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# Desk Study on the Cultural Rights of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

ENGAGING  
CULTURAL  
RESOURCES IN  
DISPLACEMENT

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Action for Hope undertook this desk study on the cultural rights of Syrian refugees in Lebanon upon request of the UNESCO Office in Lebanon. The information included in the study was researched and collected by Action for Hope staff during September 2019.

The main challenge we faced in conducting this study was the lack of evidence based research or case studies in the area of cultural rights of refugees in Lebanon which, if available, would have added a very valuable dimension to this study. To address this challenge, the researchers relied mostly on the experience of Action for Hope in designing and implementing cultural programs for Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon since 2015. However, most of the information included in the study is derived from various online sources, and especially from reports and conventions by UN organizations.

This study aims at achieving the following three objectives: a) analyze key conventions and UN reports to provide a general definition of cultural rights, b) describe the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon from the perspective of their cultural rights, and c) identify the main challenges that need to be addressed in order for Syrian refugees to exercise fully their cultural rights, and provide recommendations towards addressing these challenges.

The cultural rights of refugees is an important area of research and action that is often overlooked and we hope that this brief study will constitute a small step towards giving it more prominence in the agendas of UN organizations.

## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **The Rights of refugees in international legal instruments:** The desk study includes a general outline of the international legal instruments that provide for the rights of refugees such as the Universal Human Rights Declaration, International Human Rights Law, the Refugee Convention and other important conventions. The analysis of these instruments proves that, if implemented, they provide adequate frameworks for protecting the rights of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.
- **Syrian refugees in Lebanon:** An overview of the history of this issue and its political context since the beginning of the conflict. The study highlights the policies adopted by the Lebanese government that added to the vulnerability of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Such policies included refusing establishing formal refugee camps and restrictions on mobility and legal employment.
- **Current situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon:** An examination of the various social, economic and political challenges that face Syrian refugees in Lebanon, focusing on the issue of access to education. Syrian refugees in Lebanon are in a “protracted refugee situation”, i.e. they are in a state of limbo with no guarantees for their safe return to Syria and living in deteriorating socio economic conditions.
- **Cultural Rights:** An overview of the relevant documents and international legal instruments, especially UNESCO conventions, that provide a conceptual and legal framework for this area of human rights. This is followed by an analysis of these documents to offer a definition of the 3 main areas of cultural rights: identity and heritage, participation in cultural rights and creativity and expression.
- **Challenges to the cultural rights of Syrian refugees:** The study lists the main challenges that face the cultural rights of Syrian refugees in 3 main areas of cultural rights: the dominance of the culture of the host community and the pressure on refugees to assimilate

with it, the hostile social environments in many parts of Lebanon, and the lack of public discourse on the cultural identities of Syrian refugees.

- **Recommendations:** The study proposes 7 recommendations that address some of the previously mentioned challenges that hinder the exercise of cultural rights by Syrian refugees:
  1. Support efforts by universities, research centers, cultural organizations and artistic groups aiming at promoting the understanding and appreciation of the intangible heritage of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.
  2. Encourage the integration of arts programs in the activities of public schools that accept Syrian students.
  3. Encourage and support specialized arts training programs, and the production and presentation of artistic work in diverse forms by Syrian artists and trainers.
  4. Support efforts by non-governmental organizations, cultural organizations, artistic groups and municipalities to create community cultural centers that are close to Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon.
  5. Encourage already existing legal aid programs by non-governmental organizations to include offering legal aid to Syrian professional and amateur artists.
  6. Conduct field studies in the area of the cultural rights of refugees.
  7. Encourage mainstreaming artistic and cultural activities in the work of UN and non-governmental organizations.

### 3. PREAMBLE: RIGHTS OF REFUGEES IN INTERNATIONAL LEGAL INSTRUMENTS

According to Article 14 of the Universal Human Rights Declaration, which is the basis for all international human rights law (IHRL), “Everyone has the right to go to another country and ask for protection if they are being mistreated or are in danger”. The human rights of refugees are specified in the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (the Refugee Convention) and its 1967 Protocol. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment 1984 (CAT) also contain provisions relevant to refugees.

