

Quality of work for Syrian refugees in Jordan

Maha Kattaa and Meredith Byrne

Work permits have been at the centre of the policy debate on the hosting of Syrian refugees in Jordan. This approach needs also to involve ensuring decent working conditions for all.

The issuing of over 100,000 work permits to Syrian refugees in Jordan as of May 2018 – following a joint commitment by the Government of Jordan and the international community – is in itself an important achievement. However, work permits can also be a deceptive indicator because they measure the legalisation and formalisation of employment but not necessarily actual job creation nor the quality of work. Evidence from a 2017 International Labour Organization (ILO) rapid impact assessment¹ suggests that obtaining a work permit is only the first step towards formalising Syrian workers. Policies must also improve working conditions.

Social protection and decent work

With few exceptions, employers in Jordan are required to enrol their employees in social security, irrespective of nationality, and must do so for new employees soon after their work permits are issued. In the agriculture sector, however, Syrian workers are permitted to obtain work permits through cooperatives. This de-links them from a sponsor and thereby also bypasses the requirement for employers to register Syrians in the social security system. Similarly, in the construction sector, Syrians may obtain a work permit through the General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions (GFJTU). Under the GFJTU scheme, workers are not required to register with the national social security system but must instead obtain an insurance policy, costing approximately 45 Jordanian dinar (US\$65) annually.

The implications of protecting a large number of Syrian workers through work injury insurance schemes are not yet clear, although insurance schemes do not provide minimum social protection coverage as defined by ILO's Social Security Convention No. 102.² Furthermore, while social security

systems deduct contributions from workers' wages to contribute to national social security funds, insurance schemes do not operate in the same way. Protecting Syrian workers through social security is important not only for securing equality of treatment but also for extending social protection coverage to unemployed and retired Jordanians – because unregistered workers increase the supply of unprotected labour, while decreasing the share of workers making contributions to social security funds.

Only 20% of interviewed Syrian workers who had work permits reported being covered by social security; 13% did not know whether they were covered, nor what benefits social security provided. Many Jordanian employers interviewed during the rapid impact assessment did not believe that they were required to register Syrian workers in social security, even in sectors where they were in fact required to do so.

Since the adoption of non-employer and non-profession specific work permits, the responsibility of insuring against injury at work has shifted to the permit holders. Early focus group discussions held with Syrian construction workers who had obtained employment via ILO Employment Service Centres across Jordan indicate a generally positive reaction to having insurance (and that they do not consider the cost prohibitive) but that there is a lack of awareness of the provisions and benefits of insurance. It is also unclear whether Syrian workers who are young and in good health will want to invest in insurance policies as they may not perceive the risk of illness, injury or death as being relevant to them.

Labour inspection

Our research suggests that labour inspectors appear to prioritise verifying that all foreign workers, including Syrian workers, have the

required permits but pay less attention to decent work conditions. Of those interviewed Syrian workers who had permits, only 8% reported that their working conditions, as well as work permits, were checked during labour inspections. It would seem therefore that not all indicators of decent work have improved with formalisation. Overall, Syrians with work permits do report an increased likelihood of having written work contracts; however, hourly wages, safety provisions and relations with employers are not necessarily any better. Our evidence suggests that Syrians with permits are actually working in excess of the standard 40-hour work week, although none reported receiving overtime compensation. Focus group discussions, however, showed a more complex picture. Some Syrian workers wanted to work more hours so that they could increase their income, even though they knew they might not be compensated for the additional work. Despite having been briefed on occupational safety and health (OSH) procedures, others preferred not to wear protective gear, finding that it got in the way of their work. Employers reported that fines for non-compliance were not substantial or evenly applied, that OSH provisions were not usually checked during inspections, and that there was a general lack of consistency in the enforcement of labour laws.

Finding the right balance

By facilitating the employment of Syrian workers, the Government of Jordan has taken proactive steps to turn the arrival of Syrian refugees into a development opportunity. Government policies must continue to promote decent work conditions which should include mechanisms that gradually bring workers into national social

protection systems. In some sectors, clear information on the benefits of social security coverage or employment insurance, as well as workers' entitlements, may be of use. Clear communication is also needed around the social security system as a whole and its reliance on workers' contributions. Labour inspection could also play a more prominent role in promoting decent work if inspectors were better equipped to provide relevant recommendations to employers and workers to help them comply with regulations and standards, rather than only playing an enforcement role. Reasonable and well-regulated penalties can, when necessary, play a part in encouraging compliance.

A comprehensive review of work permits' accordance with applicable international labour standards³ could be of use for workers, employers and government representatives. More work needs to be done to identify the challenges Syrians face in obtaining work permits but of equal importance is to support the Jordanian government to find the right balance of incentives and sanctions that serve the interests of employers, Jordanian citizens and Syrian workers alike.

Maha Kattaa kattaa@ilo.org

Syria Response Coordinator in Amman

Meredith Byrne byrne@ilo.org

Technical Officer in Labour Migration

International Labour Organization www.ilo.org

1. International Labour Organization (2017) *Work permits and employment of Syrian refugees in Jordan: toward formalising the work of Syrian refugees* <http://bit.ly/ILO-permits-Syria-Jordan-2017>

This assessment was based on questionnaires completed by 450 Syrian workers (half of whom had work permits and half of whom did not) in the service, agriculture and construction sectors, and on two focus groups.

2. <http://bit.ly/ILO-Convention-102>

3. ILO (2016) Guiding principles on the access of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons to the labour market. Principle 14 (d) <http://bit.ly/ILO-guiding-principles-refugees>

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