

Roundtable

“ENGENDERING THE CRISIS RESPONSE IN LEBANON, JORDAN AND IRAQ” REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

December 1st 2020



Background

As the Syrian armed conflict has entered its tenth year, challenges related to protracted displacement, shrinking livelihoods, collapsing economies, and weak protection frameworks, have yielded various consequences for women living in Syria’s neighboring countries. Compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, these challenges have provided a fertile ground for gender-based discrimination and violence to intensify against women in both host and refugee communities.

Against this backdrop, research has documented a sharp rise in domestic, sexual, and psychological violence against women. As confinements and lockdowns have resulted in the closure of appeal and rescue services, many women living in challenging urban and social contexts have been unable to seek help when their lives and wellbeing were at stake. Within this climate, pre-existing discriminatory legal frameworks and social practices have added various layers of complexity, further marginalizing women’s contributions and leading often to their exclusion from public, economic, and social spheres.

Shedding light on the cumulative shocks and overlapping crises that Syria’s neighbouring countries have recently gone through and their implications for women, the Madad for Women program produced under the leadership of the [EuroMed Feminist Initiative](#) the regional report **Engendering the Crisis Response in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq**. Funded by the European Union (EU), through the [Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis](#), the [EU MADAD Fund](#), the report has the broader objective of feeding into the research and policy-orientated findings of the program “Strengthening access to protection, participation and services for women refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs), and women in the host communities in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq”. To that end, the report has scrutinized the Regional Resilience and Refugee Plan (3RP), as well as the national strategies that Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq have developed in applying a comprehensive gender-sensitive approach to policymaking, service provision, economic integration, and legal protection. It has also thoroughly unpacked the various social, cultural and political challenges that these countries have grappled with when it comes to tackling gender-based violence (GBV), and providing opportunities for empowerment and protection to women in both refugee and host communities.

Organized on December 1, 2020, an online roundtable bringing together key stakeholders in policy, civil society, academia and grassroots organizations in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq sought to disseminate and critically reflect on the overarching findings of the report. Its objective was three-fold: provide a cross-comparative national assessment of Lebanon’s, Jordan’s and Iraq’s strategies in combating GBV, convey critical insights into the challenges that have thwarted a holistic gender approach across the three countries, and discuss lessons learned and best practices in “engendering the crisis response” in Syria’s neighbouring countries.

Opening panel

The opening panel integrated the report and its findings within the broader developmental approach that the MADAD fund seeks to achieve in Syria’s neighbouring countries. Ms. Claudia Miller, Manager of the EU Madad Fund focused on how addressing gender vulnerabilities on the one hand and unlocking the full potential of women on the other are key

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pillars of the MADAD’s holistic and comprehensive approach to the Syria crisis. Indeed, at the heart of this approach is the necessity to address women’s immediate needs while ensuring their longer-term participation in society and development. Undoubtedly, this requires a holistic and multi-pronged intervention along the grassroots, service delivery, civil society, and policy levels. Building on Ms. Miller’s speech, H.E. Pr. Ramzi Moucharafieh, Minister of Social Affairs and Tourism in Lebanon, stressed the importance of local and international partnerships in addressing the predicament of women in both refugee and host communities. Against this backdrop, Ms. Lilian Halls-French, Co-President of EuroMed Feminist Initiative positioned the importance of the report on “Engendering the Crisis” and the online roundtable in a broader perspective of conflict management. Engendering the response to the Crisis arises as a key conflict mitigating measure in tackling the spill overs of the Syrian conflict and its multiple reverberations.

