



# **SUPPORTING RESILIENCE IN SYRIA - WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF THE CONFLICT AND THE 'NEW NORMAL'**

February 2020

## SUMMARY

**Conflict has brought about sweeping and protracted changes in the lives of Syrian people.** Social networks have been indispensable in strengthening resilience of men and women, helping them to absorb and adapt in precarious situations, and still people continue to adjust to a 'new normal' as it relates to new livelihood strategies, new ways of accessing education, and, importantly, new gender roles. Related to this latter point, upon which this policy brief is focused, death, injury, disappearance, and displacement of many male heads of household, as well as punishing economic conditions, have forced many women to adapt the ways they work, their roles within traditional family structures, and most significantly, the way that they view themselves.

**Women – both inside Syria, and women who are refugees in neighboring countries – have entered the workforce in much larger numbers, and are doing jobs often seen as being only for men.** Women have been forced to learn new skills, forge new social networks, and change the way they perceive their own roles, and rights.

**As both breadwinner and mother, many women report increased influence in family decision making. This has also brought about new feelings of independence, and has changed some views on marriage and dependence on a husband.** But this dual role also brings stress and exhaustion, as women fulfil both the role of full-time breadwinner, as well as primary caregiver and homemaker. This compounds the psycho-social stress associated with nine years of conflict and for many, repeated displacement.

While change was necessary for survival, there continue to be many pressures from both family and community for women to return to more traditional roles. Indeed, some women interviewed indicated a desire to return to the traditional role they had always imagined for themselves.

**Whether women remain in these newfound roles by choice or circumstance, or return to traditional gender roles, this newfound confidence, strength, and sense of competency must be recognized, and reinforced. Donors, as well as humanitarian and development agencies can support Syrian women by;**

1. ***Creating formal and informal opportunities for women to meet, share experiences, and support each other;***
2. ***Taking active steps to support women-led, and women-focused civil society organizations, including through increased, and more direct funding mechanisms, and by creating a greater platform for women to influence humanitarian decision making;***
3. ***Ensuring that programmes are available – at all stages of conflict and early recovery, and development – to help women access education and skill-building opportunities, as well as financial support, and other tailored support;***
4. ***Ensuring that women have access to critical protection and legal services;***
5. ***Funding and facilitating secondary support systems – including safe, affordable childcare, eldercare, and reliable, affordable transportation, as well as appropriate psychosocial and health care;***
6. ***Factoring into all interventions the various psycho-social needs that all Syrians – women, men, girls and boys – may have, with particular attention to the different types and scales of risk and trauma that may have been experienced by women and men.***

## CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Conflict in Syria – including the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, the decimation of the Syrian economy, protracted displacement and the separation of families and communities – has eaten away at family resources, and repeatedly tested everyone’s ability to cope and adapt.

**As of February 2020, 5.56 million Syrian refugees were displaced across the region including approximately 915,000 registered refugees in Lebanon; approximately 3.6 million in Turkey; and 655,000 in Jordan.**<sup>1</sup> In March 2019, 6.2 million Syrians were displaced inside the country, 83% below the poverty line, with an estimated 11.7 million people in need, 5 million in acute need, and 33% food insecure.<sup>2</sup>

An additional 900,000 people have been displaced within northwest Syria between December 2019, and February 2020.<sup>3</sup> This has triggered dependence on negative coping such as reduced food consumption, early marriage, and child labour.

In order to survive, Syrians have deployed a range of anticipatory, absorptive, adaptive, and transformative resilience strategies to cope with precarious security and livelihood opportunities, and the associated dwindling resources. CARE’s research since 2018 has sought to identify and analyse these strategies. **Between April 2018 to August 2019, CARE carried out field research to inform two in-depth qualitative studies to further examine resilience strategies and challenges among Syrians affected by war, and to understand how to effectively support those capacities to ultimately enhance resilience.**

The first study, “Understanding resilience: Perspectives from Syrians”<sup>4</sup>, sought to examine resilience in Syria, from the experiences and reflections shared by Syrians inside the country. The second study, “Syrian Refugee Women’s Roles”<sup>5</sup>, honed in on changing gender norms and women’s roles, but with a focus on refugee communities. Both studies utilized an innovative qualitative approach that involved multiple field visits to selected communities and respondents, and in which residents of those communities were the researchers conducting interviews with their peers (Participatory Ethnographic Evaluation and Research (PEER)). Participants engaged in a range of guided and non-guided tools, including Key Informant Interviews, Life Stories, and Journaling.

**Overall, this research represents the views and experiences of 382 Syrian people, including 214 women, residing in 11 Syrian governorates, as well as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.**

**As qualitative research, the samples and findings presented are not meant to be representative of Syrians as a whole or any specific subgroup, nor to represent beneficiaries of CARE interventions.** Rather they are representative of experiences and voices drawn from a broad range of individuals who may not be linked to any specific humanitarian assistance or programme. Still, their voices and experiences are essential to consider in designing, refining, and implementing programming to enhance resilience capacities.

## ENHANCING RESILIENCE

### *Social Capital: A Critical Safety Net*

**The 2020 CARE resilience studies<sup>6</sup> identified social capital as the most critical and consistently cited source of support from families and individuals facing conflict-related shocks and disruptions to their lives.** Social networks are an indispensable safety net. People who have strong social networks in a location that they have been displaced to (whether already there, or networks that displaced together) are more likely to effectively

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR (2020). Syria Regional Refugee Response. Operational Portal Refugee Situations. Retrieved from: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>.

<sup>2</sup> UNOCHA (2019). 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview

<sup>3</sup> UNOCHA (2020). ERC Statement on Northwest Syria, 17 February 2020.

<sup>4</sup> CARE (2020a). Understanding resilience: Perspectives from Syrians.

<sup>5</sup> CARE (2020b). Syrian Refugee Women’s Roles: How the Conflict Has Affected the Role of Women within Their Families and Communities (Positively and Negatively) within Refugee Hosting Communities in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey.

