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COVID-19 Impact on Syrian Refugees Employability in Jordan

Doa Mazen Fahmi Jarrar¹

Abstract: Jordan, a country with a high population of refugees, has become one of the most affected countries with the recent refugees' crisis today. Increasing the loads on a country that already suffers from a high unemployment rate. As a result, Jordan has adopted strict labour regulations concerning the employment of foreign workforce including refugees, to ensure that Jordanian citizens are given a priority in accessing the job market first. Therefore, Syrian refugees are not only facing the difficulties that already existed since their arrival to Jordan, but also an additional burden that was added with the pandemic caused by COVID-19.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore the impact of COVID-19 on Syrian refugees' employability, through answering the research questions of: What was the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the Syrian refugees' employability? How did the different defence orders in Jordan affect the employability and/ or the financial income of the Syrian refugees? And were the Syrian refugees benefited from any additional financial assistance?

Furthermore, the study was conducted after ten months of the start of the pandemic situation caused by COVID-19 in Jordan. Therefore, the refugees' employability was assessed as before, during and after the strict pandemic lockdown.

KEYWORDS: Syrian refugees in Jordan, refugees' employability, refugees and COVID-19

JEL Codes: J61, J21, J46, F35

Abbreviations and Acronyms:

FAFO – Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research

ILO – International Labour Organization

JOD – Jordanian Dinar

MOL – Ministry of Labour

NAF – National Aid Fund

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

WFP – World Food Programme

¹ Alexandre Lamfalussy Faculty of Economics, University of Sopron, Sopron, Hungary (doajarrar@yahoo.com)

Introduction

As a country that is well-known of its safety in the Middle East, Jordan has become a home for so many refugees' waves over the course of decades. Many Arab refugees were coming from neighbouring and other countries over the past years to Jordan, fleeing discrimination, wars, or political persecution.

Moreover, Jordan suffers from a high unemployment rate of 23.9% as of the third quarter of 2020, which makes the access to job market in Jordan challenging, especially for non-Jordanians (Department of Statistics, 2020). Therefore, the non-Jordanians who represent almost 29% of the total country's population, including refugees, are entitled to a strict labour regulations (WFP, 2020). As the Jordanian Ministry of Labour has closed a wide range of professions for Jordanian citizens' access only (MOL, 2019). Therefore, with the limited legal opportunities for refugees, many of these refugees have sought alternatives to generate a sustainable income, through working in informal jobs. According to the International Labour Organisation, it is believed that the percentage of informal employment among Syrian refugees has reached 52% (ILO and FAFO, 2020). Which resulted in losing the control over low wages, and difficult working conditions refugees may face.

Moreover, an additional burden has been added to the Syrian refugees' life in Jordan, with the global pandemic situation caused by COVID-19 at the beginning of 2020. The pandemic impact led to huge losses for many businesses causing a major decline in employment globally, especially during the lockdown.

Literature Review

Syrian Refugees in Jordan

The Syrian refugees' crisis resulted in displacing more than 6.6 million Syrians outside their country from 2011 until today, labelling it as one of the most protracted emergencies of our time (UNHCR, 2020b). Jordan as a neighbouring country to Syria, received a high share of refugees' waves since the beginning of the conflict. Moreover, although that Syrian refugees were eligible to receive basic aids and financial assistance from international organizations such as UNHCR, the life expenses especially for those residing outside the camps remains high (Hawkins–Assad–Sullivan,

2019). Therefore, the majority of the Syrian refugees in Jordan had to search for job opportunities to finance themselves and their dependents.

Today, Syrian refugees' population in Jordan reached 663,210 according to the UNHCR statistics as of December 2020, in which approximately 46% aged 18–59, and nearly half of them are men (UNHCR, 2021). Therefore, the need to work of these refugees has led to an increase in labour supply in a country with an unemployment rate of 23.9%.

Moreover, the current labour law in Jordan applies restrictive regulations towards refugees' employment as a foreign workforce. Therefore, refugees are benefited from a limited list of opened professions, while other professions are exclusive for Jordanian citizens only (MOL, 2019). The opened jobs are limited to four sectors, which are: construction, agriculture, manufacturing, and service sectors (ILO, 2017). In addition to infrequent jobs that are either: need a high level of proficiency or a knowledge that doesn't exist among Jordanians such as new technologies.

