



GENDER &
ADOLESCENCE:
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Adolescents in crisis: unheard voices

Episode 4: 'I can't sleep at night': adolescent
refugees and their mental health

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

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'I can't sleep at night': adolescent refugees and their mental health

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SPEAKERS

Rami:¹ 21-year-old Syrian Adolescent living in Lebanon

Assem Chreif: The Lebanese Organisation of Studies and Training (LOST)

Kareem:² Syrian Adolescent living in Lebanon

Marcel Saleh: GAGE Participatory Research Facilitator (Lebanon)

Martha Dixon: Journalist

Kiya Gezahegne: GAGE Ethiopia Qualitative Researcher (Ethiopia)

00:03

'The world's fastest growing humanitarian crisis as 1000s of Rohingya refugees...'

00:07

'It's estimated that 10,000 Palestinians have had to leave their homes to flee the Israeli...'

00:12

'for almost as far as the eye could see left and right a tide of humanity...'

Martha Dixon: Journalist 00:19

Welcome to episode four of the GAGE podcast series – adolescents in crisis: unheard voices. I'm your host, journalist Martha Dixon. In this landmark series, we ask how can we help create a better future for the millions of young people who are caught up in the increasing tide of global displacement? This episode is all about adolescent refugees and their mental health. We speak to those living in refugee camps and unfamiliar host communities to find out what it's really like for them.

1 Pseudonym used to protect the identity of interviewees.

2 Pseudonym used to protect the identity of interviewees.

Kareem: Syrian Adolescent living in Lebanon 00:55

I feel that I'm not productive. I can't express my skills, my dreams, and I don't have expectation and life. I can't sleep in the night because of this problem.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 01:11

We look at what works and what doesn't work to support adolescents facing impossible situations.

Kiya Gezahegne: GAGE (Ethiopia) 01:18

They seem to have lost hope. That's commonly shared among the people who have been displaced from their places of origin.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 01:29

We hear from GAGE's researchers on the ground who are speaking in depth to adolescents who've had to leave everything they know behind because of conflict, persecution, or climate crisis.

Marcel Saleh: GAGE (Lebanon) 01:40

They are always anxious. They are always paranoid. They don't feel safe.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 01:49

And from external stakeholders who are using the evidence from GAGE to reframe policy and programming that supports adolescents in these difficult situations.

Assem Chreif: The Lebanese Organisation of Studies and Training (LOST) 02:00

Most of the times the national bodies talk on behalf of these children. And you need these children to identify the real needs.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 02:14

We're in Baalbek in Lebanon, near the border with Syria and GAGE researchers are speaking with Kareem, an 18-year-old Syrian refugee who can't sleep because of what he's going through. He is working in construction doing hard labour on sewerage and heating system projects.

Kareem: Syrian adolescent living in Lebanon

02:40

The main reason that I made my family to leave Syria and come to Lebanon is that the world there had no differentiation between civilians and militants. Everybody was able to be killed and there was no security to stay in Zabadani. I've been working since I was 16 years old. Since that time, I didn't feel that I'm living my age. Now as an 18-year-old, I feel that I have to go to university complete my education have a better life. However, I'm I have a very bad situation. I go to work for 8, 9, 10 hours per day.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 03:35

Kareem started to go to school in Lebanon but dropped out because his family needed him to earn a wage for them to survive. The whole situation has closed his world down and his mental health is suffering.

Kareem: Syrian adolescent living in Lebanon 03:51

I feel that I don't have a future in Lebanon. I wish that I was still in Syria because in Syria at least I will continue my education and I will have more opportunities. I feel that I'm not productive. I am not. I can't express my skills, my dreams, I don't have expectation and life. I can't sleep in the night because of this problem. Concerning my life in Syria. It was very nice, very good because we had a very big house. We were living also next to our relatives. We had a strong social life and social connections. Here in Lebanon, I'm not living and I'm not living a stable life. I miss a stable life and that's my situation.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 05:02

Not only is Kareem facing hard working hours at such a young age, he also doesn't feel welcome in Lebanon.

