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## **Female Refugees' Perception of Children Education at Za'atari Camp-Jordan**

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# Female Refugees' Perception of Children Education at Za'atari Camp-Jordan

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## Abstract

Despite the establishment of nine schools at the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan, the enrollment rate for school-age children remains at fifty percent. What factors impact refugee students' enrollment? Could parents' perception of the camp's schools or education play a role in the low school attendance at these schools? This qualitative phenomenological study examined thirty female Syrian refugees' perceptions of their children education at the Za'atari Refugee Camp in Jordan. Interpretive Phenomenological Analytic (IPA) was employed to analyze the data collected through in-depth interviews. Findings demonstrated the refugees' high regard for education and their aspirations for a brighter future for their children. Results also highlighted the challenges refugees face at the camp, which impede their children education and prevent the majority of them from attending schools. The results of this study shed a light on the obstacles that refugee parents face to provide education for their children at the camp. The findings should provide educational leaders with the awareness to better understand the concerns of refugee students and their parents. Additionally, this knowledge can help host countries create policies and practices that better address refugee students' educational needs.

**Keywords:** Syrian refugees, refugees' education, perceptions of refugees' camps Education

# **Percepción de los Refugiados Femeninos de la Educación Infantil en el Campamento Za'atari, Jordania**

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## **Resumen**

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A pesar del establecimiento de nueve escuelas en el campo de refugiados de Za'atari en Jordania, la tasa de matriculación para niños en edad escolar sigue siendo del cincuenta por ciento. ¿Qué factores afectan la inscripción de estudiantes refugiados? ¿Podría la percepción de los padres sobre las escuelas o la educación del campamento desempeñar un papel en la baja asistencia escolar a estas escuelas? Este estudio fenomenológico cualitativo examinó la percepción de treinta mujeres refugiadas sirias sobre la educación de sus hijos en el campo de refugiados de Za'atari en Jordania. El análisis fenomenológico interpretativo (IPA) se empleó para analizar los datos recopilados a través de entrevistas en profundidad. Los resultados demostraron el gran respeto de los refugiados por la educación y sus aspiraciones de un futuro más brillante para sus hijos. Los resultados también destacaron los desafíos que enfrentan los refugiados en el campamento, que impiden la educación de sus hijos y evitan que la mayoría de ellos asistan a las escuelas. Los resultados de este estudio arrojan luz sobre los obstáculos que enfrentan los padres refugiados para brindar educación a sus hijos en el campamento. Los hallazgos deberían proporcionar a los líderes educativos la conciencia para comprender mejor las preocupaciones de los estudiantes refugiados y sus padres. Además, este conocimiento puede ayudar a los países de acogida a crear políticas y prácticas que aborden mejor las necesidades educativas de los estudiantes refugiados.

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**Palabras clave:** refugiados sirios, educación de refugiados, percepciones de la educación de los campamentos de refugiados



The Syrian Civil War has resulted in the displacement and suffering of millions of Syrian people. To accommodate the steady and large influx of Syrian refugees, a number of camps were established in the Jordanian desert. The first camp, established in July of 2012, came to be known as the Za'atari Camp and became the most concentrated site for Syrian refugees in Jordan.

According to extensive approximation, the camp was initially designed to house 5000 refugees. However, after one year of establishment it was housing more than 30,000 refugees. Within two years, it had become the world's second largest refugee camp and the largest in the region with over 100,000 refugees. As of today, the camp has become Jordan's fourth largest city. It has six hospitals, three schools, eight mosques, a number of public facilities, and is home to 84,000-120,000 Syrian refugees. The majority of the camp's refugees came from Daraa Governorate, the home of the uprising against Al-Assad's regime. Fifty-four percent of these refugees are females, and 23% of them are 18 years of age and older (UNHCR, 2014b).

