

## Can Joint Mobility Projects at Universities Promote Safe Transitions for Refugees?

### The Experience of Jordanian Social Work Students<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract

*This critical case study examines the experiences of social work students who engaged in an international joint mobility project, facilitated through collaboration between four universities. The paper focuses on their participation in mobility projects and the integration of research findings in the development of evidence-based practices. The projects focused on the safe transition of female refugees to new lives in the host country of Jordan. The overarching aim of this paper is twofold: first, to assist student social workers in developing and refining a multicultural understanding of the cultural context influencing the lives of refugee women and second, to teach student social workers how to advocate for the needs of refugee women. This paper seeks to provide evidence-based social work practices for those working with refugee women locally and internationally. Data was collected using four methods: questionnaires, semi-structured interviews with humanitarian and social workers, student social worker diaries, and focus group discussions. Findings suggest that engaging in mobility projects enhances intercultural skills, such as cultural competency, sensitivity, self-awareness, and adherence to the principle of "do no harm". Furthermore, students emerged as valuable resources for their colleagues, emphasizing the importance of a foundation of cultural understanding in work*

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*done to support female refugees. Culturally competent training practices for social workers, along with better tools to understand patient challenges, improved the quality-of-life focused outcomes for refugee women. Additionally, students concluded that their involvement in mobility projects significantly contributed to their professional growth, underscoring the need to prioritize the development of social work teaching and practice, both nationally and internationally.*

### **Key Words:**

*mobility program, social work, refugee women, student project, Jordan*

## **1 Introduction**

Due to Jordan's political stability compared with neighboring countries, Jordan hosts more than 2 million Palestine refugees and more than 1.3 million Syrian refugees. These figures qualify Jordan to be the second largest refugee host country per capita at global level. (World Health Organization, 2020).

In 2022 there were 760,000 officially registered asylum seekers in Jordan, with Syrians representing the majority at 670,000. This figure also includes refugees from Iraq, Somalia, and Sudan. The influx of refugees following the Syrian Civil War have placed substantial demands on essential services such as food, shelter, education, and healthcare, straining communities comprised of underserved and vulnerable individuals (CARE Jordan, 2023). Jordan, a nation with a 22.3% unemployment rate (third quarter of 2023), is categorized by the World Bank as a lower-middle-income country, and it receives aid from various international agencies. In this context, the large influx of refugees from Syria therefore has increased the burden of responsibility of both the state and relief groups, creating tension within the social and political sphere. Amidst the changing socio-political landscape, CARE Jordan (2023) has identified newly emerging vulnerabilities, particularly for female-headed households, such as gender-based violence and social isolation, which have facilitated the change in social structures and hierarchies. This has prompted the involvement of social workers and other humanitarian actors to ensure the safety of women, children, and other marginalized people.

The 2022 Vulnerability Assessment Framework study conducted by the UNHCR identified increasing rates of family debt and a 10% income loss by individual workers, suggesting a decline in economic conditions for both Syrian and non-Syrian households in Jordan. The assessment further highlighted a small but notable proportion of refugees experiencing worsening access to healthcare, food, education, and adequate living conditions – these individuals reported fears about having to resort to unsafe means of survival such as working illegally or withdrawing children from school for labor, further exacerbating tensions within the family unit (UNHCR, 2022). Of note, these challenges mirror those faced by less privileged Jordanians, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Accordingly, there has been increasing calls on government and humanitarian institutions, academia, and frontline workers to respond to the evolving needs of both refugees and the local population. Attempts to address these needs through social protection and humanitarian assistance programs have been developed and implemented with a positive response from social workers. (AlMakhamreh & Hutchinson, 2018).

Jordan, a highly educated nation, invests significantly in the institution of education. Education is generally perceived as a family responsibility and recognized accordingly as a crucial instrument for national development and the enhancement of familial welfare (World Economic Forum, 2020). Notably, female literacy in the country ranks among the highest in the region, at an impressive 97.8%. Approximately 53% of Jordanian women pursue higher education at either community colleges or universities (World Economic Forum, 2017). Simultaneously, the family structure traditionally serves as a vital safety net, at times differentially ascribing gendered emotional and economic responsibilities (AlMakhamreh, 2017).

