



CHILDREN'S REPORT

STAND WITH
ME

OUR UNCERTAIN FUTURE





Acknowledgements

This report was written by children who have been displaced by the Syrian conflict, now living in Lebanon and Jordan, with support from staff from World Vision International.

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Photograph on cover: A young girl from Syria, now living as a refugee in Jordan, contributes to the production of this report.

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FOREWORD

Many years from now, when we look back upon the Syrian conflict with a collective sense of grief, it will be the children we will think of first. As the violence enters its fourth year, an entire generation of children is suffering the brutal consequences of atrocities and global inaction. In neighbouring countries, more than 1.2 million children are struggling to survive as refugees, navigating insecurity, social tensions and educational barriers as they try to remain strong for themselves, their friends and their families.

As a children's agency, World Vision speaks often of the many issues affecting their young lives. We take these to the highest levels to try to advocate for peace, and to bring protection and aid. I have met Syrian children in the tents, shelters and apartments they've been forced to call home. I've listened to their stories. Nobody can express the harshness of their daily lives, the precision of their memories or the innocence of their hopes and dreams like they can.

To mark three years of the conflict in Syria, World Vision International invited children living as refugees to write a report, to share, in their own words, their biggest concerns, and to propose solutions. Across Lebanon and Jordan, 140 children responded. Enthusiastically they brainstormed, debated, interviewed their peers and collated and analysed results. They then elected a smaller group of writers to formalise their findings. Their words, aside from translation from Arabic into English, have not been altered.

What did the children say? They live in fear of bullying and violence. They worry about early marriage, being swept into begging as a means of survival, and suffering poverty as a result of their parents' joblessness. They feel they are a burden on their caregivers. They fear they are losing their futures.

Behind the violence and the politics, a generation of children is doing its best to grow, learn and develop in the midst of continued uncertainty. Soon these children will be adults, responsible for rebuilding the country they love. They'll be asking us why we did not do more. With our No Lost Generation¹ partners, World Vision is working to ensure that these children are educated and protected, but this will require a global effort, far bigger than us.

Three years since this conflict began, we remember the more than 10,000 children who've lost their lives in Syria. We stand with the millions who've been displaced. And we continue to call for a peaceful political solution to the conflict, so that never again will children need to plead with us for the protection afforded them under international law.

We've promised the intelligent, brave young people whose thoughts and feelings fill these pages that we will share their report far and wide; and we will. I implore all people, whether your influence is large or small, to pay attention. The children's words, at times, are difficult to read. We can let them move us to tears, but they must also move us – all of us – to action.

