

A COMPACT FOR SYRIAN REFUGEE WOMEN?

When the Jordan Compact Was Inked in 2016, It Was Presented as a Transformative Experiment in Refugee Employment. However, in the Two Years since its Launch the Compact Has Failed to Help Syrians in Need

By Bethan Staton

Every morning, Sawsan Al-Cheikh boards a bus in north Jordan's Zaatari refugee camp and travels to an industrial park for a day at work. It takes her around an hour to travel to the Jerash Garments and Fashion Manufacturing Co., where she will spend her shift at a sewing machine—work, she says, means everything to her.

She and her daughters earn a little more than \$860 between them each month. Yet, the significance of their jobs is touted as being much greater. Publicity videos from the United Nations Refugee Agency and articles show Al-Cheikh declaring that she does not want “handouts” and believes one should “take a stand and go to work” to provide for a family. UNHCR chief Filippo Grandi, on a visit to the factory, praised her and thanked the Jordanian government for facilitating a project that gives refugees the chance to work.

The project is a deal called the Jordan Compact, struck between the European Union and Jordan in 2016. Donors promised to grant Jordan \$1.7 billion in financing in exchange for the creation of 200 thousand jobs. Al-Cheikh's job is tied to an arrangement that gives factories in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) tariff-free access to European markets if 15 percent of their employees are Syrian.

Jerash Garments has worked hard for the trade concessions: its founder Oryana Awaisheh spent months speaking to refugees and now provides childcare and charter buses from Zaatari refugee camp, where eighty thousand Syrians live. Awaisheh believes tariff-free access is worth it. The factory has become a flagship success story in the Compact. “At the beginning, it was difficult but now we are hiring,” Awaisheh said. “It is not easy work but it depends on how you can provide facilities to help women get to work. The daycare centre, transportation, a meal and a permit were important for us.”

▷ A handicraft project employs Syrian refugees living in Jordan, July 11, 2016. *Muhammad Hamed/Reuters*



The reality of the factory's success, however, may not be quite as groundbreaking as it seems. Jerash Garments did not actually make the target of 15 percent of employed Syrians across the factory: it only qualified for tariff-free access when the entry bar was lowered to require the quota of Syrian workers on one production line. The headline achievement touted by the UNHCR is the employment of twenty-two Syrian workers—a small fraction of the 2,800 the company employs in total. The factory currently employs forty women, but hopes to take on one hundred workers in the coming months.

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If the success of Jerash Garments has been muted, so too has that of the Jordan Compact itself. From the outset, manufacturing industries sat at the core of the project, and textile production—an export industry often based in SEZs and with a predominantly female workforce—has looked to recruit women in the hope of accessing EU markets. When a pilot was announced in 2016, it aimed to recruit two thousand workers. Organizations including the UNHCR and the International Labour Organization's (ILO's) Better Work program held recruitment fairs in community centers to drum up interest for work in the factories and sign up women who were interested. Launched to a fanfare, the project was anticipated to be received by Syrians with enthusiasm.

However, the drive, as Better Work's Jordan Program Manager Tareq Abu Qaoud told me at the outset of the project, was not a success. Syrian women were far from ecstatic about the proposed jobs, and few signed up. By the end of 2016, only thirty Syrians had been employed under the pilot tariff-suspension program.

"This was a little bit surprising, especially for myself," Abu Qaoud admitted. "I know about Syrians, how they're living on the poverty line, and so on. I thought

they'd very much like the opportunity to formalize their legal status. But somehow they were reluctant."

The confusion was felt across the board. Why wouldn't Syrians—a marginalized group, 80 percent of whom are living under the poverty line and barred from legitimate means of making a living—do anything but jump at the possibility of work? Employers, NGOs, and the EU were left scratching their heads.

Written for Women?

But there were reasons for the lack of interest in the program by Syrian refugees—ones that should have been clear from the outset. In Jordan, the garment sector is notoriously exploitative, requiring workers to spend hours hunched over detailed, repetitive work on claustrophobic production lines. Hours are often long and pay relatively low. "They earn 190 JD every month," Abu Qaoud said. "It's not sufficient to cover the needs of the household."

