

Adolescents in the abyss of Lebanon's worst economic crisis: a focus on Lebanese and Palestinian adolescents' education, and voice and agency

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Introduction

'Lebanon's compound crisis – the combination of an economic collapse, sociopolitical crisis, exacerbated by the influx of Syrian refugees since 2011, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Beirut port explosion of 2020 – has had a huge impact on the lives of children and adolescents across all communities. In 2021, an estimated 260,000 Lebanese children and 440,000 refugee children dropped out of school, mostly to work to support their struggling families. There are also rising levels of mental distress and mental health challenges. Child labour is an increasing concern, partly driven by the growing belief that work provides more opportunities than education – a commonly held view even prior to the crisis.

The economic crisis, along with socio-political unrest, has led to an increasingly inequitable and inefficient education sector. Educational institutions provide only a minimal level of learning, and skills taught are not closely matched to the job market. Government spending on education is expected to continue to decline. School enrolment rates have been declining over recent years, with a dramatic drop in 2021–22, from 60% to 43% for adolescents and young people aged 15–24. As the economic crisis continues to worsen, many students are leaving private schools to join public schools (enrolment increased by 11% in 2020–21), putting even more pressure on the already struggling state system.

Online learning (introduced in Lebanon in response to the pandemic) has proved challenging, due to the country's underdeveloped communications infrastructure (especially inside Palestinian refugee camps), with unstable internet connection, power cuts and internet outages, and lack of access to electronic devices. As schools began to return to classroom learning, transport costs (which had increased substantially due to rising fuel prices and shortages) have proved prohibitive for many families, further disrupting their education. This has also affected teachers, who face salary losses and challenges in affording transport to school, prompting teachers' strikes, in a further disruption of education.

This report sheds light on the impact of Lebanon's economic crisis on vulnerable Lebanese and Palestinian refugee adolescents. Drawing on the conceptual framework developed by the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme, which adopts a gendered capabilities lens, the report explores gendered differences in adolescents' education and learning opportunities and outcomes, and their opportunities for voice and agency in their family and community. We focus on adolescents' lived experiences amid the turbulent and



An 18-year-old Palestinian refugee from Ein El Hilweh camp, Lebanon
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deteriorating socioeconomic and political environment. The report concludes with the implications of our findings for policy and programming so that these intersecting challenges can be more effectively addressed.

Methods

This report draws on longitudinal participatory research by GAGE with older adolescents and young people (aged 15–21 years). The sample includes more than 100 adolescent boys and girls from vulnerable Lebanese communities and Syrian and Palestinian refugees. It includes the most vulnerable groups, such as out-of-school adolescents (or those at risk of dropping out), working adolescents, married adolescents (or those at risk of early marriage), and adolescents involved with (or at risk of joining) armed forces. The sample includes: Palestinian refugee adolescents living in Ein el-Hilweh camp in Saida city, south of Lebanon, and in Wavel camp, in Baalbek city in the Beqaa valley; Syrian refugee adolescents living in informal tented settlements and collective shelters; and vulnerable Lebanese adolescents from Baalbek city. Research tools used include 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) and three rounds of individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) that started in July 2019, including 2 FGDs and 1 IDI round conducted at the beginning of the pandemic (between March and June 2020) and following the crisis (up to April 2022). There were also interactive activities such as participatory photography, intergenerational trios (interviews with adolescents' parents and grandparents) and peer-to-peer research.

This report focuses on the experiences of 24 vulnerable Lebanese adolescent boys and girls living in Baalbek city, 6 Palestinian boys living in Wavel camp, and 24 Palestinian adolescent boys and girls living in Ein el-Hilweh camp. The Baalbek region is heavily weaponised, and there are frequent armed clashes between Lebanese clans. Ein el-Hilweh camp is the largest walled-off Palestinian camp in Lebanon and is infamous for its frequent clashes between the Palestinian factions that control the camp.

Findings

Adolescents' education and learning

Educational aspirations

Social norms among Palestinian communities restrict adolescent girls' opportunities for education and work, and thus their educational aspirations. Our report finds that Lebanese girls, however, have higher educational aspirations, as culturally it is expected that girls will do paid work. As such, they receive support from their parents, who expect girls to continue their education.