The large inflow of Syrian refugees in Jordan has overstrained the country's infrastructure, including its educational system. Considering Jordan's size and modest resources, the enrollment of Syrian refugees into the country's educational system has passed its saturation point. According to Jordan's Ministry of Education, 83,232 Syrian children enrolled in public schools in Jordan. Sadly, however, this number encompasses only 44% (UNHCR, 2014a) of the total 187,675 Syrian school-age children registered with UNHCR in Jordan (UNHCR, 2013). To accommodate and encourage the enrollment of refugees, the Jordanian government has waived tuition fee for all Syrian children and instated the "double-shift" system in its public schools. Through this system Jordanian students attend the morning shift and Syrian students attend the afternoon shift (UNHCR, 2014b). Inside the Za'atari Camp schools also have a double shift: female students attend the morning shifts leaving the afternoon shifts for male students (Shmulovich, 2014).

### **Significance of the Study**

The traumatic experience of the Syrian Conflict along with the challenges associated with resettlement has resulted in many Syrian children missing a considerable school time. Because they have been unable to catch up with

current school requirements, many of the children have lost the drive to continue their education, leaving them vulnerable and having no choice, but to drop out.

Although school enrollment in camp settings is usually higher than urban settings, according to the United Nations 2014 report, half of the camp’s children is out of school. This is of major magnitude when considering 57% of the camp’s population of 82,000 is under the age of 18.

With the Syrian Crisis becoming the worst humanitarian crisis in recent years and resulting in lengthening the refugees’ situation, the call for understanding refugees’ experiences and suffering, once again, has been brought to the forefront of the global agenda. For the most part, literature on refugee research has focused, through quantitative studies, on the refugees’ traumatic experiences during pre-migration, transit stages, and subsequently, its negative psychological effects (Khawaja, White, Schweitzer & Greenslade, 2008). The new trend of refugee research begins through the use of qualitative methodology and extends the research focus to refugees’ experiences in the post-migration stage; as their hardship continues throughout their settlement. Thus, there is paucity in refugee research regarding coping mechanisms and other factors that promote positive adaptation in the post-migration stage (Khawaja et al. 2008). Building on this conclusion, this study employed a qualitative approach to explore the challenges faced by camp refugees regarding their children’s education.

The new trend in refugees’ research has been employing qualitative methodology as they have concluded quantitative methodology is problematic; as it does not holistically explain refugees’ experiences (Khawaja et al., 2008). Khawaja et al. (2008) argued quantitative methodology “fails to capture the diverse human experiences associated with extreme events” (p.493). Therefore, the researchers utilized a phenomenological approach to examine the Syrian female refugees’ experience in the camp, specifically their views and struggle with their children’s education. Phenomenology explores how a group of individuals within a culture, experience a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Johnson & Christensen, 2012). It is an attempt to “gain access to individuals’ life –worlds and to describe their experiences of a phenomenon” (Johnson & Christensen, 2013, p. 384). Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore female refugees’ views in regard to their children education.

## Conceptual Framework

Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. Viktor E. Frankl

For the most part, refugee Research has categorized the migration stages as: pre-migration, transit, and post migration experience or resettlement (Arnetz, Rofa, Arnetz, Ventimiglia & Jamil, 2013; Khawaja, et al., 2008; Schweitzer, Greenslade & Kagee, 2007). However, recent studies on refugee research have found the main focus to be on refugees' traumatic experiences and their vulnerability to psychological distress disorders while neglecting to explore the resilience aptitude and other coping mechanisms that characterize and are part of the refugees' experience (Arnetz, et al., 2013; Mann, 2010; Schweitzer, et al., 2007; Thomas, Roberts, Luitel, Upadhaya & Tol, 2011). In exploring the Sudanese refugees' resilience and coping mechanisms, Schweitzer, Greenslade and Kagee (2007) found that despite refugees' significant trauma and hardship, they were very resilient and hopeful about their future. They argued refugee research has been placing great emphasis on the refugees' traumas and post-traumatic stress reactions while neglecting to understand the positive adaptations in the refugees' settlement experiences (Schweitzer, et al., 2007). They further explained that these studies relied on checklists and questionnaires in collecting data and neglected to take into consideration the refugees' adaptation processes.