However, Syrian refugees were a little more privileged in terms of accessing the Jordanian job market than other refugees in the recent years. Since a partnership agreement was signed between the European Union and Jordan government in 2016. In this agreement, Jordan agreed on improving the living conditions for Syrian refugees, which includes creating 200,000 job opportunities for Syrian refugees. In return, the EU agreed to give Jordan financial assistance in the form of grants, loans and other trade agreements through three years, from 2016 -2018 (European Commission, 2017).

COVID-19 Pandemic Measures in Jordan

As a part of the worldwide measures to contain the pandemic caused by the coronavirus COVID-19, Jordan responded in applying strict procedures to contain the spread of the virus. While the country confirmed the first case on March 3rd, the strict measures started at an early level, with one confirmed case only (JT, 2020a). A framework that was issued by the UN, to assess the socio-economic response of COVID-19 in Jordan, has briefed the government several actions, including the issuance of defence orders to contain the pandemic and its impact on people and the economy. The framework summarized 14 defence orders, along with other actions between the 12th of March and 26th of June, 2020. However, as these actions have touched many socio-economic aspects, only main points that are connected to this study were concluded from the framework (UN, 2020:33–35).

One of the main points that are related to this study is that, a nationwide curfew was introduced on March 21st, which was later relaxed but with the following restrictions:

- On the 24th of March, only small supermarkets that were located inside the neighbourhoods were allowed to work from 10:00 to 18:00 and people were allowed to reach them on foot to buy their groceries.
- The full curfew continued to run on weekends; Fridays and Saturdays.
- Governorates and capital's neighbourhoods that have discovered COVID-19 cases were isolated from the rest of the country, with implementing strict curfew measures for several days.
- On the 29th of April, the government allowed the people to drive their vehicles based on the odd-plate scheme on alternating days, which was later suspended on June 4th with the end of the full curfew, but continued applying a nightly lockdown from midnight to 6:00 AM. However, Friday curfew continued to be introduced whenever cases are high. While public transportation got back to operate on the 12th of May with 50% capacity.

During the aforementioned period, in order to protect workers' rights and salaries, the government issued defence order number 6 on the 8th of April. According to the Jordan Times newspaper, the order stipulated that (JT, 2020c):

- March salaries should be fully paid to all workers, without deducting the 10 days spent within the lockdown.
- Employers who couldn't go back to operate their businesses due to the lockdown restrictions, were allowed to reduce their employees' salaries by 50% for the months of April and May of 2020.
- Employers who were allowed to operate during the lockdown, could reduce the salaries of the employees who have worked remotely by maximum of 50% for the months of April and May, provided that the working hours were also reduced.
- Owners of businesses that have been harmed by the pandemic and were allowed to operate again, were allowed to reduce their employees' salaries, upon a mutual agreement, by maximum of 30% for the months of April, May and June, and by maximum of 20% for the months of July and August (JT, 2020b).

- Employers who have terminated any employee services during the lockdown period, were requested to bring them back to work. However, many businesses have been seriously harmed by the pandemic, and couldn't survive longer, therefore, they have shut down and terminated their employees.
- National economic protection programmes were introduced by several bodies to help the employers overcome their losses during the lockdown, through zero-interest loans.

Later in April, on the 25th, migrant workers were able to apply through a specific platform to return to their home countries. Furthermore, The Ministry of Industry, Trade and Supply gradually opened various sectors, such as opening financial auditing and consultancy services, beauty salons and barber shops, accessories and cosmetics shops, and dry-clean services on the 27th of April, while the economic and construction sectors were opened on the 6th of May. However, the employees' movement back and forth to their work locations, was still limited to the previously mentioned movement restrictions, although some companies managed to issue mobility permits to their employees. Public sector's institutions were back to work from office on the 26th of May with a 30% capacity at any given time (UN, 2020:35). However, some sectors are still closed until the time of the study, such as cinemas, and events services. While fitness and sports centres were allowed to reopen their doors only on February 1st, 2021, with a capacity of 50%, although that they were allowed to reopen for a short time during the third-quarter of 2020, but were closed after (Roya News, 2021).

