



SCATTERED PIECES OF A HOMELAND

by David Brunetti

Life is difficult for all refugees escaping the on-going violence in Syria, but it is especially hard for women and children. The gendered experience of violence and displacement – the need to flee the increasing violence and discrimination against women, which made living conditions unbearable – is amplified by the discrimination they face as women refugees.

Women who are separated from their communities and families are more vulnerable to exploitation, violence and abuse. Many Syrian women are exposed to sexual harassment simply because of their status as refugees, which is associated with economic vulnerability. Employers and landlords are often harassing women refugees from Syria. The women described being groped, harassed and pressured to have sex.

Syrian women – many of them having lost everything during the war and struggling to survive – are becoming the most vulnerable segment of the refugee community. Many experienced emotional and physical trauma in Syria, but face a new set of challenges as refugees. Many refugees don't know anyone in their new country, and it's hard to find support within the new environment. They struggle to provide food and shelter for their children and often face harassment, discrimination and isolation.

The problem is worsened by weak legal protection, low awareness among women of their rights, cultural attitudes as well as a lack of information regarding the support that is available to vulnerable refugee women.

Many Syrian women are traumatised, deprived and stigmatised; still their ultimate priority remains their and their children's survival. Their immediate concern is being able to provide a

stable environment for their children, as well as find ways to support their families. In this settings, family planning, marital rights, reproductive and maternal health or just socialising is not a priority. But Syrian women need more than shelter and food to meet their basic needs.

Many women, especially those living in urban areas, don't know how their refugee status affects their eligibility to access health care when they first arrive from Syria. They need services to address their sexual and reproductive health needs. They need access to free contraceptives in a culturally sensitive manner. And they need basic health services that include the provision of clinical care for sexual violence survivors.

Women's centres, supported by UN agencies and other INGOs, across Jordan and Lebanon provide this safe space for women and girls to gather, to share information on support available to them, and to receive emotional support and crisis counselling.

The centres aim to empower Syrian refugee women by raising awareness on issues relating to health, GBV and parenting, but they also offer training opportunities and informal education. The centres serve to help women who may have been victims of intimate partner violence by providing a safe space where women and girls can access health care services, as well as socialise, learn and talk about issues affecting their daily life in exile.

al Azmeh – the crisis – is ever-present and inescapable.

This photo essay aims to illustrate the life of Syrian women refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. All the women interviewed have to navigate an unfamiliar and often unnerving new environment. Most face a daily struggle to find enough money to afford the rent, buy food and basic items, or access services such as health care. Their stories are often heart-breaking: families that were separated by the war, mothers having no choice but to let their children work, or leaving their children alone to go find a way to make ends meet.

Many of the women's memories are difficult, but they shared them unreservedly hoping that their stories will be heard and prevent the Syrian crisis from being forgotten.

They are regaining control of their lives and hope to be able to eventually move beyond the crisis as they fight to provide for their families but the memories of their former lives and the trauma of war haunts them.

These are their stories.

GHADA



With the Syria crisis entering its fourth year, the resources of many longer-term Syrian refugees in Jordan are being depleted, while other Syrians are just arriving — often with few resources. Many Syrian households in Jordan and Lebanon are in debt, have borrowed money or taken loans from family, landlords, neighbours, or shopkeepers. Finding a stable source of income continues to be challenging. Community support is an important coping mechanism for many families who rely on assistance from family or neighbours; are dependent on income from children, particularly boys, working; or have sold assets since arriving in exile.

In an effort to ensure that vulnerable Syrian refugees do not feel the pressure to compete over resources with members of host communities, emergency relief increasingly include community support activities, recreational activities, skills-based training and activities that strengthens the capacity of the community.

“Our life in Jordan is hard,” Ghada is a mother of three from Dara’a. She describes her family’s difficult financial situation. They are in debt, behind with the rent of their small flat and not yet prepared for the coming winter. “It’s only October but the nights are already getting colder. I’m dreading winter. We’re not prepared. Last year, we didn’t have any fuel to heat our flat. We used to go to my parents during the day and when we got home we’d go straight to bed. In Dara’a, we had a beautiful house. Now we don’t even have beds. Just mattresses. Before my children had their own rooms and toys, now we don’t have anything for them. They can’t be carefree here. I take them to the centre so they can play here and have fun.”

Ghada’s youngest son has nightmares almost every night. He doesn’t get any sleep at night and has become increasingly withdrawn. The family first came to the centre to access psychosocial support to deal with the psychological impact the conflict and exile had on the children. The women’s centre offers women like Ghada psychological counselling and support to help her understand her children’s needs and behaviour.

But beyond that Ghada is worried about her children’s education. She feels that schools in Jordan aren’t prepared to cater for the needs of Syrian children who are either traumatised or at the very least have missed out on education as a result of the on going crisis in Syria.

“I didn’t think my children benefit from the schools here. The curriculum is very different and it’s hard for them to catch up. My children need a lot of help after school, so they don’t fall behind in class. But I can’t help them with some of the classes. I didn’t take English at school and sometimes it’s difficult for me to help them with their homework. Here at the women’s centre, I’ve started to go to some of the courses. I’m taking literacy classes and want to learn English, too. I’m now better prepared to help my children with their assignments. I think I’m also a good example for them because they see that I enjoy learning and they see me studying for my classes. Now they’re more willing to go to school again.” With the help of the women’s centre in Zarqa, Ghada takes comfort in the fact that her family is slowly adjusting to their new live in Jordan.

LAMEES



Lamees and her family are from Hasakah, north-eastern Syria. Her journey to Jordan was long and tiring for her and her children.

"It took over a week to get to Jordan. At first, there wasn't much fighting in Hasakah but then the fighting between the Kurdish fighters and ISIL intensified. We just had to leave for the children."

Lamees and her children had to make the long journey to Jordan alone. Her husband was already in Amman making sure they had a small flat when they arrived. Lamees worries how the war and now the exile have affected her children. She turned to the centre in Amman for help when she noticed that her children are withdrawn, have nightmares and occasionally wet their bed at night. At the centre, she attends sessions where she learns how to deal with her children's needs.

Families under stress need extra support. Offering psychological counselling and support, the centre in Amman is helping parents be the best they can be, for their child, and for themselves. Here, Lamees receives the assistance she needs to help her understand her children's needs and behaviour.

"My children are feeling a lot better now. They don't act up as much any more. Living away from home is difficult for all of us but I was very exhausted when the children behaved badly. They didn't listen to me and I was shouting a lot. I lost my patience. I was so tired. But the staff at the centre helped my children and they helped me too. I have support here, I can always come for advice. Before I found the centre, I didn't know who to ask for advice when I had a long day and they children were behaving badly. Here, I've learned how to control myself and how to relate to my children in a better way, too. And my kids have a lot of toys here and they can play with the other children. It's great to see them more relaxed and cheerful," says Lamees about her visits to the women's centre in Amman.

Lamees, 32, mother of four, from Hasakah, Syria. Now living in Amman, Jordan.



Malika, 23, mother of two boys, from Raqqa, Syria. Now living in Amman, Jordan.

MALIKA

"In Syria, we were happy. Before the war, my husband was so romantic. He's less romantic now, since we left Syria. We have many worries. Being a refugee has affected our relationship. In Syria, we had a small but beautiful apartment. Here we have to share a room. The rent is 100JD but the landlord already told us that he's raising it to 200JD soon. My husband doesn't work and we argue a lot."

Malika first came to the clinic in Amman because her children needed psychological support. Since her first visit, she's accessed a range of services. Malika attends session and workshops on a number of topics and has found new friends. They've grown close, they support each other and the centre provides a safe space for the women to socialise and talk about the problems that worry them.

