Under Curfew: 9

Refugee Workers in the Wind

The Ramifications of the Corona Crisis on Refugees in Jordan

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Introduction

Once cases of the Corona virus (COVID 19) began appearing outside the Chinese city of Wuhan, its initial epicenter, alarm signals began sounding around the world urging for measures to be taken to stop its spread. These alarm bells warned that the world could fall into the clutches of a disastrous pandemic that will result in huge losses which will be reflected in all aspects of human life.

Governments around the world heeded these warnings and began designing multiple scenarios to deal with the virus, especially those neighbouring China which knew that it would be nearly impossible to stop the virus from entering them. These measures increased after the World Health Organisation declared it as a "pandemic" and called for the world to collaborate together in their efforts to put an end to it.

Precautionary and preventive measures that were taken by various countries focused on: social distancing, caring for personal hygiene, preventing gatherings in all their forms, stopping work in most sectors, strengthening the structure of health institutions, among other decisive measures to counter the deadly virus.

Following in the footsteps of the world, Jordan began enacting numerous precautionary measures. The most important of the decisions it took is the declaration of the Defence Law of 1992 and its amendments, followed by a number of decisions according to it.

The second of these decisions and arguably the most important is the announcement of the curfew in the Kingdom. As a result, all the public and private establishments were closed except for those deemed as working in vital sectors such those working in the health sector or in the armed or security forces.

The curfew has resulted in numerous ramifications that affected the lives of the host community and refugees alike. These ramifications are related to both the living and economic conditions of these communities, as everyone, whether Jordanians, refugees or migrants were impacted.

This report is the result of monitoring that was conducted on the impact of the Corona Crisis on Refugees Workers. The monitoring relied on phone calls with refugee workers that the Tamkeen team conducted, in addition to the complaints that the organisation received through phone or social media platforms in the period between 18/3/2020- 18/4/2020.

The Shadows of the Pandemic: Refugees from 52 Nationalities

There are 744,795 registered refugees in Jordan from 52 different nationalities. Of these refugees, 655,000 are Syrians, 67,000 are Iraqis, 15,000 Yemenis and 6,000 Sudanese, while the remaining 2,500 refugees are from other nationalities according to the data of the UNHCR.

Jordan is not a signatory to any of the international conventions or protocols concerning refugees, including the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol. Yet, the Kingdom has hosted refugees for decades, as well as allowed some of them to work in certain sectors legally. Many others work informally in open and close sectors.

