



‘Each one of us had a dream’

Gender-responsive education and economic empowerment for refugee youth in Lebanon

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July 2022

Executive summary



The Lebanese Organisation
of Studies and Training
الجمعية اللبنانية
للدراسات والتدريب

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Introduction

On a per capita basis, Lebanon currently hosts the largest number of refugees in the world. Echoing global trends, in which the absolute number of displaced persons has continued to grow in tandem with the proportion who are in protracted displacement, the vast majority of the Syrian and Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon have been there for a decade or longer. As consensus has grown that short-term humanitarian responses have become unsustainable, the international community has begun to support longer-term efforts aimed at simultaneously promoting refugee self-reliance and the national economies of host countries. Nowhere is the importance of this twinned response as manifest as in Lebanon. Gross domestic product (GDP) flatlined in 2011 (in part due to the displacement driven by the outbreak of civil war in Syria) and has plummeted since 2019, primarily due to political mismanagement so extreme that the World Bank has characterised Lebanon's economic crisis as a 'deliberate depression'. As we enter 2022, and the third year of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is estimated that Lebanon's GDP has fallen by 58%. This has resulted not only in an explosion of need for humanitarian assistance, but also growing concerns about how to meet the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets and how best to support adolescents and young people transitioning to adulthood in the midst of intertwined and escalating crises.

This research, which began with an extensive review of secondary data, uses primary qualitative data collected from Syrian and Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon in the first half of 2021. It uses a 'positive deviance' approach

to understand what sets the most successful young refugees apart from their peers. Our aim is to identify programming implications and recommended actions for donors, United Nations (UN) agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to support disadvantaged adolescents and youth in line with the SDG targets related to youth employment.

Context

Lebanon has faced a series of intertwined political and social challenges since the country won independence from France in 1943 and has never really recovered from the 15-year civil war that ended in 1990. The private sector delivers most of the services that in other countries are provided by the state. For example, at least 60% of students attend private schools. Unwilling to upset the balance of power, in which government positions are allocated on the basis of religion, officials have not conducted a census in nearly a century. Moreover, they have allowed the current economic crisis to push 75% of the country's population into poverty in just the past two years.

Lebanon is not signatory to the 1951 Convention on Refugees. Palestinians, who numbered approximately 180,000 at the time of the last survey (2017), do not have citizenship, despite having lived in Lebanon since they were displaced by the creation of the Israeli state. They are almost exclusively confined to formal camps that are physically and socially separated from nearby communities, and are excluded from owning property, accessing formal financial services, or undertaking professional work. Palestinians are not allowed to access government services; the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for

Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) provides them with health and education services and social protection. They are charged fees equal to Lebanese citizens at the country's single public university.

When Syrian refugees began arriving en masse in Lebanon in 2011, the government refused permission for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to establish formal camps. As a result, the 1.5 million Syrians in the country – of whom 844,000 are registered with UNHCR – live in host communities or informal tented settlements. Syrian refugee children and adolescents are allowed to access the afternoon shift at government schools, which is donor-funded, if they can provide requisite educational records. Only two-thirds of Syrian children aged 6–14 are enrolled. Enrolment in secondary school, which uses English (or French) language instruction, is rarer still, at 29%. Syrians face even more restrictions than Palestinians. They are not allowed to own property or access bank accounts, and those over the age of 15 are required to have (expensive) annual residency permits, while those seeking work must have a work permit and a Lebanese sponsor. Syrians are only allowed to work in three sectors (agriculture, construction and sanitation) and, in contrast to Palestinians, are required to pay much higher fees at Lebanon's public university.

The current crisis has vastly exacerbated refugees' vulnerability. With a two-year inflation rate of more than 500%, and one-fifth of all firms permanently closed, UNHCR reports that 96% of Syrian households in Lebanon are not able to meet their food needs. Impacts on Palestinians are less well measured, but in mid-2020, Terres des hommes (Tdh) reports that nearly 40% of Palestinians living in Lebanon had lost employment, and more than 60% of households reported that their income had fallen.

