2017). A recent report found that 24% of families are living in substandard housing and 16% are living in unacceptable and dangerous conditions (WFP, UNHCR, & UNICEF, 2015).

Overcrowded living conditions are becoming increasingly common among displaced Syrian families in Lebanon, rising from 18% in 2015 to 22% in 2016.

Financial challenges for Syrian families have a direct impact on food security. Despite many families receiving direct food assistance, 93% of displaced Syrian families have some degree of food insecurity (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees et al., 2016). The majority (58%) of Syrian families are considered to be mildly food insecure, while 34% are moderately food insecure, and 1.6% are severely food insecure (Government of Lebanon & United Nations, 2017). Food insecurity has a multiplying effect among families, affecting children's short- and long-term growth and development (see, for example, Jensen, Berens, & Nelson, 2017; Johnson & Markowitz, 2017).

Economic instability can also impact children's participation in school and education. Human Rights Watch (2016) found that half of the 500,000 school-age (between 3-17-years-old) Syrian children living in Lebanon remain out of school. Out-of-school rates are highest among 15- to 18-year-old Syrians, with only 3% enrolled in public secondary school (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Child labor is one of the greatest barriers to children's school enrollment and attendance, as families must prioritize household survival over children's education (Government of Lebanon & United Nations, 2017). These overlapping socio-economic vulnerabilities contribute to an increase in levels of violence against children and women and

reliance on survival mechanisms, such as early marriage and human trafficking (Government of Lebanon & United Nations, 2017).

Finally, and especially relevant to the theme of this volume, the Syrian war and subsequent displacement has also impacted family members' mental health and psychosocial well-being. Research in refugee camps in Turkey found that Syrian refugee children had experienced high levels of trauma including experiencing family death (79%), witnessing physical violence (60%) or experiencing physical violence themselves (30%) (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). Experiences such as these have been found to increase risk of developing mental health problems such as stress disorders, depression, and anxiety (Nasiroglu & Çeri, 2016; Rousseau, 1995). For both children and parents, the above adversities can accumulate and further jeopardize healthy child development and family well-being (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996b).

**Economic precarity and parenting in contexts of war and displacement.** Children's healthy development depends on parenting that is nurturing, consistent, and responsive (Bowlby, 1969; Freud & Burlingham, 1943; Masten & Monn, 2015; Winnicott, 1992b, 1992a). The quality of parental care can impact the development of children's cognitive and socioemotional skills that can predict long-term well-being (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994; Grantham-Mcgregor et al., 2007; Heckman, 2008; Knudsen, Heckman, Cameron, & Shonkoff, 2006).

In the same way, how parents care for their children in high-stress settings can impact children's short- and long-term outcomes (Shonkoff et al., 2012). In contexts of adversity such as war and subsequent displacement, parenting has a great impact on children's health and well-being (Thabet, Ibraheem, Shivram, Winter, & Vostanis, 2009). For children in these settings, effective parenting provides them with a "protective environment" (Borkowski, Landesman, & Bristol-Power, 2009; Elbedour, ten Bensel, & Bastien, 1993; Estrada-Martínez, Padilla,

Caldwell, & Schulz, 2011; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996a; Panter-Brick, Goodman, Tol, & Eggerman, 2011; Sagi-Schwartz, Seginer, & Abdeen, 2008). Yet effective parenting—and the protective environment parenting creates—can be compromised by adversities, at the very moment when it is needed the most. In these contexts, parenting, in and of itself, is not the only factor at play (Zaslow & Eldred, 1998). External factors such as social support systems, socio-economic status, health, and education also impact parenting effectiveness.

This chapter focuses on one of these external factors: economic precarity. Bradley (2007) has identified providing sustenance (e.g., access to food and health care) as a fundamental task of parenting. Yet in contexts of extreme adversity, parents may not have the financial resources to fulfill this basic and vital task. As a result of economic precarity, extreme poverty can cause family stress and family dysfunction, which can impact parenting practices and ultimately affect child developmental outcomes. This can contribute to a cycle of poverty (Townsend, 1962), within which children are likely to remain into adulthood. As Wilkinson and Marmot (1998) have explained,

Poor conditions lead to poorer health. An unhealthy material environment and unhealthy behavior have direct harmful effects, but the worries and insecurities of daily life and the lack of supportive environments also have an influence (p. 7).

