

Syrian Refugee Women Farmworkers in Lebanon: Conditions and Challenges



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Executive Summary

The study, based on a desk review and a needs assessment survey of 126 Syrian women farmworkers in Bekaa and Koura between April 2024 and April 2025, provides a stark and comprehensive account of the **precarious conditions and multifaceted challenges** faced by Syrian refugee women engaged in agricultural labor in Lebanon. This critical segment of the workforce, largely comprising primary breadwinners for their families, operates within a system fraught with **gendered, legal, and socio-economic exploitation**. The findings underscore the urgent need for a coordinated and multi-pronged approach to ensure their rights, safety, and well-being.

Context: Lebanon's Agricultural Sector and Syrian Refugee Workers

Lebanon's agricultural sector is characterized by its **informality and a deeply entrenched clientelist system**, which significantly hinders its development and reform efforts. Despite being a major employer, accounting for approximately 6% of the national population and absorbing a high number of refugees (an estimated 200,000 Syrians in 2017), the sector primarily relies on **cheap, temporary, and migrant labor**. Around 90% of Lebanese and almost all Syrian agricultural workers operate informally, lacking a legal definition of "farmer" or "agricultural exploitation," which translates into a **complete absence of social protections** like health coverage or pensions. This structural informality is exploited to maintain low costs and minimal government intervention.

Syrian refugees, in particular, face additional layers of vulnerability due to their **precarious legal status**, which largely prevents them from officially entering the labor market and advocating for their rights. As of 2019, only 22% of Syrian refugees aged 15 and older possessed legal residency, pushing the majority into hiding and further restricting their mobility and access to livelihoods and education.

Main Challenges Faced by Syrian Refugee Women Farmworkers

The study meticulously documents a range of interconnected challenges, often exacerbated by the women's legal status and gender:

- **Exploitative Labor Practices and Dire Wages:** Syrian refugee women undertake **grueling jobs in physically demanding roles** for exceptionally low wages, averaging 600,000 L.L. per day for women compared to 900,000 L.L. for men. These wages are often insufficient to cover basic necessities such as food, electricity, residence, and water, leaving no room for education or savings. Women are preferred by landowners due to their perceived discipline and willingness to accept wages half of what men earn. Long working hours, sometimes up to 15 hours, are common.
- **The Entrenched *Shaweesh* System:** The *Shaweesh*, an informal labor broker, plays a central and often exploitative role. They control access to work, transportation, and attendance, often deducting a significant portion of promised wages, leaving women with only 40,000 or 50,000 LBP per hour from a promised 100,000 LBP. This system can

constitute **modern-day slavery or debt bondage**, as *Shaweesh* figures may pay smugglers for families' migration, then use the debt to trap them in ongoing labor relationships. They wield significant authority, including threatening families and controlling aid distribution.

- **Precarious Living Conditions:** The majority of participants (94 out of 126) live in **tents in informal settlements**, which are often in dire conditions with sewage leaks, winter floods, and a lack of security. Rented concrete houses are often financially inaccessible, with owners exploiting residents by raising rent monthly. These substandard living conditions directly contribute to widespread health issues.
- **Health and Safety Risks:** Women endure **dangerous and unsafe working conditions without health protections**. They face occupational health risks from pesticide use and other agricultural chemicals, leading to skin and respiratory sensitivities, as well as back and joint pain. Injuries are common, yet often receive only basic treatment, with *Shaweesh* figures denying responsibility. Access to affordable and comprehensive healthcare is severely limited, largely due to financial constraints and the lack of social security. Water scarcity and contamination in camps also contribute to widespread health problems.
- **Vulnerability to Violence, Harassment, and Discrimination:** Syrian refugee women face heightened risks of **sexual harassment, violence, and exploitation** due to the absence of formal reporting mechanisms, fear of retaliation or arrest for lacking legal papers, and cultural taboos. Discrimination based on nationality, dialect, physical appearance, gender, and socioeconomic status is also reported from various sources including coworkers, supervisors, *Shaweesh*, and landowners. Physical violence is also reported by a significant number of participants, occurring at work, home, and public spaces, with victims often reluctant to seek help or finding little support.
- **Barriers to Education for Children:** School attendance among school-aged children is notably low, primarily due to **lack of family income, rejection from schools** (often for being over-aged or lacking legal documentation), and widespread **child labor** to support household income. Children as young as eight are reported to be working in fields under dangerous conditions, with little enforcement of child labor laws.
- **Limited Autonomy and Empowerment:** Entrenched social norms and economic exploitation limit women's opportunities for empowerment and independence, with their financial contributions often undervalued and men often viewed as primary breadwinners. Legal restrictions prevent Syrian women from establishing agricultural cooperatives or running private businesses, confining their participation to daily wage labor. Clan structures and male family members often control women's participation in training and decision-making.
- **Impact of Conflict and Displacement:** The recent Israeli aggression (2023/2024) caused displacement, destroyed homes, and made finding work extremely difficult for many participants, further compounding their vulnerabilities.
- **Systemic Failures and Weak Support Structures:** The Lebanese state's "retreat" from agriculture, coupled with its policy of not establishing formal refugee camps, has created a void allowing exploitation. While NGOs and international organizations attempt to fill gaps, their efforts are often constrained by **short funding cycles, inconsistent**

interventions, and an inability to challenge root causes or bypass the *Shaweesh* system effectively. Furthermore, Lebanese law excludes agricultural workers from labor protections, and efforts to organize workers into unions have faced significant challenges.

Recommendations for Improvement

To address these severe challenges, the study and stakeholders highlight several urgent needs and recommendations, urging a comprehensive, coordinated, and rights-based approach:

- **Ensure Fair and Higher Wages:** Advocate for **adequate and fair wages** (e.g., minimum \$10-\$15 per day) that can secure better living conditions and cover basic needs, allowing for education and savings.
- **Improve Housing and Living Conditions:** Prioritize **better housing and living conditions**, including access to clean water, free or affordable electricity, and improved shelters, especially in camps where sewage leaks and floods are common.
- **Guarantee Access to Healthcare:** Provide **affordable and comprehensive healthcare services**, especially for children, addressing the spread of diseases in camps and supporting occupational health needs. Implement health measures in fields like masks and gloves to protect against chemical exposure.
- **Strengthen Legal Protections and Documentation:** Facilitate the securing of **legal documentation** for Syrian refugees to mitigate exploitation, blackmail, and intimidation. Implement and **enforce laws to safeguard refugees** and punish aggressors, ensuring legal security and inclusion under labor laws.
- **Enhance Education Access:** Improve **access to schooling and support to reduce dropouts** for children, addressing financial barriers and issues with legal documentation. Implement **basic education** programs for women to improve literacy skills and open up more opportunities. Poverty alleviation efforts must be integrated with education programs.
- **Improve Work Conditions and Agricultural Resources:** Provide **better tools, inputs, and agricultural training** focused on sustainable farming, pest control, disease management, and advanced technologies to reduce physical effort and enhance skills. Support opportunities for women to **own land** to achieve independence and stability.
- **Enhance Safety and Security:** Address the **lack of safety and security**, particularly concerning discrimination, exploitation, and threats from authorities or the *Shaweesh*. Strengthen reporting mechanisms for abuse and harassment, ensuring **accountability and enforcement**.
- **Promote Climate Change Adaptation:** Support the adoption of **climate-resilient farming practices** and provide support for affected farmers to ensure income stability.
- **Address Personal and Emotional Needs:** Recognize and address the **emotional burden** faced by these women, providing opportunities for personal well-being, rest, and activities beyond farmwork.

- **Challenge the *Shaweesh* System:** Develop and scale up initiatives that bypass the exploitative *Shaweesh* system, such as direct employment or cooperative models, to ensure fair wages and dignified labor conditions.
- **Strengthen Union and Cooperative Participation:** Advocate for the **universal right of all workers to form syndicates and join cooperatives**, regardless of nationality, aligning Lebanese policies with international labor standards.
- **Shift from Victim-Savior Paradigm:** Policymakers and practitioners should **engage refugee women as experts** in designing local, culturally relevant solutions, moving beyond purely economic definitions of empowerment, and ensuring their voices are included in policymaking.
- **Ensure Accountability:** The international community and NGOs must **act promptly** in cases of violations, rather than merely documenting them, and ensure that perpetrators face consequences.
- **Increase Funding and Coordination:** Address the limitations of NGO projects due to **short funding cycles and inconsistent interventions**. Improve coordination among UNHCR, NGOs, and Lebanese authorities to ensure comprehensive interventions.

In conclusion, the study provides compelling evidence that Syrian refugee women farmworkers in Lebanon are subjected to profound systemic exploitation, marginalization, and vulnerability. The findings necessitate **immediate, coordinated, and sustained interventions** from governmental, international, and local actors to uphold human rights, provide protection, and foster genuine empowerment for these women and their families.

1. General Situation

1.1. Overview of Lebanon's Agricultural Sector

Despite some local attempts at import substitution in the agricultural sector, Lebanon will continue to rely on imports for up to 80 percent of its food needs.¹ The agricultural sector, while witnessing some occasional developments, requires urgent reform. The sector has long suffered debilitating impediments, mainly due to the clientelist system. Recently, the Lebanese government signed several agreements with donors to mitigate food insecurity and reform the sector. However, the needs of agricultural workers, small food producers, and small farmers are still neglected.

Agriculture employs around 6% of the population of Lebanon. Before the Syrian refugee crisis, it had over 170,000 part-time and full-time Lebanese farmers and landowners and 85,000 agricultural workers. As one of the highest refugee-absorbing sectors, an estimated 200,000 Syrian refugees worked in agriculture in 2017. Around 24% of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon work in the agricultural sector,² and 85% of hired agricultural workers in Lebanon are Syrian.³ Before 2011, 54% of the agricultural workforce in Beqaa was Syrian migrants, while in Akkar, 90% were migrants (most of whom were likely to be Syrians).⁴

Several factors have been identified as an impediment to the sector's development. They directly impact the situation of farmworkers and small farmers and do not seem to be a priority in government plans. In terms of empowering the most vulnerable segments in the sector, the following are considered key issues:⁵

- The informality of the agricultural sector: Around 90 percent of Lebanese people, and almost all Syrians, working in agriculture do so informally. Agricultural labor is unregulated; therefore, there is no legal definition of “farmer” as a profession or “agricultural exploitation” as a business. The fact that definitions of legal and

¹ "Lebanon - Country Commercial Guide," International Trade Administration, 2022, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/lebanon-agricultural-sector>.

² Nour Turkmani and Kanj Hamade, "Dynamics of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon's Agriculture Sector," Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut, 2020, https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/research_reports/2019-2020/20200215_dynamics_of_syrian_refugees_in_lebanon_agriculture_sector.pdf.

³ Chaden el-Daif (ed.), "Access to Legal Stay and Labor for Syrians in Lebanon: Status and Prospects," Refugees=Partners and Heinrich Boll Stiftung, Beirut, 2018, <https://lb.boell.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/Access-to-legal-stay-and-residency-EN.pdf>.

⁴ Turkmani and Hamade, 2020, op. cit.

⁵ Kanj Hamade, "Lebanon's Food Insecurity and the Path Toward Agricultural Reform," Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut, November 13, 2020, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/11/13/lebanon-s-food-insecurity-and-path-toward-agricultural-reform-pub-83224>.

commercial status do not exist implies the absence of any social protections for agricultural workers, such as health coverage or pensions.

- Land regulation and access to land: The top 10 percent of landowners control two-thirds of agricultural land, with large land estates being easily traceable to key political figures. Agricultural holdings are divided between (1) a handful of large estates with easy access to credit and inputs and fully integrated with trade and industrial activities and (2) myriad undercapitalized, fragmented, and in most cases, small farms that are managed in ways that prevent them from being sustainable. Furthermore, a significant number of Lebanese agricultural workers and all Syrian agricultural workers are landless. They are either employed by landowners to oversee large- and medium-sized orchards or are renting land to plant seasonal crops or set up greenhouses. Inadequate land tenure is linked to low productivity and land degradation, as it encourages unsuitable practices, such as the overuse of inputs leading to soil and water pollution. Meanwhile, inheritance laws that facilitate the fragmentation of agricultural land impede efforts to reach economies of scale.
- The weak cooperative sector: Agriculture value chain actors in Lebanon need to alter their perceptions and understanding of the role and mission of farmers and cooperative structures. Cooperatives are often viewed as local extensions of the state administration or of developmental nongovernmental organizations instead of private sector economic actors offering a more democratic and socially fair model of management and income distribution. In fact, Lebanese political parties use cooperative organizations to control farmers and rural producers and as a tool to implement de facto rural development policies. In parallel, Lebanon's public administration inhibits the sector's growth by implementing an outdated interpretation of the law, thus limiting the creation and development of cooperatives.

The state's retreat from agriculture and dependence on imports has significantly impacted the size of the population engaged in agriculture, which fell from 48.9% in 1959 to 18.9% in 1970.⁶ It has since declined further to the current rate of 6%. This drop coincided with "the government's decrease in spending, from 2.3% in 1973 to 1.4% in 2021."⁷

1.2. Syrian Refugee Women Farmworkers in Lebanon

⁶ Noory B, Habib RR and Nuwayhid I, "Exposure of Syrian refugee agricultural workers to pesticides in Lebanon: a socio-economic and political lens," *Front. Public Health* 12:1402511, 2024, available at <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/public-health/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1402511/full>.

⁷ Noory B, Habib RR and Nuwayhid I, "Exposure of Syrian refugee agricultural workers to pesticides in Lebanon: a socio-economic and political lens," *Front. Public Health* 12:1402511, 2024, available at <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/public-health/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1402511/full>.

In Lebanon and globally, the "[agricultural] sector continues to profit from cheap, temporary, and migrant labor. A similar story is repeated across the world: Mexican workers in California; Moroccans and Romanians in Mediterranean Europe; Palestinians in Israel; Bangladeshis in Greece; South Americans in New Zealand; and particularly, post-2011, Syrians in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey."⁸

According to UN WOMEN, "social, economic and political dynamics have always influenced the development of the agricultural sector in Lebanon. The suffering of workers in the agricultural sector in Lebanon dates back to distant times."⁹ The study concludes that the state's retreat adds to the sector's overall vulnerability, as farmers fall below the poverty line, with poverty rates increasing in rural areas year after year.¹⁰

As Turkmani and Hamade point out in their study on the "Dynamics of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon's Agriculture Sector, "farmers need seasonal workers for cheap agricultural labor, but the workers are also dependent and controlled by rigid legal and economic mechanisms that keep them excluded and continuously rotating, from one informal job to the other."¹¹ They point out the system's need to keep things under control, while remaining flexible, "allowing the informal economy to keep running, with low costs and minimal regulation or intervention by the government necessary."¹²

Seasonal agricultural workers from Syria are nothing new in Lebanon. However, the recent influx of Syrian refugees has shed a new spotlight on their situation, particularly due to the prevalence

⁸ Nur Turkmani & Kanj Hamade, "Dynamics of Syrian refugees in Lebanon's agriculture sector,"the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB), 2020, available at

https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/research_reports/2019-2020/20200215_dynamics_of_syrian_refugees_in_lebanon_agriculture_sector.pdf.

⁹ UN WOMEN, *Women in the Agro-Food Sector in Lebanon A REVIEW OF THE LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK*, 2023, available at <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/psdp-legislativeframework.pdf>.

¹⁰ UN WOMEN, *Women in the Agro-Food Sector in Lebanon A REVIEW OF THE LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK*, 2023, available at <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/psdp-legislativeframework.pdf>.

¹¹ Nur Turkmani & Kanj Hamade, "Dynamics of Syrian refugees in Lebanon's agriculture sector,"the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB), 2020, available at

https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/research_reports/2019-2020/20200215_dynamics_of_syrian_refugees_in_lebanon_agriculture_sector.pdf.

¹² Nur Turkmani & Kanj Hamade, "Dynamics of Syrian refugees in Lebanon's agriculture sector,"the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB), 2020, available at

https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/research_reports/2019-2020/20200215_dynamics_of_syrian_refugees_in_lebanon_agriculture_sector.pdf.

of women in that workforce. Their fragile situation has been widely documented. Syrian refugees face additional challenges due to their precarious legal status, which prevents them from officially entering the labor market. The agricultural sector itself suffers from structural issues, including the dominance of farmers' unions representing landowners and employers, leaving workers' unions underpowered and ineffective in advocating for labor rights.¹³

Syrian refugees, particularly women and children, face heightened vulnerability due to interlinked social, political, and economic factors. The impacts of these factors have been documented among migrant and refugee workers in other countries. Moreover, the absence of effective labor inspections and enforcement of safety standards means that refugee women farmworkers often endure unsafe working conditions. Without access to social security or health protections, they are left exposed to various occupational health risks, including those related to pesticide use and other agricultural chemicals, further exacerbating their vulnerability.¹⁴

To support their families, "many refugee women undertake grueling jobs in Lebanon's agricultural sector. Fields, once a place for children to play, have become sites of hard labor for women and children alike. Women report working -8 hours in physically demanding roles for wages as low as \$5 a day, which they often must share with the Shaweesh, who wields significant authority over their lives. Landowners prefer hiring women, citing their discipline and willingness to accept wages that are half of what men earn."¹⁵

While entering the labor market may help women provide for their families and improve their economic standing, it does not elevate their social status. The entrenched social norms and economic exploitation they face continue to limit their opportunities for empowerment and independence.¹⁶

Employers often benefit from informal practices by paying fewer taxes and benefits, which makes it difficult for women to prove employment or leave abusive situations. Vulnerabilities are exacerbated by conflict, displacement, and policies that undermine good governance and marginalize the agriculture sector. This leads to precarious labor conditions, including long working hours, lack of job security, and absence of social protection. Women's labor is often

¹³ Interview with Mustafa Said, Workers' Specialist at International Labour Organization (ILO), Online via Google Meet, March 1st, 2024

¹⁴ Interview with Mustafa Said, Workers' Specialist at International Labour Organization (ILO), Online via Google Meet, March 1st, 2024

¹⁵ Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024

¹⁶ Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024

undervalued and exploited, reinforced by traditional morality and kinship norms. Furthermore, recruitment processes can be fraught with misinformation, coercion, and false promises, increasing vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking. Living conditions in refugee camps are often dire, contributing to health issues.

