



Age- and gender-based violence against young people in Jordan: evidence from GAGE longitudinal research

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Introduction

Young people's right to bodily integrity and freedom from violence is core to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It features in two of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – SDG 16, Peace and Justice, which calls for an end to all forms of abuse and violence against children, and SDG 5, Gender Equality, which calls for the elimination of child marriage and all forms of violence against girls and women. Although Jordan is signatory to the SDGs, it is currently not on track to deliver on either goal (Sachs et al., 2023). Indeed, evidence suggests that young people in Jordan remain at substantial risk of multiple forms of violence at the hands of caregivers, teachers, peers and – for girls and young women – husbands.

This policy brief summarises the findings of mixed-methods research conducted in 2022 and 2023 by the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) study (Presler-Marshall et al., 2024). It aims to contribute to national and international efforts to support young people in Jordan to live free from violence in their families, schools and communities.

Methods

The GAGE longitudinal study follows the lives of 20,000 young people (aged 10–19) between 2016 and 2026. In Jordan, baseline research was conducted in 2018 (see Jones et al., 2019). This brief draws on midline research (conducted in 2022 and 2023), including surveys with nearly 3,000 participants in five governorates (Amman, Irbid, Jerash, Mafraq and Zarqa). The quantitative sample included 2,145 Syrians living in camps, host communities and informal tented settlements, 457 Jordanians, and 272 Palestinians from Jerash refugee camp. Young people were split 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. The sample was drawn to include some of the most disadvantaged young people in Jordan, namely young people who are married, have a disability, or are from the Turkmen or Bani Murra ethnic communities.

Headline findings

Our findings underscore that young people in Jordan have highly uneven access to bodily integrity and freedom from age- and gender-based violence. There are also often large disparities between adolescents and young adults, between females and males, across nationalities, between Syrians living in different locations, and by disability status.

Violence at home

Adolescents – particularly those with disabilities – remain at substantial risk of violence in the home, due to caregivers’ stress levels, beliefs that corporal punishment is necessary for proper childrearing, and gender norms. With the caveat that Syrians tend to under-report (to protect their communities from scrutiny), 20% of adolescents, and 28% of those with disabilities, reported violence at the hands of a caregiver in the past year. Girls and young women also reported regular violence at the hands of their older brothers. Of the young people who reported experiencing violence, only 16% reported having ever told anyone about it. *‘Girls are not able to complain about the father according to societal custom.’* (Makani facilitator)

Violence from educators

Boys are 10 times more likely than girls to have experienced physical violence at the hands of a teacher in the past year (2022) (21% versus 2%); boys with disabilities (36%) are at greatest risk (see figure 1) . This violence is one factor driving boys (especially Palestinians and Syrians) to drop out of school. Sources of support and redress are rare; school principals were reported to have assaulted boys who deigned to report teacher violence. *‘The teachers hit the students without care. Also, the school principal hits me.’* (14-year-old Syrian boy)

Peer violence

The midline survey found that a large minority (22%) of young people had experienced peer violence in the past year, adolescents (25%) more so than young adults (18%). Violence was more common in host communities – among both Jordanians (32%) and Syrians (29%) – than in formal refugee camps (20%) and informal settlements (17%). Respondents reported that the nature of peer violence has changed in recent years, and now commonly involves weapons, which can result in severe injuries. Bani Murra, Syrian and Turkmen young people, and those with disabilities – also reported high levels of violence from peers. *‘Violence has increased now ... and the nature of violence is getting more aggressive.’* (Community key informant)

Verbal and online sexual harassment

Most girls and young women reported having experienced verbal harassment. The risk is highest around girls’ schools. Respondents noted that they tend to endure harassment rather than disclose it (even to their parents) because they fear that if they speak up, they will be made to leave school. As a Jordanian father explained: *‘I see many guys gathering in front of school, this is a horrible phenomenon.’*

