Breaking Barriers: Digital Work and Fragile Livelihoods of Women Refugees in the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract
In the advent of the coronavirus pandemic and the push to digital work, this op-ed argues that the emerging digital economy can be vital for enabling refugee women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to overcome existing livelihood barriers. Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011, over 6.5 million Syrian refugees have been registered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) globally. Neighbouring countries across the MENA region continue to carry the largest share of the burden. Across the region, refugees live on the margins, in camps, as well as urban and peri-urban communities, and other informal settlements. Existing gender disparities coupled with other social and logistical barriers, as well as restrictive legal and economic structures, exacerbate livelihood challenges for refugee women in MENA. Research demonstrates that the digital economy, particularly crowd and ‘on-demand’ work, could provide opportunities that would enable women refugees to overcome these barriers to work. As it stands, however, the digital economy is still in its infancy, especially in host countries in MENA, and it is still fraught with challenges, including barriers to entry, employee protections and the lack of guarantees to decent work, especially for vulnerable and marginalised communities. We therefore argue that there is a need to direct efforts to maximise the benefits that the digital economy could offer, especially to refugee women – a need that has become even more pertinent since the coronavirus pandemic.

Keywords: refugees; gender; digital livelihoods; COVID-19; MENA; Jordan

Women Refugees and Livelihood Barriers
The coronavirus pandemic has had a damaging impact on the livelihoods of women globally and a disproportionate effect on refugees compared to their host populations (Clingain et al., 2021; Dempster et al., 2020). Women refugees already disadvantaged by virtue of their social status and other legal, social and logistical barriers have been hit hardest by the devastating effects of coronavirus measures, which have limited existing sources of income and restricted future livelihood opportunities (UN Women, 2020a: 30).

The 2022 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) figures indicate that the number of displaced persons in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region exceeds 16 million, with a significant share being vulnerable women and children (UNHCR, 2022a). Existing livelihood barriers in the region include: restrictions to work, which limit some professions/sectors to citizens and exclude foreigners and/or refugees, restrictions to freedom of movement, which sometimes force refugee communities to live (and work) in certain geographical locations or camps, and restricted access to bank accounts, which in some countries in MENA had devastating consequences for refugees and their families. These, among other barriers, have pushed refugees to work in the informal economy and in sectors that the International Labour Organization (ILO) has classified as ‘highly impacted’ by the pandemic (Dempster et al., 2020).

In MENA, women refugees are faced with further logistical and social barriers that render them less likely
In February 2016, the London conference, ‘Supporting Syria and the Region’, had representatives from the Jordanian government, and other development and international and non-governmental partners, resulted in the Jordan Compact: an agreement to explore ways to create employment and investment opportunities in countries most affected by the Syrian refugee crisis (see Mansour-Ille and Samman, 2017). While the Jordanian government continues to implement the Jordan Compact, refugees in Jordan – particularly women – still face significant challenges in accessing work. This is reflected in both the low percentage (22 per cent) of Syrians in Jordan with work permits (CARE Jordan, 2022: 7) and an even lower percentage of permits given to refugee women (4 per cent) (IFC, 2021). Even those with permits continue to struggle to find gainful employment to support their families (UNHCR, 2022b).

Yet, steps have been taken to improve access to formal employment for vulnerable communities (see, for example, World Bank, 2020). In 2018, the government allowed camp refugees to establish home-based businesses in all professions, including closed professions (IFC, 2021). Last year, some Syrian refugees were granted exemptions to work in previously closed sectors, including healthcare, in response to the pandemic, and since July 2021, Syrian refugees have been able to get work permits in all sectors open to non-Jordanians (UNHCR, 2022b).

Despite these positive steps, considerable barriers persist that significantly impact access to the digital economy. For example, registering a home-based business, which would enable refugee women to balance work with family and other social considerations, requires an expensive government-issued permit. Syrians living in the host community need a Jordanian business partner to be able to operate home-based businesses beyond only three permitted sectors (food preparation, handicrafts and tailoring) while requiring that at least 70 per cent of the funding goes to the Jordanian partner, leaving little for the Syrian refugee (IFC, 2021). Although the existence of legislative ‘loopholes’ has enabled some to take up limited gig work for employers based in other countries, for example, the lack of labour protections – paired with the challenges of registering freelance intellectual work as formal employment – only exacerbates their vulnerable status (Charles, 2022).

The pandemic has worsened the situation. The strict lockdown measures introduced by the Jordanian government, and hence there is a need to raise the profile of digital livelihoods is not known or understood by many refugees (Phaneuf et al., 2021). Although the existence of legislative barriers and the prevalence of the informal economy in MENA countries, as well as limited digital literacy and deeply engrained digital divides. In fact, the very concept of the ‘digital economy’ and access to digital livelihoods programming, virtual service delivery and enabling refugee communities to engage in remote employment opportunities remains limited due to legislative barriers and the prevalence of the informal economy in MENA countries, as well as limited digital literacy and deeply engrained digital divides. 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government has left many refugees economically vulnerable (Clingain et al., 2021:11). In particular, women refugees running their own local businesses have lost access to clientele – and income – as a result. This loss of local business activities and the difficulties in finding location-based work have created a new reliance on, and aspirations for, online and remote livelihood opportunities. The reliance on home-based work has also exposed them to ‘an increased risk of violence in the household’ (UN Women, 2020b: 3) and diminished their agency as caregivers, breadwinners and business owners.

The Way Forward

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted the already fragile livelihoods of displaced populations in the region. This is particularly the case for women refugees, who due to other social and logistical barriers do not enjoy the same livelihood opportunities as men. At the same time, the global transition to the digital economy in response to the pandemic has further demonstrated the importance of improving digital access and work conditions in the digital labour market in general. Now more than ever, governmental and non-governmental institutions need to adapt existing mechanisms to service delivery, vocational and skills training, and facilitate digital access and improve current legal structures to enable refugees – particularly women – to engage in remote employment (Dempster et al., 2020). This could be achieved by first clarifying the regulatory environment governing digital work in Jordan to refugees, then supporting refugees in navigating remote working in Jordan through advice and technical support, and by collaborating with the private sector and other non-governmental institutions to improve digital literacy, skills and ensuring the affordability of equipment needed for engaging in remote employment (see Hunt et al., 2017). Moreover, employing digital avenues to deliver services and vocational and skills trainings to refugees is key to improving refugee livelihoods. Refugees residing in remote parts of the country, particularly refugee women whose mobility may be restricted due to care duties in the home, would have more opportunities if provided with improved internet access. Poor or lacking internet access and digital literacy have been particularly noted by encamped refugees in Jordan (see Hunt et al., 2017), which in turn restricts access to digital livelihood opportunities. This is where non-governmental institutions and the private sector can work with governments to improve digital literacy, language skills and internet access, which are key to accessing the digital economy.

Of course, remote employment and digital access are only some of the steps necessary to improve women refugees’ livelihoods in the region. As the case of Jordan demonstrates, many remain vulnerable to violence and exploitation – both inside and outside the home. As such, gendered policies are crucial for improving women refugees’ livelihood opportunities. These must account for the social, legislative and economic barriers they face, which have only worsened since the outbreak of the pandemic. This is particularly true for any future multilateral initiatives like the Jordan Compact, which failed to dedicate specific and targeted policies aimed at helping women to overcome gendered barriers to work. For example, policies promoting the development of safe public transportation infrastructure that would provide refugees more freedom of movement, facilitating the start-up of online businesses through financial support, and providing women with specialised online training to accommodate their care responsibilities, would be a welcomed policy development in Jordan, and one that could help women both online and in their everyday lives.

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Works Cited


