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ADDRESSING POLICIES ON REFUGEE SELF-RELIANCE:
THE CASE OF WASTE PICKERS IN BEIRUT

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Executive Summary

This study examines efforts towards refugee self-reliance through waste picking among Syrian refugee children in Beirut and interrogates the gap between global policy discourse and local realities. While self-reliance is promoted in the Global Compact on Refugees as a pathway to support refugees to meet their needs and sustain livelihoods until durable solutions – such as integration, resettlement, or voluntary return – are realised, in Lebanon it often unfolds in conditions of legal exclusion and informal governance, pushing refugees into precarious livelihoods rather than enabling genuine autonomy.

The study draws on the trialectics framework for participation (Refstie & Brun, 2016) which conceptualises participation and agency as unfolding across intersecting formal, informal, and intermediary spaces, and highlights the need to engage multiple actors shaping everyday realities. Therefore, the study adopts an approach that brings into dialogue the lived experiences of refugee children and the perspectives of institutional stakeholders. It is based on qualitative research with 30 refugee waste pickers aged 7-17 and 10 institutional stakeholders, including representatives from relevant ministries, municipal authorities, NGOs, and private/environmental actors.

The findings highlight how refugee children are central suppliers within Beirut's informal recycling chain, yet remain unprotected, criminalised, and economically exploited. Three interrelated dynamics shape their everyday efforts toward self-reliance:

(1) Selective enforcement and punitive governance, whereby children face harassment, confiscation, and violence from municipal authorities operating under political pressure, low capacity, and unclear mandates, while scrap traders remain largely protected;
(2) Severe occupational and health risks, as children collect and sort contaminated materials without basic protective equipment, sustain frequent injuries, and face exposure to road accidents and hazardous waste; and
(3) Systemic exploitation within the scrap trade, where children have limited bargaining power and are vulnerable to territorial control, coercion, and price manipulation.

Based on these findings, the report proposes two policy pathways that can improve the work conditions of refugee waste pickers and strengthen their efforts toward safer and more dignified self-reliance on the short term. The proposed pathways include:

(1) Urban inclusion and protection measures to reduce violence and improve safety: This includes training police and municipal actors on non-punitive engagement with waste pickers, as well as providing basic protective equipment such as heavy-duty gloves, safety boots, masks, and reflective vests; and

(2) Work-based learning initiatives that link literacy, numeracy, and sector knowledge to children's lived realities: These programmes support practical skills such as traversing the city safely, negotiating prices, understanding weights and materials, and reducing everyday exploitation.

Importantly, these short-term initiatives are not intended to endorse or normalise child labour. Rather, they offer an entry point for immediate harm reduction and and protection from violence and preventable injury in a context where withdrawal is not immediately feasible. Building on this, the study proposes medium-term pathways and long-term reforms. In the medium term, the study proposes expanding alternative livelihood and apprenticeship pathways that build on children's existing skills while gradually reducing dependency on hazardous street-based waste picking through safer, supervised work-and-learning trajectories. In the longer term, it calls for structural reforms that regulate the recycling economy and scrap trade including licensing, taxation, and labour protections, strengthen waste governance and oversight, and expand refugees' legal residency, education, and employment access to enable sustainable pathways out of exploitative informal labour.

Keywords: waste picking, refugee children, Beirut, self-reliance, non-formal education, urban inclusion

Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011, Lebanon has hosted the highest numbers of refugees per capita in the world, with an estimated two million Syrians residing within its borders (UNHCR, 2021). Lebanon's geographic proximity to Syria, its porous borders, and long-standing economic and social ties made it one of the main destinations for those fleeing the war (Achiume, 2016). Yet Lebanon's capacity to offer protection has remained extremely limited. The state is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, and it lacks a national asylum framework or legal mechanisms to regulate refugee status. As a result, refugees have been living in protracted conditions of insecurity, relying largely on humanitarian aid, informal work, and personal networks for survival (Nassar & Stel, 2019). This legal environment has translated into restricted and unstable access to residency and work among Syrian refugees and has contributed to persistent barriers to education for refugee children, particularly as families face increasing pressure to prioritise income generation over schooling.

Over the past decade, Lebanon's overlapping crises have further intensified these vulnerabilities. Prolonged political instability has weakened public institutions and contributed to uneven governance and service provision. The economic collapse that accelerated in 2019 led to currency devaluation, soaring inflation, and the erosion of wages and basic living conditions across the country. The COVID-19 pandemic compounded these pressures through repeated lockdowns, further shrinking informal income opportunities and disrupting already fragile support systems. In August 2020, the Beirut port explosion devastated large parts of the capital, deepening socioeconomic hardship and contributing to widespread displacement and loss. Together, these shocks devastated livelihoods, eroded state services, and pushed both Lebanese citizens and refugees into poverty. Among refugees, the effects have been particularly severe, with more than 90 percent living below the extreme poverty line (UNHCR, 2021). With restricted access to formal employment, limited residency rights, and shrinking humanitarian assistance, many refugee households have increasingly relied on precarious forms of income generation within the informal economy. Amid these pressures, children have become central economic actors within their households, significantly contributing to daily survival through informal and often hazardous work (Halabi, 2013).

At the same time, Lebanon has been grappling with a deepening garbage crisis. Since 2015, when major landfill sites reached capacity and the government failed to implement a contingency plan, the country has faced prolonged waste accumulation on streets and landfills, generating severe environmental and public health consequences (Human Rights Watch, 2007). The state's short-term response in 2016, which involved establishing new landfills in selected areas and contracting private companies for collection (Rose, 2021) – did little to address underlying structural problems. Infrastructure gaps persist, and large volumes of waste continue to end up in illegal dumps or along coastal areas. Critics argue that political elites have little

incentive to pursue durable solutions, as this would threaten their financial gains from private contracts – a dynamic reminiscent of Roy and AlSayyad's (2003) concept of state-produced informality.