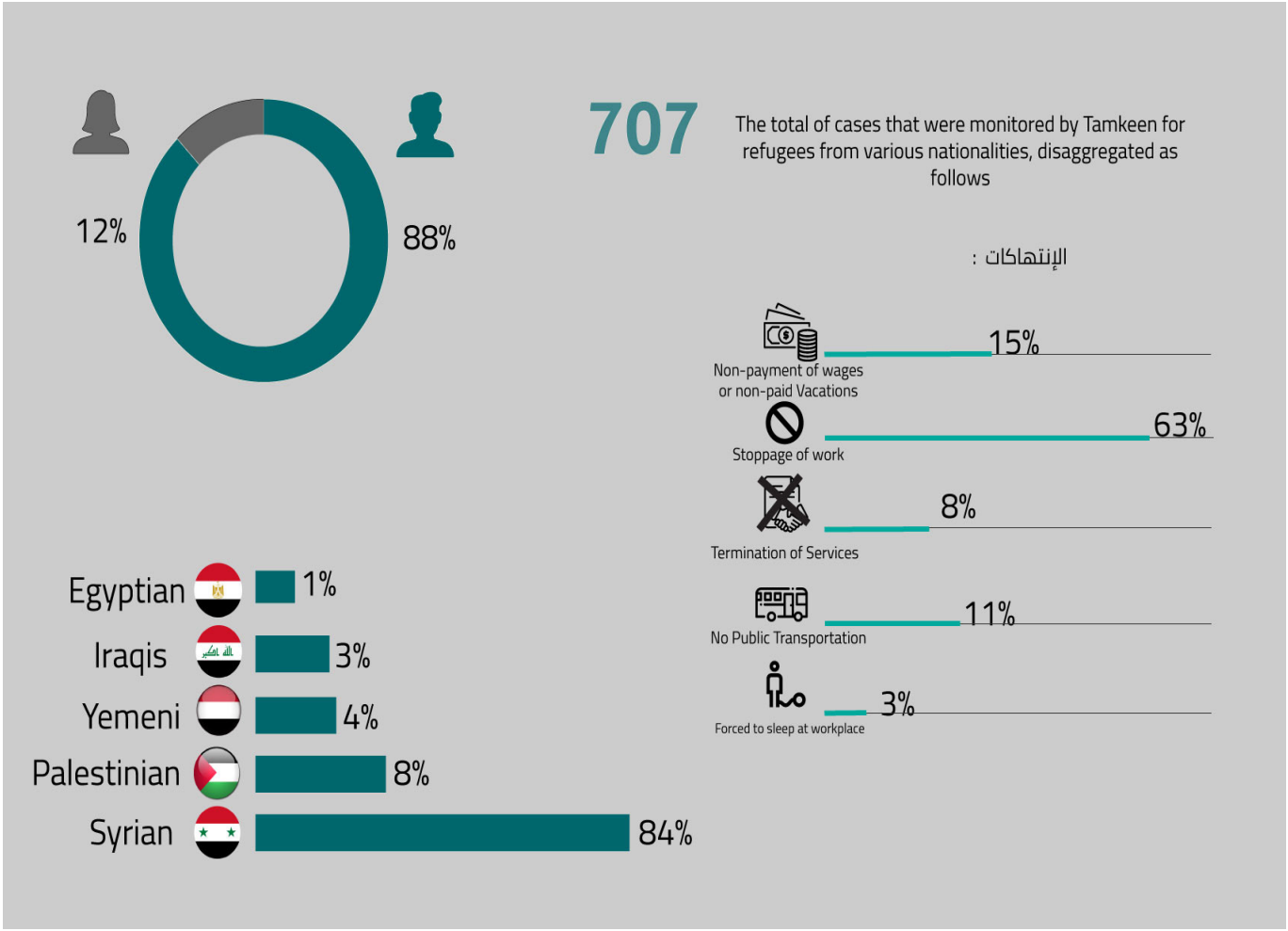
Refugees have received fluctuating levels of attention from the international community and international organizations. Since the beginning of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in 2011 though, Syrians received special interest from the international community, particularly as their influx began to affect Jordan and other neighbouring countries. While interest in other nationalities wavered, attention to Syrians remained on the agenda, unlike other nationalities, impacted greatly by Europe's attempt to stop them from arriving to their shores through the Mediterranean.

The report was based on numerous phone interviews that were held by the Tamkeen Team with female and male refugees' workers. These refugees reside in Amman, Irbid, Jerash, Ajloun, Mafraq, Ramtha, Balqa, Zarqa, Dleil, Zzraq, Madaba, Karak and Aqaba.

Throughout the monitoring period, 707 cases were reported for refugees from different backgrounds. 84% of them were reported by Syrian refugees, 8% by Palestinian refugees, 4% Yemeni, 3% Iraqi and 1% by Egyptian asylum seekers as a result of their political activities. 88% of refugees who submitted complaints are males, while 12% are by females.

The Ramifications of the Corona curtailing Measures on Refugee Workers

The implemented measures, starting from the closure of the private sector to the curfew and preventing people from moving from one place to another had an impact on Jordanian, Refugee and Migrant Workers.



The results of the monitoring showed that the complaints were disaggregated as follows:

15% of the complaints focused on issues related to wages and vacations, as workers reported that they were not paid their wages for the month of March , while others said that they were forced to sign a non-paid leave request or those who said that the current holiday is calculated as part of their annual vacations.

63% of the monitored cases were about workers whose work has completely stopped due to the curfew, which led to the loss of their income, especially those who are employed as Daily Workers.

8% of the cases were regarding workers who reported that they were arbitrarily dismissed as a result of the Corona Crisis, while 3% of the workers said that even though they work in essential sectors, they were not issued permits that would allow them to move between their residences and workplace and were thus forced to remain in their workplace, as their employers threatened them that in case they refuse they will be punished.