In Lebanon, this combination of unhealthy material environment combined with the worries and insecurities of daily life have had a destabilizing effect on family systems and have compromised families' protective social systems. Within this context, nurturing, consistent, and responsive parenting—vital to healthy child development—have become challenged and strained. For example, in research in Colombia, another country affected by war, Cuartas, Harker, and Moya (2016) found that the combination of parents' subjective feeling of economic scarcity and stress



generated by adversity such as displacement can compromise parents' mental resources needed to provide nurturing, consistent, and responsive care for their children.

### **Method**

**Participants.** We report findings from a 2016 research study aimed at generating knowledge regarding the displacement experiences of Syrian refugee parents. Collaborative family interviews were conducted with 50 individuals within six families who had fled Syria in the last five years and had “temporarily” resettled in Lebanon. Initial recruitment of participants took place in partnership with various community and international organizations working in northern Lebanon. Aligned with cultural norms, families were subsequently recruited through word of mouth. Initiated by organizations and when relevant, we visited the community *shawesh* (leader), who introduced us to any available families who would be interested in participating. The research received human subjects' approval through the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board (#4661) and followed all Research Ethics Board guidelines.

Families included 41 nuclear index family members (e.g., mother, father, children) and nine extended family members (e.g., aunts, grandmothers, cousins, etc.). Table 1 below details the family members included in the research. There were five fathers and seven mothers present for the six family interviews. One father was still living in Syria at the time of the interview. A father in one family had two wives. Two of the five fathers and two of the seven mothers had completed secondary school. Three of the five fathers were employed (two in Lebanon and one in Syria) at the time of the interview, and only one of the seven mothers was working outside the home. There were 29 (16 male and 13 female) children present for the interviews. Eight of the 25 school-aged children (five-years and older) were not attending school. Four of the families were

living in tented settlements, one family was living in an abandoned house, and one family was renting an apartment.

**Table 1: Family Participant Demographics**

	<b>Nuclear Family</b>		<b>Extended Family</b>		<b>Total</b>
<b>Adults (18+)</b>	Male (Father)	5	Male	0	5
	Female (Mother)	7	Female	7	14
	<b>12</b>		<b>7</b>		<b>19</b>
<b>Children (&lt;18)</b>	Male	<b>16</b>	Male	1	17
	Female	13	Female	1	14
	<b>29</b>		<b>2</b>		<b>31</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>		<b>9</b>		<b>50</b>

We also conducted three individual interviews and two focus group discussions (n=8) with practitioners working with Syrian families in Lebanon. Identifying as Lebanese or Syrian, all of the practitioners had extensive experience working with refugee populations, and five were even Syrian refugees themselves. Combined, the practitioner interviews and focus group discussions included 11 individuals. Interviews with these practitioners from different backgrounds bridged the experiences of service users and service providers, as all of the Syrian practitioners had been service users before becoming service providers. Overall, this element of the research added an additional layer of understanding the economic precarity of Syrian families displaced in Lebanon.

**Procedure.** Interviews were conducted by the first author with the assistance of Arabic-speaking translators. At the beginning of each interview, we gathered demographic data about the family and entered the data into an interview feedback form (IFF) (Padgett, 2012), which also included the research team's reflections on the research process. Family interviews consisted of discussions about parenting within the context of political violence, migration, and resettlement. Interviews used place-based methods that sought to understand the research participants' connection with their social and physical environments. Place-based methods include conducting interviews in a place of importance to the family (usually the home), using creative methods to elicit participants connection with the physical environment (such as mapmaking), and specifically probing for elements of place that arise during the course of data collection. 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.

In addition to family interviews, we conducted two 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 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.