Panel 1: Key findings and recommendations of the regional report

In this panel, researchers and discussants analysed and commented on the rationale, findings, and recommendations of the report. Dr. Gulnar Wakim, Gender Expert and Associate Professor at the Lebanese University commented on the objectives of the report which consisted in investigating the extent to which national strategies in Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan have addressed the gender dimension and carefully scrutinizing whether the gender dimension has been dealt with centrally or peripherally when it comes to assessing refugee needs. After conveying an insight into the methodology of the report which relied on mixed research methods including key informant interviews and perception surveys, Dr. Wakim carried out a comparative assessment of Lebanon’s, Jordan’s, and Iraq’s national strategies. Common challenges and opportunities arise in this cross-cutting analysis. Systematic uncertainty, regional disparities, and polarization, cumulative shocks, namely protracted displacement, conflicts, economic decline, and the COVID-19 pandemic have certainly weakened the gender response. Additionally, gender-blind and discriminatory legal frameworks have spelled out various negative consequences for engendering the crisis response. Whereas all three countries endorsed a national action plan for the UNSCR resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, persistent and endemic challenges have thwarted a holistic gender approach to the crisis. For instance, legal frameworks rarely enforce prevention of and reporting on harassment. Parliaments have remained resistant to change due to ingrained cultural and religious practices. Also, personal status laws have a direct bearing on women’s marginalization and disenfranchisement, including on Syrian women refugees. In yet a more complex perspective, gaps in the labour law levels, especially when it comes to integrating Syrian refugee women in the job market, hamper women’s empowerment and active participation in the job market. Beyond the legal dimension, Dr. Wakim referred to the challenge of ensuring that actors’ coordination in engendering the crisis response does not only remain at the highest policy levels but that it trickles down to the lowest levels, ensuring coordination and implementation on the ground. It is worth noting that the recent cumulative crises that encompass political polarization, economic crises and the Covid-19 pandemic have resulted in a high demand for GBV services, overloading the system and necessitating better coordination and outreach on the ground. Against this backdrop, underlying social and cultural stereotypes prevent gender-based strategies from achieving their full potential. Upcoming challenges revolve around integrating gender-mainstreaming in policy fields spanning education, social stability to health, shifting from an emergency, shifting from an GBV emergency response to a development level, and ensuring coordination across actors so as to avoid duplication of projects.

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Notwithstanding such challenges, several successes were documented. National governments are increasingly aware of the necessity to synchronize comprehensive emergency response with long-term development. Best practices consisted in establishing one stop shops where women can access medical services, legal advice and apply for vocational training. Even under the challenging conditions of protracted displacement, polarization and lockdowns, effective service delivery to camps and challenging social contexts was highlighted. Adding to this, Dr. Wakim noted the positive involvement of men and the youth as well as community gatekeepers in endorsing gender equality approaches, making the crisis response more responsive and reflective of the social fabric. She also noted improved levels of coordination between the national governments, international organizations, and civil society in cooperation on the gender response with a view to implementing the objectives of the National Action Plans. Best practices of advocacy towards legal amendments were also discussed and accounted for.

Taking into account both challenges and successes that have characterized the crisis response, Dr. Gulnar gave a brief overview of some key recommendations that the regional report puts forward. Those consist in strengthening women’s participation in decision-making positions, improving women’s economic participation in the labour force, revamping legal frameworks that anchor discriminatory practices against women (e.g. personal status laws & harassment and domestic violence laws that remain unsatisfactory or that lack harmonization). An additional set of recommendations revolved around maximizing effectiveness in the response to the crisis through a gender-based lens. Such recommendations include systematizing the question of access to services as an overarching pillar in national strategies, enhancing outreach and access to services, as well as raising awareness on existing GBV services as refugee women are often unaware of their choices. In terms of improving synergies across actors and the comprehensiveness of the crisis response, it is further recommended to intensify partnerships across local, national and international levels, and to involve actors such as men and the youth as key protagonists in advocating for women’s rights.

Reacting to the findings and recommendations of the report, participants and researchers raised various critical reflections. Emphasis was laid on how cumulative crises have not only made service delivery difficult but have also made gender-mainstreaming projects more challenging when it comes to planning, coordination across various regional and local levels. Against this backdrop, the policy concern of GBV was eclipsed by concomitant societal crises that societies such as Lebanon and Iraq are going through, relegating the importance of gender mainstreaming to a secondary position. Also, participants stressed that labour market constraints as well as the lack of longer-term strategies accounting for women’s employment and integration in the society necessitate an inquiry into how gender-mainstreaming approaches can rise beyond temporality and urgency. Within this context, it is recommended to think about the longer-term ramifications of the regional report and its integration in a sustainable development perspective. In sum, the discussion highlighted the complex challenges that shape the overarching policy landscape in which fighting GBV operates.

Panel 2: Lessons learned on gendering the crisis response and addressing violence against women and girls (VAWG)

In this panel, key academic and policy stakeholders reflected on the longstanding and embedded challenges that shape the response to VAWG. Critical perspectives were advanced on the role of civil society activism in effecting and impacting change and alleviating the chronic burdens that women have been going through throughout the years. In this view, it is important to analyse the manifold challenges that civil society and academia face in changing policies and laws stifling

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women’s empowerment. Here, embedded constraints such as political regimes and ingrained societal and religious norms have constrained feminist and youth-led movements from making further strides. At the same time, however, speakers noted the efforts and advances that national governments have made in developing strategies that seek to address women’s marginalization in legal, social, and labour fields. The best practice of developing a holistic national strategy that cuts across several policy fields, enhancing local capacity building and strengthening cross-societal partnerships was highlighted as key to advancing women’s rights and gender equality.