While taking the above points into consideration, this study attempts to delve deeper into the direct needs of Syrian refugee women farmworkers in Lebanon. It aims to inform agricultural initiatives, policy-makers, and the various stakeholders in designing interventions and programs.

Syrian refugee women in Lebanon face heightened risks of sexual harassment, violence, and exploitation due to the absence of formal mechanisms for reporting and investigating such cases. Many refrain from reporting incidents out of fear of retaliation or arrest for lacking legal residency papers. Economic vulnerabilities further expose them to exploitation by employers. Refugee women do not trust local authorities to act and fear retaliation or arrest if they seek legal recourse.¹⁷

The limited availability of shelters and income-generating opportunities for refugees has created financial insecurity, increasing the risk of exploitation. Recently, the UNHCR announced a reduction in basic aid for 30% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon due to funding shortages. As of November 2023, the number of registered Syrian refugees with the UNHCR stood at 826,000, though Lebanese authorities estimate the total to exceed 1.1 million.¹⁸

Based on the results of this study, Syrian refugee women farmworkers represent the majority of the agricultural workforce in regions like Bekaa. Most of them are the primary breadwinners for their families. They view agricultural work as the safest and most reliable option to support their households. Working in female-only groups within the fields also provides them with a sense of safety and confidence.¹⁹

2. Methodology

This study is based on a desk review of the conditions of Syrian refugee women farmworkers in Lebanon, which informed a needs-assessment survey of 126 Syrian women refugee farmworkers in Bekaa and Koura, North Lebanon between April 2024 and April 2025.

¹⁷Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024.

¹⁸Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024.

¹⁹ FGD

Following the surveys, three focus group discussions were conducted with Syrian refugee women farmworkers at their place of work. These discussions revealed numerous issues related to their living and working conditions, which were further explored during individual needs assessment interviews.

In addition to the farmworkers, five stakeholders were interviewed, covering aspects of labor rights, GBV, protection, services, health, and livelihood.

3. Survey Results

3.1 Overview

The Bekaa Valley and Koura are two regions in Lebanon renowned for their agricultural activities. Both regions host a large number of Syrian refugees, who represent the majority of the farming workforce.

The research team conducted a needs assessment in the two regions. The first round of interviews was conducted in the spring of 2024 in the Bekaa Valley. At that time, we conducted 64 interviews. However, the interviews were paused due to security issues when the Israeli attacks on Lebanon started. When the ceasefire began, a team of trained enumerators conducted 62 interviews in February 2025.

3.2 Participant Profiles

The needs assessment surveys were conducted with 126 women farmworkers from Bekaa and Koura. The surveys took between 40 and 60 minutes each. The age of the participants varied between 13 and 80, with an average age of 31 (See Figure 1). All of the participants were Syrian, except 6 who were Lebanese. The Syrian participants were displaced from Syria at different periods, but mainly due to conflict and deepening economic crisis in Syria that started in 2011. Only 4 of the Syrian participants were born in Lebanon, in addition to the 6 Lebanese participants. 12 of the Syrian participants reported being officially under the Lebanese sponsorship system (Kafala). The 12 sponsors are as follows: 5 are sponsored by UNHCR, 4 are sponsored by farm managers, and 3 are sponsored by relatives.

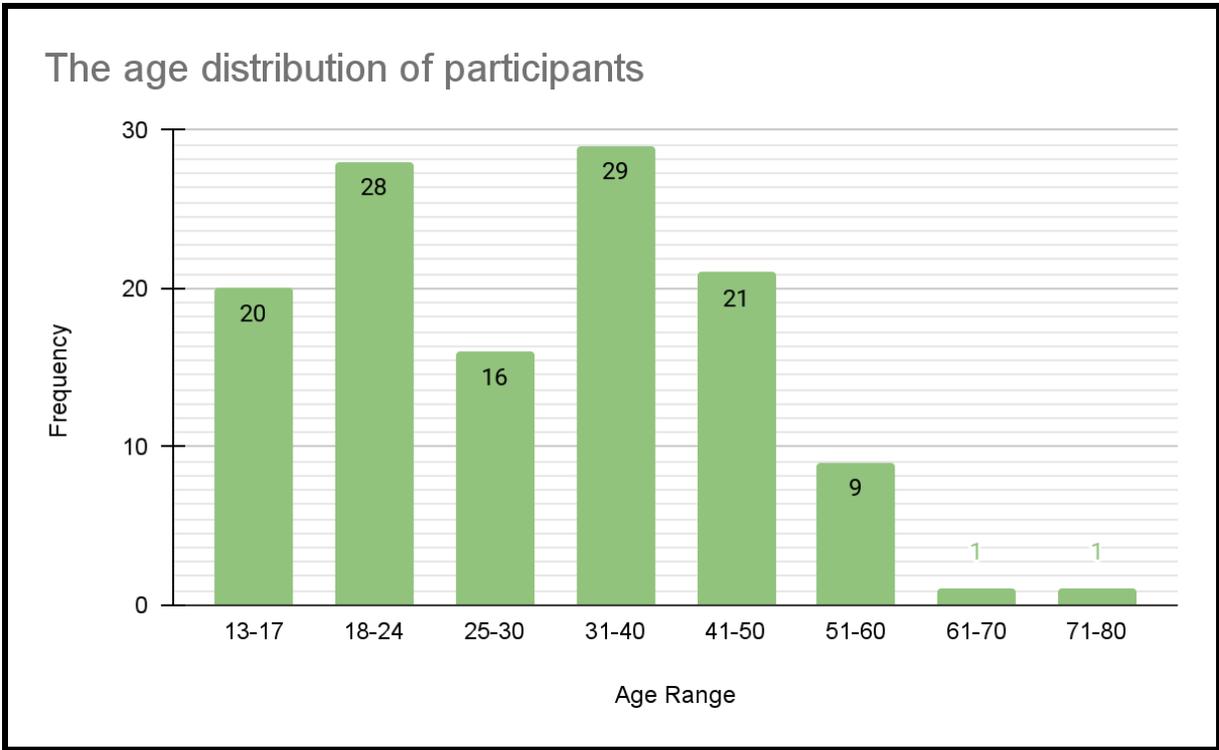


Figure 1: Age distribution of survey participants

3.3 Education and Profession

Due to many factors, the participants' education levels were mostly low (see Figure 2). School-age are rarely able to attend school due to the lack of family income that could cover their tuition. Thus, some families send their daughters to work on the farms to earn a living. In addition, many participants, especially those with children, reported that their children are rejected from schools because they are older than expected in specific grades.

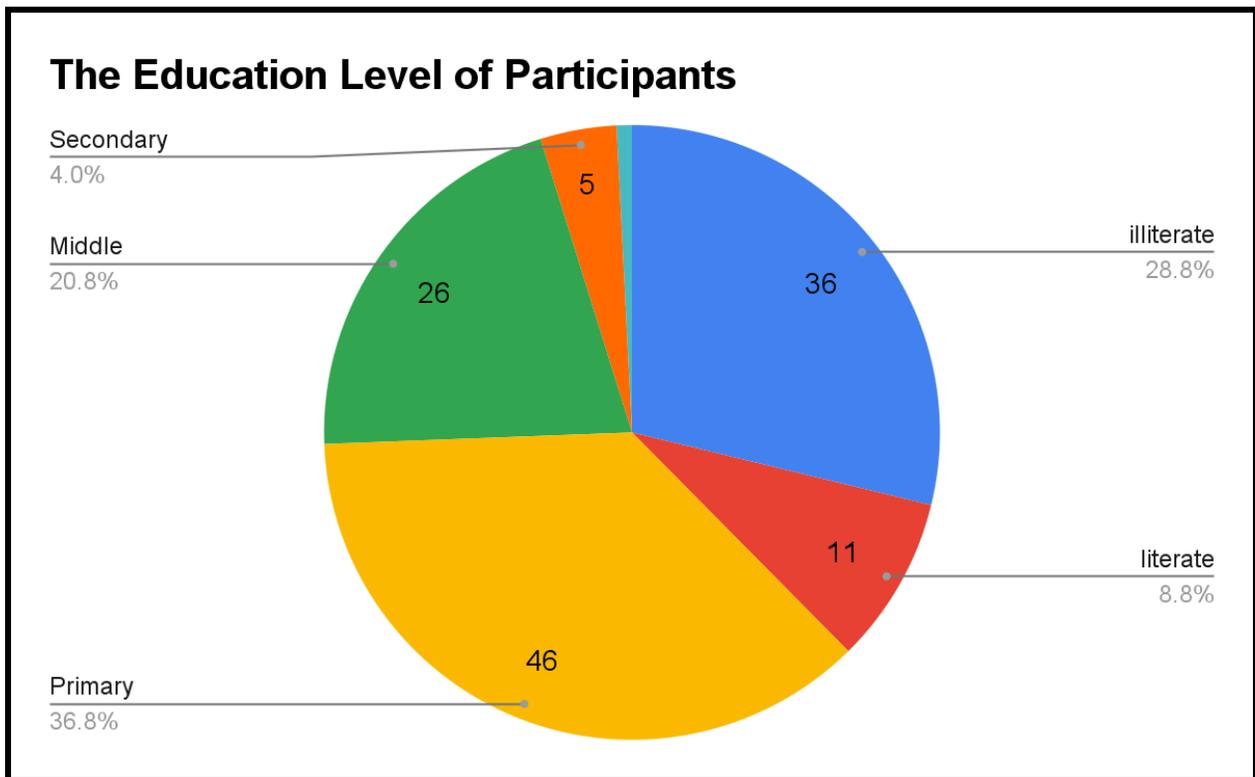


Figure 2: Education levels of the participants.

When asked if farming was their primary profession, most (115 participants) declared that it was their primary profession. Participants reported learning and acquiring farm working skills from different sources, mainly family members who used to work in farming or are still working on farms, from observation and trial with some guidance on the farm, and some from agricultural training provided by local and international NGOs (see Figure 3). The reported agricultural training or workshops are said to have lasted for months.

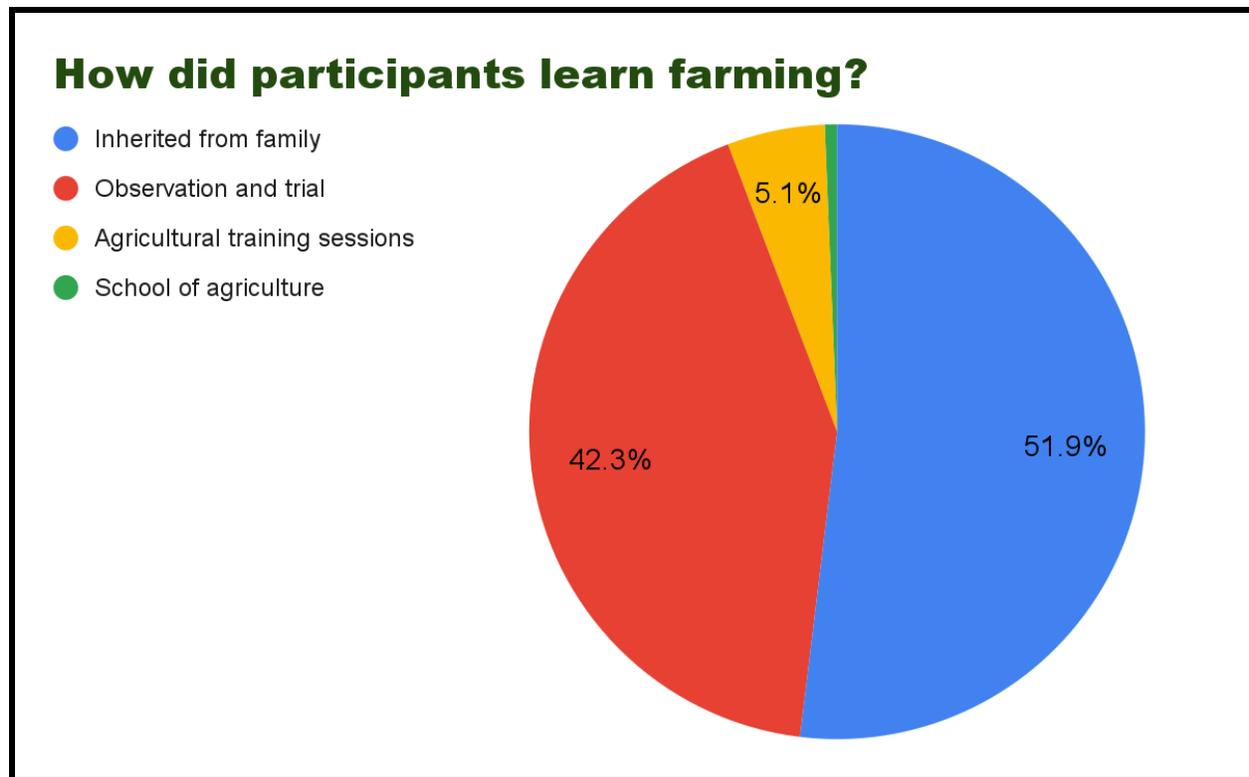


Figure 3: The ways the participating farmworkers learned farming.

In addition, the majority reported reasons for working on the farm, such as producing an income for their families, practicing a hobby, finding farming easier and requiring less practice than other professions, and not knowing any other professions. An interesting point raised was the feeling of safety described when working on farms, explaining that working in groups and in open spaces helps them feel more protected from any possible sexual harassment.

The data show that more than half of the participants became involved in working on farms after a family member or relative suggested it. This social behavior happens when community members notice a woman needing a job to produce income or help provide for her family. Also, as mentioned before, women encourage each other to work in the same farming group as it provides a feeling of bonding and safety because they know one another. In addition, a Syrian intermediary, who happens to be the *Shaweesh* most time, introduces the women in the community to chances to provide for their families through farming.

In the study region, the presence of Syrian camps means that most farmworkers come from these camps to work on farms, whether in Bekaa or Koura. According to 57 participants, workers who live near the farms where seasonal or daily work occurs, typically walk from their tents to the fields. Additionally, 76 participants reported that the work supervisor, who is sometimes called the "*Shaweesh*," arranges transportation for workers. This transportation,

often a pickup truck, carries the group to and from the farms, though it poses a significant risk of accidents due to unsafe conditions. However, 22 participants reported that sometimes they walk far distances to reach the workplace, and 5 reported paying for transportation services to reach work.

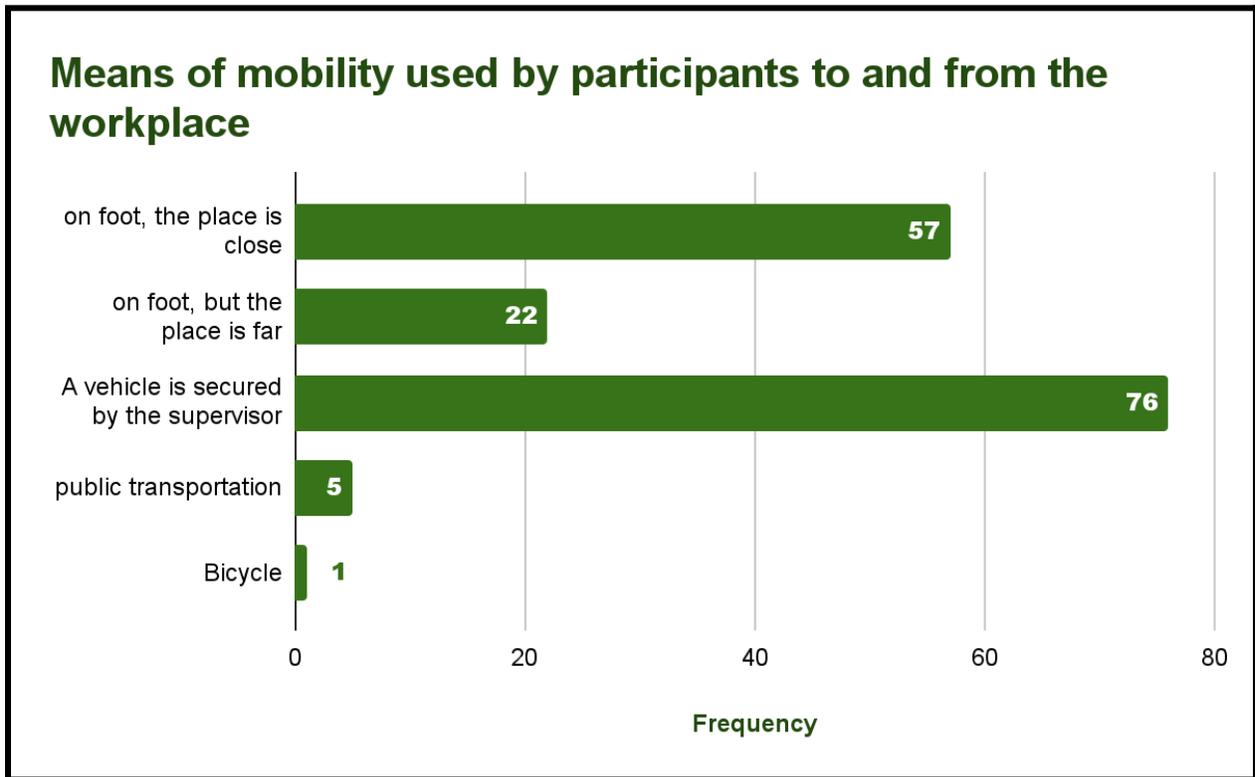


Figure 5: Participants' reported methods to move to and from the workplace.

