

Education for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon



Photo 1: Students in Beirut engaged in non-formal education at SB Overseas' Bukra Ahla center

I. CONDITIONS OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

Nearly eight years into Syria's civil war, 11 million people are estimated to have fled their homes, forcing six million people into internal displacement and over 5.5 million to move across external borders.¹ Neighboring countries have experienced a large population influx, and Lebanon in particular, which hosts 1.1 million Syrian refugees additional to a pre-crisis population of 4.2 million, making it the country with the highest per capita ratio of refugees in the world.^{2,3} This includes 450,000 Palestinian refugees registered with UNWRA.⁴ The large number of refugees in Lebanon is placing tremendous pressure on its citizens, economy,

¹ UNHCR "UNHCR Lebanon: Who we Are and What We Do." *UNHCR.org*. http://www.unhcr.org/lb/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2018/04/Who-we-are-and-what-we-do_Apr18_EN.pdf.

² McCarter, L.M. "Syrian Refugees' Access to Education in Lebanon: Obstacles to Implementation." Master's thesis, Virginia Tech, 2018. <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/83960>.

³ Buckner, E., Spencer, D. and Cha, J. "Between Policy and Practice: The Education of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon." *Journal of Refugee Studies* fex027 (2017).

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13642987.2017.1371140>

⁴ UNWRA "Where we work." *UNWRA.org*. <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon>.

government and infrastructure. Areas that host the majority of Syrian refugees are also the areas that are home to the most impoverished Lebanese.⁵

Syrians increasingly struggle to cope with life in Lebanon, as poverty rises and living conditions deteriorate. In 2017, 76 percent of Syrian refugee households were living below the poverty line of USD 3.84 per day per person and approximately 58 percent are found to live in extreme poverty.⁶

Despite the high numbers of refugees it hosts, Lebanon has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention or the accompanying 1967 Protocol and hence has not granted refugee status to Syrians now living on Lebanese soil. When they arrived in Lebanon, UNHCR started registering Syrian refugees until May 2015 when it was ordered by the Lebanese government to suspend all registrations. Consequently, refugees that were not registered before this date are now required to have sponsor in order to legally reside.⁷ It is estimated by local and international organizations that 90 percent of Syrian refugees residing in Lebanon do so without a valid permit.⁸ As the rights of Syrians in Lebanon are not protected by international law, much is left to the discretion of municipalities and political parties, some of them imposing curfew that restrict freedom of movement.⁹ Over 3500 Syrian refugees have faced evictions as per municipal order between 2016 and the first quarter of 2018.¹⁰

Syrian families face a number of difficulties such as restricted movement due to expired residency permits, poverty and food insecurity due to limitations on legal work, bullying and harassment and in securing a stable education.¹¹

⁵ Yassin N. "101 Facts & Figures on the Syrian Refugee Crisis." *Aub.edu.lb*
https://website.aub.edu.lb/ifi/publications/Documents/books/20180601_101_facts_and_figures_on_syrian_refugee_crisis.pdf.

⁶ Issam Fares Institute for Foreign Policy and International Affairs. "Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon: Fatigue in numbers" *AUB*.
https://website.aub.edu.lb/ifi/publications/Documents/infographics/20180514_fatigue_in_numbers.pdf;
Yassin N. "101 Facts & Figures on the Syrian Refugee Crisis" *American University of Beirut*.
https://website.aub.edu.lb/ifi/publications/Documents/books/20180601_101_facts_and_figures_on_syrian_refugee_crisis.pdf.

⁷ Janmyr, M. "UNHCR and the Syrian refugee response: negotiating status and registration in Lebanon." *The International Journal of Human Rights*, Volume 22, Issue 3 (2017).
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13642987.2017.1371140>

⁸ Buckner, E., Spencer, D. and Cha, J. "Between Policy and Practice: The Education of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon." *Journal of Refugee Studies* fex027 (2017).
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13642987.2017.1371140>

⁹ American University of Beirut. "Politics and the Plight of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon." *Aub.edu.lb*.
<https://www.aub.edu.lb/Documents/Politics-and-the-Plight-of-Syrian-Refugees-in-Lebanon.pdf>; Janmyr, M. "Precarity in Exile: The Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon." *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Volume 35, Issue 4 (2016). <https://academic.oup.com/rsq/article/35/4/58/2609281>.

¹⁰ Frelick, B. "Our Homes Are Not for Strangers: Mass Evictions of Syrian Refugees by Lebanese Municipalities." *Hrw.org*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/04/20/our-homes-are-not-strangers/mass-evictions-syrian-refugees-lebanese-municipalities>.

¹¹ Hussein, S. "Plight of 250,000 Syrian refugees still not at school in Lebanon." *Theirworld.org*.
<https://theirworld.org/news/plight-of-250-000-syrian-refugees-still-not-at-school-in-lebanon>.

