

**How Turkey and Jordan Treat Their Guests: Neoliberal National Policy and Negative  
Health Outcomes of Syrian Women Refugees**

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INST 4950: Global Trends

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December 20, 2019

*Abstract:* Syrian women refugees living in Turkey and Jordan experience high rates of negative health outcomes. Syrian refugee women in both countries are considered “guests” instead of legalized refugees and experience low levels of employment, high rates of poverty, as well as inconsistent access to reproductive healthcare. The purpose of this research paper was to identify the root causes of the negative financial and physical health outcomes afflicting Syrian refugee women within these two countries, and identify possible state-sponsored remedies informed by conclusionary findings. The design of the paper sought to compare the national policies of Turkey and Jordan to identify similarities and differences in legal infrastructure toward refugee care. The paper also sought to identify how neoliberal ideologies in both countries have played a role in the development of refugee national policy and how this has directly impacted the health of Syrian women refugees. The paper also analyzed the participation of NGOs and IGOs within the countries and how their presence in relation to Syrian women could translate to national policy changes. The research conducted on this issue was done through secondary analysis of NGO and IGO field reports and academic publications. Major findings of the research demonstrate that neoliberal policies as they pertain to the absence of socio-legal statuses for Syrian refugees have devastating consequences on Syrian women refugees’ health primarily through rendering them unprotected “guests” which informs their inability to find work in the formal sector. A lack of formal employment positions Syrian women refugees in closer proximity to unemployment, poverty, malnutrition, reproductive trouble, as well as prostitution and human trafficking. When available, Syrian women refugees rely on NGO and IGO intervention to help prevent these negative health outcomes by seeking employment assistance, healthcare, and legal help from these institutions. Informed by the research contained in this paper, in order for the health of Syrian women refugees in both countries to improve, Turkey and

Jordan must ratify their neoliberal national policies as they pertain to the “guest” status of refugees within their countries. By granting Syrian women refugees a state-supported foothold in the nation through legally defining them as refugees, asylum seekers, or migrants, they would be better equipped to find legal employment so that they could navigate and improve the other health aspects of their lives.

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Nine winters. For some Syrians living in Jordan and Turkey, this coming winter will mark the ninth winter they’ve spent as refugees away from their homes. The Syrian refugees living in Turkey and Jordan fled their country due to the civil war wreaking havoc upon their ancestral lands -- a civil war which has spawned the largest exodus of refugees since the second world war. The majority of these refugees are women who have unique circumstances in these host countries that must be addressed in order to ensure good health and survival, especially considering that an end to the conflict in Syria remains unforeseeable. The unique circumstances levied upon women through their displacement include navigating their new roles as primary financial earners for their families, maintaining their reproductive health in light of financial and social turmoil, and fulfilling their social and cultural roles of providing for their children and extended relations. Economically and physically, these women must be cared for in light of the changing world that was thrust upon them by war and widespread male-led destruction. Turkey and Jordan are two countries where women refugees’ unique circumstances are most obvious because they house millions of refugees; yet these are two countries where many inconsistencies in neoliberal national policy result in a failure to address and remedy these circumstances.

Turkey and Jordan are the two countries that host the most Syrian refugees in the world with a combined total of nearly five million refugees. It is for this reason that they are analyzed in tandem to offer insight into how the largest host countries are designing and implementing

policy to care for Syrian women refugees within their borders. These countries also offer insight into how neoliberal national policies directly affects women's health because both countries have experienced recent histories of neoliberal policy growth. These two countries are also used in comparison with each other because of their respective participation in international refugee conventions. Turkey is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention whereas Jordan is not. Participation in international refugee coalitions may influence how these countries construct national policy pertaining to refugees and how they respond to international pressure to take care of refugees.

Syrian refugee women living in these two countries share similarities in their struggle to find adequate employment, housing, and healthcare. Women in both of these countries face high rates of unemployment, poverty, and reproductive issues, as well as dangerous lifestyles including increased proximity to prostitution and child marriage which are informed by a limited range of available survival options.

The literature used to inform this paper stems predominantly from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) field reports published by institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and Refugees International. Legal documents taken from the Library of Congress also provide background into national policy pertaining to refugees. Other supporting literature is provided by international studies researchers and academics. While these reports range in publication dates which may demonstrate slight inconsistencies in data from year to year, many of the structural inequalities that influence recurrent issues with Syrian women refugees' health still persist despite these fluctuations in reporting dates.

The issues plaguing Syrian women's health influenced by neoliberal national policies will be explored within the contexts of two guiding research questions. These questions are: How does gender affect the financial and physical health [employment, housing and poverty, sexual and reproductive health, domestic violence, and human trafficking and prostitution] of Syrian women refugees in host countries Turkey and Jordan? And how do IGOs and NGOs address these issues in a way that host countries can incorporate their findings into national policy?

This research paper will be divided into two sections denoting detailed exploration and analysis into Turkey and Jordan. These two main sections will be subdivided into a hierarchical organization that will provide insight into how neoliberal national policies affect Syrian refugee women's health within each respective country. These subheadings will be labeled to reflect how national neoliberal policies affect Syrian women's financial health including employment and poverty, and physical health including reproductive health, domestic violence, human trafficking and prostitution.

### **Neoliberalism and refugees**

Neoliberalism can be understood and defined as the economic market affecting all avenues of life including politics, family, and education (Mavelli, 2018:482). The competitiveness of the marketplace is now part of everyday life under the neoliberal world order. This translates into the idea of citizenship as well.

