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DESIGNING & TESTING SOLUTIONS IN CRISES

Solving the Refugee Employment Problem in Jordan:

A Survey of Syrian Refugees

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Executive Summary

The Syrian conflict has presented the international community and host communities alike with a displacement crisis of unprecedented magnitude. In Jordan, there are an estimated 1.2 million Syrian refugees, the vast majority of which are unemployed.

To address this crisis, the Jordan Compact, a new partnership between the international community and Government of Jordan that provides a pathway to economic opportunity for both refugees and Jordanians, was crafted. However, progress towards converting on the economic opportunities provided by the Compact has been slow. To understand the obstacles in making progress towards the Jordan Compact, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) conducted qualitative discussions with Syrian refugees to uncover the barriers they face in accessing the labor market. The goal of this report is to offer a diagnosis of the supply-side issues that have impeded progress in order to prescribe effective solutions for the context.

Four refugee archetypes, based on common experiences in the labor market, emerge from our discussions: (1) risk-averse and fearful refugees who have withdrawn from the labor market; (2) desperate refugees with little bargaining power in the work place; (3) entrepreneurial refugees who have patched together informal portfolios of work; and (4) determined refugees hampered by a lack of information and uncertainty.

These archetypes provide insight into the type of barriers that refugees face in navigating the labor market. The stories they tell speak to the ways in which policies, poor information, a lack of power, and material constraints hinder their ability to access safe and decent work. The discussions we conducted also provide reason for optimism and illuminate opportunities to get refugees into safe and decent work. The refugees we spoke with expressed a willingness to work in textiles, agriculture, manufacturing and construction; sectors with at-scale opportunity to employ refugees in Jordan.

This report concludes with a set of recommendations that aim to loosen the constraints refugees face and calls for the relaxation of occupational restrictions and work permit application processes, the creation of credible matchmaking services, clear information on job opportunities and the implications of taking on formal work, and gender-specific solutions in the workplace. Implementing these changes and launching these services are crucial to ensuring that Jordanians and refugees are able to capture the benefits of the Jordan Compact.

Introduction



The Syrian conflict has caused a massive displacement crisis, resulting in an estimated 1.2 million refugees in Jordan alone. As the war rages on and displacement becomes increasingly protracted, refugee assets are decreasing, donors are showing signs of fatigue, and governments are struggling to address refugee needs.

In response to this crisis, the international community worked with the Government of Jordan to draft the Jordan Compact, a groundbreaking deal that aims to provide 200,000 jobs for refugees in exchange for preferential access to the European market as well as access to conditional financing from the World Bank. Despite the financial incentives provided through the Compact, progress has been slow: as of January 2017, only 9 firms had applied to export to the European market and only 37,326 work permits had been issued to refugees, with 4% going to women.¹

Compounding slow progress towards the Compact's goals of refugee employment is a fundamental lack of information on the barriers they face in identifying, accessing and retaining formal employment opportunities. In November of 2016, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) launched a qualitative research project to bridge this gap.

Syrian refugees living in informal settlements in Jordan. These families receive health services from IRC's outreach team and mobile clinic, as well as other resources including winterization kits.



Left
Fifteen-year-old Samir has been waiting for four months in Jordan's Azraq refugee camp to be reunited with his family.

Right
IRC Women's Empowerment Programming

The IRC conducted 111 semi-structured qualitative discussions with refugees living in urban centers in Mafraq, Irbid and Amman to better understand the obstacles faced in accessing employment. We surveyed men and women, the employed and unemployed, to understand the challenges refugees face in the labor market and provide a set of solutions for the context. This research builds on the livelihoods work and programming the IRC has conducted in Jordan since 2014.

Several key insights emerge from these discussions. As surfaced, an overly burdensome process to obtain work permits that anchor refugees to a single employer for a year has reduced interest in the formal sector. Occupational restrictions on the sectors and professions in which refugees can work have also narrowed employment opportunities for refugees. Additionally, a lack of clear and easy-to-access information

on employment opportunities has impeded the ability of refugees to efficiently and effectively search for jobs. Misinformation on how taking a formal job may compromise access to humanitarian assistance as well as the ability to apply for asylum status has dampened interest in formal employment.

With weak access to justice or public institutions, the refugees we spoke with fear workplace exploitation. The perceived inability to report these issues or access an outlet for accountability has weakened participation in the labor force. Lastly, the costs of paying for transport to work, or the childcare needed to enable individuals to work, has stopped many refugees from accessing employment opportunities.

The barriers reported by refugees are varied and impact on their decision-making differs depending on circumstances. Many of the underlying issues that refugees spoke of

interact with each other and rarely did the refugees who we spoke with highlight only one issue. This underscores the importance of launching integrated solutions for refugees that simultaneously loosen multiple binding constraints.

While dominant narratives on refugees suggest that they are dependent on aid and unwilling to work in available opportunities such as textiles, manufacturing, agriculture and construction, our interviews told a different story. The refugees we spoke with were willing to work in these “non-prestige” sectors, many for a minimum wage.

Moreover, our discussions provided insight into who is willing to work in which sectors. Discussions revealed that more educated women are willing to work in textiles whereas more educated men are willing to working in manufacturing. Less educated men identified preferences for working

in construction and on average, younger, more educated refugees were more likely to express an interest in agriculture. Finding safe and decent work for all refugees that fits their preferences is key to solving the refugee employment problem in Jordan.

A set of caveats about this report should be noted. First, our sampling strategy was neither random nor representative and as such, the inferences we make only reflect those with whom we spoke. Second, this report focuses on the micro-dynamics of labor rather than broader macro-structural trends. For example, we focus on why refugees may not take jobs in manufacturing plants rather than analyze how labor profile differences in the population shape cross-national competitiveness in manufacturing. Third, it is important to note that unemployment issues persist in host communities and that some of the challenges refugees face may also apply to Jordanians. While this report focuses specifically on the barriers that refugees residing in urban areas of Jordan face, identifying solutions that help host communities is crucial as well.

The Jordan Compact is an important test case for the international community. In the face of a growing anti-refugee sentiment in the west and the urgency of helping host communities address large refugee crises, it's imperative to find innovative and durable solutions to protracted displacement. By bringing the voices of refugees to bear, this report seeks to provide insight on how to leverage commitments made by the international community to make real progress towards solutions.

Methodology

In November of 2016, the IRC conducted 111 discussions with Syrian refugees in Mafraq, Irbid, and Amman.² Working with existing IRC economic program staff and refugee networks, four volunteers were recruited to conduct these discussions. Caution was taken to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents and the information they shared.

Respondents were selected through snowball sampling and initial respondents were identified through IRC beneficiary lists.³ This strategy generated a non-probability sample unrepresentative of the underlying population of refugees. We stratified sampling along gender and employment status, in order to capture variation across key groups of interest. Table 1 reports the distribution of respondents by gender across the three geographic sites.

The discussions were guided by a mix of closed-form and open-ended questions

that took between 45 and 60 minutes to complete. Open-ended questions served as a point of departure for conversations between respondents and volunteers, who were trained to probe the underlying motivations and reasons for responses. The survey included three broad batteries of questions on i) individual profiles, ii) past and current experiences in the labor market, and iii) employment preferences.

To mitigate concerns over eliciting truthful responses on sensitive information, we implemented three strategies. First, we didn't collect any identifying information from those we spoke with and did not ask for their names in discussion. Second, volunteers clearly articulated that participation in these discussions was voluntary and that neither participation nor the content of any response would have bearing on any individual benefits or punishment. Third, volunteers were trained in sensitive survey techniques to ensure that they were able to effectively and appropriately conduct these discussions.

Table 1

Distribution of samples respondents.

	Amman	Irbid	Mafraq	Total
Men	18	8	15	41
Women	3	35	32	70
Total	21	43	47	111

The Refugee Crisis in Jordan

Over the past five years, the crisis in Syria has fueled massive displacement. An estimated 655,000 UNHCR-registered Syrians now live in Jordan as well as an estimated 600,000 unregistered refugees.⁴ The magnitude of the crisis is hard to overstate: while only 20% of refugees live in one of Jordan's three official refugee camps, the largest of these camps, Zaatari, hosts 80,000 refugees and is the second-largest refugee camp in the world.

