

From VOA Learning English, welcome to As It Is! I'm Caty Weaver.

The United Nations says an estimated 1.8 million Syrians have fled their country since the Syrian conflict started two years ago. The largest number of refugees is in Lebanon. Most are women and children. Today we talk about some of the dangers they face.

## **Refugee Women Look to the Sex Trade**

About 75 percent of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon are women and children. The economic difficulty they face there is forcing an increasing number of Syrian women and girls to consider involvement in the sex trade. Some aid workers describe it as "survival sex." Avi Arditti reports.

Rima ZaaZaa is with the Lebanese aid group Solidarity and Development. She is concerned about the extreme poverty faced by many refugees from Syria. She says the number of women forced to trade sex for money and food will continue to rise as the refugee population grows.

“There are certain shelters that are known that the prostitution percentage is very high in these shelters, whether in Ain Helweh camp or in Sadaya, in different areas they are known.”

More than 600,000 Syrians have registered with the United Nations in Lebanon as refugees. But, the Lebanese government says it believes there are more than one million in the country. By the end of 2013 that number could reach two million. So many refugees would place terrible pressure on a small country that already faces economic problems.

Unlike Jordan and Turkey, Lebanon has refused to build new refugee camps to shelter Syrian refugees. Syrian women and girls are instead spread throughout Lebanon in empty buildings, low-cost housing and other places. Aid groups say the female refugees often face threats, including demands for sex from building owners, store owners and Lebanese officials.

Afana is a 26 year-old Syrian woman with two young children. She says it is not uncommon even for male aid workers to ask for sex. She explained through a translator what happened to her at one charity.

“In one of the NGOs he told her that if you accept to sleep with me, if we can have the sexual relation, every time I have any kind of access to assistance it will be yours. I will have your name on it. So she started crying and went out of the NGO.”

Lebanese officials describe reports of increased prostitution as false. They note evidence from the Internal Security Forces that shows no increase in the number of trafficked women.

But aid workers agree that organized sex trafficking is not the problem in Lebanon. They say it is individual women or girls being forced by their poverty to offer sex for money or other help. And, the aid workers say many men are accepting the exchange.

Qassem Saad works for the Lebanese office of the aid organization Developmental Action Without Borders. He says Syrian women and girls are in such urgent need that they sell themselves for very little. He says that outside a Palestinian refugee camp near Sidon the price was low as 10,000 Lebanese pounds, or seven dollars.

“Here we have a lot of cases but also because of the taboo and because of the Islamist factions that we have inside the camp the people they are afraid to talk about these things but if you go outside the camp you will see those Palestinian and Syrian girls or women who they suffer from the poverty, they are going outside the camp and they practice these sexual activities.”

Qassem Saad’s group is working to train the Lebanese police to see these women and children as victims, instead of law breakers.

I’m Avi Arditti.

## **Refugee Family Life Holds Danger Also**

Aid workers say the threats faced by Syrian women and children in Lebanon do not always come from strangers. Reports of abuse by Syrian husbands and fathers are said to be increasing. Syrian women say jobless men are worried and humiliated about living as refugees.

Aid workers in Lebanon say it is hard to learn how widespread violence and abuse is among refugee families. But, they say more women are seeking help and advice on how to deal with violent husbands and male relatives. The aid workers say the simple fact that women are coming forward is notable. Arab culture teaches women to avoid discussing such problems with strangers.

The non-governmental group Developmental Action Without Borders operates seven centers for women and children in Lebanon. Qassem Saad says all of the centers are seeing more Syrian women reporting examples of abuse.

“We have discovered a lot of girls particularly they suffer from sexual abuse inside their houses, particularly from the uncles, the brothers. But you know in this community, it is a Muslim community and the people, the Muslim people, they have their own problems. But they don’t want to see it. They don’t want to admit they have the problems.”

Syrian refugee families often live in extremely overcrowded conditions, in old, empty buildings or poorly-made shelters. Aid workers say there is deep anger over the living situation. They say men often express this anger through violence against the women closest to them.

Maryam is a 31-year-old mother of five. She fled with her family from their home in Damascus. She says her husband has changed toward her and their children since they arrived in Lebanon. She explains through a translator.

“Her husband himself never used to hit any of the children. Now he will hit the children. He will scream at her. He will shout at her.”

A social worker says Maryam has also been beaten by her husband. But the worker says she does not want to admit this to a male stranger.

Many refugees are suffering from stress disorders as a result of what they experienced in Syria, including witnessing violent deaths of relatives and friends. Qassem Saad says sexual abuse and family violence is adding to the suffering of refugee women.

“We are doing a lot of psycho-social work with them. We try to provide them by techniques how they can defend themselves and how to cope with the situation that they are living inside their houses. In some cases we are in contact with the Lebanese security because sometimes you have to protect them, to protect them by law.”

However, the law can help only protect to a point. Lebanese law does not recognize rape within marriage.

And that’s AS IT IS for today. I’m Caty Weaver. Thanks for joining us.

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