As the formal waste sector deteriorated under corruption, privatisation, and state neglect, a parallel system of informal recycling flourished (Labneh & Facts, 2021). As economic conditions worsened, the market value of recyclable materials increased, further incentivising informal recycling activity and contributing to the rapid growth of the informal waste sector. Within this expanding economy, refugee labour increasingly filled the void, providing a cheap and flexible supply of recyclable materials while remaining largely invisible to the formal economy. Among marginalised communities – and refugee children in particular – waste picking has intensified as a key livelihood strategy. This work involves collecting, sorting, and selling recyclable materials such as plastic and metal from the city's streets, bins, and landfills.

This growing dependence on waste picking reflects a form of self-reliance that emerges under conditions where state protection is absent and legal work opportunities are restricted. Yet these livelihood practices remain embedded within urban informality, where the state denies refugees legal rights to work while selectively tolerating their participation in informal labour markets. This deliberate ambiguity enables state-connected informal traders to profit from refugee labour without granting protections or rights in return, reinforcing unequal power hierarchies within the sector. In the absence of robust economic, education, and protection frameworks, the marginalisation of refugee children becomes further entrenched, leaving few pathways towards safer or more dignified livelihoods.

It is within these conditions that this study examines how refugee self-reliance takes place in practice through waste picking, and how children's everyday survival strategies are shaped by structural exclusion, informality, and crisis. In doing so, it highlights the gap between self-reliance as framed in global policy discourse and self-reliance as lived and negotiated locally through precarious and often hazardous labour. Against this backdrop, and with a particular focus on waste picking among Syrian refugee children, this study asks: How can relevant policies and programmes bridge the gap between self-reliance as a global policy objective and self-reliance as a precarious survival practice, by supporting safer and more dignified pathways for refugee children engaged in waste picking in Beirut?

Research Questions

The overarching aim of the study is to examine the policy-practice gap in realising refugee self-reliance, with a particular focus on the experiences of Syrian refugee waste pickers in Beirut. In seeking to propose policy initiatives that address this gap, the study asks:

1. What challenges hinder self-reliance for refugee waste pickers in Beirut?
2. How can local initiatives enhance their efforts in self-reliance?

Literature Review

The concept of self-reliance for refugees focuses on enabling them to regain social and economic independence in host countries and reduce their dependency on aid (UNHCR, 2024). In the past decade, self-reliance has gained prominence within the Global Compact on Refugees due to its perceived role in preparing refugees for durable solutions, including voluntary repatriation, resettlement or local integration. However, academic critiques have highlighted gaps in the effectiveness of self-reliance, particularly in its alignment with pro-growth and neoliberal models. For example, Abebe (2019) argues that self-reliance policies are often framed through a market-oriented logic that expects refugees to become entrepreneurial and self-sufficient in ways that ease pressure on host states rather than secure their rights or welfare. Relatedly, Dev Regmi et al. (2020) show that neoliberal development agendas – particularly in education and literacy policies – reduce the notion of self-reliance to human-capital formation, emphasising employability, productivity, and measurable skills over the broader social and political goals of collective transformation. Overall, in practice, self-reliance shifts from a political-economic vision of autonomy and solidarity to a technical, economistic approach that privileges productivity and cost-efficiency over social justice and equitable participation. These dynamics are clearly visible in the context of Syrian forced displacement, where the discourse of self-reliance has been promoted without the structural conditions necessary to sustain it.

In neighbouring countries that have received overwhelming numbers of refugees – such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Türkiye – donor-state relations have been structured less around rights-based protection than around political bargaining and containment logics. As Tsourapas (2019) argues, these states exemplify refugee rentierism: a governance strategy in which the presence of refugees is leveraged to attract international aid and political concessions without committing to long-term protection or integration. The international community is deeply complicit in this strategy, as containment – rather than protection – has been a central driver of funding and policy priorities. These conditions create structural challenges to self-reliance, as refugees struggle to secure livelihoods, integrate into the urban economy, or develop the skills necessary to improve their economic prospects.

Nonetheless, the modalities of refugee rentierism differ significantly across contexts. For example, following the EU-Türkiye Statement, Türkiye leveraged its geographic position as

a gatekeeper to Europe to secure billions of euros in aid in exchange for containing refugee movements across its borders (Tsourapas, 2019). Similarly, the Jordan Compact of 2016 tied international assistance to limited policy concessions, such as easing access to work permits and expanding educational opportunities for refugees, while ultimately reinforcing state control over aid distribution (El-Abed et al., 2023). In these two countries, refugee governance is highly centralised, enabling state institutions to manage aid flows directly, shape formalised state-led refugee response systems, and use their hosting status as geopolitical leverage. This centralisation has allowed both states to maintain tight control over the refugee response while offering refugees only partial and conditional access to rights, services, and livelihoods.

However, the Lebanon Compact of 2016 exemplifies a distinct dynamic which has rather unfolded through a decentralised and incoherent system in which no single state body assumed clear responsibility for refugee protection. This institutional fragmentation – rooted in sectarian power-sharing arrangements, weak state institutions, and competing political interests – produced what Nassar and Stel (2019) term 'institutional ambiguity' – demonstrated through frequent policy shifts and selective enforcement without clear communication. This approach to refugee governance allows actors connected to the state and authorities to profit from aid flows through informal and black-market arrangements, while leaving refugees uncertain about their legal status, access to education, and work opportunities. This persistent instability entrenches their vulnerability and undermines any sustainable form of self-reliance.

Drawing on Roy and AlSayyad's (2003) account, this ambiguity reflects state-produced informality: the state deliberately turns a blind eye to refugees' presence and economic participation, governing through selective enforcement and ambiguity. This strategy allows Lebanese authorities to defer responsibility for refugee protection while retaining control over when and how informality is tolerated. Donors are complicit in sustaining this arrangement. Through the Compact and other funding frameworks, billions of dollars have been channeled to Lebanese state institutions and their humanitarian partners. Rather than strengthening refugee protection, this aid has primarily consolidated state power, managed external political pressures, and maintained a transit-state narrative that forecloses pathways to durable solutions (El-Abed et al., 2023). International assistance remains tied to migration containment and regional stability objectives, aligning donor priorities with state interests rather than with refugees' rights or needs (Tsourapas, 2019).

