



Syrian Refugees in the Kurdish Region of Iraq

Assisting Non-Camp
Communities

November 2013



Executive Summary

In July 2013, Mercy Corps conducted an assessment of over 500 urban Syrian refugee households living in the Kurdish Region (KR) of Iraq. The international response to the needs of Kurdish Syrians in Iraq has to date focused largely on those living in camps, and this assessment was developed to inform Mercy Corps, other humanitarian agencies, the Kurdish Regional Government and donors about the specific needs of those living outside the camp environment. Shortly after the assessment period, the number of Syrian refugees in the KR increased dramatically, following an influx of around 50,000 refugees in August 2013. Following this influx, there has been an increased focus on supporting refugees in newly formed camps. However, a significant percentage of the refugee population (an estimated 60%) continues to reside in urban environments, particularly in Erbil, Sulaimaniya and Dohuk.

Based on the results of the July 2013 assessment, Mercy Corps offers the following recommendations:

1. Provide assistance to both camp and non-camp refugees: An estimated 60% of refugees in the Kurdish Region of Iraq are not living in camps. Government policies and UNHCR and WFP targeting strategies should take this into account and ensure that equitable assistance is provided to non-camp refugees.

2. Prioritize financial coping and livelihoods activities: The clearest need articulated by survey respondents was for a reliable income. The desire to find reliable jobs where refugees are treated and paid fairly came up again and again, raised by both men and women. As the price of rent and daily living takes up a large percentage of dwindling income, Mercy Corps recommends a range of programming designed to strengthen refugee financial coping strategies, including the provision of unconditional cash assistance to the most impoverished, the development of linkages between refugees and potential employers, and advocacy campaigns targeting employers and government policy makers to encourage fair and equal treatment of refugee employees.

3. Work in partnership with local authorities: As in most locations receiving a high number of refugees, the influx of additional people into the KR has put strain on existing resources and services. It is essential that aid organisations work alongside the KRG and local authorities in order to assist them to extend medical, educational and social services to refugees.

4. Find creative solutions to provide education for refugees: With only 5% of refugee children in formal education, a huge gap is emerging in the lives of these young people. The KRG and the international community should actively collaborate to find potential solutions to providing access to education for refugee children and young people, in a language they can understand.

Introduction

As the conflict in Syria moves into a third year, the crisis affecting Syrians remaining in their country and displaced throughout the region is reaching boiling point. The figures speak for themselves: 6.8 million people in need within Syria¹, 4.3 million internally

¹ <http://syria.unocha.org>

displaced persons², and 2.1 million refugees³. The UN has called Syria *'the great tragedy of this century – a disgraceful humanitarian calamity with suffering and displacement unparalleled in recent history'*.⁴

Mercy Corps is responding to the needs of Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, and our interventions are reaching an estimated 750,000 people in need. As the humanitarian crisis continues to lengthen and deepen, Mercy Corps is positioning itself to continue to respond to both the immediate humanitarian needs and longer term needs of refugee populations as resources become increasingly scarce.

Across the Syria response, our goal is twofold: **to meet immediate humanitarian needs on the largest possible scale while constantly seeking opportunities to build long-term resilience to recurring stresses for displaced populations and host communities.**

With this goal in mind, Mercy Corps carried out an assessment of non-camp Syrian refugees living in the Kurdish Region of Iraq in July 2013 in order to identify their critical needs, both immediate and more long term. Many of those involved in the assessment had been displaced for two years or more and their situation is becoming critical – savings have run low, job opportunities are scarce, and the majority of children and young people are out of education. Since this assessment was completed, an influx of more than 50,000 refugees crossed over the border from Syria into Iraq. Many more are expected.⁵ On 17th August 2013, more than 10,000 Syrians streamed across the Peshkhabour Bridge into Iraq⁶ – representing the largest number of refugees to leave Syria in a day since the start of the conflict in 2011 – and the international community is struggling to respond. Based on the results of this original assessment, and subsequent more recent updates on the situation, there is increasing evidence that the capacity of local communities, the existing international humanitarian community, and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to respond to the needs of Syrian refugees is stretched to breaking point.

