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Adolescent lives in Jordan: what are we learning from longitudinal evidence?

GAGE consortium

Jordan is a small, highly resource-constrained country situated in the heart of the Middle East. Long a haven for refugees fleeing regional conflict, over one-third of Jordan's 10 million residents are not Jordanian. Jordan is home to approximately 1.5 million Syrians, half of whom are registered as refugees with UNHCR. Jordan is also hosting 2.5 million registered Palestine refugees. Most Palestinians living in Jordan have Jordanian citizenship and access to its attendant benefits. The remaining 20% – like the Syrian population – do not. Non-citizens have only limited access to a struggling labour market. Nearly all are poor and most are extremely so. Some of Jordan's ethnic minorities, including the Dom and the Turkmen, are also likely to be excluded from the labour market and to be poor, due to discrimination, language barriers and self-imposed social isolation.

Background to our research

The FCDO-funded Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research programme is generating evidence about the diverse experiences of adolescents (10–19 years) living in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). It is exploring the myriad challenges and opportunities young people are facing, identifying the supports they have and need, and highlighting ways in which international and national actors can better promote adolescent agency and voice and fast-track adolescent well-being. The GAGE sample includes those most at risk of being left behind, including girls who are (or have been) married and young people who have been forcibly displaced or have disabilities.

As the world's largest longitudinal study focused on adolescents in LMICs, which is simultaneously evaluating a range of programmes aimed at supporting the development of adolescent capabilities, GAGE is contributing to the practical evidence that FCDO and its partners need to meet core development objectives, including the Sustainable Development Goals, and to build back better after the covid-19 pandemic.

In Jordan, GAGE has collected mixed-methods baseline data (between mid-2018 and early 2019) with approximately 4,000 Syrian, Palestinian, Jordanian and Dom adolescents living in host communities, formal refugee camps and informal tented settlements (ITS); fielded three rounds of covid-19 phone surveys; and is running ongoing participatory research groups with older married girls, out-of-school boys and adolescent girls and boys with disabilities



(15–19 years). GAGE is also evaluating a variety of UNICEF Jordan's programming. This includes Makani, an integrated empowerment programme that provides children and adolescents with safe spaces, learning support, life skills courses and referrals to psychosocial and child protection support services, as well as offering parenting education classes for parents. It also includes a cash transfer labelled for education (Hajati) and a tablet distribution programme aimed at improving vulnerable students' access to online education and 21st century digital skills. This brief highlights headline emerging findings and provides links to fuller publications.

What are we learning?

» Adolescent girls' access to education is better than boys' – but learning outcomes are generally poor and opportunities for decent work scarce

With the caveat that marriage ends access to education for nearly all girls, adolescent girls in Jordan are more likely to attend school than boys. Across nationalities, girls' advantage emerges in early adolescence and grows larger as young people complete basic education (which runs through 10th grade) and then transition into secondary and post-secondary education. [GAGE findings indicate that boys' disadvantage has two primary antecedents](#). First, boys attend boys'-only schools starting in third grade. These schools are taught by male teachers who are less engaged in the teaching process than their female peers – at least in part due to the relatively low social prestige accorded teaching for men. They are also relatively more likely to use violent discipline. Poor-quality teaching and widespread corporal punishment are widely reported in GAGE data as drivers of school dropout for boys. Second, due to gender norms that situate males as breadwinners, it is not uncommon for boys to begin working for pay in early adolescence. While boys' work is intermittent, it leads to boys' gradual disengagement from school. In our sample, 64% of older boys had worked for pay in the last year. Unsurprisingly, the boys most likely to have had paid work are refugees whose families are more likely to be poor.

Learning outcomes in Jordan are very low – again especially for boys. Our baseline survey found that of older cohort adolescents (then aged 15–17), 61% of girls and only 48% of boys could read a short story written at the second-grade level. Even fewer could perform subtraction with borrowing (43% and 35% respectively).

GAGE research highlights that girls' advantage over boys tells only half the story. Nationality also shapes

educational access and learning outcomes. Across cohorts, Jordanians (89%) and Palestinians (86%) have significantly better enrolment rates than Syrians (71%) and Jordanians' learning outcomes – reading and maths – are significantly better than those of refugees. Adolescents' post-secondary opportunities are especially divergent, with refugees' having far more limited access to university and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) than Jordanians, in large part due to cost barriers.

Although girls are more likely to complete secondary school and university than boys, they have extremely limited access to the labour market due to discriminatory gender norms. Not only is unpaid domestic and care work seen as the responsibility of girls and women, which reduces the time they might spend engaged in paid work, but many families see girls' (and women's) engagement in paid work as unacceptable to broader notions of femininity. Refugee girls have especially limited opportunities for work, given that national law restricts the sectors in which Syrians and stateless Palestinians may work.

» Refugee girls are highly vulnerable to child marriage – and adolescent wives face significant risks of intimate partner violence and early pregnancy

Using custom-designed qualitative tools, [GAGE has been working with ever-married girls and their families](#) to explore the drivers of child marriage and the lives of married girls. Findings underscore that for both [Syrian and Palestinian girls](#), child marriage is often driven by families' desire to 'protect' girls' reputations, and thus family honour, from rampant sexual harassment. Set against a backdrop in which girls are educationally advantaged, it is common for more conservative refugee families to insist that girls drop out of school in early or middle adolescence to keep them cloistered at home to ensure that they remain marriageable, and then to push them into marriage in middle and late adolescence. [Household poverty and caregivers' feelings of insecurity during displacement](#) amplify parental preferences for child marriage over education. The girls most at risk of child marriage are usually those who are to marry cousins, as fathers do not feel they can disappoint their brothers (and parents) and girls are afraid to speak out and be the cause of family conflict. Notably, and critical to designing effective programming, only a small minority (6%) of married girls in the GAGE sample report that they were forced into marriage. Indeed, due to caregivers' efforts to persuade girls that marriage is in their own best interests, most (63%) married girls report having felt ready to marry.