This political economy of aid also explains why local economic practices remain largely invisible in most donor programming. In sectors like waste picking, the economic contributions of refugees are rarely acknowledged, supported, or integrated into formal policy frameworks. For refugee children in particular, the implications of this structural exclusion are especially acute. Rather than enabling self-reliance, national frameworks push them into precarious economic spaces that expose them to heightened risks of detention, violence, and exploitation, while

simultaneously undermining their capacity to achieve meaningful self-reliance. This reality reveals two critical policy gaps. The first comprises the absence of legal and economic pathways that would enable safe and dignified livelihoods for refugee children and their families. The second lies in the limited scope of education and protection frameworks, which fails to provide long-term, meaningful opportunities for inclusion and skills development for refugee children.

Legal and Economic Pathways

The primary policy gap in achieving meaningful self-reliance for refugees in Lebanon – including those engaged in the waste sector – lies in exclusionary national policies that bar them from legal residency and formal employment (Naufal, 2012). These restrictions confine refugees to the margins of the economy, leaving informal work as their primary means of survival. This structural exclusion fundamentally undermines the very notion of self-reliance, turning what is framed as a pathway to autonomy into a daily struggle for subsistence. In response to these exclusionary discourses, contemporary research and practices highlight a 'local turn' in migration studies, which emphasises the agency of refugees and the significance of local economic practices (Caponio et al., 2018; Simsek-Caglar & Schiller, 2018). This perspective shifts analytical attention away from state-centred and top-down policy frameworks toward the everyday interactions, practices, and networks that shape refugees' lived experiences in specific localities. It underscores how cities, municipalities, and local actors often play a decisive role in shaping integration and livelihood opportunities, sometimes in ways that diverge from or contradict national policies. Aa for refugees, rather than treating them as passive recipients of aid, it focuses on how they mobilise networks, skills, and labour to sustain themselves and their communities.

In the context of Lebanon, empirical work has shown that, in practice, refugees often become active contributors to local economies, particularly through informal work (see Brun & Fakih, 2022; Harb et al., 2019). This stands in direct tension with national-level policies, which criminalise or marginalise the very economic activities that sustain refugee households. Despite this, there has been little policy or research attention to how this dynamic plays out specifically in the waste-picking sector, even though it constitutes a significant livelihood strategy for many. By contrast, some refugee-hosting countries have acknowledged and built on such local practices, integrating them into broader urban and environmental management strategies. For example, Türkiye's *Zero Waste Response* initiative formally appointed and licensed Syrian workers in the informal recycling sector (Al-Bustani, 2022). In Algeria, UNHCR's *From Waste to Value* programme leveraged refugee labour to ease pressure on the national waste management system, and in Dadaab camp in Kenya, the Kenya Red Cross Society trained and recruited refugee workers for recycling initiatives (The Humanitarian Innovation Programme, 2019).

These examples demonstrate how local practices in waste picking can simultaneously support environmental goals and contribute to local economies, offering a model of self-reliance that goes beyond aid dependency. Nonetheless, despite their value, such approaches continue to be shaped by top-down, regulatory agendas that prioritise governance and technical solutions over community participation. This raises concerns about their long-term sustainability, the degree of community ownership, and the risk of reinforcing refugees' subordinate positions within urban economies rather than transforming them. This disconnect between formal policy frameworks on self-reliance and lived economic practices lies at the core of my critique and underscores the importance of examining more contextually grounded, locally relevant policy approaches to waste picking in Lebanon. In this study, I extend the 'local turn' to the context of waste picking, shifting the focus from externally imposed regulatory models to practical, sustainable, and context-specific solutions. In doing so, this approach challenges dominant regulatory and humanitarian frameworks, advocating for policies that emerge from – and remain accountable to – the everyday realities of those directly engaged in waste picking and informal labour markets.

Educational Pathways

The second critical policy gap in achieving self-reliance lies in the emergency-driven approach to refugee education, which remains largely disconnected from refugees' lived realities and work prospects (Brun & Shuayb, 2020). From 2014-2015 the Lebanese government has played an active role in providing refugee children access to formal education, particularly though its Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE). Although Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the country's education law guarantees the right to education for all children – regardless of nationality – until the end of elementary school (see Al-Hroub et al., 2021). While this right has not been consistently enforced, it nonetheless created an opening through which many Syrian children were able to access schooling. Building on this legal opening, in 2014, MEHE launched the Reaching All Children with Education (RACE I) strategy – a three-year plan designed to absorb large numbers of Syrian children into the public education system. This plan offered refugee children access to formal schooling primarily through second-shift programmes (Maadad & Matthews, 2020). Under this plan, out-of-school refugee children could also participate in Basic Literacy and Numeracy (BLN) and Accelerated Learning Programs (ALP), in preparation for eventual integration into the formal system (Hargreaves et al., 2024).

While this shift expanded access to formal education, refugee children often struggled with rigid structures. For example, children faced linguistic challenges, since Lebanese public schools primarily use French or English as the language of instruction, as opposed to education back in Syria which solely used Arabic as the language of instruction (Shuayb & Hammoud, 2021). Another educational barrier entailed the lack of the legal documentation required for school registration or official exam completion, placing the children at continual risk of dropout and

exclusion. At the same time, as MEHE consolidated control over education aid and standardise provision, it curtailed NGO autonomy, reducing the opportunities for refugees to engage in alternative education programs (Shuayb, 2014). Therefore, while RACE I prioritised enrolment statistics, it left deeper issues of inclusion, learning quality, and long-term outcomes largely unaddressed.

Following the 2016 Lebanon Compact, which aimed to transition from emergency to development-oriented responses, MEHE launched RACE II – the second phase of its national education strategy. Framed as a move toward system strengthening, RACE II aimed to improve education quality for both Lebanese and Syrian children, emphasising curriculum reform, teacher training, and infrastructure development (IOM & UNICEF, 2014). It also lifted some barriers to enrolment, including easing documentation requirements, and expanded the conversation to include secondary education and learning outcomes (Brun & Shuayb, 2020). Yet despite these advances, vocational training, higher education, and work pathways were absent dimensions from RACE II. With limited access to legal residency and formal bans on employment in key sectors, refugee students had little ability to translate their education into meaningful livelihoods. To this end, RACE II remained disconnected from broader questions of legal and economic inclusion. As Brun and Shuayb (2020) argue, it embodied a model of 'futureless education', offering access to schooling without linking it to future prospects and economic needs.