For close to two years Domiz Camp in Dohuk was the primary refugee camp in the Kurdish Region (KR), however since August 2013 an additional six settlements camps have been quickly assembled to accommodate the new refugees in Erbil, Sulaimaniya and Duhok. While the humanitarian response has primarily focused on camps, an estimated 60% of refugees reside in non-camp urban and rural settings, and in some provinces such as Sulaimaniya, that number is closer to 80%. These are extremely vulnerable individuals who are struggling to meet basic needs of shelter, food and clothing for their families. This recent Mercy Corps needs analysis of Syrian refugees in the KR, including around 600 individual refugees living outside of camps, paints a concerning picture. Humanitarian needs for both camp and non-camp refugees must be met as a matter of urgency. The KRG and several local and international organizations are turning their

² <http://syria.unocha.org>

³ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php> (including unregistered refugees)

⁴ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10282089/Syrias-refugee-crisis-the-humanitarian-calamity-of-the-century-says-UN.html>

⁵ UNHCR, Latest Situational Update, New Influx of Syrian Refugees into Iraq (Sept. 1, 2013)(cited more than 50,000 Syrian refugees crossed into the IKR since August 15th).

⁶ *Syria refugees pour into Iraqi Kurdistan in thousands*, BBC News (Aug. 18, 2013), see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23745201>.

focus to include non-camp refugees, but much more needs to be done to identify these refugees, and develop holistic responses to a wide range of needs.

Mercy Corps, working with local partners Harikar and Civil Development Organization, carried out this assessment of non-camp refugees in Erbil, Sulaimaniya and Dohuk to develop a better understanding of the needs of those specific groups. This assessment report provides a unique insight into the lives of those Syrian refugees in KR not living in formal camps, which will be used to inform our own program design and also to share with the humanitarian community at large in order to better direct humanitarian and longer term assistance to non-camp refugees living in Iraq.

Context and Background

The first Syrian refugees fleeing the on-going conflict arrived in neighbouring countries seeking asylum over two years ago. Far from abating, the flow of refugees out of Syria and into Iraq continues to increase when borders are open.⁷ According to the most recent data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are approximately 199,985 registered refugees in the Iraqi Kurdish region⁸, and the number of unregistered refugees could raise this number significantly. An estimated 60% are living in non-camp host community settings, while the remaining 40% living in Domiz Camp and several other newly created settlements that are likely to become permanent camps. In the Duhok Governorate, UNHCR reported 101,301⁹ registered refugees living in Domiz camp and non-camp settings.

In Erbil there are 70,991 registered refugees scattered throughout the city and living in the settlements of Kawergosk, Baharka, Qushtapa, and Basrima.¹⁰ Furthermore, in early October UNHCR started moving refugees into the Darashakran camp in Erbil with the capacity to hold a maximum of 15,000 people, and the Governor of Erbil announced 3 additional permanent camps in October 2013 including Qushtapa, Basrima, and Kawergosk. Sulaimaniya Governorate has the lowest number of refugees overall, with 21,595 currently registered;¹¹ yet in Sulaimaniya close to 80% of refugees are not living in the temporary camp in Arbat.

When the first influx of refugees arrived to the KR, they were welcomed and settled into Domiz refugee camp and into rented accommodations alongside various host communities. Two years later, the KR is starting to feel the strain as the numbers of arrivals continues to rise. Over 50,000¹² more refugees have streamed over the border into the KR, putting further strain on an already overburdened population, and the number of arrivals continues to grow. Although most refugees are registered as residents and have the right to work in Iraq, the number of available job opportunities is dwindling and the presence of refugees is less welcome than before as they are accused of driving up rent prices and decreasing wages for the scarce jobs that are available.

UNHCR's strategy to support Syrian refugees in the KR has largely focused on camp-based refugees in Domiz Camp, which is operated jointly by the KRG's Development

⁷ The KRG has intermittently closed the border for various reasons such as security and capacity to absorb large numbers of refugees, and the recent parliamentary elections.