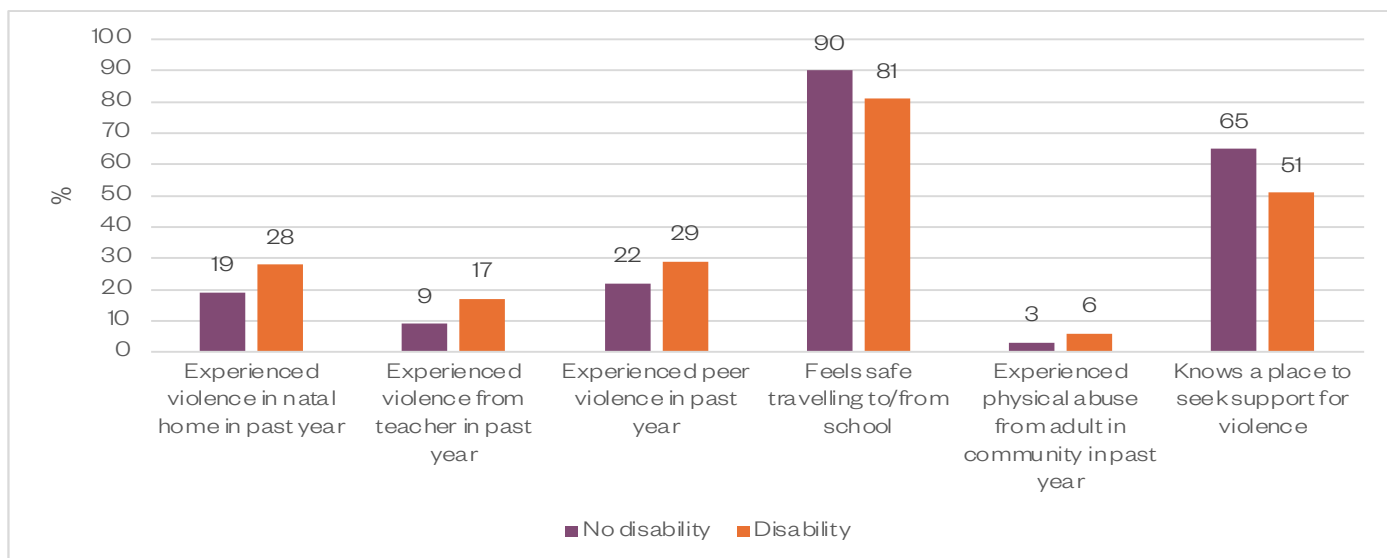
Sexual harassment online has emerged as a growing threat to girls and young women, largely because the pandemic increased young people’s access to mobile phones.

‘People hack into accounts via the internet, and they take private photos and publish them ... There are some girls who were beaten by their parents because their private photos were published.’ (16-year-old Syrian refugee girl)

Child marriage

Child marriage is common in Jordan, especially among Syrian girls. Nearly half (46%) of young women in the older

Figure 1: Experience of different forms of violence and related risks by disability status



cohort had been married by midline, with 30% married prior to age 18. Child and early marriage is driven by a complex web of social and economic drivers that have been amplified by conflict and displacement. Many parents prefer to see their daughters 'safely' married to protect girls' (and the family's) honour and to improve girls' (and family's) living standards. Although a minority of girls (usually married to their cousins) are forced into marriage, parents usually convince girls that early marriage is in their best interest. Many young wives noted that they had agreed to child marriage because while they knew about romance (often from television), they had no idea what marriage entailed.

'My daughter is asking me to get her married! ... If the girl's father stops her from studying and she stays at home, that's it, the door for marriage has opened for her.'
(Palestinian mother)

Violence from husbands

Most young people surveyed (75%) agreed that wives owe their husband total obedience; nearly half (43%) agreed that spousal violence is private and should never be discussed outside the home; and a sizeable minority (14%) agreed that violence is an acceptable way for a man to mould his wife's behaviour. Across indicators, males held significantly more patriarchal views than females. During interviews, young wives – and their husband and parents – reported that violence from husbands is common, can be severe, and is almost always kept private due to the stigma of divorce and lack of other options.

I was living like an animal ... He would leave me and the children alone and I was forced to put up with ... lack of money, insults, beatings ... No one knew about it, and if I told anyone about our problems, he would refuse anyone's interference. (21-year-old Syrian mother married as a child)

Implications for policy and programming

These findings suggest that the following actions would accelerate progress in protecting the rights of all young people in Jordan to live free from violence:

To address violence in the home:

- Continue and scale up parenting education courses (including at Makani integrated service centres) that teach alternative discipline strategies and address gender norms and how these impact expectations and violence over the life course. Courses should also address sibling violence. Makani and other stakeholders might consider partnering with religious institutions and holding father-only classes at faith-based institutions.