This educational disconnect cannot be separated from Lebanon's broader political economy. Arguably, besides its weak capacity, the state sidelines future-oriented education for refugees as this would offer them prospects for integration, which stands against Lebanon's narrative as a transit state (Shuayb & Hammoud, 2021). By keeping education detached from economic and legal pathways, the government maintained its strategic ambiguity while appeasing donors through visible but limited commitments. In turn, international aid actors became complicit in this logic, often prioritising easily quantifiable metrics – such as enrolment rates – over deeper structural transformation. As a result, refugee education became a technocratic exercise in numbers rather than a pathway toward inclusion or long-term stability.

This disconnect between education and work stands in tension with the broader idea of self-reliance as meeting refugees' actual economic and social needs, rather than preparing individuals for non-existent or inaccessible jobs (Dev Regmi et al., 2020). It underscores the need to move beyond enrolment-focused interventions toward education policies that are locally relevant, linked to labour market realities, and grounded in refugee children's lived experiences. In the context of waste picking, addressing these gaps requires reimagining education as a pathway that meaningfully supports self-reliance, connecting learning directly to the economic and social contexts in which children live and work. In response, this study adopts a practice-based approach to learning, demonstrating how children develop skills in managing their work, earnings, and expenditures through everyday practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Drawing on these

insights, the study advocates for education policies rooted in refugees' lived experiences, equipping them with technical skills, industry knowledge, and networking opportunities within the recycling sector as a means to strengthen both their protection and their capacity for meaningful self-reliance.

Taken together, the challenges highlighted in the literature on legal and economic pathways for refugee families, alongside the limitations of education policies for refugee children, reveal deep structural gaps that undermine meaningful self-reliance in Lebanon. While self-reliance frameworks are promoted as pathways to autonomy and reduced aid dependency, in practice they unfold within conditions of restricted residency, limited access to formal work, institutional ambiguity, and education systems that remain disconnected from future livelihood prospects. These tensions point to a fundamental policy–practice gap, which this study seeks to address. The following section outlines the conceptual framing and research design used to examine these dynamics empirically and identify where locally grounded interventions may realistically intervene.

Methodology

Given the limited scholarly and policy knowledge on refugee waste picking in Beirut, the study adopted a qualitative ethnographic approach centred on the lived experiences of refugee waste pickers and the institutional actors shaping the sector. This ensured that proposed initiatives were grounded in the everyday realities of those directly engaged in waste picking. It also supported the development of interventions that were both contextually relevant and institutionally realistic.

Conceptual Framework

The study draws on the trialectics framework for participation (Refstie & Brun, 2016), which conceptualises participation as taking place across interconnected spaces rather than within one unified arena. It specifically draws attention to how transformative change emerges through the ways different participatory spaces connect, overlap, and shape one another. The framework therefore provides a third way beyond purely radical insurgent action or purely pragmatic consensus-based engagement, by showing that meaningful transformation can emerge through the interaction between spaces. These include formal spaces, such as ministries, municipal governance, and regulatory systems, informal spaces such as street-based work, survival economies, and daily negotiations, and intermediary spaces such as NGOs, refugee-led organisations, and advocacy initiatives. This framework helped situate children's everyday efforts toward self-reliance within the broader institutional and economic systems that shape them. It also underscored that sustainable interventions require engaging multiple actors whose decisions affect children's safety and livelihoods, rather than treating waste picking as an isolated issue.

Research Instruments

The study generated qualitative data through semi-structured interviews, a focus group discussion, and stakeholder dialogue activities with refugee waste pickers and institutional actors.

To address the first research question, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 Syrian refugee children aged 7–17 engaged in waste picking. Interviews explored children's everyday work practices and routes, the risks they faced in public space, their encounters with municipal authorities and informal actors, and the strategies they used to secure income, minimise harm, and negotiate the urban environment. The interview approach was flexible and child-centered, enabling participants to guide the discussion and highlight the challenges most relevant to their lived experiences. The one-on-one interviews were followed by a focus group discussion with five children, selected based on availability and willingness to participate. This discussion provided further space for collective reflection, and explored children's perspectives on what could improve their work conditions and reduce exposure to violence, harassment, and exploitation.

To address the second research question, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 institutional stakeholders engaged in refugee governance, waste management, and child-related programming. Interviewees included representatives from relevant ministries, including the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, municipal authorities, refugee-led and grassroots organisations, international and local NGOs, and environmental/private sector initiatives involved in recycling. These interviews examined existing policy frameworks and institutional practices relevant to refugees engaged in the waste sector, with particular attention to gaps, limitations, and feasible opportunities for intervention and collaboration.

Following the interviews, the study incorporated a short documentary film as both a research dissemination output and a dialogue tool. The film was produced to capture everyday experiences of children in waste picking and their own perspectives on what could support safer and more dignified efforts toward self-reliance. The documentary drew on interview findings and was designed to communicate research insights in an accessible format for policymakers, practitioners, and wider audiences. The film was subsequently screened as part of a closed policy dialogue involving a small group of five institutional stakeholders, selected based on availability and willingness to engage in reflection on the findings. The discussion centered on the documentary and the broader study results, supporting joint deliberation on practical policy measures and locally grounded interventions. Following this dialogue, the documentary was published as a dissemination tool to extend the reach of the research and sustain engagement beyond the study period.

Research Participants

The study was conducted in Nabaa, a neighbourhood in Beirut with a growing number of waste pickers, shaped by poverty and by the exclusion of refugees from formal employment and social protection (UN-Habitat, 2017). While research with street children can be contentious, I was served by my long-established relationship with Jusoor, a refugee-led organisation operating in Nabaa, with whom I have collaborated on several previous projects related to refugee children in Lebanon. Following Jusoor's approach, the research team, first, engaged with the children through direct outreach in public workspaces. Subsequently, the research team reached out through snowball sampling, whereby participants referred peers within their networks. Given that waste picking often occurs within family-based arrangements, the research team sought to build trust with family members by introducing the research, too. As for the recruitment of institutional stakeholders, it was conducted through formal outreach by email and phone, drawing on existing professional networks established through previous research and collaborations within the Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS) – the organization administering this study. Stakeholders were selected based on their relevance to refugee policy, child protection, waste governance, and environmental initiatives.