During armed conflicts, women and girls are usually targeted in order to achieve political gains (Women, Peace and Security, United Nations, 2002) making them the most vulnerable group. No doubt understanding this group's adversities (vulnerability, challenges and difficulties) is very important. However, the life experiences of refugee women do not end when adversity takes hold of their lives. Many refugee women stand high and refuse to bend; they are shattered, but not defeated. The researchers believe this is particularly true of the depiction of refugee women's experiences especially in Muslim and Middle Eastern refugee women. The authors chose to focus on refugee mothers' views and experience as they sought education for their children at the Za'atari camp.

The recent refugee crisis had put a tremendous pressure on many countries

to accommodate the educational needs of such population. Lucie Cerna (2019) contends that currently these needs are largely not being met. This negatively impacts refugee students’ academic, social and emotional wellbeing.

Building on Schweitzer et al. (2007) framework, and instead of generating a list of challenges, difficulties, and abuses faced by refugee women in camp settings, the guiding framework for this study explored, through qualitative phenomenological methods, the tenacity, resilience, and strength that has empowered refugee women through their experiences as they pursued opportunities for educating their children at the camp. This study offers a comprehensive overall view of the refugees’ perceptions and life experiences, particularly, their assessments of and involvements in their children education.

### **Refugees Education**

Research on refugees’ resilience revealed that valuing education as an ingredient for success has been used as a coping strategy for dealing with their current situations (Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Goodman, 2004; Khawaja, et al., 2008). Sarah Dryden-Peterson (2011) stated that throughout the years of refugees’ calamities and normal life disruptions, education has always remained the refugees’ “highest priority.” Thus, it has served as a stabilizer and a source of hope for refugees.

In 1948, the United Nations’ Declaration of Universal Human Rights, Article 26, promoted human fundamental rights, freedoms, and peace. Accordingly, education was seen as a universal basic human right by the UN; “an ‘enabling right,’ providing ‘skills that people need to reach their full potential and to exercise their other rights, such as the right to life and health’” (Dryden-Peterson, 2011, p.9). Understanding the importance of education as support for the social and psychological well-being of an individual being, the UN, through its 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) Article 28, extended this right to all refugees. By doing so, they recognized education as a base for reaching self-reliance (Bruijn, 2009).

Perhaps there is no other group of individuals that completely understand and place such great value on education, as do the refugees in developing countries. Ruud Lubbers, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, wrote in his introduction for *Learning for a Future: Refugee Education in*

*Developing Countries (UNHCR, 2001)*

Contrary to popular opinion, visiting a refugee camp or settlement is frequently an inspiring experience. For while refugees undoubtedly suffer a great deal of hardship and trauma, they also show tremendous determination to make the best of a bad situation and to prepare for the day when they can resume a normal way of life. This determination is to be seen most clearly in the very high value which refugees place on all forms of education. Indeed, experience shows that once refugees have met their basic need for food, water and shelter, their primary concern is to ensure that their children can go to school. (p. III)

Furthermore, Sarah Dryden-Peterson wrote, “Refugees mothers, fathers, and children the world over emphasize that education is ‘the key to the future’, that it will help bring peace to their countries, that despite not knowing ‘what will happen tomorrow, ‘education brings stability and hope’” (p. 8).

In times of extreme emergencies, the basic assumption of the importance of education has been that school is crucial for the well-being of children. Rebecca Winthrop and Jackie Kirk (2008) stated education programs in emergencies usually serve as a platform for providing children with a much-needed sense of normalcy, a tool for socializing and acculturation, a nurturing and safe environment, and “as instrument for coping and hoping.” Nonetheless, they argued, “learning is rarely a central concern.”