The structure of Syrian families as well as associated gender norms, attitudes, and practices are molded by an array of factors, including but not limited to socioeconomic factors, religious socialization, and political climate (Marcus & Harper, 2015). The onset of Syria's civil war and ensuing forced displacement led to many Syrian men either staying behind, dying, or developing severe health conditions or disabilities. Consequently, Syrian women, particularly those in prolonged refugee situations, have been compelled to assume new roles within their families and communities (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009; Le Masson, 2016; CARE Jordan, 2018; United Nations, 2019).

Syrian and Arab family structures and gender norms are deeply influenced by patriarchal culture (Joseph, 1996; Women's Refugee Commission, 2019). In Syrian families, women are traditionally perceived as daughters, wives, and mothers before being recognized as potential societal contributors. Consequently, more conservative families may deem girls' education as unnecessary (CARE Jordan, 2018). In the Syrian society, once a woman marries, she becomes financially reliant on, and linked to, her husband's family. This typically results in the transference of her financial responsibility from one male-led family to another. The husband, bearing the responsibility of the family's finances, wields substantial power and influence over the women in his family. With the men typically representing the household in interactions with extended family and the community, male financial dominance is further reinforced by societal dominance (Joseph, 1996; Nasser Eddin, 2011).

Marital status and age significantly influence the roles men and women play in their families and the way that the community perceives their family unit (CARE Jordan, 2018). Increased female entrance into the workforce has elicited mixed feelings among women, with some expressing guilt or remorse for not dedicating enough time to their families, while others report feelings of empowerment or recognition from their families and communities (Culcasi, 2019; Cazabat, 2019). As Syrian women have become integrated within their host communities, they have been able to sway gender roles, grow in their autonomy, and access greater opportunities for education and community engagement with Jordanians (Almakhamreh et al., 2020). Despite advancement in opportunity, expectations of traditional familial responsibility are maintained, introducing tension between the idea of the modern woman and the customary maternal figure (Nasser Eddin, 2011).

In Jordan, efforts to professionalize social work are advancing, supported by the government and academia (AlMakhamreh & Sullivan, 2013; Almakhamreh, 2022). Since the introduction of social work education in 1965, there has been significant progress; by 2020, three universities offered degrees at the Bachelor's and Master's levels. A pivotal

alliance, formed in 2023, is enhancing the field through rigorous training and accreditation standards. This collaboration includes the Ministry of Social Development, universities, and the Northern Ireland Cooperation Overseas. Additionally, a unified curriculum has been established, approved by the Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission for Higher Education Institutions. The Social Work Law, ratified in May 2023, further underpins these advancements.

The Ministry of Higher Education's 2020 strategy promotes the practical application of social work theory and encourages cultural exchange between Eastern and Western universities (Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research [MOHD], n.d.). Local initiatives are also bolstering professional competencies within the social workforce. Addressing unemployment, social workers are pivotal in creating programs that empower female refugees economically, offering comprehensive career services and culturally sensitive training. This approach is vital for both service success and workplace skill development (Al-Makhamreh et al., 2012; MacIntyre & Paul, 2013).

Academics and social work students in Jordan have actively contributed to community development through field placements, research, and consultation. They seek to engage in international projects to highlight social work's crucial role and publish their findings. Notably, research acknowledges that over 84% of refugees live in urban areas and integrate into society (CARE Jordan, 2023). Students and scholars are dedicated to enhancing social work practices with refugees, involving themselves in international projects, and reinforcing the profession's evidence base with focused research (Almakhamreh, 2022). They prioritize developing gender-sensitive practices, especially for services aimed at refugee women. The mobility project not only facilitates research but also significantly improves the skills, knowledge, and experience of social work students.

International mobility projects are vital for developing the skills needed in humanitarian work, especially in serving marginalized communities. These projects enhance multicultural competence and professional growth by exposing participants to diverse educational and work settings, fostering intercultural communication and creativity, and breaking down stereotypes (Teichler, 2017; Patelarou et al., 2022). Such experiences are essential in social work education (MacIntyre & Paul, 2013; Webber et al., 2014).