Neither are the SEZs especially tempting locations to spend six out of seven days of the week. Stark gatherings of faceless buildings rising from the gray-yellow desert in the north and south of Jordan, they are located in isolated spots, exposed to the sweltering sun and at risk of sandstorms. Syrian refugees living in cities or refugee camps must travel to get to the factory, so an eight-hour day is bookended by an hour or more commuting.

These are obstacles for any job seeker, but they disproportionately affect the Syrian women being targeted by the sector. Women have caring responsibilities that mean they are unable, or at least reluctant, to remain far from home during the day. Linda Kalash, who campaigns for migrant workers with the Jordanian NGO Tamkeen, presents the idea that "women do not like to travel far distances." Jordan's poor public transportation disadvantages everyone, but while it is culturally acceptable for men to thumb a ride or cram themselves into a crowded intercity bus, it is unthinkable for many women. Conservative social attitudes, Kalash continued, mean women face the disapproval of family and friends over the prospect of working far from the home. And norms are entwined with very real concerns for women's safety and harassment in public spaces dominated by men, and in which bigotry against Syrians means an added risk. For the wage offered at factories the costs are simply too high. "They're excited to work, but when they consult their husbands, families they're told 'No,'" Abu Qaoud says.

For those who currently work in the garment sector, these problems do not loom so large. They are predominantly workers from Southeast Asia, often working abroad temporarily in order to save or send money home. These women frequently live in sparse, dormitory-type accommodation close to the factory site, and work ten- or

eleven-hour days. It is a hardship that seems possible for migrants who regard their work as temporary, but Syrian women are in a different situation. Refugees have costs like rent and children's clothes to think about, as well as family caring responsibilities. Because of dim hope that they will return to Syria, too, refugees are likely to be looking at their labor choices from a longer-term perspective—as work that fits with their lives.

When NGOs and the UN embarked on recruitment drives focused on Syrian women, they missed this crucial point. When recruitment began in 2016, it was based on the assumption that Syrians would take up the permits and jobs offered to them with enthusiasm—and that employers would be keen to hire them, too. In reality, the

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needs of Syrian women themselves were absent from the equation. Targeted with jobs that felt inappropriate to them, women have not taken permits with enthusiasm and at the last count just 5 percent of permits have been given to them.

“Women do have a problem with transport; they do have a problem with the patriarchal structure in the house. Men might not allow them to leave the house, they might have children,” Dina Mansour-Ille, a researcher at the Overseas Development Institute, said. “Their roles are centered in the house. There is also discrimination in the workplace. When it comes to a woman and a man, employers will choose the man.”

Any attempt to get women into work has to address these realities—but the Compact has not managed to do so. It did not mention “how work and access to it might be gendered,” Mansour-Ille suggests, and tackle or try to resolve these obstacles. This was not a failing of the Compact's ability to carry out its aims, she implies: the needs of women, vulnerable groups, and minorities were simply not incorporated at the outset.

This is widely recognized in critiques. While its ostensible purpose was to get Syrians into jobs, the Compact was negotiating a complex range of other considerations: attracting investment and courting donor interests, as well as domestic concerns like

the perceived threat from Syrian workers to Jordanian jobs. In the terms and aims of the Compact, many of those concerns came before the needs of Syrians themselves, and certainly ahead of any effort to engineer a Compact that could push to secure work that met the needs of women or more vulnerable migrant minorities in Jordan. The Overseas Development Institute concluded that the Compact “did not integrate refugee perspectives at the outset” and has, as a result, “been slow to improve their daily lives.”

Resolving Tensions in the Refugee Economy

To cut through some of the publicity and figure out why the Compact has failed to get women into work, we must think more about the agreement itself.

The deal was formalized at the London Conference in 2016—an event that brought Syria donors and Jordanian leadership together with the ambitious aim of turning the refugee crisis “into a development opportunity.”

That long-term solutions were needed had been clear for some time. Around 650,000 Syrian refugees are registered with the UNHCR in Jordan; the government estimates nearly double that number live in the country. International aid donors had stepped in to support refugees and the Jordanian state, but as the crisis dragged on it began to become clear that this would not continue indefinitely. At the same time, in 2015, the fallout had begun to reach Europe. Western governments were alarmed at the arrival of hundreds of thousands of people risking their lives to escape conflict, or the prospect of a life in limbo in countries like Jordan. They wanted to keep refugees in the Middle East.

