

## Crisis within crisis: the psychosocial toll of Lebanon's economic and political turmoil on Syrian refugee adolescents

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### Introduction

Lebanon's economic crisis, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, has had a huge impact on the lives of children and adolescents across all communities but especially Syrian refugees, many of whom cannot afford food and other basics. As a result, families resort to negative coping strategies that include pulling children out of school, sending boys to work, and marrying girls off early.

Growing levels of stress, isolation and trauma have led to an increase in mental health disorders – including depression, anxiety and aggressive behaviours. In 2021, it was estimated that 1 in 4 adolescents in Lebanon (from host and refugee communities) suffered from a psychiatric disorder, with a striking 94% of those who had a mental illness not receiving any treatment. Likewise, 1 in 4 adolescents and young people (aged 15–24) were experiencing depression and reported a deterioration in their quality of life. Among Syrian adolescents and young people, 36% had frequent depression symptoms and 70% reported that their life had worsened over the past year (Government of Lebanon and United Nations, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). Alarming, 87% of Syrian adolescents have not accessed any psychosocial support, due to a dearth of services and stigma related to mental ill-health (Inter-Agency Coordination, 2022).

This report explores the impact of Lebanon's compound crisis (economic, political and pandemic-related) on Syrian refugee adolescents' psychosocial well-being and their ability to exercise voice and agency in their family and community. Framed within the capabilities conceptual framework of the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme, and drawing on group and individual interviews with 30 Syrian adolescent girls and boys in Lebanon, we explore gendered differences in voice and agency and psychosocial well-being. The report concludes by discussing the implications of our findings for policy and programming.

### Methods

The report draws on longitudinal participatory research by GAGE with older adolescents and young people (aged 15–21 years). The overall sample includes more than 100 older 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 the armed forces.

Here, we focus on the experiences of 30 Syrian refugee boys and girls living in Baalbek city (a heavily weaponised area): 10 married



Syrian girls and young mothers living in informal tented settlements who come from Raqqqa in Syria; 10 married Syrian girls and young mothers (7 from Aleppo and 3 from Damascus region); and 10 Syrian boys (3 of them married, from Aleppo) living in collective shelters.

Research tools included 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) and three rounds of individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) that started in July 2019, including two FGDs and one 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.

## Findings

### Syrian adolescents' psychosocial well-being

#### Resilience and emotional intelligence

Syrian refugee adolescents face a multitude of challenges linked to their displacement. Their socioeconomic vulnerabilities, coupled with lack of access to education, have pushed Syrian boys and girls permanently out of school and into child labour and early marriage. These emerged as common stressors for Syrian refugee adolescents.

The ever-decreasing work opportunities and increasing unemployment, the depreciation of income and depletion of savings and other assets, along with hyperinflation, mean that Syrian refugees are often unable to meet their family's basic needs. This results in feelings of depression and anxiety among adolescents and other family members. Lebanon's compound crisis, and the decreasing access to basic services, have resulted in increased tensions and violence within Syrian refugee households, worsening the mental health and psychosocial well-being of adolescents, especially girls.

For married girls, married life is the major driver of physical and psychological fatigue and distress. They are expected to carry sole responsibility for housework and childcare, serving their husband and in-laws (if they live with them, which is often the case), often without any support. Girls living in informal tented settlements are expected to do agricultural work to contribute to household income. The economic crisis, alongside frequent electricity and water outages, has overburdened girls and young mothers, leading to a stark deterioration in their mental health and psychosocial well-being.

Syrian boys in Lebanon assume the breadwinner role at a younger age than they would have back home, which pushes some to marry earlier than they would have. Taking

on this role during an economic crisis, with hyperinflation and wage depreciation, was reported as the main driver of distress and anxiety among boys. The government's recent crackdown on Syrian refugees, increasing tensions between refugee and host communities owing to greater competition over jobs and resources, and the lack of aid have all added to the stressors experienced by Syrian adolescent boys.