⁸ UNHCR Iraq daily email update, 5 November 2013.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=103>

Modification Centre (DMC) and UNHCR. Currently, around 95,499 refugees are registered in Domiz,¹³ but UNHCR estimates that because the KR allows the refugees freedom of movement, the actual population of Domiz is probably around 45,000¹⁴. So it can be assumed that around 100,000 refugees are living with the Kurdish host population, with this number set to rise significantly as more refugees flood into Iraq.

The international community must remain responsive to the distinct needs of non-camp or 'urban' refugees in the KR – and must assume that when the immediate humanitarian needs of new arrivals are met, they are likely to face long term challenges around finding shelter, a sustainable source of income, and finding acceptance as they face an indefinite stay as a refugee.

Methodology

In July 2013, Mercy Corps and local partners Civil Development Organisation (CDO) and Harikar carried out an assessment of non-camp (urban) refugees in the cities of Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Dohuk. The assessment involved a targeted needs assessment survey¹⁵ with a random sample of 523 heads of household (206 in Dohuk, 214 in Erbil, and 103 in Sulaymaniyah; roughly reflecting the percentage breakdown in refugee populations in the three cities), a series of focus group discussions with women, youth and men in each location, and 30 semi-structured interviews with vulnerable individuals from refugee households.¹⁶ 67% of survey respondents were male (31% female), 54% of interview participants were female (46% male) and 70% of focus group discussion participants were female (30% male). The assessment also involved eight key informant interviews with key decision makers with involvement in Syrian refugees in Iraq, including UN and NGO representatives, and representatives of the Kurdish Regional Government and local government (including the Development and Modification Centre, responsible for management of refugees in Domiz Camp).

Patterns of displacement

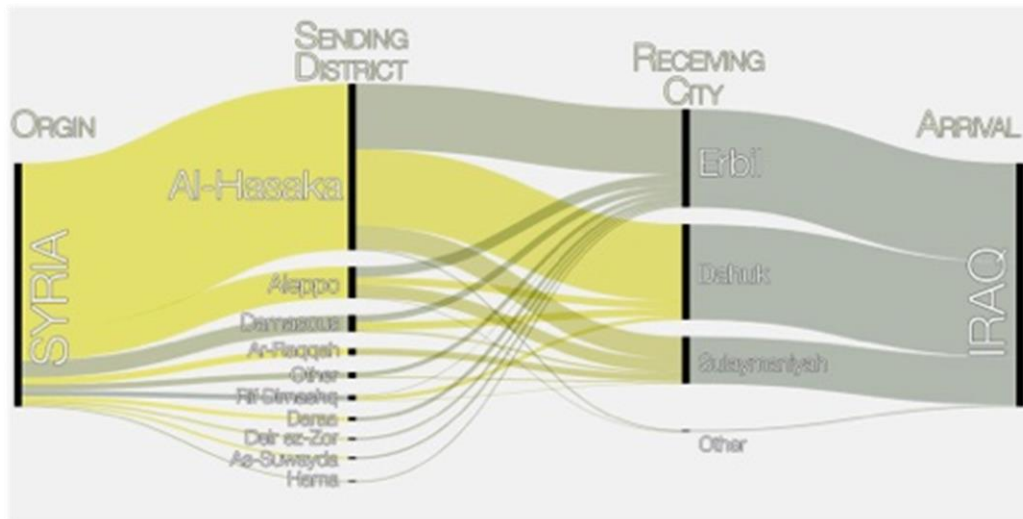
The majority of those responding to the survey indicated that they had left Syria to **escape the violence** (30%), because they were **afraid of being injured or killed in military attacks** (22%), because of **fear of being arrested** (22%) or because their **home in Syria had been destroyed** during the war (12%). The overwhelming majority of the refugees identified themselves as Kurdish, with only one respondent indicating that they were from an Arab background and only one respondent indicating that she was not Syrian but originally Palestinian. This homogenous nature of the refugee population, and the Kurdish identity that the refugees share with the host population in the KR has made them feel **relatively safe and accepted** – most interview and focus group respondents indicated that they felt safe in the KR, and expressed gratefulness for the support that has been extended to them by their new neighbours. However, recent research carried out by Mercy Corps following the sudden influx in refugees in August indicates that the increase in numbers is straining the relationship between the refugees and different host communities.