Kareem: Syrian adolescent living in Lebanon 05:12

The main problem here in Lebanon as a refugee is discrimination. People always tell us why did you come to Lebanon, go back to your country. Everyday I do the same work but there is no prospects to improve my life. Now I feel in Lebanon that I have like this gap, I don't have anything to do.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 05:49

Kareem's story about how his mental health is affected is an important part of GAGE research. The psychosocial aspect of being a refugee is key to understanding how to turn problems around for these young people. It's one of the capabilities studied during in depth qualitative research. GAGE or Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence is a consulting project led by the Overseas Development Institute, funded by the UK Foreign Office, it gathers vital

information about young refugees lives, crucially over a long-term period of nine years.

Marcel Saleh: GAGE (Lebanon) 06:33

Well, I think counselling, yes, is one of the most important things that they should receive.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 06:40

Marcel Saleh is a GAGE researcher in Lebanon, he's been speaking to hundreds of adolescents following their life path over nine years, and their emotional reaction to problems.

Marcel Saleh: GAGE (Lebanon) 06:53

And they think what they saw in Syria was very devastating. In some cases, I had kids who were surrounded in their own village in their own houses for long periods of time in Syria. They were without food, they had to eat stuff from the ground. They endured so much stuff and on their way here, they also endured so much stuff. On the road, they were shot at. They were smuggled into Lebanon. In a lot of cases, they were put in prison for long periods of time. They were also separated from their families, they had to go through hell to come here. And that alone affected them and their future lives and their social lives, and how they perceive reality, let's say.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 07:57

Impossible memories back at home and now impossible scenes in the place you ran to. The economic crisis in Lebanon has hit the country's nearly 7 million people hard. A recent UN report says poverty has drastically increased with 82% of people in Lebanon, now living without proper means. And there are marked divisions between the Sunni, Shia and Christian settlements in Lebanon. Add to that an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees. Marcel mainly talks to adolescents living in the Baalbek region of Lebanon near the Syrian border. He says it's a difficult and often dangerous place for the young refugees.

Marcel Saleh: GAGE (Lebanon) 08:42

Baalbek is a very, very hard place to live in. Like even to me as a Lebanese. When I saw what, what happens in Baalbek, I was totally surprised. I've been living in Lebanon for 27 years. And what I saw in Baalbek in the last two years was unbelievable, like I lived in South of Lebanon, which was a kind of fighting zone or a war zone, but what they endured in Baalbek in terms of violence. So Baalbek is controlled basically by different drug cartels based on drugs and weapons all around the world as well. So as a kid, a Syrian boy, adolescent refugee, who's come from Syria, and endured so much stuff, and you come to Lebanon and you want to start something new. The first thing that hits you is the drug cartel. It controls the city and you have no other

choices as well but to work or to talk or socialise with only drug cartels and what's around them and this culture of drugs around them.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 10:07

As part of his GAGE research, Marcel is now chatting to another Syrian refugee caught up in difficult times in Lebanon. Rami is 21. He also lives in Baalbek. He works as a painter and decorator and lives with 12 members of his family in a two-room apartment. Rami dropped out of school at 13 to be the main breadwinner for the family because his father had cancer.

Rami: 21-year-old Syrian adolescent living in Lebanon 10:44

It was very psychologically distressing to leave school and to start to work. Normal people have the chance to live their lives without having to do these hard jobs before they get to 18. We as Syrians have to do that sometimes as young as 10 years old. So it's really awful to do this. It's very hard to let go of your ambitions as a young kid, ambitions of getting educated, ambitions of becoming a cultured and educated person. We just have to let these ambitions go and work to provide for the family. All this pressure has forced us into illegal work.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 11:25

Rami says he ended up working in illegal hashish production, because there were few other options.