11% of the workers reported that while they were not subjected to any violations, that they were incurring large financial burdens due to the lack of public transport and them being forced to use applications for transportation instead.

Syrian Refugees in Jordan: From the War to the Corona Virus

Syrian Refugees began arriving to Jordan since the start of the war in 2011. In 2016, the Jordanian government allowed them to work, though it regulated the matter to ensure that it will not lead to an increase in the unemployment rate which was at 19% according to figures by the Department of Statistics.

Generally speaking, Syrians are employed in the sectors of: Construction, Agriculture, Loading and Offloading, Restaurants, factories or as either daily workers or self-employed.

During the period 18/3/2020- 18/4/20020 when the decision to suspend work in all sector was announced and then followed by imposing the curfew, Tamkeen for Legal Aid and Human Rights monitored the living and working conditions of Syrian Refugees, whether those who hold a permit or do not.

The report highlights the conditions of Syrians who are employed in the sectors of: restaurants and bakeries; agriculture; loading and offloading; construction; manufacturing; Home Based Businesses; Services; and daily workers.

The monitoring looks at the conditions of 598 Syrian refugees residing in the Northern and Central governorates, as well as Karak in the South. Of them, 524 are males and 74 are females.

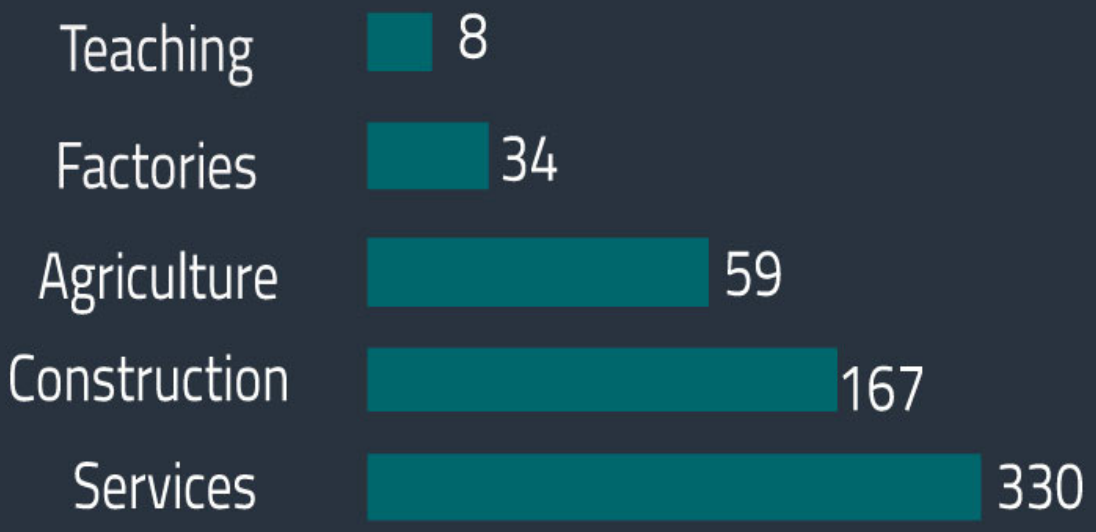
In terms of their economic activity, the complaints were disaggregated as follows: 330 in the service sector; 167 in the construction sector; 59 in the agriculture sector; 34 in factories and 8 in the educational sector. As for gender, 88% of complaints were submitted by male workers, while 12% were by females.

16% of the complaints were regarding wages and vacations, as workers reported that they did not receive their wages for the month of March, while others were forced to submit a non-paid vacation covering the holiday period; or those whose vacations were counted as part of their annual holidays.

