

# 'I WANT A SAFE PLACE'

REFUGEE WOMEN FROM SYRIA  
UPROOTED AND UNPROTECTED  
IN LEBANON



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**Many women from Syria who are in Lebanon face violence, harassment and exploitation due to the difficulties they face as refugees. They have little protection or access to justice. Their situation is made worse because the international community has so far failed to provide adequate funding and support for refugees from Syria. The Lebanese government also continues to make it extremely difficult for refugees to obtain or renew residency permits.**

*All names in this document have been changed in order to protect the identity of the refugee women who spoke to Amnesty International. The women depicted in the photographs are not necessarily those who have been interviewed.*

### **Fatima's story**

*Fatima is 38 years old. She came from Syria in 2014 and lives with her four children in southern Lebanon.*

*"I came to Lebanon with my brother and my four children early in 2014. My hometown was besieged and bombed with chemical weapons. My husband had previously been kidnapped from the factory he worked in – maybe by the security forces – but I don't know.*

*"The situation in Lebanon is very difficult and I don't feel protected here. When I arrived and was in need of aid, I tried to register my children in school. Someone at the school said that they would help me with the registration. I gave him my phone number so he could send me updates. He phoned me two to three times a day and he said that he would offer me anything I liked and asked me if I would like to go out with him. I told him I didn't*

*need his help anymore. Now I've stopped giving my number to people who offer help because I feel afraid.*

*"I feel exploited in Lebanon, mainly by men. If I hear of good people who can help me, I will go. But I discover they are not good people, that they want something in exchange. They will start complimenting me and then I understand that they want something else. Many times when I am outside on the road where I live, men who know me from my area will stop and offer me a ride. These men know that my husband isn't here. If I accept, the man will indirectly offer me his services. He will say, 'If you need a ride to any place, I'll take you.'*

*I assume in the coming days that he will ask me for more. Sometimes, the men will ask me about my marriage. When I answer that I am still searching for my husband and that my children are waiting*



*for their father, they tell me to quit searching and say that my husband is probably dead.*

*"I have no source of support in this country. My brothers took a boat and are now safe in Europe. Having no family in Lebanon makes me feel weak. It is why I want to be resettled and join my brothers."*

## BACKGROUND

More than 4.4 million people have fled Syria since the start of the crisis in 2011 with more than 1 million fleeing to Lebanon. This means that one in four people in Lebanon is a refugee from Syria and Lebanon has more refugees per capita than any other country in the world. At the start of the crisis in Syria, Lebanon largely operated an "open border" policy allowing refugees to enter the country, but this is no longer the case.

Having experienced loss and trauma, leaving behind their homes and everything they knew in order to seek safety, refugee women remain resilient and are doing their best to support themselves and their families under very difficult circumstances.

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**Above left:** Syrian refugee women interviewed by Amnesty International, Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, October 2015.

**Above:** Informal tented settlement in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, January 2016.

**Cover:** Two women walk through the outskirts of Brital village in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon near the Syrian border, October 2014. © Fairfax Media/Getty Images

## FACTS AND FIGURES

- Lebanon hosts more than 1 million Syrian refugees
- Lebanon also hosts more than 44,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria
- 25.9% Syrian refugees in Lebanon are women over 18
- 10% of the refugee population meets the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) definition of "vulnerable" and is in need of resettlement to third countries
- In 2014, UNHCR in Lebanon submitted 441 individuals in 159 cases for resettlement under the "women and girls at risk" resettlement category totaling just 7% of the submissions of refugees in Lebanon.
- One in five of Syrian refugee households are headed by women. One in three Palestinian refugees from Syria are in households headed by women.



## International support

The economic and security situation for refugees from Syria deteriorated over the course of 2015. Around 70% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon live below the poverty line, with their personal savings depleted. In 2015, the UN only received 57% of the funds it needed to support the refugee crisis in Lebanon, forcing the UN to reduce the support and amount of assistance it provides to refugees in Lebanon. In January 2015, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) reduced monthly payments for food from US\$27.70 per person per month to US\$19 and in July 2015 a further reduction was made to just US\$13.50 per person per month. A late injection of funds towards the end of 2015 meant that the WFP was able to increase the monthly payment to US\$21.60 per person from October 2015. This means that refugees receive US\$0.72 per person per day, significantly below the World Bank's global poverty line of US\$1.90 poverty line per day.

