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The least bad option: For many Syrians, exploitation is the only way to survive

VIENNA, 14 January 2016 – A new study, the first of its kind, casts light on how the conflict in Syria is making children, women and men more vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking in persons. Often people are trafficked or exploited simply because they are not able to meet their basic needs, according to research by ICMPD, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development. To prevent this, investment in infrastructure and humanitarian aid in the main hosting countries is essential.

For almost five years, Syrians have been fleeing their homes and moving repeatedly within the country or across its borders. The longer the war continues, the more people's savings are depleted, and they become increasingly vulnerable to trafficking.

Syrians' legal status in the hosting countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq does not usually allow them to work. Together with the high numbers of people arriving, which puts pressure on public services, this makes Syrians vulnerable to exploitation. Because their parents are unable to generate an income for the family to survive, Syrian children are also more at risk of child labour and sexual exploitation.

As one Syrian described: "We fled from the Kurdish party, ISIS, the Free Syrian Army, the Assad regime. We had no strength to run any longer, no bread, nothing". So getting involved in sexual exploitation, forced marriage or labour exploitation may be the only way to have any means of surviving. In a desperate situation, exploitation seems like the 'least bad option'.

Refugees intending to seek safety in Europe must pay substantial sums of money, and maybe even go into debt, to migrant smugglers. One major risk is that a situation of migrant smuggling can develop into one of human trafficking.

But the ICMPD research found that trafficking is not generally perpetrated by organised criminal groups, as is often assumed.

The most common type of exploitation is at a lower level, involving family members, acquaintances and neighbours. One 17-year-old Syrian girl in Jordan was forced by her mother's friend into temporary "marriages" with Saudi Arabian and Jordanian men, who sexually abused her. As the research study

describes, the girl was “subjected to forced marriages to about [fourteen] men over a period of almost two years. Each ‘marriage’ lasted on average between one and three days.”

The cases examined in the research also indicate that people are not generally trafficked across borders. Vulnerable Syrians are targeted for exploitation after they have fled the country.

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The International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) is an international organisation with 18 Member States and more than 350 staff members. Active in more than 90 countries worldwide, it takes a regional approach in its work to create efficient cooperation and partnerships along migration routes. Priority regions include Africa, Central and South Asia, Europe, and the MiddleEast. Its three-pillar approach to migration management – structurally linking research, migration 3 dialogues and capacity building – contributes to better migration policy development worldwide. The Vienna-based organisation has a mission in Brussels, a regional office in Malta and project offices in several countries. ICMPD receives funding from its Member States, the European Commission, the UN, and other multilateral institutions, as well as bilateral donors. Founded in 1993, ICMPD holds UN observer status and cooperates with more than 700 partners including EU institutions and UN agencies.

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