Moreover, to keep the flow of the necessary supplies, the Food and Beverage sector was exempted from the previously mentioned lockdown measures. To organize that, mobility permits were issued for food and beverage manufacturers and their employees in addition to farmers (World Bank et al., 2020:11). However, small farmers at the informal sector were not included with the exception. In addition to that, refugee workers who have been residing inside the refugee camps, were not able to receive mobility permits even if their employers were allowed to operate, the camps were totally locked.

Therefore, just like all other countries, the pandemic has hit Jordan's economy, however, the strict measures and numerous changes increased the loads on the economy and people.

Therefore, after approximately ten months from the beginning of the pandemic situation, the refugees today are facing an additional burden that was added to their challenges. Accordingly, this study aims to shed the light on this new topic that hasn't been thoroughly studied and explored. This study is a part of a PhD Thesis that focuses on the refugees working opportunities and regulations in Jordan, which was written during the pandemic period.

Methodology

The main concern of this paper is to focus on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on refugees' employability by exploring the situation these refugees have gone through, the challenges and how they were affected by the country's different defence orders. Therefore, the study is based on an exploratory qualitative approach that relies on:

- Secondary data – through reviewing a wide range of documents which explain the different defence orders and actions Jordan has implemented during the pandemic. In addition to UNHCR and other international NGO's reports.
- Primary data – the information was gathered through formal deep semi-structured interviews with twenty-five Syrian refugees who have been working in Jordan before the pandemic, whether formally or informally.

Data Collection

Formal deep semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-five Syrian refugees. Participants who have been working in Jordan before the pandemic, were asked to assess their employment situation, before the pandemic, during the strict six-week lockdown, and in the following months after the lockdown, when new pandemic measures were introduced. Part of the participants work/ worked formally as they have work permits with their employers, while others work/ worked informally through only a verbal agreement with their employers. These interviews were conducted after approximately 7 months of the end of the strict lockdown in Jordan that lasted for six weeks.

Study Questions

Data analysis of the interviews and secondary data resulted in answering the research questions of this paper, which are:

- What was the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the Syrian refugees' employability?
- How did the different defence orders affect the employability and/or the financial income of the Syrian refugees? And
- Were the Syrian refugees benefited from any additional financial assistance?

Findings

COVID-19 Impact on Work Stability and Employability

The pandemic situation has led to huge losses for many businesses and industries all around the world, which has led to an unexpected decline in the employment rate. While countries applied pandemic measures differently; as some countries haven't applied full curfew while others imposed strict curfews, the level of damage varied between industries, economies, and businesses. For example, it was visible that travel and tourism related businesses were among the most financially ailing businesses globally, with travel restrictions and the fear of the virus. However, other businesses from different sectors and industries couldn't survive due to the local restrictions and economic situation in many low and middle-income economies.

In the case of Jordan, the government has struggled in making a balance between controlling the spread of the virus through enforcing strict lockdown measures as well as suspending many businesses that believed to help in transmitting the virus, and mitigating the impact on the economy and the financial stability of people.

As a result, the impact on employability was noticeable through the jump in the unemployment rate. According to the Department of Statistics in Jordan, the unemployment rate has changed from 19.3% in the first quarter of 2020, to 23.9% within the third quarter of 2020 (Department of Statistics, 2020).

Moreover, the pandemic also affected the casual and informal workers, since they were not covered with legal documentations and mostly relied on verbal employment agreements, as well as not being entitled for

social security services. Therefore, according to the ILO, it is believed that almost one third of the informally employed Syrian refugees had lost their jobs because of the pandemic (ILO and FAFO, 2020).

As for the study participants, three out of the eight who have confirmed that they were employed informally, said that they have totally lost their jobs at the beginning of the pandemic. In addition, the other five, have confirmed that their salaries were partially deducted, which shall be explained in the next point. Table 1 summarises the participants' responses.