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 ([www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com); for a overview of Dedoose, see Silver & Lewins, 2014). Data were analyzed through careful reading and collation of transcripts to ascertain meaning and significance that participants attributed to their experiences. Transcripts were coded by the two authors. The two authors conducted frequent discussions on the coding that emerged, which resulted in the generation of concepts and their categorization into the themes we discuss below.

### **Results: Syrian Parents' Experiences of Economic Precarity**

**Worsening economic situation compared to previous life in Syria.** According to the families interviewed for this study, poverty is one of the biggest challenges for Syrian families living in Lebanon. Parents gave multiple reasons for their financial struggles including under- and un-employment, low-paid and precarious work, restrictive policies that do not allow Syrians to enter workforce, combined with rising costs of rent, electricity, and medical care. All of these factors combined with the stress of war and displacement to add multiple layers of vulnerability and subsequent stress.

Families tended to describe their current experience of economic scarcity in Lebanon in comparison to life in pre-war Syria, remembered as an idyllic time when parents could easily provide for all their children's needs. Even if they were not specifically asked about life in Syria, parents tended to use their experiences in Syria to contrast their current difficulties in Lebanon. For example, 31-year-old Umm-Fares,<sup>1</sup> a mother in a family of ten, explained: "In Syria, we

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout the chapter to maintain the anonymity of the research participants.

were able to provide anything for the child.... Here our financial status doesn't allow us at all. It is very hard for us to provide them with the necessary clothing." In the following dialogue, 33-year-old Umm-Rafik and her husband, 39-year-old Abu-Rafik, parents of four young children all under the age of eight, fondly reminisced about their life in Syria, building upon each other's examples of the amenities they were able to provide for their children:

Umm-Rafik: In Syria, even if they ask for things at midnight, we would go out and get it for them.

Abu-Rafik: [My child] would ask me at midnight to go cruising in the car, and we would go out. I'd buy them sandwiches, sweets, and juice.

Umm-Rafik: We used to take them to the zoo or the amusement park.

Abu-Rafik continued to contrast his life in Syria with his current situation in Lebanon:

I used to live my life. I used to go to restaurants if I wanted to see my friends. Now, the children would ask me for this Kinder chocolate and I'll tell them tomorrow or after tomorrow, because I can't afford it right now.

Abu-Rafik added that due to his precarious economic situation in Lebanon, he must think about every action as impacting his family's survival. Likewise, 38-year-old Abu-Mahmoud, father of six, explained how everything changed for him after leaving Syria for Lebanon: "In Syria, I was capable to 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."

Abu-Mahmoud's example that he cannot even buy bananas for his children underscores the extreme financial restrictions facing these parents and coloring the ways that they care for their children.

**Effects on parental roles.** Parents' 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 parents found to be emotionally painful, conjuring feelings of frustration and hopelessness. 37-year-old Abu-Farid, father of seven, explained that he is most frustrated by his inability to provide for his 16-year-old son Farid who has a physical disability. In Syria, Farid regularly received physical therapy and was therefore able to walk without the assistance of his wheelchair. But since arriving in Lebanon and not having access to services such as physical therapy, Farid is now confined to his wheelchair and thereby confined to his home. One of the places that Farid can now access with his wheelchair is the local canteen situated within the tented settlement where his family resides. Abu-Farid explained:

...the one kid that I need to make happy is ... [Farid]. Sometimes he tells me, "Give me 1000 Lebanese pounds [less than \$1] to go to the canteen", and I really don't have it. Sometimes he tells me "Dad, I want to buy an apple," and I really don't have the money. I need to pay for bread and for the tent. I am not providing them anything at all. I can't take them out in summer. For example, to take them to the beach or any place to just get fresh air, I can't do that. First, because of the residency permit and second, because of the financial status.

All of the family interviews highlighted that feelings of parental adequacy were so wrapped up in the happiness of their children. As another example, 31-year-old Umm-Fares stated: "Here we have a lot of pressure and stress, because we are not able to provide a better life to our kids." Parents were consistently troubled by their inability to provide for the material needs of their children, rarely mentioning their own individual material needs, with most parents describing the psychological effect this has had upon them. 31-year-old Umm-Fares added:

...we're finding difficulties because life is demanding and the income is very, very low. For instance, my kids say that they want something, but there is no money. Meaning, we're not providing them with what they want. There is a lot of psychological distress and pressure.