<sup>6</sup> CARE (2020a); CARE (2020b).

adapt to that new location. Also, humanitarian aid, while critical at times, is sporadic and not always sufficient and therefore not relied upon, while social networks have been reliable.

Roughly 20% of respondents in the study conducted inside Syria indicated that they had assets or savings to rely on, whereas nearly all respondents mentioned absorptive strategies involving family cooperation.<sup>7</sup> **In the midst of active conflict, people relied on one another to absorb shocks, stay safe and survive:**

*“The people in the village came together in a civil gathering before leaving to displacement... They agreed that gathering together in a camp will serve everyone to help people stay alive. For example, if there is a need for water, young people help bring them to the tents. If there is one who needs food and has nothing to cook on, he will cook food at his neighbours and the other things. The village people helped each other during displacement but most importantly were together in this lonely remote area, in a community” (Man, 30, Hazima, Returnee).<sup>8</sup>*

*“When the Kurds began to move towards the village, we had to leave our homes and build tents to live in. It was all very bad, but my family was together. The water was so dirty and I was worried about my child’s milk. At first I gave him sheep’s milk because he was starving, but he got sick from it. My brother’s wife breastfed my son and her children at the same time so that he would not starve” (Woman, 25, Hazima, Returnee).<sup>9</sup>*

However, there are indications that social capital may be degrading as families and communities are separated and isolated as a result of the conflict. The data show strong enduring social cohesion within groups that existed prior to the conflict (families, neighbourhoods, communities, rural towns) in response to conflict events. **However, participants note that as communities and families disbanded due to conflict, particularly among refugees, these traditional social ties may be weakening:**

*“In our old life, everything was organized. Children were in school; my husband was working; water and electricity were of course available. Then, people cared about each other in the community. When one had a problem, everyone would jump up to help out. When the war started, people stood by each other. But now it is more ‘me first’... Most people came back to the village. The village is the same but people are not the same anymore. They are keeping to themselves; people don’t ask about each other anymore. Each one is living separately, although they were helping each other until the last day before we parted ways in displacement. Family helps out most, neighbours here barely have enough for themselves” (Woman, 38, Hazima, Returnee).<sup>10</sup>*

### **Adapting to Realities: The New Normal**

**Nearly nine years into this conflict, Syrians across all locations and circumstances are not just absorbing shocks and stressors, but adapting to a ‘new normal’ as it relates to new livelihood strategies, new ways of accessing education, and, importantly, new gender roles.** Being able to effectively and willingly adapt to the realities of one’s situation is a critical component of enhanced resilience. Syrians have shown a strong willingness to adapt, even if it is a significant departure from their previous life.

*“Of course, the change in life is drastic for everyone, especially after the fall of the regime in the region. It has become a state of chaos... the price of food and transportation costs became very high compared to the salaries of people. Life has become harder than before and frankly the situation has become unbearable as poverty began to increase in the region. In general the area is in chaos and much cannot be controlled. Most services are not available. There is no longer any authority here to rely on solving issues of interest to people, such as irrigation and agricultural support which is important in this location.” (Man, 55, Hazima community leader, Returnee).<sup>11</sup>*

Their main hope is to achieve a level of stability, and to become less reliant on absorptive and anticipatory strategies to survive. As such, this is a moment of opportunity for consolidating and normalizing the positive aspects of the ‘new normal’, particularly as it relates to changing gender norms.

<sup>7</sup> CARE (2020a), p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> CARE (2020a), p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> CARE (2020a), p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> CARE (2020a), p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> CARE (2020a), p. 55.

## CHANGING GENDER ROLES

Despite some apparent indications of more progressive gender norms prior to the conflict, including near universal literacy, power and decision making in Syrian society has been almost entirely the domain of men, whereas women worked primarily in the home. Prior to the conflict, gross primary and secondary school enrolment ratios of female to male was nearly 1:1,<sup>12</sup> and yet women still made up less than 20% of the labour force in 2010<sup>13</sup>. In 2011, shortly before the conflict began, the UN Global Gender Gap Report ranked Syria 124 out of 135 countries.<sup>14</sup>

Previous research shows that the years of active conflict, widespread displacement, and latent insecurity have meant that for some women, coping with the dangers and economic stress of the conflict has resulted in an entrenchment of traditional gender roles. For some, safety concerns have further restricted mobility outside of the home, which has curtailed the pursuit of livelihoods. For others, the need to alleviate economic pressure on the household has resulted in early or forced marriage,<sup>15</sup> which often has a negative impact on women's ongoing access to education. However, other Syrian women both within and outside of Syria have seen their roles change in very different and potentially transformative ways.

### Women's livelihoods: A dual role, and double-edged sword

Many Syrian men have been killed or disappeared, and families have been separated. Many more men have sustained serious injury – both physical and psychological – or are otherwise unable to provide for their families. The result has been a difficult, but profound and potentially transformative change for women, many of whom have been faced with situations in which they need to be the primary breadwinner for their family. A 2019 study found that 31% of women in Syria reported having taken on new roles and responsibilities since the conflict began, and these new responsibilities come with some degree of autonomy.<sup>16</sup> The same study found that if women contribute to the family's income, the likelihood of being able to be part of family decision-making processes roughly doubles.<sup>17</sup>



Syrian refugee women attend vocational training in hairstyling at a CARE Urban Refugee Center in Hashimi in East Amman.

CARE's 2020 "Understanding Resilience" and "Syrian Refugee Women's Roles" studies similarly found that women are taking on roles they simply didn't have before: roughly 72% of respondents of the study in Syria<sup>18</sup> and 83% of women in the refugee study indicated having had at least one new livelihood strategy since the start of the conflict.<sup>19</sup> As the remainder of this paper describes, there are a myriad of factors to consider in understanding and subsequently supporting women's unique situations and perceptions of this reality.

The studies also found that many women both inside and outside Syria reported that they found the change in their roles difficult, but positive, indicating that they were mostly happy to have the opportunities to work and earn income for themselves, despite the intense pressure from these new roles.