Citizenship is something that can be purchased, as is evident in the country of Malta (ibid.). For a fee, anybody can now purchase a Maltese passport and become a full citizen regardless if they have even lived in or step foot in the country. The example of Malta demonstrates that even citizenship is something that can be purchased in the neoliberal era, and how through neoliberalism, citizenship is determined through a lens of economic sums and

losses. It is crucial for people across the globe now to have citizenship status in order to have any sort of political agency for themselves. The commodification of citizenship has allowed this to be a reality for anybody with enough money, but the refugees fleeing Syria are economically and legally unable to attain citizenship due to their lack of income and their socio-legal status. Their socio-legal status as “guest” in both Turkey and Jordan hinders their ability to be financially and physically healthy within these countries.

The neoliberal rationale for dealing with refugees is different than the classical liberal response which was truly geared toward welfare and aid in an effort to help the people who needed it the most (Isleyen, 2016:329). The switch towards neoliberalism has created a refugee response that focuses on refugees providing for themselves and being held more accountable for their own personal and financial development post-conflict. The image of the refugee in a neoliberal world is one of an economic subject, who should take an active role in their own physical and financial health (ibid.). They are expected to take advantage of the “opportunities” that are presented to them by the host country, such as employment. With these conditions, the well-being of a refugee is entirely their own responsibility, and no longer that of the host countries’ governments. This abdication on the part of the government leads to a complete lack of political agency for refugees. A lack of political agency for refugees has negative consequences. For example, when the Turkish government announced universal health care in 2013, they were specific in pointing out that Syrian refugees would receive the same care (Samari, 2017:262). It was not enforced in all regions as it should have been, and Syrian refugees saw very little benefit from the system. Syrian refugees, “guests” in the country of Turkey, are unable to do anything about this lack of proper governmental implementation of the program

although they are granted these benefits through Turkish law because they have no socio-legal status or political agency to vote, participate in politics, or make change.

Refugee women's health is dependent on financial health because they are seen as "economic subjects." Although their futures in a neoliberal world are supposed to completely depend on their economic contributions to the market economy, these women are unable to get jobs in the formal sector because of their lack of socio-legal status. This leads to poverty for these women in an age where the mechanisms of the market have spread to every facet of life. Everything can be commodified, including citizenship, which these refugee women have a very slim chance of achieving while living below the poverty line. Their financial health directly influences their reproductive health. Without the money to afford health care, they are relying entirely on the health care provided to them by the government or nongovernmental organizations. Governments, however, have adopted the neoliberal ideal that it is in fact the responsibility of the refugee to make the best of the place they find themselves in, and do not prioritize the quality or accessibility of the reproductive care they are providing these women. Gender-based violence is another aspect of physical health that impacts women refugees. The threat of gender-based violence makes women refugees scared to be alone, and this prevents them from seeking employment as well. Women who actively seek jobs because the government believes they are solely responsible for their economic well-being are constantly at risk of gender-based violence because when they are working in jobs outside of the formal economy, they are subject to harassment and abuses for which there are no legal protections. When these women become desperate enough economically, a common way out that they see is prostitution. Women make this choice in order to support themselves and their families when the government is not providing and their opportunities for survival are slim. They can also be forced into it by

traffickers who know that their lack of ability to move and lack of legal status give them very few other options. The abdication of the government's role in providing aid and the view that refugees are economic subjects has caused both physical and financial obstacles for Syrian women refugees.

In the neoliberal age, countries are now only excused in providing the bare minimum of physical care to refugees within their borders (Isleyen, 2016:329). From this starting point, refugees are expected to make their own way. Throughout the rest of this piece, it will become evident that this is an incredibly difficult task.

### **Syrian women refugees' health in Turkey**

#### *I. Turkey's National Policy Towards Syrian Refugees*

The northern part of Turkey shares a long border with Syria. The accessibility and proximity of this border crossing has encouraged millions of Syrian refugees to make the trek into Turkey. The border is also located close to the large city of Aleppo, which has been decimated throughout the conflict. These factors combined with Turkey's leniency in allowing a flood of refugees when conflict first began have led to about 3.6 million refugees currently living in Turkey, the largest number of total refugees across the globe (UNHCR, 2019). This is however, a substantially smaller proportion of their total population than that of Jordan, so Turkey should have an advantage in providing resources to the Syrian refugees they are housing. 1.6 million, or almost half, of these refugees are women, a significant amount that should cause the Turkish government to think about how their policies may be affecting women (UNFPA 2019). The refugees are housed in camps, most along the border, which are run under the full responsibility of the Turkish government (Samari, 2017:262). These camps were not meant to be a permanent solution to the refugee crisis happening in Syria. The Turkish government, along



with most other leaders in the region and abroad, believed that the regime would fall quickly, and the refugees could return to their home country. Nine years later, however, war wages on and the number of refugees in Turkey has only increased, including after an agreement between Turkey and the European Union (EU) in March of 2016 which sent more refugees who were trying to make their way into Europe back to Turkey (European Parliament 2019).