These projects encourage cultural exchanges and balanced partnerships, which are fundamental for effective communication between students, academics, and partner universities (Mustafa, 2009). Allmosa (2014) highlights universities' roles in bridging cultural gaps across various societies, emphasizing the humanities and social sciences as means to collaborate and share knowledge, particularly in diverse religious and ethnic settings (Patarlou et al., 2022). Moreover, UNESCO projects promote intercultural understanding through such international experiences.

The goal of these projects is to enable academic collaboration on practical social work projects with refugees across four universities, with each institution conducting research in its context (Allmosa, 2014; Sarhan, 2019). Jordan's mobility project, supported by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), began in 2019 with a focus on "Social Integration of Refugees, taking Cultural Aspects into Account." This support allows social work departments to engage in international exchanges, enhancing the knowledge of refugee needs among students and professors. DAAD also facilitates participation by covering travel and accommodation costs (Moriarty et al., 2015).

This paper focuses on the valuable insights gained by social work students participating in an international mobility project serving Syrian refugee women. It draws on evidence from their field notes and focus group discussions held eleven months after the project's end. The main aim is to show how social work students can become significant repositories of knowledge, contributing to capacity building throughout their education and training. The support from the international mobility project was instrumental in enhancing their awareness of both their internal experiences and the external environment.

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Project Phases

The two-year Jordanian mobility project, titled "Social Work and Organizational Development," represents a collaborative effort among several institutions. These include the Social Work department at the Princess Rahmah University College, part of AlBalqa Applied University in Al-Salt, Jordan; the Magdeburg-Stendal University of Applied Sciences in Germany; the Neubrandenburg University of Applied Sciences in Germany; and the An-Najah National University in Palestine. This program marked the inaugural international mobility project undertaken by the Social Work department at AlBalqa Applied University. The university's international office provided guidelines for the project's announcement and selection of student participants. The project aimed to engage second- and third-year students, aged 19 and 20, proficient in English. Parental consent, particularly for female students, considering Jordan's conservative society, was a prerequisite for overseas travel. The project employed a culturally sensitive approach to foster trust within the participants' families. The funding agency determined the participant count: three female students from AlBalqa Applied University, one student assistant from the German Jordanian University and two professors from AlBalqa University and the German Jordanian University. The following research focuses on this group.

The collaboration involved seven distinct phases, each with a clearly defined time course:

- Phase 1: The initial phase entailed a meeting among the four collaborating universities – two German, one Palestinian, and one Jordanian. An-Najah University was chosen to host the meeting. However, due to visa restrictions faced by the Jordanian team, the meeting was conducted online via Skype. The teams discussed the main project guidelines, confirmed flight dates, and defined students' roles and focus topics for the project.
- Phase 2: This phase involved the establishment of a group network. The students created a WhatsApp group that included themselves, the three professors, and a social work post-graduate research assistant from a public university in Jordan experienced in working with refugee communities. The post-graduate student was included to provide an opportunity for them to grow research and team management skills. An engineering student was included for scientific project administration and for interdisciplinary collaboration.
- Phase 3: This phase concentrated on student capacity building, featuring intensive workshops, discussions, training sessions, and orientation about social work with refugees.

- Phase 4: This phase encompassed data collection through interviews. The students and research assistants collated data from 107 female refugees, conducted literature reviews, and underwent intensive meetings with professors to discuss challenges and evaluate the research process.
- Phase 5: This phase involved exchange visits, with the Jordanian students visiting Germany and facilitating several university-based workshops at the Magdeburg-Stendal University. The participating Jordanian professors assessed the daily meetings, visited local institutions, engaged with social work professionals, and facilitated cultural sensitivity trainings.
- Phase 6: This phase entailed a joint conference in Jordan attended by German student and faculty participants, social work students and faculty in Jordan, and the Syrian refugee women served by the work (Sarhan, 2019).
- Phase 7: A focus group eleven months after the completion of the mobility project was held over zoom with all participating students and faculty.

