



A 16-year-old Jordanian girl, posing for a photo at school © Marcel Saleh/GAGE 2023



Education in Jordan: Post-Covid opportunities and challenges for young people

Authors: Elizabeth Presler-Marshall, Erin Oakley, Nicola Jones, Sara Luckenbill, Sarah Alheiwidi, Sarah Baird, Wafa Amaireh, Qasem Ashareef, Taghreed Alabbadi and Faisal Alshammari

Introduction

In its Education Strategic Plan (2018–2022), the Government of Jordan lays out its strategy to capitalise on its youth bulge by scaling up – and improving the quality of – the educational services provided to citizens and non-citizens alike (Ministry of Education, 2018). However, much of that strategy was derailed by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to school closures that were among the longest in the world (Ministry of Education and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2023). Building on baseline research (Jones et al., 2019) this policy brief draws on mixed-methods data collected by the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal research programme and summarises midline findings regarding young people’s education and learning in Jordan (Presler-Marshall et al., 2023). It touches briefly on our methods and then presents our headline findings before concluding with implications for policy and programming.

Methods

Midline research was conducted in 2022 and 2023. Surveys were undertaken with nearly 3,000 young people living in five governorates of Jordan. The quantitative sample included 2,145 Syrians, 457 Jordanians and 272 Palestinians from Jerash refugee camp. Young people were divided into two age cohorts, 1,646 adolescents who were an average of 15 years old at midline and 1,277 young adults who were an average of 20 years old at midline. The qualitative sample included 296 people—188 adolescents and young adults, as well as dozens of their caregivers and key informants. GAGE’s sample was drawn to be inclusive of the most disadvantaged young people living in Jordan and as such incorporates those who are already married, have a disability, or are from the Turkmen and Bani Murra ethnic communities.

Headline findings

Educational aspirations

Young people living in Jordan – adolescents and young adults alike – have high aspirations for education, which they see as necessary for future economic success. At midline, 89% would like to attend secondary school and 74% would like to attend university. There are significant nationality and gender differences in educational aspirations. Jordanians' aspirations are higher than those of Syrians and Palestinians (e.g. 82% versus 73% and 71% for university). Qualitative evidence suggests this is because refugee households are less able to bear the real and opportunity costs of education, especially at the secondary and post-secondary levels, and given truncated labour market opportunities.

Girls and young women have higher aspirations for university than boys and young men (77% versus 71%). Qualitative evidence suggests that this is largely due to gender norms. Males, especially those from refugee communities, are often required to contribute to breadwinning at an early age and are aware that unemployment rates are highest among the most educated. Females, on the other hand, are aware that nearly all 'socially acceptable' occupations require secondary and even post-secondary education.

Access to education

Highlighting that aspirations for education are often unrealistic, at midline only three-quarters of adolescents and one-fifth of young adults were enrolled in formal education.

Look around, there are those who have finished university education and college, yet all of them are unemployed.

(Palestinian father)

Of adolescents, 77% were enrolled, with Jordanians (96%) advantaged over Palestinians (86%) and Syrians (71%) and girls (81%) advantaged over boys (72%). For the younger cohort, enrolment fell 17 percentage points in the four years between baseline and midline, with declines disproportionately experienced by refugees, especially boys. Qualitative research underscored the importance of poverty and gender norms to adolescents' school leaving. Girls' access to education was limited by parents' concerns about girls' honour, given the threat of sexual harassment en route to school and the unaffordability of school transport. Boys lost access due to demands on their time for child labour.

Enrolment among young adults was far rarer; only 20% were enrolled at midline, with nationality and gender patterning mirroring that of adolescents (e.g. favouring

'I am a young man... I want to complete my studies, but there is a problem, which means that I have to attend one or two days a week... I want to help my family, there is no one to work for them.'

(16-year-old Syrian boy)

Jordanians and young women). Young women who were married as children were least likely to be enrolled—only 1%. Declines since baseline were 33 percentage points on average, and were steepest for Palestinians (47 percentage points), who noted in interviews that they saw little point to secondary and post-secondary education given that without citizenship they are forbidden from pursuing many professional fields of work. Midline research captured the relationship between young people's age and their access to education. Of young adults, only 67% attended 8th grade, only 55% attended 10th grade (the last year of basic education), only 47% attended 11th grade (the first year of Jordanian secondary school) and only 40% attended 12th grade. In interviews, young people and their caregivers noted that access to—and success in—secondary education depends on costly private tutorial support, to compensate for poor quality education, and entails exam fees that many households cannot afford. They added that access to post-secondary education, especially for refugees, who must pay higher tuition fees, depends not only on excellence at the secondary level but also on contacts or luck, as there are very few scholarships available.

Learning outcomes and educational quality

Midline research found that despite progress since baseline, young people's learning outcomes are dire. Of adolescents, only 60% are literate at the second-grade level and only 50% can do subtraction with borrowing. Of young adults, analogous figures are 69% and 49% respectively. Jordanians and Syrians living in host communities are significantly more likely to be literate and numerate than Palestinians and Syrians living in UNHCR-run camps. Across nationalities, girls and young women score better than boys and young men; the gender gap is the largest among Palestinians. Pass rates on the *Tawjihi*, the Jordanian school leaving exam, also speak to learning deficits. Despite the fact that only the most dedicated and brightest students complete 12th grade and sit the exam, only 70% passed— with Jordanians (81%) and

In this retarded society, once a girl turns 15, it's shameful for her to study.