Helping refugees support themselves financially and pursue meaningful work is an obvious means of doing that. But that is easier said than done in Jordan, where the issue of jobs for refugees is politically explosive. This is a heavily aid-dependent nation with persistently high unemployment—now around 18 percent—and a sluggish economy. And despite the fact that waves of refugees from Iraq, Palestine, and further afield have contributed enormously to Jordan’s economy, anti-immigrant sentiment is rife. Syrians are simultaneously feared as a threat to jobs, and condemned as a drain on state resources.

This paradoxical attitude is echoed by state policy. Until 2016, it was generally illegal for Syrians to work in Jordan: refugees were forbidden from most professions and in the few areas where they were able to work, permits were expensive and difficult to get. Despite this, the government expects refugees who live outside camps—81 percent of the total, who receive little in the way of humanitarian assistance—to support themselves any way they can. Until 2015, only about 10 percent of Syrians working in Jordan had permits. The rest worked illegally, in precarious sectors characterized by low wages, long hours, and dangerous conditions exacerbated by a constant fear of arrest.

This policy of both expecting refugees to work and making it illegal for them to do so is not accidental. Jordan's large informal economy keeps Syrian refugees—as well as other groups—in state-sanctioned precarity, creating a pool of labor that, to the benefit of capital, is easily exploitable and unlikely to claim labor rights. The stratification of citizenship also creates and reinforces politically important hierarchies. While Syrians and other migrants are confined to illegal and low-waged areas of work, Jordanians can be employed in “closed” sectors that range from teaching to engineering to retail. This serves the interests of employers and politicians, maintains the privileges of certain groups, and solidifies the framing of migrants as a threat to Jordanian jobs and prosperity.

The strategies of the Compact were an extension of this. Garment factories were just the beginning: the agreement decided that barriers to Syrians getting work permits would be eased more broadly and 200 thousand new permits would be issued. Of these, fifty thousand would be in industries generally shunned by Jordanians, and the remainder would be for work in the SEZs in exchange for tariff concessions. It addressed the fears of Syrian employment by framing jobs for Syrians as jobs for Jordanians at a rate of five to one, according to Jordan's King Abdullah—and turning what had been framed as a problem population into a “development opportunity.” The informality of Syrian employment had been useful for the hierarchies and labor class it created. By selectively formalizing that employment, the Jordanian state has managed to maintain, even deepen, those hierarchies, while attracting further investment to benefit the state.

Creating Work or Counting Jobs?

In the SEZs, women targeted by recruitment efforts that did not suit their needs failed to pursue the jobs they were offered. The same could be said for those Syrians authorities hoped would claim work permits. As the end of 2016 approached, far fewer workers were attempting to formalize their work than had been anticipated, and it seemed unlikely that the government would reach its target of issuing fifty thousand new permits.

There was no mystery around the reluctance. Plenty of Syrians wanted legal employment, but not necessarily in the sectors where work permits were allowed. For many, the added hassles tied to a permit—bureaucracy, having to stick to a single workplace, coming up against paperwork that was difficult to get—were not worth it. The biggest jump in uptake came when the rules were changed to accommodate how Syrians actually worked: linking agricultural permits to a worker rather than an employer, allowing Syrians to legally take flexible, seasonal work. By October 2017, seventy-one thousand permits had been issued, but ILO estimates still suggest that just 13 percent of Syrians have permits.

There was another problem with the system: by basing itself on distributing permits, the Compact did not create jobs but formalized them. The ILO recognizes the “vast majority” of work permits were given to refugees who were already working. If this is the case, it may have come a long way to making work more secure for some Syrians—an achievement that, in difficult circumstance, has been rightly celebrated. However, in the aim of creating jobs—and particularly meaningful jobs that mean Syrians can support themselves and pursue fulfilling lives in the country of their enforced exile—it has failed.

Reasons for this failure are arguably the same and resulted in the needs of women and other vulnerable groups being neglected. The Compact was ostensibly about Syrians, but the main actors were more worried about other things than creating meaningful, fulfilling, well-paid, and secure work, which prioritized refugees’ needs and interests. Syrians’ access to the labor market was restricted to protecting Jordanian workers. Quantifying work, through work permits, to attract investment took precedence over creating jobs. Refugees and groups working with them were excluded in favor of state and donor interests.