It is the added pressure of their children asking for things and parents not being able to provide that causes added stress among these parents. In another example, Abu-Farid explained:

It's affected us psychologically, because our kid comes to us saying he want 1000 Lebanese pounds [less than \$1] and I can't provide it to him. He goes to school and tells me he wants a thousand... honestly, I feel frustrated, my heart feels chained, I don't have it to give it to him.

**Parents' perceptions of children's rights and feelings.** Abu-Farid's comment that his "heart feels chained" speaks to the frustration that he feels at not being able to adequately care for his children by providing them with small "luxuries" or even basic amenities. Abu-Farid also described how his children are affected:

When a kid comes to you and asks you for something, and you don't have it, what would you do? You either need to tell him something that will bother him or you'll either depress him. There is nothing such as telling your child you can do whatever you want. There is pressure on us and on them. The kid would wonder, "Why aren't my parents providing me with what I want?" He'll be confused. "Why aren't they getting me [things] like the rest of the kids? It is my right to get dressed, to be happy, to go out, and to go to school."

Of course, parents wish to provide their children with everything to ensure their happiness and healthy development. Parents, such as Abu-Farid, equate this poverty with an affront to

children's rights, which parents felt they were responsible for ensuring. Indeed, poverty and war—both by themselves and in concert—can deny children their right to basic needs such as food, clothing, and a safe place to live, among other things. When asked about what she hopes for her children in the future, Umm-Fares responded:

I wish for my kids a better life than this one. First of all, education. The most important thing for me is education. Second, to get dressed and to go out and to be happy, and to make them happy with something that I get for them. They'll feel more at ease. But, I can't provide any of that for them.

Asking parents about the hope for the future illuminated their feelings of inadequacy at being unable to provide even basic resources to their children in the current environment. This persistent stress resulted in both fathers and mothers expressing a sense of hopelessness related to their financial instability.

**Health and access to medical care.** Due to economic instability, families found themselves less likely to be able to handle the stresses of unanticipated events such as medical emergencies. Many families spoke about medical issues that had arisen once they arrived in Lebanon. Abu-Farid described his two-year-old daughter's health problems in relation to his economic precarity:

[She] has two openings in her heart. Ever since we came here, our financial status wasn't very good. We went to a doctor, and she referred us to a doctor in Beirut through the UN, and they ask me for \$200 for medical imaging, and I wasn't able to get proper follow-up. One of the openings is five millimeters and the other is four millimeters.... When she gets tired her veins turn blue.



Abu-Farid explained that he was unable to afford further medical treatment or follow-up for his daughter, which caused him additional stress, especially knowing that he cannot provide an essential medical procedure for her. Other parents explained that they did not access medical services, because such support was too expensive. This becomes part of the cycle of poverty, as many health conditions are exacerbated by stress. Furthermore, not being able to address the health conditions can cause additional stress therefore exacerbating the health issue. For example, Umm-Rafik explained,

The best thing in life is to have a steady income, a good house, and a nice car. You feel psychologically comfortable. And here in Lebanon, we don't have that. Now, because of all the overthinking [stress], I have diabetes.

In another example, Abu-Farid explained, "...my hair got grey in these two years that I am here," illustrating the stress he has experienced since arriving in Lebanon as a refugee. These are examples of physical manifestations of the depletion of parents' mental resources generated by feelings of scarcity and the stress from adversity.

**Children's mobility.** The data revealed another side-effect of economic scarcity: not having enough money influenced how parents restricted their children's mobility. Parents explained that if their children went outside the home, they would see something they want that their parents will not be able to afford. For example, refugee outreach volunteer and father of four, Zaki, explained:

The parent would tell you his kid wants to go out, so [he says] "I need to put this amount of money, and I am already behind with the rent, so it's better for me to not go because he will ... want to buy something, and my financial status would not allow me to do such a thing, so I [would] rather leave them at home."