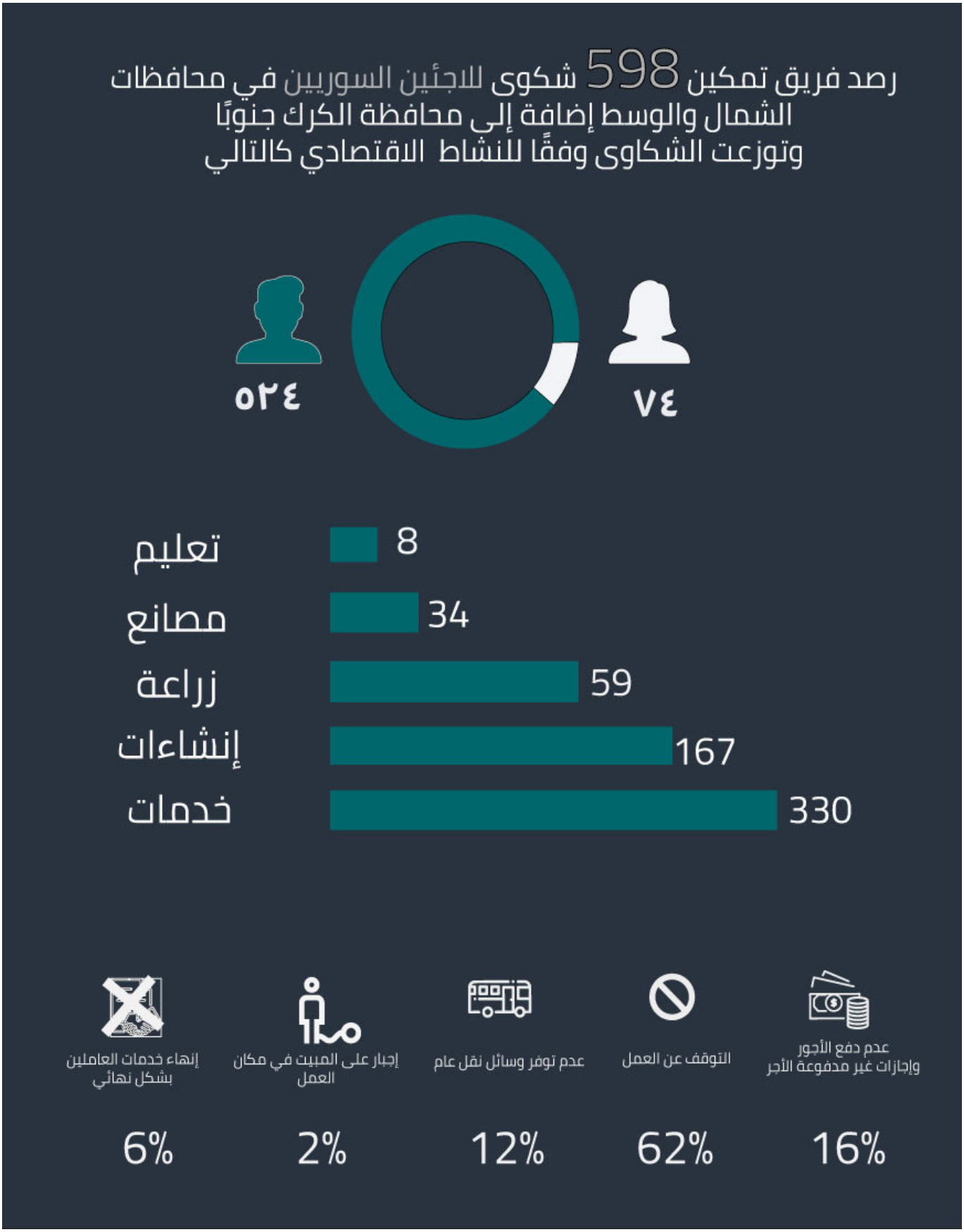
Meanwhile, 62% of the complaints were by workers whose work has been totally put on hold due to the curfew, which led to the loss of their income, especially those who work as daily workers.

6% of the complaints were regarding workers who were arbitrarily dismissed due to the corona virus. On the other hand, 2% of the workers reported that they were forced to continue work, as their sector was deemed essential, but without being issued a permit that would allow them to freely move. Another group of workers reported the same violation and added that they were forced to sleep in the workplace or face the repercussion if they refuse.