In recent years, lack of work opportunities and prospects in Lebanon limit adolescents' educational aspirations, because education is seen to have little value. For Lebanese boys, the lack of work opportunities and low return on investment in education was a main driver for lack of interest and low educational aspirations. For Palestinian boys, lack of civic and economic rights in Lebanon is a major factor in their lower educational levels and aspirations. As such the report highlights that many adolescents can see no future from staying in education, and are instead seeing it only as a means to migrate and find better work opportunities abroad.

Educational enrolment

An estimated 30.6% of Palestinian households were reducing spending on their children's education in October 2021 (compared to 26.3% in April), and 12% were sending their children to work (compared to 9% in April) as a way to cope with the loss of income and rising costs. Among Lebanese households, 7% more families were sending their children to work by October 2021, and this figure was expected to rise as the situation continues to worsen.

Educational attainment

The compound crisis in Lebanon has impacted adolescents' educational attainment. Many have left education due to their family's deteriorating financial situation, and adolescents increasingly perceive education as having low returns given the very limited work opportunities. Gendered social norms and traditions are by far the greatest barrier to girls' education, especially among Palestinian families. Palestinian boys tend to leave school at an earlier age as they are expected to take on the role of family breadwinner.

Lebanese girls have the highest levels of educational attainment, usually reaching higher education, helped by supportive parents. Lebanese families generally have higher expectations for girls to complete their education than boys as culturally acceptable jobs for girls require higher levels, unlike Lebanese boys, who are perceived to be able to do any type of work and are expected to take on the role of breadwinner, which often means leaving school early. Lebanese boys do, however, generally attain higher educational levels than their Palestinian peers. For Lebanese boys to reach university level, parental support and encouragement is key. Following the economic crisis, those in education are increasingly aiming at attaining higher educational degrees in the hope of migrating to find work abroad.

Successful primary to secondary transitions

Palestinian adolescents are more likely than their Lebanese peers to drop out of school before secondary level, for the reasons explained earlier. Among Lebanese adolescents, parental and school support are vital for adolescents' educational ambitions and their successful

education transitions. When parents are supportive of their children's studies, adolescents tend to have higher ambitions, whether through the academic or TVET (technical and vocational education and training) route. Failing to progress through school levels can be the end of an adolescent's education if the family is not supportive. This has been particularly evident in the lack of support for the shift to online classes and especially following the deterioration of the education sector amid the economic crisis. Adolescents reported feeling increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of education and lack of support for their education and educational transitions.

Adolescents' opportunities to exercise voice and agency

Mobility and access to safe spaces

Girls, particularly Palestinian girls, face the greatest restrictions in terms of their agency, life choices and mobility, principally due to cultural norms (their community perceives that girls should not be on the streets and should be accompanied by a family member whenever they go out). Boys (Lebanese and Palestinian) have much greater mobility, especially as they get older, and have access to public spaces and more leisure activities outside the home.

Violence permeates all aspects of life in Lebanon, posing risks to adolescents' safety and limiting their voice and agency. Street violence (including harassment) plays a major role in limiting girls' mobility, in Palestinian and Lebanese communities alike, as rising crime and violence means the streets are generally perceived as less safe. The increase in transportation costs due to rising fuel prices has also restricted adolescents' mobility. More time spent at home and less time outside the house with peers has harmed adolescents' psychosocial well-being, which was already deteriorating due to the impacts of financial stresses.

The Palestinian camps' seclusion and control by opposing factions (who often clash), and the inability of the Lebanese state to secure the streets and public spaces, are severely curtailing adolescents' everyday lives. Adolescent boys are at particular risk of being engaged in harmful activities like weapon-holding, joining armed groups, or undertaking illicit activities.

Access to information and digital technology

Lebanese and Palestinian boys have good access to mobile phones, with no parental restrictions on their access and usage. Palestinian girls, however, do face restrictions, and if they own a phone, their activity is often closely monitored and controlled by their mother or brother. Lebanese girls, by contrast, have some access to a mobile phone, with little parental surveillance. Nonetheless, both Palestinian and Lebanese adolescents avoid using

social media to openly share their views for fear of being criticised by or sparking conflict with their family, friends or community members.

