

Combating Child Labor through Vocational Training: Targeting Syrian Refugee Girls in Jordan

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Executive Summary

Globally, around 152 million children are engaged in child labor, equating to nearly one in ten children (“Global Estimates of Child Labour” 5). Out of that staggering 152 million children, more than 28 million have been forced to flee their homes, exacerbating their vulnerability to child labor (“Uprooted” 3). The Syrian refugee crisis is no exception to that statistic, as Syrian refugee children in Jordan have a much higher worker-to-population ratio of 3.22% compared to their Jordanian peers at 1.75% (Alkhatib et al. 20). Education is the primary tool capable of combatting these child labor rates. Out of the 27,000 Syrian refugees ages 16-18 in Jordan, only 25% are enrolled in secondary school (Small). This paper seeks to explore child labor’s relation to education and its prevalence among Syrian teen girls in refugee camps in Jordan, uncovering its causes, implications, and suggestions for potential solutions.

There are specific measures the United Nations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can employ to build upon existing programs and create an alternative to traditional secondary education. This includes vocational training programs for girls that desire to take a less rigid approach. One program is the UN ‘Women and Girls Oasis Centers,’ also known as the UN Oasis program. This program can be expanded to incorporate teen girls with elements specifically designed for them, including a paid mentorship program, an emphasis on teaching entrepreneurial and soft skills, an extension in program length, and increased job support.

Description of Policy Challenges

Due to the Syrian civil war, cross-border migration increased significantly after 2011, especially in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Unfortunately, due to the dire circumstances within refugee camps, children, especially girls, have been affected mentally, emotionally, and physically. The deprivation of education in these areas is one of the first barriers young women face when planning their future. Instead of exercising their fundamental right to education, these children are often forced to work in dangerous and arduous jobs to contribute to the family income. According to an assessment conducted in 2013, 47% of the 186 Syrian refugee households in Jordan relied either partially or entirely on the income generated from their children, fueling the vicious cycle of poverty that thrives off child labor. (“Gender-Based Violence” 3).

Eman Freeh Ali Fares is a female Jordanian teacher who worked at the Za’atari Camp with Syrian refugee girls, ages 6-11 years old, for multiple years. Throughout an interview with Eman, she highlighted many of the challenges reflected within this research, offering insight through her first-hand experience to such issues. At the Za’atari camp, secondary education is offered to female students in three main areas: scientific, literary, and vocational studies. Eman experienced absences and tardiness from many of her students due to their familial responsibilities, which often included caring for elders, selling rugs or other textiles, and providing food for other family members. Low school attendance rates among Syrian refugees reflect Eman’s observations. The school attendance rate for Syrian refugees in the Za’atari Camp is roughly 71.3%, compared to the 95% among their Jordanian peers (Alkhatib et al. 23). It is evident that the time and effort traditional studies demands may not be feasible for young Syrian girls who are expected to contribute to their family’s responsibilities and income.

Additionally, Eman emphasized the role early marriage plays within the disruption of young girls' studies and future ambitions. Among Syrian girls, an assessment indicates that 51.3% of females were married before the age of 18 ("Gender-Based Violence" 3). Eman attributes these high early marriage rates to girls seeking more financial support and opportunities that come with marital arrangements. These low school attendance rates, coupled with higher marriage rates among young girls illustrate the necessity for an adaptation in secondary education.

Policy Options to Address the Challenge

Providing an alternative to secondary education through vocational training would aid in decreasing child labor vulnerability. Instead of being placed in hazardous working conditions, the young women would have the opportunity to be surrounded by a supportive and encouraging community. This would be a safe space where refugee girls could learn with others that have similar experiences and tribulations. These girls would also gain self-confidence in their technical and social abilities, consequently allowing them to understand and demand their rights while finding employment opportunities. Lastly, vocational education would allow them to become assets, for they would have specialized knowledge, making their labor no longer disposable. These women would then contribute to the economy as a whole, thus slowly combatting the overarching cycle of poverty.

The 'Women and Girls Oasis' Program is a safe space for Syrian women refugees in Jordan to learn specific educational and vocational skills, provide gender-based violence support, and supply limited cash-for-work opportunities. Sponsored by UN Women and World Food Programme, the Oasis Center opened its doors in 2012 and has spread to twelve refugee camps, including three centers in the Za'atari Camp, the largest refugee camp in Jordan. These centers

mainly support mothers and middle-aged women, as they have now become the primary breadwinners in their household since many of their spouses became involved in the Syrian conflict. Some of these learned technical skills include sewing, tailoring, home improvement, basic computer skills, and hairdressing. The centers continue to operate and serve approximately 5000 women each month (“UN Women”).

The UN Oasis Centers are an effective model of providing women skills and offering cash-for-work opportunities on-site at refugee camps. Cash-for-work allows women to choose from various jobs each day and includes positions, such as beauticians or tailors. The centers’ emphasis on female empowerment, as opposed to victimization, enables women to start a lifelong career for themselves. In a study conducted by professors at the University of Jordan, results revealed that 100% of those interviewed stated that the Oasis Centers improved their confidence, and 96% percent claimed that it helped them generate income (Jabbar and Zaza).