Rami: 21-year-old Syrian adolescent living in Lebanon 11:35

It's very complicated to be a refugee and Baalbek, there aren't many work opportunities, I don't have the proper papers. So that's made me work in illegal things. The main job I had was a hash grower, harvesting it and putting it in the sheds. I had to do it, otherwise my family would starve. I saw some people I knew go into this work. And they changed a lot. They even started using harder drugs.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 12:01

Rami says all of this has had a devastating impact on his psychological well-being.

Rami: 21-year-old Syrian adolescent living in Lebanon 12:13

My life is zero. I don't have any ambitions for the future. Life is just terrible. I find it difficult to sleep because of all this pressure. I can't think properly. I'm only thinking about how to pay the bills. Should I go back to Syria. But if I do, they'll put me in the army. But as well, I can't stay here. It's a very emotionally unstable situation.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 12:38

Rami says having some sort of counselling would really help. But there's nothing.

Rami: 21-year-old Syrian adolescent living in Lebanon 12:49

I don't have anyone to talk to, I'd really love having someone to talk to, maybe some kind of association that gives these services. But right now, I don't have anyone.

Marcel Saleh: GAGE (Lebanon) 13:06

In the group that I have the emotion their emotional state is down. They they are always anxious. They are always paranoid. They don't feel safe as in living in a place that should.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 13:27

Marcel says the situation is so desperate in Lebanon, that many of the boys he knows have left and walked to Europe to claim asylum.

Marcel Saleh: GAGE (Lebanon) 13:37

But they told me that they had taken the decision to leave Lebanon, for example, which is a very scary and big decision to take because they're literally going back to Syria. So that's one very big decision that they take. And they just decide sometimes to walk to Europe. They tell me we're walking to Europe. So it's one of the very hardest decisions that they ever make. But when you see that they take it with such ease. You think about the situation in Lebanon you think about that staying here is probably harder for them.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 14:25

Marcel says for those who choose to leave their stories are heartbreaking.

Marcel Saleh: GAGE (Lebanon) 14:30

When I see some of the kids who went outside of Lebanon, and now like going to school, which was his always dream, and now they're going to school and they and they send me pictures playing football, for example. And living in a flat that's clean and tidy with a family that loves them that makes me feel so good. They send me pictures of books, for example, or they send me a picture of them sitting in a park, where no one is telling them like get out of here because they're living freely, they're living easily. Maybe it's the, maybe I don't know like in Europe, maybe it's hard, as much as it is here to find work to find whatever but at some point I feel that they're emotionally stable or comfortable there. They seem comfortable and they're doing what they wanted to do, which is learn. Now they're learning another language which is good.

Assem Chreif: The Lebanese Organisation of Studies and Training (LOST) 15:36

For the Syrian, they are always labelled by the Lebanese as a burden or a threat.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 15:44

Assem Chreif runs the Lebanese Organisation for Studies and Training or LOST. It's all about empowering young people to create a more developed and equal society in Lebanon. He says the Lebanese are also facing impossible times and improving their lives is key to improving the situation for Syrians.

Assem Chreif: The Lebanese Organisation of Studies and Training (LOST) 16:07

Martha when I talk about adolescents, I don't discriminate between Syrian and Lebanese because they are facing the same situation. Trauma is there on behalf of both we cannot work on trauma healing on part of the Syrians and leave the Lebanese behind because simply the Lebanese have been passing through a series of traumas since 1975. I mean, the civil war in Lebanon since 1993, really invasion over Lebanon 1996. 2006, the Israeli war over Lebanon. 2005 the assassination of ex-Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, the polarization, then you have political parties intersectorian wars, but we haven't reconciled these wars yet. Yeah, trauma healing is good, if associated with equipping these youth with the means and tools to provide for themselves and their family.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 17:22

Assem says he sees jobs and empowerment as a way out of the psychological crisis adolescents face, he says GAGE research has helped his NGO find the right way forward.

