

# Iraqi Refugee Females in Lebanon: De Facto Changes in Gender Roles

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The year 2003 was a turning point in the Arab region. The Coalition Forces invaded Iraq causing the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and the subsequent violence. This has led to a massive influx of refugees throughout the Arab region. Around 4.2 million Iraqis left their homes due to the violence in their country. Some two million have fled to neighboring countries, including Lebanon (UNHCR, 2007). Lebanon is also host to an estimated 400,000 Palestinian refugees who fled Palestine largely as a result of the formation of the Israeli state in 1948 (Shafie, 2007). Aside from Palestinians, Iraqis currently account for the vast majority of refugees in Lebanon (DRC, 2005). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that around 50,000 Iraqi refugees are residing in Lebanon (IRIN, 2007). The Lebanese State is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, thus the vast majority of Iraqis have had to enter the country illegally (IRIN, 2007).

A study based on a sample of 2,892 Iraqi individuals in Lebanon in 2007 indicated that 36.4 percent of the sample was female (DRC, 2007). Many factors in Lebanon and in Iraq affect the refugee woman's role in society. What is expected of her and those around her often changes under emergency circumstances. This article explores the extent of these changes. It will hopefully benefit researchers as well as development agencies by providing insight into the daily expectations, hopes, and responsibilities of an Iraqi refugee woman or girl in Lebanon. The article also aims to

bring the typical concerns of a refugee woman to the attention of her host community.

## Methodology

This article does not attempt to draw general conclusions regarding the Iraqi refugee population in Lebanon. Rather, it attempts to present a description of the daily life of a few Iraqi females. It uses quantitative information from other studies to inform the reader about the current situation of Iraqis in Lebanon. In-depth interviews with six Iraqi refugee women from diverse social backgrounds were conducted for the purpose of this article. The interviewees agreed to have the information they provided used in this article. However, only two agreed to have their names mentioned. For this reason many of the quotes in the following article will be anonymous. Between 2006 and 2008, the author of this article interviewed some 800 Iraqi refugees in Lebanon as a UNHCR employee. Some of the assumptions in this article are based on general trends observed throughout this period. It is important to note that religion/sect was not a significant variable in the six in-depth interviews conducted. For this reason, it is not addressed in this article.

## Research Findings

The main finding of the research was that the interviewees' responsibilities vis-à-vis their family members considerably increased. The refugee woman is expected to continue to play the roles she played in

Iraq – whether these roles are considered traditional or not – and bear new responsibilities as well. As the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children report explains:

Women suffer most from situations of displacement as they continue to undertake most domestic labor and have to cope with many additional problems, such as inadequate shelter and inadequate food and the struggles to care for and maintain their families. Increasing social and economic marginalization, family instability and the act and impact of migration alter male and female gender roles—creating internal cognitive dissonance while presenting opportunities for positive change. [...] Gender roles become more blurred as the struggle for survival takes precedence over more rigidly defined, traditional roles. Men often lose their means of livelihood, creating depression, dependency and withdrawal. Even the humanitarian assistance provided, often in the form of direct handouts, creates dependency, lethargy and a loss of control over one’s life and future. (Masculinities: Male roles, 2005)

It was found in the course of the interviews that refugee women do not expect to replace their old responsibilities with the new ones but rather, out of a sense of duty, temporarily accept the burden of both. In contrast, the men often have difficulty accepting women’s new responsibilities because of their pride and their own sense of duty towards their female family members. However, Iraqi refugee men may accept the changing dynamics on an exceptional basis. These male and female perspectives stem from the sense of duty entrenched in Iraqi culture.

Some of the reasons for the increased responsibilities of refugee women include security concerns, the family status of the refugee woman, difficult living conditions, reduced access to basic services, and trauma. These responsibilities are manifested in the persistence of household chores and increased employment. Such responsibilities affect the perception of the male figure, family dynamics, the family’s social life and their worldview.

