



The burden of war affects all demographics – but none more so than children. Fourteen-year-old Fatmah with her mother at Al Zaatari camp In Al Zaatari refugee camp north of Jordan, over 58% of refugees are children aged 0–17 years. Their lives have been turned upside down. School and play a distant memory, refugees in a foreign desert a startling reality. For many of their parents, it was the concern for the safety of their children that forced them to leave their homeland.

"We crossed the border about 4 months ago. Of course we didn't want to leave, but we had no choice." Surrounded by their six children (and a few who have befriended the group) the two twin sisters are happy to talk. "The camp is ok," says one.

"We expected it to be like this – I don't like it, but at least we can sleep at night." According to the twins, the situation in Syria prompted their children to wake up at night crying. "For their sake we knew it was time to leave."

Entitled to free vaccination, provided by the Jordanian Ministry of Health with support from UNICEF, UNHCR and WHO, their children will at least be safe from the diseases that can afflict the young in Al Zaatari. "It takes us an hour from our tent to get here [the immunization

caravan]. But I know it's for the children's good. They have begun to smile again since they left Syria. At least they get some medical assistance here – in Dar'aa, my home town, there was nothing. Our hospitals and health centres were almost all closed down. Doctors would come out to see people, but this was expensive, and I heard stories of doctors being kidnapped on their rounds," said the mother.

In the immunization caravan itself is a young mother, 18 years old. Her first child, 4-month-old Mohammad is there to receive the initial vaccines supplied to newborns. "We (her husband and she) left Syria when Mohammad was only one week old. "We were both so scared about what was happening in our country – we were terrified for the safety of our new child." The mother explains that it is very difficult for her and Mohammad in Al Zaatari. "We need more essential baby items, such as diapers. We never have enough, sometimes my husband has to buy them, and we really cannot afford to do that. We are at least glad of these vaccination campaigns, there are rumours around the camp that they are poisoned, but this is ridiculous. This is Mohammad's second round of shots, and we will continue to come, to keep him as safe as possible."

## **Syrian children living with mental health issues are a growing concern for WHO**

Fatmah is a 14-year-old girl with Down syndrome, who needs constant care - something that puts a great deal of strain on her mother. "Medically, Fatmah is fine, she doesn't need any specific medical help. But it is so difficult for both of us here. Her condition means that she suffers from social and developmental issues. She needs to be taken care of all the time. It is an impossible to do so in this place, we need another tent at least."

Fatmah is not alone. Possibly not as easily detectable as a physical illness, developmental illnesses and mental health problems are affecting a high number of children in Al Zaatari refugee camp. UNHCR reports that in Al Zaatari 32% of all refugees receiving support to prevent and deal with mental health illnesses are in fact children.

The burden of war affects all demographics – but none more so than children, especially vulnerable ones. The innocence of childhood can be quite quickly lost in Syria and Al Zaatari refugee camp. The loss of education and social protection spaces coupled with the physical and psychological damages mean that major challenges in the future are a distinct likelihood for the children of Syria. More funding is needed if leading child development agencies such as UNICEF and UNHCR along with WHO and others are able to continue to prevent and treat childhood illnesses.

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