Specifically, Article 1(a2) of the Refugee Convention defines a refugee as: “[A person who] ... owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it”.

The principle of “Universality” in IHRL also means that the rights protected by this law apply to everyone, without exception. The ICCPR and the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) are the two main UN Conventions that constitute the binding legal instruments for UN member states related to IHRL. The ICCPR requires ratifying states to protect the civil and political rights of **people in their jurisdiction, without discrimination**. It includes the right of aliens lawfully in a state that is party to the covenant not to be expelled, other than by a lawful process and only after their case has been heard by a competent authority. Article 6 of the ICESCR

states that “Everyone has the right to work, which includes the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts, and will take appropriate steps to safeguard this right.”

The CAT, ratified by Lebanon in October 2000, requires that a ratifying state shall not expel, return or extradite a person to another state where there are substantial grounds for believing that they would be in danger of being tortured. This includes not sending a person at risk of torture to a country where, although they may not be immediately at risk, they might be sent on to a country where they would be.

## 4. SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON – CONTEXT AND HISTORY

When the crisis in neighboring Syria erupted in early 2011, tens of thousands – and later hundreds of thousands – of refugees were forced to flee across the border into Lebanon. The influx witnessed its peak in 2012 and 2013, especially with the escalation of military operation in Homs and Rural Damascus. By April 2013, there were around 300,000 Syrian refugees registered by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency in Lebanon.<sup>1</sup> By April 2014, the number of Syrian refugees fleeing into Lebanon had reached one million, making Lebanon the country with the highest per-capita concentration of refugees worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

Following the adoption of the refugee policy in October 2014 aiming overall at reducing the number of refugees in the country, in January 2015 the Lebanese Government issued a series of regulations to curb the refugee flow into its territory and to regulate more closely residency renewal. The requirements included, among others, the payment of an annual fee of USD 200 per person aged 15 and above (since visa-free entry was revoked in January 2015) and undertaking of a pledge not to work. The registered Syrian refugee population started to decrease in the second half of the year, after UNHCR suspended registration in May 2015 upon a request from the Government of Lebanon. Consequently, the registered refugee population decreased from some 1.2 million as of 30 April 2015 to 1.07 million at year-end. In parallel, the socio-economic vulnerabilities of Syrian households deteriorated substantially in 2015 leading altogether to a degradation of living conditions of Syrian refugees and a reduction of the protection space.

Today, the Government of Lebanon estimates the number of Syrian refugees at 1.5 million, while, according to UNHCR, the number of registered Syrian refugees stands at 924,161 as of August 2019. 49.5% of them are male and 50.5% are female. Children under 18-year-old constitute 54% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.<sup>3</sup> 62% of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon live in the areas of Bekaa (36%), including Baalbek, and North Lebanon (26%), including Akkar, as of December 2018. The settlement of refugees in these regions is linked to different historic, social, political, and economic factors. Given the fact that the Lebanese government has adopted a “no camp” policy and prevented the establishment of formal settlements for Syrians fleeing the war, Syrian refugees sought shelter in two types of areas. Those who have settled within host communities, particularly in already impoverished neighborhoods and in informally developed urban areas, are the majority.

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<sup>1</sup> Syria Regional Refugee Response – Lebanon. Retrieved from <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR Lebanon annual operational report retrieved from <http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2520?y=2014#year>

<sup>3</sup> Key Findings of the 2018 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon. Retrieved from <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/68938>

## 5. CURRENT SITUATION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

The approximately 1 million Syrian refugees<sup>4</sup> in Lebanon are in a protracted refugee situation (PRS) defined by the UNHCR as<sup>5</sup>: "one in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same nationality have been in exile for five consecutive years or more in a given asylum country". This means that these refugees are stuck in a state of limbo: without a clear political solution to the conflict in Syria, most of them are not able to return to their country, while their situation in their country of asylum is worsening. Those living in PRS are faced with difficult challenges and are denied their basic human rights including the right to work<sup>6</sup>, the right to move freely inside and outside of Lebanon<sup>7</sup>, owing to the policies Lebanon has adopted. They also have limited access to education and to legal protection. Only 18% of Syrian refugee households indicated that all family members, aged 15 years and above, had legal residency in 2018.

