SYRIA’S WOMEN: POLICIES & PERSPECTIVES

WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN THE ECONOMY  December 21, 2017

Summary

- As of January 2016, 80 percent of the Syrian population was living below the poverty line, and the youth unemployment rate was about 78 percent, compounding many of the challenges facing Syrian women.
- The number of female-headed households has increased dramatically both inside and outside the country, with many men having died, been injured, or gone missing in the conflict. However, women receive substantially lower pay and are afforded fewer opportunities in the labor market.
- The sanctions placed on Syria by the international community, alongside the Syrian government’s reduction of food and energy subsidies, have radically increased the cost of living.

Overall Situation

The conflict in Syria has had a devastating effect on the economy. The gross domestic product has contracted by at least 55 percent, and total economic losses incurred since 2011 are estimated at more than $254.7 billion. Eighty percent of the population lives beneath the poverty line and at least 50 percent live in extreme poverty. The overall unemployment level is 55 percent, and women’s economic participation is increasingly necessary as men are killed or seriously injured, leaving women as the breadwinners for their families. This need, combined with growing access to technology, has opened up opportunities for women’s cottage industries within the home. Female entrepreneurship has risen from 4.4 percent in 2009 to 22.4 percent this year.
Foreign *sanctions* on the Syrian government have restricted the import of goods, *feeding* black market economies that are largely controlled by armed opposition groups. Domestically, the Syrian government has prioritized military operations over public investment and the reduction of subsidies on basic goods, known as *subsidy rationalization*, has nearly *tripled* the cost of living.

Outside of Syria, female-headed households *comprise* 40 percent of Syrian refugee families in Jordan and 30 percent of those in Lebanon. Compared to male-headed households, these are significantly less *economically stable*, primarily because of *discrimination* in labor markets and the added responsibilities of childcare and domestic duties that prevent full-time employment.

**Background**

Women have traditionally been *marginalized* from the Syrian workforce. Syrian women’s participation before 2011 was low (in 2005, about 16.3 percent of women were active in the workforce), but it has dropped even more since: in 2013, the percentage decreased to 13.5 percent. Despite being relatively *well educated*, local social and penal codes have prevented Syrian women from working. Legally, husbands are allowed to *forbid* their wives from working outside of the home and patriarchal norms *oblige* women to concentrate their time and efforts on domestic and childcare duties. Certain *sectors*, such as agriculture, education, and health care, have higher female participation, but women still *rarely* *receive* equal compensation or are granted ownership of land and machinery.

Because of the ongoing conflict, women’s participation in the workforce has been restricted in some ways and expanded in others. Widespread violence has affected women in particular as their movement is restricted not only by conflict violence, but also reinforced by patriarchal norms and *fear* of sexual violence. According to Global Gender Gap reports, women’s economic participation in Syria dropped from *22 percent* in 2010 to *14 percent* in 2015, but this likely indicates that women’s work has become smaller-scale and informal rather than that it has disappeared. Women have *taken* a leading role in informal education and healthcare provision, and women’s participation in entrepreneurship programs has *increased* by 18 percent since 2009. New technology has also enabled small-scale, home-based business creation. For example, in Aleppo, 50 women formed a *cooperative* to sell soap and now earn $150 to $200 per month.

Craft professions are the most common jobs for women in Syria, but in one study, nongovernmental organizations were *found* to be the most desirable employers because of their training programs and consistent pay structure. Such programs are run primarily in areas such as Tartous, a coastal city in western Syria, that have been relatively stable throughout the conflict in part because of work by groups including the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The UNDP runs a number of *cash-for-work* programs in Tartous that target internally displaced women and children to *provide* stable income and a lower cost of living for the community.

Internal trade has been greatly *disrupted* by the fighting and extensive damage to *infrastructure*. This fragmentation has led to the rise of “war traders” under the protection of different armed groups; 17 *percent* of the economically active population is engaged in crimes such as smuggling, theft, arms dealing, and human trafficking. The Islamic State’s largest source of *income* had been the sale of oil, followed by antiquities, and women in areas controlled by the group controlled were *encouraged* to stay at home and to work only in fields such as health care and teaching, where the mixing of sexes could be prevented.

In refugee communities, women’s participation in the workforce remains very low. Though female-headed households constitute *40 percent* of Syrian refugee families in Jordan, only *seven percent* of...
Syrian refugee women in the country work. In Lebanon, Syrian women earn on average roughly half of what their male counterparts do and only a quarter of the Lebanese minimum wage. This leaves many families unable to procure the most basic necessities, requiring children to drop out of school to earn additional money and rendering women vulnerable to sexual harassment at the hands of landlords and aid workers.

Policy Implications and Challenges

Syrian refugees have experienced significant barriers to working in host countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey due to legislation that restricts their right to work. To gain a one-year work permit in Jordan, refugees must be sponsored by an employer, and there are quotas for Syrian workers that prevent them from crowding out Jordanian laborers. Lebanon announced it would waive the annual $200 residence renewal fee for Syrian refugees, thus eliminating a major financial barrier to legal residence for hundreds of thousands of people. This aims to facilitate Syrian participation in the formal, taxable sector, as currently 92 percent of economically active Syrians in Lebanon are involved in the informal sector. Turkey uses similar employer-sponsored work permits, but they can only be issued after six months of residence, leaving refugees vulnerable in those first pivotal months and, as of April 2017, only four percent of refugee work permits had been issued to Syrian women.

The Syrian economy was sustained through the first few years of conflict thanks to significant help from Russia and Iran, but international sanctions and the ongoing cost of the war have taken a devastating toll. When the Syrian Women’s Advisory Board was formed in 2014, one of their first demands was the removal of economic sanctions on the Syrian people so that a transitional process could be launched. This demand, however, has not been met.

The trade deficit is enormous, reaching 27.6 percent of GDP in 2015, depleting foreign reserves and pushing mounting debt onto future generations of Syrians. In an effort to decrease the budget deficit, the Syrian government implemented subsidies rationalization, which has increased inflation and cost of living. This worsening economic situation has wide-reaching and serious ramifications: economic instability and increasing unemployment have been repeatedly linked to radicalization and spikes in terrorist attacks. To ensure a safe and stable Syria in both the immediate and long-term future, rebuilding the economy must be prioritized by the Syrian government and the international community.