Malika doesn't feel as isolated since she started visiting the clinic. Not only her children have benefited from the psychosocial support session, she also feels more confident knowing that there is support available. The comprehensive approach of the clinic has also allowed her to approach staff for advice on family planning, too.

"My husband and I sometimes discuss

having another baby. We have two sons already but he wants a girl. But I think that we shouldn't have another child yet. Not here."

Many displaced Syrian women want to use safe and effective family planning methods, but are unable to do so because they lack access to information and services or they don't have the support of their husbands. The women's centre allows women like Malika to access information and advice on family planning in a safe environment.

Malika says she now feels more confident discussing family planning with her husband because she's aware of the options that are available to her. "There is no rush to have another child just yet. It's not that I don't want to have another baby but our situation in Jordan is insecure and I also want to feel safe knowing that we'll be able to care for our family. With the contraceptives I got at the centre, we can choose when the time is right for a baby."



Ameena, 26, mother of four children, from Aleppo, Syria, now living in Zarqa, Jordan

AMEENA

"Our family was very close. At home, we would visit often but now the family is divided." Ameena, a young mother of four from Aleppo, constantly worries about family and friends who are still in Syria. She came to Jordan with her young family to make sure her children are safe. Her sisters and brothers have also fled to Amman with their young families but her parents are still in Aleppo because her father is too poorly to make the long, arduous journey. It hurts her that she isn't able to see or care for him. "I cry often because I can't see him."

In Amman, her main concern is finding enough money to pay for the small room her young family rents. She first visited the women's centre to collect a hygiene kit that includes products she isn't able to purchase with the food vouchers.

But when her youngest son was born in Amman and she's also used the reproductive health clinic's pre- and postnatal services. "I've been to the centre many times before, I knew where to go and I knew I could ask the staff if I had a question."

"Love wasn't there at first, but it grew," says Ameena about marriage. She got married when she was only 17 years old. She says she was lucky. The women's centres, which are supported by UN agencies, try to persuade women not to allow poverty to push them or their children into early marriages.

Ameena is now thinking that her daughters should continue their education and not get married as young as her. And in case, they have to live in Amman for a long time and her daughters are old enough to marry, she would prefer Syrian husbands but says they will decide when the time is right.

"My daughters are still too young to even think about weddings. But I want them to choose their own futures. I'd like them to go to school, maybe even university if they want. I want all my children to be able to live an independent life. As refugees, we have to rely on aid and that is difficult for everybody. But with a good education it's easier to adjust and make the most of the few opportunities that are there."



Hana, 29, mother of two, from Aleppo, Syria, now living in Zarqa, Jordan

HANA

Hana stayed in Aleppo for as long as she could. She delayed their departure because she didn't want to leave her home.

"I've lived in Aleppo all my life. I grew up in Aleppo. It's where I met my husband. Where we built our home. Where we started our family. I was afraid if I left I would have to give up all my dreams for the future. There was hope as long as I was in Aleppo. I was always praying that maybe the war would end. Every day I'd say: 'maybe in a few days. Maybe in a week!' but the weeks have become months, and then years. So I finally agreed to go to Jordan."

But despite her hope for peace, Hana lived in constant terror in Aleppo fearing that soldiers may enter her home; or that her house would be hit during the bombardments. She admits that she regrets not leaving Syria earlier. The war and the journey left her son traumatised and anxious. "He acts up a lot. He cries, he shouts and he doesn't listen to me. I don't know what to do. I'm losing patience but I don't want to smack him because he's gone through so much. And it's my fault, because I didn't want to leave home."

Hana turned to the centre for parenting support. She just finished her second workshop on family planning. A topic she feels strongly about. "I don't want to have another child yet. My husband knows that," says Hana. "In Aleppo, I was admitted to hospital once, for something minor, but I could hear the fighting and the missiles in the distance. I remember thinking 'I must not get pregnant in this situation.' So, I got contraceptives to prevent a pregnancy because I knew it was too dangerous and we were not safe." Hana describes the difficult health situation in Syria where many hospitals are out of service or unable to cope with critical conditions. "There just aren't enough doctors and nurses. And some hospitals have even been targeted. I was also worried because the electricity cuts out often and there's a lack of fuel. Even the generators wouldn't work. What if something happened during labour," Hana asks.

"I haven't changed my mind about having another baby yet. We just got here. Maybe in the future, who knows? But it's not the right time now."

HABEEBA

"Before the war, we had a good life. My children were doing well in school. We weren't rich but for me it was like heaven. Our family life was happier, too. I only left Dara'a to keep my children safe."

Now there's a lot of tension due to the family's financial situation. Her oldest son has recently found work but as a result the family was excluded from the food aid programme. "I don't know why. My son is the only one who works and he only earns 250JD. It's barely enough to pay for rent and bills. We need the vouchers. I'm not sure how we can manage without them."

"Discrimination is normalised," Habeeba explains.

Many Syrians experience discrimination, especially from informal and formal authorities such as landlords. Landlords often ask for rent in advance, pushing or threatening vulnerable Syrian families out of their accommodation. The other day the man responsible for running water came to her house and asked for money in advance, even though they had just settled their previous bill not long ago. When she refused to pay because of her lack of funds, he replied: 'You Syrians are always unreliable.'

"Our life has to continue. If there isn't just a little bit of normality, then we'll have nothing," says Habeeba who is determined to keep her children in school. After hearing from a neighbour about its services, Habeeba turned to a women's centre to help her and her children to adjust to their new environment. "My two youngest children don't go to school because they get bullied there. They call them 'Syrians' like it's an insult! I worry what is going to become of them without an education."

SHAHD



Shahd, 37, mother of three children, from Yarmouk, Syria, now living in Zarqa, Jordan

"Jordan is very expensive. We get food vouchers but you can only buy a limited range of products in designated shops. Only groceries and no hygiene products, luckily we can get those here at the centre," Shahd, a mother of three, laughs. "The prices of the marked items you can get with the vouchers are very expensive. I've seen much lower prices in the regular market." The family's finances and capacity to provide for her family are Shahd's main worries.

Everything else is secondary.

"I wish my children could just be children, and play with their friends in the afternoon. But my two boys work in a shop selling electric appliances after school. They earn 50JD each," Shahd is a shy talking about her children having to contribute to the family's income. "But it does help us pay the rent. My husband doesn't always work. And we don't get much help."

Shahd tries to be strong for her family but it is evident she wishes that life would be easier for her children's sake.

"I would have preferred to stay in Syria but that was impossible. We're from Yarmouk and we just got out in the nick of time. We could have all died there."

Shahd talks about her last days in Syria. Fighters burned her home in Yarmouk, Damascus while she was visiting her parents with her children. They lost everything and have nothing to remember their former lives by.

"When I got to the house with my brother, I saw that were looting my house, they took everything we had. Then they attacked us. They beat my brother in front of my eyes. And he urged me to run away. I took my children and escaped to Jordan without being able to take anything. Just the clothes on our backs. No savings. Nothing. We just had each other. I was so relieved when we reached safety. But my brother died that day. I think he saved our lives and miss him."

The trauma the war and flight has caused her daughter to lose her hair. She doesn't sleep because of recurring

nightmares and is withdrawn and quiet during the day. "It breaks my heart."

Even in the absence of direct exposure to the brutality and loss of war, the breakdown of stability can trigger emotional distress in children, resulting in feelings of fear, panic attacks and other forms of anxiety, disobedience, nightmares and regressive behaviour such as bedwetting. It can have serious longterm effects on the mental health of children, which often manifests in social isolation, aggression and depression.

In the refugee setting, parents are not always able to provide attention to children's needs. Changes in behaviour of parents, lack of access to education and recreation have a significant effect on children. Opportunities for children to interact socially is a critical aspect of ensuring children's psychosocial wellbeing.