In Turkey, however, the national policy regarding refugees does not work in favor of the Syrian refugees. Turkey is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, but, under the geographical limitation section, can recognize any refugees who are not fleeing from an event in Europe as “guests” (UNHCR 2019). Without socio-legal status in the country, refugees are afforded no real legal protections. In recent years, as a response to the growing number of refugees flooding their borders they have attempted to set up a new system to deal with the influx and have created the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) in order to deal with all policies regarding refugees in Turkey (UNHCR 2019). Each province of Turkey now requires Syrian “foreigners” to register for “temporary protection” and stay in the province in which they are residing (DGMM 2019). This does not grant them full refugee status in accordance with the 1951 Convention, however, so Syrian refugees are left behind in terms of legal protection.

## *II. Neoliberalism in Turkey Affecting Syrian Refugees*

Because the Syrian refugee women living in Turkey are afforded no real socio-legal status, it is easy for the neoliberal market to take advantage of them. The “hands-off” approach to labor markets and a lack of regulations have allowed for an informal sector to flourish in places where refugees and other migrants are living (Canefe, 2018:40). The exploitation of any migrants in the labor force is a global issue, caused by a neoliberal market which has

economized every aspect of human life. Syrian refugees in Turkey can be exploited easily because of their lack of freedom of movement, both within the country and externally and the desperation they feel in the face of trying to survive.

Neoliberalism also has an effect on the amount of aid that these refugees are receiving from the Turkish government. Under DGMM responsibility, Turkey, like most governments around the world feel that their humanitarian mission is to provide the minimum to Syrian refugees and then allow them to work their way out of their situation on their own. Camps in Turkey were not built for the purpose of providing the amount of aid that these people would actually need to live fulfilling lives while their home country was in turmoil; they give the minimum needs for survival, and oftentimes, not even that.

### *III. Neoliberalism in Turkey and Refugee Health - Employment*

In many cases, Syrian women refugees are fleeing with families: their children or elderly relatives they are expected to care for. This is especially difficult for Syrian women who are fleeing without men. Perhaps the men are still fighting in the conflict, already killed, wounded, or traveled to Europe in order to find better opportunities (UNFPA 2016). As the head of the household in a patriarchal society, however, men are supposed to be the breadwinners and provide for their families (Canefe, 2018:45). Many of these women have never been in a situation before where they have had to provide for their families and are unsure how to do so. Only one in five Syrian refugee women in Turkey are currently employed (ibid). When looking for employment they can face social exclusion, gender discrimination, language barriers, lack of childcare and exploitation by employers with the worst intentions for someone who has no legal standing in Turkish society (UNFPA 2016).

Therefore, many women end up working outside of the formal economy in Turkey. They will work as housekeepers, cleaners, or child caretakers; jobs which are not regulated in any way by the government (Canefe, 2018:45). This means that these women are not required to be paid, can work in terrible conditions, or work long hours. These jobs only increase a Syrian woman refugee's dependence on the Turkish government. Although the neoliberal government believes that Syrian refugees should be able to work themselves out of the crisis they have found themselves in, Syrian refugee women are excluded from any job that would give them that chance because of their lack of socio-legal status. The cycle will continue as Syrian refugee women continue to be taken advantage of in neoliberal labor markets.

### *III. Poverty*

67% of Syrian women refugees currently live below the poverty line (UKAID 2018). This is a significant portion of half of the refugee population in Turkey living under the poverty line. Trying to sustain their livelihoods while not making enough for even the most basic needs has turned the refugee camps into a fight for survival every day. Most families are trying to survive on a single income, sometimes even an income coming from their children, and it is difficult to meet basic needs while this is the case (UNFPA 2016). Poverty can also provide barriers to any educational opportunities for women and children, who were most likely not educated in Syria (UNHCR 2018). This can create another situation of economic dependence on the aid given by the Syrian government, because without education and language skills, it is especially hard for women to get jobs in the formal sector, so they remain stuck in employment where they are being taken advantage of.

The experience of extreme poverty can be extremely hard on these women. They can feel anxious about their finances, and as the caretakers of the family, feel extra responsibility on their

shoulders for children, wounded, or elderly members of the family as well (Korukcu, 2018:50). This constant state of anxiety can wear on these women as they continue to struggle to make it in the refugee camps. Along with mental health, poverty and lack of employment opportunities can wreak havoc on their physical health as well.

#### *IV. Reproductive health, Domestic Violence, Prostitution*

The Turkish government announced their own universal health care system in 2013 and was clear in their messaging that these benefits would apply to the Syrian refugees already in Turkey as well (Samari 2017:262). This measure was not uniformly applied across the country the country, however, and has left gaps in the health care that refugees are being provided. Most of the health services provided for Syrian refugees are in the camps, but these places are often lacking resources or staff (ibid). If the field hospitals in the camps do have doctors, they are often males, and the refugee women feel uncomfortable coming to them with reproductive issues. Other barriers to receiving health care that these women need include language barriers, cultural norms and their economic status (UNHCR 2018:50). Mental health problems also need to be addressed for Syrian refugee women to live fulfilling lives in the camps. The universal health care system in Turkey needs to be updated in order to ensure that it will cover the health of the Syrian refugee women who are living in the camps.

A third of pregnant Syrian women refugees in Turkey have been registered with complications and are in need of additional health services when they are close to giving birth (Samari, 2018:263). This is a substantial number of pregnant women who are seeking medical help that they may need urgently and are often met with many different obstacles while trying to find it. They may be scared of or unable to communicate their problems with the medical staff, worried about not being able to understand the directions that they are given during labor, or

anxious about being treated differently because they are not Turkish citizens (Korukcu, 2018:49). These cultural barriers cause even more stress on pregnant women who should be given the ability to relax knowing they are in safe hands in an already stressful situation. Having the aid of NGOs in these situations greatly benefits the mothers because the NGO workers are able to be more flexible and work hard to provide the right culturally setting for these Syrian refugee women.