Despite Jordan's history as host to the second highest per capita proportion of refugees in the world,⁵ the significant influx of refugees over the last six years has generated severe strains on service delivery and humanitarian need. Public services and infrastructure in Jordan have been radically overstretched. Despite running double-shifts to ensure that Syrian children are educated, 50% of Syrian refugees remain out of school and hospitals are overburdened and unable to provide services to those in need.⁶

The Government of Jordan estimated that addressing the 2016 cost of the refugee crisis would require 4.2 billion USD.⁷

The economic and socio-political consequences of the refugee influx have been profound. Qualitative research suggests that it may have driven wages down in the informal economy by flooding the labor market with unskilled labor while also increasing short-term prices on housing.⁸ Whereas concerns over Syrian refugees displacing Jordanians in the labor market have been tempered by different skill profiles between host and refugee communities, broader trends have resulted in growing socio-political tension and mounting discrimination towards refugees. According to a nationally representative public opinion poll conducted by the International Republican Institute in March 2015, Jordanians identified the rising cost of living, unemployment, and the refugee influx as the top three biggest problems facing Jordan and over 90% of respondents



Refugees cautiously sell shoe polish and other small items on the streets to earn some money.

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believe the refugee crisis is responsible for the first two issues.⁹

The economic landscape in Jordan has amplified these sentiments. Jordan's economy has stagnated over the past 10 years, in part due to the 2008 global economic recession. Between 2004 and 2014, no single sector created more than 60,000 jobs; sectors that did experience substantial growth were education, manufacturing and public administration.¹⁰ The economy is bifurcated in large- and small-sized firms, creating a "hollow" economy that has generated few jobs in mid-sized firms. Unemployment rates hover around 15% for Jordanians and unemployment has recently soared to roughly 40% among men aged 15-24.¹¹ Many non-prestige jobs that Jordanians themselves are unwilling to take are currently filled by migrant labor from Bangladesh and Egypt.¹²

In February 2016 at the Supporting Syria and the Region Conference in London, the international community and Government of Jordan announced the Jordan Compact, a holistic approach to address the refugee crisis. The Compact provides preferential access to the European market through simplified rules of origin for firms located in Special Economic Zones who recruit 15% to 25% refugee labor,¹³ as well as access to concessional financing in exchange for the provision of 200,000 work permits for refugees and the removal of restrictions

on Syrian refugee business formalization and economic activity in refugee camps. In a broader sense, the Jordan Compact is a test case for a new way of crafting durable solutions for protracted crises: by mixing and frontloading aid and trade that will benefit both Jordanians and refugees, this strategy seeks to improve the Jordanian economy while addressing the refugee crisis.

The Compact ultimately provides financial incentives for firms to recruit refugees in order to export to the European market with preferential tariffs, demonstrating a pathway to jobs for refugees and broader economic benefits for Jordan. To date, however, progress has been slow. Less than 20% of the target work permits for refugees have been issued and only 9 companies have filed the requisite paperwork to export to the European market.¹⁴ Further, the timing-to-impact of the Jordan Compact is out of step with the urgent needs of refugees.

Both demand- and supply-side challenges exist in converting on the opportunities generated through the Compact. The research presented here seeks to illuminate the supply-side of the equation to unpack why refugees are not accessing formal employment opportunities. Given rising political tensions, understanding these barriers and delivering on jobs is crucial to capturing the benefits of the Jordan Compact, as well as to creating a stable, economically sound Jordan.

Refugee Archetypes

The 111 Syrian refugees we interviewed captured a broad and diverse set of experiences. We spoke with underemployed men, fearful of being deported to Syria. We interviewed risk-averse and fatigued elders who viewed Jordan as their new home. We spoke with women committed to finding work and supporting their family. We talked with students concerned about their educational choices and future.

Of those we interviewed, 37% were male (n = 41) and 63% were female (n = 70). The average age was 35 and most of those we spoke with arrived in 2012 or 2013, earlier in the Syrian civil war; the average duration of stay amongst respondents was 3.9 years. While 94% of respondents were registered with the UNHCR, only 41% claimed they were receiving UNHCR benefits (n = 43).

Since they arrived in Jordan, the refugees we interviewed led difficult and uncertain economic lives. Most cultivated portfolios of informal work, cobbling together a variety of short-term opportunities. Amidst our

respondents, about half (n = 57) had some form of employment over the past month. The refugees we spoke with on average worked roughly 14 days over the past month, yet over 55% (n = 32) of those who did engage in some form of labor worked for 10 or fewer days.

The most common sectors refugees worked in were retail, often engaging in back-of-the-shop manual labor where they were less visible to Jordanian authorities; textiles, at a small scale in their own homes or small businesses; and the service industry.

Amongst those who worked, 58% (n= 33) claimed they felt unsafe in their jobs. Many refugees recounted stories of harassment and discrimination in the work place. Others described harsh labor at low wages with little agency to change their situation. Many noted that they felt uncertain given their lack of access to a work permit and legal safety.

While these descriptive statistics provide an overview of the economic lives of those we



Fawaz Rarhail Turkey, 59, from Homs, Syria, pictured with his family outside a derelict house in Al Mafraq, Jordan, which they moved into after leaving Syria.

talked with, a set of underlying archetypes emerged in these discussions. The following four archetypes capture shared narratives and common beliefs and behavior.

Despite underlying differences in those we spoke with, these archetypes illuminate common experiences in engaging and understanding the labor market. These archetypes begin to paint a picture of the barriers that refugees face in accessing employment as well as the opportunities available for supporting them in finding employment; the policy environment, lack of information, weak bargaining power, and material constraints all play important roles. The following section analyzes the stories of those spoke with to systematically assess the barriers faced.

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Four Refugee Archetypes

1.

Risk-averse refugees, fearful of the state and withdrawn from the labor market.

Many refugees expressed a deep fear of getting caught working informally, often forgoing work rather than taking any risks. A 32-year old mother of five from Irbid recounted how her husband's fear of the authorities jolted their household's financial stability. Jordanian police caught her husband working without an official work permit in a vegetable store and threatened that if they saw him there again that they would deport him back to Syria. Since that encounter, he hasn't left their home out of fear of getting caught. This financial shock has further strained her household, which was barely making enough money to get by.

2.

Downtrodden refugees, choked by desperation and little bargaining power with employers.

A subset of those we spoke with were living on the edge, resorting to any means they could. A 38-year-old mother of three boys who hailed from Dara recounted a desperate story. Since arriving in Jordan, her family had moved from Azrak to Ramtha to find work, unsuccessful in both locations. Her husband was physically disabled from being tortured by the Syrian regime and her youngest, a boy of 10, had become incontinent due to post-traumatic stress. Given her inability to find work and the need to care for her youngest, she had put her two older children, boys aged 12 and 14, to work in small retail stores because "no one would care if children worked." Her eldest earned 4 JD per day and her middle child earned 2 JD.

3.

Entrepreneurial and dedicated refugees cultivating a broad, informal portfolio of work.

Many refugees were determined to work, often breaking down cultural barriers and engaging in any opportunities they could identify. As one 23-year old college-educated Syrian female who lived in Irbid recounted, she chose to work in the traditionally male-dominated sector of construction where she could make 10 JD per day because agricultural work only paid 5 JD. To supplement this informal and uncertain work, she spent her free time collecting cans for recycling for which she should receive 1 JD per kilo. She worked arduously to cobble together the wages she needed to get by, taking any opportunity she could find.

4.

Determined refugees hampered by information and uncertainty.

While many refugees desired the opportunity to work, they were often unable to identify opportunities efficiently and effectively given the lack of credible and timely information. One middle-aged female respondent living on the far periphery of Irbid explained her frustration in identifying and searching for new jobs. She sought out and heard about opportunities from trusted friends in her community. While she would travel into the city whenever she heard about jobs, by the time she arrived, the opportunities had past and the jobs were already taken. The time it took news to travel through her networks was too slow to take advantage of these opportunities.

