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In Jordan, UNICEF received €5 million to provide 4,500 Syrian refugee and other vulnerable girls and boys (5-18 years) out of any form of education and exposed to high risks of child labour, early marriage and other forms of abuse and exploitation, with access to quality alternative education, psychosocial support, lifeskills training and cash assistance.

This contribution of the European Union has also enabled UNICEF to conduct this qualitative study on the situation of Dom children, who are amongst the most marginalized children in Jordan. This study has informed the programming of UNICEF and will support the expansion of services to vulnerable Dom children.

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Photos credit: UNICEF Jordan/Herwig
Income generation: Their work is commonly in the informal sector and involving temporary positions and migration, both within and outside of Jordan. Boys and girls generally begin to work around the ages of 13-16 either with their parents or on their own. Common income generating activities include street vending, which often brings them into conflict with the law. While some families are able to benefit from social protection services, many others are not able to benefit, with one participant noting: “some families have no means of generating income but the Ministry of Social Development is unable to help all families who need it, as there are specific requirement like being widowed or divorced”.

Shelter: Mobile communities move frequently, as often as every 20 days; as such their shelter are often temporary and offer inadequate protection. In the words of one mother, they “have been living in darkness” while another said “the entire world is developing except for us, generation after generation we are all living in the same bad conditions.”
Water, sanitation and hygiene: Without access to the piped water system, families depend heavily on their neighbours for water. For those unable to source water from their neighbours, they are forced to purchase water, which is one of their main expenditures: “We have to buy fresh water, they charge us 1 JD for every 3 gallons; it’s unfair.” The lack of sanitation and hygiene facilities is a major source of stigma for this population and can act as barrier to education and employment.

Education: Of the boys and girls who participated in UNICEF’s focus group discussions, only 10 per cent were currently enrolled in school. Barriers to their education include migration, discrimination, violence and bullying in schools. This treatment is internalized, with one girl saying “We want to attend school and learn but we feel worthless there.”

Child Protection: Children, youth and women from the participating communities face a series of potentially severe protection risks including harassment, children labour and early marriage, with girls married off starting at 12 years old in some communities. For some, labour is not a choice: “We know a child in this neighborhood who’s 14 and is the sole provider for his mother as his parents are divorced”. This can be the same in terms of early marriage: “Your girls would go to school, graduate, then work and receive a salary, so you can marry your girls off at 25. As for us, there’s nothing to do for both girls and boys, so we marry them off at 17.”

Steps that parents, youth and children take to improve their conditions were highlighted during the discussions, along with their key recommendations to ensure their children’s rights are fulfilled. Support to access safe and sustainable adequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities was a key ask and entry point for better health, but also for better education and livelihoods. In terms of education, specific recommendations included mobile schools over formal schools. Some mothers requested vocational training so that their sons and daughters would have a better chance to access the labour market. Vocational training preferences included woodworking, car maintenance, barber training, hairdressing and sewing classes. Playgrounds and soccer pitches were requested as safe spaces for children to participate in recreational activities.
Introduction

Girls and boys of the marginalized sub-group known as the Dom face major barriers to the realization of their rights to survival, development and protection. Unsettled families often live in tents insufficient to protect them against the weather and without basic water and sanitation facilities. Few are able to join their peers in school in the face of violence, bullying and discrimination. In the words of one mother, “Our children are very smart but aren’t given a chance”. UNICEF undertook a series of focus group discussions with children and women of the community, to discuss the cultural, institutional and systemic issues affecting their lives, livelihoods and access to essential services.

Background

In advance of the focus group discussions, UNICEF undertook a light desk review of the limited resource materials available on this marginalized minority group. Precise population figures for this group remain elusive, with sources varying from 30,000-35,000 people1 to 70,000-80,000 people, the latter estimate divided into 63 clans or sub-tribes. Smaller nomadic communities are not included in these numbers; these non-settled communities are likely amongst the most vulnerable. Some of the population in this group can be traced back to the Indian subcontinent, though precise historical migrations are unknown.