Adolescents use the internet to stay connected to friends and family living elsewhere, and to access a wide range of information, including education, health (especially during the pandemic), social and political events. They also use it to find education or work opportunities, and to enrol in courses or programmes run by local organisations. Some reported using the internet and social media to start their own online business.

The crisis has impacted adolescents' access to digital technology and the internet due to electricity cuts and affordability challenges. This not only prevents adolescents from accessing peer support networks, information and entertainment, but also negatively affects their education, especially as many schools are still using online (or a combination of online and in-class) teaching.

Opportunities for voice and decision-making within the family and community

Lebanese and Palestinian communities are both conservative, and structured around patriarchy and seniority. Girls' honour and chastity are central to the family's social standing. There is little communication between adolescents and their parents (in Lebanese and Palestinian families), and parents generally decide key life choices for their adolescents, including on education, work and marriage. Palestinian girls and, to a lesser extent, boys are controlled by their family, who use violence if adolescents oppose customs, rules or demands. Upon marriage, control of a girl's life shifts from her parents to her husband and in-laws. Lebanese girls, by contrast, have more say and more support from their family in making key decisions. Boys (whether Lebanese or Palestinian) have more say than girls over their choices and decisions.

Civic engagement

Adolescents (particularly Palestinian adolescents) have very few opportunities to be involved in civic life in Lebanon, but they also feel marginalised within their own community, by virtue of their age. This is increasingly resulting in feelings of despair, as they have little say in decisions that affect their lives. The state's violent response to anti-government protests in 2019 has further limited adolescents' participation in civic life and their perceptions of securing change through peaceful means. The combined impacts of Lebanon's compound crisis have pushed adolescents into hopelessness, and they are feeling increasingly marginalized, with no voice and no opportunities to express their views. One of the few positives mentioned by adolescents were programmes run by local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as they increased adolescents' participation and engagement in their respective communities.

Implications for policy and programming

Our findings suggest some priority actions for the Lebanese government, the international community, NGOs (national and international) and all other stakeholders wanting to improve adolescents' and young people's access to education, and voice and agency.

- **Improve the quality and affordability of education.** The Lebanese government must increase spending to expand public education institutions. It should also improve the quality of education by training teachers in how to use modern and interactive teaching methods, as well as modernising the curriculum and linking it to labour market needs. International organisations must increase their funding to education and provide financial support to households to help cover essential costs such as books, stationery and transport. The government, education institutions and international organisations will need to provide more scholarships for TVET and tertiary education, as many households are unable to afford the costs of even public education.
- **Expand social protection and strengthen economic empowerment efforts.** Adolescents identified household financial stresses as the main reason for school dropout. It is therefore essential to scale up social support to reach all vulnerable households in Lebanon, and to meet the increasing level of need. The government must expand its social protection provision to the many Lebanese households struggling to secure basics. International organisations must increase sustainable economic empowerment initiatives through programmes that provide skills training and support for setting up small businesses.
- **Provide employment opportunities for young people and skills programmes linked to labour market needs.** Ultimately, the Lebanese government should implement corrective policies to address the severity of the economic crisis, so that adolescents and young

people have better opportunities for decent work and incomes in future. The international community should support the government to structure and implement development policies that would create opportunities for decent work for adolescents and young people so that they are able to get sufficient returns on their education.

- **Strengthen psychosocial support for adolescents and young people.** Donors and local organisations must increase psychosocial programmes and support that targets adolescents (and their parents, due to increasing levels of domestic violence). The government must work towards providing an affordable national psychosocial support system with tailored services designed to meet the specific needs of young people.
- **Invest urgently in efforts to prevent violence and ensure sufficient redress.** The Lebanese government, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and Palestinian factions must work to increase security measures inside the camps, to discourage clashes and violence by males on the streets. NGOs should address violence and weapon-holding, whether inside the Palestinian camps or in Lebanese communities, through targeted programmes.
- **Address domestic violence and challenge cultural norms (among Palestinian and Lebanese communities) that equate masculinity with violence.** Law enforcement also needs to be strengthened, with safe reporting systems to protect girls from all types of gender-based violence.

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The GAGE consortium, managed by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), includes 35 partner organisations from around the world known for their expertise in research, policy and programming in the fields of adolescence, gender and social inclusion. GAGE is funded by UK aid from the UK government.

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