Assem Chreif: The Lebanese Organisation of Studies and Training (LOST) 17:35

In GAGE, you are peeling the onion, you are going from the attitude from the opposition to the, to the interest to the real needs, which I am voicing now. It's not a matter of belonging. Because if you are a poor person, in poverty doesn't discriminate between Shia and Sunni, between Syrian and Lebanese, you are poor you are poor. You need to work on alleviating poverty, how to do it by giving these people the means and tools of providing for themselves and their families. And not to make them more dependent by, by providing them with food kits. Like because I understand the framework of GAGE, I have been using it elsewhere, in order to identify what I am pronouncing now. It's partly attributed to GAGE that we need to work on an integrated approach. You can work more on the livelihood of Syrians. However, on increasing the livelihood however, the Lebanese law is

hindering this. Lebanese Government hasn't ratified the Convention over refugees 1951. So we don't know whether the Syrians now are refugees or not or displaced or they have another label. One, two, they're not allowed to work in the Lebanese government. They are only allowed to work in the fields of agriculture, construction and menial work.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 19:20

Assem says hearing from the young people themselves is key to finding solutions. He believes they have strong agency and know what they need to improve mental health and stop situations spiralling out of control that could end in illegal activities or extremism.

Assem Chreif: The Lebanese Organisation of Studies and Training (LOST) 19:40

It's very important to understand or voice the concerns of young people, be it Lebanese or Syrian, to see how to respond to the real needs because most of the times international bodies talk on behalf of these children. And you need these children to identify them. Real needs they are not intently going into extremism, there are drivers. And you need to stop these drivers. Stopping them is by somehow providing them with a respectful living it's not a matter of being rich or poor. It's being the dealt with as a human being. What we have noticed so far that training for the sake of training as life skills and basic literacy and numeracy is not enough, you need to link it to something else.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 20:45

Assem says they've explored small business ideas to develop resilience, and so support psychosocial well-being.

Assem Chreif: The Lebanese Organisation of Studies and Training (LOST) 20:53

We are a developmental NGO by nature. But you know, due to the fragile community we're living in, and sequence of these crises, we started to introduce one sector after the other into our mandate that there are things that we need to take care of more like agriculture and tourism because we are an agricultural community and we are a touristic attraction. And we found out that we have more supporters than before, because we delve into such sectors like agriculture and tourism and through food processing, now, we are thinking of building an incubator as a factory incubator for people. So, farmers are known here for raising goods like cattle, they have hard times in order to sell their produce. And you know, how monopoly works here and everywhere. So, we are trying to move with them the extra mile, which is transforming them from a farmer, to producer to a trader, how by for instance, they have the milk we are establishing our factory with UN agencies in the region in order to change this milk into cheese and yogurt and

the like and budget. So they won't be only waiting for the monopolised to come and buy the produce. I mean the milk for very cheap prices, they can have a more shelf life produce where they can market it with our health.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 22:52

In Ethiopia, economic empowerment is also a crucial factor in determining the psychosocial well-being of adolescents who have been forced to leave their homes.

Kiya Gezahegne: GAGE (Ethiopia) 23:02

Most of the communities that we have here in the country, live under poverty or...

Martha Dixon: Journalist 23:10

Kiya Gezahegne is a GAGE researcher in Ethiopia. She says Ethiopia has also felt much pressure following the unprecedented displacement of people there.

Kiya Gezahegne: GAGE (Ethiopia) 23:22

With the recent conflict in the northern part of the country, we even have greater number of displaced people, particularly women and children.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 23:32

In Ethiopia, internally displaced people or IDPs now number up to 2 million, according to UN figures, after being forced from their homes through conflict, drought and floods. Because its internal displacement, international organisations are much less involved. And the Ethiopian government has struggled to offer the services needed. Kiya says the strain on those who've had to find a new place to live, often coupled with a serious lack of money and job opportunities, has led to extreme psychological problems. But often these are taboo subjects.