### **Population and Sampling Procedures**

This was a qualitative phenomenological study that aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of female participants of the value of education for their children. Thirty Syrian female refugees living at the Za’atari Camp participated in this study. Thus, inclusion criteria included female Syrian refugees, living in the Za’atari Camp and were the breadwinners of their households. For the purpose of this study, females with no school-aged children were excluded. It is important to note there were a significant number of households headed by females inside the Za’atari Camp because they either lost their husbands or they were incapacitated in the war, and in some cases the males had chosen to stay behind to protect their homes or continue to fight. All interviews took place inside the camp, and participation was carried out on a voluntary basis.



### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In-depth interviewing was the main data collection method for this study. For the duration of a one-month, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Syrian female refugees residing in the Za’atari Camp. The data analysis was conducted according to the Interpretive Phenomenological Analytic (IPA) guidelines.

### **Findings**

Thirty participants who had school age children were interviewed. Twenty participants (66.6%) reported at least one or two children didn’t attend school. Two participants confessed they sent their kids to school for babysitting purposes. The results also revealed there were high percentages of students who were enrolled, but not attending.

The interviews revealed a duality in the female refugees’ stance on education. Many accorded great importance to education as a source of future security, economic independence, and a weapon against adversity. Yet, they did not take a firm stance and insist on sending their kids to school. The following section offers insights into the factors, as perceived by the female refugees, which contributed to their reluctance to take full advantage of the educational system at the Camp.

### **Reasons for Detachment from Education inside the Camp**

#### **Refugees’ perception of the inferiority of the Za’atari’s education.**

Their belief the Za’atari’s education was inferior and would not be accredited upon returning to Syria was prevalent throughout the camp. This became a driving force behind tolerating the absence of education in their kids’ lives and adopting a relaxed attitude about education. Backed by their belief that their stay at the camp would be short-lived, along with the camp’s initial conditions, many saw insisting on sending the kids to school as “a waste of time”, and somewhat extraneous as there were more pressing issues at hand. One participant explained:

It is better for me that my son works and earns five dinars because what

am I going to benefit from his schooling. I mean if we go back...if we go back to Syria, his schooling will not be accredited at all. Now, there were people who stayed here for three years and went back to Syria. They [their kids] had to repeat everything because their education was not accepted in Syria. You think about it if you don't have money to eat, and you have a family. It is better that my son goes to work.

Was this a rumor started by the Assad's regime to keep Syrians from leaving, thus extending his control over them, or was it a malicious strategy to punish the refugees and their kids for leaving Syria? This could not be confirmed. Some participants claimed they heard these rumors, but they didn't know where. While others avowed they were told by their relatives or acquaintances who had since gone back to Syria. Regardless of the origin or the accuracy of these claims, they became the excuse to keep many children at Za'atari camp away from schools.

However, ten participants (33%) reasoned that even if their kids' education at the Za'atari wouldn't be accredited in Syria, learning skills were the same everywhere, and children should continue to go to school. They hoped upon their return to Syria they would be placed according to their assessment skills. Others rationalized that basic math, reading, and writing skills were essentials for every kid and must be acquired for different reasons. They insisted it was important and mandatory that kids get an education. One young mother said, "It is important that he [her son] learns to read."

**Distance from schools and bullying en route to school.** The distance from and to school and lack of safety was the second cited reason by participants for not sending their kids to school. The schools were too far, and the kids had to walk to school in the rain and heat. During wintertime, the streets were muddy and impassable, and most children did not have adequate clothing for such weather. The summer season was very hot and dusty, and kids complained of having a hard time walking in the sand. One mother argued,

Because of the distance from school and because of the other problems that existed in the schools, parents are refusing to send their kids to school. I mean, nobody wants to lose his child for the sake of

schooling.... let’s take a first-grade student as an example, could he walk 45 minutes going and 45 minutes coming back in this heat and cold weather? Who wants to lose his child? Also, this is a camp; there were no streets; paths were muddy...mud was everywhere. The mud used to get up to our knees.