Conny Lenneberg

Regional Leader, Middle East and Eastern Europe - World Vision International

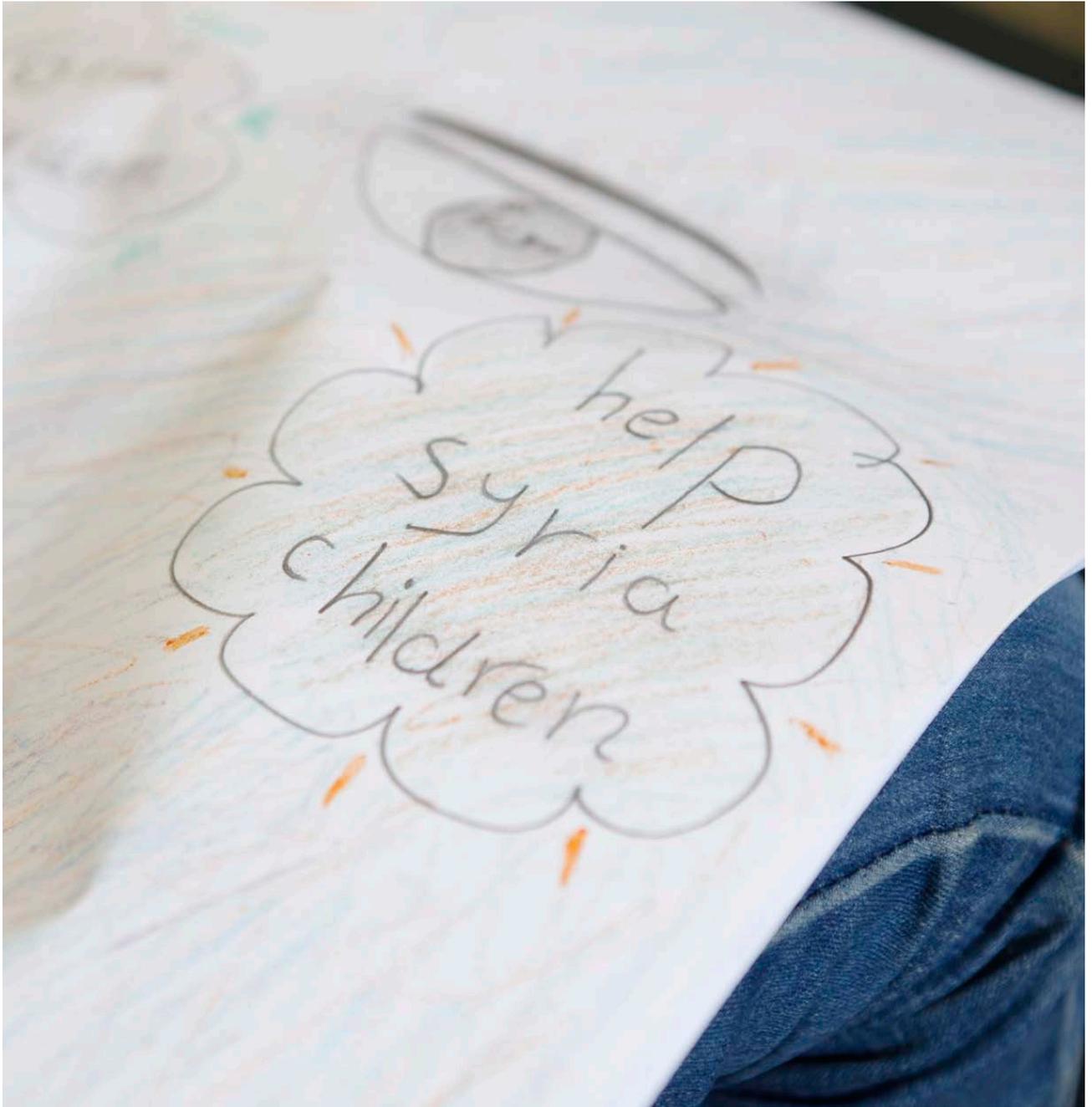


Conny Lenneberg in Jordan

Photo credit: Meg Sattler/World Vision

¹ No Lost Generation is a global coalition involving UNICEF, World Vision, UNHCR, Save the Children and Mercy Corps. The group is calling for sufficient support for child protection, education and psychosocial care to ensure that children affected by the Syria crisis do not miss out on a future.





‘All the Geneva talks, all the different things... the international community is really not listening to us. If they would only listen to us, if they would only get somewhere, if they would only stop the war, the bombs, if they would only make our lives better, and help us to live in peace – that is all we ask.’

– Soha,² 13

² All names have been changed.



INTRODUCTION

We, the children of Syria who have taken refuge in Lebanon and Jordan, write this report to make our voices heard to the world, and to share with you our fears and suffering.

One hundred and forty boys and girls (80 in Lebanon and 60 in Jordan) brought together their thoughts and ideas to write this report, hoping that it would resound in all corners of the world.

We have met many times and carried out various activities, starting with getting to know one another and defining the problems we're facing in our host countries. We did interviews, filled out questionnaires with our friends and peers, prioritised the problems we would highlight and finally wrote this report.

This message is addressed to the organisations and countries supporting our cause who are capable of making a difference and changing our reality.

We also address it to every person in this world, for perhaps then they would feel our suffering – whether at home, in school, in society or in the host country.

We call for:

- the fighting to stop, the war to end and peace to spread among the parties in the conflict, so we can go back home
- the chance to help other children – we belong to one generation
- the chance to take part in relief efforts and help other Syrian refugees and friends
- host countries to provide legal support for refugees to be able to move freely and provide them with the basic necessities of life, such as food, shelter, school and job opportunities
- host communities to treat us better and to accept us until this crisis is over
- the international community to press their governments to cooperate to help us and end this crisis.