¹³ UNHCR Daily Update, October 13, 2013.

¹⁴ UNHCR: Iraq Syria Refugee Bi Weekly Update No. 51, 8-21 October 2013.

¹⁵ Surveys were collected using FormHub and ODK Collect, using tablet computers. The survey design incorporated a rapid needs assessment with longer term livelihoods questions drawn from the Emergency Market Mapping Analysis tool.

¹⁶ Vulnerability criteria included people with disabilities, female heads of households, unmarried females, and the elderly.



Most respondents came originally from Al-Hasakah Governorate in Syria (67%), 13% came from Aleppo and 7% from Damascus. The refugees were most likely to cross into the KR through the Peshakapor crossing in Dohuk province or through Sahela unofficial crossing just south of Peshakapor; the majority waited at the border for up to seven days before entering. Both these crossings were closed in May 2013 (open only for reunifications and medical emergencies) and re-opened in August 2013, allowing 47,000 people to cross in 14 days.¹⁷ Over a quarter of respondents reported that they had left family members behind in Syria, and many brought this up as a source of great worry and distress to them during interviews. Eight survey participants noted that they had been separated from children during their displacement from Syria.

“We are no longer living as one family – some of my sons came to live in Iraq and others are still in Syria. This causes me a lot of pain – I’m always thinking about them and their safety. Are they alive, how are they? These are the questions I think about now.”¹⁸

Although most refugees were registered with UNHCR, 12% of respondents indicated that they were not – some of these are recent arrivals, which indicates that they will register in time, but about 30% of respondents indicated that they had deliberately not registered due to distrust in the process. As many as one-third of refugees managed to gain residency in the KR the day they arrived, with an additional third gaining residency within 10 days of arrival. The ability to register as a resident in the KR, with the right to freedom of movement and permission to work, gives the refugee community in the KR many advantages over those displaced to Jordan or Lebanon. However, as the numbers of refugees are continues to rise there are indications that the government may cease issuing residence to new arrivals which would place those refugees in an increasingly vulnerable situation, one that may contribute to growing fractures among the refugee population.

It is clear from the responses that the refugees who participated in this assessment were from a **disadvantaged background within Syria**, before their displacement – around a quarter of heads of household were illiterate with no education, and a further third had

¹⁷ This pattern of entry into the KR is confirmed by the Syria Needs Assessment Project (SNAP) analysis of Syrian displacement patterns – see ‘Syrian Border Crossings (SNAP) 30 August 2013’

¹⁸ Quote from interview with 50 year old male refugee in Dohuk

only completed primary education. The majority (70%) had been working as daily labourers in Syria. Around half the participants had entered the KR illegally, mostly because they did not have the appropriate documentation with them to enter legally, but 10% noted that they crossed illegally because of involvement in political parties and 12% wanted to avoid paying “official” fees – anecdotal reports indicate that such fees are probably in fact charged by unofficial militia groups at the border.

To summarise, the refugee households arriving into the KR are under **multiple stressors and their ability to withstand the shock of displacement** is eroded by many disadvantages. They are suffering from the emotional effect of fleeing their homes out of fear for their lives, leaving behind loved ones, and many of their possessions. It seems that most of the displaced are not highly educated or skilled, and although they have a relatively accepting host community, it is uncertain how long those levels of acceptance will be maintained as many more refugees pour into the KR.

Language Barriers

Challenges around **language differences** were noted in focus group discussions and key informant interviews as one of the most challenging issues facing refugees in the KR. The difference in Kurdish dialects between the Iraqi Kurdish population living in Sulaimaniya and Erbil, and Kurds from Syria, is significant given the different dialects. Kermanji is the dialect spoken in Syria and the Duhok Province, whereas Sorani is the dialect in Erbil and Sulaimaniya. Furthermore, the relatively low prevalence of Arabic language spoken in Sulaimaniya and Erbil (more residents in Dohuk speak Arabic as they are closer to Arabic speaking regions such as Mosul) poses additional barriers between the refugees and host population. Language barriers make it more difficult to integrate into education, to communicate with each other, and to find work, and to build relationships and friendships. Many refugees reported having no interaction with the host community in large part due to language barriers.