3.3 Family and household

As represented in Figure 6, half of the 126 participants are married. Of those, 30 have spouses employed as farmworkers. This shows the depth of the families involved in farming.

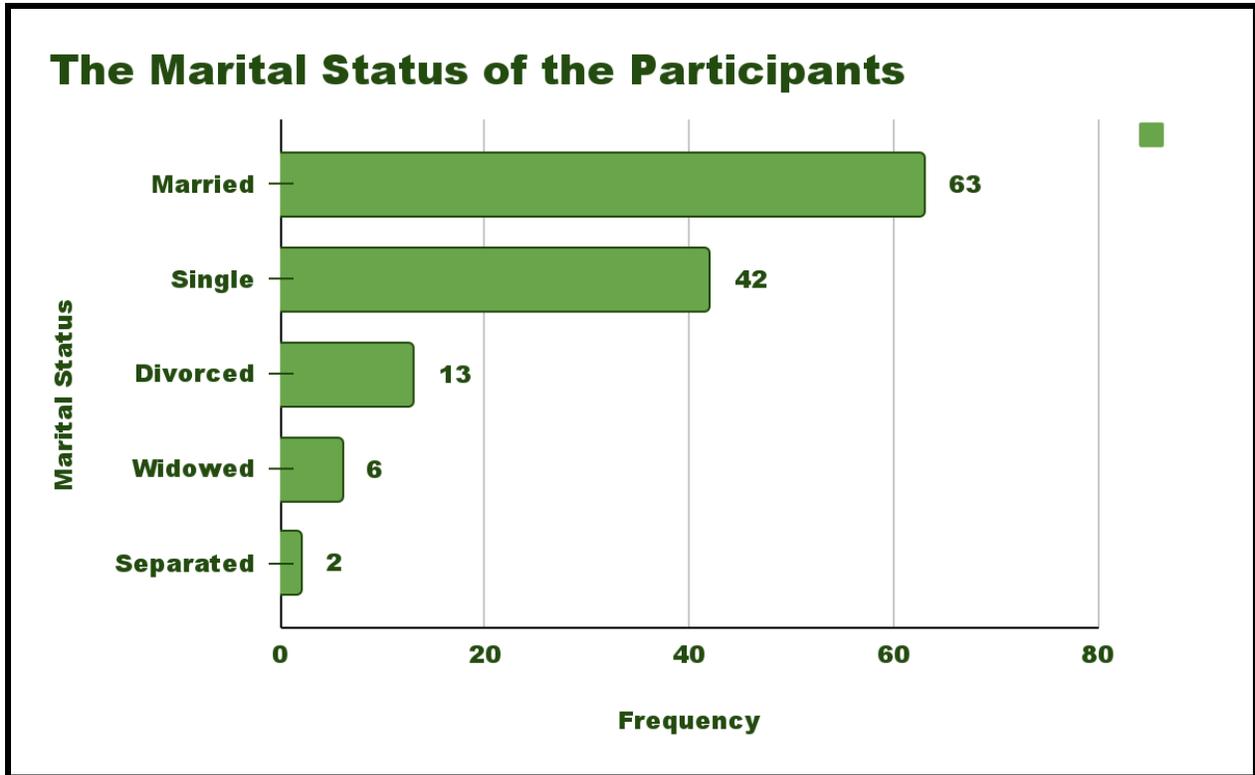


Figure 6: Marital status reported by the participants.

3.4 Children

Seventy-nine participants reported having children, with an average of four children per household. Given the participants' average age of 31, most of these children are under 18 years old (Figure 7). Despite this, school attendance among school-aged children is notably low. Forty-nine participants stated that none of their children attend school, fifteen reported that only some of their children do, and just eight said that all of their children are enrolled. In some cases, children were reported to be either married or significantly behind in school, while ten participants indicated that their children are still under 4 years old.

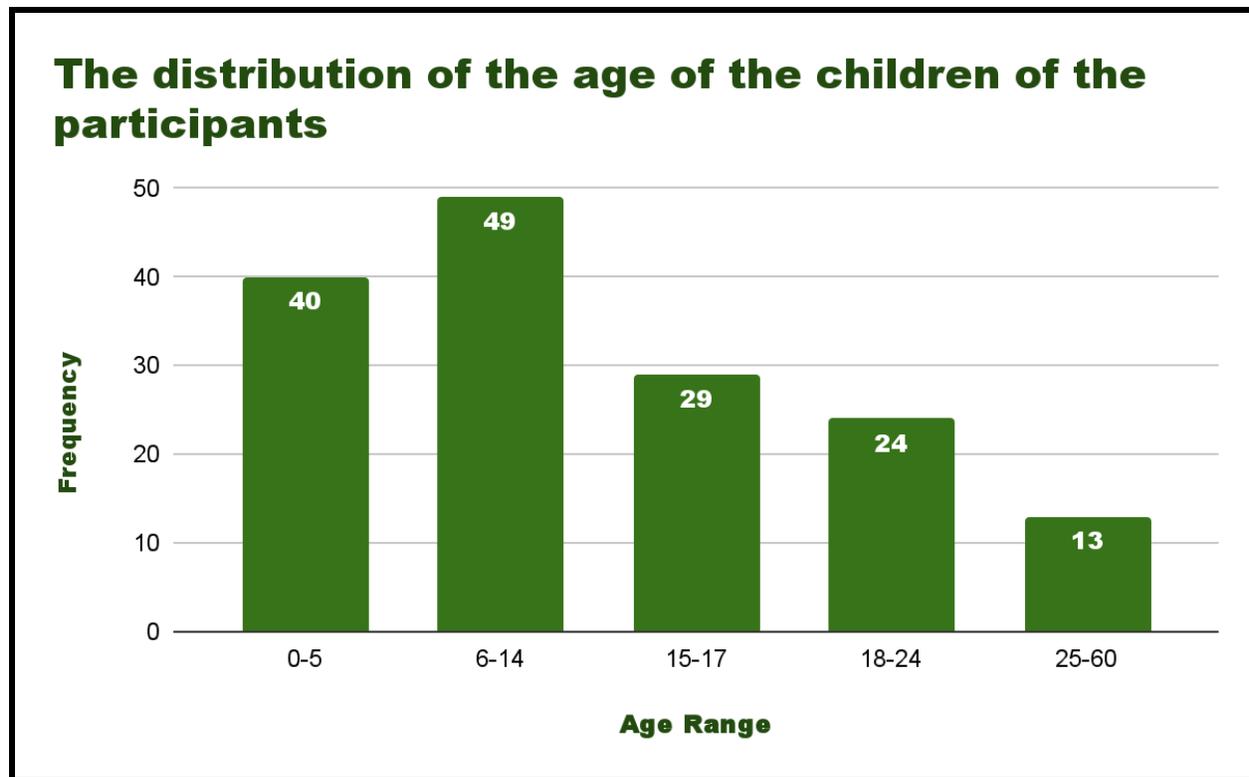


Figure 7: Age distribution of the participants' children according to the presented age range.

The reasons for non-attendance vary. Many children are engaged in work to help support household income, while others are unable to attend due to the high cost of tuition, which exceeds what families can afford. Some children have been rejected by schools because they are over the expected age for their grade level or because they lack legal documentation due to their nationality. Additionally, three participants reported that their children have special needs, which prevents them from enrolling in school. However, ten participants noted that their children are accessing alternative educational opportunities, such as free literacy programs, informal education centers in camps, or learning through the internet.

When asked about childcare arrangements while mothers are at work, thirty-six participants said they leave their children alone at home. These participants expressed serious concerns about their children's safety, citing risks such as arson attacks on Syrian camps, traffic accidents involving nearby highways, and the threat of kidnapping. Twenty-nine participants reported relying on the supervision of a relative, neighbor, or another adult, while eleven said they bring their children to the fields, where they assist with farmwork. A few participants mentioned that their children are in school during the mothers' working hours.

Most children were reported to have some agricultural knowledge, acquired through various means. Many have learned by listening to their parents speak about their work, observing or

helping their mothers in the fields, or working themselves to contribute to the household income. A few have received agricultural training from NGOs. In total, forty-seven participants expressed interest in improving their children’s agricultural knowledge and skills.

3.5 Residence:

An average of 7 individuals are reported to live in each of the 126 households, with a maximum of 20 individuals per household and a minimum of 2. Most of the participants live in tents on camps (Figure 8). Some reported living in rented concrete houses, and they have to pay up to \$200 per month, which is beyond their financial ability. Some of those who live in concrete houses reported the exploitation of the owners, who tend to raise the rent every month. There is also a case worth mentioning of a family living in inhumane conditions in a barn.

The conditions of the tents are awful, especially with the reported leakage of sewage into the tents, the floods during winter, and the absence of security. In addition, these conditions are more harmful due to the presence of the elderly, infants, and people with special needs. The effects of these harmful conditions were evident in the skin and respiratory diseases that most of the participants reported.

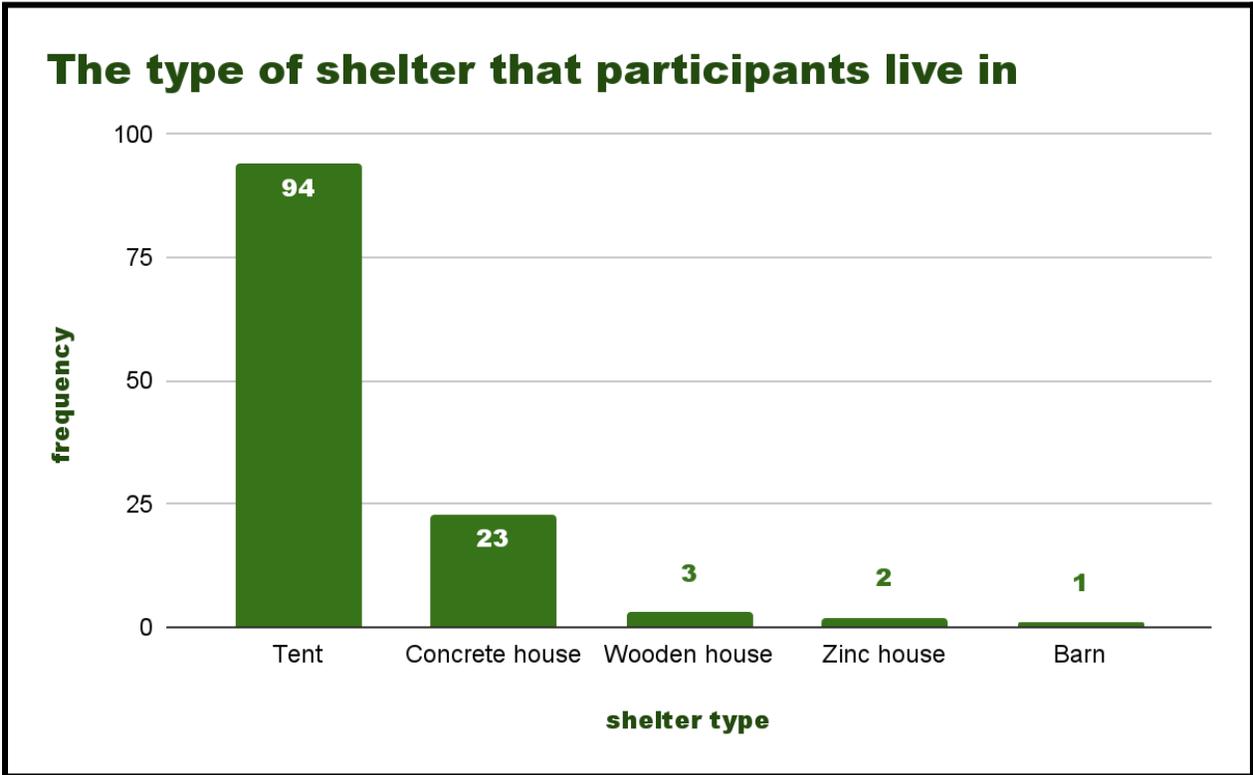


Figure 8: The type of shelter each participant lives in.

As explained earlier in the report, the participants are Syrian women who were displaced from Syria due to the conflict and economic crisis. They decided to become farmworkers to provide for their families. 58 participants reported that they are the head of their household, and 52 reported that they are the head of the household but with the help of their husband, father, brother, or sister.

3.6 Farmwork

Of the surveyed women, 55 did farmwork on a daily basis, 47 on a seasonal basis, and 21 worked both on a daily and seasonal basis. Seasonal work usually lasts for 3 months. The average number of reported working hours is 6.7 hrs for daily and seasonal work, with a minimum of 2 working hours per day and a maximum of 15. The average daily income of farm workers from farmwork varies between 100,000 L.L. per day and 2,000,000 L.L. per day, with an average of 600,000 L.L. per day in both daily and seasonal work. The head of the work, or the *Shaweesh*, sets the wages. There are a few reported cases where workers have a say in determining the daily wage depending on the service provided. Similarly, the number of working hours is set in the same way as the setting of wages.

The responsibilities and services provided by the participants in the farmland are numerous. The most frequent ones reported are harvesting, planting seeds and seedlings, weed clearing, tilling, extracting and preserving seeds, fertilizing, and irrigation. The least frequently reported responsibilities and services are farmland cleaning, peeling, chemical spraying, storage, dehydration, pasturing, animal husbandry, threshing, canning, procurement, and supervision.

On the other hand, the participants reported that male farmworkers are responsible for supervision and monitoring, spraying chemicals, procurement, tilling, irrigation, animal husbandry, harvesting and picking crops, fertilization, planting seeds and seedlings, weed cleaning, and threshing. Most participants explained that all workers, men and women, do the same work. Yet, the person set to monitor is a man. Another difference between men's and women's work is the 7.6 average working hours per day for men compared to the previously mentioned 6.7 average daily working hours for women. In addition, the reported average daily wage for men farmworkers is 900,000 L.L., while that of women is 600,000 L.L.

3.7 Teamwork:

As mentioned earlier in the report, women are comfortable doing farmwork because it is done in groups, which gives them a feeling of bonding and protection. Around half, or 66 participants declared that farmwork depends on collective effort, and 40 declared that it depends on both

collective and individual efforts. In addition, the participants explained that teams of women farmworkers contain an average of 10 women, a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 100.

The *Shaweesh* is mostly responsible for collecting these teams of workers, as reported by 55 participants. Sometimes, the workers are collected by the head of the farm or other women farmworkers, as reported by 27 and 18 participants, respectively. Many participants indicated that the person responsible for gathering the workers' requests requires the presence of specific characteristics and skills in the female farmworker to be accepted. The reported characteristics and skills are farming experience, physical power, age, and physical appearance. It is worth noting that some participants reported that the worker who monitors and reports on other workers is more likely to be rehired. Some respondents added that recruiters prefer having workers in an age range of 10 to 35.

3.8 Farmwork rules

The farm has some rules that must be followed by workers. The power dynamics in the farm are in the hands of the landowner and the *Shaweesh*. The *Shaweesh* is present on the farm as the executive authority, while the landowner represents the higher authority. According to the data in this needs assessment, the landowner was mentioned 92 times as the one responsible for setting the rules, followed by the *Shaweesh* being mentioned 43 times. The majority of the participants explained that violating the rules would result in warnings and then dismissal. Some reported violent actions done by the *Shaweesh* or the head of the work when a worker violates the rules, including insults and verbal and physical abuse. In a few cases where the *Shaweesh* of the farmland is the *Shaweesh* of the camp, the tent and family of the farmworker are threatened or abused in cases of disobeying the orders of the farm authority.

3.9 Living conditions

The decision to work on the farms is not accompanied by the desire to be a farmworker, according to the declarations of the farmers. Farmwork is a job they seek to help their families maintain the basic living needs. Consequently, we asked the participants about their satisfaction with working on farms. The data shows that 96 participants declared being satisfied with their work on farms. However, 24 declared dissatisfaction. To elaborate, those participants identified the following reasons for their dissatisfaction: low wages, being obliged to work due to the livelihood situation, and the hardship and exhaustion caused by farm work. With the 2019 economic crisis in Lebanon, many of the participants had to work to help provide for their families. 61 participants described that their living conditions in Lebanon were worse five years ago. In contrast, 42 described their living conditions in Lebanon were better five years ago, and 15 described their living conditions had never changed after the crisis.