The Dom community is highly heterogeneous. This report is based on a series of discussions with the two major sub-groups, the Bani Murra and Turkman, both self-identified titles. Due to the historic discrimination faced by this community, members of the group tend to hide their original ethnic identity, and instead resort to adopting a Jordanian, Bedouin, Turkman or more generally an Arab identity to better assimilate with the surrounding community.3

The Bani Murra consider themselves Arabs, descendants of pre-Islamic Arabs. They are highly fragmented due to multiple waves of historical migrations (West Bank, Gaza, Iraq and Syria) into Jordan. While some members of the Bani Murra community have settled4, many smaller groups are still nomadic. The Bani Murra speak Dommewiri commonly referred to as “Al-Asfouriyah” alongside Arabic. The language is a mixture of different languages such as Turkish, Kurdish, Farsi and Hindi and may differ in dialect from one group to another.

The Turkman population speak Turkish and tend to preserve a nomadic way of life. Interviews with members of the Turkman during the field research stage of the report confirm that there are around 5,000 individuals who identify as Turkman. They seasonally migrate between the Jordan Valley, Zarqa, and Sahab/Amman.5,6

Communities of Dom live across Jordan, with concentrations reported in Amman, Madaba, Zarqa, Jerash, Mafraq, Karak and Irbid with seasonal movement to the Jordan Valley. They are Muslim, though not all are strictly practicing, with some groups retaining more ancient religious traditions.7,8 According to a key expert on the Dom, Mohammed Tarawneh, an anthropologist at Yarmouk University, they are an egalitarian matrilineal society with equal gender roles.9 The Bani Mura and the Turkmen have their own leadership structure.

3 Ibid.
4 Settled: Live in stone homes in one area. Semi Settled: Seasonally move between two locations (usually between a home in the city during summer and tents in Jordan valley in winter). Non settled/ roaming: Live in tents, regularly move either because of evictions and/or seasonal movement.
5 Source: Interview with Dr. Mohammed Tarawneh, Anthropologist, Yarmouk University, 16 June 2016.
7 Khuzam, Akram, Short documentary including Jamal Naji, Alhurra TV ,<www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TeQBbwWMf4>.
8 Interview with Mohammed Tarawneh.
9 UNICEF interview with Mohammed Tarawneh.
“Our children are very smart but aren’t given a chance.”
Bani Mura leaders (Mukhtars) are selected from within the individual communities to fill a permanent role. The Mukhtar completes official documents for his community members; presents specific needs of the community to government offices; mediates disputes within the community; and may serve as a liaison between the police and members of the community. Reportedly, more and more communities are not selecting a new leader when the role becomes vacant unless the local police specifically ask them to elect someone. The role is changing from a person with skills to counsel the community with regard to cultural matters, to a government prescribed role that will assist them with policing the Dom communities.

This marginalized community is victim of regular discrimination. Girls and boys from this community learn early in life to hide their identity, sometimes walking into nearby residential areas to catch the school bus in order to avoid being identified and ridiculed. They have fewer friends from other communities. Outsiders (farmers) throw rocks at us sometimes,” said a community member. Problems between boys from this community and outside Jordanian community can escalate into violent altercations requiring police intervention. When problems do occur, they are able to approach to the police and believe they are treated fairly.

Some focus group discussions reported tensions between the Bani Murra and Turkmen groups themselves, to the extent that at times they will not establish their settlements in the same area. This problem may be localized to specific communities, as there are other reports of Bani Murray and Turkman living together. When problems do occur between the groups, they resolve the issues amongst themselves with the help of the Mukhtar. In certain cases, it can take two years or more to resolve tensions through internal mechanisms.

Methodology

UNICEF undertook a series of twelve focus group discussions between 17 July and 9 August 2016, with Bani Murra and Turkmen communities, as well as mixed discussions with the two groups. The samples were identified based on UNICEF partner recommendations of groups that they knew were present, to whom they had sent outreach teams or with whom they had worked. Topics discussed included issues related to child protection and access to basic services such as water, sanitation and hygiene, health and education.