Shelter

Shelter was identified as a primary concern for almost all survey, interview and focus group participants. Most live in **rented accommodation**, with an average of six family members living in two rooms. Around 8% are living in tents or homemade shelters, and given the massive influx of refugees into KR in August, it can be predicted that almost all those new arrivals will be living in inadequate tented accommodation in extreme temperatures during summer and winter. Local families hosted 5%, and 6% were living in collective shelters or public buildings. Six households had no accommodation at all, and a quarter of respondents indicated



This 87-year-old man in Sulaymaniyah reported that he was living in a public park with his wife and 7 grandchildren

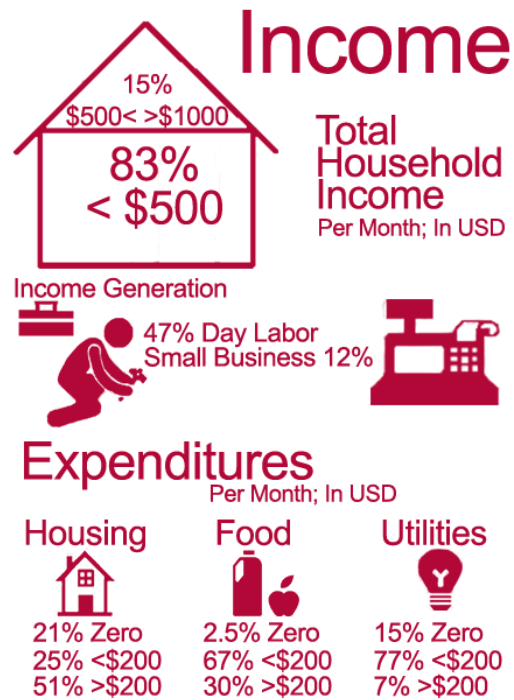
that their housing was not wind or weather proofed.

The KR is expensive and the high cost of accommodation was one of the most frequently mentioned challenges in interviews. Although 25% of respondents said they didn't have to pay rent, 50% pay \$200 or more in rent per month. 84% noted that their monthly family income is less than \$500 – which means that the majority are spending around half their income on rent. 90% of respondents indicated that they did not have any savings, meaning they have no safety net and must either find work or access humanitarian assistance. These families will find it increasingly difficult to afford the high cost of rent as well as available housing options. As the number of refugees pushes rent prices higher, key informant interviews indicate that this is likely to be one of the major sources of **conflict between the host population and Syrians**.

Livelihoods – access to jobs, fairness of treatment

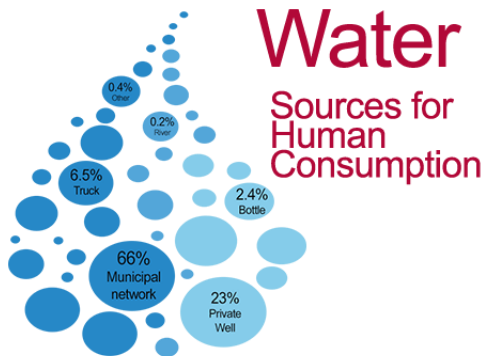
Refugees repeatedly expressed concerns about getting a job, keeping a job, and being treated fairly at work. Access to income was the most frequently mentioned problem in key informant interviews, and a theme that recurred in focus group discussions, particularly for groups of young men aged 18-35.

In male youth focus groups, the issue of work was linked to many factors – earning money, finding something to do with the day, and being treated with respect or treated fairly all came up repeatedly. Having a continuous job with a fair salary was associated with not just income, but also social status around being able to meet caretaker obligations. Two groups of young men stated that there were increased family tensions and poor relational dynamics linked to men being home all day in overcrowded dwellings. Two interview participants further alluded to a link between the lack of work and domestic violence. They also felt unfairly treated by employers who paid less than market rates, because they knew that Syrian refugees were desperate and would agree to accept lower wages – 80% of male focus group participants brought up this issue. This was an issue that was also raised in key informant interviews as a problem between Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish populations – five key informants (from Kurdistan and from the international community) noted that there is a perception among Iraqi Kurds that the influx of Syrians is reducing the average salary.



