

Adolescents in Jordan: economic empowerment and social protection

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Adolescents need tailored support to develop the aspirations and skills they need to become the *'generation capable of creativity and innovation with high productivity'* envisioned by Jordan's new National Youth Strategy. GAGE research findings suggest that adolescents in Jordan, especially Syrian refugees, remain vulnerable to exploitative child labour and rarely benefit from programming for economic empowerment.



Aspirations and skills

Refugee adolescents in Jordan have limited occupational aspirations largely due to restrictive work permit regulations, and in the case of girls restrictive gender norms and limited opportunities mean Jordan has one of the lowest rates of female labour force participation globally (14% in 2018)¹. While Syrian boys sometimes report having aspirations for professional careers, Palestinian boys primarily aspire to skilled trades (mechanics, electricians or barbers) because most know that whatever their level of education, their occupational options are restricted. Girls' options are even more limited. Although many younger girls (10–12 years)—and a few older ones (15–17 years)—are aiming high, most admit that they are afraid to even hope to find a job. An out-of-school Palestinian girl, aged 17, from Gaza camp noted:

'I would like to become a chef ... If I told anyone at home about my dream, they would laugh at me and think I'm not serious.'

Few adolescents have access to the skills and training that would enable them to realise their aspirations. A Makani adolescent programme implementer in a host community noted, *'A lot of our children are smart and educated, but they're too shy to speak even in front of their friends, so we must work more on their presentation skills so they express themselves and develop their self-confidence'*. This is especially true for girls, who also have few opportunities to learn to manage money. Our survey found that girls were 17% less likely than boys to have had control over how to spend cash in the past year. The recent introduction of financial literacy classes in schools appears timely based on our research—only 5% of adolescents reported having any savings. Boys interested in the skilled trades noted that training programmes for males are extremely limited, while girls reported that their access is limited by their parents, most of whom prioritise marriage over careers.

Child Labour

Driven by high poverty rates, child labour is common in Jordan – especially for boys and for Syrian refugees. Among older adolescents, 64% of boys but only 11% of girls had worked for pay in the past year. Among older boys, Syrians were more likely to work than their Jordanian and Palestinian peers (67% versus 53% for both Jordanians and Syrians). Boys' labour is intermittent and poorly paid. In the week before completing the survey, for example, Syrian boys reported working 22 hours for a mean wage of 1.7 JOD/hour (USD 2.4). Syrian girls living in informal tented settlements were overwhelmingly more likely to be employed than girls in other contexts (46% versus less than 10%) – partly because they can provide agricultural labour alongside their parents, which deflects safety concerns, and partly because households are poorer.

¹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS>

Social protection

Social protection programming, including cash transfers, can be an important mechanism to support adolescent economic empowerment. However, programme design in Jordan has focused predominantly on household subsistence needs, rarely addressing adolescents' specific age- and gender-related needs. UNICEF's labelled education cash transfer, Hajati, is an exception but our qualitative research suggests that existing social protection programmes for refugees, including Hajati, are increasingly jeopardised due to budget cuts driven by decreased funding for the Syrian crisis and priority shifts. As one Syrian refugee father of adolescent boys in a host community in Irbid emphasised:

'In the winter, UNICEF gave the boys 20 dinar in the school ... We took 60 dinar for the sons. Then, they stopped giving us in April. They sent a message that there was a shortage in aid ... Now there is nothing.'

Makani programme effects

Although our research suggests that UNICEF Jordan's integrated Makani programme could be strengthened by offering the vocational skills that adolescents want to learn—and need to learn to become economically independent—it found that the programme is already having positive impacts on adolescents' economic empowerment. Adolescents who attend Makani (especially those in Social Innovation Labs) learn problem-solving skills, develop self-confidence, and practise speaking up for themselves. In addition, compared to non-participants, older boys have worked 23% fewer hours over the last week, older girls are 41% more likely to have money they control, and younger girls are 143% more likely to have savings. We also found evidence of synergies between Makani and UNICEF's cash transfer. Older boys who participate and receive cash have worked fewer hours in the last week than those who only participate or only receive cash (17.7 hours versus 22.3 versus 26).

Programme recommendations

Include working adolescents in Makani and other extra-curricular programming—through expanded opening hours and outreach—to build skills and provide opportunities to socialise with peers.



Incorporate financial literacy in Makani life-skills courses for adolescents who miss out on the new school-based financial literacy curriculum.



Expand Social Innovation Labs and volunteering opportunities—in terms of areas served and enrolment capacity—to reach more adolescents to develop teambuilding and other soft skills.

Use Makani centers to link older adolescents with vocational training courses to help them find routes out of exploitative labour and to support them to become creative, productive workers able to contribute to strengthening the Jordanian economy.