The considerably low income received by the participants tends to cover the expenses of the most basic human needs: food, electricity, residence, and water (Figure 9). The participants reported the absence of most of the support from the UNHCR, especially the maintenance of the infrastructure they used to provide for the Syrian camps. Medical expenses are not covered by any organization. With the spread of skin and respiratory diseases in the camps due to sewage leaks and contaminated water, the health conditions of residents are worsening. Consequently, the burden of living conditions is overwhelming these women.

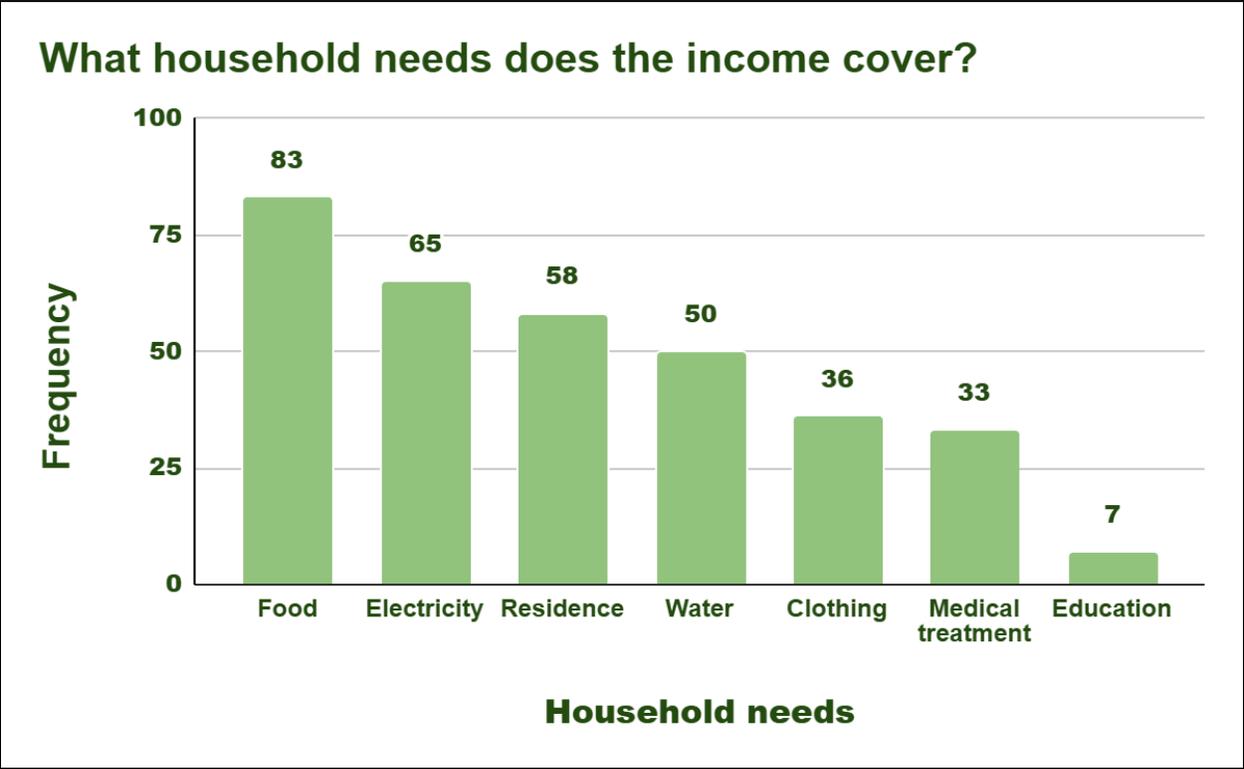


Figure 9: Household needs reported to be met by the participants' farm work income.

3.10 Health

The hard living conditions that the participants experience while living in tents on camps that have problems like water contamination and bad infrastructure, the health of the families living there is always at risk of infections and diseases. According to the responses of the needs assessment, 69 participants reported suffering from health problems. The health problems mentioned the most include hypertension, respiratory diseases, skin issues, cardiac and blood illnesses, Arthritis, seizures and epilepsy, Hemophilia, and other less-reported illnesses. In addition, the participants explained that agricultural work caused them health problems, including skin and respiratory system sensitivities due to chemical input in farmlands and back and joint pain due to the type of work. Also, 26 participants reported facing workplace injuries,

including mild and acute injuries. The injuries were treated with basic bandages or covered with a piece of cloth. Some participants reported that *Shaweesh* denies any responsibility for workplace injuries.

Only 24 participants reported receiving medical support, but that is not 100% financially covered medical aid; at most, it covered 30% of the financial expenses. The medical support is reported to be provided by UNHCR, local Syrian doctors, NGOs, and clinics.

Following The Washington Group Short Set on Functioning, available [here](#), we looked in more depth into the participants' physical health (Figure 10). The data shows that the majority of the participants can handle the six basic activities. A recognizable number of participants have some difficulties in cognition, mobility, and vision. Likewise, a few participants have a lot of difficulty with mobility, vision, and cognition.

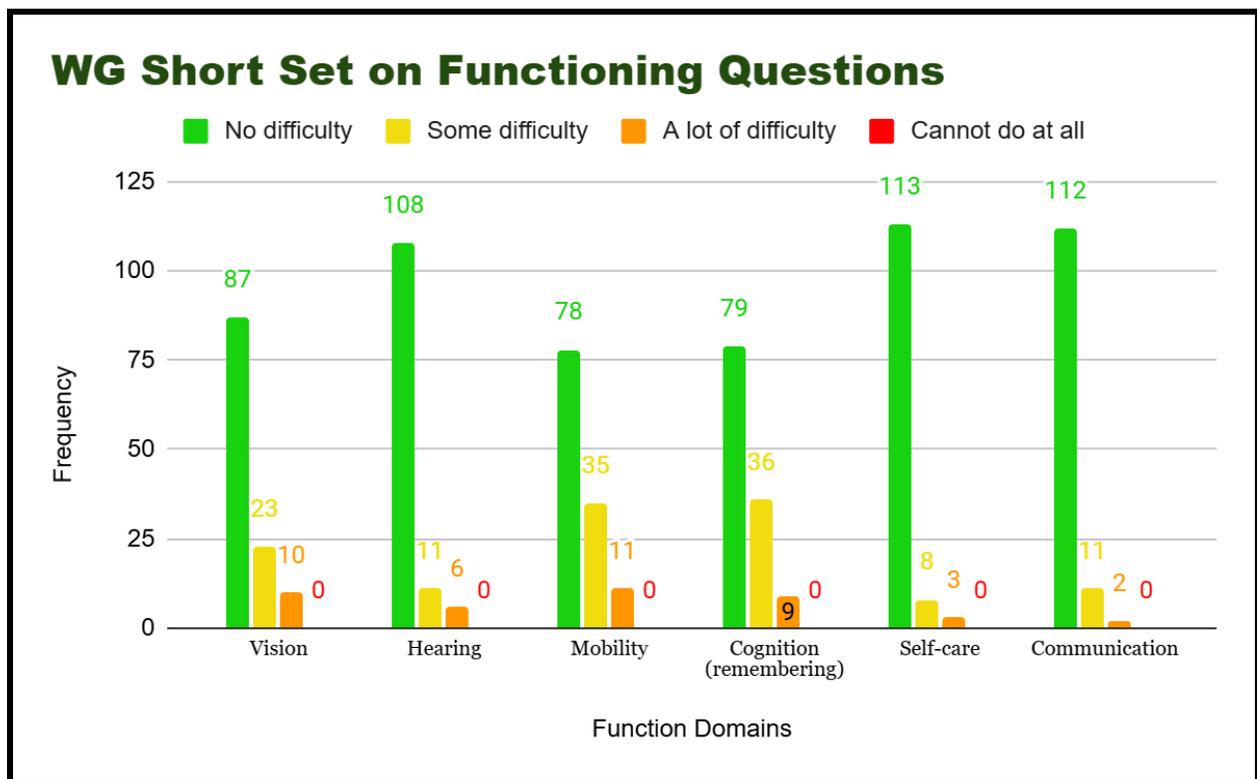


Figure 10: Reports of participants' health according to the Washington Group Short Set on Functioning Questions.

3.11. Safety

As mentioned before, teamwork provided the participants with bonding and protection. We asked the participants to determine the level of safety they felt at the farm where they worked. We gave them a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being the total absence of feeling safe and 10 being the

complete presence of feeling safe. The chart (Figure 11) shows that most participants feel safe at farms. However, we studied other indicators to understand workplace safety and protection levels.

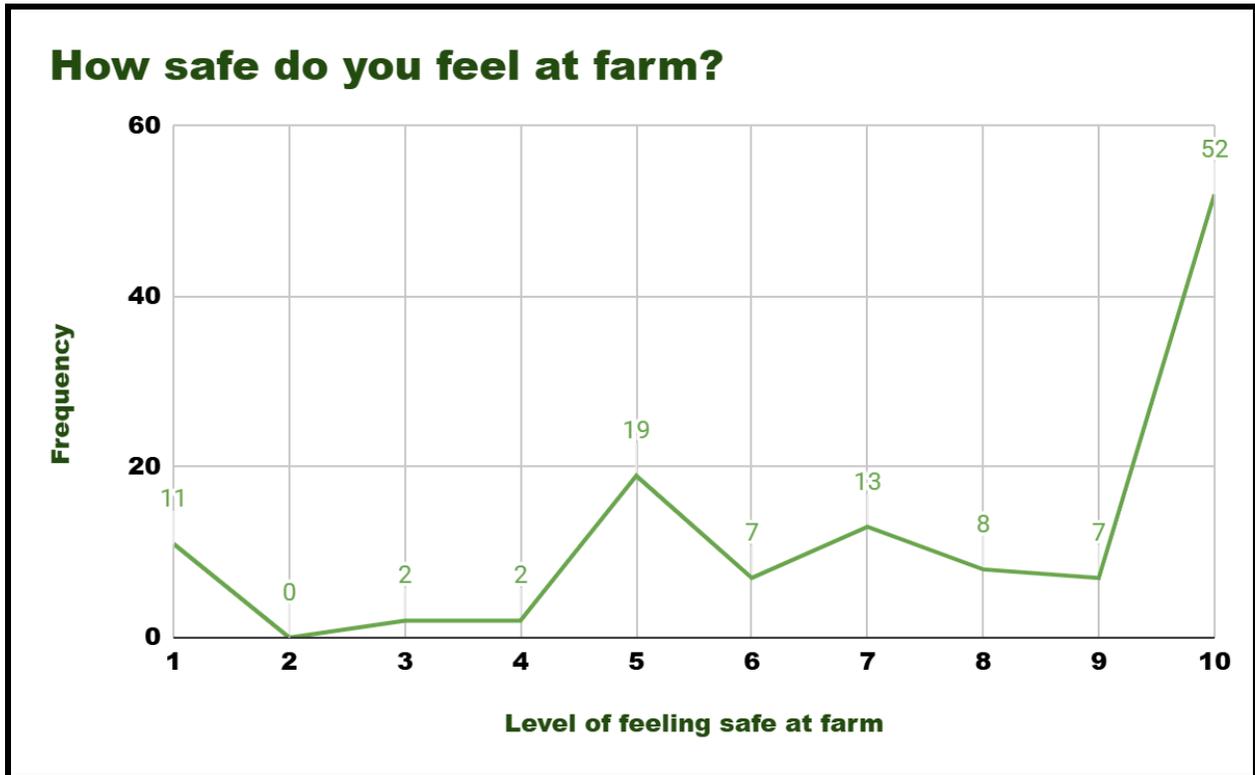


Figure 11: Participants' answers to the question, "On a scale from 1 to 10, how safe do you feel at the farm?"

3.12. Discrimination:

To delve more into the level of safety and protection taking place at the farm workplace, we used the Discrimination and Physical Violence questions from the "Survey Instrument on the Situation of Women Migrating From, Into, Through and Returning to Niger" by UNWomen, available [here](#).

31 participants reported being discriminated against at the workplace (farm). Discrimination based on nationality and dialect was reported 19 times, discrimination based on physical appearance was reported 12 times, discrimination based on gender was reported 4 times, and discrimination based on socioeconomic status was reported 4 times. Participants reported that discrimination was from male and female coworkers, the work supervisor, Shaweesh, and the landowner.

3.13 Physical violence

The questions in this section examine the levels of physical violence that the participants faced in Lebanon, whether at work, at home, in public spaces, or on the streets. However, we should take into consideration that women in this society tend to be embarrassed about talking about this type of violence since the topic is considered sensitive. In addition, considering the open space in which most of the participants were interviewed, the level of feeling open to talk about sensitive topics could be reduced.

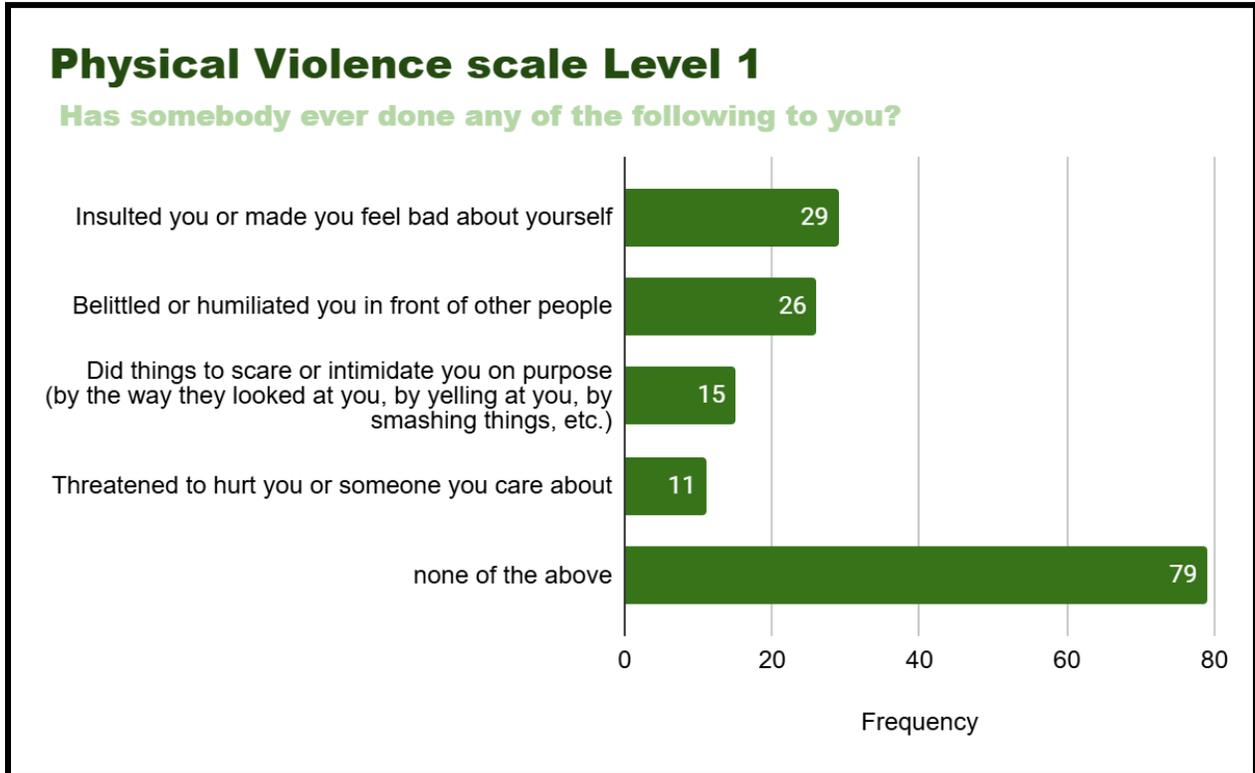


Figure 12: The frequency of participants who reported experiencing any of the mentioned physical violence acts.

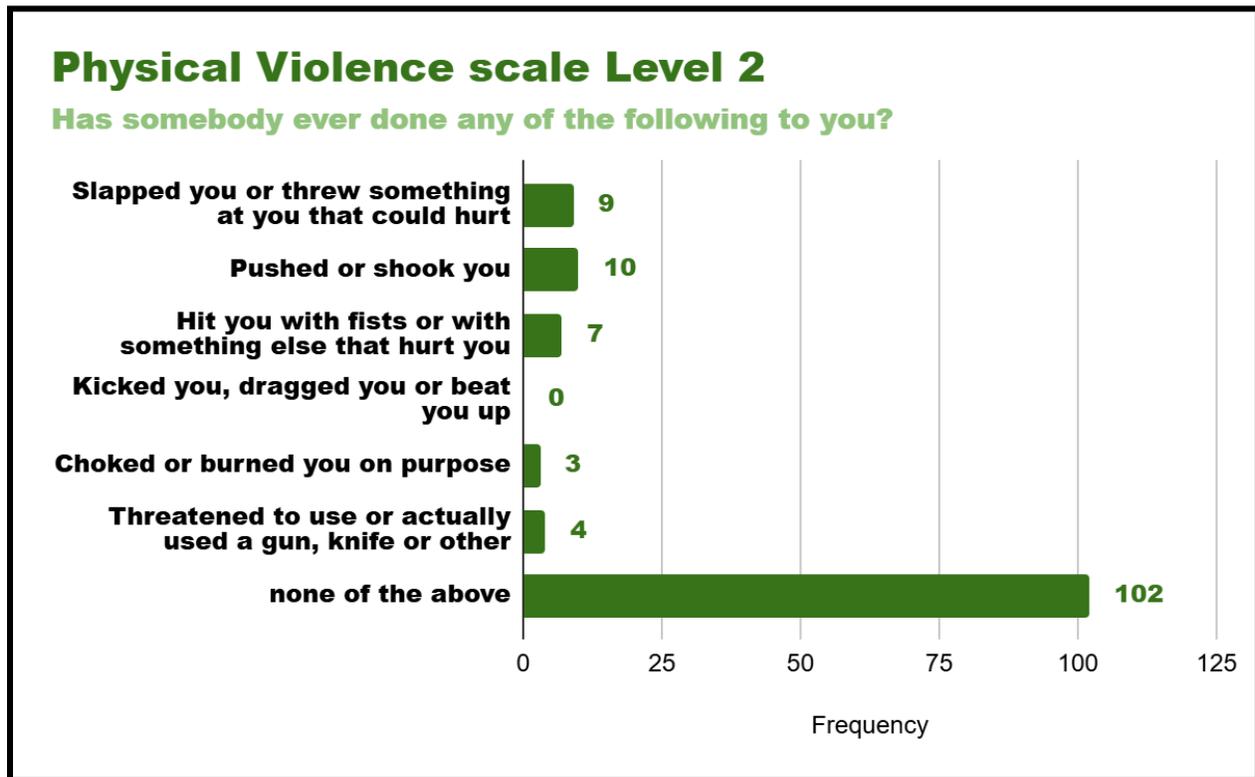


Figure 13: Frequency of participants who reported experiencing any of the mentioned physical violence acts.