## 2.2 Target Population and Data Quality

This research prioritized the experiences of Syrian refugee women and social-work students during the mobility project. According to the UNHCR's (n.d.) 2020 Operational Portal Refugee Situations in Jordan, approximately half of the Syrian refugees in Jordan are women, with the majority residing in Al-Salt, one of the most populous cities in Jordan. Al-Salt, located within the Al-Balqa governorate, has a population of 491,709, with around 20,000 being Syrian refugees. Despite the significant percentage of displaced individuals in the city's population, limited research has been conducted on the resettled Syrian refugees in Al-Salt. The study aimed to assess the impact of displacement on women's familial roles, the services offered to refugee women in the host community, and the challenges encountered during the delivery of social work interventions with women. This study utilized a strengths-based approach for the students and a host community-based approach for the refugees (AlMakhamreh et al., 2015).

The primary focus of the study was to understand the experiences of social work students when working in international projects, and how their experiences provide evidence to support the practice of social work in the refugee field. The university's network and research supervisors facilitated access to data from local community organizations and the social development office. A formal letter from the dean's office was used to secure access to the data. The team conducted face-to-face visits with local refugee advocacy and support organizations, explaining the rationale behind requested information as well as its guaranteed confidentiality. To gather descriptive information, the local community center facilitated connections to refugee women, who joined the study using informed consent. Some refugee women invited their friends or relatives to participate. The chosen urban city, Al-Salt, has fewer refugees per capita than other cities of Jordan; however, it does have a low socioeconomic status and does not receive adequate attention for services from national or international funds. This permitted the team the ability to conduct research in small groups with primarily underserved individuals.

Triangulation methods were employed to collect data for the research, including questionnaires and interviews with refugee women, as well as in-depth interviews with workers and policymakers. Qualitative data was also collected from participant students

through field diaries documenting their experiences, and after eleven months of commencing the project, a follow-up focus group was conducted with the same students.

The present study employed an exploratory design and integrated both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, tested and revised by expert professionals and academics. A total of 107 Syrian women, aged between 17 to 80 years and residing in Al-Salt, comprised the population sample. It was a purposive sample accessed through the community centers, but also through utilizing the snowball sampling technique. The questionnaire covered a range of topics that included, but were not limited to, closed and open-ended inquiries regarding the women's experiences in Syria and Jordan. Prior to participation in the study, both verbal and written consent were obtained from the participants. They were reassured of the confidentiality of their details and informed about their right to disengage from the study at any point.

To achieve a 70% confidence level, denoted as T2, the study assumes a variance ( $\rho$ ) of the main estimate at 50% and a margin of error (E) also set at 50%. The collected raw quantitative data was initially input into the KoboToolbox (2020), an open-source platform designed by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative. This platform, a suite of tools for data collection and analysis, is specifically engineered for disaster relief and humanitarian crises, ensuring superior data quality along with streamlining data collection and recording processes.

### **2.3 Refugee Women**

Following completion of the questionnaires, qualitative data was collected through in-depth interviews (Boyce & Neale, 2006). This method was deemed most appropriate and culturally sensitive for gaining insights into the personal experiences of both the recipients and the stakeholders involved in the delivery of NGO support to refugee women (Bryman, 2001). Interviews were conducted with seven Syrian women, four Jordanian social workers, and two members of the Jordanian parliament.

The data collected was organized and analyzed by the researchers. Given the native language proficiency of the researchers, the qualitative data did not necessitate systematic or formal translation. The thematic analysis of qualitative data was conducted using coding based on higher-order concepts and major themes to organize and pinpoint key results (Darlington & Scott, 2002; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers primarily sought to understand the underlying meaning of the articulated experiences (Rapport, 2004).

The participants were informed about the purpose and nature of the research, clarifying that it had no connection with the UNHCR or any governmental body in order to reduce the power dynamic between the researchers and the participants. Particular attention has been paid to ensure that the results are presented in a way that does not stigmatize underprivileged communities (Rapport, 2004).

### **2.4 Students**

To understand the impact of these experiences on students' professional development, students were asked to maintain a diary detailing their experiences related to social work knowledge. A follow-up focus group discussion was held with the three students and the

student assistant during the mobilities 2019 and 2020 as well as eleven months after the completion of the mobility project.