The Barriers Refugees Face

Syrian refugees living in informal settlements in Jordan. These families receive health services from IRC's outreach team and mobile clinic, as well as other resources including winterization kits.

i. The Policy Environment

Refugees must navigate difficult policy landscapes when looking for and retaining work. Onerous permitting processes, structural informality in the economy, and occupational restrictions have created obstacles to participating in the labor force.

Despite recent progress on relaxing access to work permits, the process remains a deterrent to many.

Working in the formal sector requires obtaining a work permit, which is a costly, twelve-step process for both refugees and employers. While the Ministry of Labor has waived the costs associated with hiring Syrian refugees since April 2016, informal fees, barriers and hidden costs continue to cause problems.¹⁵ Indeed, refugees must obtain an ID card, proof of residency, and medical certificate, all of which may generate often-insurmountable costs.

Economy-wide informality has impeded refugees from obtaining work permits.

Indeed, some of the barriers to accessing permits are fueled by underlying issues unrelated to refugees' beliefs or behavior. An estimated 44% of the Jordanian economy is informal.¹⁶ If refugees take up employment in informal businesses, employers are not able to provide access to work permits even if refugees desire permits. Moreover, many of the sectors refugees tend to work in such as agriculture and construction are disproportionately informal in nature, which in turn compounds the challenges of accessing a work permit.

Informalities in other parts of the economy are also a constraint. Obtaining a work permit requires establishing proof of residency, however as one refugee we spoke with in Amman explained, their landlord would not provide the requisite documents for residency because he had not registered the apartment in order to avoid paying taxes

on rent. These structural challenges have made it all the harder for refugees and employers to apply for work permits.

Refugees expressed frustration about employer-anchored permits.

In the current policy landscape, refugees must identify employers who are interested in recruiting them and supporting them in the work permit application process.¹⁷ Work permits remain tied to that employer and are valid for a single year; if a refugee leaves a job, they lose their work permit and will have to apply for a new permit if and when they find a new job.

Many of the refugees we interviewed expressed unease over this structure: respondents were concerned about being fettered to a sole employer and the potential for exploitation and abuse. While refugees would be able to leave jobs, this generated

concern over employer retribution if they left and were no longer protected by a permit. Some of the refugees we spoke with thought that employers would report them to the authorities if they left their job. Even if they had appropriate identification and documentation, they feared any scrutiny by the authorities.

Others avoided obtaining work permits because they believed it would reduce opportunities to apply for asylum in other countries.

A subset of those we spoke with feared that acquiring a work permit would undermine their chances of ultimately applying for asylum or resettlement outside of Jordan. Many believed that they would be deprioritized if they were formally employed and as such, those hopeful of further migration avoided opting into the formal labor market.

While humanitarian benefits have reduced the desire to work for a small number of refugees, it hasn't distorted preferences for work.

Some of the refugees we spoke with who received humanitarian benefits reported concerns that they would lose their benefits if they took on formal employment. While there is no direct policy that revokes benefits for those employed, many legitimately feared that if benefits were to be reduced, they would be the first to lose them given their other sources of income. This was driven by the fact that informal earnings are hidden from the government and the belief that it would be easier to obfuscate these earnings when applying for humanitarian assistance.

Whereas concerns over aid dependencies have dominated the political narrative about refugee labor, it's important to note that a limited number of refugees receive benefits that fully supplant wages. For example, the UNHCR provides cash assistance to 135,544 out of an estimated 1.2 million Syrian refugees.¹⁸ Moreover, given that benefits are targeted to those who are most vulnerable, it is likely that those who receive benefits may not otherwise be able to participate in the labor force.

The data from our discussions suggest that neither UNHCR registration status nor receiving benefits has a distinguishable impact on preferences to work or obtain work permits.¹⁹ This insight suggests that while concerns over losing benefits are non-trivial, they may have disproportionately influenced the debate on formal employment.

Concerns over work permits have had dire consequences. Many refugees, unable, unwilling or fearful of accessing work permits, took high-risk jobs in sectors that often led to crippling accidents. A 35-year-old mother of 6 from Dara who first fled to the Zaatari camp and then moved to Ramtha for work recounted one such story. Her husband had worked night shifts in construction and fallen from a crane, breaking multiple parts of his back. His boss provided 50 JDs in compensation, however the surgery he needed would cost 5,000 JDs. Taking care of her injured husband, children and earning an income to support everyone was impossible and the family remained on the financial edge.

A 39-year-old male recounted the challenges of taking jobs in informal businesses unwilling to register and provide work permits. Originally from Dara, this refugee held a masters degree in social science and had worked in non-profit organizations in Syria. His wife and children had fled to Irbid a year before he arrived. He had solicited jobs, but kept running into the problem that those willing to hire him weren't formal and wouldn't pay the costs of formalization to provide him a work permit.

44%

of the Jordanian economy is informal

Despite these barriers, many refugees want, and believe it is in their interest, to obtain work permits.

Many of the refugees we spoke with clearly and repeatedly emphasized the value of acquiring a work permit. Not only are work permits associated with the stability of a yearlong employment opportunity, but they also provide crucial legal protections.

Many refugees believed that if they got caught working informally without a permit, authorities would force them into refugee camps, or in some cases, deport them back to Syria. Even if rare or unfounded, the refugees we interviewed repeatedly highlighted fears over being caught without a work permit and many respondents knew others who had suffered one of these fates. Indeed, these types of low-probability, high-severity consequences shaped the beliefs and behavior of many refugees. As a 32-year-old male who had taken a night shift in Amman to avoid getting caught by

the police for working informally told us, “I have nightmares about getting caught without a permit.” These preferences are also illuminating in another sense: whereas many refugees are believed to draw relatively high wages from informal portfolios, the preference for permitted employment reveals a desire for protected and stable work, even if wages are lower.

Additionally, occupational restrictions have confined refugee employment opportunities.

The Government of Jordan has restricted the occupations in which Syrian refugees are allowed to work. These restrictions generally apply to high-skilled employment; Syrians are ineligible to practice medicine, work as lawyers, or engage in other similarly skilled labor. However, these restrictions also apply to under-served professions; despite grappling with double shifting in schools and over-crowded health clinics, Syrians are prohibited from working as teachers or midwives.

While the motivation for these restrictions is to reduce competition with Jordanians, this has fueled inefficiencies in matching the skills of refugees to the needs of the market and driven some refugees out of the market. We spoke with pharmacists working in administration, social scientists working in retail, and aviation experts who were unemployed. While these restrictions affect a minority of refugees given that roughly 80% are considered low skilled, there is disproportionate need for labor in certain closed occupations such as education and health that could be filled by refugees.²⁰

A restrictive policy environment has made it unnecessarily challenging for refugees to access formal employment opportunities. Despite these challenges, many refugees seek out the formal protections provided by work permits. Loosening regulations and restrictions will help these refugees as well as the economy.

One respondent living in Amman claimed that he could not access a work permit and avoided working because of the potential downside of getting caught. Full of fear, he recounted the story of a young 16-year-old boy who had escaped a refugee camp and got caught working illegally by Jordanian authorities, after which he was deported back to Syria. While he used to work as a mechanic, concerns over getting caught without a permit drove him out of the labor market. As he told us, “I’d rather stay at home without work than work without a permit and get kicked out.”

In Irbid, one energetic and entrepreneurial female respondent in her early thirties had launched her own plumbing business in partnership with a Jordanian. Defying cultural norms by leading her own business in a traditionally male-dominated space, she was keen to acquire a work permit to gain social and legal protections. As she explained to us, “work permits are the medicine to my illness.”

While the Ministry of Labor has waived the costs associated with hiring Syrian refugees since April 2016, informal fees, barriers and hidden costs continue to cause problems.

ii. Inconsistent Information & Misinformation

Clear, credible and consistent information on employment opportunities and the consequences of taking on formal work is cornerstone to any efficiently functioning market. However, the lack of easy-to-access information on how to identify job opportunities and misinformation about the consequences of taking on formal employment are common in Jordan.