Because Turkey allowed such a large influx of refugees in to their country when the conflict first started, anticipating a quick end to the war, the proper legal frameworks and infrastructure was not put into place until much later. The basic needs of the refugees were all that was being met at first; reproductive and women specific care was not on the list of priorities. An overall lack of resources has caused problems for women refugees who often do not have their health care needs met. They are faced with a lack of feminine hygiene products, as well as other hygiene materials such as soap and places to bathe (Samari, 2017:264). The health issues that women face can be made even worse by the lack of hygienic practices they are able to access; without bathing and feminine hygiene products their chance of becoming ill increase. Facing these gender specific problems should be a priority for the Turkish government so as to ensure that the Syrian refugee women living in their country remain healthy.

Instances of domestic violence in the refugee camps in Turkey have increased since the beginning of the conflict because of the longevity of the conflict itself, the stress of displacement and below average living conditions, and the shift in traditional gender roles (Leitner Center, 2018:2). This report by the Leitner Center, given to the UNHCR, finds that half of the Syrian refugee women they had conducted interviews with were no longer comfortable leaving their homes and said that they did so less often than they had when they were back in Syria (ibid).

This also led to a spike in early marriages as families began to look for a male who would be able to protect their daughters. These marriages, however, were not officially recognized by the Turkish government, who does not give legality to marriages of girls under 18, so they will ultimately lead to an increased risk of domestic violence as well (Canefe, 2018:45). The report finds that a girl who is married before the age of 18 is much more likely to go through an incident of domestic violence than a woman who is married later in life (ibid).

Women who become economically desperate and see no other way for them to earn an income to support themselves and their families have turned to prostitution. This is a dangerous area for women to work in because there are no legal protections or rights afforded to them in sex work in Turkey (Canefe, 2018:46). It is easy for these women to be in legal trouble if they are caught and in some cases even sent back to Syria. Women have to weigh the risk heavily before joining this dark area of the economy. They are easily exploited by sex traffickers who know how financially desperate the refugee women are and that they have nowhere else to turn in the Turkish economy. Forced prostitution and child marriage are the two most common ways that human traffickers are able to take advantage of Syrian refugee women (Leitner Center, 2018:26).

#### *V. NGO and IGO involvement in Jordan*

The NGOs in Turkey faced a unique challenge beginning in 2011 when the Syrian civil war began because many of them were shut out of the refugee camps to begin with (Samari, 2017:263). Many of these I/NGOS faced problems getting a mandate to be allowed to help with humanitarian aid from the Turkish government because they could be suspected of working with minority groups or political groups that would go against the current regime (Aras and Duman,

2019:480). Erdogan and his government view the Kurds as a dangerous minority group, and as he continues to make more moves toward authoritarianism, he becomes more sheltered as to he lets into the country. Any humanitarian group who may offer aid to the Kurds as well as the Syrians will be kicked out of Turkey. Therefore, many of the humanitarian NGOs operating in Turkey at the moment are funded by Western Europe, and are careful to remain on the good side of Erdogan because they see it as their mission to ensure that the refugees can remain in Turkey and not have to venture to Europe (ibid).

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), which also operates a humanitarian mission in Jordan, signed a memorandum of understanding with the Turkish Ministry of Health in 2012 (UNFPA, 2015:36). They planned to enact a key part of their crisis response plan, the Minimal Initial Service Package (MISP) that would give the initial framework for aid in maintaining social rights and the health of the refugee population coming into Turkey (ibid). This initial response plan, however, was delayed by the government and did not come into effect fully until around 2014 when the delivery of health services became coordinated with the Ministry of Health (Samari, 2017:257).

In addition to providing services such as reproductive health clinics and physical health products for Syrian women refugees, UNFPA provides psychological support through their program Women and Girls Safe Space (UNFPA 2016). These meetings provide a sense of community and allow women in the camps to come together and share their anxieties and problems with each other so that they know they are not alone in their struggles. All of these women have been through recent trauma in Syria, and many of them have experienced trauma in the camps or are still trying to navigate their way through their new lives as the sole bread winner for their families. Having a safe area to speak with other women about what they are

going through is extremely beneficial to these women and is a service that is necessary for them to live fulfilling lives in the refugee camps of Turkey. Women can receive services from the Safe Spaces as well, such as family planning, counseling, income training, language classes, legal help and the chance to network with people they may have lost while fleeing the conflict (UNFPA 2016).

The I/NGOs in Turkey provide four major services to the Syrian refugees: registration, legal assistance, education, and employment help (Aras and Duman, 2019:481). The NGOs first seek to provide help with the application process for Temporary Protection and then ensure that they understand the legal rights they can be afforded with this status (ibid). NGOs then provide aid in establishing a life for the refugees in Turkey with employment services and education they may need in order to support themselves (ibid). With these four steps the NGOs working in Turkey hope to provide the help that refugees need in the most important aspects of their lives so that they have legal protection and can have access to the resources necessary for them to live fulfilling lives while staying in Turkey.