ABEER



Abeer, 23, mother of three children, from Dara'a, Syria, now living in Deir Alla, Jordan

"I miss my house in Dara'a. We've just finished it when we had to flee Syria in spring last year and hardly lived in it," says Abeer, a mother of three young children under 5, about her home in Dara'a. "It was small but it was comfortable and it was ours. We've saved for a very long time before we were able to start construction. And my husband did much of the work himself. Family and friends all pitched in to help. Whenever they had any time to spare, they would help us finish the building work. And I prepared special meals to thank them for their hard work and friendship."

"When it was finished, I enjoyed decorating the house. I loved making it homely for my family. I chose all the furniture. And I tried to make the bedrooms special for my son and daughter. It was supposed to be our forever home where we would raise our children – a place of refuge where my children could always feel safe and protected. I don't even know if it still stands," says Abeer.

"You never think this could happen to you," says Abeer about becoming a refugee. "In the news, you see it happening to other people and you feel for them. You imagine what it must be like to leave your home, your memories and everything you know behind but you never expect it to happen to you. But it did. It happened to us," Abeer sighs. Adjusting to life in exile hasn't been easy for her and her young family. "We have nothing now. No savings. Only debt. And we haven't received much aid, only food vouchers. My husband works sometimes but we never know how to pay the rent."

After settling in Jordan, Abeer has had her third child. The baby girl is now 5 months old. "I came to the women's centre when I was pregnant with my daughter. Healthcare is free at the clinic that's why I came here first," says Abeer who was approached by a volunteer. Abeer also visits the women's centre in Zarqa because she was worried about the wellbeing of her two older children and how their experiences or war and displacement have affected them.

"I can bring my children and they can play with other children their age."

Visiting the women's centre in Deir Alla regularly, Abeer has become part of a wider support network of Syrian refugee women who offer each other encouragement and friendship that helps them adjust to life in a foreign country.

"At first, I was worried about my daughter. I want to enrol her at school next year. In Syria, education is free but I didn't know if I could afford to send her to school here. At the centre, there is always someone to talk to and ask questions. It's difficult for us refugees; we don't know where we can turn for advice like this. But everybody here is very supportive. I've made new friends; we visit and help each other. I now feel like I'm part of a community. And with the skills I'm learning at the centre I'm dreaming of starting my own small business soon."

JANNAH



Ever since the family of six fled Syria and failing to adapt to their new life in Jordan, Jannah's husband has withdrawn himself from his family. "He doesn't do anything. He doesn't even look for work anymore. I provide for him. I get food for us," she said ardently, "And I feed him." Jannah is proud to be able to provide for the family.

The Jordan Valley is an agricultural area. Jannah and her 14-year-old daughter, Maysa, are the only members of the family currently in employment. They work on nearby farms from sunrise to sunset. The work is hard and the fertilisers used in the farm cause a rash that they haven't been able to get rid off but she says they don't care. It's a steady source of income and it allows Jannah to always have an eye on her daughter. The work pays reasonably well though most of the money to cover the rent, utilities and food. Life in Jordan is expensive and the family doesn't have any savings left.

Keeping her fourteen-year-old daughter, Maysa, safe is Jannah's main concern. "Men stop by to ask about my daughter all the time," says the mother of four. Boys and men in the area harass them constantly. Everybody tries to get to her. And neighbours and relatives advice Jannah to marry her off as soon as possible so she wouldn't have to worry about her safety anymore. But even though she's not in a position to send her to school, Jannah believes Maysa is too young to marry.

"There is a Jordanian woman going from family to family. She asked about my daughter trying to arrange a marriage with a local man but when I refused she insulted me. 'Who do you think we are?' she asked, 'I would have paid 100JD for the girl.' But you can't buy my daughter." Jannah is exhausted trying to keep the family together and her daughter safe.

Talking about early marriage, Jannah fervently expresses the bewilderment she felt when she learned that yet another daughter of an acquaintance has been married off at a young age. "I don't know why these families arrange marriages for their children," she shakes her head in disbelief.

"I will die before I give my daughter away. I will not marry her off at this age! I'm here. I'm taking her to work with me to work everyday. I want to protect her because I can't leave her at the tent during the day. It's too dangerous. I need to be with her to protect her."

"I know of a family whose 13-year-old daughter got married not long ago. They don't have many children, she was the only girl and they are educated people. I wonder how big a burden she could have been for the family? I don't think they know how an early marriage can destroy the spirit and health of a child. I want my daughter to play. I want her to go to school. She needs someone to take care of her and protect her. She should not have to take care of a family!"

"Our life is not easy and we may not be rich but I love my children. And I want to spend more time with Maysa before she's getting married," say Jannah who has already declined a proposal, against her family's wishes. "It is too early. Maybe love was not an option for my generation; but I want her to be able to chose marriage for the right reasons," she says with a smile. "It's my dream for her to go to school. I'll keep looking for a way to send her to school again. I want her to be able to do the things I wasn't able to do myself."

FARAH

Women are the sole providers for one in four Syrian refugee families. They struggle to provide food and shelter for their children and often face harassment and isolation. Many refugees don't know anyone in their new country, and it's hard to find support within their new environment.

Access to financial resources to cover basic household needs is a major concern for many Syrian families. Female heads of households in particular find it difficult to generate an income as they struggle to balance the need to work with socio-cultural factors that sometimes limit women's interaction in public.

Traditionally Syrian men work while women stay at home. Now those women must find ways to provide financially, often while raising children as well as caring for family members with chronic illnesses or disabilities.

Farah is a mother of four from Damascus. In Syria, Farah and her husband owned their home. She did not work. "It was a peaceful life," she says, "until the fighting began." Her husband went missing amid the crisis. She doesn't know what happened to him. She heard rumours from neighbours but she can't be sure. Farah is clinging to the hope that he's still alive and that they'll be reunited again.

In Jordan, the aid her family receives isn't enough to pay for rent, bills and food. Farah is the sole provider for her four children and elderly mother. She faced countless obstacles trying to find a job. She has never worked before and feels a lack of experience and skills is holding her back.

Hoping to improve her skills and chances for better work, Farah participates in training programmes at the women's centre in Zarqa. Since attending the counselling activities, the pressure of providing for her family doesn't weigh as much any more. "Coming to the centre has helped me gain a new perspective. I have made friends and I learn new skills. I can get support when I need it." After visiting the centre regularly for weekly counselling activities and socialising with other Syrian women, Farah identified an opportunity to increase her income. Farah is now preparing meals for women in her neighbourhood who, due to the overcrowded and unsuitable housing, don't have access to a kitchen of their own. "Without the centre I wouldn't have had the confidence to approach my neighbours and offer to cook for them. I didn't even know many of them."

"We have to discover hidden strengths in ourselves. I have to be stronger. I'm often tired, and I struggle, but I'm providing for my family," says Farah proudly. "Syrian women are smart. Things have changed and now we are the providers of the household."

Farah, 34, mother of four children. She lives with her children and elderly mother since her husband went missing in Syria.

WUROUD



"I found a purpose and stopped feeling sorry for myself," she says. "Now day after day I feel stronger. I take strength from the people around me as well. We help each other out."

Before the war, it was Wuroud's dream to become a teacher but when she was expecting her first child she had to put her dreams on hold. Then the war started and everything changed. During her flight from Dara'a Wuroud was separated from her husband and thought she may never see him again. She waited for him and the border and luckily they were reunited. In Azraq RC, Wuroud has been able to regain some of her confidence.