Tamkeen recorded 598 complaints by Syrian refugees in the Northern and Central governorates, as well as Karak in the South. They are disaggregated as follows



Termination of Services	Forced to sleep at workplace	No Public Transportation	Stoppage of work	Non-payment of wages or non-paid Vacations
6%	2%	12%	62%	16%


رصد فريق تمكين 598 شكوى للاجئين السوريين في محافظات
الشمال والوسط إضافة إلى محافظة الكرك جنوبًا
وتوزعت الشكاوى وفقًا للنشاط الاقتصادي كالتالي
٥٢٤
٧٤
تعليم
8
مصانع
34
زراعة
59
إنشاءات
167
خدمات
330
عدم دفع الأجور
وإجازات غير مدفوعة الأجر
التوقف عن العمل
عدم توفر وسائل نقل عام
إجبار على المبيت في مكان
العمل
إنهاء خدمات العاملين
بشكل نهائي
16%
62%
12%
2%
6%

Another set of complaints were lodged by workers whose institutions were excluded from the official holiday decision as they were deemed essential. These include: Supermarkets, bakeries, food delivery, water, fuels and factories. The complaints by these workers focused on the stoppage of public transports, which resulted in them finding it difficult to go to work, which later led some institutions to provide them with means of transportation. These complaints amount to 12% of the total that was received during the monitoring period.

Syrians tend to work in cities and areas where they have a large presence like in Amman, Irbid, Mafraq, Zarqa, and Jerash. Many of those who reached out to Tamkeen reported that they have not received their wages for either the months of February or March.

In the city of Mafraq, 103 cases for Syrian refugees where monitored, many of whom are working in restaurants. These workers expressed their fears regarding the possibility of having their services terminated due to the curfew, even though this would violate the Labour Law. They also said that the Labour Directorate in Mafraq has been unresponsive to their complaints.

Another governorate covered by the monitoring is Jerash, where 134 cases were registered for Syrians employed in touristic restaurants. These workers receive their wages on a daily basis. Some of the restaurants paid the wages to the workers for the period of the curfew, while others did not, even though some of the workers are formal and are even included under the umbrella of Social Security Corporation. The same violation was registered in restaurants in Northern and Southern Azraq as well as in the Capital of Amman.

As for Agricultural workers, it should be noted that some of them have been able to continue working. Unfortunately, these workers were not provided with proper occupational safety and health tools even prior to the crisis, as they were asked to cover them on their own expense. Thus, these workers are now working in risky conditions but cannot stop since the alternative is losing their job and their income.

Palestinians

The situation of Palestinian refugees differs from other nationalities in terms of the protection they receive, since they are not covered by the UNHCR but instead are covered under the auspices of the UNRWA which was financially struggling even before the onset of the Corona Crisis.

There are currently 600,000 Palestinian refugees residing in Jordan. These refugees hold a Jordanian travel document but not a national number. They are allowed to work in the Jordanian Labour Market but have to issue a permit to do so. Some of these refugees reside inside camps, while others outside. In Jordan, there are 10 refugee camps for them: Jerash, New Amman Camp, Marka Camp, Baq'a Camp, Souf Camp, Hosun Camp, Talbiye Camp, Irbid Camp, Zarqa Camp and Jabal al Hussein Camp.

Similar to others, Palestinian Refugees were affected by the current circumstances as a result of the governmental measures taken to curtail the spread of the virus. The Tamkeen team registered 56 case involving Palestinian who reside in the Northern or Central governorates as well as in Aqaba.
In terms of their economic activity, the complaints were disaggregated as follows: 11 case in the construction sector, 4 cases in the educational sector, 33 case in the service sector, while 4 cases were registered in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors.

11% of the complaints were regarding wages and vacations, as workers reported that they did not receive their wages for the month of March, while others were forced to submit a non-paid vacation covering the holiday period; or those whose vacations were counted as part of their annual holidays.
Meanwhile, 54% of the complaints were by workers whose work has been totally put on hold due to the curfew, which led to the loss of their income, especially those who work as daily workers.

22% of the complaints were regarding workers who were arbitrarily dismissed due to the corona virus. On the other hand, 2% of the workers reported that they were forced to continue working and sleeping in their workplace, as their sector was deemed essential. However, since their employer did not issue them with a permit that would allow them to freely move, they had to remain in the workplace or face the repercussions if they refuse.

