



Youth economic security, skills and empowerment

Learning from positive outliers among youth affected by forced displacement in Jordan

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Executive summary



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Introduction

In 2021 there were more than 25 million refugees globally. More than half are under the age of 18, and the vast majority are hosted in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). The international community, as enshrined in the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, has emphasised the need to support refugees to become self-reliant and build sustainable and dignified livelihoods, while highlighting the economic and social benefits their economic integration could bring to host communities.

Syrians accounted for a quarter of the world's refugees in 2021. The Syrian crisis has led to a number of efforts by the international community to support those affected by this mass forced displacement. These include the Jordan Compact, which seeks to transform the crisis 'into a development opportunity', shifting the focus from short-term humanitarian aid to education, growth and job creation for host communities and Syrian refugees alike. As part of the Compact, Jordan committed to offering school places to all Syrian children, providing some vocational training opportunities and issuing 200,000 work permits for Syrian refugees in specified sectors. While the Compact has led to some improvements in education and labour market access for Syrian refugees, significant challenges remain. Syrian refugees are still largely limited to the informal economy, while work permits are restricted to sectors that do not align with the skills they typically hold, and few work permits have been issued to women. Critically, most of the research on refugee economic participation has focused on

adult refugee populations, particularly men. Data on adolescents and youth, particularly girls and young women, is limited.

There has been even less attention to the perspectives and realities of Palestinian refugees. Although they represent the most protracted refugee situation globally, efforts to support them to become independent and self-reliant have been fragmented and inadequate. Data from the 5.4 million Palestine refugees in the Middle East and North Africa region provides an alarming picture; in Jordan, labour force participation was 62% for Palestine refugee men but just 10% for women.

This report aims to fill some of these research gaps and contribute to efforts to support refugee youth to realise their potential in line with the commitments enshrined in both the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to 'leave no one behind', and in the Global Compact on Refugees, to 'enhance refugee self-reliance', so that these young people can become active agents of positive change and participate in the development of their communities and host countries. Focusing on male and female youth aged 15–24 years from Syrian and Palestinian refugee communities in Jordan, as well as vulnerable Jordanians in host communities, the report captures their aspirations and experiences in building independent and sustainable livelihoods. It incorporates a gender lens to identify and analyse the factors that promote or hinder youth participation in the labour market, paying particular attention to gender norms and roles.

Context

Long a haven for refugees fleeing regional conflict, the most recent census in Jordan (2015) found that one-third of those living in the country are not Jordanian. Of non-Jordanians, approximately half (1.3 million) are Syrians. A large majority of Syrians in Jordan live in host communities, although about one-fifth live in one of two refugee camps, which are gated off from surrounding communities, and a much smaller number (15,000) live in informal tented settlements scattered throughout the countryside. There is also a large (2.4 million) Palestinian population in Jordan. While most of these have Jordanian citizenship, the 20% who do not have few legal rights and are all but invisible in recent data.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, refugees living in Jordan were extremely likely to be unemployed and poor. Jordanian law stipulates that they can only work in certain sectors (agriculture, manufacturing, construction, food services and retail trade) and while work permits for Syrians are free, they are administratively difficult to acquire. Furthermore, the nationality-based labour prioritisation strategy that has led to increased hiring of Syrians appears to have worsened conditions for non-Syrians. Due to restrictive gender norms and lack of access to governmental jobs, refugee women – Syrian or Palestinian – are highly unlikely to work. Young people's access to work is a particular concern. The youth unemployment rate in 2021 was nearly 40%.

The Jordanian government and its partners have worked hard to ensure that refugees have access to education. Syrian students attend government schools, for free, primarily at an afternoon shift. Palestinian students attend schools run by UNRWA until the end of 10th grade, at which time they may access public schools. Although approximately four fifths of all refugee children

attend primary school, enrolment for both Syrians and Palestinians begins dropping in early adolescence. Boys are more likely to drop out than girls, due to their involvement in child labour and their greater risk of experiencing violence at school. At secondary school level, less than a third of Syrian students and only half of camp-dwelling Palestinian students were still enrolled when they reached adolescence.