II. ACCESS TO EDUCATION FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES

All children in Lebanon, including Syrian refugees, have a right to free and compulsory primary education under international law.¹² It is generally acknowledged that although Lebanon is not signatory to the Refugee Convention, it has provided for an inclusive theoretical policy framework, which aims to provide all school-aged Syrian refugees with education.¹³ Steps have been taken to allow refugees without proof of residency to enroll in schools and so-called “second shifts” have been set up, allowing over 300 public schools¹⁴ to provide Syrian children with formal education in 2017.¹⁵

In previous years, during the months before the start of the new academic year, UNICEF launched a ‘Back to School’ campaign, during which they conduct outreach to ensure and assist Syrian out-of-school children in Lebanon to enroll in Lebanese public schools.¹⁶ And each year since the start of the Syrian crisis, the number of Syrian children enrolled in Lebanese public schools has steadily increased. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) set up a plan called ‘Reaching All Children with Education’ (RACE) with support from international donor agencies and strives to provide free education. At the start of 2016, students aged 7-17 who have been out of school for more than two years had an opportunity to attend the so-called Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) set up by MEHE.

Although the number of enrollments and spaces in classrooms have increased every year of the crisis in Syria, still a significant number of parents find themselves obliged to say, “our children are growing up without an education.”¹⁷ An estimated 36 percent of those aged 6 to 14 remain out of school, meaning they do not access to formal education.¹⁸

Despite past efforts, the percentage of out of school children this school year did not follow the trend of previous years due to a significant funding gap affecting MEHE and UNICEF. Only students qualifying for so-called prep-ECE and those entering grade 1 were able to enroll in public schools depending on available spaces, while no other new students could enroll. In the

¹² Khawaja, B. “Growing Up Without an Education: Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon.” *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/19/growing-without-education/barriers-education-syrian-refugee-children-lebanon>.

¹³ Buckner, E., Spencer, D. and Cha, J. “Between Policy and Practice: The Education of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* fex027 (2017). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13642987.2017.1371140>

¹⁴ UNHCR “UNCHR Lebanon: Who we Are and What We Do.” *UNHCR.org*. http://www.unhcr.org/lb/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2018/04/Who-we-are-and-what-we-do_Apr18_EN.pdf.

¹⁵ Khawaja, B. “Growing Up Without an Education: Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon.” *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/19/growing-without-education/barriers-education-syrian-refugee-children-lebanon>.

¹⁶ Sewell, A. “Cash shortfall hits refugee education” *The Daily Star Lebanon*. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2018/Oct-04/465312-cash-shortfall-hits-refugee-education.ashx?fbclid=IwAR0pNpBFU4Hyv_FbHoau5Wpoc_W3pCrUpn-eeenYLOh3ZgxFtEqsX6Yhc4qs.

¹⁷ Khawaja, B. “Growing Up Without an Education: Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon.” *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/19/growing-without-education/barriers-education-syrian-refugee-children-lebanon>.

¹⁸ Sewell, A. “Cash shortfall hits refugee education” *The Daily Star Lebanon*. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2018/Oct-04/465312-cash-shortfall-hits-refugee-education.ashx?fbclid=IwAR0pNpBFU4Hyv_FbHoau5Wpoc_W3pCrUpn-eeenYLOh3ZgxFtEqsX6Yhc4qs.

ALP, only students who needed to complete one more cycle (out of three) were able to re-enroll.¹⁹

Many parents are going out of their way to ensure access to education for their children. Some have entered into significant debts to pay for transport or educational materials, others have gathered their belongings and moved to the vicinity of schools that would possibly accept their children.²⁰

III. OBSTACLES TO EDUCATION

The above-mentioned social exclusion, insecurity and poverty prevent a generation of Syrian children from receiving necessary education, placing them at a disadvantage and at risk of being pushed into child labor and early marriage.²¹ These are two commonly named factors contributing to children being out of school, in addition to the cost of education and the need to stay at home.²²

1. CHILD LABOR

Child labor significantly undermines a child's capability to attend or stay in school, as the minimum working age is just 14.²³ As poverty among Syrian families in Lebanon increases, many are compelled to take their children out of school in order for them to make a living to meet the families' basic needs. According to UNICEF, approximately 180,000 Syrian kids in Lebanon are working. Often, they work long hours for a small salary.²⁴ With one-third currently working, adolescent boys are the most vulnerable to child labor. One-third of those adolescents working have entered the labor market before the age of 12, in areas such as agriculture, construction and work in small shops. Most do not attend school while working.²⁵

¹⁹ Khawaja, B. "Growing Up Without an Education: Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon." *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/19/growing-without-education/barriers-education-syrian-refugee-children-lebanon>.

²⁰ Khawaja, B. "Growing Up Without an Education: Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon." *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/19/growing-without-education/barriers-education-syrian-refugee-children-lebanon>.