During the focus groups, few problems were raised in terms of access to health services. A minority of participants described facing financial barriers and/or discrimination from service providers. As such, barriers to access to health services are not elaborated in the report.

Each discussion had a maximum of ten participants: two sessions for boys (12-18 years); two sessions for girls (12-18 years); two mixed children’s sessions (11-18 years) and six sessions with women. Seven sessions were with Bani Murra, three with Turkman and two were mixed. These interviews were complemented by a desk review of available resources, key informant interviews and discussions with UNICEF implementing partners who provide services to Dom communities. Information from these sources is referenced as relevant.

Given the limited information available about this group, UNICEF approached key informants to identify and access communities for interview. This report is therefore not based on a representative sample, but rather aims to gain insights on the marginalized communities and validate anecdotes.

The biggest challenge during the discussions was the language barrier in communicating with the Turkmen, though in each group there was at least one member who was able to translate into Arabic.

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10 This is a term used by this community to refer to all those are not belonging to this community.
While UNICEF is in regular contact with government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) providing services to the Dom, it was difficult at times to track down specific locations as they are highly mobile. This was further exacerbated by rumours of impending evictions which forced some participants to leave in the middle of a session.

The recommendations identified during this assessment are being used to design and implement short, medium and longer-term responses for UNICEF, the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) and other partners. This includes access to quality education, water, sanitation hygiene and protective services as well as opportunities for civic engagement and entrepreneurship initiatives.
1 Income and Expenditure
This community participates in a variety of income-generating activities and have varying income levels. Their work is commonly in the informal sector and involving temporary positions. Women indicated making around 5 Jordanian Dinars (JD) a day, with their work commonly entailing selling handmade accessories, clothes and henna; working as housemaids; or being employed in hair salons. Men are contracted many times as trash collectors by municipalities.

Participants in the Bani Murra groups mentioned that both men and women travel to work in Gulf countries, either acting as street vendors (men) or working in private homes (women). Parents were reported to travel for up to two years at a time, before returning for a year. During these times, children are generally left in the care of their grandparents.

Street vending is another common economic activity for adult respondents, with men selling small items such as belts and sunglasses. Street vending is seen as a form of begging by authorities, putting those who participate at risk of arrest. However, street vending, a term used by some in the groups interchangeably with begging, helps them feed their children and in the words of one woman: “Begging is better than stealing, it helps us get by.”

Income generating activities for children

Children begin to work around the ages of 13-16 in this community who participated in the discussions. Younger children also work, though not as regularly. For some participants, the income generated by children was said to support their families to meet their basic needs, while for others it was reported as a form of allowance for the children. This was echoed by one of the girls from the Bani Murra group who said “I go to work in homes to be able to support my brothers.” However, this may be a personal sentiment as a boy in another group noted that he is not pressured by his family to work.

Mothers in both the Bani Murra and the Turkman explained that boys would start collecting scrap around the age of 15 and would sell 1kg of scrap for 4 JD. In the winter, Bani Murra families move to Ghor where their children help in some farming jobs while Turkman mothers said their children work in nearby factories. Bani Murra children were also reported to accompany their parents to work. Boys will accompany their fathers who work as trash collectors to help with the street cleaning while girls would accompany their mothers while they clean homes or help them in selling homemade goods.

Children were also reported to be participating in work that exposes them to risks, such as construction. Girls described cleaning homes for 5-10 JD a day for families that they do not know. According to their mothers, children in the Turkman group participate in street vending items such as toys, balloons and sunglasses, potentially bringing them in contact with the law.

Financial support

Some families interviewed as part of the focus group discussions receive cash transfers from the National Aid Fund (NAF). Families with members who are living with disabilities, widowed or divorced receive a monthly stipend of 45-100 JD. A woman from the Turkman group highlighted that many had registered with MoSD and various charities but have not yet received any support. One woman voiced the opinion that charities support only Syrian refugees and military families.