Additionally, many school children were subjected to harassment and abuse during their commute to and from schools. This made many parents uncomfortable about sending their kids to school. One mother stated. “If I want to send her, that is if I can make her go, the school is located at the end of the camp, too far. I cannot let her go by herself. It is not safe to walk by herself.”

Another participant said,

I feel it is important for her to learn, and I wanted her to learn, but I don’t know! If I send her to school, I have to take her there, and I have to pick her up. The school is too far, and I can’t take her and bring her back. It is a long distance and my leg. I fell down on my leg, it is fractured now, and I cannot walk. I swear I can’t even walk.

Faced with this problem, one participant who insisted on sending her 16-year-old daughter to school and was adamant about not letting her walk by herself succeeded in convincing other parents on her street to send their daughters as well; thereby forming one big group with the reasoning that strength is in numbers. However, because of the relatively small size of the group, when one did not or could not attend school on any given day, the other members of the group would not go to school as well. This resulted in the girls losing interest altogether; which was another reason enumerated by the participants.

As security became a serious issue threatening many lives during the first year of encampment, parents forbade their children from going to school altogether. Others insisted on accompanying their kids to school on a daily basis. Thus, kids’ attendance became contingent on the adults’ convenience and time. In many cases, this responsibility fell on the female as being the sole caregiver. Having to manage many other responsibilities, accompanying the

kids to school became a secondary priority when confronted with other “urgent” matters.

**Children lack of interest in schooling.** During the interviews it became common to hear mothers complaining: “My daughter refused to go to school;” “My son will not go to school, and he doesn’t mind me anymore;” “This is if I can make her go to school;” and “Sometimes I send them to school, and sometimes they refuse to go.” An elderly participant talked of her frustration with her son’s disconnect:

I couldn’t make him go [to school]. Kids here are different from what they used to be. They have different reactions. I mean their life has changed. Everything has changed. Before [encampment] you used to talk to your child, and he minded you. Now they don’t mind you. I feel they get mad and upset over little things. It is from what they have seen over there [in Syria].

These statements demonstrated the Za’atari children’s traumatization and lack of interest in school and education, especially among older children.

Lack of interest in schooling had become a phenomenon in the camp and different reasons were cited for this problem: A) Disruption from schools for a long time. B) Different Curriculum. C) Parents’ Perceptions of the Za’atari Schools. D) Bullying and Aggressiveness among Students, and E) Child Labor. The following section elaborate and provide reasoning for lack of students’ interest in schools at the camp as professed by the mothers in this study.

**A. Extended disruption from schools.** The extended disruption from school has put students at great disadvantages; many children lost their basic skills of math, reading, writing, and drive to learn. According to a participant working in the camp U.N. Literacy Center, twelve to fourteen-year-old children had forgotten most of their basic skills of math and reading, and were having a hard time regaining their skills.

Now most of the kids in the center are not enrolled in schools. They don’t know how to study. They cannot read or write...when I tell them

that they need to learn, they say, ‘What are we going to do with these schools’ certificates. We don’t want to learn’.... they say Jordan’s certificate [education] is not accredited in Syria.

**B. Different curriculum.** Having to deal with a different curriculum, which seems to be a burden for the children as well as their parents, has exacerbated the problem. According to the participants, their children were having difficulties adjusting or following the Jordanian curriculum. Furthermore, a few participants confessed they themselves were having a hard time understanding the curriculum and found themselves unable to help their children in their schoolwork. Faced with this dilemma, they declared there was nothing they could do.

**C. Parents’ perceptions of the the Za’atari schools.** Parent participants posited the classrooms were crowded; schools were not sufficiently equipped, and adequately prepared to deal with camp children and their psychological state:

When I went to enroll my child at the school, I looked around the school. I felt that was not an environment for teaching or learning. There was no teaching taking place. The teacher assistant was standing there telling the students to sit down and hush.

A mother of two elaborated,

There is no learning here [at the camp]. There is no learning taking place here. I encourage my sons to learn for their future in Syria. Nobody gives them attention and nobody cares if they learn or don’t learn; nobody [at the school] cares.