- Provide parents with stress-reduction programming that includes attention to gender norms and how these impact parents' stress levels. Proactively target parents of young people with disabilities.
- Continue and scale up efforts to raise young people's awareness of their rights and how to report various forms of violence.
- Train teachers, school counsellors, and health care providers in how to recognise the signs of child abuse, and how to involve protection services (bearing in mind requirement to report suspected cases, in line with national law).
- Improve access to social protection to reduce household stress levels, proactively targeting young people with disabilities and setting benefit levels to reflect their higher living costs.
- Campaign (using mass and social media) to encourage adolescents and young people experiencing violence at home to seek help.
- Establish helplines that can be anonymously accessed via the phone and internet, so that individuals can access support and information whenever and wherever they can. Responders should be trained to recognise disability-specific risks to bodily integrity.

To address teacher violence:

- Train teachers regularly in non-violent discipline strategies. Include a component on inclusion, integration and non-discrimination toward people with disabilities.
- Develop and monitor accountability systems that let students and parents (anonymously) report violent teachers, and principals who fail to act on such reports.
- Raise awareness about and enforce sanctions against teachers who are repeat offenders.

To address peer violence:

- Continue and scale up programming for young people – at Makani centres and other community venues – to foster social cohesion and reduce disability-related stigma. Programming should address all forms of violence and make sure young people know how to avoid, reduce and report violence.
- Develop and scale programming for boys and young men (possibly using near-peer mentors) to support the adoption and spread of non-violent masculinities. Pair this with increased access to recreational spaces and opportunities (including evening use, such as floodlit football fields).
- Provide parenting education courses that address gender norms, and how these impact children's risk of either perpetrating or experiencing violence.
- Train teachers in how to prevent and address bullying.
- Improve policing in the most at-risk areas (and during the most at-risk hours). Pair this with efforts to develop trust between communities and the police.

- Campaign (using mass and social media) to encourage individuals (especially those from marginalised communities) to report violence.

To address verbal and online sexual harassment:

- Continue and step up policing around girls' schools (at the start and end of the day).
- Campaign (using in-person sessions, and mass and social media) to raise everyone's awareness that sexual harassment is not the fault of the girl being harassed, and to support reporting, shame perpetrators, and encourage bystanders to intervene.
- Develop and scale programming for boys and young men to foster alternative masculinities and encouraging males to become protectors, not harassers.
- Enforce the law, fining perpetrators of sexual harassment at first instance, then imprisoning repeat offenders.

To address child marriage:

- Use all measures to keep girls in school as long as possible. Raise awareness among girls and parents about the importance of education, increase the number of years of compulsory education (and enforce the law), and offer tutorial support, transport allowances, and cash -for education.
- Provide gender-focused empowerment programming that teaches girls their rights, raises their aspirations, strengthens their voice, and encourages reporting and help-seeking.
- Continue raising awareness among girls, their parents, and the parents of young men (at Makani centres and schools, and through NGOs and religious institutions) about the risks of child marriage and the advantages of adult marriage. Girls should be given information about what marriage actually entails.
- Eliminate the legal loophole that allows girls to marry at 16 with the permission of the religious court, moving the minimum age for marriage first to 17, and then 18.

Pair this with stepped-up enforcement (using existing mechanisms), prosecuting parents and husbands where needed.

To address violence by husbands:

- Provide programming for engaged and newly married couples (including through religious institutions) to teach communication skills, raise awareness about gender norms and how these impact relationships, and make sure that young couples know their rights and responsibilities, including how (and where) to seek help should they need it.
- Develop and scale programming for young wives, to provide them with access to caring mentors and peers, and a venue for reporting violence should they need to. To make such programming palatable to gate-keepers (e.g. husbands and in-laws), courses could provide practical instruction on housekeeping, cooking and childcare.
- Develop and scale programming for young husbands to foster alternative masculinities; this might be made more palatable by linking it to fatherhood courses.
- Make parents aware (through parenting education courses and mass and social media campaigns) that their obligations to their daughter do not end when she marries.
- Establish phone/internet helplines (that can be accessed anonymously) so that individuals can access support and information whenever and wherever suits them. Raise awareness about these services at health clinics, religious education centres, markets, and other localities that women frequently visit.
- Scale up medical, legal and psychosocial survivor services, and address the stigma and shame around divorce.
- Campaign (using mass and social media) to encourage non-violent masculinities.
- Lower the legal burden of proof required by survivors.

References

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