Panel 3: Enhancing access to comprehensive services and localizing the response

In this panel, several speakers commented on the provision and delivery of services that target GBV and VAWG in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. They illustrated countless success stories in ensuring that health, medical, psychosocial, and legal services are accessible to all and that responses are localized. Still, they all emphasized the challenges that combined crises such as the pandemic and the harrowing financial crash in Lebanon or regional polarization in Iraq have spelled out for outreach and service delivery. Key issues that speakers discussed are: how to provide services in volatile and constantly changing situations? How to localize service provision in polarized regions and situations? How to ensure that women can reach out to courts and have access to legal aid when facilities are closed?

In that regard, speakers highlighted several best practices, among which:

- The importance of coordination with multi-stakeholders spanning local centres and ministries is key to ensuring that service provision delivery reaches different environments.
- Recruiting local workers who live in the regions where services are provided and who had local knowledge of social dynamics turned out to be a success story.
- Service delivery and outreach requires dynamic mindsets, modalities, and responses. Thus, switching from offline to online service delivery and to digital sharing was key to ensuring continuity and sustainability of the approach.
- Twinning service delivery with training sessions and advocacy is important to shifting from an emergency to a developmental response in curbing GBV. Indeed, as one speaker noted, delivering services without changing the underlying legal and protection frameworks remains a limited endeavour.

Panel 4: Improving the enabling factors for women in the workforce

In this panel, speakers discussed multiple ways of training women to access better employment opportunities, connect them to job opportunities, enhance their skills, and optimize their productivity. Jordan was adopted in this regard as a key case study for extrapolating best practices and lessons learned. Speakers highlighted several successful practices such as ensuring outreach to many regions in Jordan, matching skills with job opportunities, developing sustainable strategies, convening training sessions, devising offers for flexible employment either at home or in the workplace, incentivizing women to go work and to participate in the labour force. Speakers also emphasized the importance of training ministerial units on labour rights and on organizing debates that can inform refugees and host populations of their labour rights. In this regard, women’s access to employment requires as well paving the way for an underlying protection environment in which legal protection and aid are provided and in which individuals are well informed of the labour markets’ requirements. Speakers also highlighted the importance of ensuring that seed fund opportunities are available so that women can start their own business and can harness their creative skills in various sectors. Of



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paramount importance is the necessity to rethink flexibility and adaptability in the job market, allowing women in both refugee and host communities to tailor employment to their own needs and social environments. Nonetheless, several challenges were emphasized. Innovative practices notwithstanding, several impediments constrain women’s access to work such as lack of transport, social pressures, and traditions. Syrian refugee women encounter various problems when it comes to accessing labour permits as they are deemed as not qualified and as existing opportunities do not match their profile. In that regard, they are often relegated to informal employment. A structural and more sustainable approach to women’s access to the labour market emerges thus as a highly desirable goal.

Concluding remarks

In the conclusion, a final appraisal accounting for both challenges and success stories was established. The moderator of the panel Ibrahim Draji, UNHCR expert from Syria, reflected on the strides that countries made in engendering the crisis response. He summarised structural challenges that need to be overcome, among which lack of statistics in accounting for GBV, and longstanding social traditions and pressures that hamper women’s empowerment. Notwithstanding endemic and longstanding constraints, he emphasised novel practices, as creative online and offline solutions that local and national platforms have adopted to respond to service delivery and awareness raising despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the coordination between civil society actors and national governments in championing gender equality initiatives. There was consensus that it is not possible to talk about “engendering the crisis response” if no fundamental legal reforms targeting both host populations and refugees are underway. UNSCR 1325 provides an opportunity to rethink legal frameworks, and to integrate grassroots actors and feminist movements as key protagonists in combating GBV. While Jordan emerges in regional perspective as a success story in integrating refugee women in the labour market, more progress is welcome. Regional initiatives and strategies that embrace women’s employment as a key pillar of national development are highly encouraged.

About the EU Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian crisis, the EU Madad Fund:

Since its establishment in December 2014, a significant share of the EU’s non-humanitarian aid for Syria’s neighbouring countries is provided through the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, the EU ‘Madad’ Fund. The Trust Fund brings a more coherent and integrated EU aid response to the crisis and primarily addresses economic, educational, protection, social, and health needs of refugees from Syria in neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq, and supports overstretched local communities and their administrations.

For more information about the EU Trust Fund, please visit https://ec.europa.eu/trustfund-syria-region/content/home_en

