SAVING LIVES
CHANGING LIVES

Gender, Risks and Urban Livelihoods Study in three cities in Syria:

Aleppo, Homs and Lattakia

WFP
World Food Programme

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Displacement-affected men and women in rural and urban contexts face very different food security and nutrition-related challenges. In recent years, the World Food Programme has been addressing these challenges through a variety of livelihoods initiatives across the Syria crisis response. However, there remains limited information on the vulnerabilities and capacities of displacement-affected men and women and the risks they face when engaging in livelihoods in urban areas, especially in Syria. More work needs to be done to understand the opportunities and risks for different vulnerable people arising from livelihood interventions.

WFP's Regional Gender Policy identifies the need to increase attention on mainstreaming gender equality and women's empowerment programming into mid to longer term responses aimed at building the resilience of communities to shocks and stresses, including socio-political shocks (policy shifts, instability and conflict), while ensuring that interventions 'do no harm'. It also identifies the need to build staff capacity in gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) programming and for improved gender and age analytical work to support the design and monitoring of gender-responsive interventions in access-constrained contexts.

This study was commissioned by WFP in 2017 to help build the evidence base in this area. It aims to provide fresh new insights to evolving and emerging urban livelihoods dynamics using a gender and protection lens and based on a set of qualitative investigations across three of Syria's major urban areas: Homs, Aleppo and Lattakia. It also identifies ways in which WFP and other actors can better support the design of safe, gender-responsive urban livelihoods strategies for vulnerable groups, mainly internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host communities in Syria.

Report written by Gabriella McMichael, independent consultant.

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings of a Gender, Risks and Urban Livelihoods exploratory study conducted in three cities in government-held areas of Syria (Aleppo, Homs and Lattakia) to inform the development of safe, gender-responsive, urban livelihoods programme strategies by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) in Syria and other actors. The study aimed to:

1. Identify opportunities for safe, gender-responsive, urban livelihoods programming for targeted vulnerable groups, mainly IDPs and the host communities in Syria; and
2. Design practical, qualitative tools to support the collection of primary data in access-constrained contexts.

The analysis is guided by WFP's Gender Toolkit and Protection Guidance Manual, with the main protection risks and constraints mapped onto a women's empowerment sequence to help identify entry points and prevention or mitigation strategies for safe, gender-responsive, urban livelihoods programming. The study aimed to gain a more in-depth understanding of the protection risks and constraints that vulnerable and food-insecure women and men face when engaging in income-generating work. It relied on a qualitative methodological approach employing two main methods: semi-structured interviews with WFP beneficiaries (women and men) in both host and IDP communities, as well as a desktop review. The study conducted thirty-three semi-structured interviews (ten with women in households headed by a man; ten with women in households headed by a woman and 13 with men) in both host and IDP communities.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR GENDER-RESPONSIVE LIVELIHOODS INTERVENTIONS

The findings show that vulnerable and food-insecure women and men in the three cities, whether in vulnerable host or IDP communities, live in fragile and insecure environments that constrain their access to income-generating opportunities to meet basic needs. The combination of pre-existing gender inequalities and deeply embedded gender-biased social norms and institutions, stress and upset, displacement, family separation, poverty, sexual harassment and other protection risks, and the fact that many women are mothers who now need to provide for their families on their own, puts women and their children especially in a vulnerable position. These factors undermine women's ability to generate income, to benefit from it and to achieve self-reliance on an equal footing with men. The findings are:

1. Deeply embedded gender-based social norms and institutions constrain the ability of women to access and benefit from productive work.