For the first-level questions on physical violence (Figure 12), we received answers other than “none of the above” from 81 participants, indicating the presence of physical violence at different levels. The question was multiple choice, and the most reported physical violence experiences were insult, belittling, and humiliation. For the second-level question on physical violence, only 33 participants answered with option(s) other than “none of the above”. Both levels of violence require linking the victims to special associations that can help them, and lead a legal report to protect them and hold the attackers.

16 of the participants who reported experiencing the mentioned forms of physical violence explained that it happened at home, 3 at relatives' houses, 23 happened at work, 3 at school, 14 in public space, 3 at school, and 2 at camp. 31 participants mentioned that these experiences happened more than once, and 11 reported that they experienced this only once in their lives. The people who committed this violence were family members, partners, relatives, teachers, male and female coworkers, strangers, neighbors, landowners, police, friends, Shaveesh, and the farm business owners. After experiencing this type of violence, only 21 participants

searched for help. 13 of the 21 participants sought support from family or friends to whom they could tell about their experience. Two who were students who experienced violence at school looked for help from teachers and school principals. Five participants looked for social services (Social services include, for instance, providing psycho-social counseling, financial support, safe accommodation, legal and advocacy services, housing, and employment support). Finally, one of the participants who was harmed at her camp looked for help from the landowners. However, only 10 participants received the help they sought. Three received support from friends, three from INGOs, three from family members, one from the head of work, and one from teachers at school.

Less than 5 participants mentioned privately that they were sexually abused at work. The topic was further investigated during the focus group discussions and stakeholder interviews (please see section 4.5 below).

3.14 Challenges and needs

The needs reported by the participants provide a brief look into the struggles and challenges they face daily as women agricultural workers responsible for providing for their households (Figure 14). All the following needs are interconnected.

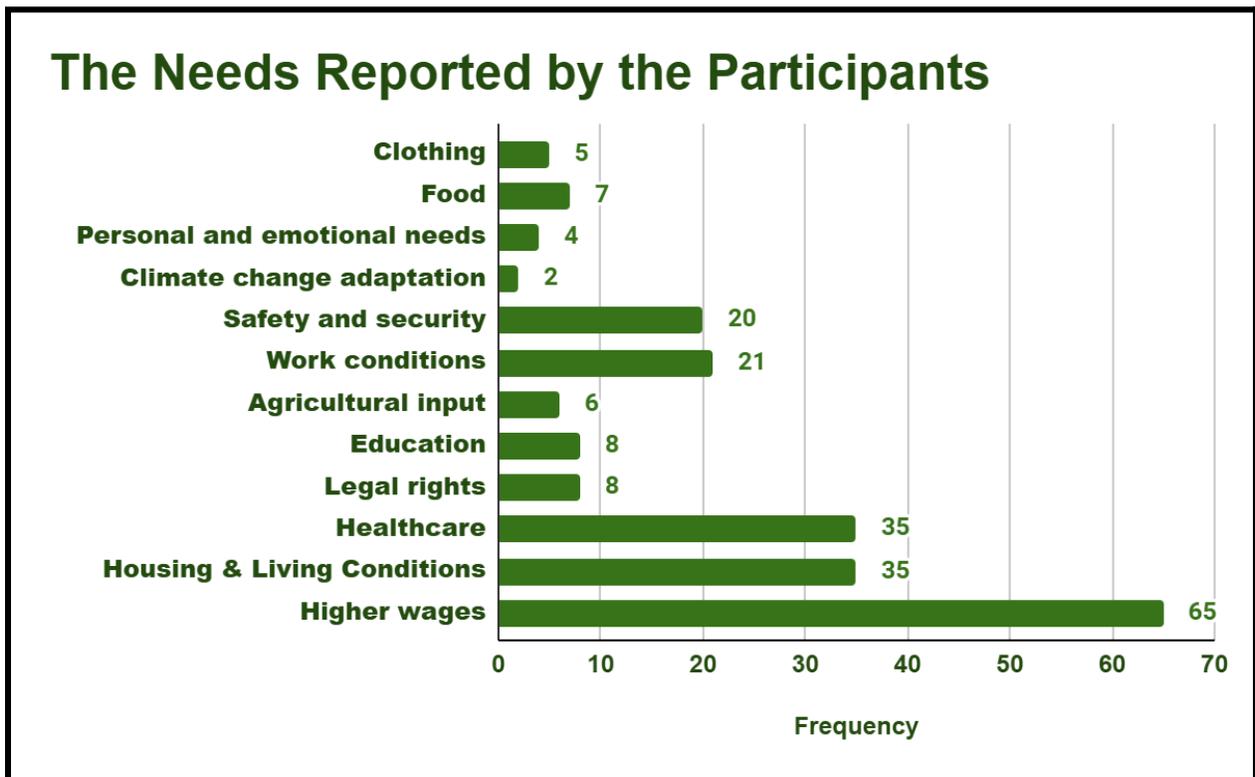


Figure 14: Frequency of needs and challenges as reported by the participants.

1. **Economic needs:** 65 participants reported the need for higher wages, and some suggested the minimum wage be at least \$10 to \$15 a day, something that could secure better living conditions. As mentioned before, daily wages can barely secure the basic needs of food and shelter, and there is no room for education or savings. Due to the economic pressure that prevents wages from meeting the needs of life, some also requested financial assistance.
2. **Housing and living conditions:** 35 participants highlighted the need for better housing and living conditions. Most of the participants live in tents or concrete houses, with rent higher than their financial abilities. Also, the lack of access to clean water, free or affordable electricity, and better shelters makes seeking better conditions a priority to report.
3. **Healthcare and medical needs:** As mentioned before, medical needs are difficult to meet due to the absence of any kind of medical security. In addition, bad living conditions have led to an increase in health issues for household members. Consequently, access to healthcare services is considered a priority, especially for children.
4. **Legal rights and documentation:** A problem standing in the way of the majority of the Syrians who were and are still being displaced is the hardship of securing legal documentation. This problem is making this population an easy bite for exploiters like the Shaweesh, who use this issue to blackmail and intimidate them to gain money or even physically abuse women and children. In addition, workers without legal papers face restricted mobility and fear of deportation.
5. **Education:** Many participants expressed their desire to return to school or ensure their children could attend school. Due to the difficulties of maintaining legal documentation and a lack of financial capacity, children and some participants are facing hardships in returning to school. Some participants expressed the importance of education for them or for the children to break the cycle of poverty and improve their opportunities in life.
6. **Work conditions and agricultural resources:** Participants expressed the need for better tools and input, such as seeds and equipment, to reduce the physical effort they spend. Some emphasized that owning a piece of land will help achieve independence and stability in agriculture as a source of food and income. They added that receiving agricultural training will enhance their skills.

7. **Safety and security:** As reported previously, some participants explained the lack of safety and security, especially with the rate of discrimination, security threats, exploitation, arson in the camps, and deportation. The situation indicates the vulnerability of farmworkers living in precarious conditions.
8. **Adaptation to climate change:** Since the participants receive their income from farmwork, they highlighted the need for adaptation practices for climate change. Climate-resilient farming practices and support for affected farmers will positively affect the farmworkers and provide stability for their income.
9. **Personal and emotional needs:** Although not reported by many participants, the majority of participants expressed their need for personal well-being, such as moments of rest and joy or activities beyond farmwork. This reflects the emotional burden of their circumstances and the need for a holistic approach to addressing their struggles.

3.15. Recommended Training and Skills Development:

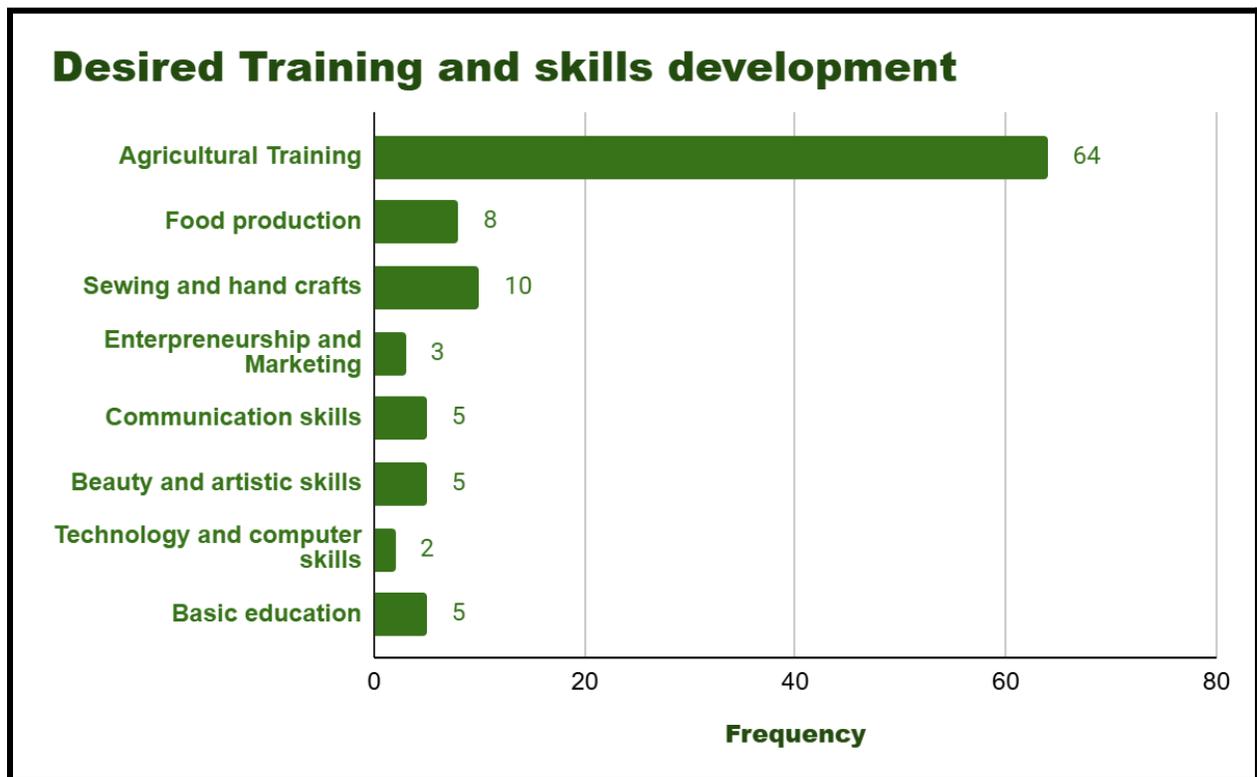


Figure 15: Participants' reported desired training and skills development.

1. **Basic education:** Many participants expressed the desire to improve their literacy skills, particularly reading and writing. This would open more opportunities for them and could help them secure more humane life conditions.

2. **Agricultural training:** The majority of participants aspire to improve their agricultural knowledge and skills, with an emphasis on sustainable farming, fertilizers, pest control, disease management, plant care, soil testing, greenhouse management, advanced farming technologies, and economically friendly practices. In addition, they showed interest in seed preservation and crop rotation, which indicates their awareness of climate change and its impact on agriculture.
3. **Food production:** 8 participants showed interest in learning food-related skills such as dairy and cheese production, food preservation (mouneh), and processing fruits into marketable products. These skills can provide additional income sources, especially for home-based businesses.
4. **Sewing and handicrafts:** 10 participants mentioned their desire to learn sewing and handicrafts, which offer a sustainable means of earning supplementary income.
5. **Entrepreneurship and marketing:** 3 participants recognized the importance of marketing skills, sharing expertise, and learning strategies to enhance their income.
6. **Communication skills:** 5 participants highlighted improving interpersonal and public speaking skills to boost confidence and expand their professional network.
7. **Beauty and artistic skills:** 5 participants showed interest in creative skills such as drawing, makeup, and hairdressing to explore outlets and alternative professions to break free from agricultural labor.
8. **Technology and computer skills:** 2 participants mentioned their desire to learn basic computer skills.

4. Challenges Faced by Syrian Refugee Women Farmworkers

Stakeholder interviews, while confirming the reported challenges and concerns, provided a more detailed and in-depth look at the situation of Syrian refugee women working on Lebanese farms. These women face a combination of gendered, legal, and socio-economic challenges that severely limit their well-being and enjoyment of rights.

Many live in informal tented settlements built on the lands of Lebanese landowners. Of the surveyed women, 90 out of 120 Syrian refugees or three quarters reported living in such a settlement. This living arrangement is deeply entangled with their labor. Women and children are often forced into working on the farmland where their camp is located, creating a system of forced labor in exchange for shelter. The labor relationship is not governed by contracts or choice, but by legal instability and dependency. The majority of these women lack legal residency and work permits, exposing them to constant threats of attacks, arrest, and

deportation. Their undocumented status not only limits access to fair wages and decent work, but also renders them unable to speak out or strike for better conditions.²⁰ The fear of state violence that happened particularly during the 2019 economic crisis and the breakdown of the Lebanese government, silences any attempts at collective action, such as demanding higher pay or better treatment. Without the protection of legal status or access to housing alternatives, refugee women find themselves trapped in a cycle of exploitation, coercion, and fear.

According to the 2019 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon,²¹ only 22% of refugees aged 15 and older had legal residency. Governmental decisions have further pushed undocumented refugees into hiding, curbing their mobility out of fear of arrest. This has significantly impacted their daily lives, restricting children's access to livelihoods and education. In addition, the UNHCR delisted 35,000 families from assistance programs, leaving 90% of Syrian refugees living below the poverty line.²²

Young Syrian refugee women face immense challenges in securing suitable work opportunities in Lebanon. Many rely on humanitarian aid to meet their basic needs. These obstacles include legal restrictions, mobility constraints, poor working conditions, low wages, and exploitation at the hands of employers, the *Shaweesh*, and sometimes their families.²³

Gender-based violence (GBV) is evident at many levels and in various settings.²⁴ Syrian refugee women farmworkers also face health problems that are barely treated due to the absence of health aid, and the high cost of health care in the presence of low wages and long exhaustive working hours.²⁵

Several NGOs provide various types of help and aid to these women. However, NGOs projects are bounded by the availability of funds and the short -12 month timeline. These projects cannot handle the huge number of eligible people. Thus, "beneficiaries are left hanging on a cliff."²⁶

²⁰ Interview with Amr Saadeddine, Researcher on Refugee Women Engaged in Agricultural Work in Lebanon, Beirut, January 12, 2024.

²¹ VASyR 2019, *Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon*, UNHCR-Lebanon,

²² Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024

²³ Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024

²⁴ Interview with Farah Abi Mosleh and Feryal Moghrabi, Farah Social Foundation, Online via Google Meet, Friday, April 26th, 2024

²⁵ Interview with Farah Abi Mosleh and Feryal Moghrabi, Farah Social Foundation, Online via Google Meet, Friday, April 26th, 2024

²⁶ Interview with Farah Abi Mosleh and Feryal Moghrabi, Farah Social Foundation, Online via Google Meet, Friday, April 26th, 2024

Security restrictions compound the issue, with strict regulations requiring permits from Lebanese authorities (such as State Security and Military Intelligence) to enter or leave camps. Refugees must also inform authorities of the names of farms and individuals leaving the camps, often facilitated by the *Shaweesh* as the intermediary with security forces.²⁷

The sharp decline in living standards and income has led to a surge in exploitative practices, poor working conditions, child labor, and growing tensions between refugees and host communities. Syrian women refugees also suffer from deteriorating housing conditions in camps, compounded by inadequate access to clean drinking water, poor sanitation, and waste management facilities.²⁸

According to Serge Harfoush, Team Leader at the agroecological initiative Buzuruna Juzuruna, "nearly 95% of farmworkers in Lebanon are Syrian refugee women. These women operate under exploitative labor systems, primarily controlled by the *Shaweesh* figures who serve as informal labor brokers. Farmworkers often receive only a fraction of their actual wages, as the *Shaweesh* deducts a significant portion under the pretense of organizing and transporting them."