Refugees repeatedly noted a lack of information on jobs and where to find them.

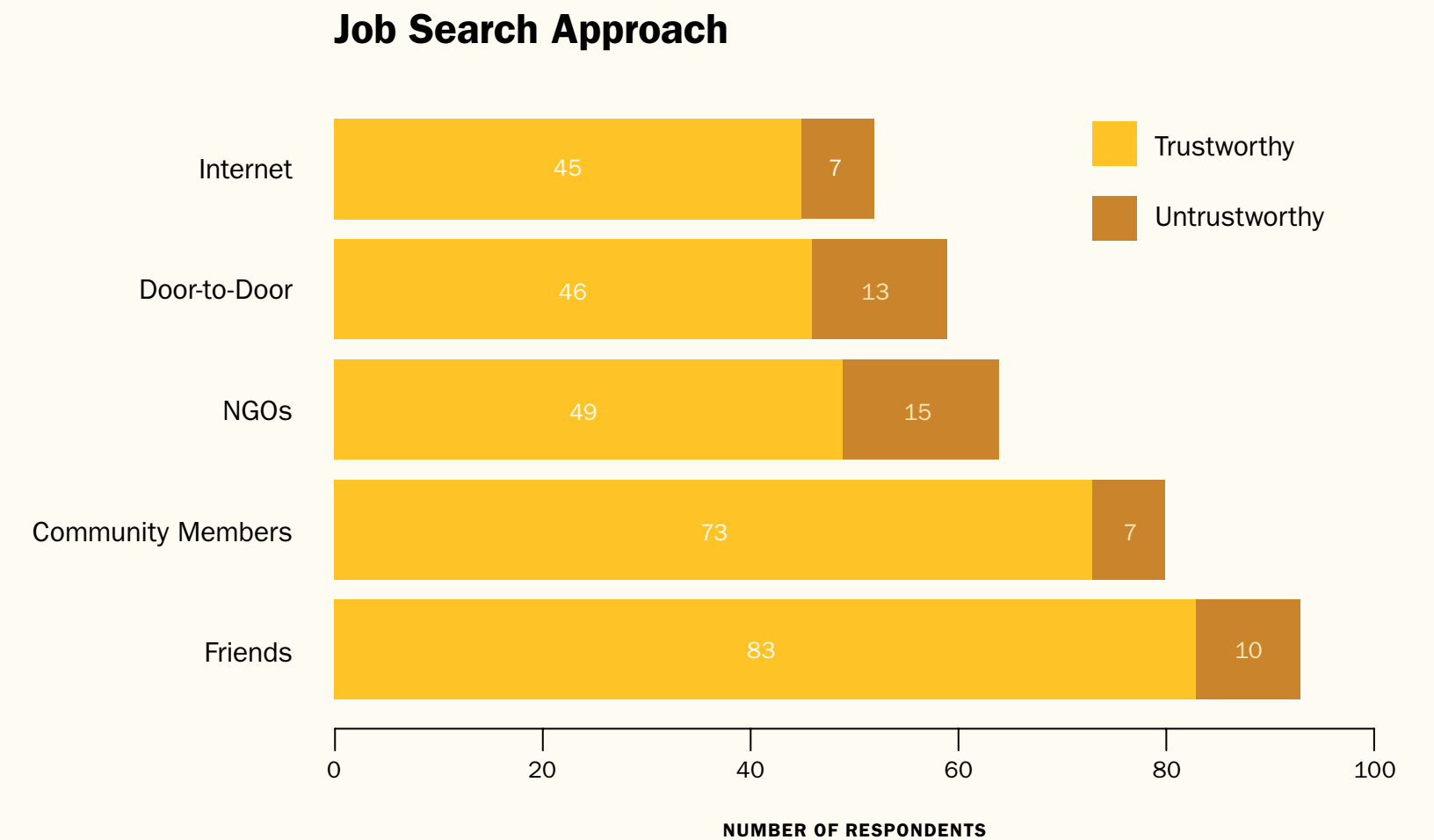
The refugees we spoke with often highlighted the challenges of finding out about job opportunities, the requirements for jobs, and the lack of a centralized source for job information as key challenges. As Figure 1 (right) highlights, the vast majority of the refugees we interviewed search for jobs through friends, community members or NGOs. Recruitment is often informal with individuals drawing on their social networks to identify potential employees.

While this search process is common across most markets, low levels of integration between Syrian refugees and Jordanians and poor public opinion of Syrians by Jordanians make it difficult for refugees to find “out-of-network” job opportunities.²¹ Moreover, given that refugees tend to be detached from the labor market, there are few bridges to opportunity through within-network searches. Respondents noted that their networks remain their primary source of employment opportunities, but rarely actually have new jobs to offer.

Evidence from interviews with firm owners and employers conducted elsewhere reveal parallel problems on the demand side: many have been unable to identify and recruit refugee labor despite the underlying interest in doing so.²² This stems from the inability to access and identify individuals. Coupled with the concerns refugees identified, it is clear that the lack of information has hindered refugees from finding jobs and

Figure 1

This figure visualizes the ways refugees search for jobs.



employers from finding refugees in credible and consistent ways.

Misinformation on the consequences of taking formal employment has subdued labor market activity.

While UN agencies and others have launched information campaigns to dispel the belief that taking a job compromises the ability to receive humanitarian assistance, respondents noted that they down-weighted this information because of the vested interests of these messengers. The refugees we spoke with were concerned that agencies were misleading them in order to avoid distributing aid. Moreover, the refugees we interviewed were strategizing over the long-term: whereas no NGO or UN

agency has suggested that those working would lose benefits, refugees were aware that if cuts to overall benefits were made, it would be likely that those with jobs would be deprioritized from receiving aid.

A lack of consistent information and misinformation has exacerbated feelings of insecurity and uncertainty among the refugees with whom we spoke. Refugees don't have the ability to easily find jobs nor accurately understand the implications of participating in the formal labor market. This has resulted in missed opportunities and poorly informed choices.

Syrian girls living in an apartment building for Syrian refugees in a city in Jordan.



Uncertainty in the policy environment dissuaded some from finding formal opportunities that would provide work permits. As one 27-year-old from Dara and now living in Irbid explained, the rules on work permits were vague and constant changes in their pricing were a signal of uncertainty. She avoided applying for a work permit because she believed the policy on permits may change again and that the costs of applying would not pay off.



iii. Bargaining Power & Safety**Weak access to recourse and dispute resolution mechanisms has generated fears over workplace exploitation.**

Many of the refugees we spoke with claimed that the greatest deterrent in searching for jobs is the potential for workplace harassment or abuse. In the informal sector, refugees felt that employers went unchecked because they couldn't escalate issues to the authorities. In the formal sector, the refugees we interviewed felt similarly constrained given the fact that employers held their work permits.

General fears over public authorities, public services, and forums for justice undermined the safety valves that exist in the face of workplace exploitation. Respondents reported deep-seated fears of police, not necessarily because of police mistreatment in daily interactions, but because of the power police have to deport refugees to camps or Syria.

Many of the refugees we spoke with directly experienced workplace abuse that was in part driven by weak bargaining power. Those interviewed claimed that they went unpaid for work completed, were often paid systematically less than their Jordanian or Egyptian counterparts, were often fired without notice, and were sometimes physically abused or sexually harassed.

Fears over public authorities were amplified by rumors of refugee harassment.

In addition to the direct experiences of the refugees we spoke with, concerns were stoked and reinforced by the experiences of our respondent's friends, family and community. In the type of low-information, uncertain environments that refugees operate, these second-hand experiences have shaped and buttressed the beliefs of others.