Social work students underwent training in conducting research with vulnerable populations and had regular meetings with their supervisors. This approach helped them stay vigilant about their roles and maintain neutral positions as researchers. The process of ascertaining profound significance was closely monitored by the academic supervisor throughout the research stages of analysis, transcription, and interpretation. To ensure validity, the supervisors, along with the researchers, made sure that the study accurately and faithfully captured the cases it intended to investigate. At every stage, it was assured that data analysis was grounded in credible evidence, and findings were a faithful representation of the research topic, thus maintaining the integrity and trustworthiness of the research findings.

### 3 Findings

The findings below attribute specific themes from the students' experiences and reflections from the mobility project, showcasing their development and growth in the practice of social work. The quotes following the themes were obtained from student reflections from diaries and focus groups as well as faculty focus groups.

#### 3.1 Developing Self-Awareness :

"Interviewing refugees and immersing myself in their environment was a first for me. This close interaction underscored the importance of withholding judgment as a person, and a social worker" (student, diary, 2019).

"Upon returning to Jordan, I recognized a significant change in myself and my learning priorities. This newfound self-confidence and perspective had a positive impact on my personal development and vision for the future" (student, focus group, 2019).

"I realized that an individual's religious practice, or lack thereof, doesn't define their moral character. Mutual respect and acceptance are crucial, irrespective of personal beliefs" (student, focus group, 2019).

"It was a profound international experience. My perspective towards Germany and Western society evolved significantly, and I gained a clearer understanding of local and international social work" (student, focus group, 2019).

#### 3.2 Building Professional Skills:

"The mobility program enhanced my research ability and facilitated my own comparison and reflection. I gained a deeper understanding of myself and cultivated empathy for the experiences of my project colleagues" (student, diary, 2019).

"The refugee women in Germany had different experiences navigating their resettlement than the women living in Jordan, despite having led similar lives prior to displacement. I changed how I engaged in small talk with the women after realizing the differences" (student, focus group, 2023).

"I observed the differences in principle application between Jordan and Germany, gaining a crucial insight: the necessity of respecting cultural sensitivity" (student, focus group, 2019).

"We honed our social work skills and developed greater awareness of our emotions and ideas, while learning a great deal about female refugees" (student, diary, 2019).



"I understood the importance of ethical conduct, confidentiality, and accepting individuals as they are, not as I believe they should be" (student, focus group, 2019).

### **3.3 Building Cross-Cultural Bridges in Social Work Practice between Germany and Jordan:**

"My involvement in the mobility program was invaluable. I had scant knowledge of regional or international social work. The workshops in Germany and Jordan enlightened me about the intricacies of refugee aid" (student, focus group, 2023).

"Engaging with German students has broadened my understanding of our society and others, particularly from a Western perspective" (student, focus group, 2019).

"International social workers must strive to understand and avoid misjudging collective cultures to fully grasp family issues, marital problems, and children's socialization" (student, focus group, 2019).

"Before visiting Germany, I harbored fears and negative expectations about the Germans' attitude towards non-native speakers and their respect for Arabs and Muslims. The reality was a pleasant surprise, debunking these stereotypes. The welcoming nature of the German students we encountered, with whom we remain friends and in contact, was eye-opening" (student, focus group, 2019).

"I now work in a completely field but have been able to build relationships with clients in Germany because of my experiences getting to learn about German people during the mobility project. I do not think I would be working with German people now without the international experience" (student, focus group, 2023).

"Visiting Germany deepened my comprehension of the refugee situation and the specific international interventions required. I gained insights into policy, community, and school systems and issues related to refugee livelihoods" (student, focus group, 2020).

### **3.4 Long-Term Impact on Student Experiences:**

"It was great providing the students with direct experience in using the methodological process, particularly in a new environment that challenged them" (faculty, focus group, 2023).

"I still reflect on the lessons I learned during the project now as I work in a refugee camp. I learned directly about how different women navigate gender-based inequalities, and how to elevate them in ways that meet their needs. I also conduct my own research now, that has been successfully used to increase funding for child protective services and people with disabilities" (student, focus group, 2023).