Even when NGOs or initiatives try to avoid the *Shaweesh* system, they often end up relying on them for large-scale labor demands. Although some women are employed directly and paid fairly, most are subjected to exploitative, unjust working conditions with minimal oversight or accountability. Harfoush stresses the deeply inhumane nature of the work, where women work eight hours under the sun for low wages that often do not compare to the difficulty or dignity of their labor.²⁹

Refugee women farmworkers face multiple challenges, including strict supervision at their workplaces, limiting their autonomy and ability to advocate for better conditions. Clan structures further restrict their freedom, as male family members often control their participation in training programs and decision-making. Even in cases where female workers are required to fill out assessment forms, the process is closely monitored by their families. In some instances, training sessions had to be conducted with male family members present simply because the instructor was a man.³⁰ Additionally, women are often subjected to forced labor during pregnancy, highlighting the lack of legal protection and basic labor rights. The overall fear

²⁷Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024.

²⁸Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024.

²⁹Interview with Serge Harfoush, Project Leader at Buzuruna Juzuruna, online via Google Meet, June, 21st, 2024.

³⁰ Interview with Castro Abdallah, Union Leader - FENASOL, Beirut, March 22, 2024.

of authority, coupled with political and social dynamics, discourages these women from advocating for better working conditions.³¹

4.1. Economic Challenges

Non-Lebanese workers, including women, often face systemic discrimination in the labor market, with inequalities in wages and exclusion from social security systems. These disparities disproportionately affect female farmworkers, further entrenching economic vulnerabilities and limiting their roles and opportunities in the labor force.³²

Women face **limited job opportunities and extremely low wages**. Additionally, they endure **sexual harassment and exploitation in the workplace**, which restricts their ability to sustain employment. Many women do not report these abuses due to the **lack of a supportive social structure and economic vulnerabilities** that force them to tolerate certain violations, and **the lack of awareness of complaint and redress mechanisms**.³³

Syrian refugee women also grapple with societal stereotypes. Both the host community and the refugee community impose **cultural constraints** that stigmatize women working outside the home. It is often assumed that women who work are engaging in sexual services to earn income. As a result, many women prefer to work from home or avoid working altogether.³⁴

BOX 1: Overlooked Economic Contributions

According to women's rights defender Nawal Mdallali, "women's financial contributions within families are often undervalued, as men are seen as the primary breadwinners, while women are considered secondary contributors to household income. This perspective limits women's economic participation and reinforces traditional divisions of labor. Moreover, childcare responsibilities and household duties pose significant challenges for working women. Refugee women are expected to manage the double burden of supporting their families economically while simultaneously caring for household needs."³⁵

"Economic hardships facing families force women to shoulder additional responsibilities, yet their efforts are neither acknowledged nor appreciated. This dynamic underscores the

³¹ Interview with Castro Abdallah, Union Leader - FENASOL, Beirut, March 22, 2024.

³² Interview with Mustafa Said,

³³ Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

³⁴ Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

³⁵ Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

persistent gender inequities and cultural barriers that restrict the empowerment and economic independence of refugee women."³⁶

4.2. Employment and Livelihood

Under Lebanese law, Syrian women are not allowed to establish agricultural cooperatives or run private businesses. The types of work permitted for Syrians are limited to sanitation, agricultural labor, and construction. Syrian women can only participate in cooperatives as daily wage laborers. Due to the living conditions in refugee camps, they lack the resources to engage in private entrepreneurship.³⁷

Syrian youth and women occasionally participate in joint projects, such as the EU agricultural reforestation initiative. However, these projects are marked by unfair practices, labor exploitation, unhealthy working conditions, and insufficient minimum wages that fail to cover basic daily needs. Many employers do not comply with minimum wage regulations, and most women work informally on a seasonal, weekly, or daily basis. Reports indicate that 99% of Syrians in Lebanon are employed in informal sectors.³⁸

Refugee women are particularly disadvantaged as they struggle to establish the social networks necessary to secure work opportunities. They also face significant gender-based wage disparities. According to a survey conducted by the International Labour Organization, 92% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon lack legal work contracts. Refugee women face additional challenges with regulatory and legal procedures. Obtaining a work permit, even for allowed sectors, is difficult as it requires the employer's involvement and incurs financial costs. Moreover, work permits are generally only available to refugees registered with the UNHCR.³⁹

Without a legal work permit, most refugees are forced to engage in the labor market illegally, placing their families in a precarious situation. Refugees often accept jobs that pay far less than Lebanese workers receive for the same tasks. Recent years have seen stricter enforcement of hiring restrictions on Syrian refugees, with the Lebanese Ministry of Labor issuing several

³⁶Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

³⁷Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

³⁸Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

³⁹Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

decisions related to annual fees for work permits and limiting the employment of non-Lebanese workers.⁴⁰

In the FGD, women described other job opportunities as risky, such as working in underground factories like tissue paper factories, where harassment is more common. Additionally, long working hours in other sectors, sometimes exceeding 12 hours, prevent women from spending time with their families.⁴¹

According to Mdallali, "refugee women and girls often earn between 200,000 and 300,000 Lebanese pounds for their labor, while men earn 400,000 to 500,000. In some camps, women and girls must pay 100,000 Lebanese pounds to the shaweesh (camp leader) to work. Men sometimes take the women's earnings or physically abuse them, though some women use the money to purchase household necessities. Typically, men stay in tents while women and girls work in the fields."⁴²

In the Bekaa Valley, for example, the *Shaweesh* overseeing the fields is often a man carrying a stick, while the workers are primarily women and girls. The labor in the fields is predominantly done by women, who face exploitation not only from their husbands and families but also from the shaweesh. After a long day of work, women return to care for their families, cook, and manage the household, perpetuating a cycle of male dominance where men view women as household property. Men often pressure women to bear children to benefit from child labor.⁴³

From their experience with women Syrian refugees in Bekaa, Farah Social Foundation explains that although women and young girls, and boys work the most and with the biggest effort spent, they receive low daily wages, and a large number of young girls receive the lowest daily wages, exploited due to their young age.⁴⁴

In response to these challenges, some collaborative projects aim to support both Lebanese and Syrian communities. For example, the World Food Programme, in partnership with local organizations, has launched an initiative to plant over one million trees, creating income opportunities for Lebanese and Syrian refugees amidst Lebanon's ongoing economic crisis.⁴⁵

⁴⁰Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

⁴¹ FGD

⁴²Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024.

⁴³Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024.

⁴⁴ Interview with FSF

⁴⁵Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

Additionally, the Qatar Fund for Development and the International Organization for Migration has initiated a year-long project, “Supporting Livelihoods in the Bekaa and Northern Lebanon.” This project targets 604 vulnerable Lebanese and Syrians in Bekaa and Northern Lebanon, aiming to create productive income opportunities, promote entrepreneurial livelihoods, and enhance job prospects for communities facing inadequate municipal services. These efforts are focused on conflict-prone areas in the north, Akkar, and the Bekaa Valley.⁴⁶

4.3. Barriers to Union and Cooperative Participation

The ILO emphasizes the universal right of all workers, regardless of nationality, to form syndicates and demand labor protections. However, Lebanon’s failure to align fully with international labor standards limits the realization of these rights. Syndicates and unions, such as the Syndicate of Farm Workers in Saida, play a critical role but remain donor-dependent and constrained in scope. International organizations like the ILO continue to advocate for the inclusion and protection of refugee workers, urging Lebanon to adopt more inclusive labor policies that align with global standards.⁴⁷

Legal restrictions and systemic exclusion prevent Syrian refugees from forming cooperatives or participating in collective organizing to improve labor conditions. Most refugees lack valid residency permits, and obtaining one often takes months or even years. As a result, many abandon the effort entirely, choosing to live and work in legal invisibility. This legal instability makes it nearly impossible for refugees to unionize, form worker cooperatives, or advocate for their rights. Although the need for solidarity and joint organizing among Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian agricultural workers is clear, current legal and political structures stand in the way. Some NGOs have tried to fill this gap by improving conditions or challenging exploitative systems, but their efforts are often constrained. While a few have acted as allies, others have accidentally legitimized existing abuses by failing to challenge the root causes or by participating in systems that maintain inequality. The lack of legal recognition and protection for refugee labor leaves refugees without any institutional platform to assert their rights.⁴⁸

Refugees in Lebanon are barred from forming or joining cooperatives and syndicates, despite international standards that uphold their right to organize. While the International Labour Organization (ILO) works with cooperatives and farms to promote labor standards, Lebanon has yet to sign key international conventions ensuring these rights. This exclusion limits refugee

⁴⁶Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

⁴⁷ Interview with Mustafa Said

⁴⁸ Interview with Amr Saadeddine, Jan. 2024.

workers' ability to advocate for their rights collectively, leaving them dependent on NGOs and external organizations for support.⁴⁹

According to Castro Abdallah, head of the independent FENASOL union federation, "efforts to organize agricultural workers into a formal union similar to the one for domestic workers faced significant challenges and was refused the legal permit." Nonetheless, many workers prioritize immediate financial survival over long-term collective action. Because most farmworkers are seasonal laborers, their main concern is securing income for the next harvest rather than engaging in advocacy efforts that could improve their working conditions in the long run.⁵⁰

On the other hand, Serge Harfoush from *Buzuruna Juzuruna* described a positive example of cooperative participation through a project called Rezq al Wefq Garden, launched around 2019–2020. Initially designed as a communal gardening initiative, it brought together Lebanese and Syrian families to work on a shared 10-dunum plot. The program provided training in governance, conflict resolution, and self-sufficiency. Over time, the families became more independent, covering their own rent and fuel costs. In this setup, the shaweesh system was entirely avoided, since the participating families themselves organized and carried out all the work. This initiative stands in contrast to the dominant exploitative systems and demonstrates how structural support and empowerment can lead to more dignified labor models for refugees.⁵¹

4.4. Legal Residency

Refugee women rarely rely on legal or judicial mechanisms to address labor violations, rectify unfair contracts, or seek equality in wages. Many are unaware of the available legal processes, while others lack trust in the system or face cultural and institutional barriers to pursuing justice.⁵²

Residency issues remain a significant hurdle for Syrian women. The legal status of refugees can be categorized into pre-2015 and post-2015 stages, with a distinction between those registered with UNHCR and those who are not. Successive Lebanese government policies have imposed strict, expensive residency renewal requirements, described as harsh by refugees. These policies have disproportionately affected populations who cannot return to Syria or leave Lebanon. Temporary residencies have been granted to financially stable individuals, students, and those married to Lebanese nationals. Many refugees could only secure residency through a "sponsorship pledge" by a Lebanese guarantor.

⁴⁹ Interview with Mustafa Said

⁵⁰ Interview with Castro Abdallah

⁵¹ Interview with Serge Harfoush,

⁵² Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

According to the 2019 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, only 22% of refugees aged 15 and older had legal residency.⁵³ Governmental decisions have further pushed undocumented refugees into hiding, curbing their mobility out of fear of arrest. This has significantly impacted their daily lives, restricting children's access to livelihoods and education. In addition, the UNHCR delisted 35,000 families from assistance programs, leaving 90% of Syrian refugees living below the poverty line.

"Refugee women fear filing complaints due to their precarious legal status and the risk of deportation," explained gender rights expert Nawal Mdallali . "The lack of long-term shelters and sustainable programs to combat discrimination and violence further exacerbates the situation. For instance, despite Lebanon passing the Sexual Harassment Criminalization and Victim Rehabilitation Law on December 21, 2020, which marks progress in addressing sexual harassment and protecting whistleblowers, the law falls short of meeting international standards like the Convention on the Elimination of Violence and Harassment. This convention advocates for a comprehensive and gender-sensitive approach, including labor laws, occupational safety, equality, and anti-discrimination measures."⁵⁴

4.5. Harassment, GBV, and Reporting Mechanisms

Harassment in the agricultural sector is a significant issue, yet it is rarely reported due to cultural norms and fear of repercussions. Instead of being directly disclosed, cases of harassment often surface indirectly through conflicts that arise among workers. In some cases, investigations into workplace disputes reveal that harassment was the underlying cause, yet no official complaints are filed. This reluctance to report is largely due to the Middle Eastern cultural context, where discussing harassment is considered taboo. Moreover, the Lebanese labor law excludes agricultural workers from its protection, leaving them without legal recourse. Migrant women working in agriculture face additional hardships, including verbal abuse, constant accusations of theft, and the obligation to work under exploitative conditions. The absence of a formal syndicate further limits their ability to seek justice or report abuse.⁵⁵

Syrian refugee women are among the most vulnerable, often facing a "silent" danger that can lead to death and go unreported for various reasons. Society either turns a blind eye or indirectly contributes to the impunity of perpetrators. According to reports from KAFA Association, there were approximately 1,860 rape cases, 407 attempted rapes, and 523 instances of child harassment involving children under 10 in refugee camps between 2019 and

⁵³ VaSyr 2019, op cit.

⁵⁴Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024

⁵⁵ Interview with Castro Abdallah, Union Leader-FENASOL,

2022. Additionally, 114 harassment crimes and 171 rape cases were recorded during the same period, with the perpetrators often being husbands or brothers.⁵⁶

The laws in Lebanon do not sufficiently protect refugee women from sexual harassment. Although legal protections exist, refugee women rarely report harassment or rape due to fear of scandal, retaliation from camp leaders, or expulsion from camps. For instance, cases like the Nuzha girl and a prostitution network in Saadnayel highlight the gravity of the issue.⁵⁷

The lack of legal protections for Syrian refugee farmworkers leaves them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Transforming these workers from "illegal" to legal status is essential for providing them with legal security and inclusion under labor laws. However, the absence of robust syndicates and reporting mechanisms means abuses, especially harassment, often go unaddressed. According to Labor expert Mustafa Said, "strengthening syndicates and other labor organizations is crucial to establishing accountability and enabling workers to report grievances safely and effectively."⁵⁸

Refugee women report problems related to child marriage, discrimination in education and work, forced marriages, polygamy, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and psychological abuse. Additionally, they face the loss of privacy within camps, economic exploitation, increased domestic violence, child marriages, and unstable legal statuses. These challenges are compounded by feelings of alienation, the absence of supportive social structures, and the inability to make personal decisions.⁵⁹

Reporting Harassment and Abuse

The effectiveness of reporting mechanisms is subject to skepticism. While awareness sessions on harassment and child protection exist, there is little to no enforcement. Laws are present in theory but lack practical impact due to absent consequences. There is also an absence of engagement between awareness efforts and accountability. While farmworkers may learn about their rights, the *Shaweesh* and others in power rarely face repercussions for violations. NGOs may only act when there is external funding, and even then, follow-through is limited. As a

⁵⁶Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024

⁵⁷Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024

⁵⁸ Interview with Mustafa Said,

⁵⁹Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024

result, the farmworkers remain among the most forgotten when it comes to legal protection or justice mechanisms.⁶⁰

Sources and stakeholders acknowledge the need to enable and strengthen referral systems for women to report exploitation, gender-based violence (GBV), and harassment. However, external sources also highlight deep skepticism about the effectiveness of such mechanisms due to a lack of enforcement and accountability. Recommendations include expanding access to information about existing protection and support services, improving research on SGBV, and developing better coordination mechanisms among stakeholders. Crucially, victims often face fear of repercussions, social stigma, and mistrust of authorities, which deters reporting.