The international response to the Syrian refugee crisis since 2012 has focused mainly on providing the basic needs of survival such as adequate shelter, medical services, food, water and sanitation. In Lebanon, even these basic provisions were hardly adequate, especially after 2015. Currently, 69% of Syrian refugee households live below the poverty line according to the 2018 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon. This means that these households are living in extreme poverty and are unable to meet their survival needs of food, shelter, and health.<sup>8</sup> 19% of households are residing in non-permanent structures, mainly informal tented settlements. 15% are occupying different non-residential structures such as agricultural rooms, engine rooms, pump rooms, active construction sites, garages and farms. Overall, 35.5% of refugees reported living in substandard shelters.<sup>9</sup>

The informal shelter settlements, especially in Bekaa and Baalbak, lack the most basic services as is evident in the recurrent incidents of casualties and injuries caused by fires and severe weather conditions in these settlements<sup>10</sup>.

The fact that some of these settlements are located on or in privately owned property, and are thus not under the direct jurisdiction of UN agencies, nor the Lebanese government, adds considerable economic and social vulnerabilities for Syrian refugees. The need to earn some income to pay for the rent of their tents, and other very basic needs, forces Syrian families to send their children to work in agriculture and other manual, low-pay work, instead of sending them to school. Employers also prefer to hire children to work in such jobs because they are faster, more obedient and cost less than adults. The restrictions on the free movement inside Lebanon of male adults in particular hinders the ability of this group of refugees to find work. Further restrictions on the legal employment of Syrians also contributes to increasing child labor among Syrian refugees. It is generally believed that around 10% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon aged 6 to 18 years work in agriculture and other manual work. In addition, child marriage is on the rise among the most vulnerable Syrian refugees in Lebanon. It was found that 29% of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 were married in 2018, a notable increase of 7% compared to 2017. Another study showed that more than one-third of surveyed Syrian refugee

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/books/2018-2019/20190701\\_101\\_facts\\_and\\_figures\\_on\\_the\\_syrian\\_refugee\\_crisis\\_volume\\_2.pdf](https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/books/2018-2019/20190701_101_facts_and_figures_on_the_syrian_refugee_crisis_volume_2.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/excom/standcom/40c982172/protracted-refugee-situations.html>

<sup>6</sup> Article 23 of the Human Rights Declaration: <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

<sup>7</sup> Article 13 of the Human Rights Declaration: <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

<sup>8</sup> 101 Facts & Figures on the Syrian Refugee Crisis – Volume 2, 2019 [https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/books/2018-2019/20190701\\_101\\_facts\\_and\\_figures\\_on\\_the\\_syrian\\_refugee\\_crisis\\_volume\\_2.pdf](https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/books/2018-2019/20190701_101_facts_and_figures_on_the_syrian_refugee_crisis_volume_2.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, UNICEF, & WFP. (2018, December). VASyR 2018: Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon. Retrieved from <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/67380>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2019/1/5c386d6d4/storm-flooding-brings-misery-syrian-refugees-lebanon.html>

girls between the ages of 20 and 24 years married before turning 18. Before the conflict in Syria, child marriage was significantly less common among Syrians. Some figures showed child marriage rates to be four times higher among Syrian refugees today than among Syrians before the crisis. Child marriage can occur when refugee families are in need of financial support and social stability in times of hardship, and is considered among the many negative coping mechanisms that families resort to.<sup>11</sup>