"You can't compare it to before the war though. But here I have the chance to work, help others and make a contribution. I teach literacy skills to 11 women. Those women were never given the opportunity to learn before but are now able to read and write because of the centres. In fact, we all start learning new things. Without the crisis we wouldn't have moved away from home but now we learn new things and learn about things we didn't know about before. Being able to socialise with other women from all over Syria who went through similar experiences is a source of strength for me. And it's a great opportunity."

Wuroud, 25, from Dara'a, is a volunteer at the women's centre in Azraq RC, Jordan.

YARA

While most domestic violence is a reaction to new surroundings and dynamics, in some cases, abuse that began back home spirals out of control when compounded with the stress of being a refugee. "It was happening before – but now it's worse," says Yara, a mother of five. In order to combat the problem faced by women and children, the women's centre provides one-to-one counselling, as well as dedicated outreach teams who visit refugee communities in urban areas and give workshops on abuse – often detecting cases in the audience. Social workers and outreach volunteers sit down with families and have discussions with men and women's groups.

"At home, in Syria, I didn't notice it so much because we were living with my husband's family. Now that we live here on our own, without his family, he's been shouting more and more." In Jordan, their relationship grew tense and her husband became more violent. "He's mad all the time. And we argue a lot about little things. We also have a lot of money worries. Our rent is 200JD, it's too much. Even if we worked day and night, it would be a struggle."

Since arriving in Jordan last year, the family has been struggling to get by. The aid they receive barely covers their expenses and without a work permit her husband only works occasionally as a labourer. Sometimes he sells tea and coffee. The family's financial situation is further complicated by the fact that Yara has to care for her brother who's lost both of his legs in the war. He used to care for his mother at home but now it falls to Yara to send her money whenever she has a little to spare. She feels guilty not to be able to take care of her, too. The responsibility she feels for her brother and mother further fuels tensions between the couple. She's tired and exhausted.



Yara, 25, mother of four young children, from Aleppo, Syria, now living in Deir Alla, Jordan.

HAJAR & IBRAHIM

"Homs is a city of horror," says Hajar a mother of four from Homs. All of her children but her oldest daughter are living with her and her husband, Ibrahim, in Zarqa, Jordan. "There was the smell of explosives everywhere, there were fires burning that filled the air with black smoke. I used to go to work every day and hear the sound of snipers' bullets. The worst thing was the fear of kidnapping," she says. "Sometimes we didn't take out the rubbish for days for fear of being in the street."

"It's hard, especially for the children," adds Ibrahim. "Our main worry is their welfare. As an adult you can cope, but the little ones don't understand what's happening. They are afraid of sudden noises and if a door slams they jump."

When the fighting came closer and closer to their neighbourhood he thought, "We either die here or we get out of Homs now. Before heading to Jordan, we went to Damascus to stay with my daughter and her family but their neighbourhood wasn't safe either. There was fighting everywhere, and I decided we must move on," says Ibrahim sadly. "My son-in-law didn't want to leave Damascus, and at first, my wife didn't want to go either because of my daughter. It was difficult for us to leave them in Damascus. It was the last time we saw our daughter and our grandchildren."

When Hajar talks about her daughter her eyes tear up. The couple and three youngest children left their home in Homs two years ago but their daughter and grandchildren are still in Syria. "We talk everyday. I worry about her. It's not safe. I wish she was here with us in Zarqa."

Ibrahim says that all their financial worries pale compared to the concern about their daughter and her young family. "Our family is scattered all over. We have family who are now in Turkey, Lebanon and here in Jordan. Only my daughter is still in Syria."

"My mother recently died. I didn't see her and now my daughter has no family left in Syria," a tear fell down her cheek. "My daughter tells me they only have electricity a few hours a day. And I fear it's not safe for her to stay there but...." Hajar's voice breaks. "That the family is separated is very hard on us."

"Everyone comes with a story," says Hajar about the women's centre in Zarqa. "So many of the stories are tragic. Women who have lost their husbands in the war or even a child, and families that are separated, like ours. Here at the centre, we can talk about our experiences, we share our sorrow and we support each other, too. Before I came to the centre, I didn't leave the house very often and I didn't even know my neighbours. The loneliness made it difficult for me to cope with my emotions."

"I'm a carpenter. In Syria, I had my own shop," says Ibrahim proudly as he remembers his previous life before the war. "I wish they'd allow me to work in Jordan legally. I'm skilled. I have experience."

The refugees from Syria have left everything they know and own behind and have become dependent on humanitarian assistance, but they carry a wealth of experience, education and skills with them across the border. Ibrahim is keen to work as a carpenter again, he feels he could make a valuable contribution with his experience as a carpenter but he doesn't have work permit.

"The work permit is very expensive, I can't afford to get one anyway. And I've heard that even if you manage to get one, UNHCR will immediately suspend your aid. But I don't know anyone with a work permit who found steady work, and they still need to borrow money to get by. Most people try finding work illegally for very little money and no security."

Hajar, 44, and Ibrahim, 50, from Homs, have 4 children. Two are younger than 18. The family now lives in Zarqa, Jordan.



SHEHAB

Shehab, 7, from Dara'a, Syria, with his family in Azraq RC, Jordan. He was allowed to visit his family to celebrate the Islamic New Year.



Noor lights up when she talks about her son Shehab. "Before the war, he was a happy child. All my children were." There is a lot of love in Noor's home. She tries to make life as normal as possible for her children. "I work hard to make things nice," she said. "But they see the truth," she says while hugging Shehab. It's like she doesn't want let go of him ever again.

Shehab is a bright boy with an infectious laugh. "He's always been good. Never caused me any worries," that was until the day their neighbourhood in Dara'a came under bombardment and their home was hit. Part of a wall had collapsed on top of Shehab and

his brother, Zaid, who had rushed over to Shehab to protect him but the boys were trapped under the rubble.

At the sight of her children trapped and injured, Noor collapsed. The children and their mother were rushed to hospital for emergency treatments but when they arrived Shehab's father, Abid, was told Shehab needed extensive work and that the hospital was unable to perform the surgery Shehab needed. The hospital staff urged him to take him to Jordan instead. They left on the spot and the boys were rushed to the hospital in ar Ramtha.

Shehab underwent two surgeries but despite the efforts made by medical staff in ar Ramtha, the delay in accessing healthcare facilities immediately after the incident in Dara'a meant that Shehab's legs could not be saved.

While the boys were treated in ar Rmatha, the rest of the family was sent to Za'atari RC. Noor wasn't able to visit her sons in hospital for three weeks until 'Eid. "I know they were well looked after medically but children need their mother. I missed them so much. It was very difficult for us not to be able to visit or care for them. But finally we've been able to relocate and we're a family again."

The staff at women's centres in Za'atari and Azraq RC have supported Noor and Abid in the administrative processes involved in their relocation. Shehab is also able stay with his parents in between hospital stays due to the continued efforts of dedicated personnel.

"This has been a difficult situation for us. A child shouldn't be alone at the hospital, and parents need to be able to visit their child. We need to be together."

Noor continues, "as a refugee, you are suddenly alone. If you're lucky like me, you still have your family but we have all lost loved ones. And all our friends and

family are either in Syria or scattered across the region. It's important to have these people in your life, but that's all gone. Every Syrian family has a story. Sadly, our stories are not unique."

Abid says about his experiences, "we tried to stay neutral and not get involved in order to protect my family. But this is what happened to us. We lost everything, my sons were injured and Shehab lost his legs. For what?"

The prolonged separation of his family following Shehab injury has weighed heavily on him. Regardless of his own frustrations, Abid says that his wife has suffered a great deal more "Noor

is a strong woman, she has always supported me. Now I try to be strong for her. We're all happy that Shehab was finally able to visit us but he needs to return to the hospital soon. I'm happy he receives the treatments he needs but I hope that soon he'll be well enough to stay with us for good."