Tamkeen recorded 56 complaints by Palestinian refugees in the Northern and Central governorates, and Aqaba in the South. They are disaggregated as follows

Termination of Services

22%

Forced to sleep at workplace

2%

No Public Transportation

11%

Stoppage of work

54%

Non-payment of wages or non-paid Vacations

11%

As for the final 11% of the workers, they said that while they were not subjected to any violation, they were struggling due to the stoppage of public transports, which incurred them with additional financial burdens since they were forced to use the more expensive applications.

It should be noted that a number of cases were reported for teachers who did not receive their wages for the month of March as a result of the Crisis. These teachers are employed as extracurricular teachers at one of the international agencies. Another case that ought to be highlighted is the case of workers in factories in the Cyber City, Ramtha who were arbitrarily dismissed.

Moreover, it was noted that the working conditions of many Palestinian Refugees remained the same, whether before or during the crisis. They are still working without work permits. They are still excluded from social protection as they are still not covered under the umbrella of social security and thus are not offered any of its insurances. As for healthcare, those who are registered with the UNRWA receive basic care including periodical tests and basic medications. During the Corona Crisis though and in light of the financial difficulties faced by the agency, it could not offer refugees sufficient services to cover all of their health needs. Consequentially, another burden was added to the shoulder of Palestinian refugees who were already struggling to cover their basic needs.

Yemeni Refugees

There are 27,106 Yemeni asylum seekers and workers residing in Jordan. These Yemenis are struggling both financially and in terms of the aid that is provided to them.

Tamkeen recorded 25 cases for Yemeni workers; 2 of whom are working in the construction sector and 23 working in the service sector.

25 cases that were monitored by Tamkeen for Yemenis refugees in Jordan

2 construction sector

23 Services sector

“There are many Yemenis living here but cannot work. Those who do are working informally and once they see inspectors, they run away.” With this sentence, a Yemeni worker began his conversation with the Tamkeen Team. He works for 14 hours each day and is paid by the hour, though his wage does not exceed 200 JODs despite the difficult working conditions.

Many Yemeni workers, especially those working in the city of Mafraq, work in restaurants, grocery stores, produce selling stores or bakeries. All of these institutions have been deemed essential during this crisis, except restaurants.

For these workers who have returned to work after the partial allowance for some sectors to resume working, they reported that they are working 8 hours a day, and implementing a shift system. As for their wages, they do not usually exceed the minimum wage. Workers have also reported that employers are not providing them with occupational safety tool against the Corona virus, even those who work in groceries where employers have not even given them either gloves or face masks. During their tour of the city, the Tamkeen team noted that only one worker was in fact wearing gloves while working.

As for Yemenis working in restaurants, these workers have stopped working due to the imposed curfew. All of these workers came to Jordan to work as chefs for Jordanian employers in their Yemeni food restaurants so they could prepare traditional Yemeni dishes. They reported that as of yet, their employers have not told them whether they will be paid for the public holiday. Therefore, they are currently spending the money that they were able to save from previous months, though they remarked that if the situation goes on till the end of April, then they will be negatively affected.

Another Yemeni worker who is employed at a store told Tamkeen that he could not go to work due to the crisis. The worker was not paid his wage for the month of March, which led his roommates to help him buy his basic needs till live returns to normal and he is able to go back to work and get his salary.
Several Yemeni workers who reached out to Tamkeen confirmed that their working conditions in Jordan are difficult. They added that they are working informally till their asylum application is approved in another country. The reason behind their informal work is that once employers find out that they are Yemeni, they do not hire them. As a result, the current crisis has compounded on their already difficult situation as they lost their jobs and their incomes.

Since these Yemenis are daily workers, they all agreed that they are currently struggling as they are facing the impossible decision of either paying their rent or securing their livelihoods as they cannot afford both. They ended by saying that they have no idea what will happen to them and by wondering when will this crisis be over.