## Factors Contributing to Shifting Gender Norms

### Security Concerns

The vast majority of newly arrived Iraqis in Lebanon stay in Lebanon illegally because the Lebanese State does not recognize refugee status. Iraqis continue to travel to Lebanon for the following reasons: some do not feel safe in the countries bordering Iraq where their persecutors might reach them, some have family ties to Lebanon, others consider the salaries in Lebanon to be better than in neighboring countries, and some feel that there is more freedom in Lebanon (DRC, 2005). According to the Danish Refugee Council, 71 percent of Iraqi refugees in Lebanon are smuggled across the Syrian border (IRIN, 2007). Fleeing persecution and violence in their country of origin, families, including children, new-born infants and elderly, do cross the borders in a clandestine manner. They prefer risking arrest and detention to staying home. A few enter legally and overstay their visa expiry date and only very fortunate persons/families manage to obtain residency permits.

The experience of crossing international borders in a clandestine manner puts the female at high risk, even if accompanied by a male family member, traditionally the protective figure. For example, an adolescent girl gave the following account of her experience when she fled Iraq in 2005: because her father worked with the Americans in Iraq, her fifteen year old brother was killed and her father was threatened. The family legally fled to Syria and then entered Lebanon illegally. Her ten and seven-year-old brothers and three-year-old sister cried during their journey: “We had to walk a lot ... it was very tiring. We were very scared ... and it was so cold”. Such experiences may threaten Iraqi gender roles: the father, traditionally a protective figure, was unable to prevent his daughter from being afraid and experiencing insecurity.

According to a Public Information Officer in UNHCR Beirut, thus far there has been a significantly higher detention rate of males for illegal entry to and/or stay in Lebanon. A young female head of household stated: “I have frequently been stopped by the Internal Security Forces

because I do not have a residency permit. I tell them to 'do whatever they want,' they don't arrest me. They say 'you are a woman and you have 3 children'". This significantly changes family dynamics as female family members have greater freedom of movement than males. Though men continue to see themselves as the providers for the family, they are forced to accept some compromises. The father of the 16-year-old refugee female mentioned above stated:

Around a week after we arrived, she [then 14 years old] started working. I stayed home for around 2 months at the beginning because the Internal Security Forces had raided Iraqi homes in the neighborhood. Therefore, I couldn't go out. I only had \$200 USD left and I used part of the money for rent. So I spent my last \$50 USD on a small oven as there was nothing in the apartment.

Though he was able to find work two months later, thus preserving his role as family provider, his daughter continued to work – sharing the responsibility of providing for the family. Many Iraqi men work as janitors in their buildings because this job requires minimal movement for them while their female family members work outside the home.

According to UNHCR, in November 2007 five hundred Iraqis were held in prison for illegal entry and/or stay in Lebanon (IRIN, 2007). A minority of Iraqis are caught upon illegal entry to Lebanon. Most Iraqi men are detained at checkpoints while leading their difficult daily lives. Many female dependents are therefore left behind and must fend for themselves. However, there are also families, including children, that have been caught on the Syrian-Lebanese border trying to enter illegally and have been detained. Nagham, a thirty-year-old single woman, was hoping to surprise her younger brother in Lebanon after much suffering in Iraq. In Iraq, her elder brother had been kidnapped in 2006 and has not been found since. She was threatened. She fled along with her cousins to Syria and attempted to enter Lebanon illegally to join her younger brother: "We spent 50 days in prison. We were held with people who were charged with

prostitution and drugs. It was very difficult." UNHCR was able to have her and her extended family released. She was issued a circulation permit from the General Security Directorate which is valid for 3 months, renewable under the condition that UNHCR finds a third country in which she can be resettled.

In addition, some Iraqi men in Lebanon fear that the conflict in Iraq will continue to impact them in Lebanon. They fear that they will be pursued and harmed in connection with whatever caused them to flee Iraq. When asked if she had Iraqi friends in Lebanon, a married Iraqi woman said:

I have acquaintances but not friends. My husband [...] doesn't want people to know that he's here. Despite his precautions, they found him [in May 2007]. He was buying cigarettes in a supermarket, around 8:30 pm. Three men approached him in Dora area [Beirut] and beat him up. They did not speak. They tried to take him but he screamed. He was in bed for four to five days. We could not inform the police. Caritas visited him and paid for his operations. He continues to have problems with his back.