The findings suggest that in Aleppo, Homs and Lattakia, food-insecure, displaced and host community women in households headed either by women or men continue to be constrained by deeply embedded social norms and values that assign care and domestic responsibilities primarily to women and "breadwinning" to men. Many women were prevented from working by their families or showed little interest in pursuing income-generating work. Fear of kidnapping and general insecurity because of the crisis was often presented by women and men respondents as a reason for the increasing restrictions on women's mobility by their families. Nevertheless, the persistence of patriarchal values and traditional gender stereotypes mean that women faced many of the same mobility constraints as before the crisis, limiting the hours they can work and the nature of work they can do. When women did work, gender stereotypes tended to restrict them to specific, low-productivity occupations. Men also tended to be stigmatised in some situations for challenging traditional roles. Cultural norms restrict women in other areas. For example, income-earning women in households headed by a man continued to have limited say over major financial decisions in the home. Women's lack of financial independence and their corresponding lack of confidence and experience in making financial decisions explains the more limited financial literacy of women and their lack of financial inclusion compared to men. This is supported by findings from the desk review. Such factors not only limit women's ability to engage in productive work but also to realise its benefits. Nevertheless, the study notes instances where men do participate in household tasks and take responsibility for children's education.

2. Women who work are likely to face a dilemma between engaging in livelihoods and motherhood, family responsibilities and domestic work.

Because women bear primary responsibility for domestic work and childcare, women interviewees who worked faced a dilemma between working and their responsibilities in the home. The ability of women to access childcare support was crucial to their ability to generate income. Additionally, because men often did not take on domestic burdens in the home when women went out to work, women ended up shouldering a "double burden".

WFP and other actors consider improved livelihoods mainly as the ability to sustainably engage in productive work and improve productive assets and capacities in a manner that strengthens resilience to shocks and stresses. However, it is important to recognise that household self-reliance does not rest simply on the ability of individual household members to maximise their income-generating potential. Rather, it relates to the interconnected productive and reproductive roles women and men carry out in the private and public spheres. Acknowledging the contributions made in the private sphere, and their complementarity with those in the productive sphere, can encourage greater focus on the long-term and strategic needs of women and men and gender-transformational programming.

3. Low psychological well-being and absence of a supportive environment in urban communities constrain women and men in engaging in productive work.

Although it was beyond the scope of this study to assess psychosocial issues, most interviewees indicated that their own psychological well-being or that of family members including children had been severely affected during the crisis. Interviewees cited hopelessness, grief, anxiety, depression, nightmares and trouble sleeping, constant fear and personality changes.

These issues were compounded by the fact that for IDPs especially, displacement often meant the absence of a supportive environment and lack of protective mechanisms (such as families and friends, home community and social networks). The various aspects of social cohesion — social interaction, social networks, trust and reciprocity among neighbours, perceived safety and sense of community — appeared to be weak for many women and men respondents. The lack of supportive environments, especially for women in households headed by a woman, means that when mothers work, children can also be put at risk or

5. Women and men face various protection risks that constrain their ability to pursue and benefit from livelihoods.

Although it is not possible to ascertain the extent of protection risks for women, men, girls and boys from the data, the information points to the wide-ranging threats that they face. Women and men faced threats when just moving outside the home, including from car bombs and being caught in crossfire. Many respondents perceived a high risk of kidnapping or abduction. There was the potential for vulnerable women and men to be exploited as they engaged in casual wage labour and for high levels of sexual abuse and harassment, especially for women. For example, interviewees highlighted threats of sexual harassment and exploitative wage-labour conditions (perceived to affect women more) and of violent theft or extortion because of possession of physical productive assets (perceived to affect men more). Reports also suggest that women are increasingly engaged in transactional sex for income to survive.

The interviews also highlight that protection risks are not only a detriment to well-being; they also undermine social interaction, trust among neighbours, perceived safety and sense of community and the willingness of women and men to invest in and engage in productive labour.

6. Women's increased engagement in livelihoods may lead to protection risks for children.

There were instances where women working outside the home led to child labour and less school attendance. This especially related to older children being withdrawn from school to take care of younger siblings so that their mothers could work outside the home. The interviews also suggest that many children are suffering psychosocial issues. At the same time, the desk review indicates that boys and girls may drop out of school and be exposed to protection issues because they are working or begging on the streets to support their families. Early marriage is increasing, especially affecting girls

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