A few complained their kids were passing grades, but were not learning anything. One participant was frustrated about her six-year-old son forgetting the basic skills: “My son couldn’t write his name. I asked him to write his name but he couldn’t. He told me he couldn’t. How did he pass? How did he pass first grade?”

**D. Bullying and aggressiveness among students.** Over 90% of the participants expressed concerns about their children's high level of aggressiveness, and other behavioral and emotional problems such as; bullying, hitting, shoving or fighting, using profane language, passivity, and disconnection from their family. Many of these behaviors were manifesting in and around the schools. The participants said they hesitated or did not want to send their kids to school because of bullying and harassments. Two participants confessed they stopped sending their kids to schools because the kids themselves had turned into bullies and many students were complaining about them. One of them expressed frustration with her two sons; one had become very aggressive and the other very passive.

I used to send them to school even when one used to come back with his face all bloodied and beaten up while the middle one had kicked and hit his classmates...I keep them in the house now because of these problems. They beat the kids, and the other kids hit them back. So I thought if I keep them with me, they wouldn't cause any more problems.

A divorcee with ten children said her "middle son, has become very aggressive and was constantly getting into fights." She further explained that she did not know what to do with him. In other cases, the children themselves had become passive and defenseless; refusing to go to school altogether to avoid being bullied or harassed.

**E. Child Labor.** Due to having to leave everything behind, the severity of encampment life especially during the first year, and the absence of the protection of a male figure, many households were faced with financial constraints. This resulted in many women having to rely on their kids to help bring in extra income. According to participants' narratives, it has become a common practice within the Za'atari Camp for children to take turns in running the family stores or selling merchandise in wheelbarrows around the camp. One mother admitted, "My boys, sometimes they go to school and sometimes they don't. They sell tomatoes on a wheelbarrow around the camp."

A storeowner with three children said, “Aha, it is ok. I let my kids work in the store. I cannot stay all day in the store. I stay until one of them comes from school, then I leave.” When asked about their schooling, one explained, “Yeah, my kids go to school. I have a little kid, he is twelve years old and when he is off school, I let him work.” On days when the store did not yield enough money, the children had to go around selling goods on the streets.

One mother explained,

The store cannot make it. All day long for one Dinar, what could a Dinar do, it is not worth anything? Work is very slow; there are two other stores here, on this street. Work is very slow.... My oldest son doesn't want to go to school; he wants to work, so we told him to go to school during weekdays and work when the school is off.... he sells different things on the wagon when the weather is good. I let him go out with the wagon when school is off.

Sometimes, the children themselves understood the hardship their families were going through and decided on their own to help out by working:

Imagine! The boy wrote he wanted to grow up to help his family. What's your goal in life? 'Be anything just to help my parents.' Do you believe it? This is all he aspires to. His ambition was to become a doctor, an engineer, a teacher...anything. My child has no ambitions, but to help his family, to do anything to help his family.... and he is doing this now. You know, he is doing this now. He told his father to buy him a box of biscuits. When his dad asked why? He said, 'I want to sell it and help you'.

Child labor exists predominantly among storeowners and unemployed households. Of all employed participants with children, thirteen reported that due to their own employment at the camp the household was financially stable; this was their sole responsibility. In fact, many stressed their main reason for working was to provide for their kids and to avoid having them share in this responsibility. Eight out these thirteen participants (61.5%) were among those who insisted on sending their kids to school.

However, employed participants' children were having to assume their share of the burden. They were expected to shoulder some of the responsibilities with their mothers, therefore the responsibility of taking care of the house and younger siblings shifted to the oldest children. The magnitude of this burden on children's educations couldn't be confirmed, as participants themselves seemed to be oblivious of this shift. They seemed unaware of the sacrifices their kids were making and the lasting effects this had or would have on their education as stated by one participant:

Before we were depending on the male; he used to get out, work, and make money. The female was sitting home. She was responsible for her house and cooking. Now the situation has changed. Now I am the one who has to provide. I have put my daughter in my place. My daughter now is the mother. I tell her to take care of her brothers; for example, if they are hungry put food for them. If your sister needs changing, change her diaper. Take care of them. Now I am different. I am now the male of this house; I go out and look for a job. I mean the situation has changed.... now, I am counting on my nine-year-old daughter. I go to work, and I leave her here taking care of her brothers. She babysits them and does some chores around the house.