"I bring my strong cultural humility, that I grew during the mobility project, to all of the professional and personal experiences I have" (Student, focus group, 2023).

"This experience has facilitated my personal and professional growth as a social worker and as a gender equality advocate outside of my professional work" (Student, focus group, 2023).

### **3.5 Language Barriers and Navigating Gender-Cultural Dynamics:**

"Working across linguistic barriers and cultural norms was initially daunting and exhausting, but it ultimately concluded on a positive note" (Student, focus group, 2019).

"Sometimes I felt stress about potentially behaving culturally inappropriately" (Student, focus group, 2019).

Quantitative and qualitative data from the questionnaires with social workers and Syrian refugee women also highlighted themes that provide insight into their lived experiences and the impact of social workers. The questionnaire revealed that half of the participating Syrian refugee women in Al-Salt, Jordan face challenges associated with traditional Syrian gender roles. The majority of the participants hailed from Daraa (48%). The quotes following the themes below were obtained from student reflections from diaries and focus groups as well as quotes from social workers and Syrian refugee women.

### 3.6 Traditional Gender Roles:

“Most women are controlled by the culture of their patriarchal society” (social worker).

“Even though they had to assume traditionally male responsibilities within their households, they were still expected to fulfill their conventional roles, often with limited resources” (social worker).

“I have a full-time job without my husband's support with household tasks and childcare. This causes a great deal of stress” (Syrian refugee woman).

### 3.7 Access to Social Services:

According to the descriptive study, 70% of participants revealed a lack of knowledge on where to receive services.

“We raised awareness of the need to increase certain services; some women could not read or write” (social worker).

“Some women lack knowledge about the services provided in some centers. Social workers must do more work on advertising these services” (student, diary, 2019).

“They know about the services their relative or friends or neighbor told them about” (student, diary, 2019).

67% complained about the distance to service providers.

“Some women live far away from our organization. We used to reimburse them for transportation fees, but can't anymore because of lack of funding” (social worker).

“The woman was late to the sessions, explaining she did not have the money to travel to the community center, given how far away from her home it is” (student, diary, 2019).

### 3.8 Opportunities for Safe Transitions:

The majority of the respondents (93%) disclosed they were the primary income providers for their families with about 67% of the wives suggested that they have had an increased participation in family decision-making since their arrival in Jordan.

“Despite these cultural constraints, many participants reported contributing more to their families' incomes in Jordan than in Syria, due to male family members' illness or absence” (social worker).

“I am the mother and the father at the same time; I have become the breadwinner for my family, and I fulfill many of my husband's responsibilities” (Syrian refugee woman).

“We do needs assessments and offer trainings to empower the livelihood of Syrian women” (social worker).

### 3.9 Tailoring the Role of Social Workers with Refugee Women:

Concerning the role of social workers, most respondents (78%) reported having case management sessions with them.

“We assist the refugees with their psychological well-being” (social worker).

“They have training on gender violence, fighting early marriage cases and working with oppressed people” (student diary, 2019).

“We offer refugee women training for income-generating opportunities and empowerment, to support their goals to join the labor force. But we need more to increased access to income-generating opportunities” (social worker).

“We need more support for programming targeting women refugees in Al-Salt, such as parenting, training, English language lessons, and vocational training” (social worker).

### 3.10 Professional Challenges for Social Workers:

“I found it hard to work with cases of violence” (social worker).

“I struggle when dealing with children experiencing sensitive issues like sexual harassment” (social worker).

“We lack training and knowledge to adequately work with vulnerable children” (social worker).

## 4 Discussion

This article delves into the experiences of social work students involved in mobility research projects, facilitated by collaborations with two universities from Germany and one from Palestine. It critically examines the perspectives from social work students, social workers, faculty, and Syrian refugee women to explore the growth of social work students and the challenges facing Syrian refugee women in Al Salt, Jordan.