Despite the existing mechanisms, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants reported feeling unsafe due to a lack of consequences for those who attack the camps. Furthermore, they said women are reluctant to report harassment or abuse because there is no clear reporting system, and they believe authorities would not take action against the perpetrators.⁶¹

The year 2024 saw heavy restrictions and pressures on Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The FGD participants expressed fear due to the constant threats they faced, particularly from the *Shaweesh* or individuals outside the camps. These threats are usually directed at men, with deportation to Syria being a constant risk. As a result, many women are left to provide for their families, while children remain unsupervised in the tents. FGD participants also mentioned threats of violence, including the deliberate burning of camps, human trafficking, and shootings.⁶²

Harfoush does not explicitly compare the wages of men and women in his interview. However, he does provide detailed accounts of how women's wages are reduced through the *Shaweesh* system. Although women may be promised around 100,000 LBP per hour, they often receive only 40,000 or 50,000, with the remainder taken by the *Shaweesh*. In some exceptional cases, *Buzuruna Juzuruna* pays the women directly behind the *Shaweesh's* back to ensure they receive their full wage.⁶³

Despite performing equal or even greater physical labor than men, refugee women farmworkers receive lower wages. They wake up as early as 4 or 5 AM to work in tobacco, potato, apple, and olive harvesting, often working long hours or even double shifts. However, the absence of labor law protections means they receive no social support or safety benefits. Many women believe that their work is inherently less valuable than men's, contributing to wage inequality. In

⁶⁰ Interview with Serge Harfoush,

⁶¹ FGD

⁶² FGD

⁶³ Interview with Serge Harfoush

seasonal agricultural work, entire families often participate in the harvest, but wages are not distributed equally among family members. The lack of legal enforcement regarding equal pay further exacerbates this issue, leaving women in a cycle of economic vulnerability.⁶⁴

BOX 2: Emerging Mobilization

In May 2014, local newspapers reported that Syrian refugee workers called for a strike to protest calls from some Lebanese to deport Syrian refugees. Although the strike was short-lived due to the need to work, the FGD participants viewed it as a success because some Lebanese individuals began to recognize the importance of Syrians as workers in Lebanon. The participants expressed relief that the decision to deport refugees was postponed, which would make it easier for them to mobilize and live without fear.⁶⁵

4.4. Health Risks

Amid Lebanon's severe economic crisis and the state's complete absence in managing citizens' affairs, international and local organizations have taken on the role of the government by providing financial resources and social, health, legal, and protection assistance to refugees. Without these organizations, there would be significant disruption within the refugee communities in camps, as many rely on monthly financial support due to restrictions on employment for registered refugees. These organizations also provide healthcare for families registered with the UNHCR.⁶⁶

According to Mdallali, "two out of ten refugee families cannot access essential childcare supplies, and one in ten families cannot obtain women's hygiene products. Refugees have also reported health crises and contagious diseases caused by camp living conditions, such as scabies, lice, and skin diseases. The ongoing issues of contaminated water, inadequate sanitation, insufficient health facilities, and poor hygiene standards have exposed refugees to diarrhea, skin infections, hepatitis, and numerous other illnesses."⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Interview with Castro Abdallah,

⁶⁵ FGD

⁶⁶ Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

⁶⁷ Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

Occupational Health Risks

Women face health risks due to the strenuous nature of fieldwork and the lack of adherence to health standards. Many suffer from gynecological infections, particularly during menstruation, as there are no days off for them. Additionally, personal hygiene standards are neglected in both the fields and camps due to harsh living conditions.⁶⁸

In the agricultural fields, there are no safety measures to protect workers, such as masks, gloves, or other protective gear against exposure to chemicals. Some women experience allergies and respiratory issues caused by pesticide inhalation, which can develop into chronic illnesses. These concerns are rarely discussed with supervisors or employers, as they are deemed trivial and not open to discussion.⁶⁹

Women in agricultural work endure dangerous and unsafe conditions without any health protections. The risk of injuries from snake and scorpion bites, falls, and heat strokes is high, yet there are no safety measures or insurance policies in place to support them. The exclusion of farmworkers from labor law protections means that even in cases of severe injury, these women receive no compensation or medical coverage. The lack of basic workplace safety standards highlights the urgent need for reforms to protect female farmworkers from occupational hazards.⁷⁰

Dr. Amr Saadideen describes serious mental and physical health consequences among refugee women and children engaged in agricultural labor, this includes cases of psychological trauma, with reports of breakdowns, depression, and long-term mental health issues. The coercive and stressful nature of their work, combined with housing insecurity, poverty, and fear of arrest, contributes to a toxic environment that takes a heavy toll on their well-being. These conditions, according to Dr Amr, can lead to disability or even death, not only through physical harm but also due to untreated psychological illness. Despite the severity of these issues, no official health services are provided, and the women often suffer in silence due to their vulnerable status.⁷¹

Water Scarcity

The most common issues raised during the focus groups were scarcity and contamination of water. The women live in camps within tents, registered by the UNHCR, which is responsible for

⁶⁸Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

⁶⁹Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

⁷⁰ Interview with Castro Abdallah

⁷¹ Interview with Amr Saadeddine

providing water for drinking and other uses. However, since April 2024, water shortages have occurred, leading the women to report the issue to UNHCR representatives. In response, the UNHCR dug a well and claimed the water was safe to drink, but the women described the water as muddy and unfit for consumption. They had no other choice but to use it. The cost of water trucks is too high for these low-income workers to afford, so they have to use the contaminated water for daily activities.⁷²

The use of unsafe water has led to widespread health problems, including skin diseases, fever, and other health issues. Despite reporting the situation, the UNHCR only placed dissolvable tablets in the well, claiming the issue was resolved. The health of the camp residents continued to deteriorate. In addition to water issues, the participants reported that they receive no medical support from UNHCR. They must pay out of pocket for medical appointments and prescriptions, which is unaffordable given their low wages.⁷³

The lack of protective measures and awareness regarding pesticide use is a critical concern. Beyond direct work hazards, the decline in public health services in rural areas increases the burden on households, particularly women, for social reproduction and healthcare. Studies also point to chronic poverty and indebtedness contributing to poor health outcomes.⁷⁴

The absence of effective labor inspections and enforcement of safety standards means that refugee women farmworkers often endure unsafe working conditions. Without access to social security or health protections, they are left exposed to various occupational health risks, including those related to pesticide use and other agricultural chemicals, further exacerbating their vulnerability.⁷⁵

Pesticide Use

A study at AUB's Public Health Department indicates that "the capital-intensive agricultural system in Lebanon has substantially relied on pesticide use which has increased from 4 kg/hectare of cropland in 1990 to 6.5 kg/hectare in 2021, nearly three times the global average of 2.26 kg/hectare in 2021 (50). Agricultural workers hence faced increased exposure to harmful pesticides, exacerbated by weak or non-existent OHS regulations."⁷⁶

⁷² FGD

⁷³ FGD

⁷⁴ Noory B, Habib RR and Nuwayhid I, "Exposure of Syrian refugee agricultural workers to pesticides in Lebanon: a socio-economic and political lens," *Front. Public Health* 12:1402511, 2024, available at https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/research_reports/2019-2020/20200215_dynamics_of_syrian_refugees_in_lebanon_agriculture_sector.pdf.

⁷⁵ Interview with Mustafa Said

⁷⁶ Noory B, Habib RR and Nuwayhid I, "Exposure of Syrian refugee agricultural workers to pesticides in Lebanon: a socio-economic and political lens," *Front. Public Health* 12:1402511, 2024, available at

A paper published in the US National Library of Medicine explained that "studies on the effect of pesticides used in Lebanon on human health, particularly on agricultural workers, demonstrated that some of them have limited skills regarding safe pesticides application that was associated with low precautionary measures to reduce the risk of pesticides contamination."⁷⁷

Among Lebanese agricultural workers, "there was a higher prevalence of multiple symptoms of subacute intoxications that might be due to pesticides but did not need hospitalization. On the other hand, workers, exposed to pesticides because of their profession, bare a 4-time higher risk of having life-threatening acute intoxications than other workers."⁷⁸

The AUB paper mentioned above concludes that "Lebanon's political and economic policies had undermined good governance, marginalized the agriculture sector, and constructed work and social environments for the refugees that increased their vulnerabilities. These policies are not unique to Lebanon but mirror the main features of global capitalism and neo-liberalism where intensive food production that is controlled by the few requires intensive pesticide use. It is reported that large-scale agricultural schemes have increased pesticide use by 1.8% for every 1%."⁷⁹

4.5. Children of Syrian Women Refugee Farmworkers

According to VASyR 2019, "the percentage of children between 5 and 17 years old who are engaged in child labour remain very similar to last year's rate at 2.6%. It must be noted that child labour may frequently be underreported and peaks during agricultural season, which did not overlap with this year's data collection. Of children who are engaged in labour, 27% are working in agriculture."⁸⁰

Researcher Amr Saadeddine suggests that "child labor among Syrian refugees in Lebanese agriculture is widespread and deadly." Dr. Saadeddine explains that, according to a study by AUB, 81 Syrian children died from labor-related conditions among 3,000 children surveyed in

https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/research_reports/2019-2020/20200215_dynamics_of_syrian_refugees_in_lebanon_agriculture_sector.pdf.

⁷⁷ Abou Zeid, Mohamad I et al. "Suggested policy and legislation reforms to reduce deleterious effect of pesticides in Lebanon." Heliyon vol. 6,12 e05524. 7 Dec. 2020, available at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33319086/>.

⁷⁸ Abou Zeid, Mohamad I et al. "Suggested policy and legislation reforms to reduce deleterious effect of pesticides in Lebanon." Heliyon vol. 6,12 e05524. 7 Dec. 2020, available at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33319086/>.

⁷⁹ Noory B, Habib RR and Nuwayhid I, "Exposure of Syrian refugee agricultural workers to pesticides in Lebanon: a socio-economic and political lens," Front. Public Health 12:1402511, 2024, available at https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/research_reports/2019-2020/20200215_dynamics_of_syrian_refugees_in_lebanon_agriculture_sector.pdf.

⁸⁰ VASyR 2019, op. cit.

agricultural camps. This alarming statistic reflects both the invisibility and the normalization of child labor in these areas. Although Lebanese law prohibits the employment of children under the age of 14, the Ministry of Labor does not enforce this rule in informal refugee camps or settlements. Several factors drive families to send their children to work, including the burden of debt accumulated during migration, the need to repay smuggling fees, and the lack of access to education. Often, families are provided shelter on farmland in exchange for labor, and children, along with women, are pressured or required to work. This setup creates a system of coerced child labor deeply rooted in structural inequality and legal neglect.⁸¹

Child Labor and Education Challenges

Child labor peaks during agricultural seasons, including planting, harvesting, and picking. There is growing concern about psychological, physical, and possibly sexual violence faced by working children. While Lebanese law allows child labor under certain conditions, Lebanon committed in 2013 to end the worst forms of child labor through a National Action Plan by 2016. However, a significant percentage of children remain out of school, with enrollment rates dropping sharply in middle school. This is primarily due to financial strain, as many children must work to support their families, while others are unable to afford school fees amid Lebanon's economic crisis.⁸²

Lebanese laws, including Law 686 (1998) and Law 150 (2011), mandate free and compulsory education in public schools up to the primary and basic education levels for all children without discrimination. However, enforcement remains weak.

International organizations and ministries have mainly conducted statistics on school dropouts without effectively enforcing compulsory education up to the intermediate level. According to UNICEF, approximately 600,000 children are out of public schools. Alternative education programs, designed to re-enroll children who dropped out for over two years, were suspended in 2019. Students who progress to Level 3 in these programs often return to informal work or vocational training if placements are available.⁸³

In response to the growing number of out-of-school children post-2014/2015, the Lebanese government launched the Reaching All Children with Education (RACE) program, establishing evening shifts in public schools for refugees and a dedicated unit within the Ministry of Education. Donor contributions, coordinated through UNICEF, funded refugee education.

⁸¹ Interview with Amr Saadeddine

⁸² Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

⁸³ Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

Despite millions of dollars allocated and hundreds of schools opened to refugees, large numbers of Syrian children remain illiterate.⁸⁴

A 2020 Norwegian Council report revealed that six years after RACE's launch, 58% of school-aged refugees were still out of school. RACE 2 (2017–2021) aimed to enroll 500,000 students but fell short. By 2021, 30% of Syrian refugee children aged 6 to 17 had never attended school.⁸⁵

Following RACE 2's conclusion in 2021, Lebanon's Ministry of Education and UNICEF launched the Trust Fund for Education (TREF), backed by a \$62 million donor commitment, to strengthen resilience and governance in the education sector under the 2021–2025 National Education Plan. However, only \$18 million has been received so far.⁸⁶

Syrian refugee children bear the brunt of the crisis. In 2021, primary school enrollment among children aged 6–14 dropped by 25%. Child labor among Syrian refugee children increased, with at least 27,825 engaged in work, often in hazardous conditions. Additionally, one in five girls aged 15–19 was married, and over half (56%) of children aged 1–14 experienced violent disciplinary measures.⁸⁷

The lack of a clear, long-term education plan for refugees stems from their exclusion from civil, social, and employment rights. Education without future opportunities in the labor market becomes an ineffective investment for many refugee families struggling with severe economic and social challenges.⁸⁸

To ensure education serves a meaningful purpose, it must be coupled with the right to participate in the workforce and broader society. Otherwise, education programs risk being reduced to basic literacy initiatives.⁸⁹

⁸⁴Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

⁸⁵Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

⁸⁶Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

⁸⁷Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

⁸⁸Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

⁸⁹Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

Given that poverty is the primary barrier to education, refugee education programs must be integrated with poverty alleviation efforts. Lebanon's public schools need to triple their capacity to accommodate refugee children, but this seems nearly impossible under current circumstances. Partnerships between the public and private sectors, along with civil society, are essential to address these challenges.⁹⁰

The absence of social security and economic rights is a problem faced by all workers in the agricultural sector, men and women, of all ages. This puts them at high risk in the presence of health issues in the household farmwork. FSF recommends immediate intervention in this regard, especially since they noticed that most of the boys and girls are dropping out of school and joining the ranks of agricultural workers to help their families with breadwinning. These children are also exploited to do exhaustive work for very low wages.⁹¹

For Buzuruna Juzuruna, child labor emerges as a significant concern. Harfoush describes how the *Shaweesh* figures often bring girls as young as eight to work in the fields, sometimes presenting them as legitimate laborers. In response, Buzuruna Juzuruna imposed strict conditions: no workers under age 15, and ideally over 18 (though this is difficult to enforce due to labor shortages). To accommodate families, children are allowed to accompany their mothers to the fields but are strictly forbidden from working. This policy was a necessary compromise to prevent forced labor and reflects the attempts of Buzuruna Juzuruna to establish humane practices within the constraints of the current system.⁹²

Child labor remains a widespread issue in the agricultural sector, particularly among refugee families. Many parents rely on their children's earnings to support the household, often prioritizing short-term financial needs over their education. In past awareness campaigns, some parents openly admitted that they preferred receiving the small daily wages their children earned rather than sending them to school. Economic hardships drive families to make these difficult choices, as many have multiple children to support. Addressing child labor requires legislative action, social security programs, and comprehensive support services to ensure that children, whether refugees or Lebanese, receive education and protection from exploitation.⁹³

⁹⁰Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

⁹¹ Interview with FSF

⁹² Interview with Serge Harfoush

⁹³ Interview with Castro Abdallah

Financial Challenges and Education

According to the FGD, the average daily wage for these workers is 400,000 L.L., for approximately six hours of work. This income is insufficient to cover basic household expenses, leading many families to live in extreme poverty.⁹⁴

Financial hardships have forced many young girls to leave school and work on farms to support their families. Transportation expenses also make it difficult for children in the camps to attend school, contributing to high dropout rates among refugee students.⁹⁵

4.6. Role of the Shaweesh in Farmwork Dynamics

The Shaweesh plays a crucial role as an intermediary between landowners and agricultural workers, often managing the recruitment, transportation, and attendance of laborers. This position is typically informal and can be held by Syrian refugees or Lebanese individuals who have close ties to the employers. According to development researcher Zeina el-Helou, "the *Shaweesh* system concentrates power in the hands of these intermediaries, who may exploit their authority to commit or facilitate abuses such as wage theft, harassment, and sexual exploitation. Workers have limited ability to challenge or escape this dynamic, as the Shaweesh controls access to work and transportation, deepening the vulnerability of refugee women to various forms of exploitation."

The Shaweesh exercises significant control over the lives of refugees, not only over women but also over men. However, his interactions with women and girls often involve violence, harassment, and exploitation. He may withhold aid distribution if he is dissatisfied with a family, woman, or girl. In some cases, the shaweesh marries girls from the camp, exploits working women, and takes a portion of the wages earned by the girls or women. He also decides who gets to work. The situation varies between camps, but incidents of harassment by the Shaweesh against girls in the camps have been reported. Unfortunately, the girls rarely report these cases due to fear of scandal or being expelled from the camp. In the Bar Elias camps, one Shaweesh married two girls and attempted to marry a third, who had to be smuggled out to escape. In another camp, a Shaweesh married three women and divided a single tent into three sections for them.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ FGD

⁹⁵ FGD

⁹⁶ Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

Farah Social Foundation explained that reaching out to Syrian women and young girls and boys working on farms is hard due to *Shaweesh*, who is in control, preventing them from talking to NGOs to discuss their problems and needs.⁹⁷

The *Shaweesh* system is central, described as "similar to a prison officer or supervisor."⁹⁸ The *Shaweesh* controls access to laborers and imposes arbitrary fees and wage deductions. They often act without oversight, and many have exploited their positions to improve their own circumstances, like moving out of camps and profiting from the labor of women. Even when initiatives attempt to bypass the *Shaweesh*, they are often forced to rely on them during peak labor seasons. Harfoush described how he had to negotiate with one relatively ethical *Shaweesh* to ensure minimum labor standards, such as age restrictions and nonviolence. Despite these interventions, the *Shaweesh* system remains a deeply entrenched barrier to fair labor conditions.⁹⁹

The *Shaweesh* system plays a pivotal role in maintaining control over refugee labor on farms. The *Shaweesh*, who is a sort of camp supervisor, often facilitates the family's migration by paying the smuggler, then assumes control over the debt. This debt is used to trap families in ongoing labor relationships where wages are deducted or manipulated, creating a cycle of dependency. The *Shaweesh* controls access to work, housing, and even information, acting as both employer and tyrant.¹⁰⁰ According to Dr. Saadeddine, this system amounts to modern day slavery or debt bondage. The International Labour Organization has explicitly condemned it as a violation of labor rights. Refugees working under a *Shaweesh* have no alternative; even if they experience wage theft or abuse, they cannot report it to authorities due to their lack of legal documents. The *Shaweesh* operates with impunity, reinforcing the broader system of exploitation that defines refugee labor in Lebanese agriculture.¹⁰¹

4.7. Responsibility for Refugee Rights

The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) is a joint response involving multiple stakeholders, co-led by the Lebanese government and the United Nations. It includes contributions from a wide range of organizations, both local and international NGOs. The LCRP adopts an integrated approach to address the needs of Syrian displaced persons, Palestinian refugees from Syria, and the Lebanese host communities. This includes a combination of humanitarian interventions and stabilization initiatives, with an emphasis on maintaining service delivery through public institutions at the local level.