With few legal options for work, some Syrian adolescent boys are engaging in harmful or illegal activities (including drug dealing and joining armed factions), but fear the shame this would bring if their family found out. Other boys are considering migration to Turkey and Europe as their only chance of decent work opportunities and a better life in future, though irregular migration also entails extreme risks (at the hands of people smugglers). Although this highlights the extent of despair felt by young Syrian refugees, it also reflects adolescents' resilience in the face of ever-mounting challenges.

Amid mounting stressors, sleep and self-isolation emerged as common coping strategies used by adolescents. Girls, who lack mobility and access to support, resort to piety, domestic work and childcare, whereas boys, who have greater freedom of movement and access to mobile phones and leisure activities, can more easily access their friends and peers, though the compound crisis has limited their opportunities to do so.

#### Access to emotional support from adults

Mothers and older siblings are a main source of support for adolescent boys and girls alike. However, such support is limited by Syrian family structure, which is rooted in seniority and conservative cultural traditions and norms, which constrain girls' lives in particular. The lack of communication within Syrian households and taboos around discussing sexual and reproductive health issues mean that girls are left with little support during puberty and before and during marriage.

Girls get little support from the adults in their life. This is due to the centrality of girls' reputation, and cultural expectations of a wife's submissive role, as well as stigma surrounding divorce. In such contexts, intimate partner violence is normalised as it is culturally accepted. Boys rarely seek support from adults in their lives due to the age/generational gap, and fears of being criticised or assaulted (Syrian parents do not communicate much with their children and violence was reported as a common form of discipline).

Rising poverty, lack of security and lack of internet access affect adolescent boys and girls but have increased married girls' isolation. Their lack of access to family and support networks is harming their psychosocial well-being.

### **Access to social support from peers**

Gendered norms among Syrian communities restrict girls' mobility and access to mobile phones, which in turn limits their access to peer support. These restrictions become even stronger after marriage. Boys, however, have much greater freedom of movement and access to friends, who are their main source of emotional (and sometimes financial) support. However, the increase in street crime and violence due to the economic crisis has affected both girls' and boys' safety and mobility. Rising poverty means that boys are also less able to spend leisure time with their friends or visit them. Lack of access to the internet due to electricity cuts and rising costs means that boys have increasingly limited online access to friends and peers too. Adolescent boys are spending more time at home as a result, with less access to their peers, becoming more isolated and lacking support.

### **Access to quality psychosocial services**

Syrian adolescents lack access to psychosocial support services, either due to lack of information about what services are available or lack of services where they live. Girls' lack of mobility further deters them from seeking services. However, girls and boys reported that participation in youth programming at local organisations had several positive impacts on their psychosocial well-being, including improved self-esteem and managing feelings of anger and frustration.

## **Syrian adolescents' opportunities to exercise voice and agency**

### **Mobility and access to safe spaces**

Many factors combine to limit Syrian girls' mobility in Lebanon – not least poverty, discrimination and harassment – but Syrian cultural norms limit the very few leisure opportunities available to married girls. They are typically isolated at home, doing housework and childcare, and have to be accompanied by a family member when going out, leaving them physically and mentally exhausted.

However, boys are at greater risk when it comes to the widespread violence and insecurity, and the threat of being targeted by Lebanese authorities, especially at checkpoints. Adolescent boys and girls reported feeling more insecure now due to the widespread violence among weaponised Lebanese communities where local clans frequently clash.

### **Access to information and digital technology**

The internet is the main source of information for girls and boys alike. Girls mainly use it for information on health, sexual and reproductive health, and childcare. Boys use it

to gain skills, access work opportunities, and access news and other information.

Married girls cannot own a phone as it is perceived as 'shameful' within their community. Despite their restricted access to a phone, it remains an important means of contact with their family, relatives and friends who live far away, or back in Syria. Married girls typically reported the phone and television (TV) as their main sources of entertainment, but frequent electricity cuts have limited their access, further adding to girls' isolation.

Syrian boys have much more access to a phone and much more freedom to use social media. While some girls are passive users of their husband's social media, boys often have an active online presence, though they too reported being affected by electricity cuts.