Photo credit: Joy Toose/World Vision





Photo credit: Meg Sattler/World Vision



OUR LIVES AT HOME

We, the children of Syria, are facing many problems.

The first problem is poverty. It affects families who cannot buy food, clothes and medicine that children need, because of the high cost of living in Lebanon and Jordan, the absence of a breadwinner and the reliance on organisations to help pay the rent.

Families have low income and no job opportunities. All of this has a negative effect on us psychologically. It leaves our parents unable to provide basic domestic needs and family requirements. Our luxurious life in Syria is no more than a dream now. Our only concern has become how to get our food.

From the comfortable houses and the spacious rooms we used to live in in Syria, we find ourselves now in unsafe tents, camps and small, narrow rooms in remote areas, away from markets and stores. We are fleeing the racket of the house to the school or even the street to find some quiet.

The main reason we're living in groups in small houses or camps is the high rent of houses. There is no privacy any more, with the large number of people in every room. We no longer feel comfortable or at peace.

'We carry the weight of the world on our shoulders, but we do not complain because we don't want to overburden our parents.'



Photo credit: Ralph Baydoun/World Vision





‘If I had the opportunity to address people in power around the world, I would say, ‘Haven’t you had enough of the destruction in Syria? Haven’t you seen enough blood in Syria? Haven’t you seen enough deaths in Syria? What else do you still need, to save us and bring us back to our country, If I had a magic wand, I would erase all the destruction that happened in Syria or in any other country and draw instead the best and most beautiful thing for everyone. My dream is to graduate from law school so that I can support the oppressed and give them their rights.’

– Hanadi, 17

Photo credit: Nicholas Ralph/World Vision



This is also damaging our school education. One of the child refugees we interviewed in Lebanon said, 'My friend is living with ten other people in one room. He cannot concentrate on studying, so he failed.'

When we fled Syria, we left without our possessions and money. We had to live a basic life, and our parents had to settle for any job to sustain our livelihood. We carry the weight of the world on our shoulders, but we do not complain because we don't want to overburden our parents.

Hekmat, 16, says, 'My father is a doctor, and he used to work in Syria. When we fled to Lebanon, all Lebanese hospitals turned him down, just because he is Syrian. This has had a negative impact on our life.'

'Some girls have been forced into early marriage against their will.... This is the case of many girls who have lost their childhood and their dreams – to carry the burdens and worries of a new family that they do not know how to build and manage.'

Souheila, 17, tells her own story: 'My father works for 14 hours straight in a restaurant and earns US\$400 a month to provide for us our basic needs. But this is not enough because our family consists of 11 members. I only see my dad in urgent situations.'

For our lives as children, the ghost of forced early marriage has loomed. It has become a negative habit in society. The questionnaires we filled out revealed that many girls younger than 18 years old are getting married because of their family's financial burdens. Some girls have been forced into early marriage against their will, to break away from the shackles of poverty.

Other girls are being forced into marriage after being harassed. This is a terrible problem. Parents are marrying off their girls out of fear for them and to protect them and their honour.

This is the case of many girls who have lost their childhood and their dreams – to carry the burdens and worries of a new family that they do not know how to build and manage.

As if these psychological burdens were not enough, we find no one to talk to and tell of our suffering and the problems we're facing.

The survey we carried out revealed that all the children prefer to talk to their parents and family, but the bad psychological state has made parents unfit to listen to their children.

'We cannot talk to our parents because they are suffering like us and more. At the end, we find ourselves listening to them, instead of having them listening to us.'

'My friend's father comes home from work exhausted,' said one interviewee. 'If my friend tried to talk to him, [his father] would hit and abuse him because of the psychological burdens inflicted on the family.'

We are forced into carrying these burdens. We cannot talk to our parents because they are suffering like us and more. At the end, we find ourselves listening to them, instead of having them listening to us.





Photo credit: Meg Sattler/World Vision



OUR LIVES AT SCHOOL

It is not only at home that we are facing problems.

Problems are chasing us to school, or at least chasing those among us who got the chance to enrol in school.

Syrian children in schools are finding it difficult to adapt and get along with others, because they are blamed for any problem that happens in school.