A 30-year-old man living in Amman recounted his recent experience, which captured this exact dynamic. He was fortunate enough to find a low-paying but consistent job working at a dry cleaners. After coming in daily for four months and waiting for payment for the past few weeks, he came in one day and his boss quizzically asked, "Who are you?" Without the ability to escalate the dispute, he forwent his earnings, taking a large financial hit in an already challenging time.

iv. Gender**Female refugees face unique barriers to accessing employment in Jordan.**

The female refugees we spoke with articulated two specific barriers to obtaining employment. First, many claimed that cultural barriers prohibiting women from working in certain roles or in public spaces with men have driven them out of the formal labor market. These norms have reduced overall labor force participation down and data suggests that only 4% of Syrian female refugees are formally employed.²³

Second, while many of the female refugees we spoke with conveyed an interest in working in formal sectors, many were burdened by non-income generating household work. These constraints influenced the forms of business they engage in as well as their preferences for material support. Of those responsible for household duties, many had tried to launch small businesses based out of their homes. As noted below, when identifying what solutions would help females access the

labor market, nearly all claimed the need for childcare support whereas men rarely cited this need.

Female refugees also highlighted specific fears over work place sexual harassment and gender-based violence.

Multiple respondents noted that they had experienced workplace sexual abuse. Others had been sexually harassed in public spaces, which in turn augmented concerns over experiencing similar behavior in the workplace. Many of the refugees we spoke with had been harassed in taxis, on the streets, and in markets by men they believed were targeting them because they were Syrian.

Female refugees face uniquely different barriers to accessing employment opportunities than men; implementing solutions that serve them is key to translating their preferences to work in the formal sector into actual participation.

As one female respondent in Mafraq recounted, she had been working as a house cleaner in the home of a harsh household head who she accused had sexually harassed her. Anxious over the situation, the wife of the household head reported that the respondent was trying to seduce the husband to the police and as a result, she was forcefully deported back to a refugee camp.

v. Material Obstacles**The costs of, and ability to, access childcare has anchored refugees to their home and removed them from the labor market.**

Respondents in the sample we interviewed had on average 2.5 children in their households and high childcare costs restricted their ability to take work outside of the home.²⁴ The burden has largely fallen on women in the household.

Although income from employment opportunities sometimes tipped the scale and enabled households to afford childcare, it was more often prohibitively expensive. In the face of uncertainty and instability surrounding work, finding new caretakers remained a challenge.

Among the refugees we spoke with, underlying health concerns compounded childcare issues. Many noted that their children had become incontinent due to post-traumatic stress, complicating their ability to leave children alone at home and

making it all the more challenging to find childcare or educational opportunities that would provide this type of support. While providing childcare would ease the ability for these families to access employment opportunities, supporting underlying health issues is key.

Transport costs and the safety concerns generated by distant work have impeded refugees from taking jobs.

While refugee populations largely reside in urban centers throughout Jordan, many of the job opportunities, particularly but not restricted to those in Special Economic Zones, are distant from their homes. For those considering low-wage jobs, many said that the daily costs of transport could change the financial equation and ultimately deter them from taking a job.

Yet, a set of the refugees we spoke with noted that the issue of proximity was not

Amira's 10-year-old daughter, Bilal, stands staring into the window in their home in Mafraq, northern Jordan. Her mother is Amira, one of the Syrian volunteers at the IRC Clinic in Mafraq.



As one 50-year-old women living in Ramtha recounted, she had taken on her brother's four children to care for them, yet received no benefits despite applying for them. She was unable to work outside the home because she was unable to pay for care for her nieces and nephews. She now remains at home living off the charity of her neighbors.



“When I walk down the street I hear the comments men make. When I take public transportation to pick up aid or do the shopping, men always ask me if I am Syrian. I feel immediately objectified...The result is incredible daily stress and growing depression. I feel like I am choking.”

- Farah, age 36.

solely about the costs of transport. Rather, they explained that long transit times were a deterrent to taking jobs because of their inability to immediately address any home emergencies, such as a health concern or potential eviction. Those we spoke with prized the ability to respond quickly and were hesitant to consider jobs that were too far away. Distinguishing between the financial dimensions and security concerns over transport is key to addressing this barrier.

That said, it is also important to note that many were willing to travel moderately far distances: men, were, on average, willing to travel 46 minutes to an employment opportunity and women were willing to travel 30 minutes on average. Our interviews revealed that both the type and extent of these barriers vary by gender: compared to the female refugees with whom we spoke, men preferred financial support for transport whereas females underscored the need for supporting childcare. Addressing these material barriers is key to helping refugees access employment opportunities.

Leveraging Opportunities for Getting Refugees to Work

Despite the barriers that refugees face in the labor market, many of those we interviewed expressed a keen interest in formal employment. This section identifies trends in these preferences and highlights a set of opportunities for getting refugees into safe and decent work.

To understand the labor market preferences of those we spoke with, we simply asked refugees what sectors they wanted to work in. Figures 4-6 (page 24) plot the breakdown of the sectors refugees expressed an interest in working, disaggregated by location and gender.

A broad set of trends emerges. The women we spoke with overwhelmingly expressed a desire to work in education and health across all geographic locations. They also consistently conveyed an interest in working in factory-based textiles and retail, with

greater numbers preferring to work in the former than the latter. In comparison, men's preferences were more evenly distributed across sectors in Irbid and Amman. The male refugees we spoke with living in Mafraq disproportionately favored work in retail.

As policies and programs are launched to support refugees in accessing employment, aligning support with refugee preferences will lead to better outcomes. However, economic realities may not provide this luxury and identifying what sectors refugees are willing to work in is similarly important.

The refugees we interviewed are willing and want to work in “non-prestige” sectors.

Given occupational restrictions on refugees and growth trajectories in the Jordanian economy, job opportunities are likely to arise