<sup>12</sup> UNESCO (2019). UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Sustainable Development Goals, Syrian Arab Republic, Education and Literacy. Retrieved from: <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/sy>

<sup>13</sup> World Bank (2019). World Bank Data Bank, Labor Force. Retrieved from: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=SY>

<sup>14</sup> UN (2011). Global Gender Gap Report 2011. Retrieved from: [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GenderGap\\_Report\\_2011.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2011.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Syria Resilience Consortium (2019). "Hidden, Overlooked and At Risk. The role of gender, age and disability in Syria", p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Syria Resilience Consortium (2019). "Hidden, Overlooked and At Risk. The role of gender, age and disability in Syria", p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Syria Resilience Consortium (2019). "Hidden, Overlooked and At Risk. The role of gender, age and disability in Syria", p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> CARE (2020a), p. 42.

<sup>19</sup> The study reports 45 of 54 women engaging in new livelihoods in their host community. CARE (2020b), p. 19.

For many women, working and contributing income (in some cases, the entire household income) has vastly increased their confidence and belief in their own abilities. Holding the role of household breadwinner, and in particular going outside of the home to work with other people, and using skills that they hadn't used elsewhere before, has translated into a belief in their own self-worth beyond just the family. This has created a newfound confidence to express their agency in other domains in the household, in relationships, and in society generally.

*"Everything changed once I started to work and become an independent woman, I feel that I am the strongest among my family and friends, I have three siblings and I am the youngest, but they all ask me for advice. They feel that I am very strong, because I challenged everybody and nothing stood in my way. I wasn't a strong woman before, and I couldn't make my own decisions, but now I am completely changed and have made my own decisions in life. My daughters got affected so much, because when I was weak, they used to copy what I did, and now when I became strong and responsible, they copy what I do as well, and I consider it a positive thing in my life. In the past, I was afraid of the society, because I was a woman and it wasn't allowed for me to do everything, but now I do not fear anything and I can do whatever I want. For instance, I couldn't divorce my husband in the past because of my weak personality and because of people's thoughts about me, but now I managed to do it" (Woman, 21, Refugee in Turkey from Aleppo).<sup>20</sup>*

*"My family in Syria refused my work [taken on because the husband died in conflict] and they were afraid of this step, but I decided and insisted on trying, which was a successful step for me that changed my personality and gave me financial independence. I do not need anyone now as I am a strong woman... I will maintain this role because I do not want to marry again, and I am now adjusting to my new situation, and even if I return to Syria, I would do the same. I aspire to have a political role after the conflict ends. I would like to have a part in political decisions because this role did not exist in Syria before. If I stay in Jordan, I wish to have a job at one of the organizations, not a volunteer" (Woman, 37, Refugee in Jordan from Dara'a).<sup>21</sup>*

*"I can now make decisions because I am the one who works and provides for the family. For example, I chose when to move from the house, when and where" (Woman, 31, Refugee in Jordan from Damascus).<sup>22</sup>*

**While this change in gender norms among Syrians is not necessarily widespread, and while many Syrian families would still not consider these changed roles to be acceptable, identifying when, how, and among whom changing gender norms are occurring will provide an important insight into how future interventions can help women to remain resilient, and to consolidate their empowerment in the post-conflict period.**

*"The most difficult situation that happened was when we had to leave our house because of the heavy shelling and siege and go to another place where we do not know anyone. We suffered in the beginning because of the siege and after we experienced the lack of money and the difficulty of adapting to a new community and the difficulty of finding new work for my brothers and my father. But, thank God, we gradually integrated into society. My brothers found work for them in a clothing store. Organisations provide food and cash coupons and they also provide better job opportunities through training courses. I took a sewing training course with one NGO. One of my neighbours talked to me about the sewing workshop that she owned before she was displaced and how she was successful in her work and her physical status was very good but after she was forced to leave and left her home and her work she was very sad and affected by her new situation which was completely differed from the previous. Yet her determination was not weakened and she asked one of the organisations for financial support to add to the money which she had to buy a sewing machine. She started a small project which grew to four sewing machines and gathered women to work with her and provided training in the profession" (Woman, 23, Turmanin, Displaced).<sup>23</sup>*

## **Dual Role – A double-edged sword**

There is also a more negative side to the changes that women are experiencing. **In taking on new roles, women heads of households often feel incredibly stretched as both breadwinner and primary caregiver to children, elderly parents, and disabled family members. They describe profound stress and worry related to successfully occupying both the roles of men and women.** Some look back fondly on their previous life, where they played traditional female roles within the household, and hope to return to these roles one day:

---

<sup>20</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 20-21

<sup>22</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> CARE (2020a), additional quotation not published in main report.

*“These new circumstances have put me in the position of being both mother and father for my children, and this applies to most women in my community... The current situation supports women’s empowerment and the idea that she is equal to men, but the reality is that she took on the role of both males and “I used to be a housewife in the past, a mother and a lady in my community, but afterward, I became like females simultaneously. Now she does both” (Woman, 35, Raqqa, Displaced).<sup>24</sup>*



Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian women learn together during a pastry-making course at a CARE-supported vocational training center in Tripoli, Lebanon.

*a cactus, hard with thorns on the outside due to enduring hardships and coping with the unstable life circumstances and atmosphere. Without a doubt, responsibilities were a heavy burden to me and changed the old female inside me. It may be a result of my husband’s illness, displacements, or the fear of the unknown future for me and my family. All of the above, forced me to gain maturity fast, which was burning me, due to the rapid change, so I lost my femininity and became hard as a rock, emotionally. The reality imposed this change, and I had no choice in it. Holding to hope is what helps me keep going” (Woman, 35, Refugee in Turkey from Aleppo).<sup>25</sup>*

There is also a profound accumulation of stress. Women with poor mental health, who are also stressed about their children’s mental health, describe how affected they are by the pressures of supporting their family combined with the trauma they endured in Syria, and – for refugee and IDP women – while they were escaping the violence. **Though they had continued to hang on, some indicated that it was becoming increasingly difficult to continue coping:**

*“Last year, I was better off than this year. My work was better, and I was able to provide for my children. But a health issue hindered me from supporting my kids. To me, it was tiresome, physically and mentally, as I worried about my kids and their wellbeing during my illness.*

<sup>24</sup> CARE (2020a), p. 47.