If any classroom furniture such as desks are vandalised, the blame always falls on us, the Syrian children. We cannot defend ourselves or discuss the matter with the principal, because teachers discriminate between us and Lebanese or Jordanian students.

It is not just a matter of discrimination. Sometimes we are abused in all sorts of ways, physically, verbally and morally.

Rami, 13, says, 'Once, we were in class. The principal came in and began scolding us, accusing us of scribbling on the class walls and messing around with the desks. We tried to convince him that all the mess happening in school is not our fault, and that it could be the Lebanese students who did that. But he did not listen to us. He insisted on blaming us.'

'One of my friends received an intense beating from the principal when he accused my friend of something he had not done,' says Mohamed, 14. 'When my friend tried to defend himself, the principal did not believe him and hit him on his head till he bled.'

Samira, 17, talks about another incident: 'Once, the teacher asked my friend to answer a question in English. My friend couldn't reply because he was weak in English. The teacher hit him.'

'There are not enough initiatives to make the curriculum any easier for Syrian students... An excellent student in Syria becomes a failing student in Lebanon.'



Photo credit: Jon Warren/World Vision



The abuse is not just physical but also verbal. We are cursed and humiliated not just by the teachers but by the other students.

Layla, 12, says, 'Lebanese students do not call us by our names. They call us indirectly, using words like "You, Syrian boy" or "You, Syrian girl."

'Some children make fun of us,' adds Samir, 14. 'They call us bad words that hurt our feelings. They even write them on the board and humiliate us in front of everybody.'

Labib, 12, says, 'Once, between classes, my friend opened the door to see the teacher speaking with the principal. The principal cursed him and cursed his family.'

All these behaviours, curses and humiliations are affecting us and our desire to study.

Luckily, there are a children who defend us when we are subjected to this kind of violence.

Ehab, 13, adds, 'Once, I took some heavy beating from some children. Some Jordanian friends who love me stood up for me and helped me.'

There is another problem that we face in schools in Lebanon: The Lebanese and Syrian curricula are different, making studying hard for us because of the language differences.

In Syria, for instance, focus is on Arabic. Sciences and mathematics are taught in Arabic. In Lebanon, these courses are given in French or English. There are not enough initiatives to make the curriculum any easier for Syrian students. This affects our morale and discourages us from studying. We feel that our level is low. An excellent student in Syria becomes a failing student in Lebanon.

'Once, I took a heavy beating from some children. Some Jordanian friends who love me stood up for me and helped me.'



Photo credit: Ralph Baydoun/World Vision



OUR LIVES IN THE COMMUNITY

We are facing many problems outside our country. Our parents are facing discrimination at work. The salary of a Syrian employee is not half or even one quarter the salary of a Lebanese or Jordanian employee. Both do the same job.

We suffer because their low income does not fulfil our needs. Before, during the holy month of Ramadan, we used to feel ecstatic and overwhelmed with joy because our parents would buy us new clothes. In Syria, whatever we asked for came true. Here, our parents can no longer afford to meet our needs as their income is low because of discrimination at work. Among the reasons behind this are racism and sectarianism, which are widespread today, although we would never have known the meaning of these words if it were not for this crisis.

We, the displaced Syrian children, are suffering from violence in the streets. We're getting beaten up and cursed. Verbal abuse affects us more than beating, because getting hit hurts us momentarily and does not instil permanent pain in our hearts. Verbal abuse hurts us deep inside. Humiliating words such as 'When will you go back to your country?' and 'When will we get rid of you?' resound in our minds, hurting us.

86% of Syrian children interviewed said that they have been exposed to violence.

One child said, 'When we visit the mall to shop, Jordanian young guys come over and make fun of us for the coupons we get and blame us for the hike in prices in Jordan. We find ourselves unable to deal with them.'

Jad, 17, who lives in Lebanon, talks about an incident that happened to him: 'Yesterday, while I was walking, I saw a girl running away from someone, shaking all over with fear. I was curious to find out what was wrong with her. She came over to me saying, "Protect me from those guys. They are chasing me." I went to check what's wrong, and when I asked why they were chasing her, one of them replied, "I want the girl." A fight broke out between us and we beat one another. But some shop owners quickly came over, drew us apart and reconciled us.'