### **Syrian refugee women's health in Jordan**

#### *1. Jordan's national policy toward refugees*

Like Turkey, Jordan is home to one of the largest populations of Syrian refugees in the world. Jordan houses nearly 1.1 million Syrian refugees, nearly eighty percent of whom are women and children (UNHCR, 2018). Despite acting as one of the largest host states of the modern age, Jordan's national policies concerning the welfare of Syrian women refugees are lacking in the sense that they are nearly nonexistent. National policies are formally absent since Jordan is not a signatory to international referendums such as the 1951 Convention of Refugees



or the 1967 Protocol so therefore is not expected to adhere to the protocols designated within these international conventions. The only national policy pertaining to the health and security of refugees in Jordan stems from a 1998 Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Jordanian state and the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (Saliba, 2016). Even after the influx of Syrian refugees at the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, national policy in Jordan has been relatively unmoved save for the 2016 Jordan Compact which focused on lessening the legal barriers needed for refugees to obtain work visas within the country.

Accompanying the lack of formal refugee law, the Jordanian state has maintained that Syrian refugee camps be seen as “temporary” housing units rather than formal constructions (UNHCR, 2018:2). These motions by the state have had great effects on the abilities for Syrian refugees to create for themselves a livable lifestyle since they are without legal help or state-sponsored protections (Tobin, 2016:4). This lack of coherent national policy leaves gaping holes in the means for Syrian refugees, specifically Syrian women refugees, to obtain good financial and physical health in the way of steady employment, avoiding poverty and securing safe housing. These financial factors in turn influence their abilities to take care of their physical health through obtaining sexual and reproductive health services and distancing themselves from domestic violence, prostitution, and human trafficking.

Unlike Turkey, Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention so one of its first policies pertaining specifically to the treatment of refugees and displaced peoples came in 1998 despite it being a large host country of refugees prior to this point. The UNHCR Memorandum of Understanding was signed in 1998 in the face of Jordan having virtually no guiding refugee policies. This memorandum with the UNHCR allowed for Jordan to borrow certain legal frameworks from the 1951 Convention for how the state and legal entities refer to

refugees and their status within the country. According to the memorandum, Jordan abstains from “refoulement,” or the forced repatriation of refugees to a state where their lives would be placed in immediate danger. This memorandum requires Jordan to acknowledge that refugees should be treated according to international standards in the way of being able to practice their own religion free from discrimination, rights to legal counsel in accordance with the laws of Jordan, as well as be free from overstay or departure fees. Even with this memorandum in place in Jordan’s legislature, the UNHCR has played the focal role in determining who is and who is not a refugee as newly displaced refugees enter the country. Even though Turkey is a signatory to the 1951 Convention, both Jordan and Turkey do not have a formal determinant of who legally is or is not a refugee. Much like as in Turkey, according to Jordan’s Ministry of Labor, the Jordanian state instead refers to Syrian refugees as legally ambiguous “‘visitors’, ‘irregular guests’, ‘Arab brothers’ or simply ‘guests.’”

This legal ambiguity is one of the ways in which Jordan’s legal frameworks and national policies fails refugees. If there is no definition of a refugee, there is no policy created to specifically address the plight of refugees. Senior Foreign Law Specialist Issam Saliba (2016) writes for the Library of Congress on Jordan’s refugee law and policy that the state does not have a state-specific definition of a refugee so it relies on the 1998 UNHCR framework to determine who is an asylum seeker, or “guest.” Saliba writes this lack of state legal framework leaves many Syrians refugees in Jordan without visas and without the means to apply for residency within the country. Protections are granted to them only by the UNHCR. Their refugee status is only legally validated through the obtaining of the Asylum Seeker Certificate (ASC) issued by the UNHCR, not the Jordanian state. Despite protections for Syrian refugees’ within the country hinging on the work of IGOs such as the UNHCR, in 2015, Jordan instructed the UNHCR to stop issuing

ASCs to Syrians. The UNHCR reports that ASCs are crucial for Syrian refugees to obtain life-sustaining resources within the nation since they lack the government-issued documents that would allow them to be recognized and considered for legal procedures such as employment, housing, and healthcare. Even with this fact, the Jordanian state has worked in a neoliberal fashion to reclaim autonomy of its state and government from international actors by curbing influence of foreign actors' participation within the nation.

The Jordanian state has fought to claim autonomy of how they want to treat refugees by instituting the Jordan Compact of 2016. This compact is a legal document that attempts to make the obtaining of work visas for Syrian refugees more lax so they can participate in Jordan's formal labor market (Lenner and Turner, 2019:66). This was a neoliberal attempt to turn a humanitarian crisis of an influx of refugees into a state and economic benefit by putting displaced people to work (*ibid.*). The work visas that the Jordanian state made easier to acquire for Syrian refugees were mainly issued for areas of agriculture, construction, and industry, sectors of employment heavily dominated by men and migrant workers. While this compact was designed to benefit both the Jordanian state and Syrian refugee communities, tension has ensued because integrating Syrian refugees into the Jordanian economy has come at increased competition for jobs for other migrant workers (*ibid.*, 67). This is a severe problem for Jordan because migrant workers are a population which makes up a majority of the state's labor force.