Figure 2

Proportion of Respondents Willing to Take Minimum Wage Jobs

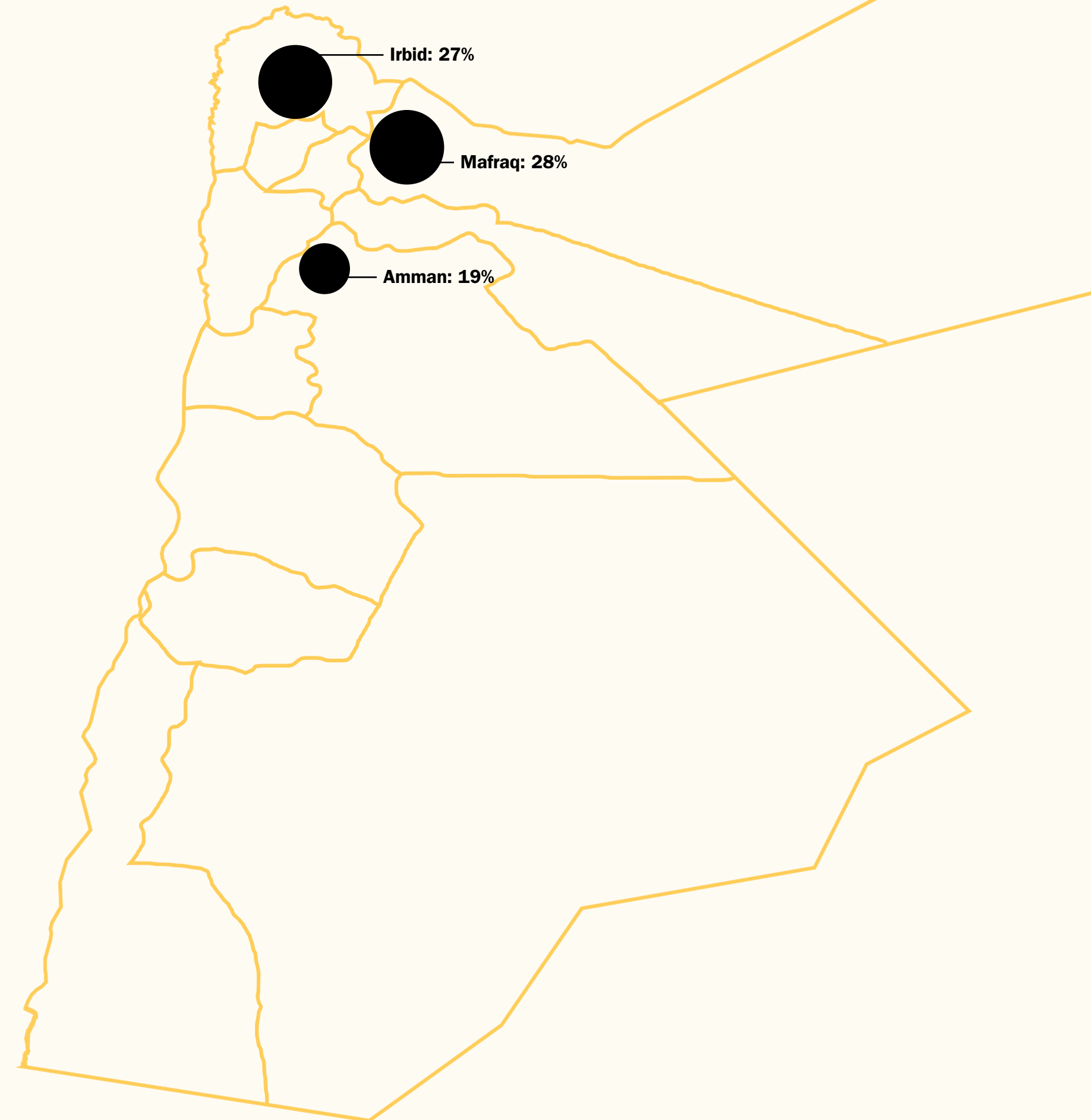


Figure 3

This figure visualizes the wages individuals would need to be paid to take a job in agriculture, textiles, construction and manufacturing. Means are in brown, a single standard deviation in yellow.



in manufacturing, textiles, construction and agriculture. Of the refugees we spoke with, 63% of respondents expressed a willingness to work in agriculture; 57% claimed that they would work in textiles, and over 75% of respondents said they would work in manufacturing or construction.²⁵ While these findings are limited to this sample of respondents, it provides suggestive evidence that there may be a substantial number of refugees willing to work in these sectors. This is particularly important given that it contrasts with dominant narratives that refugees are unwilling to work in these sectors.

A substantial number of those we spoke with are willing to take minimum wage jobs.

To assess whether refugees would be willing to take jobs in non-prestige sectors at competitive wages – the current minimum wage of 190 JOD per month for Jordanians – we asked those we interviewed how much they would need to be paid at jobs in agriculture, textiles, construction and manufacturing sectors. Figure 3 visualizes the wage preferences of those across those sectors.

This data reveals two trends. First, desired wages remain stable across sectors with individuals expressing preferences for an estimated 325 JOD per month. The consistency across sectors speaks to a general level of need in salaries. Second, the bottom 20 - 25% of respondents note

they are willing to work for minimum wage in these sectors. More specifically, 18% claimed they would work for minimum wage in agriculture, 22% claimed they would work for those wages in textiles, 25% noted this was a sufficient wage in manufacturing, and 23% suggested they would work in construction for these wages.

Together, this data and the stories that refugees shared underscore that some, though not all, refugees are willing to take minimum wage jobs. Effectively identifying, targeting, and recruiting individuals who are willing to work at these wages is key to getting refugees into formal employment opportunities in these sectors. At the same time, it is also crucial to identify livelihoods solutions for refugees unwilling to work in these sectors at these wages.

Refugees living in Mafraq and Irbid are willing to accept lower wages than those in Amman.

This is largely due to higher living costs in Amman and the fact that higher-skilled refugees tend to reside in Amman. Figure 2 visualizes the distribution of respondents willing to take minimum wage jobs as a percentage of those we interviewed.

A few other wage- and sector-specific geographic trends emerge. While those living in Amman were willing to work in agriculture, construction, manufacturing or textiles, fewer were willing to work at low wages. Substantially more refugees living in Irbid were willing to work in textiles

whereas substantially more of the refugees we spoke with in Mafraq were willing to work in agriculture. This may in part result from individuals migrating to cities where there is demand for their skills.

Diving further into the interviews revealed trends in the profiles of those willing to work across these sectors. Younger, more educated refugees were substantially more likely to express an interest in working in agriculture. More educated women, particularly those who don't receive UNHCR humanitarian assistance, were more likely to articulate a willingness to work in textiles. More educated men were more likely to express an interest in manufacturing, and less educated men were more likely to express an interest in working in construction.

These correlates provide preliminary insights on who prefers to work in which sectors, the type of information needed to facilitate specific labor-market targeting. As broader, representative samples of refugees are surveyed and supply-side interventions launched, it is all the more important to identify these characteristics in order to effectively and efficiently match refugees with employment opportunities.

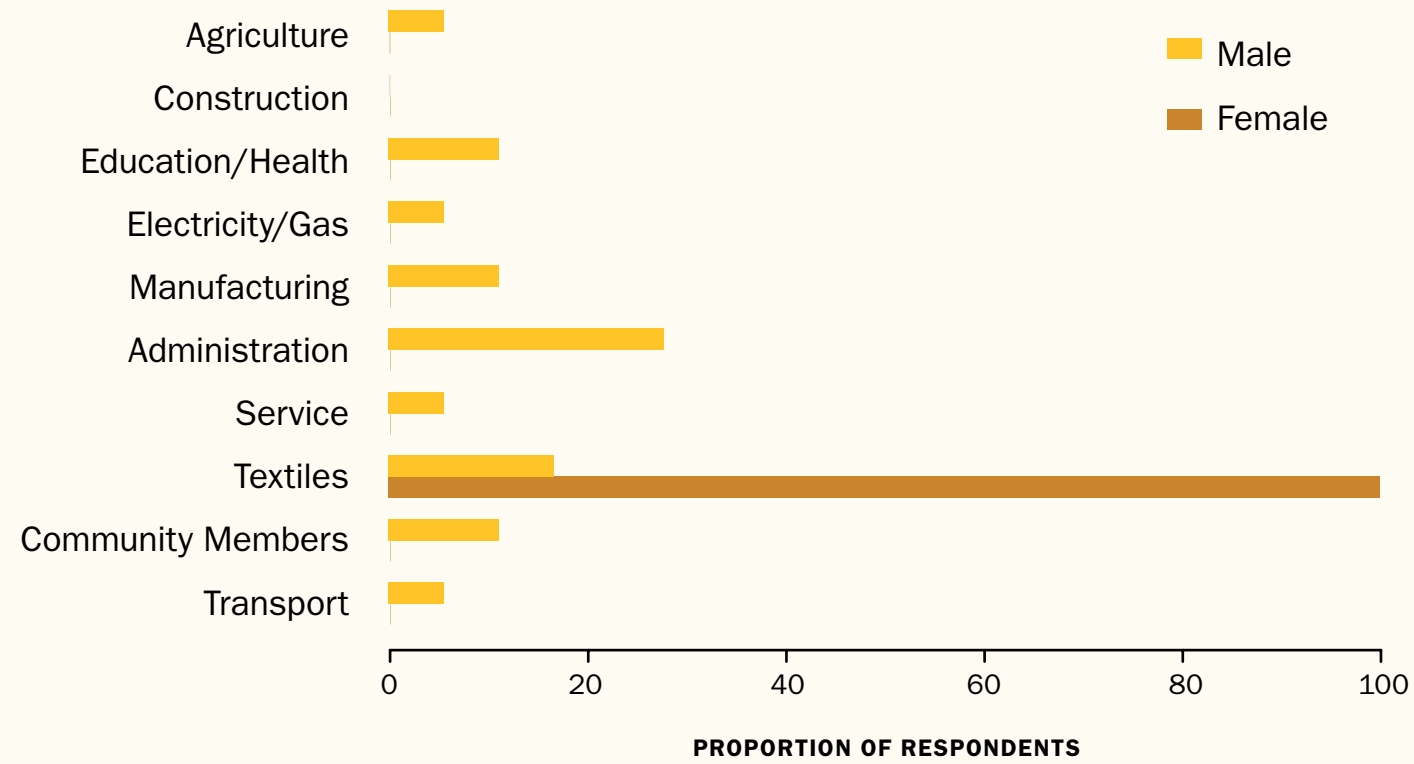
To support refugees in accessing employment opportunities, work must be done to break down the barriers they face and take advantage of the opportunities that exist. Our interviews suggest that there are refugees interested and willing to take on formal employment opportunities in a broad swath of sectors, including non-prestige sectors, at a minimum wage. While leveraging those opportunities is needed to get refugees into formal jobs, identifying opportunities for safe and decent work for all refugees and host communities is crucial.