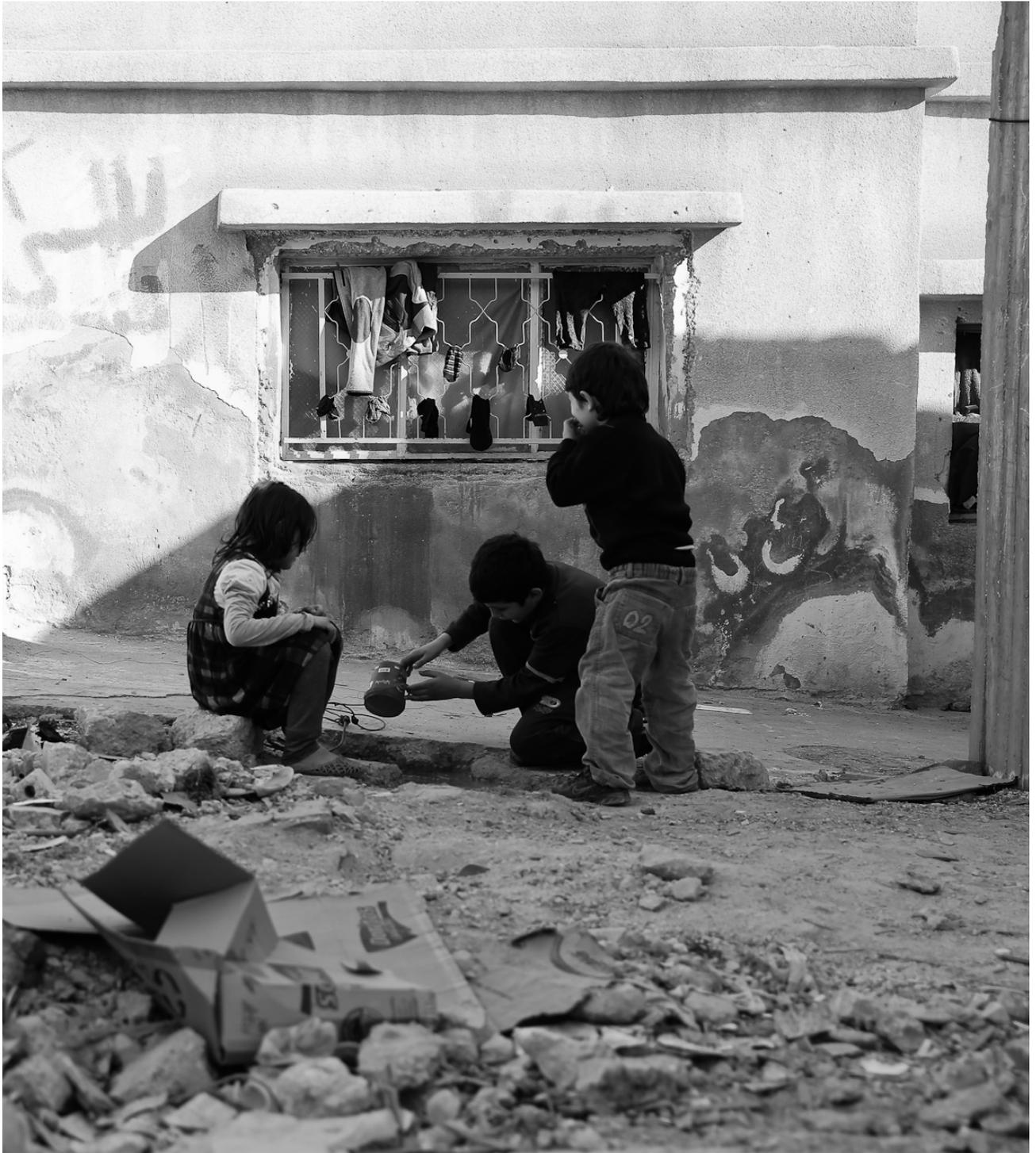
Some municipalities in Lebanon imposed a night curfew, to put an end to fights and problems that may break out between Syrians and locals. This is really frustrating. If we fell ill at night, our parents wouldn't be able to take us to a hospital because of that decision.