²¹ UNICEF, "UNICEF launches interactive glimpse into Syrian children's struggle for education." *Unicef.org*. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-launches-interactive-glimpse-syrian-childrens-struggle-education>

²² WFP, UNHCR, UNICEF. "Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon 2016." *Wfp.org*. <https://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp289533.pdf>

²³ Khawaja, B. "Growing Up Without an Education: Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon." *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/19/growing-without-education/barriers-education-syrian-refugee-children-lebanon>.

²⁴ PRI. "Syrian refugees resort to child labor in Lebanon." *Pri.org*. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-09-05/syrian-refugees-resort-child-labor-lebanon>.

²⁵ Plan International. "Adolescent Girls and Boys Needs Assessment: Focus on child labour and child marriage." *Data2.unhcr.org*. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/64845>

2. EARLY MARRIAGE

Lebanon has not enforced a civil code that regulates personal status matters, including child marriage. Rather, different religious courts recognize several separate personal status laws, with some setting the minimum age of marriage at no more than nine years old. Some others set the minimum age anywhere between 14 and 18.²⁶

With 13 percent of girls married below the age of 18, early marriage was not unseen prior to the war in Syria. However, forced displacement has significantly increased the prevalence of this practice to approximately 35% of Syrian girls younger than 18. Several factors can be attributed to this stark increase. For some families, early marriage serves as a way of protection against sexual harassment or violence by men in the camps or urban neighborhoods. For others, it reflects an economic struggle as early marriage means feeding one less person.²⁷

Early marriage poses a serious barrier to a girl's education in Lebanon, as most girls stop attending school once married, to assume household duties. Conversely, a 2016 survey found that of those Syrian girls aged between 13 and 18 enrolled in school in Lebanon found 25 percent opposed early marriage. Hence, education has proven to be a deterrent of early marriage.²⁸

IV. THE ROLE OF NGO'S IN PREVENTING A LOST GENERATION

When public schools do not have the financial or physical capacity to enroll more Syrian children in their second shifts, non-formal programs are vital in ensuring children remain engaged and continue their learning, rather than getting discouraged. Since the start of the conflict in Syria, non-formal education has been an important element of the humanitarian response in Lebanon, now serving a twofold purpose. First, education provided by informal structures that follow the Lebanese curriculum serves as a stepping-stone to public education for students who have missed out on important years of education.²⁹ Second, owing to non-formal education structures provided by NGOs, over 400,000 Syrian students, who otherwise would not have any access to education, are provided with an opportunity to learn.

²⁶ Khawaja, B. "Growing Up Without an Education: Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon." *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/19/growing-without-education/barriers-education-syrian-refugee-children-lebanon>.

²⁷ Bartels, S.A., et al. "Making sense of child, early and forced marriage among Syrian refugee girls: a mixed methods study in Lebanon." *BMJ Global Health*, Volume 3, Issue 1 (2018). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5838398/>; Khawaja, B. "Growing Up Without an Education: Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon." *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/19/growing-without-education/barriers-education-syrian-refugee-children-lebanon>.

²⁸ Khawaja, B. "Growing Up Without an Education: Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon." *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/19/growing-without-education/barriers-education-syrian-refugee-children-lebanon>.

²⁹ UNICEF. "Bringing Syrian refugee children back to school in Lebanon." *Unicef.org.uk*. <https://www.unicef.org.uk/bringing-syrian-refugee-children-back-learning-lebanon/>.



Some students have missed out on education in both Syria and Lebanon and are now no longer school-aged. The only available option is non-formal education, however, many NGOs providing non-formal education do not accept students older than 14 years old.³⁰

One hurdle Syrian students are likely to face once they go to public school is the language of instruction. All core subjects, such as science, mathematics and life skills, are taught in either English or French (depending on the area), in stark contrast with what they were used to in Syria, where all subjects were taught in Arabic. Another barrier for parents wanting to enroll their children in public school is the cost of transportation. Although UNICEF organizes buses for certain areas each year, some parents prefer to send their children to nearby non-formal education centers, as they are often established inside or next to camps. In addition, parents are worried about corporal punishment and the lack of attention in public schools.³¹

As three quarters of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are women and children³², SB Overseas was dedicated to set up three non-formal education and empowerment centers in Aarsal, Beirut and Saida to assist children, youth and women. In addition, we provide psychosocial support services and small-scale material aid, especially including winter clothes, mattresses, blankets and diapers. For more information on our interventions please visit our website <https://sboverseas.org/>

³⁰ Khawaja, B. "Growing Up Without an Education: Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon." *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/19/growing-without-education/barriers-education-syrian-refugee-children-lebanon>.

³¹ Khawaja, B. "Growing Up Without an Education: Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon." *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/19/growing-without-education/barriers-education-syrian-refugee-children-lebanon>.

³² UNHCR "UNCHR Lebanon: Who we Are and What We Do." *UNHCR.org*. http://www.unhcr.org/lb/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2018/04/Who-we-are-and-what-we-do_Apr18_EN.pdf.