The restrictions imposed on Syrian refugees concerning access to the labor market socially impacted the refugee families. In 2018, 32% of Syrian refugee households in Lebanon did not have a working member. This means that one third of refugee households do not have any active breadwinner. To overcome the difficulties of the situation, Syrian refugees adopt livelihood coping strategies which are classified into three categories according to their severity: stress, crisis, and emergency. In 2018, 51% of Syrian refugee households used crisis strategies, including selling productive assets, withdrawing children from school for work, reducing non-food expenses, and marrying off children under 18.<sup>12</sup>

## 6. ACCESS TO EDUCATION

The main aim of this study is to examine the level of protection of the cultural rights of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and the available provisions for enjoying and practicing these rights. However, access to formal and non-formal education is important to exercising cultural rights in that it provides the essential tools for participating in cultural life, safeguarding living heritage and for creative expression. Education provides individuals with the skills and abilities to read, write, research, analyze and communicate methodically and effectively.

At the same time, and based on the afore mentioned description of the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, it is not possible to separate the issue of access to education from other issues such as access to legal employment, social protection, and the right to move freely inside Lebanon. According to UNHCR's 2018 report "Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon"<sup>13</sup> only 23% of Syrian children aged 15-17 years are enrolled in schools. The percentage among children aged 6 to 14 is 68%, but actual school attendance rates are less than 11%. This simply means that more than one third of the 488,000 Syrian children at school age in Lebanon are not enrolled in schools and around half of those who are enrolled in education do not attend school. It is also important to note that according to the same report, only 11% of Syrian refugee youth aged 15 to 24 years were enrolled in formal education.

The reasons for this deficiency are many: despite the international support to the Lebanese public education system, school capacities are still below what is needed to address this size of demand. Most schools allow Syrian students in a separate educational session that starts in the afternoon, but while this solves the problem of the use of the school building, it does not solve the problem of shortage of teachers and educational materials<sup>14</sup>. Since it is illegal to employ Syrians in public schools as teachers, the existing teacher capacity in village and small town schools has not increased. In addition, 94% of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon are not aware of the availability of non-formal education opportunities. The other main obstacle is the cost of transportation which is comparatively high in Lebanon, and certainly above the financial ability of refugee families.

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<sup>11</sup> 101 Facts & Figures on the Syrian Refugee Crisis – Volume 2, 2019 [https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/books/2018-2019/20190701\\_101\\_facts\\_and\\_figures\\_on\\_the\\_syrian\\_refugee\\_crisis\\_volume\\_2.pdf](https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/books/2018-2019/20190701_101_facts_and_figures_on_the_syrian_refugee_crisis_volume_2.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> 101 Facts & Figures on the Syrian Refugee Crisis – Volume 2, 2019 [https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/books/2018-2019/20190701\\_101\\_facts\\_and\\_figures\\_on\\_the\\_syrian\\_refugee\\_crisis\\_volume\\_2.pdf](https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/books/2018-2019/20190701_101_facts_and_figures_on_the_syrian_refugee_crisis_volume_2.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/lebanon/media/701/file/Lebanon-report-4-2018.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/19/growing-without-education/barriers-education-syrian-refugee-children-lebanon>



Additional, and possibly more difficult to resolve reasons include the issues mentioned earlier in this report: the pressure on families to send children to work because of poverty, and the legal restrictions on mobility inside Lebanon, especially for male adults.

## 7. CULTURAL RIGHTS OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

### 7.1 CULTURAL RIGHTS: SCOPE AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

There is no official definition of cultural rights, but there are however many commonly used descriptions of the scope covered by the term. The lack of an official definition of the term could be attributed to two main reasons: the ambiguity of the term “culture” itself, and the dynamic and evolving nature of the subject matter.