⁹⁷ Interview with FSF

⁹⁸ Interview with Serge Harfoush

⁹⁹ Interview with Serge Harfoush

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Amr Saadeddine

¹⁰¹ Interview with Amr Saadeddine

The UN agencies, including UNHCR, UNICEF, UNOCHA, WFP, and ILO, alongside the Lebanese ministries responsible for implementing the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), manage various aspects of the Syrian refugee situation. The five ministries involved are the Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Interior, and Ministry of Environment, in coordination with UN organizations and partner agencies.

UNHCR provides support to both Lebanese communities and refugees, coordinating protection efforts for all refugees in Lebanon in collaboration with the government, UN agencies, and local and international partners. Its responsibilities include:

- Registration and monitoring
- Border protection.
- Legal assistance and civil documentation.
- Psychosocial support and child protection.
- Addressing and reducing gender-based violence (GBV) and facilitating resettlement to third countries.

Through the LCRP, UNHCR and its partners work to mitigate the ongoing impacts of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon. This includes ensuring protection, providing immediate assistance to individuals with specific needs, delivering services through national systems, and promoting economic, social, and environmental stability in Lebanon.

FSF highlighted the lack of legislative policies from the government in cases of abuse or harassment in refugee communities. While NGOs attempt to fill this gap, the absence of strong referral systems and government support limits their effectiveness.¹⁰² While economic security and social protections are essential for improving conditions for refugee farmworkers, limited funding cycles and inconsistent intervention leave many refugees vulnerable.

The exclusion of farmworkers from Lebanese labor laws leaves them without fundamental legal protections, making them highly vulnerable to exploitation. Seasonal and migrant farmworkers lack the stability needed to demand better conditions, as their work is irregular and dependent on harvest cycles. Past efforts to improve worker inclusion, such as initiatives for construction workers, have faced resistance due to political and racial tensions. Additionally, the lack of data collection centers in agricultural regions makes it difficult to track worker conditions and advocate for policy changes. Ultimately, the responsibility for improving refugee rights falls on both governmental and international bodies, which must work to ensure labor protections and social support mechanisms are extended to all agricultural workers.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Interview with FSF

¹⁰³ Interview with Castro Abdallah

Responsibility for the protection and rights of Syrian refugee farmworkers is widely scattered, and often neglected, among various actors. The Lebanese state deliberately chose not to establish formal refugee camps for Syrians, citing its past experience with Palestinian camps and its desire to avoid permanent settlement. This policy created a void that allowed private landowners and Shaweeshs to exploit refugees with little oversight. In practice, the state benefits from the availability of cheap, unofficial labor, while distancing itself from any responsibility for their well-being. The role of the International Organizations has also been mixed. While some international organizations have attempted to address abuses and improve working conditions, others have, intentionally or not, helped legitimize the systems that perpetuate exploitation. NGOs working on refugee issues face serious limitations, often constrained by the very legal frameworks they seek to challenge. Dr. Amr also stresses that Lebanese citizens must take part in efforts to protect refugee workers by showing solidarity and advocating for labor justice across communities. Without pressure from below, both local and international institutions will continue to allow these violations to stay out of control.¹⁰⁴

4.8 Impact of the 2023/2024 Israeli Aggression

After the recent Israeli war on Lebanon, households in affected areas were forced to relocate to safer regions. We aimed to study the impact of the war on farmers whom we had interviewed previously. Since the Bekaa region was among the areas targeted, we selected the farmers from Bekaa to conduct a short post-war follow-up questionnaire.

We interviewed 30 Syrian women farmworkers over the phone. These women had also participated in our earlier needs assessment study. Data collection took place between April 15 and April 30, 2025.

Displacement and Shelter Challenges

The short assessment revealed that four participants had been displaced during the war, seeking refuge in other parts of the Bekaa region. The shelters they found were mainly garages or tents, making housing their primary challenge during displacement. One participant reported surviving through debt to meet her basic needs, while another explained that her family had to continue working during displacement to sustain themselves. At the time of the interviews, none of the displaced participants had returned home, as their houses had been destroyed or burned during the war.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Amr Saadeddine,

Employment and Support During the War

Finding work during the war proved extremely difficult. Only one participant reported having continuous employment that allowed her to provide for her family. Moreover, despite the presence of philanthropic organizations distributing food kits during the war, 29 participants stated they had not received any support from NGOs or INGOs. The impact of the war was severe, leaving all participants struggling to recover economically and emotionally to this day.

Views on Returning to Syria

During the conflict in Lebanon, political changes also occurred in Syria. We wanted to explore whether these changes had affected participants' views or circumstances. Only one participant had visited Syria since the shift in authority, while 11 knew families who had done so. Nine participants expressed a desire to return to Syria, believing they might have better economic prospects there. They also cited difficulties obtaining legal documents in Lebanon, which limited their access to education and employment, as a key reason for considering return. Some indicated they would continue farming in Syria, while about half said they might return to Lebanon for work even if they moved back to Syria.

Reasons for Not Returning to Syria

The 20 participants who did not plan to return in the near future explained that they remained unconvinced of Syria's safety. Some had no home to return to, as their houses were destroyed during the 2011 Syrian war. They stressed that for them to consider going back, basic needs such as safety, shelter, jobs, and economic and political stability would need to be secured.

5. Conclusion: Key Challenges Facing Syrian Refugee Women Farmworkers in Lebanon

The study provides a comprehensive look into the challenging conditions faced by Syrian refugee women farmworkers in Lebanon, highlighting numerous interconnected issues and proposing several recommendations for improvement. The lived experiences of Syrian refugee women farmworkers in Lebanon are characterized by a complex web of **gendered, legal, and socio-economic challenges** that severely limit their well-being and rights.

Key challenges include:

- **Informality and Lack of Legal Protection:** Around 90% of Lebanese and almost all Syrian agricultural workers operate informally, meaning there is no legal definition of "farmer" or "agricultural exploitation," leading to an **absence of social protections** like health coverage or pensions. The agricultural sector profits from cheap, temporary, and migrant

labor. The vast majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon lack legal residency and work permits, making them vulnerable to constant threats of arrest and deportation, and preventing them from officially entering the labor market or advocating for their rights. Only 22% of Syrian refugees aged 15 and older had legal residency in 2019.

- **Exploitative Labor Practices and Low Wages:** Refugee women often undertake grueling jobs, working long hours (average 6.7 hours, up to 15 hours) for very low wages, averaging 600,000 L.L. per day, which is significantly less than men's average of 900,000 L.L.. Wages are often set by the *Shaweesh*, an informal labor broker, who frequently deducts a significant portion of the promised pay, sometimes leaving women with only 40,000 or 50,000 LBP per hour from a promised 100,000 LBP. This income barely covers basic needs like food, electricity, residence, and water, with little to no room for education or savings.
- **The *Shaweesh* System and Debt Bondage:** The *Shaweesh* system is a pivotal and deeply entrenched barrier to fair labor conditions, with *Shaweesh* figures controlling access to work, housing, and information, often exploiting their authority through wage theft, harassment, and sexual exploitation. This system can amount to modern-day slavery or debt bondage, as *Shaweesh* may pay smugglers for families' migration, then use the debt to trap them in ongoing labor relationships.
- **Precarious Living Conditions:** Most participants (94 out of 126) live in tents in camps, which are often in awful conditions with sewage leaks, winter floods, and a lack of security. These conditions contribute to widespread health issues like skin and respiratory diseases. Rented concrete houses are often too expensive, with owners exploiting residents by raising rent monthly.
- **Health and Safety Risks:** Women endure dangerous and unsafe working conditions without health protections. They face occupational health risks from pesticide use, chemical exposure, and physically demanding roles, leading to skin and respiratory sensitivities, as well as back and joint pain. Injuries are common but often only receive basic treatment, with *Shaweesh* denying responsibility. Access to healthcare is limited and largely uncovered financially, leading to severe consequences for their well-being.
- **Vulnerability to Violence and Harassment:** Syrian refugee women face heightened risks of sexual harassment, violence, and exploitation due to the absence of formal reporting mechanisms, fear of retaliation, arrest for lacking legal papers, and cultural taboos. Discrimination based on nationality, dialect, physical appearance, gender, and socioeconomic status is also reported. The study directly underlines the **lack of legislative policies from the government** in addressing abuse and harassment among refugees, and the **limited effectiveness of NGOs** in filling this void due to "lack of strong referral systems and government support and inconsistent funding. It also notes that the ILO advocates for universal labor rights, but Lebanon's failure to align with international standards means these rights are not fully realized. This aligns perfectly with the broader critique from other sources regarding systemic failures and the need for more inclusive, localized, and refugee-centered approaches to rights protection.
- **Barriers to Education for Children:** School attendance among school-aged children is notably low due to lack of family income, rejection from schools for being over-aged, lack of legal documentation, and engagement in child labor to support household

income. Child labor, particularly in agriculture, is widespread and dangerous, with children as young as 8 working in fields.

- **Limited Autonomy and Empowerment:** Entrenched social norms and economic exploitation limit women's opportunities for empowerment and independence, with their financial contributions often undervalued. Clan structures and male family members often control women's participation in training and decision-making. Legal restrictions prevent Syrian women from establishing agricultural cooperatives or running private businesses.
- **Impact of Conflict and Displacement:** The 2023/2024 Israeli aggression caused displacement, destroyed homes, and made finding work extremely difficult for many participants.

Furthermore, actors should take the following lessons into consideration in addressing the situation described in the report.

On the one hand, humanitarian aid and justice frameworks often reinforce a **victim-savior paradigm**, creating a power imbalance that disempowers refugees. There is a consistent call for policymakers and practitioners to **engage refugee women as experts** in designing local, culturally relevant solutions, moving beyond purely economic definitions of empowerment.

On the other hand, international bodies like the ILO advocate for universal labor rights, regardless of nationality, but Lebanon's policies often fall short of these international standards. The lack of government legislative policies and support structures forces NGOs to fill gaps, but their efforts are limited by inconsistent funding and weak referral systems. Furthermore, migrant women's voices are seldom included in the policy making process.

6. Recommendations

Empowering Syrian Refugee Women through Agriculture Training

In Lebanon, Syrian refugee women from various age groups have found an opportunity to break the monotony of their daily lives and acquire new skills through a vegetable farming training program. This initiative not only helps them but also benefits their families. In the town of Mazboud, Lebanon, this training is conducted by an Italian charity organization, which also provides the participants with a small space to practice their newly acquired skills.¹⁰⁵

To address these critical issues and improve the conditions of Syrian refugee women farmworkers in Lebanon, the following urgent needs and recommendations have been highlighted:

¹⁰⁵Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, [March 18th, 2024]

- **Secure Higher Wages:** Advocate for adequate and **fair wages** (e.g., minimum \$10-\$15 per day) that can secure better living conditions and cover basic needs, allowing for education and savings.
- **Improve Housing and Living Conditions:** Prioritize **better housing and living conditions**, including access to clean water, free or affordable electricity, and improved shelters, especially in camps where sewage leaks and floods are common.
- **Ensure Access to Healthcare:** Provide **affordable and comprehensive healthcare services**, especially for children, addressing the spread of diseases in camps and supporting occupational health needs.
- **Strengthen Legal Protections and Documentation:** Facilitate the securing of **legal documentation** for Syrian refugees to mitigate exploitation, blackmail, and intimidation. Implement and **enforce laws to safeguard refugees** and punish aggressors, ensuring legal security and inclusion under labor laws.
- **Enhance Education Access:** Improve **access to schooling and support to reduce dropouts** for children, addressing financial barriers and issues with legal documentation. Implement **basic education** programs for participants to improve literacy skills and open up more opportunities.
- **Improve Work Conditions and Agricultural Resources:** Provide **better tools, inputs, and agricultural training** focused on sustainable farming, pest control, disease management, and advanced technologies to reduce physical effort and enhance skills. Support opportunities for women to **own land** to achieve independence and stability.
- **Enhance Safety and Security:** Address the **lack of safety and security**, particularly concerning discrimination, exploitation, and threats from authorities or the *Shaweesh*. Strengthen reporting mechanisms for abuse and harassment, ensuring **accountability and enforcement**.
- **Promote Climate Change Adaptation:** Support the adoption of **climate-resilient farming practices** and provide support for affected farmers to ensure income stability.
- **Address Personal and Emotional Needs:** Recognize and address the **emotional burden** faced by these women, providing opportunities for personal well-being, rest, and activities beyond farmwork.
- **Challenge the *Shaweesh* System:** Develop and scale up initiatives that bypass the exploitative *Shaweesh* system, such as direct employment or cooperative models, to ensure fair wages and dignified labor conditions.
- **Strengthen Union and Cooperative Participation:** Advocate for the **universal right of all workers to form syndicates and join cooperatives**, regardless of nationality, aligning Lebanese policies with international labor standards.
- **Shift from Victim-Savior Paradigm:** Policymakers and practitioners should **engage refugee women as experts** in designing local, culturally relevant solutions, moving beyond purely economic definitions of empowerment, and ensuring their voices are included in policymaking.
- **Ensure Accountability:** The international community and NGOs must **act promptly** in cases of violations, rather than merely documenting them, and ensure that perpetrators face consequences.

- **Integrate Education with Poverty Alleviation:** Recognize poverty as a primary barrier to education and integrate refugee education programs with comprehensive **poverty alleviation efforts**.
- **Increase Funding and Coordination:** Address the limitations of NGO projects due to **short funding cycles and inconsistent interventions**. Improve coordination among UNHCR, NGOs, and Lebanese authorities to ensure comprehensive interventions.

The focus group discussions highlighted the following urgent needs:¹⁰⁶

- **Access to Clean Water:** Reliable and safe water sources for daily use.
- **Medical Support:** Affordable healthcare services.
- **Education for Children:** Improved access to schooling and support to reduce dropouts.
- **Fair Wages:** Advocacy for adequate wages to meet basic living standards.
- **Legal Protections:** Enforceable laws to safeguard refugees and punish aggressors.

The discussions revealed the precarious living and working conditions of Syrian refugee women in Bekaa. Their contributions to Lebanon's agricultural sector are critical, yet they face systemic challenges that require immediate and comprehensive interventions. Addressing these issues will require coordinated efforts from UNHCR, NGOs, and Lebanese authorities to ensure their rights, safety, and well-being.¹⁰⁷

Laws must be enforced, and immediate action should be taken upon any report or complaint to protect displaced women. The international community must not remain passive, while NGOs should not limit their role to documenting violations; they must act promptly in the absence or failure of official institutions. Saving a displaced woman or any woman from domestic violence, exploitation, or harassment requires confrontation. Women must report any such crimes without hesitation, as "hidden" crimes are among the most damaging to women and minors. The continuation of such crimes harms society in general and women or girls in particular.¹⁰⁸

Despite Lebanon ratifying international conventions like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), it has failed significantly in protecting Syrian refugee women from gender-based violence. The legal status of approximately 85% of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon remains a significant barrier to accessing justice.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ FGD

¹⁰⁷ FGD

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024.

Human rights laws, including measures to eliminate gender-based violence, must be respected, protected, and enforced for all individuals on Lebanese soil.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰Interview with Nawal Mdallali, Human Rights and Gender Equality Expert and Founder of SAWA for Development Association, Interviewed through email and Zoom, March 18th, 2024.

8. ANNEXES

8.1. Annex 1: Stakeholder Interviews

The following points questions used to guide the semi-structured interviews held with the various stakeholders.

1. Talk about the challenges that are most likely to be found rising in the case of refugee farmworkers, and especially the women farmworkers.
2. What are the reporting mechanisms that refugee women farmworkers can follow in cases of abuse or harassment? Are their programs in NGOs or related entities that raise awareness and receive reports from this group?
3. With the minimal wages earned by farmworkers in Lebanon, how do wages differ between men and women refugee farmworkers, and does this wage gap play a role in the duties of the two on the farm?
4. How does the fact that refugee workers are still denied to form cooperatives or even join existing ones explain the NGOs' and related entities' different programs and initiatives to preserve the humane rights of refugee workers?
5. How do you think the farmwork affects the health of women farmworkers? How about the chemicals they are exposed to?
6. Are there any legislations in the Lebanese system that consider the many cases of young girls and children working on the farm and leaving schools?
7. What is your take on the part of the Shaweesh in the work of these women?
8. Whose duty is it to help refugees maintain their rights and protect themselves?

8.2 Annex 2: Focus Group Discussion

The following questions guided the focus group discussion (FGD) held in Koura on

Introduction to Work and Decision-Making:

1. Who decides whether you work on agricultural land?
2. Are there other job opportunities besides agriculture? What are they?

Perceptions of Agricultural Work:

3. What was your first impression of agricultural work, and has it changed over time?
4. How would you describe the agricultural working conditions in the Bekaa region?

Challenges Faced:

5. What challenges do women agricultural workers face?
6. What specific challenges do women face in the workplace?

Impact on Well-being:

7. How do the challenges you face affect your mental health and family life?
8. How would you describe the level of safety in your workplace?

Support and Advocacy:

9. Are there projects or initiatives that could provide financial support to female agricultural workers?
10. If a female agricultural worker faces abuse or violations, who can support or help her?
11. What is your opinion on the work of associations with women agricultural workers?

Specific and Sensitive Issues:

12. Have you experienced work-related problems or harassment?
13. How have hate campaigns against Syrians and perceptions of the host community affected you?
14. What is your living situation, and do you have access to public services?
15. Are you aware of the strike movement? What is your opinion on it?