Open for business: Syrian refugee brings a strand of normal life to women living in the Azraq Camp

Written by Dania Mousa

The idea feels magnificently ordinary – even mundane. It is something that we see and experience almost every day. But for women living inside refugee camps, it is a reminder of what life back home used to be like.

Eedah was a young woman when she leapt the chance to train as a hairdresser back in Syria, hoping to one day open her own hair salon. She says that even though she did not get the chance to open a salon back home due to her financial situation, she did make one of her dreams come true when she married the love of her life after 6 years of facing opposition from both families.

Eedah, now 33 years old, had three children and was pregnant with her fourth when she arrived in Jordan to escape the war. “We were never one of the lucky ones who found jobs inside the camp, aid was our only hope”, she said.

Shortly after settling in the camp, Eedah was faced with the sudden, unanticipated death of her husband, leaving her with four children to raise and care for without a source of income. “Ever since we arrived here in the camp, my job was to only cook, clean and look after my children. But I suddenly had to become a mother, a father, a caretaker and a teacher to my children, and amid all the challenges, I still needed to grieve”, she added.

Refugees living inside the camps often rely on aid for food and other basic services. However, due to the high cost of living and a scarcity of resources, working-age residents often apply for temporary jobs -
known as cash-for-work positions - inside the camp. These short-term jobs provided by humanitarian organizations are considered highly insufficient to allow refugees to access the labour market and maintain a minimum living standard.

With all the poverty and lack of resources witnesses by the refugees living in camps, governments and aid agencies need to work towards improving the overall quality of asylum to refugees, with a focus on increasing access to sustainable ways for income generation. “If you ask any refugee living in the camp what their biggest problem is, they’ll tell you it’s the lack of money” said a DRC staff member working in the Azraq Camp.

Amid her grief and despair, Eedah found a ray of hope when she heard about the Danish Refugee Council’s (DRC) small business grants. “This was my chance to make my lifelong dream come true”.

Funded by Denmark’s development cooperation ‘DANIDA’, the grant demanded that anyone applying must take a short training course on how to start a small business before receiving the money. Without hesitation, she took the training, and later received the grant. “I went to Amman to buy supplies and furniture for the salon and I couldn’t wait until it was ready to welcome customers. I just wanted to make women feel pretty and make some money for my children” she said as a beaming smile spread on her face.

Located inside her caravan in Village 2, Eedah’s salon has become a gathering spot for women living nearby. “I’ve had 5 brides come to me so far to get their hair and makeup done for the wedding” added Eedah with exuberating excitement. She keeps her prices very low because she understands that most women visiting her save up money for weeks to be able to get their hair done.

Female-headed households are incredibly common in the camp due to the killings, imprisonment or extreme injuries that men had to face back in Syria. And with little to no regular income, these women and their children face crushing poverty and isolation in their everyday life in the camp.

Many women around the camp see Eedah as a hero; someone they look up to and admire. But according to her, she just worked very hard to make her dream come true against all odds. She says aid organizations need to focus more on providing jobs for women inside the camp as they are “often neglected”.

In a place where most people live in harsh conditions and extreme poverty, there is always more work to be done. The legacy of war has left a generation of young people without hope or a sense of direction, and we often forget how big of an impact the smallest interventions can make.

Eedah is now the owner of a small hair salon, running a successful business and generating income for her family. A small grant transformed her life and that of her family, and influenced many others to work hard in hopes of a better life.