It must also be noted that cultural rights have until the beginning of the millennium received less attention from international agencies and have been treated as rights of a lesser nature. The understanding of the scope of these rights has also developed since then to indicate the close relationship between the cultural rights of individuals and communities on one side and the cultural diversity of humanity on the other side. The first UN document to address this was the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity 2001<sup>15</sup> that states in its Article 5 that “Cultural rights are an integral part of human rights, which are universal, indivisible and interdependent. The flourishing of creative diversity requires the full implementation of cultural rights as defined in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in Articles 13 and 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. All persons have therefore the right to express themselves and to create and disseminate their work in the language of their choice, and particularly in their mother tongue; all persons are entitled to quality education and training that fully respect their cultural identity; and all persons have the right to participate in the cultural life of their choice and conduct their own cultural practices, subject to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

The UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage is an international legal instrument aiming to safeguard and ensure respect for intangible cultural heritage.<sup>16</sup> The 2003 Convention recognizes that intangible cultural heritage provides communities and groups with a sense of identity and continuity and is thus crucial for promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. Article 2.1 of the Convention states that “consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development.” Moreover, the 2003 Convention’s Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage recognize “The right of communities, groups and, where applicable, individuals to continue the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills necessary to ensure the viability of the intangible cultural heritage ...”. They also underline the rights of communities, groups and individuals to access “the instruments, objects, artefacts, cultural and natural spaces and places of memory” necessary for the enactment and transmission of their intangible cultural heritage, including in situations of armed conflict.<sup>17</sup>

The UNESCO 2005 Convention on The Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions is largely seen as a substantial international legal instrument for the understanding and

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<sup>15</sup> [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=13179&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

<sup>16</sup> Article 1 of the Convention states that: “The ‘Intangible Cultural heritage’ means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.” See <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>

<sup>17</sup> <https://ich.unesco.org/en/ethics-and-ich-00866>



exercise of cultural rights. It states in its guiding principle 1 that “Cultural diversity can be protected and promoted only if human rights and fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression, information and communication, as well as the ability of individuals to choose cultural expressions, are guaranteed. No one may invoke the provisions of this Convention in order to infringe human rights and fundamental freedoms as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or guaranteed by international law, or to limit the scope thereof.” The Convention outlines in its Articles 7 and 8 the scope of rights and freedoms that need to be protected and exercised to ensure the diversity of cultural expressions. It also describes in its Articles 9, 10 and 11 the mechanisms and partnerships needed to achieve the same goal.

The Fribourg Declaration on Cultural Rights of 2007<sup>18</sup>, although not an official international legal instrument, includes perhaps the most comprehensive description of cultural rights. It covers the cultural rights of individuals, communities and peoples as specific areas and in their intersection with other civic, social and economic rights.

The UN Human Rights Council Resolution 10/23<sup>19</sup> in 2009 included a clear framework for recognizing and protecting cultural rights, including the following important points:

- cultural rights are an integral part of human rights, which are universal, indivisible, interrelated and interdependent.
- the right of everyone to take part in cultural life and to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications;
- it is the duty of the States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- no one may invoke cultural diversity to infringe upon human rights guaranteed by international law, nor to limit their scope;
- States have the responsibility to promote and protect cultural rights;

But the most important decision included in this resolution is to establish, for a period of three years, a new special procedure entitled “independent expert in the field of cultural rights”, with the mandate to identify best practices in the promotion and protection of cultural rights at the local, national, regional and international levels; to identify possible obstacles to the promotion and protection of cultural rights, and to submit proposals and/or recommendations to the Council on possible actions in that regard. The report<sup>20</sup> of the first incumbent of this position, Farida Shaheed, which was submitted to the UN General Assembly on 22 March 2010, constitutes the most solid foundation for the understanding of the scope and types of cultural rights.