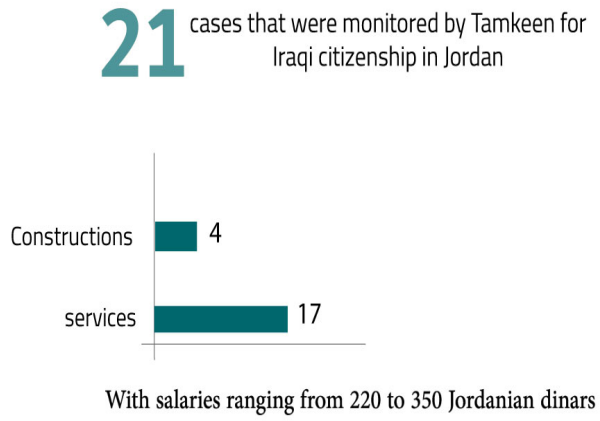
Iraqis

The struggles of Iraqis do not much differ from the other nationalities, as they all have one thing in common: they left their countries looking for stability, after running from their countries that were ravaged by wars and the absence of economic or political stability.

The economic and living standards of Iraqi refugees in Jordan vary. Some of them are investors and businessmen, while others are employed either formally or informally and some of them even receive minimum wages.

Tamkeen was contacted by 21 Iraqi workers; 17 of them work in the service sector and 4 in construction.

Some of them confirmed that they work formally and receive wages that range between 220 to 350 JODs. However, they added that these wages do not sufficiently cover theirs and their families' needs. They added that the current crisis has impacted them due to many reasons. They include: not being paid their salaries by their employers; being forced to sign not-paid vacation requests; and in one case where an employer arbitrarily dismissed an Iraqi worker by claiming that their contracts have ended and that they will be renewed after the crisis is over.



Those who work informally are not in a better state, as their wages usually range between 150 to 220 JODs. These workers were also not paid their March salary due to the refusal of the employers to do so and delaying it due to the crisis and the subsequent holiday decision taken by the government to stop the spread of the virus.

Refugees and the Corona Crisis: The Absence of Social Protection

As noted above, the Jordanian government forced a number of measures to curtail the spread of the virus. While reason behind these decisions is completely understood, there is no denying that the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 will be felt hardest by the most vulnerable categories in our societies, including refugees. Indeed, the consequences of the COVID 19 response measures risk plunging families who already live under the poverty line further into hardship.

The struggles of these refugees are further compounded by their exclusion in some of the social protection programs that the Jordanian government has announced as part of its response plan to the pandemic.

It was thus with disappointment that we noted that refugees and migrants were not included in either the measures announced by the Social Security Corporation nor by the National Aid Fund that were sequentially formed as the crisis progressed. The last of these decisions was the announcement of Defence Order Number 9, which established 3 funds under the auspices of the Social Security Corporation and one Program for Daily Workers implemented by the National Aid Fund.

A careful reading of these programs though shows that while Palestinian Refugees can benefit from these programs; refugees from other nationalities are only included under one program: The Support Program. Additionally, the program only provides loans or aid to those who are registered in the Social Security Corporation.

The omission of refugees from such programs is worrying on a number of fronts. The first of which is that there are many refugees who work in the formal sector and are in fact registered under the umbrella of Social Security, and yet cannot benefit from all the programs.

Moreover, and in an economy that has been struggling, the overwhelming majority of refugees are employed informally in very precarious conditions. The massive economic downturn caused by the pandemic, together with measures to prevent the spread of the virus, such as closures of small businesses, social distancing, restrictions on travel, and the curfew, has aggravated an already complicated situation. Thus, their exclusion from the program that was supposed to assist Daily Workers constitute a major blow to their already debilitating livelihoods.

Recommendations:

1. The necessity for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the international community to fulfill their duty towards refugees of all nationalities, and to provide them with healthcare and basic needs.

2. The necessity for the international community and funders to continue their support to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) so it could continue providing the necessary relief and services to Palestinian Refugees.

3. The need for the Jordanian Response Plan to the COVID-19 Pandemic to be inclusive and comprehensive. It also must consider the particular needs of specific vulnerable groups, including refuges and ensure that they are covered in the socio-economic aid measures taken by the government and that they can access healthcare.

3 May 2020

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