The international community's failure to provide sufficient support to Lebanon and to adequately fund the UN's regional response to the Syrian refugee crisis is shocking. The international community must share the responsibility for assisting and hosting refugees by increasing financial support for the humanitarian response and by increasing resettlement for those refugees most in need.

## Residence permits

In 2015, the Lebanese government introduced tough new criteria for refugees to renew their residence permits. Most refugees find it impossible to pay the fee (US\$200 per person) to renew their permits and provide the numerous documents required. Without a valid permit, refugees from Syria are considered to be in breach of Lebanese law. This exposes them to a range of human rights violations, including arbitrary arrest, detention, deportation, restriction of movement to avoid crossing checkpoints and lack of access to justice because of fear of reporting crimes of violence and harassment to the police.

The lack of valid residence permits is a key reason why refugee women from Syria are unable or unwilling to report violence, harassment and threats to the Lebanese authorities.



## VIOLENCE, EXPLOITATION AND HARASSMENT

Refugee women from Syria, including Palestinian women from Syria, face gender-based violence and exploitation in almost all aspects of their daily lives. Refugee women without adult male relatives and who are the heads of their households in Lebanon are particularly at risk.

Some refugee women in Lebanon who are the heads of their households are widows, some are divorced and some have husbands who have either stayed in Syria, sought asylum in other countries, or who are missing, forcibly disappeared or detained in Syria.

Refugee women struggle to meet the high cost of living in Lebanon. Many worry constantly that they won't be able to pay their rent on time and that landlords may evict them. Some say their

landlords charge them suspiciously high bills for electricity or water but that they are unable to challenge this for fear of eviction. Refugee women told Amnesty International about poor living conditions such as dirty surroundings and rodent infestation as well as a lack of basic amenities such as electricity and water in informal settlements.

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**Above left:** Syrian refugee women working in a makeshift bakery in Al-Jarrahieh camp in West Bekaa, Lebanon. January 2016.

**Above:** Syrian refugees in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, January 2016.

## Palestinian refugee women from Syria

Syria's pre-conflict population included a large number of Palestinian refugees. Many of them also fled the conflict in Syria and there are now more than 44,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria living in Lebanon. Just over half of the Palestinian refugee population are women and girls. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are treated differently to Syrian refugees. The Lebanese government has imposed even more restrictions around residence permits and employment for Palestinian refugees. In addition, Palestinian refugees, who fall under the mandate of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), receive UN assistance that is different from the assistance given to Syrian refugees who fall under the mandate of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).



### **Reem's story**

Reem is a 28-year-old Palestinian woman from Yarmouk, a suburb of Damascus, who now lives in Mar Elias Camp in Beirut.

"One time, my mother went back to Syria to get some of the family's documents. While she was there, the Lebanese government introduced new regulations for Palestinians entering Lebanon and my mother was unable to return. I telephoned the General Directorate of General Security [part of the Lebanese Ministry of Interior refugees need to deal with when renewing their residence permit]. I spoke to an official I had dealt with in the past to ask if he could help. He

**Above:** A woman walks through a poor neighbourhood of Beirut with a high concentration of refugees from Syria, July 2013.  
**Above right:** Some refugee women are employed by NGOs to do traditional embroidery which is made into items such as wallets or purses and sold, Lebanon, October 2015.

said he would help if I went to Jounieh with him [a coastal town about 16km north of Beirut known for its resorts]. I told him no and that I prefer my mother goes back to Syria. Eventually, my mother was able to pay and cross the border back to Lebanon.

"Another time, someone told me that they would give me money for rent in return for marriage. When I walk on the street, he says, 'I'm going to marry her'.

"My life pattern has changed. The way I do my hair has changed and I have to dress differently. I say to them 'who gives you the right to speak to me like this?', I can't go out with my friends outside the camp. Even if I come back at 8 or 9pm, I hear 1,000 words from men and when they approach me [they] are all holding weapons.

"I want a safe place – any place in the world that is safe."

### **Rajaa's story**

Rajaa is 50 years old. She travelled with her children from Syria to Lebanon in 2013.

"I came to Lebanon in 2013 alone with my children. My husband was disappeared in Syria.

"I live in a tent with 10 people – we are three women with our children but no husbands. Every 15th of the month, I have to pay rent for my tent. The landlord won't wait for us so sometimes I have to go out and beg for the money in order to pay the rent. Since we live in tents, we suffer a lot of problems and issues. The tent leaks. When it rains, we sleep with wet clothes.