Where consent was granted, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data were analysed thematically using NVivo to identify recurring patterns, practices, and policy gaps. Findings were organised thematically to capture both the risks associated with waste picking and the protective measures and harm-reduction interventions that could address these risks on different levels.

Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical clearance through CLS's internal review process, which required submitting the research protocol for assessment by a panel of experts. Foremostly, all research procedures were guided by the core ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and do-no-harm. Additionally, and especially given the vulnerability of waste pickers, research ethics were approached as an ongoing, relational practice rather than a one-off compliance exercise. This included several ethical considerations.

Firstly, given the physical and social risks associated with waste picking – including exposure to hazardous materials, police harassment, and economic precarity – careful measures were taken to ensure that participation did not heighten vulnerability. Interviews were conducted in safe and familiar spaces chosen by participants, and away from locations where they might face surveillance, harassment, or legal threat. Collaboration with Jusoor was particularly important in this context. Besides providing an entry point for access and trust-building, Jusoor also served as a reference point for the research team and the participants in case concerns arose during or after participation.

Secondly, the research stance in the field was fully overt. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, the nature of their involvement, and their rights. Children were explicitly told that participation was voluntary and that they could terminate or withdraw at any point without any consequences. Consent was approached orally, given that literacy barriers could make written consent intimidating or exclusionary. The study also acknowledged the ethical complexity of securing consent in a context where many children worked independently or alongside senior family members. Consent was therefore treated as an ongoing process, rather than a one-time procedure. Drawing on prior ethnographic work with street children, a contextualised approach to oral consent was used, particularly in cases where parents were absent. In such situations, the research team engaged with senior family members acting as guardians to seek permission, while ensuring that children retained agency in deciding whether to participate. Given the sensitivity of their work and the risks associated with increased visibility, direct engagement with scrap traders was intentionally avoided.

Moreover, given the power dynamics inherent in research with marginalised communities, the study adopted participatory and reciprocal practices intended to mitigate asymmetries. Interviews were structured in ways that allowed children to lead the conversation and determine what they wished to share. To reduce potential harm or distress, interviews were guided by themes rather than rigid questions, allowing children to control the depth and direction of their narratives. Participants were reminded that they could pause, stop, or withdraw at any stage without repercussions. During interviews, participants were offered something thoughtful – such as a meal or snack – as a gesture of respect and rapport-building in an informal setting. This was framed as appreciation rather than payment or coercion, and participants were not informed of this gesture in advance to avoid undue influence on their decision to participate.

As for the research team, it involved two members: the principal with extensive experience conducting research with refugee children and a research assistant who supported data generation. The assistant was himself a refugee. He had previously worked with the principal investigator during doctoral research with street children, during which he was extensively trained in ethical engagement with vulnerable groups. The principal investigator accompanied the assistant in the field during the initial period to ensure appropriate training and alignment with safeguarding procedures. The research assistant and principal investigator conducted regular check-ins before and after field visits for continuous follow up on emerging issues.

Additionally, power imbalances were carefully managed during dissemination and policy engagement activities. Waste pickers invited to participate in the group discussion were selected to be peers or relatives who were on good terms, to reduce the risk of conflict among children. The group discussion was held separately from that with the institutional actors to reduce the likelihood that children would feel intimidated or constrained in what they shared. Insights gathered from the children were synthesised and presented to institutional stakeholders in ways

that preserved children's anonymity and comfort, while ensuring that their perspectives meaningfully shaped policy discussion.

Lastly, to ensure confidentiality and data security, all data were anonymised. Participants, including refugee children and institutional stakeholders, used pseudonyms, and no identifying personal information was included in the dataset. A single encrypted file/list containing identifying information was stored separately from all research materials and was accessible only to the principal investigator. Where consent was granted, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and stored securely. For the filmed component of the project, all footage was pseudonymised to ensure that no identifying personal information was shared, and faces were blurred. All files were transferred to a password-protected system immediately after each session and deleted from the recording device. Field notes were digitised and stored securely in an electronic database; hard copies were destroyed after digitisation and data entry. No third parties were involved in data processing or storage.

Findings

Interview findings reveal that waste picking in Beirut has evolved within a fragmented governance system and a deteriorating waste management infrastructure. Under conditions of institutional breakdown, the recycling chain has become increasingly dominated by informal networks. Amid these conditions, high-profit actors consolidated power through political and territorial protection, while refugee children working in the street have remained lowest in the hierarchy and have disproportionately experienced enforcement, physical harm, and exploitation. As a result, children supported in sustaining the profitability of the system by supplying recyclable materials, yet remained the most visible and criminalised actors, with little recognition, protection, or rights. These conditions stand against children's efforts to achieve self-reliance. Based on the study findings, three interconnected dimensions of violence can be highlighted. This includes: (1) selective enforcement and punitive governance directed at children; (2) severe material and occupational hazards; and (3) economic exploitation and abuse within the scrap trade.

<u>Selective Enforcement and Punitive Governance</u>

First and foremost, the study findings reveal that governance in Beirut's waste-picking economy was ambiguous. Waste picking was neither fully regulated nor entirely outside governance. Instead, it was shaped through discretion, uneven oversight, and selective enforcement. Waste picking had become central to the city's recycling economy, operating as an indispensable link between urban waste, informal collection, and downstream recycling markets. This system was dominated by scrap traders – often connected to political, municipal, or territorial power structures – who consolidated lucrative networks. While these actors

increasingly functioned as de facto businesses, they continued to operate outside regulation. A municipal representative described the growing dominance of scrap traders across the city:

> *Scrap traders already operate like businesses… they own vehicles, equipment and hire employees. They should be taxed and regulated, but currently they are not.*

A representative of an environmental initiative further underscored this monopolisation and lack of governance:

> *Scrap traders have taken over the recycling sector. They compete with us as private actors, but they do so informally and without any regulation. Their work is illegal and should not be allowed.*

These dynamics illustrate how informal networks can operate openly and profitably beyond formal regulation, while still being tolerated through state practices. This resonates with Roy and AlSayyad's (2003) argument on state-produced informality, where informality is actively produced through ambiguity and selective enforcement, often protecting powerful actors while marginalising weaker ones. Within this system, refugee children became central suppliers sustaining the city's recycling chain, yet remained excluded from recognition, protection, and rights.