The Jordanian market has not experienced intended benefits from the influx of Syrians even after the Jordan Compact because Syrians still have trouble obtaining work visas so employers prefer non-Syrians as employees because of their legal status. It is for this reason that many Syrian refugees, especially women, remain unemployed (UN Women, 2017). The economic status of Syrian refugees within the country has not improved for this reason. Many of

the jobs available for refugees are the same ones offered to migrant workers and other legalized immigrants. With few legal documents awarded to Syrian refugees because of the absence of Jordan's formal refugee laws and legal frameworks, as well as Jordan's demanding of the UNHCR to cease the administering of new ASCs, potential Syrian refugee workers are the least attractive candidates for these positions within the formal Jordanian sector. The neoliberal Jordan Compact of 2016 also directly avoids addressing the economic needs and woes of Syrian refugee women since the Compact designates more work visas for workers in male-dominated sectors of the economy that traditionally discriminate against the hiring of women (Lenner and Turner, 2019:81).

## *II. Neoliberalism in Jordan affecting Syrian women refugees*

The Jordan Compact of 2016 is an obvious neoliberal approach to a humanitarian issue. The goals of the compact were to make an impact on both the lives of the state and the lives of Syrian refugees who were relegated to living in camps or in poverty in Jordanian cities. While the compact has nominally increased the number of permit holders among Syrian refugees, it has encountered pushback from labor sectors that have relied on migrant workers. Many Syrians are also without government identification or ASCs which makes unable securing a work permit extremely difficult.

Lenner and Turner (2019) summarize in "Making Refugees Work" how the Jordan Compact comes at the end of twenty years of neoliberalization of Jordan which has sought market solutions to socioeconomic and state frictions (71). The state has worked alongside international actors such as the International Monetary Fund to help integrate the Jordanian economy into the greater world neoliberal economy by attracting international investment as well as making way for migrant labor to constitute a larger portion of the Jordanian economy. Jordan

now relies heavily on migrant workers in its formal sectors since it is a cheaper alternative to employing Jordanian citizens.

Neoliberal tendencies have also allowed for the Jordanian state to skirt around enforcing regulations on the informal sector. Informal employment has risen in recent years due to the Syrian refugee influx into the state. Informal employment accounts for those who work without a permit or those who have a permit but work in an industry or occupation in which they were not assigned a permit (ibid., 73). Due to these workers in the informal sector contributing to Jordan's economy, the state tends to be lax on regulating the informal sectors of the market which includes the health and working conditions of the employed. This laissez-faire approach to the employment and labor of unregistered, non-citizens in Jordan is a result of neoliberal tendencies that seek to allow the market control over societal functions and flows. These tendencies affect Syrian women refugees in particular since they are goaded into working in the informal sector due to lack of government and legal support. It is in the informal sector where they are more prone to abuse, exploitation, and workplace overwork due to their informal and unregulated status (Refugees International, 2018:14).

### *III. Neoliberalism in Jordan and Refugee Health - Employment*

These policies that favor neoliberal tendencies such as the Jordan Compact impact the health of Syrian refugees, specifically Syrian women refugees, directly by first influencing their abilities to find and hold a job where they are protected from work abuse and are guaranteed livable wages. Of all the work permits granted by the Jordanian government to Syrian refugees, only four percent of permits have been given to women despite nearly 30 percent of Syrian refugee women actively looking for work (Refugees International, 2018:17). Thousands of Syrian women refugees are then relegated to the informal sector where wages are low, and work

is unreliable. Women refugees work in occupations such as housecleaning and food services where they work manual labor for low wages and live in fear of being discovered by authorities for working illegally. This fear of working without a permit is especially high for Syrian women refugees seeing as though the consequences of being caught working without a permit are facing high fines, being detained, or being deported back to Syria (Refugees International, 2018:16). This risk is especially high for women with children or large families that they are culturally expected to support. These neoliberal policies directed by decrees such as the Jordan Compact back Syrian women refugees into a corner where they are legally unable to acquire protected, formal employment, so must find employment in the shadows where they are prone to abuses and exploitation all in order to support their families.

The neoliberal policies that predominate Jordan as they pertain to Syrian women refugees have a great effect on the health and wellbeing of these displaced women living in the country. Syrian women refugees are legally unable to find the wide range of work that would support them and their families which affects all different avenues of their health ranging from their financial health including poverty and housing to their physical health, including reproductive health and recovery from domestic violence and prostitution.

The policies currently in place in Jordan restrict Syrian women refugees from finding fulfilling and sustainable employment within the formal sector and angles them to work in precarious positions within the informal sector. Syrian women are unable to work so are unable to save funds for health or family emergencies or eventual repatriation. One Fafo Foundation report published in 2019 finds that only two percent of all Syrian families in Jordan have savings which lends to the notion that very few families are making enough money to go beyond making ends meet (Tiltnes, Zhang, and Pedersen, 2019:54). The restrictions on their employment options

have devastating impacts not only to their financial health and abilities to save money for future repatriation or emergency situations, but it also affects their physical health through informing the health risks they are exposed to while occupying lower socioeconomic statuses within Jordan.

#### ***IV. Poverty***

Syrian women refugees in Jordan live in higher numbers of poverty than other comparative populations in the country due to their high unemployment statuses (UN Women, 2018). Syrian women refugees are affected by poverty because of their lack of access to steady employment and because they are the family members who are culturally and socially expected to care for larger families of children and elderly. A UN Women report from 2018 found that nearly 86% of Syrian refugees living in Jordan live below the poverty line (3). Poverty affects women's households in particular because women-headed households spend on average 1.6 times their household earnings due to their increased familial responsibility of taking care of children and extended family (UNHCR, 2018:10).