"When you are bankrupt and have no money, it is also humiliating. I want to ask governments if \$13 [a month] is enough for them to survive."



## Exploitation and harassment in employment

Refugees often work informally, especially those with irregular status in Lebanon. Of the refugee women who spoke to Amnesty International, women whose husbands had died or who were detained were more likely to be working than women who were in Lebanon with their husband. Some refugee women who work or who have tried to find a job are underpaid. Sometimes, employers deliberately pay refugee women very low wages because they know the women are desperate or are in economic need and have invalid residence permits so will be unable to complain. Some refugee women also experience sexual harassment or risk being harassed at work. Several refugee women said that they had either left a job, or not taken a job, because the behaviour of an employer made them feel uncomfortable and suspicious of their intentions.

### *Nada's story*

*Nada is 29 years old. She has been living in Lebanon since 2013 working and supporting a number of families.*

*"I came to Lebanon in 2013 and live with my sister. My father is deceased and my two brothers are detained. I am taking care of four families. I used to work in a warehouse for clothes. The employer didn't pay us for a week so we left. And he used to tell us 'if you accept to stay late, I will drive you back' and I thought this was a type of harassment.*

*"I've been working doing embroidery at the [NGO] centre for two years and help with the rental of the house. Although the situation is good, I still need another job so I can help my sister and parents.*

*"[If I had to report a crime], I would go to the police because I won't shut my mouth for my rights."*

## Sexual harassment in public places

Many refugee women experience sexual harassment in public spaces and women who are heads of households are more likely to be targeted for harassment by men who know they are alone in Lebanon.

Refugee women from Syria told Amnesty International about sexual harassment by police officers, government employees in charge of renewing residence permits, employers, bus and taxi drivers, and strangers on the street. Such harassment includes Lebanese men making inappropriate sexual advances towards refugee women or offering financial or other types of assistance to refugee women in exchange for sex. In other instances, men make marriage proposals to refugee women or their daughters in exchange for assistance.



### **Aisha's story**

Aisha is 33 years old. She came to Lebanon from a suburb of Damascus in 2012 and lives in Taalabaya, Bekaa Valley, with her husband and four children, one of whom has a rare medical condition.

*"I arrived in Lebanon in 2012.*

*"It is difficult to renew residency permits – my permit expired in August 2014. I attempted to renew my legal status but you need \$200 and it is better to invest money in other things. Instead of paying for my residency renewal, I prefer to pay for my daughter who is sick. [Without a valid permit] I am afraid to go out. I'm afraid to cross checkpoints. I have to go to Beirut for hospital appointments for my daughter every 15 days. I go across the checkpoints and they [the authorities] haven't stopped me yet but I'm always afraid that someone will speak to me.*

*"A Lebanese man once came and told me he would help me with official documents but in exchange he wanted to spend the night with me. Even though I was standing with my daughter, this man passed by and stopped to ask me this. Although I mentioned my husband, he still proposed to spend the night with me and give me money.*

*"I told another woman about what happened to me and I described the car. She said that she knew the man and he had done the same thing before.*

*"There is exploitation of the situation of Syrians, especially when they find us in need."*

### **Inability to seek redress**

They also told Amnesty International about the serious lack of trust they have in the Lebanese authorities to effectively and impartially investigate complaints reported by refugees. Even when refugee women from Syria attempt to report crimes of violence and harassment to the police, the authorities have refused to help them because they have invalid residence permits.



### **Hanan's story**

Hanan came to Lebanon in early 2013 and lives with her three daughters in Shatila camp in Beirut. She is 38 years old and a Palestinian refugee from Syria's Yarmouk Camp in Damascus.

*"My husband is in Germany. Since he left, people look at me weirdly, including the people who distribute aid. They put conditions on the aid, and say they will only give me the aid if I will see them later on. The taxi drivers also harass me and tell me that they will take me to places that are not where I asked to go.*

*"I had an incident once with a bus driver when I was with my daughters coming back from Bekaa to Beirut. There was only one other man apart from the driver on the bus and I was alone with my daughters. The bus driver started doing abnormal actions to try and harass me. The first thing he did was*

*take his gun and place it next to him so I would know that he had a weapon with him. My eldest daughter who is 16 was really terrified. But I had to tell her not to be scared and promised her that I would manage the situation.*