According to the findings, the students’ immersive engagement with Syrian refugee women through the international mobility project has deeply influenced their self-awareness. In general, social work students enroll at their universities at a young age because of the nature of Jordanian society in which families tend to be cautious of the influence of social experience. As a result, gaining self-awareness is foundational, as it ensures culturally sensitive social work practice. The realization of withholding judgment, acknowledging diverse perspectives, and fostering mutual respect aligns with the core values of social work. This attunement to personal biases and prejudices is crucial for effective engagement with vulnerable populations.

Along with self-awareness, students honed their professional skills. Not only were students exposed to more than the required 400 field training hours during their teaching program, but they were able to gain an international perspective in social work by viewing refugee integration in a new setting. The exposure to diverse cultural contexts allowed them to refine their research abilities and facilitated comparative reflections. Understanding the unique experiences of refugee women in different settings underscores the significance of cultural sensitivity in social work interventions. The acquired skills of empathy and nuanced observation contribute to a more comprehensive and effective social work practice.

In addition, one of the critical outcomes of the international mobility projects was the ability to build cross-cultural connections between Germany and Jordan. The exposure to regional and international social work dynamics has broadened students' understanding of refugee aid intricacies. However, it can be argued that student reflections and findings, which emphasize understanding and avoiding misjudgements based on collective cultures, aligns with the need for developing culturally competent social work practice. There is a necessity of informed cross-cultural practices to address complex issues related to family dynamics and cultural nuances.

The integration of cultural humility into professional and personal experiences reflects a commitment to ongoing growth and awareness. Students commented on how they now better understand women's empowerment and the changing dynamics of gender roles. The ability to navigate gender-based inequalities and contribute to research that influences funding for essential services showcases the enduring influence of mobility projects on students' professional trajectories.

The findings also helped build structure on how to improve the preparatory social work students undergo for an international mobility project. Along with an orientation, it is important to continuously offer training sessions for social work students and professionals, focusing on cultural competency, including language proficiency, understanding diverse cultural norms, and addressing stereotypes to enhance effective cross-cultural engagement.

Challenges faced by students, such as language barriers and navigating gender-cultural dynamics, can take a toll on students. Building resilience for social work students to overcome these barriers is needed through cross-cultural collaborations, trainings, and a thorough understanding of the complexities of social work practice. However, the positive outcomes underscore the adaptability and perseverance cultivated through international experiences. The importance of such mobility projects proved to be fertile grounds for learning and teaching about local and international refugee-related issues and their impact on host communities. Through university workshops and meetings, students deepened their cultural awareness and built a mutual understanding around ethical aspects of social work.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the multifaceted role of social workers in supporting Syrian refugee women. From addressing traditional gender roles to offering mental health support, social workers emerge as integral contributors to the well-being of refugee communities. The emphasis on tailoring interventions to specific needs and engaging in case management sessions aligns with the person-in-environment approach, emphasizing the importance of understanding individual experiences within broader social contexts. Social workers can support Syrian women in Al-Salt, and more broadly, all refugee women, by enhancing their awareness of refugee rights, conducting informational sessions about available psychosocial support services, and connecting them to resources providing vocational and parenting training, emergency cash assistance, and English language lessons. They can also aid in obtaining work permits and connecting them to income-generating opportunities.

As case managers, social workers offer extensive support, ranging from assisting refugees with their psychological well-being and helping them join the labor force, to providing the necessary tools to deal with situations of violence or oppression. Based on the findings,

social workers in Al-Salt are tasked with addressing key social issues that these female refugees face, including early marriage, workplace harassment, and domestic violence. In acknowledging women's resilience, it is crucial for social work interventions to understand that these women possess an inherent strength. The research indicates the importance of promoting women's engagement in income generation through the provision of trainings and workshops. This not only enhances women's status and decision-making roles but also ensures that refugee women have secure transit routes, safe spaces, and resources necessary to build a life free from violence and poverty post-conflict. Social workers should strive to bridge the gap between humanitarian and developmental interventions, with a focus on bolstering Syrian women's inherent resilience and autonomy, while simultaneously addressing their immediate needs.

Although social workers play an essential role in uplifting the underprivileged, it is important to recognize the professional challenges faced by social workers, including difficulties in handling cases of violence and sensitive issues involving children. This acknowledgement underscores the importance of continuous professional development to enhance the capacity of social workers in dealing with complex and sensitive cases. Specialized training for social workers to handle cases of violence and sensitive issues involving children should be developed and encouraged to mitigate the stress faced by social workers.