<sup>25</sup> CARE (2020b), pp. 21-22.

*I went to the doctor and I was admitted to the hospital for 15 days, which caused me to lose my job, because my employer fired me for being absent for so long. Thank God, after recovering, I went looking for jobs and I found one similar to the one I had, washing dishes, preparing coffee and tea in offices and houses. Unfortunately, I am working for a Turkish employer, as I could not cope with people here. Sometimes I feel that my brain could not comprehend what happened to me and how I reached this point, but my only motive was my children” (Woman, 34, Refugee in Turkey from Aleppo).<sup>26</sup>*

*“I came to Jordan to seek refuge escaping war and suppression in Syria. I am the head of the family and the only provider. I carry the responsibility of this family that consists of females only. My role in Jordan changed because I was forced by social conditions to be the mother and the father for my daughters. This role took a great effort until I succeeded in it. I have had this role for seven years during which my life was turned upside down as I was carrying a responsibility bigger than me. In Syria life was much easier socially and mentally. In this host country, we encounter marginalization and psychological pressure; we endure the household responsibilities, rent, children education and living needs. When I first became a refugee I was depressed to the point that I was living on antidepressant and anxiety medications because I could not stop thinking” (Woman, 26, Refugee in Jordan from Dara’a).<sup>27</sup>*

### **Structural and Financial Barriers to Women’s Livelihoods**

**Women who have never worked outside the household, especially those who also have little education, lack many of the skills that are needed to engage in the more lucrative employment markets. Many work as cleaners, childcare attendants, or cooks, essentially doing jobs that they have always done within their own homes.** While some have taken courses to learn new skills for employment, not all have access to skills training, while others have found that the training available has not resulted in better jobs:

*“Because I did not have education, I did not know what kind of work I would do to secure my children’s livelihood ... So I worked for two months picking fruit... Work on farms was not new to me. Back in Syria, we have land that we used to plant and work on, but the difference here is, I am constrained by the owner’s rules regarding what time I can come and leave. I was forced to abide by his rules in order to provide for my kids and pay the rent. Because I live far from the city centre, I did not know about aid or trainings that are provided by NGOs. NGOs work within the city of Mafraq, while the rural areas do not have their support. As refugees, we cannot only do trainings; we need to have jobs after them. I am thinking of starting my own project to support me and my children” (Woman, 26, Refugee in Jordan from Dara’a).<sup>28</sup>*

*“I did not work outside the house. I only took care of my children and family, but when I became a refugee, everything changed. I learned to depend only on myself and not wait for help from anyone, not even my husband or children or family. Honestly, it [the need to work to support family] was imposed on me, and I did not want to work. I do not want to remain in this job, working in people’s houses as a maid, where I have to bear their tempers and personalities. Maybe I chose this job only because I did not want to need anyone, to depend on myself and support my family, but the nature of the work was not my choice, as I did not have other opportunities. I do not know if there are other choices for me, because the situation is the same. I wish I could find a better job, even if it was in school services, at least I would have a secure job” (Woman, 42, Refugee in Lebanon from Rif Damascus).<sup>29</sup>*

**Women who are interested in starting or growing a business often lack access to finance to make that happen, even if they have the skills (newly learnt, or previously acquired) that make them confident that they would be able to succeed.**

*“I want to open a clothing shop. I consider it the best job for me as a female. In the meantime, I am studying Turkish, so I can communicate with people, in order for my project to succeed. As for the barriers I face, I struggle to open my shop, because I don’t have enough money, and the license would take a long time for this project. If I had money, I would start this project, especially because my brother knows a lot of businessmen who are able to help me with the products” (Woman, 21, Refugee in Turkey from Aleppo).<sup>30</sup>*

---

<sup>26</sup> CARE (2020b), pp. 23-24.

<sup>27</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 25.

<sup>29</sup> CARE (2020b), pp. 25-26.

<sup>30</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 28.



*“Here we struggle... I want to work with my husband in a small shop, but we do not have the capital to start such a business, as the minimum amount we need to rent a shop and fill it with products ranges between 10,000 to 15,000 lira, excluding licensing and other related expenses” (Woman, 35, Refugee in Turkey from Aleppo).*<sup>31</sup>

*“I work in small-scale clothing retail. I have financial shortages and inadequate income, because I have to pay rent and also have my own household expenses, which is keeping me from growing the business. If I had financial support, I would not only support myself and my family, I would also support other women, by establishing a project, for example, establishing a sewing and crochet workshop. This was like a project I did in Syria, but here I do not have the financial support to start such project. I hope one day I will be able to achieve it in order to continue supporting women and helping them gain their financial independence” (Woman, 39, Refugee in Lebanon from Hama).*<sup>32</sup>

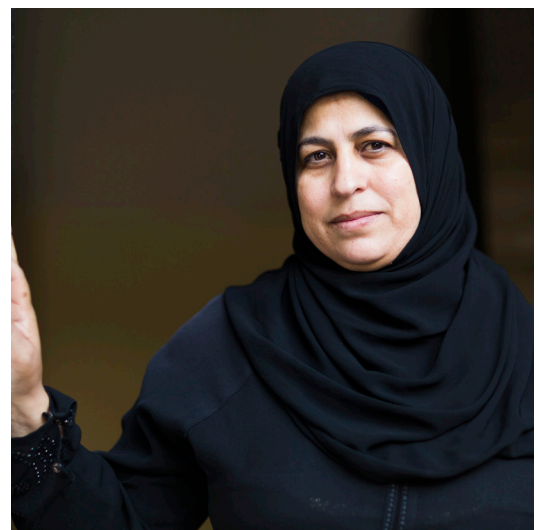
*“Finding an affordable house is not easy, especially with the additional expenses of insurance and commissions, not to mention the sudden increase in rent. This situation has become common among refugees, because they do not own property and have to pay rent. I make clothes and toys from wool to support myself and have a secure income. I put all of my energy in my work and I am very good at it. I would like to improve myself and increase my income by opening a store to sell my products to more customers, but in order to avoid closing, I need to have a license from the municipal government and money for rent. I trust that my business will flourish, because I publish my work on social media, where people like my work and place orders. This profession is my only love. I keep myself updated with new products and techniques by watching YouTube. I improve myself and create new designs and products that interest people” (Woman, 53, Refugee in Turkey from Homs).*<sup>33</sup>

**There exist additional structural barriers that are specific to refugee women, including having a certain legal or residential status and documentation, work or business permits.** There is exploitation in the workplace as a result of these factors. Women are not eligible to work legally in many industries, limiting their options. Some women are in the country legally, but special work permits are required and employers are not always able or willing to acquire them.