Methods

We employ a positive deviance approach that relies on a purposively selected sample of young Syrian and Palestinian refugees who have managed, despite the difficult Lebanese context, to access employment and/or advanced education. The young people included in our sample are between the ages of 15 and 24 and are diverse in terms of their gender, nationality, and whether they live in formal refugee camps or host communities. They also have different experiences in terms of whether and how they are pursuing work versus higher education. Although the bulk of this report uses a case study approach that relies on carefully interrogating the lives of the 25 young refugees who completed individual interviews, it is also informed by: 17 individual interviews with the parents and spouses of successful young refugees; group interviews with 44 young refugees who have been awarded university scholarships or are training for work, or working; and 13 key informant interviews with programme implementers, staff from international NGOs, UN agencies, employers and civil society organisations (CSOs).

Findings

The young outliers who participated in our research can be divided into two groups: those who have found work and are pursuing their livelihoods; and those who are undertaking advanced education to gain skills for future employment.

Youth in paid employment

Of the successful young workers taking part in our research, most entered the labour market after completing intermediate education, but without attending secondary-level education or training. In line with national-level statistics, these

young refugees are disproportionately male, due to restrictive gender norms that limit girls' access to work. They are also disproportionately Syrian, due to Palestinians' better access to secondary school. Some of these young workers have found employment due to personal, social and financial capital. Personal capital has been especially important to those who have opened their own businesses, due to the capital required for start-up in a context where refugees are barred from accessing formal financial services. Another group of young workers emphasised the importance of economic empowerment programmes to their successful employment. Some reported that coursework helped them access work, either directly, by linking them to job openings, or indirectly, by providing them with skills demanded by local labour markets. Others highlighted that empowerment programming had helped them upskill in ways that supported their existent employment.

A minority of successful young workers entered the labour market after obtaining secondary-level education or training. These young people are again disproportionately male, due to restrictive gender norms that limit girls' work, but are far more likely to be Palestinian rather than Syrian because of paired push-pull factors. First, Palestinian students, but not Syrian students, are pulled into technical and vocational education and training (TVET) by access to quality TVET programming that is provided for free by UNRWA. Second, they are pushed into secondary-level TVET because of marginal returns on academic education, due to Lebanese laws that prohibit refugees from undertaking professional work. Syrian students must choose between low-quality public TVET and often expensive private institutes, and, as a result, are less likely to take this path.

The young refugees who are successfully pursuing livelihoods in Lebanon have several

things in common. In an environment in which the administrative, legal and financial barriers to education have been set deliberately high, they are relatively more educated, usually due to a confluence of personal ambition and family and peer support. They are also emotionally resilient enough to adapt their aspirations to the Lebanese reality and 'make do', at least in the short-to-medium term. Indeed, what stands out about the young refugees who are now actively pursuing livelihoods is how they have been able to take their childhood dreams – for careers in engineering, medicine and maths – and channel at least a large measure of enthusiasm into their current occupations.

Our research echoes the broader body of work, and underscores how difficult it is for refugee girls in Lebanon to engage in paid work, due to restrictive gender norms that position boys and men as breadwinners and girls and women as financially dependent caretakers. If girls and women must work, it is important that they have the advanced education that positions them for the 'right' kinds of work – shielded from the public and potential harassment. For relatively less-well-educated girls and young women, marriage – or even engagement – effectively eliminates the potential of taking up paid work.

Youth pursuing advanced education

The Lebanese educational system has two parallel pathways at secondary level: academic and vocational. Palestinian students who completed academic secondary school all did so at UNRWA schools. Although several young people who left formal education before completing 12th grade complained of under-resourced classrooms and poor-quality instruction, Palestinian students have a clearly delineated academic pathway. This is not the case for Syrian students. Some Syrian adolescents have been able to enrol in

government-run secondary schools, but to do so they must provide the required documentation, pay fees, and speak and read English (or French) well enough to master content. With exceptions, our research suggests that the Syrians most able to take advantage of this pathway are those whose family members are both unusually well-educated and better off financially. Other Syrian students enrol in private secondary schools that cater to Syrians. On the one hand, these schools do not have onerous administrative barriers, are affordable, use Arabic as the primary teaching language, and deliver quality education more consistently. This makes them preferred over schools using the Lebanese curriculum – especially those run by the government. However, they entail considerable commitment on the part of students and families because students must sit exams in Syria. They also introduce further complexity to students' trajectories because the credentials they issue are not recognised by the Lebanese government. Our research found that it is not uncommon for Syrian students to use secondary-level TVET as an alternative pathway to university studies. Although this route can entail years of additional real and opportunity costs, it can provide those who are barred from academic secondary school – because they lack paperwork, cannot pay fees, or have insufficient English – with a second chance to achieve their educational aspirations.