Shehab's condition continues to make improvements but his injuries are still healing. He's looking forward to the day the prostheses will be fitted.

MAHMOUD

"Going home is our dream," says Mahmoud, a family man with four young children under the age of six. The family fled Hama one and a half years ago. Mahmoud's youngest child is only 20 days old. His wife and oldest daughter visited the clinic and women's centre throughout their pregnancies and now receive postnatal care.

"I miss my old life. I miss work, our orchard, walking down familiar streets, visiting my favourite café, and neighbourly chats. The children miss school and their friends. We miss days out with the family. I miss my mother's cooking and sharing meals with the whole family – sisters, brothers, uncles, the children, everybody coming together at my mother's house. We all miss home. I carry the key to my house with me in my pocket everywhere I go. But I'm afraid we will never get the old life back."

"My family has suffered a lot. Especially the children," Mahmoud holds his daughter close as he describes how his children have been affected by the war and displacement. "My daughter is so young, she doesn't remember our life before the war. All she knows is conflict and exile. As the war went on, she stopped talking. She didn't play with her siblings or the other children in the neighbourhood anymore. As a father, it hurts me to see my child like this. My wife mentioned this once when she visited the women's centre for a prenatal visit, and the staff told her about the rehabilitation programme for children," explains Suleiman.

"Since then, we all go together. My daughter has improved so much. She now starts saying 'mom' and 'dad,' and she is more outgoing. The progress my daughter made gives me hope. And I decided to get counselling, too. We've been through a difficult time and I think the centre has helped us a lot."

Mahmoud is also receiving psychological support at the clinic in Deir Alla. "Before coming to the centre, I felt torn within. It's difficult because here I cannot provide for my children." Mahmoud remembers, "I was really scared of the future. I was afraid of everything but working with the counsellor has helped me gain a new perspective. I feel much better. I'm not as anxious anymore and I can take better care of my family."

The clinic Mahmoud's family visits has a comprehensive approach to service delivery that combines free healthcare provision with psychosocial support for both children and adults. "We come here together as a family and we can all get the help we need. At the same place. At the same time. That's a great advantage. Especially the children benefit. There is the rehabilitation programme for children but they can also play with the toys and other children. My daughter is much happier now."



Mahmoud, 47, father of four, from Dara'a, Syria, now living in Deir Alla, Jordan.



FADI

According to statistics from the Jordanian government, most registered marriages of Syrian refugees are to other Syrians rather than people outside the refugee community.

"I love my daughters. I don't them to move to another country. If my daughter married a Jordanian man she would stay here, and I would miss her. It's my wish for all of us to return to Syria together," says Fadi.

In fact, Syrian men attending the men's session at the centre in Za'atari RC are offended by the suggestion that they might want to marry off their daughters to men of other nationalities. Most said it is difficult to verify the background and social status of potential husbands.



SAMI

The financial situation of Syrian families is often very difficult. So when a man proposes to their daughters, they often agree, regardless of whether this man is suitable or not. The dowry is often very small and sometimes no dowry is paid at all. Sami, a man attending a psychosocial workshop run by UNFPA to help adjust Syrian men to life in exile and changing family dynamics, told me about a man none of his neighbours knew was going around asking whether there were unmarried Syrian women who want to get married to Jordanian men.

"It is both annoying and humiliating. These People are not helping Syrians, but exploiting our difficult conditions."

Out of fear of harassment and exploitation, he told his daughter to stay inside and not to talk to anyone if he's not at home. Sami doesn't want his daughter to marry and feels guilty for keeping her inside for most of the day, restricting her freedom



BASIL

Basil talks about the hardships of living here. He gets angry when asked if he would ever consider marrying one of daughters to an older man who offers a lot of money.

This is why he's going to make sure his daughters "marry a Syrian man in the future." Basil added, "Syrians will treat them better, I hope. They are too young to marry yet, I want them to go to school and learn."

"Those marriages all end up in prostitution," he said, referring to short-term marriages, a legal cover for sexual exploitation.

Basil heard that one of his Syrian acquaintances "sold" his underage daughter to a local man. The wedding was done in secret by a local sheikh, as Jordan does not allow people under the age of 18 to get married. After a few days, the man brought the girl back to her family.

YASMEEN

The lack of work is a common concern for displaced Syrians. Jobs are a source of distraction and dignity, but they are difficult to come by, and difficult to keep. Female Syrian refugees are particularly vulnerable to unemployment. Most women looking for work in Lebanon are unable to find a job. If they do find employment, they're earning about 40 per cent less on average than their male counterparts.

"I want to learn new skills but I'd also like to contribute here," says Yasmeen who is expecting another child. But instead of looking forward to having her baby, Yasmeen is concerned with her family's finances.

"I worked as an accountant before the war and I would like to get a job and be able to support my family. I'm qualified but I think the skills I learn at the women's centre will help me find better work in Lebanon." Like many educated and highly skilled middle-class Syrians, Yasmeen and her husband are struggling to find work that matches their skill level.

Roughly one third of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are unemployed. Most Syrians, who have found employment, work in unskilled or semi-skilled professions. They earn less than minimum wage. Her husband's wage alone is not enough to cover the expenses of Yasmeen's family. Even though she's pregnant, she feels the pressure of having to contribute to the household income.

But the women's centre offers Yasmeen more than just training to improve her chances of finding a job once she's and her baby. She also found a place of refuge and a support network.

"I try to go every day. It's the only time I get to myself. I can meet with the other women, talk and forget about my worries for a little while. We've become good friends. And we help each other. I'm going to have my baby soon and I didn't have any baby clothes. I didn't feel prepared but my friends gave me baby clothes and blankets they didn't need anymore. We didn't plan to have another child because we feel insecure but it's a comfort to have supportive friends."

"Life here doesn't get worse," she said. "It doesn't get any better either. We just want to go home," says Yasmeen, who's expecting her third child. Then she talks about her life in Nabatieh. "My home is very small. We are eleven people in my house. It's too many. We can stay at the house until the end of the year but then we will have to move. I don't know if we can find something that we can afford. And we will have another baby by then, too." Yasmeen implores, "it's so important that I find a job."

Yasmeen, accountant and soon mother of two, in her home in Kfar Seer, Lebanon.

AMEERA

Syrian women refugees are exposed to sexual harassment more than Lebanese women simply because of their status as refugees, which is associated with economic vulnerability. Indeed, many of the Syrian women refugees mentioned that this stigmatisation and harassment is making their husbands and families overly protective, limiting their mobility. In some cases, ensuing family tensions appear to have led to domestic violence.

When Ameera first came to the centre, she always worried about people knowing she is a widow. She asked her neighbours to warn her if they see anyone hanging around. "Men often knock on our door and pretend they work with Islamic aid agencies," she says. She does not answer. Sometimes she calls out, 'Brother, please check who's at the door!' to trick visitors when she's alone. She lived in perpetual fear of harassment.

"It is difficult to be both the mother and the father at once," she explained, smiling modestly; her husband died almost two years ago in Syria. Ameera describes her how loving and caring her relationship with her husband was.

"My husband and I have been married for thirteen years and we were very much in love. But he's been taken away from me." Ameera and her three children now share a small flat in an unfinished building with her brother and his in-laws. Their house is small, cold, damp and overflowing with people. "There is no privacy at home."

"For a long time, I was very sad. I missed my husband. I was very pale, and had lost a lot of weight" say Ameera about the time before she accessed services at the women's centre. After the loss of her husband and home, Ameera became depressed and increasingly withdrawn. At the centre, she receives counselling to help her cope with her bereavement.