## 7.2 THREE MAIN AREAS OF CULTURAL RIGHTS

By analyzing the previously mentioned legal instruments, we can conclude that there are three main areas of cultural rights:

**A. Identity and Heritage:** This area includes rights such as: the right of individuals and communities to subscribe to a specific cultural identity, the right to change this subscription, the right to use and exercise the language(s), dialects, to continue the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills necessary to ensure the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, the right to receive respect for one’s cultural identity, the right to have access to heritage sites and archives, the right to practice own religious beliefs freely, the right to change or abandon own religious beliefs, and the right to belong to a cultural community or disconnect from this belonging.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/instree/Fribourg%20Declaration.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> [https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/E/HRC/resolutions/A\\_HRC\\_RES\\_10\\_23.pdf](https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/E/HRC/resolutions/A_HRC_RES_10_23.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> [https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/14session/A.HRC.14.36\\_en.pdf](https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/14session/A.HRC.14.36_en.pdf)

**B. Participation in Cultural Life:** This area includes the right to have direct, safe, affordable and non-discriminatory access to cultural services, spaces and products, the right to access formal and informal educational programs, the right to access public spaces to practice art and participate in cultural activities, the right to access information and knowledge that would enhance participation in cultural life, the right of free mobility inside and outside national borders, the right to gather and convene individuals and groups involved in cultural activities, and the right to form legal entities to enhance and avail participation in cultural life.

**C. Creativity and Expression:** This area includes the right to free expression, the right to access formal and informal education and training programs that would enable individuals and groups to produce artistic and cultural products and activities, the right to access financial and other resources needed for artistic and cultural production, the right to access cultural spaces and venues to present artistic and cultural production, the right to freely disseminate via digital and other means artistic and cultural products, the right to publicize and inform audiences about cultural activities and products, the right to exchange and cooperate among cultural creators within and across national borders, the right of mobility inside and outside national borders, and the right of cultural creators to benefit morally and materially from their work.

### **7.3 THE CHALLENGES FACING THE CULTURAL RIGHTS OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON**

#### **A. Identity and Heritage**

- Historical cultural connection between Syria and Lebanon have a double impact on the cultural rights of Syrian refugees. On the one hand, the commonalities make it easier for refugees, especially children and youth, to feel related to their new locations, use their intangible cultural heritage to build bridges with the host communities and understand their new social environments. On the other hand, the culture of the host community may have a dominant influence as refugees seek to assimilate to their new surroundings, posing a threat to the viability and continuation of their intangible cultural heritage. For example, many of the young refugees who come from rural and Bedouin parts of Syria are not using the dialect of their family but rather the Lebanese dialect spoken around them. The same tendency applies to dress codes, music and culinary practices, which are all important elements of the cultural heritage of the communities from Syria.
- This assimilation is accelerated by the somewhat hostile social environments in some parts of Lebanon. The feeling of pride normally associated with one's subscription to a historical cultural identity, or even only a particular cultural tradition, is becoming more of a liability for young Syrians in Lebanon.
- The lack of a public discourse on intangible cultural heritage of Syrian communities in Lebanon, and the almost complete absence of institutions that work to safeguard and raise awareness about this heritage may eventually lead to its loss in the conscious memory of young Syrian refugees.

#### **B. Participation in Cultural Life**

- **Affordability:** There are very few cultural centers, art education programs, theatres, movie houses etc. that exist in Lebanese cities, towns and villages that host Syrian refugees, and that offer free or affordable activities. If they exist, the average distance between such facilities and a refugee settlement is 10 KM. For most Syrian refugees outside Beirut, the cost of transportation is prohibitive and constitutes a major obstacle towards free mobility and access to culture.
- The lack of legal protection for young Syrian males is another serious obstacle as many of them have difficulties in obtaining the necessary legal documents for safe mobility inside Lebanon.

- The supply of cultural services, programs and products that target Syrian refugees in Lebanon is rather limited, and obtaining information on them is not easy. Most Syrian refugees that Action for Hope met and worked with since 2015 have had no information about any plays, concerts, film screenings or art exhibitions in the parts of Lebanon where they live. In some parts of Lebanon, the hostile social environment causes many Syrian refugees to feel unwelcome in public spaces where they could be identified as aliens.