Female Syrian refugees face additional challenges linked to their gender, and although many young women work in cities, they are also responsible for caring for relatives. Female participants reported challenges in finding work; they also highlighted cultural norms, within their own communities as well as host communities, that made it unacceptable for women to work outside of the home, particularly if these jobs required distant travel and work or travel after sunset. In interviews, young girls in particular

noted that they couldn't take up jobs that took them out the house at night (for example waitressing in restaurants) because the social norms in the KR were more conservative than those in Syria, so they were left without disposable income and with nothing to do. Respondents also cited the challenge of balancing childcare with work.

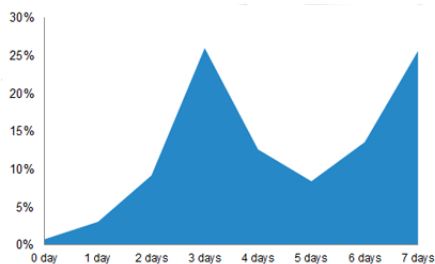


47% of survey respondents reported working in the KR in daily labour jobs, and around 13% reported running small businesses. Interestingly, when asked if their income had increased, stayed the same, or reduced since leaving Syria, 25% of respondents noted that their income had increased. This is reflective perhaps of the relative wealth of the KR compared to other parts of the region, providing some with improved economic opportunities. However, 65% indicated that their income had reduced, and when asked about daily costs such as fuel, rent, transport and medical expenses, the majority noted that these outgoings had substantially increased (with the exception of education – as children are no longer attending school and this cost has decreased).

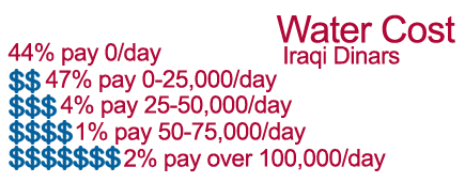
Distance Outside Shelter



Water Availability Days per Week



The graphics below summarise the access to sanitation and water facilities in the current housing available to the refugees in this assessment – this level of access is likely to be far less for those arriving into temporary shelters in the heat of the summer.



Access to services

The survey asked questions about access to water, sanitation facilities, healthcare and education. Compared to other refugee populations in Jordan and Lebanon, access to municipal water and sanitation services for urban refugees was reported to be relatively good – but the increasing numbers

of refugees are likely to strain existing service provision further.

Most respondents flagged their concern over the **lack of educational opportunities available for children and young people**. Only a shocking 5% of households reported that their children were attending schools in Iraq – when they lived in Syria, more than half the respondents indicated that they had children in school.¹⁹ The main challenges cited include the availability of Arabic language classes in the KR – Syrian children learn in Arabic, while Kurdish is the primary language of most schools in the KR. To compound the challenges, Syrian Kurds speak the Karmanji dialect which is distinct from the Sorani dialect spoken by Iraqi Kurds in Sulaimaniya and Erbil,²⁰ so there is very

¹⁹ This is consistent with UNHCR data that indicates similar low levels of education throughout the KR.

²⁰ In Duhok the dialect is similar to that of Syrian Kurds.

little opportunity for refugee children to integrate into schools even where places are available.

For young people, the lack of ability to pick up university or college places has not only left them with a gap in their education, it has left them with few activities and little purpose to their lives.

“The main challenge I am facing is that I was studying in Syria and I can’t continue my studies here as they learn in Kurdish – we studied in Arabic in Syria. I need transportation fees to reach the only Arabic school here. So I am bored here; I don’t have a job, I feel isolated and never go out and meet people.”²¹

Health was another issue of concern, particularly for persons with disability or chronic disease. Syrian refugees in the KR are entitled to free healthcare, and 30% of survey respondents indicated that they had not paid for healthcare since they had arrived. However, 50% of respondents indicated that they paid between \$1 and \$100 per month in health care fees, suggesting that they either resorted to private healthcare services or were being illegally charged for government provided healthcare.