In the absence of integrative policies that recognise informal recycling labour or regulate the scrap trade, municipalities become the main actors managing waste pickers in public space. Yet municipal officers operate under contradictory pressures: they face demands from communities and state actors to govern refugees, while lacking resources, clear mandates, and safeguarding training. This gap produces inconsistent responses that range from informal tolerance to punitive crackdowns, with enforcement disproportionately directed at children rather than the broader profit chain that benefits from their labour. As a Ministry of Social Affairs representative explained:

> *Local municipalities act depending on political climate and leadership… the visibility of street children rises or falls depending on state will.*

Municipalities are also pressured by communities to regulate the activity of refugees. As a municipal representative explained:

> *We are pressured by the communities to take action. Everyone blames municipalities.*

Yet municipalities operate with severely limited capacity. As the municipality representative continued:

We are short-staffed – we went from 370 to 70 officers in our area after COVID. We lack the funding to train officers but also with the continuing turnover of staff, it is hard to develop a sustainable training program for the officers.

Beyond resource shortages, municipalities lack legal mandates. The same representative noted:

Municipal officers are not judicial officers… we have no legal authority to detain children.

At the same time, while child labour is technically prohibited, specialised enforcement capacity is almost non-existent. A representative from the Ministry of Labour explained there are only 20 labour inspectors nationwide, an extremely limited number compared to the scale of street work. This severe capacity gap effectively shifts the burden of enforcement onto under-resourced municipalities, which lack both the mandate and means to offer meaningful protection. As the MoL representative explained, without coordination between ministries, municipalities, and justice actors, regulation remains impossible.

These contradictory pressures result in a patchwork of responses across municipalities towards waste picking, including tolerance, indifference, or violent crackdowns depending on local leadership and political climate. Some officers show limited empathy. Rami, a 12-year-old waste picker, described:

Some officers are kind – they warn us of dangers on the streets and they notify us when a violent officer is coming, so we could leave.

But more commonly, harassment and abuse are routine. Ahmad, a 13-year-old waste picker, explained:

The municipalities are merciless. They beat us, they detain us, they have no pity…

While children are frequently targeted, scrap traders remain largely immune to enforcement. Traders operate as de facto businesses with political cover, while municipal officers exercise discretion over children's presence in public space. Ali (14) explained:

Some municipality officers are friends with the scrap traders. They do not do anything.

This dynamic is further compounded by Lebanon's economic collapse, which eroded municipal salaries and created new incentives for informal profit. A municipal representative described how salaries dropped drastically from roughly $800 to as little as $25 at one point. While this was later partially restored but it was still described to be insufficient. In this context, some officers benefit from the economy they are meant to regulate, reinforcing discretionary enforcement. Alia (15) recounted:

The municipality officers hit us and takes away the plastic we have collected. They sell the confiscated to the scrap traders.

These testimonies reveal punitive governance embedded in institutional fragmentation. Municipalities lack resources, training, and clear mandates, yet exercise discretionary power in ways that reinforce children's precarity. Meanwhile, scrap traders remain shielded by their political and economic leverage. The lack of integration of refugee children into Lebanon's urban economic structures means they receive no institutional support or safeguards to reduce risks. While they play a central role in sustaining Beirut's recycling chain, they remain invisible, unsupported and exposed to harm.

Material Conditions and Physical Burden

Beyond punishment and harassment, waste picking involves intense physical labour, exacerbated by the absence of basic rudimentary tools. Children walk several kilometres to reach areas with less competition, navigating between neighbourhoods, industrial zones, and commercial streets. Rami explained:

I walk from Dora to Dekwaneh every day because too many people collect here, and I will not be able to find enough materials [to] support my daily income.

Moreover, children climb into dumpsters, reach into waste, and sort through contaminated materials without gloves, protective shoes, or carts. Hazards such as sharp metal, broken glass, and rusted wires lead to injuries that often go untreated. Samir (10) explained:

When I take the metal out, I cut my hands and sometimes blood runs.

Children also described inhaling strong odours and encountering decomposing animals in containers. Some have improvised hooks to extract materials without climbing inside. Nonetheless, access to these items remains uneven. Not all children know about these tools or can afford to make them. Additionally, many children carry heavy loads in sacks, walking long distances through dense traffic, often at night with limited visibility. Several reported near-misses and injuries. Huda (14) for instance was struck by a car and needed 18 months to recover. These conditions reflect not just occupational hazards, but the absence of any protection infrastructure for child waste pickers.

Exploitation and Abuse in the Scrap Trade

Beyond exposure to violence by authorities and the lack of protective tools, children faced systematic exploitation by scrap traders and intermediaries who benefit from their labour. Scrap traders increasingly monopolised the waste economy, establishing exclusive networks that controlled prices, trading routes, and supply chains. Many children reported being forced to sell

to a single trader or a gang-linked intermediary, leaving them with little choice over where to trade or at what price. Rabih (15) recounted:

> *Once, I was hung upside down for 24 hours because I challenged a member of the gang who forced me to sell only to his boss. After that, they made me swear I would work for them only.*

These incidents reflect the coercion and territorial control practiced by scrap traders, especially those operating in lucrative and central areas. In effect, scrap traders operated through informal enforcement mechanisms that restricted children's mobility and bargaining power, and which placed children at risk of violence if they attempted to resist or exit exploitative arrangements. Under these conditions, children had limited control over income and prices. They typically received around 400,000 LBP or approximately 4USD per day, while traders resold the same materials to larger businesses in foreign currency for significant profit margins. This reveals a deeply unequal structure. While children bore the physical risks of injury and hazardous exposure, as well as the legal risks associated with visibility in public space, traders captured the highest value within the chain.