But we would like to emphasise that not all the Lebanese and Jordanian people we meet every day treat us this harshly. Many of them are dear and loyal friends whom we love a lot.

Another problem we would like to shed light on is begging on the streets. The Syrian community, particularly children, and more precisely children living in tents or camps, are suffering from this problem. We see many children begging on the streets, trying to sell some daily items, such as cigarettes, chewing gum and tissues. They are vulnerable to many issues, such as getting beaten up, as well as sexual abuse.

These children are begging instead of attending school because their family and younger siblings need money and basic household needs.





‘To the global leaders: Wake up. We are not involved or guilty in this. Put yourselves in our place. Would you wish for this?’

– **Rania, 14.**

Photo credit: Ralph Baydoun/World Vision



Given this situation, some women are selling their belongings in the streets, and some are even selling their hair.

We're afraid that this problem may become aggravated and lead to losing some of our dear brothers and friends.

'We would like to emphasise that not all the Lebanese and Jordanian people we meet every day treat us this harshly. Many of them are dear and loyal friends whom we love a lot.'



Photo credit: Jon Warren/World Vision





‘If I have the opportunity to send a message to important people, I would ask and beg them to help us to get back to our country and to bring peace to all countries, not only to Syria.’

– *Dounia, 15.*

Photo credit: Ralph Baydoun/World Vision



OUR LIVES IN COUNTRIES OLD AND NEW: SYRIA, LEBANON AND JORDAN

Staying, working and studying in Lebanon requires having identity papers, but most of us don't have them because we were forced to leave our country in haste.

Ibrahim, 16, says, 'Bombs were falling all around our house in Syria, and we were forced to leave without bringing any of our identity papers, including a school certificate to allow me to carry on with my studies in Lebanon.'

Ibtissam, 15, says, 'Regarding residency papers in Lebanon, once they expire, we have to pay a US\$200 penalty per person in case of violation. Then we cannot move freely in Lebanon.'

We fled the flames of war, only to find ourselves surrounded by danger, explosions, kidnapping and theft. We are unable to live peacefully.

Adel, 12, says, 'We were walking on the main street, and suddenly, an explosion nearly cost us our lives if God hadn't protected us.'

We live in constant fear that something will happen and affect our life or hurt us.

'We fled the flames of war, only to find ourselves surrounded by danger, explosions, kidnapping and theft. We are unable to live peacefully.'

Sana, 13, adds, 'I know someone who was kidnapped and we haven't heard from him yet.'

We are very scared that the crisis will move to Lebanon, and we'd have to be displaced again.

With all this, our fears grow day by day that the war will rage on, that destruction will intensify, and that we will lose many of our friends and relatives who are still under fire in Syria. What we fear most is our uncertain future. We are afraid we may never go home and may be stranded away from our country and home.

83% of child participants said they would participate in the relief effort if given the chance.



Photo credit: Jon Warren/World Vision





‘If I could, I would rebuild my country Syria. I would put back the smile on its face, without a drop of hatred or oppression, keeping the smiles and joy in the hearts of the innocent children who haven’t experienced anything in this life except fear, horror, hunger and displacement. Even though I lost hope in any future, still I will dream. My dreams are to continue my education in the field of law and to become a lawyer and defend the oppressed. I want to raise my voice to the entire world, even if only once.’

– *Hasan, 16.*

Photo credit: Ralph Baydoun/World Vision



RECOMMENDATIONS: WE ASK FOR PEACE, PROTECTION, AND THE OPPORTUNITY TO HELP

If given the chance, we would like to help other children by raising their spirits, playing with them and entertaining them. We belong to one generation, and we understand what they lack and need, both psychologically and emotionally.

We would love to take part in relief efforts and help other Syrian refugees and friends to help wipe away their tears and the pain of being away from their country. We would love to draw a smile on their faces.

In the end, all we want is for the fighting to stop, the war to end and peace to spread among the parties in the conflict, so we can go back home.

We turn to the host countries and ask them to provide legal support for refugees to be able to move freely. We also ask them to cooperate with NGOs and UN organisations to improve the lives of Syrian refugees and relieve their pain, as well as provide them with the basic necessities of life such as food, shelter, school and job opportunities.