Poverty is affected by the financial health of Syrian women refugees which is directly impacted by neoliberal state policies, yet poverty also directly affects the wellbeing of Syrian women's physical and emotional health because of the additional challenges poverty forces onto those living under its conditions. Syrian women refugees who live in poverty in Jordan are subject to adverse living conditions such as living in makeshift homes where they are exposed to the elements (Dunmore, 2015). Within these makeshift, temporary, and informally constructed homes, they have restricted access to fresh drinking water and water adequate for bathing or preparing food. Many women buy water from tanker trucks or rely on bottled water to sustain

themselves, yet they may not always be able to afford it given the inconsistencies in how they find and acquire money (Tiltnes, Zhang, and Pedersen, 2019:8).

Syrian women refugees living in poverty are also more prone to “food shocks,” or food shortages, since they are unable to afford to buy food for themselves and their families so rely on public assistance food systems from NGOs (Dunmore, 2015). Due to the precarious and tense relationship between the Jordanian state and NGO involvement which sees the Jordanian government restricting the movement and presence of NGOs and IGOs within the country, these food shocks are constant and have devastating effects on the malnutrition rates of refugee women and their children living in poverty (Achilli, 2014:82).

**V. *Reproductive health, Domestic Violence, Prostitution***

Poverty is one of the greatest determinants of health outcomes because of how all-encompassing it is to the lives of individuals living in it. Syrian refugee women in Jordan are more prone to health risks stemming from poverty-induced states of living. These include high rates of malnutrition, lack of prenatal care associated with poor delivery outcomes and higher risks of pregnancy complications accompanied by insufficient postnatal care, as well as inadequate access to clinics for recovery from domestic abuse and treatments of sexually transmitted diseases stemming from prostitution (UNHCR, 2018:16). The UNHCR (2018) finds that nearly half of all Syrian women refugees living in Jordan do not have the monetary means to afford prenatal or postnatal care which leads to complications during pregnancy which put both mother and children at risk (16).

Poor Syrian refugee women also encounter domestic abuse at high rates but do not have the resources to leave their situations or afford healthcare to heal and recover since they do not have the financial resources to afford transportation to reach clinics for therapy and medical



assistance. Syrian women refugees are also more prone to contracting STDs from participation in prostitution or from domestic violence from their partners who may have been exposed (Al-Maharma et al., 2019:609). They often do not have the money to seek medical help for these issues especially when any money they do have is put toward supporting and feeding their families (UNHCR, 2018:15). If left untreated, many issues plaguing women's reproductive health such as breast cancer, HIV, or STDs like herpes or gonorrhea have lifelong impacts on their health such as informing the development of cervical or ovarian cancer (Al-Maharma et al., 2019:610). This is why health risks associated with negative lifestyle choices informed by poverty which is influenced by neoliberal restrictions on formal employment is so necessary to address in entirety. One aspect of women's health affects the other through a trickle-down relationship which is why help and aid are so important for Syrian women refugees. Most help for many Syrian women refugees in offering solutions to this string of problems is offered mainly in the form of NGO assistance.

#### **VI.** *NGO and IGO involvement in Jordan*

Even though Jordan in recent years has worked to reduce the presence of NGOs within the country as per neoliberal tendencies of nationalism and isolation from foreign influence, as well as expecting refugees to work for themselves, many NGOs within Jordan persist in providing relief for Syrian refugee communities. The first way in which NGOs remedy the faults left by hands-off, market-based state policies is through providing women with labor and skills training so that they may be able to find administrative and non-manual labor jobs within Jordan's economy (Campbell, 2016:1). Many Syrian women who receive skills training are actually employed in NGOs with the skills that they learn through NGO involvement (UN Women, 2019). This is one of the most important solutions of NGO work in Jordan because the

financial health of Syrian women inform all other aspects of their lives. With steady employment, they can support their families and provide for themselves and others a healthy lifestyle away from the dangers of informal employment, prostitution, or human trafficking.

In addition to offering skills training to Syrian women, NGOs also work to offer women legal assistance when issues do arise due to their unregulated and informal status within Jordan. Many women who seek formal employment are unable to do so because they do not have the legal documents, such as a permanent address or visa, to apply for a work permit in Jordan's formal economy (UN Women, 2019). Women working in the informal sector are also subject to fines, detention, or deportation, so NGOs help combat these legal punishments for Syrian women. By involving NGOs such as UN Women-sponsored organizations in helping them overcome these many arduous obstacles, Syrian women are in better places to find employment which helps inform all other aspects of their health including poverty and having money available for healthcare.

Along with helping address the financial and legal needs of Syrian women, NGOs help support Syrian refugee women through setting up health clinics in closer proximity to Syrian communities (UN Women, 2019). Many poor Syrian refugee women do not have access to prenatal or postnatal care, and they do not have the resources to find help to escape from domestic abuse or prostitution because many health clinics and counselors are located outside of Syrian communities. Syrian women do not have the money or means to travel long distances for their health which is why NGOs have set up health clinics specifically to address the needs of Syrian women. These clinics also offer classes aimed at men to address the root causes of domestic abuse and offer mental health resources aimed at alleviating the stresses and tensions that cause abusive households (UN Women, 2019). Clinics such as those run by the Arab

Women's Organization also help Syrian refugee women escape from prostitution and recover from the many abuses endured including mental abuse and prolonged exposure to violence and STDs (UN Women, 2019).

