Listening to the Voices of Syrian Women Refugees in Jordan: Ethnographies of Displacement and Emplacement

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AUTHOR’S NOTE


1 In the border town of Irbid, in Northern Jordan, five refugee camps host more than a quarter of a million refugees, the majority of whom are women. Outside of the camps, the population of the towns and villages along the border have doubled since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011 bringing the number of refugees in this border area of Jordan to well over half a million. This paper is an ethnographic exploration of the real desires and needs of these Syrian refugee women.

I. Locating the study

2 The UNHCR estimates that by the end of 2014 there will be over 4 million Syrians seeking refuge in the neighbouring countries of Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq and Egypt making this “one of the largest refugee crises in recent history.”1 Jordan currently hosts nearly a quarter of these refugees,2 80% in urban non-camp environments3 in the poorer Northern Governates of Irbid and Mafraq. Over 80% of these refugees are women and children.4

"Guests and Aliens": Re-Configuring New Mobilities in the Eastern Mediterranean After 2011 - with a special focus on Syrian refugees
The majority of the Syrian refugees entering Northern Jordan are from the city of Dera’a, the largest city of the southern Horan plain, and only 30 kilometres from Jordania’s second largest city, Irbid. Dera’a is part of the Horan region, made up of three Syrian provinces, Dera’a, Sweida and Quneitra and the Al Ramtha district in Jordan. As a result of the deep historic bonds between Syrians and Jordanians, many Syrians moved to Jordan to stay with relatives when the conflict first began, not considering themselves “refugees”. The tradition of on-going hospitality is now becoming a challenge in and around Irbid however. Identified as a “poverty pocket” by the UNHCR at the start of the Syrian crisis, the pressures on schools, hospitals, the police, water, electricity, housing, and the fragile job market has brought about increasing tensions between the Jordanian and Syrian populations in and around the city. Rents have increased tenfold in Irbid since the beginning of the crisis. As the likelihood of a quick solution to the conflict and subsequent return of the refugees becomes increasingly unlikely, the regional and historic ties that unify Syrians and Jordanians are making way for points of potential friction between the two communities, and some cultural and social differences are heightened.

II. Methodology

Over a period of five months, Jordanian anthropologist Dr Ruba Al Akash and British visual anthropologist Karen Boswall spent time with 15 extended families in Irbid and the surrounding villages to learn about the real experiences of the women and children in particular and ensure the voices of those living outside the camps are heard. In order to gain as objective a representation as possible, the selection process was made through Jordanian individuals with private connections to the Syrian community rather than through international organisations, NGOs or religious groups. Most families were interviewed in their homes, or in the home of one of the community members.

III. Summary of findings from the research

There were a number of similarities between the experiences and preoccupations shared by the families and in particular, the women we interviewed. The events prior to leaving Syria, and the experiences in the refugee camps, the relationships with their Jordanian neighbours, and their living conditions were difficult and traumatic for all those we interviewed, as was the level of isolation and the sadness all the women carried. Setting out for the unknown was generally only undertaken after an event catalysed a need to protect family members from death, rape, or imprisonment and torture. The difficulties described by the interviewees that motivated them to then leave the camps ranged from physical discomfort, especially those arriving in the winter months, to psychological and emotional stress, not least for fear of the safety of their daughters. Many of those we interviewed talked of the perceived risk of rape of their younger daughters. For many of the families interviewed, the marriage of a young daughter was seen as a solution to a number of difficulties, many believing it will save her the risk of losing her virginity through rape before marriage and making it more difficult for her to find a husband. Marrying a daughter also relieves the family of the responsibility of supporting her and in some instances; it brought in additional financial benefits.
Syrian refugees living outside the camps are not entitled to work. A number of solutions are found to generate additional income, including accepting extremely low wages for illegal work. This level of poverty has resulted in increased instances of child labour, largely carried out by the boys. In a study of the Syrian refugees living outside the camps in Jordan conducted by UN Women in 2013 it was found that over 20% of girls under the age of 16 and nearly 19% of women never leave their homes and nearly 50% of both women and girls very rarely left the home. Even where families live on the same floor of apartment buildings, it was unusual for them to spend time together or even to communicate with one another. Many of the women and girls we spoke to referred to their homes as a prison. They also lamented the fact that they had so little to do. Communal activities that have been introduced in refugee communities around the world, such as using creative processes to process their traumas, making music, forming groups and societies and studying, were not considered appropriate when so many people are still suffering in Syria. The women carried the burden of sadness. It was their duty as Syrian women to connect through their tears with those who are suffering and losing their lives in the country they left behind. Therefore, the daily routine of crying, either alone or in groups was a common regular activity among all the women we interviewed.

We don’t live a normal life. We are not happy. A lot of people from my family got killed in Syria, so how we can live a normal life? We live with sadness. We lost happiness; there is no space for it.

Conclusion

The narratives and life stories set out in this paper provide insight into some of the experiences of those refugees who are suffering the consequences of the current conflict in Syria and whose peaceful lives and livelihoods have been disrupted. Although much effort has gone into ensuring the needs of the vulnerable population of the camps, there are deep concerns that the hundreds of thousands of women and children who have left the camps are at greater risk of a series of threats including “recruitment by armed groups, including of under aged refugees; labour exploitation, including child labour; early marriage; as well as domestic, sexual and gender-based violence”. The conclusions of this research support the findings of a Harvard Field Study published in January 2014 calling for “innovative and creative programmatic responses” and that the presence of such large number of refugees living outside the camps in Northern Jordan could increase the instability in the region. By listening to the voices of Syrian women refugees and airing reflections on the fear, suffering and sadness of some Syrian refugee women living outside the camps in and around Irbid, this paper highlights the complex and multi-layered nature of refugee experience.

NOTES


3. The UNHCR estimated in the above report in December 2013 that the number of refugees living in non-camp settings in Jordan would rise from 81% to 84% by the beginning of 2014. This figure was increased to 90% by the beginning of 2016.


7. In 47% of refugee households that reported paid employment, a child is contributing to the household’s income, and 15% reported child labour as the primary source (85% of reported child labourers were boys). Statistics from UNWOMEN July 2013, op. cit.


9. Interview with Nadia recorded in November 2013.

10. PDES/2013/13 July 2013 From slow boil to breaking point: A real-time evaluation of UNHCR’s response to the Syrian refugee emergency where the UNHCR’s Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES) recommend “Quick Impact Projects” be designed to “provide immediate and tangible benefits to those living in refugee-populated areas”. Such projects, it states, “should be accompanied by an effective communications strategy, so as to ensure that their purposes are well understood and that messages of solidarity and community cohesion are conveyed to refugees and host populations alike”. http://www.unhcr.org/52b83e539.html.