We also address our host communities and ask them to treat us better and to accept us until this crisis is over.

Last but not least, we ask the international community to press their governments to cooperate to help us and end this crisis.

At the end, and after we've told our story and our suffering, we can only wish that Syria will go back to the way it was before. We wish that Christians and Muslims will live in peace. That peace and security will once again spread in Syria and the whole Arab world.

We wish that all children will once again enjoy the rights of which they were robbed, and that peace will spread everywhere. We wish to go back to our country safe and sound to live a free, dignified life and build a prosperous future for Syria.



Photo credit: Meg Sattler/World Vision



APPENDICES

Methodology

This report was written entirely by Syrian refugee children living in Lebanon and Jordan.

Using plenary sessions, small-group discussions, peer-to-peer interviews, questionnaires and thematic debates, 140 child participants (80 girls and 60 boys, between the ages of 10 and 17) worked together to identify and reflect upon their daily challenges and hopes for the future. World Vision child participation experts organised and facilitated each formal session, working alongside these groups of children over a four-week period in both Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, and Irbid, Jordan.

The objectives of the sessions were to:

- provide children with the tools and skills to look for evidence on how they experience their well-being and rights
- provide children with the skills and tools needed to conduct child-led research
- enhance children's skills to write their own report
- build the capacities of children to advocate on behalf of other children.

Trained in basic research methods, child participants asked each other questions that focused on their understanding of the Syrian crisis and the willingness of adults to provide a safe space for children to participate in humanitarian response. Participants were encouraged to express themselves in a variety of ways and to tell their stories in ways that felt appropriate to them. The data generated from these meetings represent the social experiences, perceptions and beliefs of the child participants involved.

Using various participatory tools, children collectively analysed the challenges they identified at household, community and national levels and formulated recommendations for key decision makers. The original report was written by children in Arabic and then translated into English.

Given the limited number of children involved, the analysis does not claim to represent the situation of all Syrian refugee children, but draws conclusions based on the situations and contexts of the child participants.

Child Protection Considerations

The facilitation team ensured safe and ethical participation of children, strictly adhering to World Vision's child protection protocols. World Vision followed a child protection reporting system in order to report cases of abuse and misconduct against children. This system includes a referral procedure in coordination with local partners engaged in the crisis response.

In order to ensure that participation was meaningful, safe and ethical, World Vision child participation experts organised and facilitated each formal session. Following an introduction on the purpose and methodology of the sessions, children were encouraged to decide on their own whether or not they would participate.

The design of the sessions was careful to take into account cultural norms and age of participants, allow for participant feedback on the methodology and provide smaller discussion spaces for children to engage comfortably and meaningfully.



Any specific child protection issues affecting participants that arose during the writing process were reported and are being followed up according to standard World Vision International procedure.

All names have been changed to protect the identity of the children involved, and all photos were taken and are used with informed consent.

Ethical and quality assurance considerations

- **Publication standards for protection of children:** To ensure the safety of the participants, all personal information such as name and contact details were removed from the notes. Child participants are identified only by their gender and age and, in some cases, a pseudonym.
- **Psychosocial health and support:** Many children who have fled Syria have been exposed to extreme violence and psychological stress. A child protection expert present at all sessions ensured that the required technical expertise for counselling was on hand, especially in cases where there could be issues caused by children reliving their experiences.
- **Consent:** The research team ensured that participation was voluntary and informed. Children were not offered any kind of compensation for their participation in the research. Consent was acquired from parents or caregivers, making sure they understood the rationale, the type of activities to be conducted and the way the research would be used.
- **Ethics:** This research followed ethical considerations to ensure that the principles of justice, respect and doing no harm were upheld. Measures were taken to ensure the safety, rights, dignity and well-being of the participants.
- **Meaningful participation:** Children were interviewed in accordance with the *Minimum Standards for Consulting with Children* developed by the Inter-Agency Working Group on Children's Participation. These include transparency, honesty and accountability, child-friendly environment, equality of opportunity, and safety and protection of children (IAWGCP, 2007).
- **Cultural appropriateness:** Children participated in their local language in order to minimise misinterpretations.
- **Gender:** The project team ensured equitable participation of boys and girls and took into account potential cultural sensitivities.



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