*“In Syria, I had absolute freedom in everything, while here in Lebanon, regulations restrict Syrians from moving from one area to the other. Syrians do not have permits to work, and sometimes authorities close their businesses and deport them. In Syria, it was much easier to have a business, while here, though I have freedom, spending my money, I found difficulties when it came to having a business” (Woman, 39, Refugee in Lebanon from Hama).*<sup>34</sup>

*“The hardest situation for me and my family was last year. I was working as a translator in a hospital. While working, I was suddenly summoned to the manager’s office and found security forces there. Then the manager told me I was not allowed to work there anymore, because I was not certified from Kilis University with a translation certificate” (Woman, 32, Refugee in Lebanon from Aleppo).*<sup>35</sup>

Some refugees are in their country of refuge illegally, ineligible to work, and struggle to find support to help them obtain legal status or formal work opportunities.<sup>36</sup>



Bedriyyah, 47, is a Syrian refugee that lives in Jordan. She came to Jordan with absolutely nothing. She managed to take her life in her own hands and she is now not only feeding her eight children, but also that of her community. She has her own catering business, and from her own simple small kitchen, she’s selling her tasty food to people she knows, organizations and bazaars.

<sup>31</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 28.

<sup>33</sup> CARE (2020b), p.28.

<sup>34</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 26.

<sup>35</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> In all three countries, obtaining work permits is a barrier to legal employment for both male and female Syrian refugees. Complex and changing national policy in each location has profoundly hindered opportunity for income-generating activities. In each country, formal mechanisms to facilitate legal refugee employment became critical issue in 2016. Yet, despite international agreement and enacted policy, the number of work permits issued to Syrian refugees since that time has remained notably low. This includes 104,000 work permits issued in Jordan by end of 2018; 500,000 in Lebanon by 2018; and 35,000 work permits issued in Turkey by the end of 2017. In both Jordan and Lebanon, Syrian refugees’ legal work is limited to certain sectors (agriculture, construction, environment/cleaning services in Lebanon; agriculture, construction, and manufacturing in Jordan). In all three countries, work permits are obtained largely by men. CARE (2020b), p.8.

**Those who have found work often cite exploitation in the workplace. They are subjected to longer hours, lower wages, lack of contracts, and the constant risk of being fired at will.** As illegal workers, many women are not protected by the laws or afforded the same rights as their counterparts with legal documentation:

*“I’m trying to find a way to go to another country as a refugee, because I can’t go back to my country, I don’t have money and I entered Lebanon illegally. I just want to have legal papers, so I can work and educate my children” (Woman, 39, Refugee in Lebanon from Rif Damascus).<sup>37</sup>*

*“I now work in a candy shop and before this I moved from one job to another, because I used to get teased a lot, and my bosses always threatened me that if I didn’t do what they asked, then they would fire me. Most of the time, I lost my job, because I refused to do things that I didn’t believe I should do in my role. I used to work for 12 hours a day for a small amount of money, even though I have experience and have worked since I was 13 years old. Syrian people aren’t allowed to work in Lebanon, but we work in an illegal way, so we have no rights in work and no health insurance” (Woman, 20, Refugee in Lebanon from Damascus).<sup>38</sup>*

**Some women have tried to open small businesses only to have them closed down as a result of improper or inadequate permits. This is a major deterrent to women seeking to work for themselves.**

*“Changes in the area are becoming worse; security here are putting pressure on Syrians by closing their businesses to make them go back... After we stood up on our feet [and opened a clothing shop], the security forces in Lebanon came and closed the shop, so we returned back to point zero... We could keep the shop, but we had expenses along with the pricy license that cost \$7,000. In addition, we have to open a bank account to maintain our business, which is difficult for Syrians” (Woman, 55, Refugee in Lebanon from Idlib).<sup>39</sup>*

*“I hope to have a mini supermarket so I can pay our expenses and pay for my children’s education. I need financial support and I need residency papers, because if anything happened, I could be kicked out of Turkey. That’s why I need this kind of support, in order to start working and to be somehow stable, without being afraid of displacement once again” (Woman, 34, Refugee in Turkey from Aleppo).<sup>40</sup>*

**Finally, some women do have legal status in their respective countries of refuge, but still find themselves ineligible for work permits, or eligible for only a very restricted field of work due to a lack of proper documentation. This is often because they left Syria with nothing or have not been able to return to renew expired documents:**

*“Because I am from Syria and my kids are Syrian, we can’t get residence, because the kids got out of Syria without taking their IDs. We got out with our passports only, and now they are expired, and I need \$2,000 to have the residency” (Woman, 34, Refugee in Lebanon from Aleppo).<sup>41</sup>*

*“I wish to have official work, where I will have all the rights. I am trying to have it, but not having the nationality prevents me, because refugees are not allowed to join the governmental workforce” (Woman, 35, Refugee in Jordan from Idlib).<sup>42</sup>*

## **Social Capital: Women Forging New Social Networks**

**Working outside the home has afforded some women the opportunity to form new social networks with a much wider range of friends and acquaintances than would have been possible before.** This was described as an important source of psychological support and strength, even if the initial separation and struggle to re-establish a life has been difficult and painful.