Kiya Gezahegne: GAGE (Ethiopia) 24:13

Within the GAGE research with people that we have talked to at least among the internally displaced adolescent girls and boys we have heard very horrifying stories of how they lost their families in front of them. So we have heard from girls of age 10 and 12 and 14 that they have seen their families being murdered right in front of them and that's quite shocking, later on for an adolescent but even for an adult. So even if they might not be open about it, they live in this traumatic situation where they have to relive it again and again in their memories. One of the challenges that we had in the first years of this research was that whenever we asked the adolescents about their psychosocial well-being, we usually didn't get a response. Because as because of lack of awareness, and also we are not that conscious about our mental health status and so it's sometimes bizarre for

the children to be asked such questions because they are not used to it and also for us to explain to them what we really mean by mental well-being. And so that was one of the challenges that we faced in discussing about mental health. What we have noticed here from our GAGE research is that it's not even within the radar of the government or even the community because we lack awareness on what we mean by mental health, or mental illness in relation to being displaced and going through such horrible situations. And also, going through conflict people are in a state of mental illness and that's pretty much neglected.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 26:29

Kiya says it's vital to get voices heard, and to help create safe spaces where mental health issues can be discussed.

Kiya Gezahegne: GAGE (Ethiopia) 26:37

In most cases, they seem to have lost hope and that's commonly shared among the people who have been displaced from their places of origin. And also they don't have that emotional strength to see the future in a positive way. Because with being displaced, there comes uncertainty of what the future holds for you.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 27:08

Kiya says hearing the stories that teenagers tell her is often hard, and they're in really difficult positions.

Kiya Gezahegne: GAGE (Ethiopia) 27:16

It was very emotional, to hear at the girl explain how she lost her father and how she saw this incident. What they have told us is that people usually find it difficult to sleep, most of the time, particularly among adolescents, we tend to have no future or no prospect of the future and when you're not engaged in any activities. And you just sit and reminisce about what has happened in your life, including the incidents that have happened during the conflict and that usually puts them in a state of depression. And when we say depression, for instance, they lose meaning in their existence. And that might lead to suicide, a to extreme case, or to self harm sometimes and also to a state of mental illness where, where you have also physical pain in some instances. We have heard a lot of stories, which is disturbing. Even as a researcher I remember having headaches and also not being able to sleep for some days because some of the stories that they share with us is very horrific. You learn that many people have gone through the same experience and we have not been able to stop this for quite some time. It's something that can that have a solution but because we are not aware of it or we haven't given attention to these problems that we are losing bright individuals in adolescents that might have lived a better future.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 29:18

The international community agreed that more resources were needed for Youth Mental Health in the landmark pledges made in the Global Compact for refugees back in 2018. Today, in Ethiopia, and in other places where adolescents have been forced from their homes, there is still little institutional support. But Kiya says displaced teenagers tell her just speaking to GAGE researchers really helps. Now Ethiopia and the world are hearing these conversations too. And slowly understanding the importance of investing in psychosocial support and mental health, in humanitarian and development work with young people.

Kiya Gezahegne: GAGE (Ethiopia) 30:05

At some point, you can also see relief on their faces from the time they started discussing the issue with us in the time when they are done with the interview. So that's what we have noticed and we always hope that we are being of

help for them by discussing such issues. I believe we have started the discussion of mental health among adolescents, and among adults as well, but we still lagging behind because we as a community are not aware of this issues. From where we have been in the past. I think we still have a long way to go.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 30:57

You've been listening to episode 4 of the GAGE podcast series – adolescents in crisis: unheard voices, where we shine a light on the stories of young people who've been forced from their homes, and look at what's needed to turn their lives around. You can access much more information on all of GAGE work in their new book, *Adolescents in Humanitarian Crisis*, written by GAGE researchers across East Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. It synthesises the research to date about adolescent refugees, as well as those who've been internally displaced.



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About GAGE

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year longitudinal research programme generating evidence on what works to transform the lives of adolescent girls in the Global South. Visit www.gage.odi.org.uk for more information.

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