Recommendations from the participating communities

Participants in the discussion groups believed that Syrians and other groups are treated better in terms of support and called for similar assistance for their families. The community recommended that social assistance programming be expanded beyond their current criteria. In the words of one mother who participated in the discussions, “some families here have no means of generating income but (NAF) doesn’t help all families who need it, there are specific requirement like being widowed or divorced.” Others requested vocational training so that their sons and daughters would have a better chance to access the labour market.
Access to Shelter
Roaming communities are regularly forced to move as they are seen a source of irritation to neighbours or landowners. According to a leading Jordanian anthropologist, the Dom people believe that all human beings commonly own the land, hence, settling on other people’s properties is considered normal. Even when settled in urban environments, many of the Dom populations chose to attach tents to their houses to uphold their traditions.

Housing conditions

Mobile families from the community who participated in the focus group discussions reported living in tents, which are not waterproof, nor are they insulated from severe temperatures and weather conditions. Due to the nature of their shelter, they do not have regular access to water, adequate hygiene facilities or electricity. Two to three families might share one tent. One woman from the Bani Murra group noted that her tent was filled with insects.

A Bani Murra woman noted that high rental costs were a major barrier to improved shelter conditions: “We want to live a normal life and shield ourselves like the rest of the people but how can we afford it when the cheapest house to rent is for 150 JD?” One woman who was able to settle with her family reported that her home had bad ventilation and was covered in mould.

Recommendations from the participating communities

Many participants in the focus groups were interested in settling in one place, but are forced to remain nomadic due to their circumstances. Barriers to settlement include extreme poverty and lack of land ownership. Participants generally expressed a need for better shelter. The Dom pointed to the shelter support received by Syrian refugees as something that could be replicated for their communities.

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1 Report by Ghada Saba, Roya TV, 1 November 2013, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7VoZFlCM>.  
2 Interview with Mohammed Tarawneh.  

Access to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
The biggest concerns raised through the focus group discussions were around water, sanitation and hygiene. Across Jordan, access rates to piped water networks is 98 per cent (83 per cent in rural areas) and connections to a sewer system is 68 per cent. The temporary nature of Dom shelters, as they move for economic migration and due to eviction, means that none of the unsettled participants’ families had access to adequate water and sanitation facilities.

Water

In the words of one Bani Murra woman, “we envy those who live in stone homes and have water and electricity, even getting a gallon of water is a lot of trouble.” Without access to the piped water system, families depend heavily on their neighbours for water. For those unable to source water from their neighbours, they are forced to purchase water, which is one of their main expenditures. Prices reported in discussion groups range from 0.25 to 0.3 JD.

Sanitation

Participants in the various group discussions were keenly aware of their lack of sanitation facilities. Underlying the issue of sanitation were issues of privacy and dignity. As two or three families may share a single tent, there is a lack of privacy when they need to use the toilet. Many parents cannot afford diapers for their infants. One woman in Irbid noted specifically that she found practicing open defecation in the desert demeaning.

Hygiene

The lack of facilities and items to practice adequate hygiene is a major source of stigma for this population. A lack of hygiene can act as a barrier to jobs, as was described in one group. Some mothers felt that they cannot bring their children to educational centres as they lack personal hygiene and do not have proper clothing. The historical discrimination against people from this community for the lack of hygiene means that even those who are settled, and more likely to have hygiene facilities, are conscious about their hygiene and complain that people accuse them of not being clean.

Recommendations from the participating communities

Support to access safe and sustainable adequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities was the key ask. This included items such as mobile latrines and water tanks. For this community, WASH is not just the key for better health, but also better for education and livelihoods.
Access to Education
Of the boys and girls who participated in UNICEF’s focus group discussions, only 10 per cent were currently enrolled in school. A common theme throughout the discussion was the desire for education. However, Dom children face a range of socioeconomic and cultural barriers to the fulfilment of the right to education. One mother commented that “our children are very smart but aren’t given a chance.” Drop outs were reported from the Bani Murra group as happening between third and sixth grades.

**Education barrier: Mobility**

The mobile or nomadic lifestyle adopted by some of the groups from the community create a barrier to enrollment in formal school. It was noted that children cannot stay in school because they migrate, often times between Ghor (in winter) and Amman (in summer). Once established in a new location, they are often told their children are ineligible for schooling.