Methods

The research involved multiple qualitative interviews carried out in a sequenced approach. In line with the positive deviance approach that underpins the report, we carried out in-depth interviews (IDIs) with 68 male and female youth aged 15–24 years living in host communities and refugee camps who were considered positive outliers – that is, young people who have made choices and had opportunities that set them apart from their peers in terms of economic security, skills and empowerment. These young people were purposefully selected from four main categories, based on a snowballing approach: (1) youth receiving university scholarships; (2) youth attending technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programmes; (3) youth who have started a small business; and (4) youth enrolled in economic empowerment programmes. We also carried out five focus group discussions (FGDs) involving a total of 28 adolescents and youth to explore what young people think was valuable about these initiatives and what could be improved, and 15 caregivers to better understand the role of parental support.

We also interviewed key informants (14), including programme implementers, staff from international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), United Nations (UN) agencies, employers, and civil society organisations (CSOs), to explore how

interventions are designed and implemented, as well as barriers and enablers to youth economic participation in Jordan.

In order to situate these findings we contextualise them with mixed methods data collected as part of the Gender and Adolescent: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal study in 2018/2019 involving 4000 adolescents from vulnerable Jordanian households, and from Palestine and Syrian refugee families in camp and host community settings.

Findings

GAGE baseline

Positive deviants must be understood in context. Because of that, we highlight here the headline findings of GAGE's baseline research in Jordan – organised to demonstrate adolescents' economic (in)security.

Economic aspirations

GAGE baseline survey findings (from 2019) indicate that adolescent refugees' occupational aspirations are high: 73% of girls and boys in our sample – across age groups, nationalities and locations – aspired to a professional career. Our qualitative findings revealed more diversity, with boys' aspirations emerging as noticeably more realistic than girls' – perhaps because they know that gendered norms that define males as breadwinners mean they must earn a living to support their family.

Educational opportunities

Echoing the broader evidence base, our baseline survey found that refugee adolescents' access to education in Jordan remains far from universal. Enrolment rates were higher for Palestinians than Syrians, across age groups and both sexes. Across age groups and including both Syrians and Palestinians, girls were more likely to be enrolled

than boys. Young people and their caregivers identified poverty as a key barrier to education. Some of the costs involved, such as for uniforms and transport, are real, while others represent forgone opportunities. For boys, the opportunity cost of attending school is fewer work options; for girls, the opportunity costs of attending school revolve around marriage.

Our survey also found that learning outcomes for refugee adolescents are extremely low. Fewer than half could read a short story written at the second grade level or perform subtraction with borrowing. Refugee students emphasised that classrooms are overcrowded and under-resourced, and that teachers are often poorly trained, unengaged and even violent.

Market-appropriate skills

Overall, few adolescents in our sample had participated in any form of skills training. Of those who had, they had participated in relatively short-term classes provided by local and international NGOs that were designed to empower refugees. Indeed, many refugee respondents reported unmet demand for training programmes, especially. Palestinians from Jerash camp face the strongest legal restrictions on employment and live too far away to avail themselves of UNRWA's TVET centres.

Access to decent and age-appropriate employment

Our findings underscore that adolescents' access to decent and age-appropriate employment is deeply gendered. Of older adolescents, nearly two-thirds of boys but only a tenth of girls had worked for pay in the past year. Our qualitative work highlighted that this gender gap is the result of social norms that position boys as providers and girls as in need of protection. Unsurprisingly, given that Syrian families are disproportionately likely to be poor, Syrian adolescents are more

likely to have worked for pay in the past year than their Palestinian peers. In part reflecting national law but also shaped by Jordan's high youth unemployment rate, our survey found that boys' work tends to be piecemeal and is extremely poorly paid. Girls' lower levels of paid work do not indicate that girls are not working – merely that they are not being paid for the work they do at home for their families.