While the UN Oasis Centers are incredible support systems for Syrian women refugees, they do not currently include older girls’ needs (ages 15-17), many of whom would benefit from their services. Children in general who have had a break in their education may find it hard to reintegrate into normal secondary school, and this frustration could cause them to drop out and resort to child labor. Others do not understand the value of education because they witness this paradox of people with degrees who are jobless and people with less education who are employed (Small). A vocational program would give them an acceptable alternative to traditional secondary education, allowing them to learn new skills, find a potential career path, and keep them from falling into child labor’s grasp. As mentioned above, the UN Oasis Centers offer more than just vocational training, and these additional services should be adapted and expanded upon better to serve the 15-17 year teenage girls demographic. This includes:

- **An emphasis on soft skills and business skills so that the girls are armed with more than just technical skills and are better prepared overall when they enter the workforce** (Chaffin 53). This way they would have more chances at higher-paying jobs that they otherwise would not have gotten, and which could help bring themselves and their families out of poverty, which is a significant cause of child labor.
 - Included in this would be language, reading, and writing lessons to ensure all the girls are educated in these essential areas. It is not clear whether these three subject areas are all currently offered at the Oasis Centers, but regardless, they would have to be better tailored towards younger learners.
 - In regard to language learning, the possibility of providing it remotely using technology is promising. From an assessment conducted in 2015, it was found that about 85% of the youth surveyed in the Za'atari Refugee Camp have access to mobile phones (Maitland et al. 7). The Norwegian Refugee Council Youth Programme that has a location in Za'atari is one organization that is seriously looking into it as a mode of instruction, and it might be beneficial for the UN Oasis Centers to collaborate with them.
- **A mentorship program between older women in the Oasis Center and younger girls within the same technical discipline where both sides receive compensation.** Along with the technical aspect, these older women would also serve as supporting figures and role models within the younger girls' lives.
 - Questscope, an organization that already provides a successful general mentorship program to young people in the Za'atari Refugee Camp, emphasizes personal development and leadership (Questscope). Questscope could be a model for a mentorship program at the Oasis Centers or a potential partner in the future.
 - Providing the girls with payment would help ensure that they are able to still contribute to their families and would not feel as pressured to drop out of the program and get a job that could be potentially hazardous. This is comparable to the Cash-for-Work opportunities that are currently available to the Oasis Centers' participants.

- **Extending the program.** Female participation in the UN Oasis Centers currently lasts from a few months up to a year. In the same way that traditional secondary education lasts until around 18 years of age, these teenage girls would benefit from a multi-year program to build up their skills repertoire and gain valuable experience before going out into the workforce at 18 or later if they desire. The goal is to keep them out of child labor, and if someone, for example, enters the program at 15 and leaves just a few months later, then that goal is not achieved.
- **Post-Program Support.** To break the cycle of child labor, it is essential that there is job support for women after the program, which would enable them to support their families without relying on their children to work. The International Rescue Committee in Jordan offers cash assistance to sustain women during the job-search process, and this could be used as a model for the UN Oasis. Additionally, to decrease the likelihood and need for child labor, women should have access to financial advisors, where they would learn how to manage a budget and support their families without needing the children to work.

An important consideration in this plan is remembering that this program's success lies in its ability to convince parents that it is worth the opportunity cost of sending their children to work. Since child labor traditionally occurs as a mechanism to generate income for families, it is vital that parents see this program's value to increase participation. Information sessions held in target towns would help the people better understand it and to showcase its benefits. A way to promote attendance would be through providing incentives like food or other items. These incentives would entice participation and provide an opportunity to demonstrate this program's advantages, ultimately increasing its impact.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Existing UN Oasis Centers demonstrate a consistent track record of positively affecting their patrons' lives. Based on this success, a strategy of expanding the UN Oasis Centers' scope to target the 15-17 year old female demographic has the potential to decrease this group's overarching problem of child labor. With current Oasis Centers serving as the blueprint, it is optimistic that young refugee women at risk of child labor in Jordan would benefit from a strong support network that equips them with the necessary tools to attain more lucrative and fulfilling opportunities.

Implementation of such a tailored program demands cross-collaboration among various stakeholders. Beyond the target demographic of teenage girls, these suggestions inevitably involve coordination with the surrounding community, member governments, and related NGOs. In order to produce a program that creates positive and tangible outcomes, multi-sectoral efforts will need to focus on overcoming several obstacles. The predominant challenge in accomplishing a program of this nature is attaining adequate funding to provide enough financial support and cash assistance to deter teenage girls from resorting to premature, unsafe labor opportunities. Addressing this barrier may entail further research on the contributions young women make to the economy upon entering the formal workforce. It is certainly plausible that these measures will save UNHCR nations and host-country governments money in the long-term, under the premise that eliminating poverty and promoting self-reliance decreases the humanitarian costs of hosting refugees. Furthermore, if UN Oasis programs focus on providing refugees with formal economic opportunities, this opens the door for governments to tax earned wages and receive a return on investment. By investing in the training of Syrian refugee girls, we are investing in their futures, making progress toward a humanity without child labor.

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