**Prior to the conflict in Syria, many women had small but tightly woven social circles,** and these long-standing social networks have been critical for women and others in dealing with the shocks and stressors of the conflict. Displaced or otherwise conflict-affected families often stayed with extended family members or in-laws; borrowed money from them; worked for them; protected one another physically during active conflict inside Syria; and helped

<sup>37</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 27.

<sup>38</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 28.

<sup>39</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 27.

<sup>40</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 27.

<sup>41</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 27.

<sup>42</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 26.

secure papers to cross borders. **However, many Syrians have been physically separated from these tightly woven circles, which is a profound shock. While some travelled to locations where family members had already settled (or travelled in groups of extended families), others travelled alone or with children and husbands only.** In either case, arrival and adjustment to the host country was difficult due to the absence of familiar social networks to rely upon in times of need.

However, refugee women described forming new social networks, and relying less on networks that had been largely prescribed to them at birth or by marriage (e.g. in-laws, extended family, neighbours). **A number of Syrian women refugees interviewed<sup>43</sup> described new, wider circles of friends and relatives than they had in Syria. For women in particular, the people in these networks also differed significantly from those groups they were a part of in Syria** (where networks were based on proximity and family ties). Many refugee women have met others through employment, through NGO training courses or drop-in centres, or in the neighbourhoods in which they live. Often, they form new networks with other refugee Syrians.

*“I have a wide network of connections due to my work in retail. Also, I have a good reputation in the area. Here, relations are wider, because I have customers and friends from other areas and some of them are Lebanese, not only Syrians. They have a positive effect on me psychologically, by planting hope and determination to continue work and not surrendering to the hardships we face as refugees” (Woman, 39, Refugee in Lebanon from Hama).<sup>44</sup>*

*“My relationships in Syria were only with my relatives and school friends. Now I have wide relations with people from a variety of backgrounds. These relations, with men and women, young and old, help me and give me courage and strength, because I learned about other experiences and the hardships they went through. I derived my strength from people I work with and I have the ability now to cope with any situation” (Woman, 20, Refugee in Lebanon from Homs).<sup>45</sup>*

## SOCIAL PRESSURE TO REVERT TO TRADITIONAL ROLES

**Many women have indicated ongoing pressure from family and social networks to revert to a more a traditional lifestyle and family structure, and it is very likely that social pressure – coupled with more restrictive prevailing conditions – will continue or increase as time passes.** Some women indicated that a major barrier to their success in pursuing livelihoods is the support she receives (or does not receive) from her family while doing so; traditional gender norms are still present and, despite many women now occupying new spaces, these former norms show signs of enduring. **This lack of support may prevent women from pursuing new and different livelihoods, or in only occupying these new spaces temporarily during times of acute need:**

*“My parents don’t support me, they always tell me that women are supposed to be at home, but I want to be strong and I don’t want to listen to their words” (Woman, 34, Refugee in Lebanon from Aleppo).<sup>46</sup>*

*“These [NGO and other civil society] organisations support women a lot and encourage them, even when they face difficulties and pressures from their families, who sometimes prevent them from going to the organization. When parents know that the organisations are giving them food and money, though, they allowed women to go” (Woman, 30, Refugee in Lebanon from Rif Damascus).<sup>47</sup>*

Some women who lost their husbands feel pressured to remarry, whether they want to or not:



Salma, a single mother of six, has built a farming business despite living amid one of the world’s most dire humanitarian crises.

<sup>43</sup> One in Jordan, five in Lebanon, and four in Turkey offered this information.

<sup>44</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 33.

<sup>45</sup> CARE (2020b), pp. 33-34.

<sup>46</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 22.

<sup>47</sup> CARE (2020b), pp. 22-23.

*"I had to marry for the second time without really taking time to consider if the man was suitable. When my first husband died, I could not take care of my daughters financially, and my parents could barely carry our burden, so I just married my second husband to take care of us. If I had my own income I would not have married, but instead worked and rented a house for me and my daughters. My parents pressured me to marry quickly as*

*I was still young and a widow. "If not now, then maybe never," they said. My parents could not help as they had to rent a house and pay for utilities which they could barely afford. As a consequence of the second marriage, I lost my daughters. My new husband cannot have them in the house; he cannot afford it, and also my ex in-laws would not allow my daughters to live with a strange family. If I had had time to think right, I would have found a way to keep my children with me and not hastily marry, as now they have to live with my in-laws." (Woman, 27, Refugee in Jordan from Dara'a).<sup>48</sup>*

**There is also the potential that, with increased stability, women will eventually be in competition with men who are then able to return to the labour market. Some women worry that when men begin looking for viable employment again, the women will be pressured to return to their roles in the home.** This will become increasingly relevant in future if increasing stabilization leads to refugees returning Syria or as Syrian refugees decide to permanently integrate into a host country.<sup>49</sup>

*"There will be a clash if men return to the workforce and have working opportunities. They will force women to stay at home again, like before, because they believe that women are created to be housewives. While women who are without men, they will return strong and independent" (Woman, 55, Refugee in Lebanon from Idlib).<sup>50</sup>*

*"Men living in Syria today still disapprove of work for Syrian women in Turkey, because they have not lived in the same situation [as we refugees] in a host country. Customs in Syria are very different from Turkish customs. I do not think that the opportunities I have here for work would be similar in Syria. They would be much less" (Woman, 43, Refugee in Turkey from Idlib).<sup>51</sup>*

**Some refugee women suggested that host countries had more progressive gender norms related to women's livelihoods and education, and they found it easier to move past the societal pressures against women working that they had grown up with.** They indicated that now, they worried about returning to Syria, because traditional gender attitudes may remain and could be detrimental to their newfound empowerment:

*"I don't think of going back to Syria. I want to stay in Turkey, in the place that helped me to be a strong woman and strengthened me and my personality" (Woman, 21, Refugee in Turkey from Aleppo).<sup>52</sup>*