Here, Ameera is regaining her confidence, and attended therapy and drama therapy sessions. She learned to express herself and talk about her feelings of loss and anxiety. She says of herself that she feels like a new person. "Those close to me, my son and my friends, cannot believe how much I've changed. I used to wear black everyday, now I like to wear colours again. And I smile more."

"Before I came to the centre, I didn't know about the different forms of violence against women. I didn't know it could happen within a family, too. My husband and I were happy, though we got married when I was very young. But after he died I was unhappy, and my family was very controlling. Now, I stand up for myself. And I feel strong enough to talk about my experience. Here, I met my best friend. I learn new skills – I even take English classes – that will help me find work. It's my dream to have my own place just for my son and me."



Ameera, 26, mother of three children, in the women's centre in al Marj, Lebanon

RANA



Rana, from Cham (Damascus), Syria, in the women's centre in Nabatieh, Lebanon. Her 17-year old twin daughters - Malak and Hala - are both married and expecting their first child soon.

Some Syrian refugees marry off their daughters at a young age believing that marital status offers a form of protection from predators, rape and violence against women as well as a means to safeguard their daughter's future.

But these girls, who by fleeing the war in Syria have already been subjected to more than any child should, are at risk of mental health issues resulting from social isolation, stress and abuse.

"My daughter, Hala, married for love," says Rana. "I got married when I was her

age [17], too, so I didn't think it would be a problem." Rana talks quietly about her life in Damascus before the war. It's only a distant memory now. She talks about her son and her twin daughters, Hala and Malak, who are now seventeen years old. And how the family decided to leave because they were afraid her son would have been drafted to the military soon. Her husband, a taxi driver, narrowly escaped three mortar explosions before giving up work.

Three months he was unemployed not able to find safer employment. They didn't any future for themselves or their children if they stayed in Damascus.

Before they left Damascus Hala and Malak got married. Hala wasn't able to join her family in Lebanon because her new in-laws are Palestinian-Syrian and, as Palestinians, are currently banned from entering Lebanon.

"I was happy for her. She was in love. But now..." Rana pauses, "Now, he's become another person. They are stuck in Syria. I worry about her. Her husband is very controlling now. He's not treating her well. She can't go out or meet friends and he started beating her. She has no privacy in her home. She lives with her parents-in-law and their grown children.

Her in-laws insult her saying that she isn't a good wife. It leads to more arguments with her husband. And I can't protect her anymore." Rana explains that Hala had an abortion not long ago because she didn't feel ready to be mother yet. Alone in Syria and without her mother and siblings, it was a difficult time for her that was exacerbated by the tensions in her new home. Rana believes that letting her daughter get married was a mistake. "He's taking his frustrations out on Hala because we are far away."

Malak got married soon after her sister's wedding. Unlike Hala, Malak and her husband were able to leave Syria with her parents. Rana explains that she let her daughters marry young because she feared for their safety. "I was so worried about Malak when we moved to Lebanon. What if something happened to her? I thought she'd be safer with a husband." Rana is despairing because Malak's new husband has started beating her daughter. Malak is unable to cope with the sudden responsibilities of wife and homemaker, and she's been diagnosed with depression and anxiety. The tense relationship with her husband and her in-laws is overwhelming for the girl. "He shouts at her when she makes mistakes. And sometimes she passes out because of the stress this situation causes her. She misses her sister, too; they were so close. She's pregnant now. I don't know what can I do to help her."

Early marriages leave girls vulnerable to abuse. Still children themselves, both sisters are now expecting their first child. Instead of protecting Malak and Hala from harm, marrying at a young age has left them even more exposed to exploitation and violence.

A girl who marries young and becomes pregnant — regardless of the circumstances or reasons — is a girl whose rights are undermined. A married girl is likely to be pressured or forced to leave school. She is denied her right to an education. A girl who is prevented from accessing contraception or even information about preventing a pregnancy is denied her right to education.

"I'm not able to help either of my daughters. I feel there is nothing we can do." Rana and her husband wish nothing more than to bring their daughters home but feel helpless.

War and displacement has left Malak and Hala exposed to abuse, and in their predicament Rana and her husband are unable to offer them parental protection.

On the contrary, they feel vulnerable themselves in Lebanon. "It's not easy for Syrians in Lebanon. They don't like us here and think we have to accept this abuse because we're refugees," Rana cries.

"My husband is insulted in the street. He was attacked by local youths once. He works so hard to provide for us but we just make ends meet. In the market, they demand higher prices from me because I'm Syrian. And even I get harassed in the street. I'm the mother of grown children yet men call after me: 'yeah, you're cheap,' 'come with me, I know you have experience.' It's humiliating and frightening. I think the harassment is even worse for married women. These men think we're experienced and lose that we'd accept their vulgar offers

unlike unmarried women. As a married woman and mother of two daughters, I know exactly what they're thinking of when they're catcalling. It's degrading. We are all suffering in displacement but that I'm not able to protect my girls is the worst feeling."

Rana started visiting the women's centre in Nabatieh to take part in the recreational activities the centre offers.

"I wanted to take my mind of my sorrows. At home, I would constantly worry about my daughters but also about our money troubles. How are we going to keep a roof over our heads? At first, I felt guilty to come here to do embroidery. But I realised that there are a lot of services on offer — not just recreational activities. And the people here are very helpful." Rana sees a counsellor on a regular basis and is also taking part in therapeutic activities such as art and drama therapy. "It helps me to express my feelings. I feel like a different person after class."

By expressing herself through art, an art therapist helps Rana understand things about herself that she otherwise may not have comprehended. It helps displaced women like Rana process complex emotions and feelings that they're struggling with to facilitate healing. Art therapy can help improve various mental and physical symptoms including anxiety, tension and reducing pain. It can be beneficial to those who have mental disorders, post traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) and have suffered emotional abuse.



ZAFIRAH & HAIFA



Zafirah with her baby, her mother, Haifa, and her siblings in her home, an unfinished, abandoned building in rural Lebanon.

Here, amid the chaos of displaced people, it's easy for women like Haifa to feel forgotten, as though they've entirely lost their place in the world. Gone are their homes and their possessions. Gone are some of their family members and friends. Gone is the support of a tightknit community. They struggle to create some kind of normalcy. And are forced to make heart-breaking choices.

Haifa, a widow and mother of six children, is a cancer survivor. Before the war, she went into remission after a long battle with cancer, countless rounds of radiotherapy and surgery. In Syria, healthcare was free. Now in Lebanon, Haifa tries not to think about

the cancer. But the intrusive thoughts and doubts that keep torturing her. Am I still in remission? Has the cancer come back? Would I be able to fight it again? What's to become of the children? Endless questions keep nagging her.

"I didn't have any follow up appointments since we left Syria. I wouldn't be able to afford treatment anyway. Not in Lebanon. I can't go back to Syria for the treatment, my children are too young, I can't leave them here and I don't want them to go back to Syria. It's not safe for them."

The responsibility of safeguarding her young children is weighing heavy on Haifa. "Here, there is nothing," she says. "I try to recreate some things from our old life but it can't be done. It's not the same. When I think back to Syria, everything about it is better. Even the air." Haifa is despairing. Her family depends on her and they are barely scraping by. "I only use one spoonful of the milk powder to prepare the formula for the little ones hoping it would last longer." She doesn't like to talk about her worries because she doesn't want the younger children to know.

In this context, women like Haifa see marriage as the only means of survival. Her daughter is only 14 years old but already married. It was a difficult decision but the family saves money with one less person to feed and care for. "No girl wants this life," says Zafirah while holding her baby.