*"How do you think I was able to get off the bus? I had to promise to come back to him and told him, 'as you like, I will first just take my daughters home', I took his phone number and his name because this was the only chance for us to get out. I even thought to myself that, if things went to the extreme and I wasn't able to get away, I would just give him whatever he wanted as long as he didn't hurt my daughters.*

*"I waited to complain until I reached Shatila police station in Beirut. I was really angry but they told me, 'do you know that you're not eligible to present a complaint? You don't have legal status.' And then they said*

*in a sarcastic way, 'why did he come up to you and harass you in the first place?'*

*"A lot of [refugee] women are subjected to assaults, harassment, theft and even rape but can't present complaints because of their illegal status in Lebanon and being threatened with arrest."*

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**Above left: A bus in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, October 2015.**

**Above: Journey from the Bekaa Valley to Beirut on a cold foggy night, Lebanon, January 2016.**



### **Maryam's story**

Maryam is a 35-year-old woman from Homs. She told Amnesty about harassment by Lebanese police officers after having to make a report to them about the death of a relative.

*"One of my relatives died in August. The police took a report from me and my sister. It included all our information – names, addresses and telephone numbers. After a while, the police would pass by our house or would call us and ask us to go out with them. It was the same three police officers who took our report. Because we don't have legal [residence] permits, the officers threatened us. They said that they would imprison us, if we didn't go out with them.*

*"This happened for about two months. Then our landlord wanted the house back so we moved house. We changed our phone numbers and didn't give the*

*police our new address. Now I wouldn't dare go to the police station. Even if I did go, I wouldn't benefit. The police wouldn't help me.*

*"Harassment [of refugee women] is a very big problem in Lebanon – whether I am single or married I am always harassed. They [the men] tell me that they'll pay me to do things for them [for] pleasure. That is why we are afraid for our children. I have a daughter who is 16 and I am afraid to send her even to the nearest shop."*

### **Lebanon's international legal obligations**

Lebanon has not ratified the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, the main international legal instruments for the protection of the rights of refugees. However, Lebanon is bound by customary international law and other international human rights instruments that also apply to refugees living in the country.

Lebanon has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

These instruments protect a range of human rights including the right to be



free from discrimination and violence, the right to an adequate standard of living and the right of access to justice. Lebanon is specifically obliged under CEDAW to ensure that refugee women are not exposed to violations of their rights under the Convention, such as gender-based violence, irrespective of whether those violations are committed by state actors or private persons and other non-state actors.

### **The international community's obligations to provide assistance**

The international community has an obligation to provide humanitarian assistance and co-operation and this includes providing assistance to refugees. Every country should contribute resources to the maximum of its capacity. International assistance includes financial support for refugees and resettlement to third countries of those refugees most in need.

