



EVALUATION BRIEF



SUPPORTING THE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF SYRIAN WOMEN REFUGEES

Evaluation of the Syrian Women’s Economic Empowerment Regional Project



The ongoing Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, has precipitated one of the largest humanitarian crises in history. The vast majority of refugees have sought refuge in the neighbouring countries of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. The Syrian conflict has disproportionately had negative impacts on Syrian women and girls by reinforcing and exacerbating pre-existing gender inequalities. This translates to greater curbs on women and girls’ movement in the public sphere, resulting in constraints to their participation in social and economic activities, access to education, as well as access to basic services. The breakdown of community protection mechanisms existing prior to the conflict coupled with the loss of financial and social assets have made women and girls even more vulnerable to various forms of SGBV, including forced and early marriage and survival sex. Women also have had less access to economic opportunities than their male counterparts and female unemployment stands at 20%, almost three times that for men.¹

In April 2014, UN Women initiated a two-year regional programmatic intervention to respond to the needs of Syrian women refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Syria (internally displaced women). The regional project aimed at economically empowering the target group to reduce their vulnerability and enhance their protection against gender based violence through two main outcomes:

- Economic empowerment of vulnerable Syrian women through increased access to economic recovery and livelihoods opportunities
- GBV/women’s awareness training and advocacy to increase awareness on women’s rights and strengthen their capacities

In 2016, the UN Women Regional Office for Arab States commissioned a final evaluation of the programme to contribute

to enhancing the organisation’s approach to supporting Syrian women’s economic empowerment and strengthening their capacities to claim their rights through increased access to economic recovery opportunities, training and meaningful engagement in community life. The evaluation included in-depth assessments in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. In total, the evaluation includes the views and perspectives of 176 stakeholders, 147 women and 29 men, representing both institutional and individual stakeholders.

Programme in Numbers	
	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2121 women increased awareness of their rights in protection against exploitation and GBV, available psycho-social & GBV services • 85 service providers trained on GBV case management • Three public awareness campaigns on VAW reached more than 50,000 women, men, girls and boys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than 3740 women trained in one of 11 professions • 900 women accessed CfW & supported, 29,900 indirect beneficiaries • 120 vulnerable women started micro-businesses & built business partnerships with women from the host community

What are the main evaluation conclusions?

Despite limited funding, UN Women successfully leveraged partnerships and existing resources and capacities, to meet the diverse requirements of the project and maximize comparative advantage. This partnership approach increased UN Women’s operational capabilities and reach in each of the five countries. Partnerships with other UN agencies combined their mandates and strengths, ensured coordination of efforts and avoided

¹ILO. 2016. Women at Work: Trends 2016

local levels and complementarity of efforts will be critical to continuing and expanding these efforts.

The project established a strong multi-country base for UN Women to further develop its humanitarian action approach and expand it into countries where it had not previously worked on humanitarian issues. It also increased UN Women’s engagement with the humanitarian architecture in the region. Moving forward UN Women should expand these efforts to complement and enhance the capacities of other key actors to deliver on gender equality in their humanitarian response.

Access to both vocational training and cash for work has also enabled some women to obtain follow-on economic opportunities through both self and other employment. The money received from the project enabled participants to make spending decisions based on their own needs and priorities. For the majority of women due to legislative and other contextual constraints, the economic benefits were short-term and focused on traditional jobs limiting women’s ability to find opportunities elsewhere. Nonetheless, there is emerging evidence that the project has successfully contributed to elements of empowerment, both social and economic. Many women reported that they gained positive non-economic benefits from participation. Participants’ ability to earn and control income, albeit short-term, enhanced their sense of agency. Women expressed a new sense of independence, greater participation in household decision-making, and an increased sense of self-worth and dignity. Respondents witnessed changes in the perception of family members and neighbours. Their ability to provide a source of income for the family helped them to negotiate their position with respect to decision-making within the family. In host community settings, collective training and workshops allowed for greater social cohesion, understanding and interaction between Syrian refugee and host community women.

Safe Spaces: A Platform for Engagement and Empowerment

One of the significant results of the project was the creation of safe spaces for women. This aspect of the project has been received well and appreciated by participants. In all four countries visited, women – both refugees and from host communities look forward to going to the centres. Respondents mentioned that centres provided them with opportunities to have discussions with other women who come from the same background, share similar problems, and are able to empathise. The centres acted as a platform for coping with stress, as women discussed these issues with each other and sometimes with trainers and staff.

The reduction in SGBV is less clear. One of the most significant project results was the creation of safe spaces for women (see text box). Access to cash to fulfil additional requirements and priorities coupled with spending time outside the house at training or work or in the safe spaces was reported to contribute to a decrease in household tension and stress. Respondents also reported increased knowledge as a result of SGBV / women’s rights awareness trainings; nonetheless, the SGBV component could have been more fully developed. Where UN Women had

more experience working with refugees, the SGBV component was more advanced and included greater outreach and referral mechanisms. The engagement of men and boys in trainings, something expressed as important by women, was also a challenge, particularly as it was not an explicit part of the project design in all countries. Strategies which opened with discussions on stress and coping mechanisms and then introduced SGBV seemed to be more effective in engaging men.

How can UN Women improve?

Recommendations to move forward

Based on the findings and conclusions, six key recommendations were made. UN Women should:

1. Articulate a more explicit and holistic framework for working on gender equality and women’s empowerment in humanitarian action. This framework should be measurable and look across the humanitarian-development continuum. This conceptual framework should incorporate a Theory of Change, accounting for - security and well-being of refugee women, individual agency of women, power relations, and legal policies and frameworks.
2. Establish a comprehensive Monitoring Evaluation Accountability and Learning (MEAL) system to inform future work in humanitarian action. This will allow it to track progress, detect unintended results, assess the impact, and be accountable to stakeholders.
3. Place greater focus on capacity development of implementing partners to strengthen national capacities on ensuring humanitarian action is gender responsive. Investing in implementing partners’ capacities allows them to better support, reinforce and strengthen nationally led, gender-responsive humanitarian and early recovery interventions
4. Include a more robust SGBV component as part of its broader efforts to enhance social protection. This should include expanding partnerships with others actors who are working on SGBV and expanding the work on engaging men and boys in addressing sexual and gender based violence through the identification and leveraging of good practices.
5. Explore different modalities for ensuring sustainable economic opportunities for vulnerable women from Syrian refugee and host communities in partnership with other key actors. This can include advocacy for policy change, training and integration of women into less traditionally female areas of employment where there is sufficient market demand, and the expansion of agreements with other actors (public and private) to procure goods / services produced by women on an ongoing basis.
6. Advocate for multi-year funding to enable longer-term planning and programming in humanitarian action. This can contribute to substantial gains in intervention relevance, quality, effectiveness and efficiency. Most importantly, supporting women’s economic empowerment and SGBV requires a longer-term, multi-dimensional approach which addresses the underlying causes of gender inequality.