The study highlights the importance of developing intercultural competencies through community-based interventions among social workers. The findings have implications not just for local practice, but can also be leveraged to enhance international social work practice. The study advocates for international and local learning experiences to understand diverse cultures. The results encompass various theoretical frameworks such as the gender-sensitive approach, the familial approach, the refugee-host community focused approach, the human rights approach, and the strengths-based approach.

The study also consisted of some limitations. The relatively small sample size of students, professors, and refugees could have posed a barrier in gaining additional nuances of the lived experience. Another limitation is that participants were restricted to students who took part in the project, encompassing individuals from different academic years. All participants were females, and the lower number of males can be attributed to their decision not to apply for the research, primarily due to language barriers, given that English proficiency was a requirement for such mobility projects. It is worth highlighting that this study was the first of its kind at AlBalqa University, making it challenging to approach social work students who have had exposure to international mobility projects.

This research does not support the exclusion of men from social work interventions, as this could inadvertently harm women or lead to negative consequences. The study strongly advocates for culturally sensitive competencies in social work practice within the host community, as this could significantly reduce conflict within Syrian families. Implementing family-based and individual interventions could enhance the safe transition for women refugees to enjoy a healthy well-being and environment, and future research will include perspectives from Syrian men on safe transition and integration.

Moreover, future research should encourage the interdisciplinary collaboration between social workers and professionals from diverse fields. By utilizing community networks and

leveraging technology for information dissemination, barriers such as illiteracy can be overcome. This can also help provide a holistic approach to addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by Syrian refugee women, including health, education, gender equality, and employment.

International mobility projects have been shown to have a transformative impact on students' self-awareness, professional skills, and their ability to navigate challenges in social work practice. By including a sample that addressed the long-term impact of international mobility projects on students, this study found sustained personal and professional growth. Such student-focused mobility projects can be instrumental in assessing how a social work curriculum equips its students to interact with sensitive and marginalized groups at an international level (Shaw et al., 2006; Shaw & Funk, 2019; Mullen et al., 2008; Gray & Schubert, 2012; Moriarty et al., 2015). Social work programs should continue advancing such mobility projects to bolster unique educational opportunities, not only for students but also for their professors.

## 5 Conclusion

Mobility projects, as evidenced by the research presented, have proven to be robust platforms for nurturing students' social work capacities and skills. They offer valuable insights into international and local social work practices with female refugees, thereby enhancing students' understanding of the role of social work. These transformative experiences have not only enriched students' self-awareness and professional skills but have also bridged cultural gaps in social work practice. The research underscores the importance of fostering cultural humility, adapting to challenges, and tailoring interventions to the unique needs of refugee populations.

Drawing on data analysis from social workers and female refugees, we strongly recommend advanced training for social workers in gender-based approaches, life skills, family approaches, mental health, and psychosocial considerations. Additionally, supporting social workers with their self-care and well-being is essential, along with bolstering their reflective skills to enhance self-awareness when working with female refugees. Social workers play a pivotal role in supporting Syrian refugee women, addressing gender roles, providing access to services, and navigating challenges with sensitivity. The identified challenges, including language barriers and dealing with culturally sensitive issues, emphasize the ongoing need for training and support to enhance the effectiveness of social work practice.

This article advocates for the incorporation of a strength-based approach and the refugee-host community approach in the training and practice of social work students. International mobility projects and the experience of information exchange significantly contribute to the professional development of social workers. These projects create an enriching learning environment where students can better understand their own – as well as others' – cultural values and contribute to the development of social work practice. This study sheds light on the often-overlooked perspective of students as part of a host community, indirectly influencing our understanding of how to enhance social cohesion and interpret refugees' viewpoints. The implications of this study extend to fostering greater self-awareness in both national and international social work practice and developing intercultural competencies. More broadly, it enhances the effectiveness of

social work practice in diverse and multicultural settings, especially in facilitating safe transitions for women refugees.

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