**Education barrier: Violence in schools**

Children and their parents report that children are bullied by both their teachers and fellow students. They report being physically and verbally abused by their teachers in school. In the words of one girl, “We want to attend school and learn but we feel worthless there.” Some students are made to do chores around the school instead of going to class. One girl from the Bani Murra group recalled her teachers making Dom students clean the school grounds in the sun, making her cousin dizzy.

Students are also bullied by their peers, purportedly with no consequences from their teachers. Boys in the Bani Murra discussions described how other children stole their belongings and hit them. They reported instances of other students trying to provoke Dom students into fights. Even in protective community centres, Dom children complain of bullying.

**Recommendations from the participating communities**

Most mothers and children who participated in the discussions value education, to improve their children’s futures. Specific recommendations included mobile schools that would move along with their communities. The quality of education is also important, with parents complaining that their children have reached fourth grade without being able to read or write. When given a chance, as they have been through Makani spaces4, Dom children are committed to learning. Dom children raised preferences for mobile Makani centres over formal schools, as they were learning more in Makani centres. They also face less harassment. Vocational training preferences included woodworking, car maintenance, barber training, hairdressing and sewing classes. As noted, the provision of WASH items and clothing would also help children be better accepted by their peers.

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4 The Makani approach aims to expand learning opportunities for all children not accessing any form of education in Jordan. Makani centres have a holistic approach that provides all vulnerable children and youth with learning opportunities, life skills training and psychosocial support services under one roof. Settled Dom children participate in Makanis on a regular basis, while mobile Dom children participate for shorter periods.
Child Protection
Children, youth and women from the participating communities face a series of potentially severe protection risks, both from within and from outside their communities. Meanwhile, they are less likely to access essential protection services. **Most participants were registered and reported no problems registering births or deaths, or accessing courts.**

**Harassment**

Girls described facing harassment in the streets, places of work and their communities. Mothers fear their daughters will be abducted. Fear for girls’ safety leads their families to limit their freedom of movement. Not all girls feel they can go to their parents when they are harassed, for fear of being punished by their parents. Harassment acts as a key motivator in early marriage. Some families report cases of harassment or rape to the police while others prefer to resolve it within the community. In some cases, harassment is not reported in order to avoid possible social stigma. Focus group participants generally felt that when incidents were brought to the police that they were dealt with fairly.

**Early marriage**

Bani Mura communities reported that girls are commonly married off between the ages of 15 and 16 while Turkman women say it is 12 and 13 for girls in their community. A Turkman mother explained that if children are married off around 15-16 years old, prior to the legal age, a marriage contract is written at home and is later documented when the couple reaches the legal age. In the words of one Bani Murra mother, “Your girls would go to school, graduate, and then work and receive a salary, so you can marry your girls off at 25. As for us, there’s nothing to do for both girls and boys, so we marry them off at 17.” If their son wants to get married, the parents marry off a daughter first if possible to use the dowry money to cover the son’s marriage costs. Although most of the girls in the focus groups were close to the age they would normally be married, none of participants expressed a desire to get married while a few participants reported that their parents often try to convince them about getting married soon.

**Child labour**

Most of the children work, starting between the ages of 13 and 15, and beyond missing out on their education, this work can often be hazardous for the children. Children often work from dusk until dawn, sometimes returning with scrapes and cuts from collecting scrap. In the words of one Bani Murra mother, “Sometimes my children feel fatigued and ill from working. They rest for a couple of days and then go back to work.” Not all parents know that it is illegal for their children to work. A mother from the Bani Murra group noted that there have been incidents in the past when children from their community have been detained by government authorities for begging or selling on the streets. If children are caught street vending or begging they might stay in custody for days until their bail is paid, which is around 70 JD. Some participants claimed that they are arrested for just being on the street and accused of begging even if they are just hanging around.

**Recommendations from the participating communities**

Mothers and children requested playgrounds and soccer pitches, safe spaces for children to participate in recreational activities.