At the same time, the findings suggest that exploitation was not uniform. Not all traders were equally violent or predatory. Over time, children learned which traders were less exploitative and attempted to make strategic choices about where to sell. These traders were often smaller and more local operators, sometimes in areas where waste picking was less profitable. Yet this choice remained constrained as children's decisions were shaped by geography, market competition, gang control, and fear of retaliation. Even when children identified fairer traders, their capacity to shift trading relationships was limited, and the overall hierarchy of the scrap economy remained intact.

Children also developed practice-based skills through everyday work, learning numeracy, risk awareness, and negotiation strategies to improve the conditions of their survival. As Fatima (10) explained:

> *I count how many bottles make one kilo, and I know how much each scrap trader pays for this amount. This way, the scrap traders cannot trick me.*

Ali added:

> *I can tell the weight of the recyclables without even measuring – seven kilos per bag once it's full. The scrap traders cannot fool me anymore.*

Older children also developed an advanced understanding of the city and its demands. Ram commented:

> *I learned how to read signs on the street. Otherwise, I would be lost.*

These accounts demonstrate children's agency and learning. Skills such as counting, estimating weight, or learning street signs were adaptive strategies developed under experiences of violence. In many cases, children developed these skills only after repeated incidents of exploitation, conflict, or loss. Nonetheless, not all children had the time or experience to develop such knowledge, particularly younger children or those newly entering waste picking. Even for those who developed negotiation capacities, the structural imbalance remained. Traders continued to control territories, set prices, manipulate market information, and benefit from informal protections. As a result, children's learning could reduce some forms of everyday deception, but it could not dismantle the broader system of extraction in which they remained positioned as the most vulnerable actors.

Taken together, these findings show that refugee children's endeavours toward self-reliance through waste picking in Beirut were systematically constrained in practice. Waste picking operated as a structural function of informal governance. In this context, refugee households relied on waste picking as one of the few available pathways to generate daily income. Yet within this system, children remained the most visible and criminalised actors in public space, as they were disproportionately exposed to selective enforcement and punitive governance, harsh material and occupational hazards, and systematic exploitation within the scrap trade. While children developed practice-based strategies to negotiate risks and prices, their bargaining power remained structurally limited by monopolised trading networks, territorial control, and unequal value extraction by scrap traders. Therefore, although waste picking enabled income generation in the absence of legal protection, existing policies failed to protect refugee children from violence, injury, and exploitation. These gaps point to the urgent need for interventions that reduce harm in the short term while building safer and more dignified pathways beyond waste picking over time.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined a fundamental policy–practice gap in the implementation of self-reliance frameworks, focusing on Beirut's waste-picking economy. It unfolded within a context of protracted Syrian displacement, Lebanon's economic collapse, and a long-running waste governance crisis. Under conditions where refugees faced restricted legal access to residency and formal employment, many households were pushed into hazardous informal livelihoods. Within this landscape, waste picking emerged as a critical survival strategy and one of the few available routes through which refugee families could generate daily income and meet basic needs – especially as humanitarian support declined, and poverty deepened.

To analyse how self-reliance was negotiated on the ground, the study drew on the trialectics framework for participation (Refstie & Brun, 2016), which conceptualises the possibility of transformation as emerging through the ways that formal, informal, and intermediary spaces

of participation connect, overlap, and shape each other. This framework was particularly useful for understanding the lived realities of refugee waste pickers because it treats children's experiences as embedded within and constantly shaped by multiple interacting systems. This includes everyday survival practices on the street, informal scrap trade networks, municipal governance and enforcement practices, NGO presence and protection programming, and national-level policy constraints. In other words, rather than treating policy as something that can be designed in isolation, the framework supports an integrated understanding of children's realities while also identifying where interventions may realistically intervene across different spaces, making proposed solutions both contextually grounded and institutionally feasible.

Methodologically, the study adopted a qualitative ethnographic approach. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with 30 refugee waste pickers aged 7–17, alongside interviews with 10 institutional stakeholders from relevant ministries, municipal authorities, NGOs, and environmental/private sector actors. One-on-one interviews with children were followed by a group discussion with five participants, which enabled the study to collate children's priorities, recommendations, and harm-reduction needs in collective form. These insights were then synthesised into a media output and brought into a stakeholder dialogue, where institutional actors reflected on the findings and discussed what practical responses could be taken forward to address children's exposure to violence, injury, and exploitation.

The findings demonstrate that waste picking in Beirut operated under conditions of institutional breakdown, sustained through informal governance and exclusionary policy conditions. Refugee children occupied the most precarious position in this system. They performed essential labour that sustained the city's recycling chain, yet remained criminalised, unprotected, and routinely exposed to violence, injury, and exploitation. These conditions were shaped by multiple interconnected structural failures, including the collapse of waste management infrastructure and regulatory oversight, the absence of inclusive labour governance, fragmented municipal mandates and weak enforcement capacity, the political protection of profit-making informal actors, and the systematic exclusion of refugee children from education and longer-term mobility pathways.

Within this landscape, scrap traders consolidated profit while operating outside formal regulation and benefiting from the cheap and steady flow of recyclables produced through children's labour. Children bore the physical risks of injury and illness, the legal risks of visibility in public space, and the routine violence associated with street-based work, while adult intermediaries captured value and remained largely protected. Municipalities simultaneously became the most visible form of governance under collapse. Pressured to manage refugee presence in public space without adequate mandates, resources, or training, municipal actors exercised uneven and discretionary responses ranging from tolerance to violent crackdowns. This

produced punitive governance targeted toward children, while the broader profit chain sustaining the waste economy remained largely unregulated.

At the same time, the study showed that children developed practice-based knowledge through waste picking as a form of everyday adaptation and survival. This included negotiation skills, pricing and arithmetic knowledge, and risk awareness that enabled them to maneuverer the waste economy and minimise harm where possible. However, these skills were developed under deeply unequal conditions. Intermediaries monopolised territories, trading networks, and pricing systems, while children's exclusion from formal education limited their ability to verify weights, prices, and calculations. As a result, children's learning and agency did not translate into protection or autonomy; instead, it often coexisted with heightened exposure to exploitation and coercion.