### Living Conditions

The living conditions of Iraqi refugees in Lebanon are poor. Most households live in rented apartments with one to two rooms, for which they pay between \$200 to \$250 USD per month. Incidentally, the price of rent is roughly equivalent to the average monthly salary an Iraqi earns in Lebanon (DRC, 2007). In 2005, there was an average of 2.37 family members in an Iraqi household in Lebanon, while in 2004 in Iraq there was an average of 6.4 persons per household (Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation & UNDP, 2005). This difference is due to the fact that the family average in Lebanon is affected by the large number of single Iraqi men in Lebanon. In fact, in 2005, 61 percent of Iraqi males in Lebanon above the age of 18 were single compared to only 21 percent of women above the age of 15. Thus, despite the low average family size in Lebanon, in reality it is not uncommon to find families consisting of five or more persons. For example, an extensive household

assessment conducted in 2007 showed that Iraqi families composed of five to eight individuals amounted to 19.2 percent of Iraqi households in Lebanon (DRC, 2007). Unfortunately, many have to live in the apartments described above. Describing her apartment, an Iraqi female said: “It is composed of two rooms [...]. The living room has a TV and a couch where my parents and my sister sleep and the [other] room has 3 mattresses and a closet where we sleep, me and my two brothers.”

Many families fleeing Iraq sell their possessions before fleeing. They have to pay a considerable amount of money to smugglers – an average sum of \$200 USD per person. They arrive to Lebanon with a modest sum of money, which is usually quickly depleted because of the high cost of living in Lebanon. A married Iraqi woman with two children explained that she is not always able to buy fresh groceries in Lebanon:

Honestly, when I go and buy groceries, I don't buy the fresh vegetables, I buy day-old vegetables as they are sold at cheaper prices. There are things I do not buy. Now meat is sold for 10,000-12,000 LL. I cannot buy it. I buy tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplant and potatoes. Now apples are for 1,500-2,000 LL. I cannot buy them either. If they sell apples from the previous day, I might buy them.

A female head-of-household, who was a flight attendant in Iraq and whose money has quickly depleted in Lebanon, said: “We eat anything now, a piece of bread or potatoes.” Another example is that of a family of five which had to live in a one-room apartment where sewage odors were persistent and humidity and water leakage made the family constantly sick. The family had to stay in that apartment for more than eight months before they managed to find better accommodation.

#### Access to Services (Education and Health)

According to the study conducted in 2005, 55 percent of Iraqi households in Lebanon did not send any of their children to school (DRC, 2007). The main reason provided was the high cost of education (DRC, 2007). It is generally accepted in Iraqi society that girls and boys should attend school.

In fact, according to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in 2004, 58 percent of boys and 47 percent of girls between the ages of 6 and 24 went to school (DRC, 2007). A study conducted in Lebanon in 2007 showed that 53.7 percent of girls between the ages of 15 and 17 went to school while only 35.5 percent of boys did. The study found that this gender discrepancy was due to the fact that boys of that age were more frequently expected to work than girls of the same age (DRC, 2007). These statistics indicate that the Iraqi community has continued to prioritize education in the refugee context though it has been forced to adapt to new conditions. The fact that girls and boys are not able to pursue their studies is very distressing for parents and for the children. Notably, one of the adolescents interviewed and her father could not refrain from crying when asked about her and her brother's inability to attend school.

Concerning access to healthcare, the 2007 survey in Lebanon revealed that 66-68 percent of medical bills are paid by the Iraqi refugees themselves (DRC, 2007). With the high cost of health services in Lebanon and their difficult financial situation, many reported that they could not continue to buy their prescription drugs or be examined by a physician because of their inability to cover the cost. The fact that the male family member cannot provide for such basic necessities may also weaken his position within the family and lower his own self-esteem.