After telling this story, Zaki admitted that he also keeps his children inside the home due to economic precarity:

I don't have the guts to get outside.... I wish to provide for them as much as I can. [If they ask, "Why are you not taking us out?"] I would find excuses like I am busy, I have work to do." ... If I take them outside they would want more things.

In a similar example, NGO worker Sakina, told a story about a father she worked with, explaining his rationale for not wanting his children to be outside the home:

...he doesn't want to take his kids outside, because, let's say he was going to take them to the garden, let's say, or to the park, and then they would ... see something that they want, and they might ask for it, and he won't be able to provide it for them. So ... the father is thinking ..., "Even if I take my kids out, they're going to see something that they want, and they're going to want more things that they didn't think they would want."

## **Discussion**

Parenting practices are one component of a constellation of factors influencing child and family well-being. The element of economic precarity can be far-reaching, impacting multiple levels of the socio-ecological framework—such as parenting—that combine to serve as a “protective environment” for children affected by war (Borkowski, Landesman, & Bristol-Power, 2009; Elbedour, ten Bensel, & Bastien, 1993; Estrada-Martínez, Padilla, Caldwell, & Schulz, 2011; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996a; Panter-Brick, Goodman, Tol, & Eggerman, 2011; Sagi-Schwartz, Seginer, & Abdeen, 2008). The findings indicate that economic precarity in the form of macro-level issues such as un(der)employment and lack of identity documents can impact families at the meso- and micro-levels by leading to household-level poverty and

increased caregiver distress (Justino, 2006; Murphy et al., 2017; World Bank Group, 2015). All of this has the potential to impact child well-being.

Family interviews gave parents an opportunity to describe their ongoing experiences of economic precarity in Lebanon, which they tended to explain in contrast to their situation in Syria. All of the families discussed facing varying degrees of economic precarity, with an understanding of the impact upon their children. The data revealed that the happiness and well-being of parents—and their feelings of parental adequacy—were tied up in their ability to provide material goods for their children. Several parents mentioned that their inability to provide for their children was a violation of their children’s rights, invoking a global responsibility to ensure these rights are met. Their stress related to their financial situation was exacerbated by unexpected medical issues that individual family members faced upon arriving in Lebanon that families were now not able to afford. Parents described these experiences as emotionally painful, conjuring feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and ultimately stress, exemplified in Abu-Farid’s comment that “My heart feels chained”. This finding echoes Skinner et al.’s (1992) finding that a change in breadwinner status may cause frustration within the family, as well as research by Moya and Carter (2014) that suggests that the combination of war and stressors such as economic precarity can shatter individuals’ hopes and beliefs. Parents’ feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and stress contributed to an unrelenting cycle of poverty. In other words, increased stress upon family members manifested in negative health consequences with family members not being able to work, thereby pushing families further into economic precarity. The data also revealed a side effect of economic precarity for families: parental restriction of children’s mobility outside the home. This finding supports Taylor and Macdonald’s (1998) research that found children in families with lower socio-economic status

were significantly less likely to be involved in activities beyond the home. Despite the challenges facing these parents, the data also highlighted the ways they show care and love for their children. Nevertheless, the unrelenting pressure of economic precarity felt by parents continues to deplete their mental resources driving them towards sub-optimal decisions (e.g., child labor, early marriage, etc.) (Cuartas et al., 2016).

### **Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Research**

The findings from this study point to ways we can better understand the intersection between parenting and economic precarity in the context of war and displacement and thereby propose suggestions for practice and policy. An important approach to supporting children affected by war is to provide psychosocial support to their caregivers. This includes supporting parenting, emphasizing what parents do well, and providing parents with the opportunities to speak about the challenges they face. Key elements of effective psychosocial support programs for parents include trauma-focused psychosocial support, content that addresses the daily stressors (e.g., economic, emotional, etc.) they experience, and strategies that strengthen parents' responses to children's stressors (Betancourt, 2015; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Murphy, Maignant, Boone, & Smith, 2015).