(15-year-old Syrian girl)

young women (77%) advantaged over Palestinians (69%) and Syrians (67%) and young men (61%).

In interviews, respondents spoke at length about absent and un-engaged teachers, particularly in boys' schools and in Syrians' afternoon shifts; about limited instructional time (only three hours per day for Syrians in double-shift schools); about the staffing issues that plague schools inside UNHCR-run camps; and about learning losses due to school closures during the pandemic. Students with disabilities added that they are often ignored in the classroom and that teaching methods are rarely disability responsive. Impacts are visible in lower literacy and numeracy rates among the young people with disabilities in our sample.

Violence at school

Despite laws and policies that prohibit violence in school, and despite reductions since baseline, violence remains common in Jordanian boys' schools. Of enrolled adolescents, the midline survey found that while only 2% of girls had been physically abused by a teacher in the past year, 21% of boys had faced corporal punishment. Rates were highest for Palestinian boys attending schools run by UNRWA (29%). With the caveat that many girls do not frame social exclusion

▶ The situation in education is bad... There is frequent absence of public schools' teachers.

(Jordanian father)

as violence, violence from peers also disproportionately impacts boys (29% versus 22% of girls). Due to the stigma that surrounds disability, adolescents with disabilities were more likely than their peers without disabilities to experience both violence from a teacher (17% versus 9%) and violence from a peer (29% versus 22%). In interviews, respondents reported that complaining about school violence rarely results in improvement, because school administrators, especially at boys' schools, are more likely to support teachers than students and their families—especially when students are Syrian.

▶ Ever since I started going to school here, I stopped caring about my studies... I stopped attending that much... If the other girls [non-Syrian] have a secret, they don't talk about it in front of me, they talk about it by themselves.

(15-year-old Syrian girl)

Parental support for education

With the caveat that parents are usually behind adolescents' school-leaving – due to pressures on boys to contribute to household income and demands on girls to isolate at home prior to marriage – parental support for children's education is generally high. This is particularly true for Syrian parents, who see education as critical to their children's longer-term success, and regularly reported interfacing with teachers and principals to address poor learning outcomes and violent discipline. Although girls and young women are more likely to be enrolled in school than their male peers, several reported that parents are more likely to support boys' education than girls', because aspirations for daughters centre around marriage and motherhood, rather than employment.

Implications for policy and programming

If Jordan is to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals and achieve the policy objectives laid out in its Education Strategic Plan, our research suggests the following priorities for policy and programming.

Invest in efforts to improve teacher–pupil ratios, teacher contact hours and teacher quality in both governmental and UNRWA schools:

- Build more schools and hire more teachers, so that classroom headcounts drop and students can have full-day instruction.
- Invest in teacher training, especially for men, including on child-friendly pedagogies that make learning fun, as well as effective approaches to classroom control, and non-violent discipline strategies. Especially in formal camps, ensure that teachers are adequately equipped with content knowledge.
- Develop and monitor accountability systems that let students and parents (anonymously) report teachers who are violent or failing to teach, and principals who fail to act on such reports.
- Pair stringent enforcement of policies on teacher absenteeism, violent discipline and bullying with incentives for teachers and schools that are identified by students and parents as using best practices.

Pay attention to gender gaps and invest in gender-responsive measures:

- Scale up policing around girls' schools to reduce sexual harassment, which heightens the risk of school dropout for girls.
- Work with NGOs, including UNICEF-funded Makani multi-service centres, to scale up adolescent empowerment programming that teaches boys about alternative masculinities, directly addresses restrictive gender norms, and supports young people's aspirations, self-confidence and voice.
- Work with NGOs, including UNICEF-funded Makani centres, to scale up parenting education courses that raise awareness about the importance of education and directly tackle gender norms. Such efforts should include intentional outreach to fathers as well as mothers.
- Especially at the secondary level, provide girls with vouchers for school transport and invest in cash transfers for education.

Prioritise measures to address the educational disadvantages of the most marginalised young people:

- Invest in media campaigns for parents and adolescents, especially boys and including in the Turkmen language, to raise awareness about the importance of education to young people's futures. These should include directly addressing the gender norms that contribute to school-leaving.
- Scale up efforts to enrol married girls, working to attract girls – with homeschooling programmes or free childcare

– and also to address the concerns of their marital families.

- Invest in measures to improve learning outcomes for adolescents with disabilities.
- Work with donors to lower the costs of public universities for non-citizens and to expand the availability of scholarships and educational loans.
- Remove the barriers that limit Syrians' and Palestinians' access to the labour market, including by hiring a large cadre of Syrian and Palestinian teachers who could serve as role models for young people.

Prioritise targeted support to adolescents to facilitate education transitions:

- Provide adolescents, starting in early adolescence, with educational and career counselling services that help them optimise their educational trajectories for the resources and opportunities available to them, including opportunities related to technical and vocational training.
- Work with NGOs, including UNICEF-funded Makani centres, to scale up free tutorial support through the end of secondary education, at least until schools can provide full-day instruction.
- Invest in curating free tutorial online support sites so that they are easy for students to find and are vetted as being aligned with the curriculum and exams.
- Eliminate exam fees or provide vouchers for students from low-income households.

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