Mansour-Ille believes the Compact crucially succeeded in putting a taboo issue on the table—opening what she calls the “black box” of jobs for refugees. However, while the intention may have been creating and formalizing jobs, it was ultimately about attracting investment. “It was a good initiative but it was a government-led initiative,” Mansour-Ille says. “It fails to even mention vulnerable groups, and does not consider how work and access to it might be gendered.”

If NGOs and the migrants themselves had been a part of the conversation, Mansour-Ille “guarantees” gender would have been discussed, but the meetings that created the agreement were “very hush-hush.” The Compact may have failed to listen to Syrians, but it did not have Syrians at its heart in the first place.

When the successes of the Jordan Compact are sold to the rest of the world, women like Sawsan Al-Cheikh are presented as an archetype of the deserving migrant. But while few appear drawn to the opportunity of minimum wage labor in garment factories, there are hundreds of thousands of Syrian women in Jordan who are enthusiastic about building meaningful lives and supporting their families.

In a recent study by ILO and the Institute for Applied International Studies (Fafo), 57 percent of female respondents expressed a desire to find a job, but most were not actively seeking employment. Their reasons—like the women themselves—are diverse, and they are not always the same ones barring work in SEZs. Researchers identify social pressures and domestic duties as crucial reasons for women not seeking work, yet there is also a lack of suitable opportunities, unacceptable pay, and a fear of both gendered and xenophobic street harassment and abuse. In one of the most

thorough surveys on Syrian women refugee livelihoods, access to credit was identified by a clear majority of women as the biggest barrier to employment and fear of authorities also loomed large. A majority in a recent survey said seeking work did not fit with childcare responsibilities.

One of the more important but overlooked obstacles, too, is the fact that Syrians are forbidden from unionizing and organizing to address these needs themselves. It is illegal, in Jordan, for refugees to form any type of association, so women are forbidden from setting up, for example, cooperatives to widen the markets of their individual work or unions to begin mobilization around their own labor rights.

These crucial obstacles to women's employment have not been considered by the Jordan Compact. Opportunities for refugee women have been framed through interests other than refugees themselves: they are a way to attract investment, exploitable human capital under terms attractive to business and under confines unthreatening to—and that often reinforce—hierarchies of nationalities within the state. These interests are antithetical to structures—freedom of association and unionizing, access to legal work under terms that do not discriminate by nationality, solid labor protections—that would underpin meaningful and viable work for refugees.

None of this is surprising given Jordan's economic reality. At the time of writing, street protests have prompted a change of government and billions in anxious funding from Arab states. The nature of the Compact's economic reform and deal-making follows decades of neo-liberalizing policies and IMF-imposed structural adjustment, reinforcing free trade and reducing government intervention and spending to suit the interests of capital.

Even if the Compact does begin to formalize labor rights for refugees, it necessarily does so in this context. A different approach would mean focusing on the needs of refugees themselves. Some initiatives have started attempting to do this. Programs by Better Work have consulted women about their skills and interests, working with employers and refugees to think about developing opportunities that can fit with people's lives. Mansour-Ille and her colleagues have pitched gig economy infrastructure, training and protections as a way to support the many women—around 60 percent in some areas—already working from home.

However, change needs to go further. New policies should tackle the way informality and access to work in Jordan are defined by nationality, how older laws maintain the privilege of citizens and precarity of migrants and as such create a barrier between Syrians and the labor market. Changing the law to allow Syrians freedom of association has been widely recognized to be crucial. For women, it would mean providing childcare and putting money toward reducing child marriage, enacting and enforcing legislation around equal pay and maternity protections, and investing further in girls' education.

It is a common refrain that in Jordan, a country with scarce natural assets, the greatest natural resource is its people. Jordan is a state built to a large degree by waves of migrants seeking economic opportunity or fleeing hardship. Yet, while rhetoric depicts a Jordan that welcomes new arrivals with open arms, the reality is that refugees are politicized and confined, turned into scapegoats and leveraged for what they can best do to serve the interests of state and capital.

Their own needs, and the possibility for them to build lives for themselves and communities that surround them, are sidelined. To avoid repeating the failings of the past, what comes after the Jordan Compact must put refugees at its heart.