Furthermore, two of the formally employed, out of seventeen participants, have confirmed that they had to quit their jobs, as they were not paid during the lockdown despite of what was agreed by their employer. Even after the lockdown was over, the work load has increased, and salaries decreased.

The additional load on refugees resulted in an increase by 18% in the poverty rate among Syrian refugees in Jordan, which was already high even before the pandemic. This was justified in the lack of financial support, except those offered by the UNHCR, for those refugee workers who have been affected by the lockdown (World Bank, Joint Data Center of Forced Displacement, et al., 2020:11).

Unlike their Jordanian peers, who were entitled to the several protection programs such as the National Aid Fund (NAF) of the Ministry of Social Development and Social Security program. The NAF has distributed cash and e-wallet assistance to several Jordanian families that was harmed directly by the lockdown. While the Social Security Corporation offered a program targeting those fully or partially lost their jobs during the pandemic, through cash assistance over a short period of time (UN, 2020:16).

Moreover, the Jordanian government in cooperation with the Central Bank of Jordan and many of the private sector organizations who have contributed in an initiative to support small and medium sized enterprises. The initiative supported the businesses that were severely harmed during the lockdown, or those businesses that couldn't operate even after the end of the lockdown, due to the restrictions, through giving them low or zero-interest loans, providing that they don't fire any of their workers during the period of the loan (Kebede et al., 2020:18).

However, refugees were not entitled for most of these financial programs, although most of these working formally, are insured within the Social Security service. While non-Jordanians whom born to Jordanian

mothers as well as Palestinian refugees originating from Gaza, were included in one exception offered through the Social Security Cooperation for its insured workers program. However, one participant confirmed that he managed to find a way to withdraw an amount from his savings from the Social Security department, which was covering non-Jordanian workers. He explained that his other Syrian colleagues were not entitled for this service, as it requires a specific insurance period at least.

An additional challenge was facing working mothers in general and working women refugees in specific, since the digital learning was imposed, working mothers faced a difficulty to assign time to work-from-home with the presence of their children. Women participants confirmed that they were extra loaded with an additional teaching tasks especially for children at first grades, which was added to their work tasks, and housework. Moreover, after the return to work from office in April and May, they found it difficult to leave their young children at home. As expatriate mothers, they mostly do not have other close family members who can take care of their children, at the time schools and kindergartens remained closed. While a separate decision, allowed later the opening of nurseries in consideration of the working mothers' complaints in all cities in Jordan.

Moreover, three participants have confirmed that they were able to find better work opportunities after the lockdown, which they see as a positive impact on their career caused by COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1. Participants responses over different elements, distributed over their type of employment.

Participants Response on	Informally Employed	Formally Employed
Type of Employment	8	17
Lost the job during the pandemic	3 out of 8	None, but 2 quitted for not being paid
Didn't receive a salary during the lockdown	6 out of 8	2 out of 17
Salaries were reduced during the lockdown (up to 50%)	2 out of 5 (of those maintained their jobs)	13 out of 15 (of those maintained their jobs)
Salaries were reduced lockdown the lockdown (up to 30% in the first 3 months)	4 out of 5 (of those maintained their jobs)	11 out of 15 (of those maintained their jobs)
Received financial support from the Social Security dep. Or any Jordanian body	None	1 out of 17
Received additional financial support from UNHCR (one-time pandemic payment)	5 out of 8	4 out of 17

Source: constructed by researcher

Jordan's Pandemic Response and the Influence on Refugees' Income

As mentioned earlier, defence order number 6 allowed employers to reduce their employees' salaries in reference to different schemes. Therefore, those who have worked from home, or couldn't reach their work locations were subject to 50% deduction for April and May, while others who managed to reach their work locations, were subject to a deduction of up to 30% for April, May and June and 20% for July and August. Despite that this order was applied to all workers including Jordanians, other factors, such as the difference in minimum wage between Jordanians and non-Jordanians, as well as the lack of support programs for non-Jordanians, affected the refugees the most.