#### Past Harm and Trauma Experienced by Female and Male Refugees

[M]embers of a terrorized social group who find that what has happened to them is incomprehensible, and that their traditional recipes for handling crises are useless, are particularly likely to feel helpless and uncertain what to do. When war so routinely targets the social fabric, community structures may not be able to fill their customary role as a source of support and adaptation. (Summerfield, 2000, pp. 232-235)

The mere existence of pervasive violent conflict in one's country may have severe psychological consequences on the population. According to

Reschen (2006) many Iraqis are expected to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder due to the violence in their country (p. 971). In addition, many Iraqis have personally experienced persecution before deciding to flee, especially in the aftermath of the Samarra attacks in February 2006 (in 2004, around 12 percent of Iraqis in Lebanon had experienced traumatic events) (DRC, 2005). Many women and girls have experienced rape, assassination attempts, threats to their lives, or have witnessed their family members being kidnapped, killed, or tortured. The middle-aged woman mentioned above, whose husband was killed, described her twenty-year-daughter with the following: "Since her father died [in March 2006], she became like this. She locks herself up in the room and says she wants her father."

### Changes in Women's Role in the Family

The sixteen-year-old adolescent mentioned above, who started working in Lebanon in 2005 when she was 14, described her role back in Iraq as such: "I would return home from school and study. When I finished my studies, I would help my mother with cleaning and other house chores. Then I would help my younger siblings study." Since she came to Lebanon, her concerns have shifted. Describing her changed state of mind, she said: "If I stayed home and didn't go to work, my father would not be able to provide for the family alone. I am always thinking about my responsibilities in the house [...]. I never thought of anything other than my studies [in Iraq]." Zahra, a widowed mother with two daughters, said: "my only responsibility used to be to teach my children and hope that they would graduate from university. Now I have to worry about expenses... Thinking of the future was a shared responsibility with [my husband] but now it is more of a burden. We are not in our country." A recurrent theme among the interviews conducted is that these females, adults and minor, think of and worry about responsibilities which they had not considered before fleeing Iraq.

The 16 year old adolescent mentioned earlier still helps with the household chores even though she has a job and her mother and two of her younger

brothers do not work outside the home. The sense of guilt and duty towards her family makes her feel like she is not doing enough. Cleaning the house is still an exclusive responsibility of females, even when they are burdened with long working hours outside the home. The woman is also expected to cook, as was the case back in Iraq. There may be some instances during which the male figure helps, however they are exceptional. If there is more than one female in the house, the one who does not work outside the home does most of the cleaning and cooking. With regards to buying household consumer items, it seems that in Iraq the male had a shared or exclusive responsibility to purchase such items. Now, in cases in which the family entered Lebanon illegally, the responsibility becomes exclusively that of females because frequently men do not feel safe outside the home.

### Iraqi Refugee Women and Employment

According to a UNDP report on living conditions in Iraq in 2004, 13 percent of females above the age of 15 were in the labor force, in contrast to 69 percent of males. Nineteen per cent of women between the ages of 25 and 54 were employed. Eighty-eight per cent of men in the same age bracket were employed (Masculinities: Male roles, 2005). In 2005, 55 percent of the Iraqi population in Lebanon was working, the overwhelming majority did not have residency permits: "91 percent of the males and 38 percent of the females [above the age of 16] were reported to be economically active. 47 percent of the females are fulltime housewives" (DRC, 2005). The need to earn money is therefore translated for both genders into higher rates of employment, particularly for women.

The issue of working in the country of asylum is problematic for refugee women on three levels. One level is whether the refugee woman ever worked in Iraq. For example, a 31-year-old Iraqi refugee, who had not completed her primary education and who was a housewife in Iraq, stated: "a woman never works in Iraq especially... [if] she lives in the village of Tallesqof (village in Mosul province)". As she and her husband need to provide for their two school-age boys, she now works as a cleaning lady.