Lebanon's educational system also has TVET and academic pathways at the tertiary level. In our purposively selected sample, the young refugees attending tertiary-level TVET programmes are disproportionately female, Syrian, graduates of private Syrian secondary schools, and studying in the allied health fields that are perceived as 'feminine' and provide relatively better access to the labour market. Of the girls pursuing this pathway, cost emerged as the key factor.

Universities were too expensive and UNHCR offered – at least until the crisis – scholarships to Syrian TVET students. Refugees' access to university is heavily dependent on their nationality. Palestinian students – although they are offered only 'left over' spaces and are limited in what they are allowed to study – are not required to pay the exorbitant fees charged to Syrians. Of the Syrian university students in our sample, all attended Lebanese secondary schools, rather than Syrian secondary schools.

Regardless of what and where they are studying, the young people pursuing advanced education are unanimous that their success is a result of a constellation of factors. Echoing their peers who are successfully earning their own livelihoods, students first identified their own determination to succeed. This, they admit, has been heavily shaped by family support – emotional and financial – for education. Knowledge, serendipitously acquired rather than provided in any institutionalised way, about how the Lebanese educational system works and how to apply for scholarships has also been critical to helping young people access advanced education. Similar to their peers who are in work, the young refugees pursuing advanced education are also emotionally resilient enough to tolerate challenges, setbacks and course changes. Many spent years out of the classroom, jumping administrative hurdles one by one, and are now studying in fields that are permitted – but not preferred.

Most research participants agreed that it is harder for refugee girls to pursue education than boys. This was true for adolescents as well as their parents, and for those with both lower and higher levels of education. Girls' access to tertiary-level education is especially limited because classes are co-educational. For Syrian girls, cultural preferences for marriage and motherhood limit

access to education. Despite broader narratives about the limited importance of girls' education, Palestinian girls face relatively lower barriers to education – but extremely high barriers to using that education to find work. Few married girls, regardless of whether they are Syrian or Palestinian, are allowed to study, due to demands on their time as well as restrictions on their mobility and interaction with non-family members.

Implications and recommendations

Refugee young people living in Lebanon have long faced myriad high barriers to their successful acquisition of skills and employment. Lebanese laws and policies are explicitly aimed at making it difficult for them to access formal education and making it all but impossible for them to access decent work. The economic crisis and the covid-19 pandemic have only served to make matters worse, as high unemployment and inflation have worked in tandem to further restrict access to work and school.

Although in the shorter-term, the primary need of refugee youth and their families is for stepped-up humanitarian assistance to meet basic needs, in the medium- and longer-term, as Lebanon's intersecting crises begin to abate, there is an urgent need for the international community to refocus efforts on how to support young people to ready themselves for independent adulthood. Our research with positive deviants suggests that to meet the Sustainable Development Goals donors should prioritise the following:

Support for primary and intermediate education

- Work with the Ministry of Education to reduce the administrative barriers that keep Syrian children out of school – including recognising

the certificates provided by private Syrian schools. In the short-term, use placement testing to determine grade level rather than school records when records are not available. Donors could work with the Ministry of Education to develop this testing and then fund low-income students' tests.