Fifteen participants out of the twenty-five have confirmed a deduction from their salaries by mostly 50% when they were not able to work during April and part of May, while the deduction continued to be 30% after the opening till June and 20% for July and August for most of them, with reduced working hours. While eight participants confirmed that they haven't received the salaries of April and part of May, in which three of them have totally lost their jobs. Only two participants confirmed that their salaries were not changed during or after the lockdown, as according to them,

they work for Food and Beverage companies, that weren't affected by the lockdown.

Moreover, five participants who worked for restaurants and haven't received salaries during the lockdown, confirmed that they were paid per hour instead of a monthly salary for the first two months after the lockdown, which resulted in less income, as restaurants were struggling to operate with the same performance as before the pandemic, which resulted in reduced working hours for restaurants workers. Moreover, they have also confirmed that their colleagues who were within the probation period at the beginning of the pandemic were fired. Two workers from a manufacturing industry, confirmed that the reduced salaries decision wasn't applied on the higher management which are mostly Jordanian citizens. Although that the defence order number 6, states that salaries deduction has to be applied on all, including higher management. Moreover, they were involuntary asked to take 15-day unpaid leaves for the months of December and January.

Moreover, although that part of the participants work for industries that were operating during the lockdown, they have confirmed that the transportation to their work location was a challenge. Even when a transportation service was provided, some of them mentioned that they were not able to reach the meeting point due to movement restrictions during the lockdown, and as Syrian refugees are not allowed to drive in Jordan unless for limited cases, such as those entitled for senior professions' work permits, or university students.

Moreover, one participant has confirmed that he was promoted to a new job before the pandemic with his current employer, however, due to the losses his company has made during the lockdown, the new title was closed and he has to go back to the old job.

Financial Assistance to Syrian Refugees

Although that the national financial support programs didn't include Syrian refugees, the UNHCR and World Food Programme continued on distributing food vouchers on the Syrian beneficiaries in Jordan. Ten participants said that they are entitled to the UNHCR & WFP food vouchers and have continued in receiving them. The amount of these vouchers varies between JOD 15 to 23 (approx. EUR 19 to 30) per person per month; depending on each family's situation.

Moreover, nine out of the ten participants who are entitled to the food vouchers also confirmed that they have received extra financial assistance

which was specifically paid due to the lockdown impact on refugees. The received amounts varied between participants, as part of them confirmed receiving an amount of JOD 300 (approx. EUR350), distributed over two payments, other confirmed receiving a one-time payment of JOD 85 (approx. EUR100). Furthermore, according to the UNHCR Office in Jordan, and additional cash assistance of USD 25.4 million was distributed over up to three separate payments, depending on each family's situation, for approximately 51,000 vulnerable refugee families in Jordan, who have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (UNHCR, 2020a).

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, refugees are facing double burdens today; while being away from their home countries and entitled to strict regulations by host countries, in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic that harmed them the most. Although that the pandemic situation has affected most workers and businesses in Jordan, refugees were less benefited from financial aids.

Moreover, the increase of restrictions towards the employment of refugees in Jordan has led to an increase of informal employment, resulting in losing the control over work conditions; where harsh conditions and abuse may exist. Adding to this that refugee workers who have been working informally were not able to defend their employment rights just like their peers, during the pandemic crisis.

Therefore, if more efforts are introduced to formalize the informal market for refugees, control over working conditions will be imposed, and refugee workers' rights will be protected. This can be implemented through making a clear distinguish between the foreign workforce regulations and those related to the refugees who are already located Jordan. This will not only minimize the access of foreign workers for the benefit of refugees, but also will reduce the competition between Jordanians and other nationalities, especially that the refugee workers already reserve their place informally. In addition, minimizing the population in the country, through giving the priority to refugees in accessing the work opportunities instead of bringing expatriates, shall minimize the pressure on the infrastructure, and natural resources of the country.

Lastly, as all workers in Jordan are entitled to the same amount of deductions by the Social Security Department, in addition to the compulsory social security insurance regardless of the nationality of the worker.

Future programs that are implemented to support insured workers, under any circumstances, whether pandemic situations or disruption of work for any other reason, shall be introduced to all workers regardless of their nationality.

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