"There was no choice. My mother isn't well and I have a lot of young siblings. I was a burden to them." Zafirah describes how a Lebanese woman was visiting the neighbourhood looking for a girl to marry her son. She offered them a "mehr" – a dowry – that eased the family's financial burden. "I was able to repay a debt and buy

food and clothing for the children. It's sad but we really needed the money," explains Haifa. The dowry that was paid was enough to support the family for almost a year.

But married life is not how Zafirah imagined. She sacrificed the dreams she had for her future instead spends her days taking care of her husband and youngson. Taking on adult responsibilities wasn't an easy adjustment for her. Her husband often complains to her mother that Zafirah can't cook or clean. "She wants to play and go to school like she used to in Syria. He's realising that he married a child and he doesn't have patience with her." Zafirah relies on

her mother to help her with household chores and looking after the baby.

At fourteen the reality of being a homemaker, wife and mother is overwhelming. She has become increasingly depressed and scared – especially of her husband's advances.

Outreach volunteers of the women's centre in al Marj have recently approached Haifa and Zafirah. Zafirah was given a comprehensive medical examination, and began receiving regular psychosocial support. She is now working with social workers to improve their economical situation and psychological wellbeing.

Najwa, 27, widow and mother of four, in her home she shares with her in-laws in Lebanon.

NAJWAN

"I think the war has changed my life. Before I was dead but now I'm alive," says Najwan, a young mother of four who fled Syria with her young children and in-laws when her husband went missing.

Najwan describes a traumatic childhood and a loveless marriage. "My parents got divorced when I was nine years old. My father took my sister and me away from my mother and he left us with our grandmother." Without a loving parent to look out for her, Najwan was groomed by a neighbour soon after she moved in with her grandmother. For three years she had to endure the abuse of a trusted neighbour and family friend. Najwan was too young to understand what was happening but when her eventually grandmother discovered the abuse it was her who was punished not her abuser. Najwan was only thirteen years old when her family rushed to marry her off to an older man. Her in-laws took advantage of her youth and insecurity. She was a traumatised child overwhelmed by her new responsibilities and her family's expectations. Her mother-in-law especially vented her frustrations and anger on Najwan. Instead of guiding the child, she punished her for every mistake. "I didn't know how to run a household and didn't know how to cook. My mother-in-law always pointed out my mistakes and hit me and insulted me. My husband never interfered or asked his mother to be more understanding with me," remembers Najwan. She felt she didn't deserve better.

"Then the war started and things began to change," says Najwan. "Before the war, my husband was working hard to provide for us. But when the war started there was very little work and fighting everywhere. One day, he went out looking for food for our family.

But he never came back. We didn't know what happened to him. The family was desperate to find him. There was no food. No water. No electricity. We were in a miserable state. My children kept asking me, 'where is daddy?' I told them that he was travelling. Every day bombs hit our neighbourhood. There was no place we could go to for safety. This is why we fled. Even here in Lebanon, I'm thinking that my husband may still be alive. Only recently we heard what happened. Our neighbours said he was arrested and they believe that he has been killed, but they can't be sure. I have not him yet mourned. I don't know if I can believe what I've heard."

When Najwan arrived with her in-laws in Lebanon, Najwan was mentally and physically exhausted. The family doesn't have any savings and they're struggling to earn enough money for the rent. Najwan was especially worried about the wellbeing of her youngest son. "Emad is only 4 years-old, he doesn't know anything but this crisis. He doesn't have the same childhood my older children had before the war. He can't play outside, it feels like I'm keeping him in prison."

A friend in the neighbourhood told her that the women's centre could help her and her son. "We started seeing a therapist. And I'm feeling much stronger." Even her friend says she's a different woman now. "She's not the person, she was before."

"The centre has helped me a lot. I'm learning new skills. I'm going to all the classes they offer at the centre. I want to learn everything. I missed out on school because I married young but here I have a chance to learn again. And I'm enjoying it so much. I have attended all the communications workshops, too."

"And I have started to stand up for myself. For the first time, I have said 'no' to my mother-in-law," Najwan is radiating as she describes the ways in which the centre has helped her.

After working with a social worker and attending intensive counselling sessions and workshops, Najwan has gained a confidence she's never had before.

"I've decided to say 'no' to any one who wants to hurt me."

The day Najwan decided to be more assertive, her life turned around. "I'm now strong enough to politely say 'no' to my mother-in-law, and she stopped bothering me. My in-laws are not as controlling as they used to be. They don't like me coming to the centre but they can't stop me."

At the centre, Najwan has been able to become more assertive and independent but she's also found a strong support network in the other women who visit the centre. "We've become very good friends. I feel loved and supported for the first time. They are like family to me."

"It's my dream to have a job and my own house for my children and me. I've never imagined that I would have to work or want to work. I used to see myself as a homemaker and mother. But because of the war, I'm a refugee, a widow and have to provide for my children. The situation forced me to rethink. And with the support from the centre, I'm more confident and more capable. I like the idea of working now because I know I have friends who love and support me. I'm not alone anymore. I don't have to face my problems alone anymore but can talk about my feelings and problems with loved ones. And I'm happy to support my friends with their dreams, too."

ZUBAIR

Zubeir is a quiet boy. He's 17 but looks much older. He's only been able to join his mother and sister in Lebanon a few months ago. He's trying to find work to support them but his body is covered in scars and his leg is badly injured still. "It's not easy to find work here if you can't do physical work."

His mother, Jihan, explains, "He's been through a lot in Syria." The neighbourhood was raided one evening almost two years ago. "They went from house to house arresting all men with similar sounding names. They entered our house and took Zubeir," say Jihan. "They just took my son. We didn't what was happening. It was like an abduction." Zubeir was 15 years old when he was held for a year in administrative detention without trial before being sentenced in his absence to four months in Adra prison.

"The prison was ok. The time I spent in the security holding was horrible. I was arrested with almost one hundred people. We were put in one large room. There were at least 25 other children my age in the cell. We didn't get any food for the first few days."

"They tortured us everyday for the first weeks. They wanted me to confess to a crime I didn't commit. They said I was helping rebel by trafficking weapons but I didn't do that. And I didn't confess. They burned my legs and back with electroshocks."

Meanwhile, his family had no idea where Zubeir was held or why. He was eventually able to get a message out to his mother that he was still alive.

During his time in administrative detention, Zubeir found his uncle who had also been arrested. They were able to support each other and hold on to the hope that they'd be released soon. "But they were beating us almost everyday. They hit us with steel rods, they cut us, and they didn't give us water to get a confession from us. My uncle was badly injured and died. It was terrible because I lost hope that I would ever see my family again."

"It was a terrible place. When they gave us food we had to eat it off the floor. We didn't have toilets in the cell and there were faeces everywhere."