Taken together, these findings highlight the scale of the policy–practice gap in self-reliance. At the policy level, self-reliance is frequently framed as a pathway through which refugees meet basic needs through work, reduce dependency on aid, and gradually build autonomy. In practice, however, the study shows that refugee children's self-reliance often emerged within an informal economy shaped by violence, extraction, and institutional neglect. Rather than functioning as a route to empowerment, self-reliance frequently operated as a mode of abandonment, whereby children carried responsibility for household survival while the structural conditions that produced vulnerability remained unaddressed.

Recommendations

These dynamics point to an urgent need for interventions that reduce harm on the children and strengthen their capacity to pursue self-reliance in meaningful and dignified ways. This requires a set of integrated interventions across short-, medium-, and long-term horizons.

<u>Short-term Priorities for Immediate Harm Reduction</u>

In the short term, interventions should prioritise reducing violence, physical harm, and everyday exploitation, while engaging children's practice-based knowledge as a resource for protection and safer negotiation of current realities. Three immediate approaches emerge as priorities.

a) *Child-friendly Municipal Governance:*
   Immediate improvements are possible through targeted capacity-building for municipal actors responsible for regulating public space. Municipal staff should receive training in child safeguarding. Clear protocols should prohibit beating, confiscation of collected materials, and arbitrary detention, alongside mechanisms that strengthen accountability and reduce discretionary abuse. Municipalities can also appoint designated focal points to coordinate with child protection organisations and local actors. This approach does not require

municipalities to solve child labour. It rather equips them to reduce harm and violence in their everyday interactions with waste pickers.

b) *Rapid Safety and Protection Package:*

Municipalities, in coordination with grassroots organisations, can support harm-reduction measures that respond to the material risks of waste picking. This may include the distribution of basic protective equipment (such as gloves, protective shoes, reflective vests for night visibility, and safer extraction tools), alongside first-aid support and referral pathways for injury treatment. Importantly, such measures must be designed carefully so they do not increase surveillance or place children under further scrutiny. Here, grassroots organisations play a central role, as they understand community dynamics, local hierarchies, and the informal systems through which children move. This aligns with the local turn in humanitarian and development practice, which emphasises that locally embedded actors are often better positioned to implement context-sensitive protection strategies in complex environments.

c) *Work-based Learning Programmes:*

Education can serve as a protective tool when it is connected to the needs of the communities. Work-based programmes can strengthen children's arithmetic skills, negotiation capacities, and risk awareness, helping them verify weights, prices, and calculations, negotiation skills, detecting harm, and enabling them to better protect themselves in exploitative market interactions. Additionally, these programmes can highly rely on the children's own experiences offering peer support. These programmes provide relevant, flexible learning directly linked to children's immediate needs, timetables, and safety.

<u>Medium-term Interventions to Support Alternative Pathways</u>

In the medium term, interventions can support alternative pathways that reduce dependency on hazardous waste picking by expanding safer routes into livelihoods and learning. Rather than treating waste picking as the only available survival strategy, these approaches build on children's existing skills and responsibilities while gradually shifting them into work and education environments that are less exploitative and less physically harmful.

a) *Livelihood Initiatives:*

Urban and livelihood initiatives can build on children's economic contributions and entrepreneurial knowledge by creating opportunities for alternative income-generating activities that are safer and more regulated. This aims to reduce children's exposure to violence, injury, and coercion, while still supporting families' need for daily earnings. Such initiatives can support gradual transitions into other forms of work within the urban economy, including supervised micro-enterprise opportunities or service roles – such as

assisting in small shops, sorting recyclables in safer environments, or supporting community initiatives (e.g., assisting NGOs in outreach and distribution). They can also enable pathways into more structured forms of work, including supervised placements in trades such as mechanics, carpentry, and electronics repair. Where appropriate, older adolescents could additionally be linked to informal tourism-related services – such as guided neighbourhood storytelling or cultural walks – through safeguarded formats.

b) *Apprenticeship Pathways:*

Apprenticeship programmes can offer work-based learning pathways that connect education to viable livelihood options beyond waste picking. This can include vocational training or supervised apprenticeships in practical sectors aligned with labour market demand. These pathways are particularly important where immediate withdrawal from labour is not feasible, as they create safer learning and work trajectories while maintaining the possibility of income generation. Over time, apprenticeships can support children in developing recognised skills, expanding networks, and gradually reducing dependency on street-based hazardous work.

Long-term Priorities for Inclusion

Over the long term, addressing the challenges related to self-reliance, particularly in the case of waste picking requires addressing the broader political economy that sustains it. This includes structural policy reform to recognise and regulate the recycling economy as a sector rather than leaving it to informal monopolies. Regulation should include taxation and licensing mechanisms, labour protections, and enforcement strategies that focus on intermediaries and profit-making actors rather than criminalising children. Integrating recycling into municipal planning is also essential, including the development of safer sorting infrastructure that reduces reliance on street extraction and mitigates occupational hazards.

Long-term change also requires addressing wider constraints tied to refugees' legal and economic status. Expanding legal protection and improving documentation access are essential for enabling refugees to enter education and livelihood pathways without exclusion. Broader interventions should also enhance safe mobility opportunities, including education scholarships, legal travel routes, and protected pathways that expand refugees' future horizons and reduce structural vulnerability.

Overall, the study findings show that policy interventions for harm-reduction are necessary and possible. These interventions can reduce violence in public space, limit physical injury, and interrupt everyday practices of exploitation. Medium-term pathways can also be developed gradually by building safer livelihood and apprenticeship routes that respond to children's economic realities while expanding their future options. Importantly, these measures are not intended to legitimise child labour. Rather, they recognise that turning a blind eye constitutes a

form of structural violence, leaving children exposed to preventable harm and long-term repercussions for their safety, health, and life chances. In this sense, short- and medium-term policy initiatives represent a necessary step toward justice, inclusion, and genuine pathways out of hazardous informal labour, until structural and political conditions for long term and durable solutions are realised.

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