

The intersection of gender and disability in displacement settings: Jordan as a case study

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Context

The scale at which the Syrian civil war has escalated is exceptional, causing millions to be displaced internally and in neighbouring countries. Jordan, a country which borders Syria to the North, currently hosts 660,582 registered Syrian refugees with the vast majority of refugees living in urban settlements. Evidence suggests that Syrian refugees in Jordan are experiencing astonishing levels of poverty due to depleted resources, loss of livelihoods, poor health and limited educational opportunities. However, these deprivations are further exacerbated for vulnerable groups, specifically disabled male and disabled female refugees who may experience specific challenges due to the intersection of gender, disability and displacement. Indeed, it is frequently postulated that disabled women experience double discrimination on account of both their gender and disability, gender may be another social category upon which many refugees experience tremendous hardship including inequality and marginalisation. As Abu-Habib (1997:21) states: “the way in which disability is experienced is profoundly affected and determined by gender. As such, this research aims to develop a deeper understanding of how ones social location impacts their experience of poverty, focusing on three identity vectors: gender, disability and displacement.

Aims

1. What are the main factors that exacerbate poverty for disabled Syrian refugees?
2. How does gender intersect with disability to exacerbate poverty in displacement settings?
3. How can humanitarian organisations better address the needs and priorities of disabled Syrian refugees in Jordan, taking into account gendered vulnerabilities?

Findings

- Data acquired through interviews and focus group discussions suggested that a concoction of institutional, environmental and attitudinal barriers contributed to the acute risk of poverty for disabled Syrian refugees. In terms of environmental barriers, the distance between homes and services, particularly in urban areas, meant that some disabled Syrian refugees were not accessing humanitarian services including rehabilitation services and educational programmes. In terms of institutional barriers, disabled refugees complained that certain kinds of support, such as specialist medical care, was rarely available through humanitarian programmes. Furthermore, disabled refugees complained about feelings of discrimination and shame wrought upon them due to misconceptions about their impairments.
- Interviews with key informants and discussions with disabled Syrian refugees, both male and female, demonstrated that the intersection of gender and disability affected disabled women perpetually and unfavourably. For example, disabled female refugees faced inequalities and difficulties in accessing humanitarian programmes, such as livelihood projects. which was systematically rooted in socio-cultural practises, such as the cultural norm of viewing women as inherently vulnerable and primarily as

'homemakers'. This was seen as perpetuating dependency and inequality, thus contributing to the 'feminisation of poverty' (Pearce, 1978:28). It was also suggested that disabled girls may encounter a strong reluctance in joining humanitarian projects such as education or community-based rehabilitation due to ongoing feelings of physical insecurity in the new environment but also due to cultural beliefs about women's autonomy.

- On the other hand, responses from disabled men also confirmed the harmful conflictual dilemma associated with masculinity and disability leading to a loss of their 'gendered identity'. Discussions with disabled male refugees revealed that they felt discriminated by a humanitarian system which perceived women as more vulnerable, and thus, disabled male refugees as 'less deserving' of support. This highlighted the need to focus on the experiences of disabled male refugees as equally as disabled female refugees.
- Interviews with key informants revealed that to better address the needs of disabled refugees, it was important for humanitarian organisations to consider culturally appropriate and inclusive educational and livelihood programmes, particularly for female disabled refugees. Furthermore, interviews with key informants revealed that raising awareness and challenging attitudes about disability in a culturally appropriate way, particularly amongst families and carers of disabled female refugees, was integral to achieving better inclusion and ensuring the equal enjoyment of human rights for disabled Syrian refugees.
- Distance between services was also recognised as a major barrier to accessing humanitarian services. It was suggested that this was particularly challenging for disabled female refugees who may already feel under pressure to seclude themselves in urban communities and may not want to increase the burden and costs upon their care givers. To overcome this, it was suggested that NGOs embed accessible transportation to-and-from services as part of their programmes.
- In addition to this, it was mentioned that shelter and ground-floor accommodation in cities like Amman was a strong concern for disabled Syrian refugees; indeed, discussions with disabled Syrian refugees complained that ground floor accommodation was expensive and impeded upon their ability to 'participate in humanitarian activities' and 'form social networks'. Therefore, suitable accommodation was identified as a strong priority for disabled Syrian refugees, specifically in Amman.
- Discussions also revealed that in order to improve the services for disabled refugees, increased coordination and harmonisation of aid projects was integral to ensure that a greater number of disabled refugees were targeted, particularly those with 'less' visible impairments, whereas fragmentation could undermine these efforts.

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