When asked whether her husband accepted the fact that she was now working, she explained that it upset him but that “he is forced to accept it.” She and her family fled to Lebanon in 2006 after having been threatened. They had less than \$1,000 USD upon arrival. Her husband earns \$200 USD per month. Their rent alone is \$210 USD. The father of the 16 year old girl who is working explained that humanitarian organizations tried to intervene to stop his daughter from working. He said:

I told the humanitarian organization that I really cannot afford for my daughter to stop working. We are paying rent and we are barely able to survive. [...] Every day I see my daughter going to work, my heart is torn to pieces. Now my 12 year old son is also working. I have my pride. My sister in Australia asks me if I need anything but I don't tell her that I need any money.

The refugee woman who is not used to working and her family are forced to accept her new role in the labor force but they are not pleased with it. This situation can hurt their self-pride: having a working woman in the family is understood by some to be a sign that the man is unable to fulfill his duties as family provider.

Another level is the nature of the job itself. Even if the refugee woman worked in Iraq, the work conditions in Lebanon are often unacceptable to her or her family. The nature of the job itself becomes the main issue. Notably, work opportunities in Lebanon are primarily limited to a number of blue-collar jobs. The issue of pride thus recurs. A 31 year old refugee said:

[My husband] absolutely does not want me to work. He says ‘I am the man and I should provide for the family’. In addition, the fact that I work in homes as a maid makes it worse. I am my parents’ only daughter and never did such things in my life.

Because she was worried about her parents’ perception, she stressed the importance of keeping her identity confidential. She explained that she continues to conceal her difficult living conditions from her parents. She believes that

they would be upset if they found out and would blame her husband.

The third level is that of exploitation. Once again, there is very little that the protective figure in the family can do to prevent this. As the overwhelming majority of Iraqis do not have residency permits, they do not have protection against exploitation in the work place. Many report that, among other things, they are not paid on time and complain of long working hours, in addition to being paid very little.

In addition, the increasing number of working children is a worrying trend in the refugee population. One of the adolescents interviewed for this study worked in a jewelry box factory for 5 months when she first arrived in Lebanon until she contracted a skin infection from the chemicals she was forced to work with. She worked from 7:30 am until 5:30 pm or 8:00 pm from Monday to Friday, and from 7:30 am until 12:30 pm on Saturday. She earned \$200 USD (300,000 L.L.) a month and was treated disrespectfully by her employer and colleagues. Three days after quitting her job, she found another job doing embroidery. In her new job she works as late as 9 pm some nights. She is only allowed to have a half an hour lunch break. Nagham, who was a hairdresser for more than 10 years in Iraq, was offered pay as low as \$66 USD (99,900 L.L.) a month at a hairdresser shop in Lebanon. Still another example is that of a female head-of-household who was offered a job as a housekeeper, provided that she allowed her potential employer to marry her 10 year old daughter.

### Changes in Gender Roles in the Home

Iraqi men’s ability to play a traditional role in the family is reduced in the refugee context by a number of factors, including the high risk of detention, the limited income that the refugee men can earn, physical and psychological injury in Iraq and the risks incurred while crossing borders etc. “Our society does not respect a man who sits at home while his wife works and feeds the family,” said Kholoud Nasser Muhssin, a researcher on family and children’s affairs at the University of Baghdad. “This



This is a drawing by an unidentified beneficiary of Caritas Lebanon Migrant Center in which she pleads: "Dear Jesus help release my father and brother from prison and thank you for protecting them from every harm possible. Amen."

phenomenon will definitely weaken the role of the father and reduce respect among children for their fathers in some families. It will adversely affect an already devastated society," added (IRIN, 2007). The father of the above-mentioned adolescent girl explained that when he and his family were crossing the Syrian-Lebanese border with the smugglers, he was worried about the safety of his then 14 year old daughter: "I was very worried about her. I was scared, because we were the only family being smuggled across the border. It was at night, the smugglers could have harmed her. They wanted to carry her [as she was tired] but I didn't let them, I carried her myself." The daughter also explained that even though her parents were with her at the time, she did not feel safe. In addition, her father is unable to protect her in her work place

as he is not present. Her father said:

When we applied to Australia, we used to sit and talk about what we will do. I will not let the children work. I will only let them focus on their studies, nothing else. [...] I don't pressure my children to work. This is not what I hoped for at all. I want them to study. Every father wants that for his children.