Many refugees are committed to leading financially productive lives in Jordan. A forty-year-old father of three living in Amman explained that each day he counts the 200 stairs he crosses on his daily walk to the tailor shop where he makes 180 JD each month, a salary hovering under minimum wage. These wages didn't dissuade him from work and as he reflected, "a constant drop of water leaves a mark on the rock."

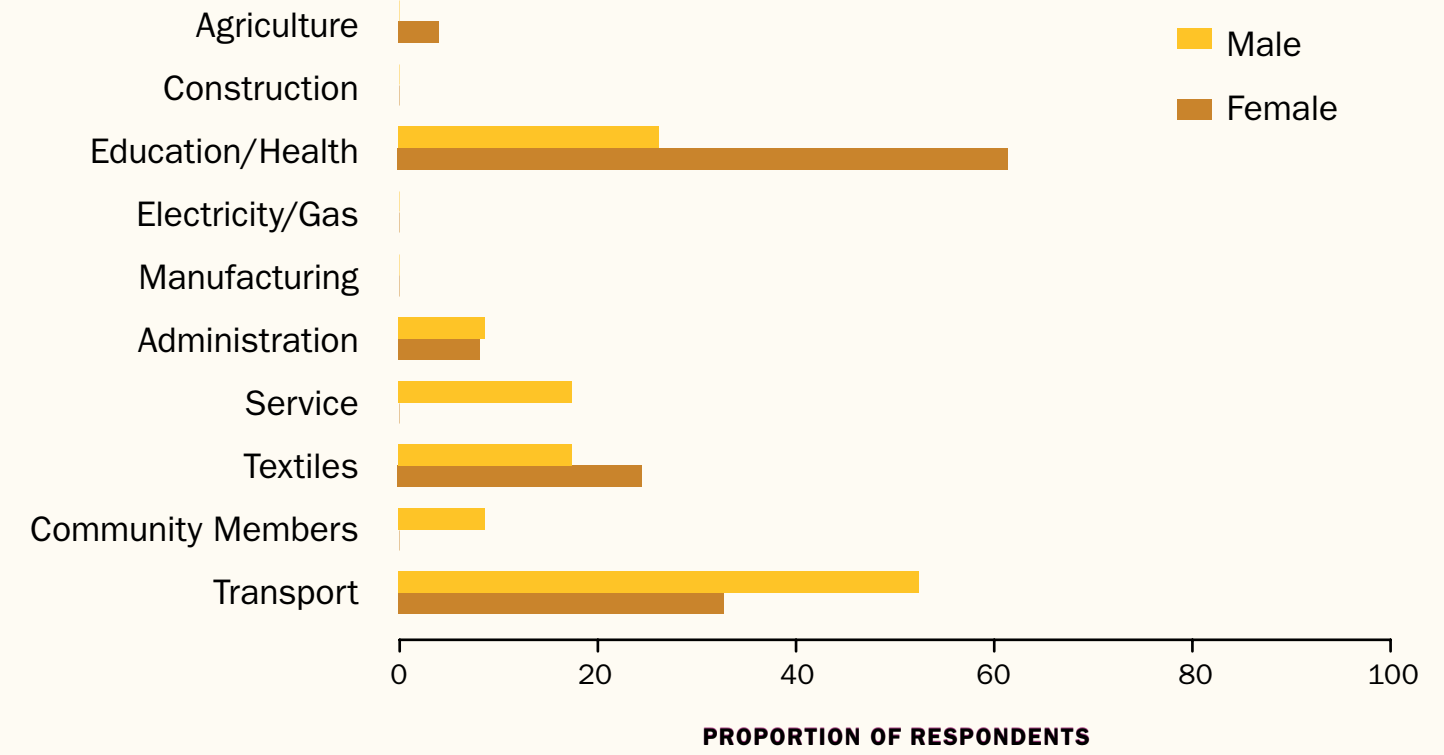
Figures 4-6

This figure visualizes the sectors in which respondents expressed an interest in working (Mafraq: n = 47, Amman: n = 21, Irbid: n = 41). Note that this question did not capture home-based work.

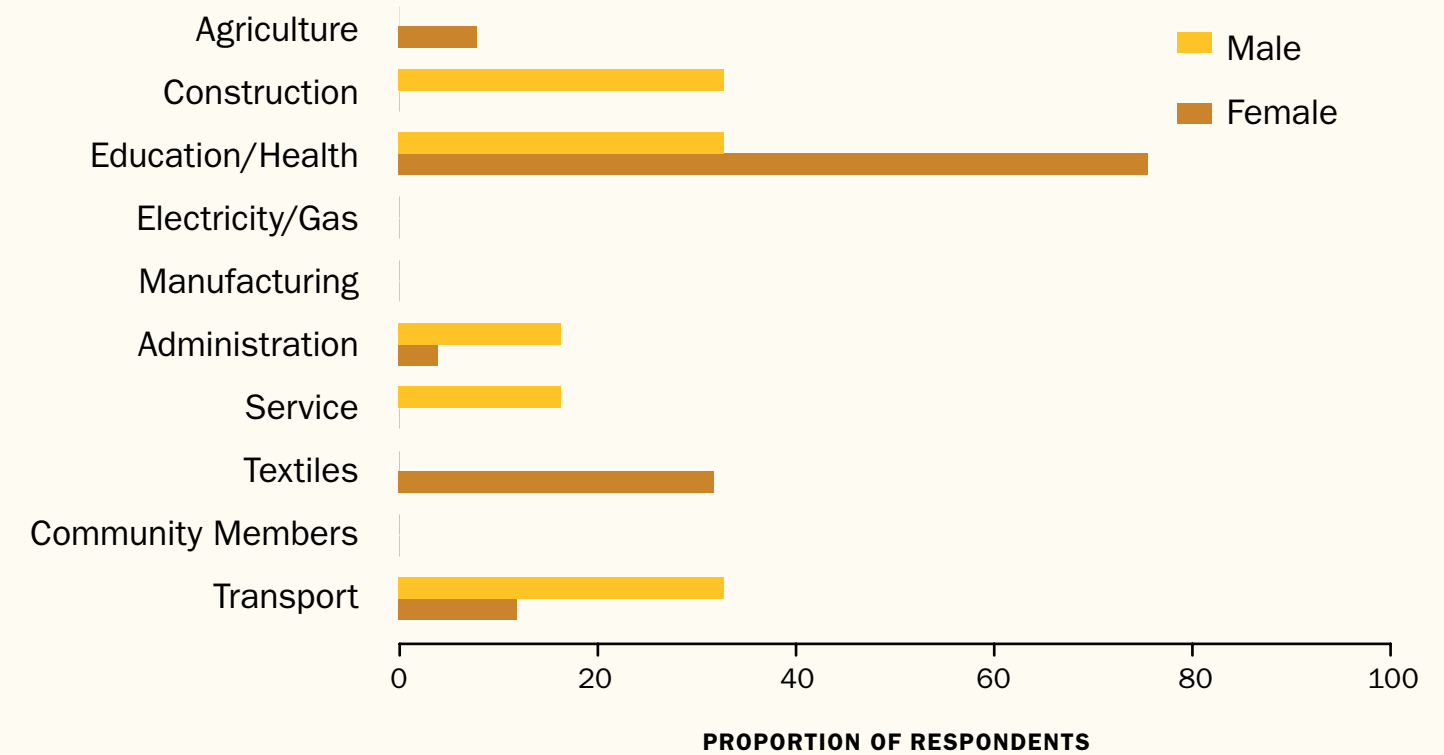
**Figure 4
Preferred Sector of Work (Amman)**



**Figure 6
Preferred Sector of Work (Mafraq)**



**Figure 5
Preferred Sector of Work (Irbid)**



Conclusions & Recommendations

One year after the London Conference and in spite of some early progress, much remains to be done towards solving the problem of refugee employment in Jordan. While the financial incentives articulated in the Jordan Compact have potential to promote economic growth and job creation for both Jordanians and refugees, additional support is needed to convert on this opportunity.