- To help offset the real costs of education, provide low-income students with educational assets (or vouchers) including school supplies and uniforms. Distribution should be at least annual, available to students until the end of secondary school and include Lebanese students as well as refugees to foster social cohesion.
- To help offset quality deficits in the short- and medium-term – and better support all students to academically thrive – provide after-school tutorial support in both schools and community venues. Programmes should be open to all, regardless of nationality, and target not only older students who are already struggling, but younger students who are working on foundational skills. Courses should pay special attention to helping students to develop strong English language skills.
- To reduce the strain on government schools, provide vouchers for low-income students to attend private schools. While efforts should be inclusive of Lebanese students, to improve social cohesion, they could prioritise the private schools that are catering to Syrian students – given those schools' track records of supporting Syrian refugees to learn – and work with those schools to develop documentation that would meet requirements for continued enrolment in Lebanon's higher education sector.
- To improve young people's longer-term educational and occupational trajectories, provide school- and community-based

programming aimed at improving psychosocial well-being and supporting the development of life skills such as communication and leadership. Programming should be inclusive of nationality and carefully tailored to address gender norms.

- To address low enrolment rates, especially in adolescence, design awareness-raising programming for parents and young people, emphasising the importance of education to not only work, but broader life chances. Tailor messages for gender and nationality, using popular media and sports figures as possible.

Support for secondary and higher education

- To ensure that Syrian young people and their families understand how the Lebanese educational system works, in terms of gateway exams and vocational versus academic pathways, provide adolescents and parents with school- and community-based information and guidance starting no later than early intermediate school. Also provide secondary school students with school- and community-based information about scholarship opportunities and guidance that includes active support for the application process.
- To help offset the real costs of higher education, scale up the provision (and amount) of tertiary-level scholarships including to low-income students of all nationalities, and/or transport vouchers (e.g. bus tickets) for low-income students of all nationalities. Over the longer term, work with the Ministry of Education to reduce tuition fees required of Syrians and other refugees.
- To support Syrian secondary and tertiary students to thrive academically, ensure that they have access to continued support to learn English (or French).

Support for work skills

- To ensure that students and their families – especially Syrians – are aware of TVET programming and its advantages vis-à-vis labour market opportunities, raise awareness and actively promote the vocational pathway, starting in intermediate school. Tailor messaging to account for gender norms, to improve girls' and women's access to employment over time.
- To support young people's access to the labour market, work with TVET institutes, universities and the Ministry of Labour to strengthen links between schools and local labour markets, and use economic empowerment programmes to help them find and enter niche markets, attending to hyper-local contexts and taking care not to over-saturate markets.
- To support young people to find and keep decent work, ensure that universities, TVET institutions and economic empowerment programmes help them develop soft skills alongside harder employment-related skills.
- Over the longer term, work with the Ministry of Labour to remove barriers to refugees' work – including the requirement that they have work and residency permits, and limits on employment.
- Support for self-employment
- To help young people launch their own businesses, ensure that economic empowerment programmes provide graduates with necessary tools and other assets, as well as access to credit on favourable terms. In the case of refugees, also provide them with logistical (including financial) support to access work permits and overcome legal barriers.
- To improve the odds that young people's businesses will prosper, support young entrepreneurs with programming aimed at developing their business and computer skills. Over the longer term, work with the Ministry

of Labour to remove barriers to refugees' self-employment, including the requirement that they have work and residency permits and prohibitions against their accessing saving and credit opportunities.

Support for girls

- To address restrictions on girls' mobility, provide them with transport or transport vouchers for education, training and internships, and in the most conservative areas consider single-sex transportation to overcome restrictive gender norms.
- To address the gender norms that leave girls with little access to higher education and especially paid employment, provide them with empowerment programming focused on raising their aspirations and strengthening their communication and negotiation skills, whilst simultaneously investing in gender norms change programming targeting parents and husbands.

Support for Palestinians

- To address Palestinians' social exclusion and foster social cohesion, make greater efforts to include them in programming currently attracting primarily their Lebanese and Syrian peers, and also work with UNRWA and other actors to ensure that scholarships are transparently distributed to those who have earned them. Over the longer term, work with the government of Lebanon to remove the barriers that are responsible for Palestinians' social and economic exclusion, including their lack of citizenship and their confinement to camps and settlements.
- To address the fatalism that is lowering Palestinian boys' and parents' aspirations for education and work, pair awareness-raising and hands-on programming aimed at highlighting what is possible – even under current Lebanese law – using local role models as possible.



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We are grateful for the funding support provided by Global Affairs Canada and UK aid.

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