Financial literacy and inclusion

Partly due to the economic fragility of their households and partly due to generational hierarchies that leave even young adults financially dependent on their parents (or parents-in-law, in the case of married girls), fewer than a quarter of adolescents reported controlling cash in the past year. There were no gender or location differences. Reflecting household poverty levels – albeit also adolescent preferences – only 5% of adolescents reported having any savings, and only married girls mentioned access to credit.

Access to age- and gender-responsive social protection

Our qualitative research findings highlight that existent social protection programmes have been vital in helping many Syrian refugee families make ends meet. World Food Programme (WFP) vouchers and UNHCR cash transfers have helped families achieve some measure of food security and pay their rent. Positive impacts on consumption are generally larger inside camps. Although residents do not receive UNHCR cash, they do not have to pay rent and are provided with myriad other in-kind benefits. UNICEF's Hajati cash transfer, which is labelled for education, helps many families to educate their children. It helps offset the need for boys' labour and allows families to pay for school transport for adolescent girls. Palestinian refugees, however, have little access to social protection, due to drastic cuts in funding for UNRWA in the past two years.

Positive outliers

Our findings highlight that a complex set of factors have shaped the choices that positive outlier youth made around economic empowerment, the impacts of those choices, the challenges they have faced, and their aspirations for the future.

Factors shaping youth economic empowerment choices

Cross-cutting themes that emerged include the individual's drive and commitment to better their lives and those of their families, strong family support (in terms of emotional, financial and time commitments) and, in the case of youth with academic scholarships and those pursuing TVET courses, strong support and encouragement from teachers. Of those engaged in TVET programmes, because such courses are less socially prestigious a number of youth admitted that their initial motivation had been academic failure and a sense that there was no alternative pathway to economic empowerment, but that over time they had come to appreciate the practical orientation of TVET and the skills and networks they had gained through it. For youth with their own small business, a key motivation was financial – the need to support their household – while some also expressed a keen entrepreneurial interest.

Impacts of programme participation

Youth outliers had overwhelmingly positive views about the impacts of participating in their chosen fields. They highlighted opportunities to develop new knowledge and technical skills as well as forging a sense of purpose, and developing soft skills and self-confidence. For young people involved in university education and TVET programmes, another common theme that emerged was the opportunity for social mobility, especially for refugees, and the ability to access new social networks. Exposure to positive role models – especially for refugees and female

youth – was also a valued impact of programme participation, particularly for those at university or in TVET and economic empowerment programmes. Youth who had set up their own business also underscored the financial improvements they had experienced, albeit from a low baseline.

Limitations and challenges

The positive impacts of programme participation notwithstanding, the youth positive outliers in our study also underscored a number of common challenges. These include financial challenges, with students citing the costs of transportation and the lack of access to educational loans as critical concerns. Young people with small businesses also cited the lack of access to affordable credit as a major barrier to expanding their business and realising its full potential. Young people from refugee communities also cited discrimination on the basis of their refugee status as a key concern – both in terms of experiencing discrimination from peers and teachers while undertaking courses, and concerns that their future opportunities would be truncated on account of their lacking national identity documents (ID). Female youth emphasised that discriminatory gender norms that determine how they are treated by family and relatives, and their community, were a major constraint. They reported that they often had to negotiate their participation in education and programming, given fears about the risks of sexual harassment and the threat to their family honour while travelling to and from educational or workplace venues. Norms that call into question the appropriateness of non-traditional livelihood options represented another barrier for girls and young women.

Future aspirations

In terms of future aspirations, key themes that emerged across the positive outlier youth in our sample included a desire to become recognised

as experts in their field and, in some cases, to continue with higher education so as to gain further knowledge and skills and also achieve social mobility. For female youth, delaying marriage and motherhood, and achieving personal economic independence, were also key to their future aspirations.