Nuclear families in Iraq usually share a house with their extended family. Even in cases of insecurity when they have to stay home, family members can socialize with siblings, in-laws, cousins, etc. In Lebanon social life for Iraqi refugees of both genders is limited for a variety of reasons. Unemployment, security, high cost of living, past trauma and family status affect Iraqis' social life

in Lebanon. The wife of an Iraqi man who was subjected to assassination attempts in Iraq and in Lebanon, explained: “We specifically wanted to live in a neighborhood where there are no Iraqis as my husband is very scared [...]. My husband’s security situation doesn’t really permit us to socialize as he doesn’t want people to know that he’s here.” In this case, the security concern plays a determining role in the family’s social life. The husband’s fears affect the wife by reducing her social activities.

Other families who only have security concerns vis-à-vis Lebanese authorities also have a reduced social life for both genders, specifically for the men. One of the interviewees explained that she takes her children to places of worship without her husband, for fear that he might be detained because of his illegal status. Both the husband and the wife are distressed by the situation but feel they have to accept it. The woman seems to have more space for socializing, but often chooses not to do so without her husband. With respect to financial constraints, the father of the adolescent girl described what family leisure was for him:

Sometimes my children see other kids having birthday parties and so on. I do everything I can to buy them a cake and a soda when one of them has a birthday. And I allow them to invite one or two close friends. Sometimes I take them to the Sunday market when we need to buy something. Sometimes we just go for walks in the area.

### Social Impact of Shifting Gender Norms

Due to exceptional circumstances, the refugee community seems to have become tolerant of situations that would not have been acceptable under normal circumstances. Nagham, who was imprisoned for 50 days for illegal entry explained that an imprisoned female in Iraq is viewed very badly. However, this is not the case outside Iraq: Nagham’s brother was very supportive during and after her detention. Moreover, she was not stigmatized by her community. The same applies to women who are living alone, which in Iraq is typically frowned upon. As the extended family network is available there, the female head-

of-household is expected to reside with them. However, given that she is living outside Iraq, the fact that she chooses to live alone is not held against her.

In addition to changing social norms, the short-term aspirations of Iraqi refugee women are often impacted by displacement. For example, Nagham explained that when she was in Iraq, she dreamt of getting married and of having a family. Now, she dreams of reuniting with her disappeared brother and her other brother residing abroad. The importance of family is persistent in Nagham’s aspirations. Her current priority is to reconstruct her previous life rather than to begin a new family.

A young Iraqi woman head-of-household explained that she hopes for security, to be in her own house with her children, to stop fleeing and to stop fearing the future. She said, “Life has no taste anymore. I have no feeling for the future. My life is my children now. Life has no taste now. I get them food and ensure they are alive. One cannot think of the future, work, or building a life, nothing. We live day by day.”

The adolescent 16 year old girl explained that when she was in Iraq, she dreamt of graduating from school and helping her siblings in their studies. Now, she constantly thinks of how to provide for her family and hopes that she will be resettled to a third country where she can go back to school. Her ambition to finish her education is a constant, but it is on hold until the more urgent objective of earning money or traveling to another host-country is fulfilled.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, these interviews suggest that Iraqi refugee women in Lebanon are struggling to balance traditional gender stereotypes and labor divisions with the new demands of poverty, illegality, safety concerns, poor living conditions, and unemployment. Women are being forced into roles that were previously alien to them. Simultaneously, safety restrictions and the high risk of detention often result in men’s limited



movement, which makes them unable to perform duties which are traditionally theirs (providing for the family, fulfilling social obligations, etc.) As a result, the gender dynamics in the family have shifted. Because of the extraordinary circumstances, it appears that both genders and the Iraqi community at large are willing to accept these changes, but only on a provisional basis. If the conflict in Iraq continues to make return impossible, the temporary changes in gender roles could become more permanent. Careful attention and further research should be undertaken to understand

the short-term and long-term implications of shifting gender dynamics to ensure that support is appropriately tailored.

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