Employed and unemployed participants agreed on the importance of education, however, most of the employed mothers were firmer about sending their children to school than unemployed mothers. One mother explained:

Yes, my daughter goes to school. Seriously, from the time we came here. I like for my daughter to go to school, even though there were too many people against it and did not send their kids to school...I used to walk her to school in the morning, and when it was time for her to go home, I picked her up from school. The important thing was that there would not be a time when she didn't study.

Employed participants reasoned education "is their weapon against any adversity." They wanted to make sure their children were equipped with "this weapon" so they could handle any future hardship that might lie ahead. Because of their employment, they could afford a better life inside the camp



than those who were not employed; therefore, wanted their children, in particular, their daughters, to be afforded the same opportunity. The unemployed participants, on the other hand, attributed their hardships at the camp to their unemployed status because of their lack of education. One participant said, “Had I had an education or any kind of skills, my life would have been much better...and I wouldn’t be in this miserable situation.” In other words, valuing education was motivated by their desire to prevent their kids from experiencing the same fate.

A few participants paralleled the same sentiment of wanting to spare their daughters from their own fate by giving them a better chance in life with education. Also, many began to realize the value of education or vocational skills in their daily lives. They felt that they did not want to subject their daughters to the same restrictions they had undergone while growing up:

It is important now. Had I had a job, I would have relied on my job rather than going to this and that for help. My job would have helped me.... because of what I had experienced in my life and what had happened to me, it is a must that my child doesn’t experience what I did. I must work hard and insist my daughter reads and earns a degree just like everybody else.

## **Discussion**

Attainment of education before the Civil War was the building block of Syria’s communities regardless of their socio-economic status. Education was among the regime’s top priority, and as a result, Syria had one of the highest literacy rates in the Middle East (Christophersen, 2015). However, the years of civil war has had a profound impact on the schooling of Syrian children. Much of their educations was interrupted, and as a result, they have lost their core competencies of reading, writing, and math. Due to the Za’atari camp’s relatively short history and its many challenges, education did not take a precedent in the refugees’ priorities. Children are paying a high price for the crisis as many of them are out of school and dropout rates at the Za’atari are alarmingly high (Save the Children, 2014).

The results revealed a duality in female refugees’ stance on education. Participants understood the importance of education for their children’s future self-sufficiency and psychological well-being; yet not all acted accordingly.

Paradoxically, education to them was seen as the guarantee for a decent and better future, and they all wanted their children to have that guarantee. Their statement: “Had I had a degree, a certificate or any kind of education, I won’t be where I am now” echoed throughout the interviews. They saw part of their predicament as being a result of their lack of education and wanted to protect their kids from the same fate. In spite of this understanding, education took a backseat when faced with the camp challenges and hardships.

Then, one must ask why the detachment? For the most part, the focus of participants was placed on returning to Syria, as they believed that their time at the Za’atari camp was short-lived. Driven by the belief education at the camp would not be accepted anywhere in Syria, participants seemed to invoke a logic of necessity when negotiating their kids’ education options at the Za’atari. Some rationalized having an extra source of income in such difficult times (by allowing their children to work) would be more logical than sending them to schools where their education would not be accredited upon their return to Syria. Others thought the confinement of their kids, especially daughters, was a more logical way of ensuring their safety, honor, and well-being. Other participants believed that their kids had seen enough traumas in their lifetime, and didn’t want to subject them to additional hardship and tension when no benefits would be gained from attending camp schools.