Implications for policy and programming

Our findings underscore that young people affected by forced displacement in Jordan face myriad intersecting barriers to successfully acquiring skills and employment. The Covid-19 pandemic and the associated economic crisis have only served to make matters worse, as rising rates of unemployment and inflation have combined to further restrict access to work and school. There is now an urgent need for the Jordanian government and the international community to refocus efforts on how to support young people to ready themselves for independent adulthood. Our research with positive outlier cases suggests that to meet the SDG commitments to ending poverty and promoting decent work for all, including youth, and in line with the Global Compact on Refugees, the following actions should be prioritised.

Support for basic education

- To help offset the real costs of education, expand social assistance programming that targets low-income students of all nationalities and provides either cash transfers or vouchers that are sufficient to cover the costs of education through the end of secondary school.
- To help offset quality deficits in the short term and medium-term – and support all students to thrive academically – provide after-school tutorial support in schools and community venues.

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- To ensure that out-of-school young people are supported to keep learning, scale up informal education and bridging programmes that enable young people to return to school if they like.
 - To improve young people's longer-term educational and occupational trajectories, provide school- and community-based programming, tailored to address gender norms, to improve psychosocial well-being and support the development of life skills such as communication and leadership.
 - To better position parents to lift their children's educational and occupational trajectories, provide parent education courses. These should foster improved parent-child communication and open up space for young people to practise decision-making.
 - Target parents and adolescents with messages that emphasise the importance of education not only for future work opportunities but for improving broader life chances.

Support for higher education

- To raise the aspirations of young people and their families for higher education, develop awareness-raising programming that includes exposure to local role models, especially for refugee communities and for girls.
- To ensure that Syrian young people and their families understand how the Jordanian educational system works, provide adolescents and parents with school- and community-based information and guidance, starting no later than lower secondary school.
- To help offset the real costs of higher education, scale up and advertise the provision of tertiary-level scholarships and interest-free education loans to low-income students of all nationalities.

- Provide transport vouchers for low-income students of all nationalities and, over the longer term, work with the Ministry of Education to reduce educational fees required of Syrians, stateless Palestinians and other refugees.

Support for work skills

- To ensure that students and their families – especially refugees – 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 conservative gender norms.
- 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.
- Use economic empowerment programmes to help young people find and enter niche markets, attending to 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 more technical, employment-related skills.
- Over the longer term, work with government agencies, parliament and UN agencies to influence political dialogue around removing barriers to refugees' taking up work in the formal sector – especially in regard to work permits and sectoral limitations.

Support for self-employment

- Provide graduates with career counselling and the financial, marketing, management, communication and digital literacy skills and other assets needed to start up their own businesses.

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- Provide young refugees with support to access work permits and overcome legal and logistical barriers to self-employment.
 - Develop programming that supports young entrepreneurs' access to credit on favourable terms.
 - Over the longer term, work with the Ministry of Labour to remove barriers to refugees' self-employment (e.g. requirements for work permits and restrictions on accessing formal financial services).

Support for girls

- To address restrictions on girls' mobility, provide them with transport or transport vouchers for education, training and internships.
- To address the gender norms that leave girls with little access to higher education and especially paid employment, empowerment programming should target girls and focus on raising their aspirations and strengthening their communication and negotiation skills.

- Scale up course offerings that are culturally acceptable for girls such as computer technician courses, graphic design, architecture, English language and management.
- Invest in awareness-raising efforts with parents and husbands to shift gender norms.

Support for stateless Palestine refugees

- To address the fatalism that is lowering aspirations for education and work among stateless (ex-Gazan) Palestinian boys and their parents, pair awareness-raising with hands-on programming to show what can be achieved – even under current Jordanian law – using local role models where possible.
- Over the longer term, work with the Jordanian government and international actors to remove the barriers that are responsible for stateless Palestinians' social and economic exclusion.

Canada



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