### **Resettlement procedures for “women and girls at risk”**

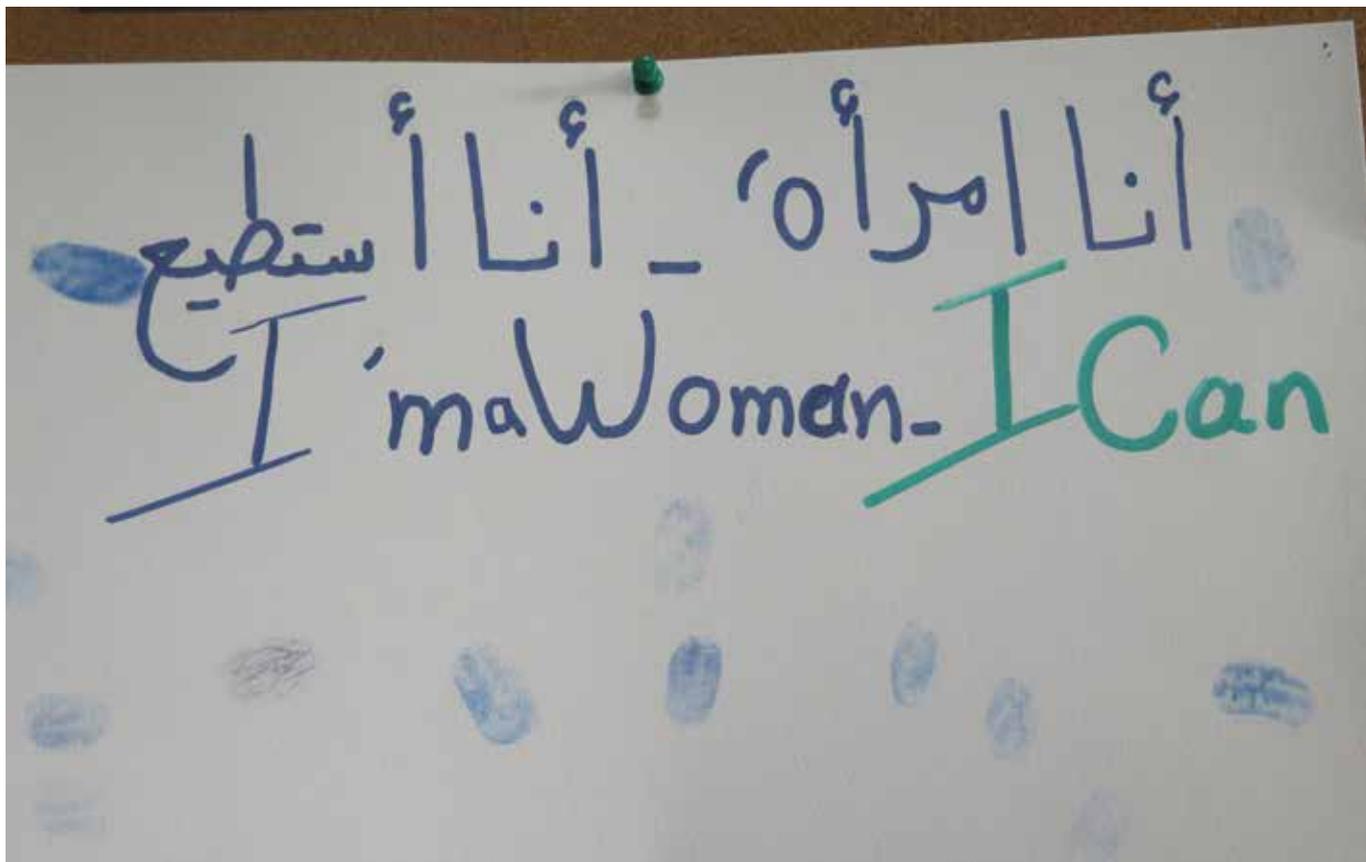
UNHCR considers “women and girls at risk” to include any woman or girl with protection problems particular to her gender, including abuses that fall under the category of torture. The protection problems and threats are compounded by her gender and require a specific response.

### **CONCLUSION**

Despite the heavy strain on Lebanon's resources and infrastructure as a result of hosting more than 1 million refugees from Syria, the restrictions on refugees put in place by the government are not justified and results in increasing the risks of human rights violations and abuses.

*Above: Bekaa Valley, Syrian Refugee Camp, Lebanon, October 2015.*

*Above right: A woman hangs clothing at a makeshift settlement for Syrian refugees in Bar Elias, in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, October 2015.*



Poster at an NGO centre for Syrian refugee women, Lebanon, October 2015.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### To the government of Lebanon:

- Ensure that all refugees from Syria can renew their residency in Lebanon until there is a fundamental change in circumstances in Syria that means it is safe for them to return. To this end, remove obstacles to residency renewal, including the fee of US\$200.
- Ensure that police provide a safe and confidential environment for all women and girls to report incidents of gender-based violence or other human rights violations or abuses, irrespective of their nationality or the status of their residence permit, and ensure that all such complaints are recorded and promptly, impartially and effectively investigated.

- Ensure that Syrian refugee women and Palestinian refugee women from Syria living in Lebanon without their husband are able to renew their residence permits without being required to show permission from their husband or to prove his whereabouts.

### To the international community including the Gulf Co-operation Council, the EU and its member states, the USA, Australia, Canada and all other countries able to provide support:

- Substantially increase the number of resettlement and humanitarian admission places for refugees from Syria who are currently hosted in Lebanon and other neighbouring countries so

that the 10% of refugees from Syria whom UNHCR consider the “most vulnerable” (approximately 450,000 people) are resettled by the end of 2016. Resettlement should be equally available to Syrian refugees and Palestinian refugees from Syria.

- Ensure that refugee women whose husbands are forcibly disappeared, or who lack documentation proving the fate or whereabouts of their husbands, are not disadvantaged in decision-making on resettlement because they are unable to demonstrate their husbands’ whereabouts.

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than 7 million people who campaign for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

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