Gender based violence and sexual harassment

Sexual harassment and discrimination against women and girls

were also highlighted as a problem for many respondents. While the vast majority of men and women felt accepted in the KR, and noted that they felt safe, some female interview and focus group discussion participants noted young host population men treat them poorly and subjected to continuous sexual harassment. Young Syrian women and girls reported withdrawing from society and avoiding public events, because of their sense that they are not respected by the male host population, or that their cultural differences with the Iraqi Kurdish population are misunderstood or used to justify the harassment and poor treatment. This in turn creates a very lonely, frustrating home life for women and girl refugees. Iraqi Kurdish decision-makers who were interviewed stated their perception that Syrian refugees had “differing moral standards” and that this was an issue of concern; yet it also appears to be used as a pretext for abusive behaviour directed towards female refugees.

Sanitation



²¹ Quote from interview with 16 year old female refugee living in Dohuk

“Negative comments and bad words – mobile phone numbers being thrown at us – this is why I don’t feel safe here and I don’t go out.”²²

High levels of **psychological stress** are prevalent in this refugee population indicated by reports by participants of feelings of withdrawal from society linked to cultural and language differences, sadness and worry about family members left behind in Syria. Many also report the pain of losing houses and possessions, being forced to live far from home, and the lack of education or job opportunities available (particularly for women). Women in particular noted that they felt isolated and that they had few options for support as they were far from their usual community – this feeling of isolation was mentioned in focus groups and in 60% of interviews.

Reports of **early or forced marriage** and incidents of **gender based violence** in communities inside and outside Syria²³ are very concerning, and the sensitivity around these subjects makes them difficult to explore in a general assessment like this. However, several respondents indicated that ‘this is a problem in my community’ and ‘I’ve heard of this happening, but not to anyone in my family’. Two interview participants confirmed that they knew of cases of forced marriage in their extended communities – one reported a 13 year old girl married to a much older man in order to ‘save her reputation’ and prevent her from becoming involved in love affairs, and another reported a girl who was married at 13 years for a small fee, as her family desperately needed an income. One interview participant indicated that they knew of cases of girls married to local Iraqi Kurds for a cash payment.

Recommendations

As the number of refugees arriving into Iraq continues to grow, and places in the existing camps are limited, the needs of non-camp or urban refugees in the KR continue to grow too – the issues and problems facing refugees uncovered in this assessment can only be assumed to have worsened in the last 3 months as scarce resources are stretched to cover yet more arrivals.

Based on the results of this assessment, Mercy Corps presents the following recommendations to the KR and the international community:

- 1. Provide assistance to both camp and non-camp refugees:** An estimated 60% of refugees in the Kurdish Region of Iraq are not living in camps. Government policies and UNHCR and WFP targeting strategies should take this into account and ensure that equitable assistance provided to non-camp refugees.
- 2. Prioritise financial coping and livelihoods activities:** The clearest need articulated by survey respondents was for a reliable income. The desire to find reliable jobs where refugees are treated and paid fairly came up again and again, raised by both men and women. As the price of rent and daily living takes up a large percentage of dwindling income, Mercy Corps recommends a range of programming

²² Quote from an interview with 19 year old female living in Erbil

²³ “Urgent Action Required to protect Syrian women and girls from sexual violence” International Rescue Committee, July 2012

designed to strengthen refugee financial coping strategies, including the provision of unconditional cash assistance to the most impoverished, the development of linkages between refugees and potential employers, and advocacy campaigns targeting employers and government policy makers to encourage fair and equitable treatment of refugee employees.

3. **Work in partnership with local authorities:** As in most locations receiving a high number of refugees, the influx of additional people into the KR has put strain on existing resources and services. It is essential that aid organisations work alongside the KRG and local authorities in order to assist them to extend medical, educational and social services to refugees.
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