### **C. Expression and Creativity**

- Many of the professional Syrian artists who came to Lebanon between 2012 and 2015 were not registered as refugees, and have left to Western countries or to Turkey. The few artists who remained in Lebanon have some access to production opportunities either in the TV drama industry or in independent cultural production. However, the legal framework in Lebanon for the employment of non-Lebanese artists does not allow them to equally access employment opportunities and creates difficult financial and bureaucratic conditions for their employment. Additionally, since Syrian refugees are only allowed by Lebanese law to work in the three sectors of Agriculture, Construction and Environment (Cleaning Services), Syrian artists and cultural practitioners don't have access to work-permits.
- Access to financial resources for producing art work by Syrian artists has decreased since 2016, as is observed from the number of production grants given by the main donor organizations operating in Lebanon.
- There is some ambiguity around the legal frameworks for the work of amateur and semi-professional artists. For example, shooting and producing a film by amateur filmmakers requires security permissions by different authorities, and in some cases is denied if some of those taking part in the film do not have valid legal residence permits, which are in turn very difficult to get.
- Access to arts education programs is extremely difficult due to the cost of these programs and the transportation cost. Opportunities for artistically talented young Syrians to train in the arts are rare, especially outside Beirut. It must be noted here that the University of Saint Joseph offers a full university scholarship in audio visual studies for Syrian students.
- Mobility rights of professional and amateur Syrian artists in Lebanon are restricted by the existing legal frameworks. One award winning young filmmaker who lives in Beirut is unable to travel outside the city because his passport has been held by the authorities for over two years and another artist, a theater director and playwright, is in a similar situation because he fled to Lebanon illegally in 2014. Restriction on travel outside Lebanon is another difficult obstacle; those registered with UNHCR cannot travel outside Lebanon and return to it again. For example in 2017, Action for Hope's theater company that consists of amateur artists, including minors and children, was invited to perform at the Edinburgh Festival but could not travel because the members of the group would not be allowed to return to Lebanon after they leave.

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations could be implemented through various modalities such as funding programs, capacity building programs, and exchanges:

- 8.1 Support efforts by universities, research centers, cultural organizations and artistic groups aiming at promoting the understanding and appreciation of the intangible heritage of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.** This could take various forms: collection and documentation, research, training, conferences, performances, and training programs. It is important that such efforts are developed jointly by Syrian and Lebanese partners and that they are not limited to elite circles in the major cities but are coupled with outreach programs in refugee communities.
- 8.2 Encourage the integration of arts programs in the activities of public schools that accept Syrian students.** This should also include teacher training, developing tool kits and awareness raising activities for student families.
- 8.3 Encourage and support specialized arts training programs, and the production and presentation of artistic work in diverse forms by Lebanese and Syrian artists and trainers** that targets young Syrians and that also involves active participation by Lebanese youth.
- 8.4 Support efforts by non-governmental organizations, cultural organizations, artistic groups and municipalities to create community cultural centers that are close to Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon.** Such centers could be hosted by already existing social clubs, youth centers and schools. The activities offered in these centers should enable and encourage free creative expression by young Syrians, as well as practice of intangible cultural heritage expressions such as music, dance and culinary arts. These centers could constitute much needed spaces for dialogue between host communities and refugees.
- 8.5 Encourage already existing legal aid programs by non-governmental organizations to include offering legal aid to Syrian professional and amateur artists** in relation to their status as artists, their mobility, and with the legal procedures needed for their practices.
- 8.6 Conduct field studies in the area of the cultural rights of refugees.** This should include collecting data and documenting case studies on the resources and practices related to intangible cultural heritage, creative artistic expression, and access to cultural services.
- 8.7 Encourage mainstreaming artistic and cultural activities in the work of UN and non-governmental organizations** that provide aid, development and relief programs to Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Although this might be difficult but it is important to at least start to discuss it.



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