*"Lebanese society differs from the Syrian one regarding their perspective on working women. For them, it is normal for women to work, while Syrians do not accept it. Some Syrian men disdain working women, saying, 'now you have tongues to talk with' and they become abusive" (Woman, 55, Refugee in Lebanon from Idlib).<sup>53</sup>*

*"For me, within the current circumstances, I managed to work and secure an income to support my children. If I was still in Syria, I would not even dream of having work, so how would my children live?" (Woman, 34, Refugee in Turkey from Aleppo).<sup>54</sup>*

**Since adjusting to their new lives and locations, some women also describe certain advantages that come from the physical separation from former communities. In particular, women noted that being distantly separated from in-laws and extended family members was liberating.** These women describe not having to answer to these family members, as well as leaving harmful or otherwise unsupportive relationships behind. For one woman, freeing herself from a harmful family was worth the profound housing insecurity that she then experienced:

*"I have the ability to make decisions now. In Syria, I used to live with my in-laws and had no right to have an opinion or make decisions. Now I have the opposite because it's just me and my husband living together.*

<sup>48</sup> CARE (2020a), p. 48.

<sup>49</sup> A March 2019 study found that return is unlikely in the near future: 5.9% of Syrian refugees intended to return in the next 12 months; 69.3% hoped to return (but did not intend to) in the next 12 months, and 75.2% hoped to return "one day". 19.9% do not hope to return at all (49% of whom cited uninhabitable dwelling, and 22% cited having no family members). UNHCR (2019).

<sup>50</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 23.

<sup>51</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 23.

<sup>52</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 21.

<sup>54</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 21.

*I decided to put my children in a good school and then enrolled myself in women's empowerment trainings. In the future I plan to pursue my education. When I got out of Syria and away from my in-laws' house, I became one of the women who get to make decisions. With the training, I know my rights and duties and how to protect myself" (Woman, 32, Refugee in Jordan from Rif Damascus).<sup>55</sup>*

## WOMEN'S OWN PERCEPTION OF CHANGE

**Many women – both inside Syria, and in refugee contexts – have increased confidence in their own capacity to be “the breadwinner” or “both mother and father”, that is, to play both traditional gender roles within families. Many expressed a new sense of empowerment, working outside their homes, taking on jobs or professions normally reserved for men.** As an extension of this confidence, they were able to engage in public and civic spaces in new ways.

*“As a woman I was liberated from many restrictions especially concerning work, though not many suitable jobs were available... Despite hardships, women have gained their own identity” (Woman, 29, Raqqa, Returnee).<sup>56</sup>*

*“During the siege, one of my friends said to me, ‘Look at us! We don't remove our headscarf until right before we sleep.’ We were always ready for anything – to run, to protect our families. There were no mirrors to see ourselves and we stopped remembering to look anyway. When my family arrived in Idleb and we took a house, I looked into the mirror and raised my hijab. I saw myself as a very different person. I wondered how my husband would see me after this very difficult period. We did not really look at each other at all, since all we cared about was protecting the children, and surviving hunger and bombing. The temporary calmness in Idleb has brought back to us the fact that we are also our own women, and wives too... In this town there is no shop for women, so we have to go to the neighbouring areas to access the simplest necessities. So I want to open a shop with make-up and women's accessories here. I want to free myself from thinking about all the terrible things that we went through. It may be kind of an escape, to unburden my soul and not imprison myself in the past. I will not be defeated. I will not die. I am alive” (Woman, 34, Ariha, Displaced).<sup>57</sup>*

**Many of the women in the study who spoke positively about their role as breadwinner also expressed confidence that they would continue working—even if their family no longer needed the income—because it provided them a newfound sense of purpose and power:**

*“This change [in women's roles related to work] will happen here and inside Syria. I lived through the Syria crisis and after nine years, I got used to my new life as a productive, active woman” (Woman, 25, Refugee in Turkey from Deir ez-Zor).<sup>58</sup>*

*“I think it will continue because it is impossible to make women weak again or to return them to economic dependence and exclude them from the workforce. For such a long time this has not been their reality and it doesn't seem normal any more” (Woman, 43, Refugee in Turkey from Idlib).<sup>59</sup>*

*“If I return to Syria, I would start up the same work that I've been doing here. I would start my own project where I engage women who are vulnerable and without a supporter. My dream is to find work opportunities for such women in order to give them dignity and security because I experienced being lost and felt the bitterness of being in need while I was responsible for my son and my family. I am not just satisfied, I am proud to have this role because I feel power inside and a responsibility towards refugees” (Woman, 43, Refugee in Jordan from Dara'a).<sup>60</sup>*

**For some women, this confidence in earning one's own livelihood also shifts their perceptions of marriage and the degree of agency they have in making decisions about their relationships.** Some women find empowerment

<sup>55</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 35.

<sup>56</sup> CARE (2020a), p. 46.

<sup>57</sup> CARE (2020a), p. 46.

<sup>58</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 22.

<sup>59</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 22.

<sup>60</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 22.

in their existing relationships, seeing their role as “complimentary” to that of their husband. Many women recognize the important role that men play in a marriage, both in terms of offering emotional support to their wife and children, but also critically in terms of providing livelihood support, even if it is particularly difficult as a refugee.

*“Before, when we were in Syria, my role was complementary to my husband’s. He was an employee and we depended on his salary, so my salary was only for my own expenses. Over the last seven years and currently, I’ve been responsible for all the expenses including the rent and everything else. Now my husband and I both have major roles in the household. In winter I work while his work stops, and vice versa, so our work complements each other’s... When I face some challenges in my life I run to my husband because he is the only one I trust and he is always there for me to overcome my challenges and I am there for him too” (Woman, 35, Refugee in Lebanon from Homs).<sup>61</sup>*

Others feel they don’t need a man at all given their new sense of self-reliance and realization that they don’t have to suffer through an abusive or unfulfilling marriage. These women have fundamentally changed their perception of marriage. One woman described instances of her husband raping her more than once and said she could not leave because of familial pressure against divorce:

*“We are living as expatriates in a dire situation, making a great effort to cope with our new reality. But the most dire thing is living these horrible days and years knowing that your partner is not someone you can rely on, especially in difficult times, knowing that his only concern is his lust and all his energy goes into that... One of the reasons I stayed with my husband was the fact I couldn’t ask for divorce, because it was a taboo in my family. It did not matter if I was living the life I wanted or not, or if I was happy or not. What mattered to my family was that they did not hear that their daughter is divorced. So I stayed with my husband, because I did not have the courage to take this step” (Woman, 35, Refugee in Lebanon from Idlib).<sup>62</sup>*

This same woman considered work to be a potential pathway out of this abusive marriage:

*“I searched for work for several days and finally I found my job... I congratulated myself on this step as it was a good step for me... I headed to my job and started to restore myself from below zero, but still I was the weakest link in the house. The decision to work started a time bomb in the house, but I was determined to have control of my life. I started my work but the problems increased. Every morning I had to create and act out a new scenario in order to go to work. Men’s decisions were sacred but I stepped over them and I began to carry out my plan [to leave husband]” (Woman, 35, Refugee in Lebanon from Idlib).<sup>63</sup>*

And still others desire marriage, but on their own terms:

*“Getting divorced was a difficult stage in my life as it is not easy to be a single parent for two children and to leave my home... though it was the only solution to end the suffering in my marriage. I compromised a lot for my children’s sake to stay, but the situation only got worse. Once, when my daughter was sick, my husband refused to take her to the hospital. Similar incidents made my life so tough and forced me to ask for a divorce. In the future, I do want to marry again. I need a husband, a man who is compassionate and who can love me and my children. I need someone who can compensate for the dreadful days we went through, who stands beside me to raise the children and be responsible for them and give them the love they did not get from their father. I really want someone who is supportive in order to go through this harsh life and difficult conditions we are living in” (Woman, 29, Turmanin, Returnee).<sup>64</sup>*

Finally, there are women who continue to work out of necessity, but they are clear in their preference to return to a more traditional role, where they do not need to work.

*“I don’t want to work in the future. I want to marry a man who loves me and to raise my children and take care of my husband. I do not want this job” (Woman, 24, Izaz).<sup>65</sup>*

---

<sup>61</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 30.

<sup>62</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 32.

<sup>63</sup> CARE (2020b), p. 32.

<sup>64</sup> CARE (2020a), p. 47.

<sup>65</sup> CARE (2020a), p. 47.

*“This independence is more common in some regions already than others because of traditions that did not allow women to work or sometimes leave the home prior to the war. Women have become more independent since the start of the war because they are trying to help their husbands or their children, especially if there is no husband (like me). But in general, women everywhere who are alone are forced to work.*

*I believe that these changes are permanent for some people like me because my family has no other income. But for other women, it may be temporary if things are stable and calm again in Syria” (Woman, 42, Ikhtarin).<sup>66</sup>*

**But overwhelmingly, these women have a new found sense of confidence, competence, and empowerment that needs to find support whether it manifests in women as leaders outside the home, or as strong, confident women inside the home.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

*Donors, as well as humanitarian and development agencies should promote women’s leadership in humanitarian and early recovery responses, supporting a platform for Syrian women to define their own priorities, shape the support they receive, and make decisions for themselves and their dependents by;*

1. **Creating formal and informal opportunities for women to meet, share experiences, and support each other**, in order to maintain new social networks, facilitate support systems for women who continue in the labour market, and ensure that women returning to more traditional roles maintain access to learning and dialogues available within the public sphere, if they so choose.
2. **Take active steps to support women-led, and women-focused civil society organizations**, including through increased, and more direct funding mechanisms, and by creating a greater platform for women to influence humanitarian decision making at local, national, regional and global levels.
3. **Ensure that programmes are available - at all stages of conflict and early recovery, and development - to help women access education and skill-building opportunities, as well as financial support, and other tailored support** to overcome barriers in an environment where women may not be widely valued or accepted in the workplace.
4. **Ensure that women have access to critical protection and legal services**, including support in securing necessary civil documentation, and support navigating legal systems and structures that may tend to undermine women’s ability to live and work independent of a husband.
5. **Fund and facilitate secondary support systems - including safe, affordable childcare, eldercare, and reliable, affordable transportation, as well as appropriate psychosocial and health care** - to alleviate some of the stresses and barriers associated with the dual roles of caregiver and breadwinner that many Syrian women are playing.
6. **Recognize the impact of trauma on people’s ability to recover, regardless of socioeconomic status, gender, age, education level, or displacement status.** Factor into all interventions the various psycho-social needs that all Syrians - women, men, girls and boys - may have, with particular attention to the different types and scales of risk and trauma that may have been experienced by women and men.

---

<sup>66</sup> CARE (2020a), p. 48.



**CARE International UK**

**89 Albert Embankment**

**London SE7 1TP**

**6000 7091 020**

**[www.careinternational.org.uk](http://www.careinternational.org.uk)**

**[insights.careinternational.org.uk](http://insights.careinternational.org.uk)**

**Registered charity number: 292506**

**PHOTOS:**

p1, Mariam (name changed) works on a farm where she earns the equivalent of 20 US cents per day – barely enough for her and her four children to survive. She received support through CARE's partner the Syria Resilience Consortium. Photo © Abdullah Hammam/Syria Resilience Consortium 2019

p3, A displaced family in northwestern Syria © Syria Relief 2019

p10, A man and boy in southern Syria carrying relief items through bomb-damaged buildings © CARE 2016

p17, People with boxes of emergency relief items in southern Syria © CARE 2016

p25, Mariam (name changed) with her two youngest children in the small room where they live. She had to take her two older children out of school to help look after the younger ones. Her oldest daughter also works with her on a farm to help provide for the family. Photo © Abdullah Hammam/Syria Resilience Consortium 2019

p57, Hamdou, a father of five children, was severely injured following an airstrike on his workplace. CARE's partner Emissa provides vulnerable families with agricultural inputs such as seeds and tools. Photo © Emissa/CARE 2017

p62, Children playing in a makeshift camp for displaced people in Idlib © Syria Relief 2019