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

As already noted, Syrian communities are culturally conservative and structured around patriarchy and seniority, and girls' honour and chastity is thus central to the family's social standing. Parents typically decide their children's key life choices, including on education, work and marriage.

While boys have some say (agency) in those choices, the family controls every aspect of a girl's life. Syrian girls are raised to be submissive to their parents and any males in the family. Male control serves to preserve the girl's honour and reputation – and that of her family – within the community. It also prepares girls for married life, when being submissive to the husband is a cultural expectation.

Control of Syrian girls and their social isolation intensifies after marriage. The husband typically has complete authority over his wife, reflecting cultural norms that perceive husbands to own their wife, and thus control her choices and her movements. In-laws also have substantial authority over married girls. For married girls, lack of control over their own life leads to lack of self-efficacy, which has major consequences for their psychosocial well-being.

### **Civic engagement**

Syrian adolescents have no civic rights in Lebanon, so it is almost impossible for them to engage in civic life. This is reinforced by feelings of rejection by Lebanese society and negative experiences when Syrian adolescents and young people come into contact with Lebanese authorities, which can lead to arrests and forced deportation. While participation in programming provides some Syrian adolescents with an opportunity to engage in activities with their Lebanese peers, they lack participation in programmes that could aid their civic engagement in the wider society.

# Implications for policy and programming

Our findings underscore the enormous challenges facing Syrian adolescents and young people in Lebanon. To strengthen their emotional resilience and access to psychosocial support, and increase their opportunities for voice and agency, the follow policy and programming measures should be considered:

- **Expand aid provision and strengthen economic empowerment efforts.** UNHCR and other United Nations (UN) agencies must increase provision of aid to reach all Syrian refugee households in Lebanon. Amounts of social assistance should be increased to keep pace with hyperinflation.
- **Provide employment opportunities to adolescents and young people from refugee and host communities.** The Lebanese government, with support from the international community, should implement corrective policies to tackle the economic crisis, and implement development policies that create opportunities for decent work. Policies must aim to decrease tensions between host and refugee communities rooted in competition over jobs and scarce resources.
- **Strengthen psychosocial support services that target adolescents and young people.** Programming should target married girls in particular, as they are extremely isolated and vulnerable. The Lebanese government must work towards providing an affordable national psychosocial support system with tailored services for the most vulnerable groups, including refugees.
- **Expand programming and services that promote and encourage adolescents' active participation.** Local and international organisations must build avenues of communication with and promote active participation of refugee adolescents (especially adolescent girls) to reduce their isolation.
- **Invest in targeted social cohesion programmes.** Social cohesion is often mainstreamed in programming that includes participants from both Lebanese host and refugee communities. However, adolescent refugees'

lived experiences reveal that there is little social cohesion in practice, which leads to persistent feelings of discrimination and alienation. Lebanon's complex political history and ongoing economic and socio-political crisis renders the refugee situation unlikely to be resolved by state-led intervention. Responsibility thus falls to UN agencies, NGOs and donors to implement programming that considers the wider context as well as the specific needs and capacities of each refugee community.

- **Support Syrian adolescents and young people to acquire legal documentation.** UNHCR, along with the international community, must pressure the Lebanese government to eliminate the barriers that prevent Syrian refugees acquiring legal residency and, ultimately, legal status in Lebanon. UNHCR and the international community should help refugees acquire necessary documentation (including covering the costs of renewing papers).
- **Increase efforts to combat child marriage.** As part of longer-term efforts to tackle child marriage, the international community and local civic actors must advocate for the Lebanese government to increase the legal age of marriage to at least 18 and unify this across all religious courts.
- **Invest urgently in efforts to prevent violence and ensure sufficient redress.** Adolescents reported that lack of safety and security was a key driver of increased psychosocial distress. The Lebanese government must introduce policies to address the increasing insecurity, including dealing with the very real threat posed by armed groups in Baalbek city (political factions, and drugs and arms traffickers). With the reported increase in domestic violence following the pandemic and the economic crisis, law enforcement should be strengthened, including safe reporting, to protect girls from all types of gender-based violence.

## For our publications and to get in touch

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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