Ironically, the participants’ encampment had changed their perspectives about pre-encampment life and brought the lack of formal education to the forefront of their thinking. Participants linked their current predicament to their lack of formal or vocational education. Those who could not find a job and had a hard time providing for their families attributed it, among other reasons, to their lack of education or skills. Thus, they wished to prevent their kids from having the same fate. References were made to formal education as being “a weapon in their hands” against any kind of future adversity. On the other hand, the employed participants linked their survival in the camp to their ability to work; thus, wanting to provide the same opportunity to their kids (including daughters) by insisting on their education. For many of these refugees, the importance of education did not escape them. However, in the midst of everything that was taking place in the camp; the severity of the camp’s situation during its first year of establishment, the lack of security, and inadequate infrastructures, education took a backseat. Refugees had to

concentrate on survival needs. Thus, many saw no harm in putting their kids’ education to the side for the time being.

The findings from this study echo the results of Nael (2107) research. Sarah Nael (2017) interviewed Syrian families at the Za’atari camp seeking their perceptions of the education provided for their children at the camp. She found that parents expressed the same duality of views expressed in this study regarding education. Parents viewed the education of their children to be very important but deemed the education provided to their children at the camp as lacking quality. Parents contended that schools are available and the curriculum is good at the camp. However, they perceived the quality of teaching and teachers’ training to be poor. As a result, they expressed doubts about the value of their children education.

## **Implications**

The data on refugee children is scarce making it more difficult to inform future policy and provide targeted services for these students (Cerna, 2019). Both Cerna (2019) and Crul (2016) asserted that there is limited research on policies and practices regarding refugees’ integration when it comes to youth’s education. Bonin states that, “. . . as the current situation is basically without precedent, the existing empirical research provides a rather weak basis for inferring what could work best to support educational development of this target group [refugees]” (2017, p. 44).

This study provided insights into gaps in the literature on refugee education, specifically, parents’ perceptions of their children education at the refugee camp. Information gathered from this study could contribute to the development and improvement of school practices for youth refugees. The findings suggest that there is a need to create a welcoming, safe and inclusive environment for students and their parents in order to build a stronger relationship between the schools and parents that can lead to long-term success for children. This sentiment was supported by earlier research (Chrispeels, & Rivero, 2001; Fazily, 2012; Kessler-Sklard, 2000).

Schools should provide refugee children academic support by assessing students’ skills and providing a positive learning atmosphere (Pastoor, 2016). Educators should work diligently to remove barriers to students’ success, fill gaps in their learning skills, and highlight their accomplishments. Additionally,

educators need to foster strong relationship with parents enlisting their support in keeping students motivated to increase students' persistence and success in schools (Sidhu & Taylor, 2009).

The findings of this study support earlier research's (Bonin, 2017, Cerna, 2019) contention that there is a need to adopt a comprehensive model for refugee education that addresses not only the academic needs of these students but their social and emotional needs as well. Essomba (2017) argued that refugee children often deal with trauma which impact their social and emotional development as well as their academic learning. Therefore, they need schools with strong emotional and affective component.

To respond to the need of refugee children for language learning, overcoming interruptions in schooling or limited education, adjusting to a new education environment, developing a sense of belonging and feeling safe, it is useful if teachers and other professionals are trained to support their specific needs. (Cerna, 2019. p. 41).

This means that schools should provide teachers with professional development that will enable them to develop the skills needed to address the students' needs. Mary Mendenhall (2015) argued that, . . . teachers lack the experience and skills related to teaching refugees and this in turn leads to poor quality education for refugees" (p. 102).

The findings of this study represent the views of the interviewed population in the Za'atari camp, which were similar to the results of Nael (2017) research. The perceptions expressed in this study, one can postulate, reflect the views of similar refugee groups encamped around the world. The knowledge garnered in this research reflect the views and challenges faced by parents as they seek education for their children. Therefore, education policy makers and camp organizers should seek avenues to address these challenges in order to provide quality education for refugee students.

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