NGOs and IGOs do most of the work in addressing the health of Syrian women refugees in Jordan. By being actively involved in their communities and addressing the specific needs that come from their "visitor"-status within the country of Jordan, NGOs help alleviate the suffering that neoliberal policies and market-directed approaches have levied upon the marginalized community of Syrian women refugees.

The case studies into both Jordan and Turkey illustrate that these host countries are neglecting to give socio-legal status to Syrian refugees who are within their borders because of neoliberal ideology that sees them as economic subjects who are accountable for their own health, both financially and physically. This has caused a gap between the care that should be provided to these refugees and the care that has been provided by the state.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Turkey and Jordan are two countries who host the majority of Syrian refugees in the world, yet their national policies informed by neoliberalism have created severe health issues for Syrian refugee women living within their borders. The first policy recommendation offered to remedy the proliferation of negative health outcomes for Syrian refugee women in both countries is aimed at changing the socio-legal status of refugees in Turkey and Jordan since they both lack the legal framework in defining a Syrian refugee. This policy change could come at the state itself amending legal frameworks to award state-sponsored legal status to refugees through granting them official refugee or migrant classification. This would immediately impact the health of Syrian refugee women because they would then be able to apply for formal work and

formal housing, and they would have the legal means to participate in state healthcare through which other physical health determinants could then be addressed. If the states are reluctant to make changes to their national legal infrastructure concerning Syrian refugees, Turkey and Jordan could allow NGOs and IGOs more access within their countries and grant them autonomy in re-issuing ASCs to refugees. These ASCs would grant refugees legal protection since the ASCs denote international protection of refugees including keeping them safe from refoulement or non-voluntary deportation. ASCs would also grant refugees the abilities to apply for formal housing and work visas within the two countries.

While the socio-legal status of Syrian refugee women should be the primary objective of policy change within the two countries, another policy recommendation comes at the specific remedying of women's healthcare. Healthcare offered to Syrian women refugees should be made a priority since they constitute more than half of the refugee populations in both countries. Syrian refugee women also encounter gender-specific obstacles such as fear of violence, discrimination, and high rates of poverty that inhibit them from seeking women-based care that informs their lifelong health. The governments of Turkey and Jordan could follow the lead of NGOs and IGOs such as UN Women and Arab Women's Organization in building or funding health clinics in closer proximity to Syrian camps, communities, and settlements so Syrian refugee women have more access to consistent reproductive healthcare. Along with this, the governments of Jordan and Turkey could also build off of Turkey's universal healthcare plan and offer free or reduced-priced healthcare to Syrian refugee women and women-headed households since the proliferation Syrian women's reproductive issues are informed by their lack of access to monetary funds.

While the aforementioned policy changes exist outside of the contexts of neoliberalism and advocate for a stronger role of government in providing for Syrian women refugees, there is also a more realistic policy change that could exist within the current neoliberal state. This policy change comes at the suggestion of further reducing barriers needed for Syrian refugee women in particular to acquire work visas so that they can help themselves by working as is demanded or intended by neoliberal ideology. Reducing the work visa requirements so that Syrian refugee women could apply for them even without legal documents of residency or citizenship would do well to inform positive trends of financial and physical health among Syrian women in both host countries. Having a work visa allows for participation in the protected formal sector which means women could then have alternatives to working in the precarious informal sector which proves to inform all other aspects of their lives.

### **Conclusion**

There is no end in sight to the conflict still marring the Syrian state. Repatriation is not yet an option for the millions of Syrian refugees scattered across Turkey and Jordan. While Turkey and Jordan host the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world, their neoliberal policies which withhold government protections and levy the market as the central resolutionist actor demonstratively prove to harm Syrian women refugees who are seeking asylum within their borders. By withholding from Syrian women refugees a protected socio-legal status within the nation, Syrian women are unable to find formal employment which informs high rates of poverty, reproductive issues, as well as goading them into closer proximities to domestic violence, prostitution, and human trafficking. Turkey and Jordan's neoliberal policies that seek isolation and autonomy from foreign influence inhibit NGOs and IGOs from being able to distribute aid on a grand scale, informing disparate conditions experienced by Syrian women

who rely on non-governmental aid to help them provide for themselves and their families. While NGOs and IGOs are restricted statewide access to refugee communities in both states, many women depend on NGOs and IGOs for employment, skills training, legal counseling, as well as medical assistance, and food and water. Even the reduced presence of NGOs and IGOs have life-saving benefits for the Syrian women refugees they are able to assist. With this fact in mind, Turkey and Jordan could take inspiration from the work of NGOs and IGOs by offering a legal status to women refugees so they are protected persons within the state; offering them widespread, accessible and comprehensive women-based healthcare; as well as offering them increased opportunities to participate in the formal labor market.

For nine winters, some Syrian women refugees have been living as temporary and unprotected guests in Turkey and Jordan. They have been subject to state neoliberal policies which have pushed them further into the shadows where for nine winters, their health has suffered as a result. The current treatment of Syrian women in Turkey and Jordan is not viable in the context of an unforeseeable end to the conflict informing their displacement. Change must happen so that in the winters to come, Syrian women's health can improve and Syrian women "guests" will be recognized and protected as Syrian women refugees.

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