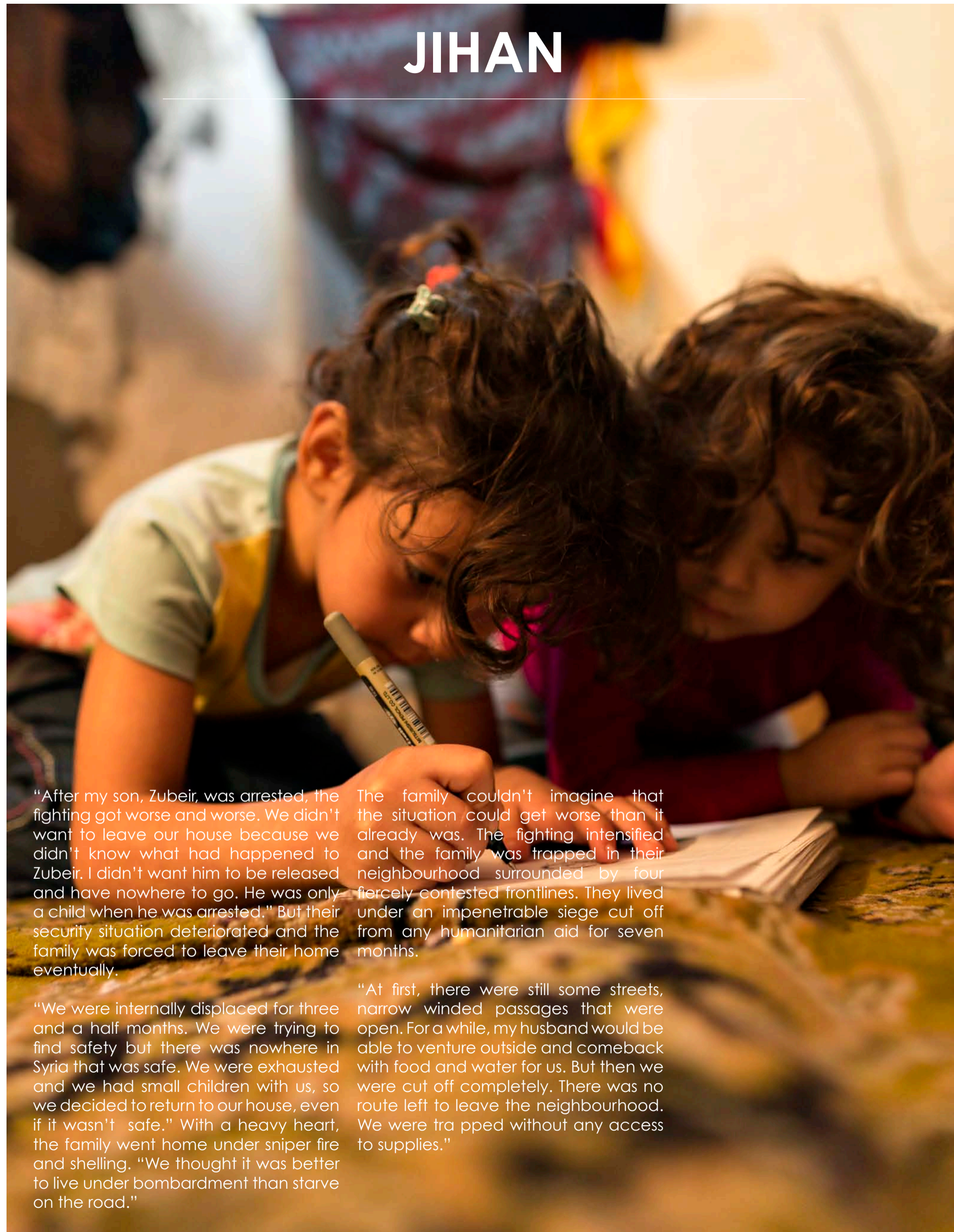
Finally, a year after his arrest by intelligence services a warden called his name one morning. They told him he was sentenced to four months imprisonment for arms trafficking and aiding a demonstrator and that we was being transferred to Adra. Zubeir had never been officially been charged with a crime, didn't have access to legal council or been to court. "They forged a confession. They said I confessed, but I didn't."

By the time, Zubeir arrived in Adra his family was already displaced and unable to visit him in prison. "But his uncles visited him, when we couldn't. At least, he wasn't alone," says his mother, Jihan.



Zubeir, 17, from Darayya, in the home he shares with his mother, Jihan, and his three sisters. Zubeir was arrested when he was only 15 and spent a year in detention before being sentenced to four months in prison.

JIHAN



"After my son, Zubeir, was arrested, the fighting got worse and worse. We didn't want to leave our house because we didn't know what had happened to Zubeir. I didn't want him to be released and have nowhere to go. He was only a child when he was arrested." But their security situation deteriorated and the family was forced to leave their home eventually.

"We were internally displaced for three and a half months. We were trying to find safety but there was nowhere in Syria that was safe. We were exhausted and we had small children with us, so we decided to return to our house, even if it wasn't safe." With a heavy heart, the family went home under sniper fire and shelling. "We thought it was better to live under bombardment than starve on the road."

The family couldn't imagine that the situation could get worse than it already was. The fighting intensified and the family was trapped in their neighbourhood surrounded by four fiercely contested frontlines. They lived under an impenetrable siege cut off from any humanitarian aid for seven months.

"At first, there were still some streets, narrow wended passages that were open. For a while, my husband would be able to venture outside and come back with food and water for us. But then we were cut off completely. There was no route left to leave the neighbourhood. We were trapped without any access to supplies."



Jihan, mother of four, is separated from her husband, who is still in Syria and is unable to join the family. After being internally displaced, the family had decided to return to their home only to live under siege for seven months. The Red Cross was able to evacuate Jihan and her daughters but her husband had to stay behind.



"My daughter was two and a half years at the time, and I was still breast feeding. Otherwise, I don't think she would have survived. I used to cut up any fabric I could find to keep her clean. We didn't have any food. We would go out and try finding something, anything in the abandoned and destroyed houses in the neighbourhood. We risked our lives to go out, there were snipers hiding who shot at anything that moved. After a while, we weren't able to find any foodstuffs anymore. We were starving."

Jihan describes her situation bluntly, "when there was no food left, we would go out and look for animal faeces. We would break them up and look for undigested grains. And we gave those washed grains our children to eat."

"At the end, we had no running water and it was impossible to go out and scavenge for anything edible. We were encircled by the frontlines and trapped. There was no end to the siege in sight."

"Then I heard a rumour that the Red Cross was able to evacuate women and children. It was a difficult decision to make because we had to leave my

husband behind. But if we wanted our children to survive I needed to leave him. He's still trapped in our home. I haven't seen him since. It breaks my heart that this happened to our family."

When the family tried to flee their neighbourhood for a second time they were detained at a checkpoint. They tried to detain Zubeir's younger brother and other boys but luckily the Red Cross staff was able to intervene and released the children. Finally, Jihan and her three youngest children were able to leave Darayya.

"Once we left Darayya we were placed in a shelter for internally displaced people. The Red Cross provided food but we weren't able to leave. Eventually, we were able to get bailed out and we left to Lebanon straight away. Zubeir was able to join us here when he was released."

"We arrived in Lebanon on November 10 last year. My sister was already in Lebanon and we stayed with her at first. At last, we were safe."

After leaving her sister's small home, she found a room but wasn't able to afford the rent on her small income.

"They asked us to leave when we couldn't pay the rent. Money is our biggest concern. I found a work as a cleaner and my employer let's us use this room for free. Before the war, we were well off and had a comfortable life. The war changed all that. Now I live in this small room with my children. It smells. We have no running water and there is no bathroom."

"We always need money. The food coupons are never enough. Sugar is a luxury we have had for years. Even at 'Eid, I didn't even have any candy for my children. The winter is coming and the little one's need new shoes. Nothing you see here is ours. Everything is borrowed. We own nothing anymore. Even the blankets are borrowed," she sighs. "My kids are always sick. We're always cold. They have difficulty breathing because there is no ventilation in the house. And the smell..."

Part of the 'Dreaming of Syria' project, in which David Brunetti documents the everyday lives of Syrian refugees across the region, 'Shattered Pieces of a Homeland' tells of the experiences of Syrian women who have fled with their families to Jordan and Lebanon.

The women interviewed for 'Shattered Pieces of a Homeland' are working hard to adjust to their new lives in exile. Many of them are regularly visiting women's centres and clinics that offer recreational activities, psychosocial support for them and their families as well as training opportunities to improve their chances of finding employment.

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* Becoming a refugee and being reliant on aid can happen to any one. The women I've met have shared their experiences freely to further understanding of the refugee crisis but have requested not to be identified by name to protect their identities.