A practical way to support parents experiencing economic precarity is through economic interventions such as cash transfers and food vouchers. Despite the lack of rigorous evidence on the impact of cash assistance programs in refugee crises, what little research that does exist points to the these programs being effective in reducing poverty (Verme et al., 2016). Though there has been no research on the direct impact that these programs have in parenting, one study

found that when jointly administered and universally, cash assistance programs and food vouchers can cut poverty in half (Verme et al., 2016).

By way of illustration, in the winter between 2013-2014, The International Rescue Committee assisted Syrian families living in northern Lebanon by giving them \$575 on ATM cards to purchase materials to keep families warm and dry during the cold winter months (Lehmann & Masterson, 2014). At the same time, the World Food Programme provided families with an e-voucher for \$30 per month to be used at participating food stores. An evaluation of the dual intervention found that cash assistance increased school enrolment, reduced child labor, and prevented reduction of family food consumption (Lehmann & Masterson, 2014). Nevertheless, the evaluation also found that even with the cash assistance, the household income remained insufficient to cover the family's basic needs.

Another example comes from UNICEF's No Lost Generation / Min Ila Education-Focused Cash Transfer Program, which provides cash to help vulnerable refugee households keep their children in school. The program, which is currently being pilot tested in Akkar and Mount Lebanon Governorates, targets families with children ages 6-to-14 who enroll in second shift schools. As a result of overcrowding and high demand for education among refugee populations, second shift or double-shift schools are divided into two time periods: one that begins in the morning with a second shift that starts around lunchtime. Children aged 5-9 will each receive \$20 per month while children 10-14 will receive \$65/month. The cash is intended to help households reduce harmful coping strategies (e.g. child labour, reduction in nutritious meals, etc.) and bear the indirect costs of sending children to school. However, households that do not have any form of official documents (either UNHCR or government-issued documents such as a Syrian national ID or passport) cannot be included because UNICEF uses a bank-based

payment system. However, households with no official identification documents represent a negligible proportion of the population.

Ultimately, current policies to provide cash to families remain short of providing economic inclusion and self-reliance and are only designed for short-term support (Verme et al., 2016). Furthermore, these programs are sensitive to declines in humanitarian aid funding. When a 2015 conference to raise aid money only reached half its goal, cash assistance decreased to only \$13 per person per month for food (Rosenberg, 2016). A 2016 conference was more successful in raising aid money, and the monthly allowance was raised to \$27 per person (Rosenberg, 2016). But this amount is still not enough for families facing severe economic precarity, especially when most families continue to accumulate debt. For instance, a January 2017 survey of Syrian refugees found that the majority of participants felt that they were unable to meet their basic needs with the aid they receive (Ground Truth Solutions, 2017). These voluntary funding mechanisms are also not sustainable. To be sustainable, future programs must also include improvements and access to the labor market, thereby nurturing the economic inclusion of families (Verme et al., 2016, p. xi).

A limitation of this study is that it was cross-sectional, only exploring the impact of economic precarity among a small sample of families at one point in time. However, this limitation points to a number of areas for future research. There is an obvious need for more comprehensive research on the role of economic precarity in the lives of displaced families. Future research should aim to be longitudinal, covering a longer time period so as to better understand the ebbs and flows of a family's life cycle in the context of displacement. In this way, research may uncover what existing mechanisms may exist to support a family through economic hardship. Furthermore, future research should focus on rigorous program evaluations

to ascertain the effectiveness of economic interventions for families. The idea of just giving people cash as opposed to traditional aid is gaining momentum (Aizenman, 2017), but should be evaluated to better understand the impact. Finally, research should aim to unearth creative ways that systems can be strengthened and sustained to help support refugee families economically in the long-term.

In volatile settings such as Lebanon, where families experience the concurrent challenges of displacement and economic precarity, we must seek strategies to ameliorate the negative consequences of such cumulative adversities. In this way, we can help to interrupt the cycle of poverty that so many families are caught in and support the capacity for parents to continue to serve as effective protective shields for their children.

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