While this research evidences the barriers that exist in accessing the market, it underscores pathways for getting refugees to work. In addition to identifying refugees committed to accessing formal employment, the interviews we conducted provide insight on the solutions needed to make progress in the current landscape to get refugees into safe and decent jobs.

We conclude with a set of recommendations aimed at removing barriers and leveraging the opportunities we identified.

1. Relax work permit restrictions, simplify the process for obtaining work permits, and remove occupational restrictions.

Removing obstacles for both refugees and employers to access work permits is key to increasing participation in the formal market. This should be done by delinking work permits from a single job and employer, reducing the number of formal steps required to file for a work permit, and simplifying and incentivizing business formalization in the market. Expanding the sectors and professions open to refugees is similarly important to moving towards fuller employment for refugees.

2. Create a credible source of information to help connect and match refugees to employers.

Supporting a system that can engage both refugee and employer communities by providing information on opportunities in the job market will mitigate information related obstacles. A centralized resource that both refugees and employers can use to identify job opportunities and potential employees would help overcome these issues. These tools should aim to address the needs of refugees and employers that current systems do not fully provide, and should ultimately be designed to ease search costs, enable reputation building, and help provide an overview of the market for both refugees and employers.

3. Clarify the short-, medium-, and long-term impact of taking work permits as it relates to benefits, asylum status and legal protections.

For refugees to make informed decisions about employment opportunities, there must be clarity on how employment affects both their legal status and benefits. This requires that relevant actors have made decisions about those implications and that communication about these decisions with refugees is credible and clear.

4. Increase refugee confidence in public authorities by establishing refugee-tailored services in state institutions.

Improving the daily experience that refugees have with state institutions and officials will reduce concerns over engaging the state. This will in turn increase individual willingness to participate in the formal economy by ensuring that refugees feel safe if visible. This can be achieved by establishing refugee-specific services in statute institutions, such as employment dispute resolution mechanisms tailored for refugees.

5. Provide refugees the material support needed to access employment opportunities.

This includes providing childcare and transport support to help get refugees into work. Solving the material constraints refugees face in accessing jobs is financially savvy: the costs of these solutions are marginal compared to the broader benefits employment generates for the economy. Providing these supports will increase labor force participation as well as the scope of opportunities refugees can access.

6. Implement gender-specific solutions and enhance support for female labor force participation.

The female refugees we interviewed highlighted three concrete solutions needed to overcome gendered barriers. First, refugees noted that separating workspaces by gender would assuage cultural concerns on gender integration. Second, female respondents suggested that same-gendered management would ease safety issues and cultural concerns. Third, female respondents suggested that family visits by the relevant patriarch to their workspace to consent to the situation would mitigate remaining concerns. Several manufacturing firms operating in Jordan have integrated some of these features into their workspace and expanding these elements is key to increase female labor force participation.

7. Leverage market tools that support refugees in accessing opportunities that fit their preferences.

The refugee population in Jordan is diverse as are their preferences for different types of employment opportunities. As interviews illuminated, some refugees are willing to work minimum wage jobs in non-prestige sectors while others are not. Ensuring that these refugees can access the formal market while also guaranteeing decent work for refugees with different preferences requires segmenting the labor pool and refining targeting, recruitment and support for these individuals.

8. Adopt a lean, fast-paced “test and learn” approach to increasing employment.

The urgency of making progress towards the Jordan Compact and the desire to work articulated in the interviews we conducted requires that all actors move quickly. Doing so responsibly and effectively means implementing innovative ideas at small scale, rigorously testing their impact, and scaling up ideas that work while abandoning those that do not. This means exploring opportunities in the gig economy and non-traditional spaces as well as providing the ability to develop flexible solutions for refugees. This requires coordination across implementing partners and outcome measure harmonization to facilitate assessment.

A young Syrian refugee girl looks out of a window in one of IRC's women's centers in a city in Jordan.



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Footnotes

- ¹ Project Management Unit, Ministry of Planning and Cooperation, Government of Jordan. January 15th, 2017. “Presentation on Livelihoods for the HPDG.” www.data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=12722. *Jordan Times*. January 26th, 2017. “Six companies to export to the EU under new ‘rules of origin.’” www.jordantimes.com/news/local/six-companies-export-eu-under-new-rules-origin%E2%80%99
- ² An additional 8 discussions were conducted in Ramtha, which are aggregated into Ibid for analysis.
- ³ We took care to recruit from programming other than the IRC’s health work to avoid interviewing individuals with health issues systematically correlated with negative employment outcomes.⁴ Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS). 2014. “Syria Needs Analysis Project, April 2014.” Note that total estimates vary by source, ranging from 650,000 – 1,400,000 refugees.
- ⁴ ILO. 2015. “Access to work for Syrian refugees in Jordan. A discussion paper on labour and refugee law policies.”
- ⁵ CARE. 2016. “Six Years Into Exile: The challenges and coping strategies of non-camp Syrian refugees in Jordan and their host communities.”
- ⁶ Achilli, Luigi. 2015. “Syrian Refugees in Jordan: A Reality Check.” EUI Migration Policy Centre.
- ⁷ CARE. 2016. “Six Years Into Exile: The challenges and coping strategies of non-camp Syrian refugees in Jordan and their host communities.”
- ⁸ International Republican Institute. 2015. “Survey of Jordan Public Opinion.”
- ⁹ McKinsey & Company. 2016. “Opportunities for Inclusive Job Growth in Jordan.”
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ West Asia – North Africa Institute. NA. “Providing 200,000 Work Opportunities for Syrian Refugees in Jordan: A Viability Assessment”
- ¹² Specifically, 15% refugee labor in year 1, increasing to 25% refugee labor in year 3.
- ¹³ Project Management Unit, Ministry of Planning and Cooperation, Government of Jordan. January 15th, 2017. “Presentation on Livelihoods for the HPDG.” www.data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=12722.
- ¹⁴ Jordan International Non-Governmental Organization Forum. 2016. “The Work Permit Maze.”
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- ¹⁶ Agricultural and domestic work is an exception.
- ¹⁷ Interview with UNHCR 1/13/17.
- ¹⁸ This is based off a multivariate regression analysis and assumes that stated preferences are a good guide to actual behavior.
- ¹⁹ McKinsey & Company. 2016. “Opportunities for Inclusive Job Growth in Jordan.”
- ²⁰ Findings from a nationally representative survey of Jordanians highlight negative opinions. International Republican Institute. 2015. “Survey of Jordan Public Opinion.”
- ²¹ McKinsey & Company. 2016. “Opportunities for Inclusive Job Growth in Jordan.”
- ²² Project Management Unit, Ministry of Planning and Cooperation, Government of Jordan. January 15th, 2017. “Presentation on Livelihoods for the HPDG.” www.data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=12722.²⁴ It is important to note that Article 73 of the Labour Code requires childcare be provided by employers in medium- and large-sized firms, however the refugees we spoke with rarely worked in these type of firms.
- ²³ We focused our questions on these sectors given current job opportunities, potential sector-level growth, and occupational restrictions.
- ²⁴



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Who we are

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) responds to the world's worst humanitarian crises and helps people to survive and rebuild their lives. Founded in 1933 at the request of Albert Einstein, the IRC offers life-saving care and life-changing assistance to refugees forced to flee from war, persecution or natural disaster. At work today in over 40 countries and 29 cities in the United States, we restore safety, dignity and hope to millions who are uprooted and struggling to endure. The IRC leads the way from harm to home.

The IRC began our work in Jordan in 2007 with refugees from Iraq. With the arrival of refugees from Syria in 2012, we ramped up operations, which now include primary health care, mobile outreach, and empowerment programs for those in need.

Founded in 2016, the Airbel Center draws on the global resources of IRC to improve outcomes across the entire humanitarian sector. Our designers and strategists partner with IRC experts and field staff to identify, resource, and manage innovation projects in IRC field locations, and take what works to global scale.

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