Married girls in Jordan are at very high risk of gender-based violence and adolescent pregnancy. In individual interviews, many adolescent girls report being abused by their husbands and their mothers-in-law, both of whom admit to preferring adolescent brides over young adult women specifically because it is easier to control and manipulate those who are less mature. GAGE findings further indicate that it is not uncommon for child marriage to begin with rape,

I would have to pay for bags, books and a taxi to go there ... we can't afford these things. We have to pay rent, for electricity and water ... so school isn't the right thing for us.

(16-year-old out-of-school Syrian boy)

I did not know anything before this night ... he put the bed sheet over my face to prevent me from crying and he had sexual relationship with me. Then, he went out and I started crying.

(18-year-old Syrian mother of four)

that physical violence at the hands of husbands is a daily occurrence for many girls, that married girls are deliberately isolated from sources of potential support (including not only peers, but also their parents), and that forced pregnancy is common. Because bearing children is central to girls' value to their marital family, married girls are not able to refuse sex, are rarely allowed to use contraceptives, and are sometimes placed – even in early adolescence – on fertility medications meant to increase the chance of pregnancy.

GAGE data underscores that girls at risk of – or in – child marriage have relatively few sources of support. Although some girls and parents have access to Makani (or other NGO) programming that teaches the risks of child marriage, the judges responsible for preventing child marriage rarely do. Married girls' access to psychosocial support and justice services is limited by the same actors who place them at risk. Many married girls are not allowed to leave home and the girls most likely to have been pushed into marriage generally have the least support to divorce.

Pressure to engage in child marriage comes from all sides:



» Adolescents with disabilities, those in high-security refugee camp environments and from ethnic minority communities are at high risk of being left behind

Even within Jordan's complex humanitarian context, some adolescents are at greater risk of being left behind than others. In some cases, risk is elevated by disability. GAGE respondents highlighted that access to education for adolescents with disabilities is limited by the lack of door-to-door transport, inaccessible educational infrastructure, poorly adapted curriculum and learning materials, and the stigmatising beliefs and behaviours of teachers and fellow students.

53% of adolescents with disabilities have been bullied.

40% of adolescents without disabilities have been bullied.



In other cases, risk is elevated by where adolescents live. Those living in ITS, for example, have the least access to education and are at the highest risk of child labour and child marriage. Similarly, those living in Azraq Camp, where security is especially tight, have the lowest learning outcomes and the least access to post-secondary education or decent employment.

Nationality also shapes risk, often in unexpected ways. Although by most metrics Syrians are disadvantaged compared to Palestinians, even those without citizenship, the threats facing Palestinians have grown since the onset of Syria's civil war. Poverty rates have risen in tandem with unemployment rates (as the labour force has grown faster than the economy) and access to social protection and quality services has deteriorated in line with UNRWA budget cuts. Longer term impacts of funding shortfalls are becoming evident in boys' learning outcomes. Only 22% of Palestinian boys in our sample could read at the second-grade level and only 28% could subtract. Jordan's Dom adolescents are not

I used to know how to read and write, but when my mother had the baby boy, she made me leave school to take care of him.

(13-year-old Dom girl)

Evaluating UNICEF Jordan's innovative programming

GAGE is finding that UNICEF's programming is supporting adolescent education in myriad ways. The Makani programme has not only helped out-of-school students to enrol, but is raising adolescents' aspirations and improving their learning outcomes by offering hands-on educational programming and homework support. Labelled cash transfer programmes are helping families prioritise education over child labour (and child marriage). **In line with recommendations made by GAGE**, the Hajati cash transfer now provides students with US\$35/month (rather than US\$28) until the end of secondary school (rather than up to 10th grade). For young people not enrolled in Hajati, UNICEF Jordan has recently rolled out a new pilot cash transfer, also linked to Makani, that aims to incentivise uptake of education by providing US\$90/month for school-related costs, including transportation. During the covid-19 pandemic, UNICEF Jordan has also met young learners' needs innovatively. By providing tablets and data packages to 10,000 needy families whose children are enrolled in Makani centres, the programme has not only supported students to access distance education provided by the Ministry of Education but has allowed Makani staff to continue providing learning and psychosocial support services.

only highly vulnerable but are nearly invisible, as they are not refugees but are isolated from Jordanian society. In our sample, fewer than one-third were enrolled in school; violence, malnutrition and child labour were rampant; and child marriage was an under-estimated constant because families do not apply for marriage licences until girls are old enough to marry – by which time many have had several children.

» Covid-19 has negatively impacted adolescent education and mental health

As has been true around the world, [the covid-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the lives of adolescents living in Jordan](#). First and foremost, it has compromised their access to education, as schools were closed for more than 12 months. Although the government of Jordan delivered education online and via TV, and our covid-19 phone survey found that 90% of adolescents were able to engage in some learning activities during school closures, the vulnerable young people already most at risk were the least able to afford devices and connectivity and the most likely to be excluded from education.

Rising unemployment during pandemic-related lockdowns has resulted in increased poverty and food insecurity, especially in host communities where rents are high and the in-kind food support provided in UNHCR camps is not available. This in turn has exacerbated stress and led to increased household violence; it has also led to more boys becoming involved in child labour. [Social isolation](#) has also become more common, particularly for girls given prevailing gender norms that limit their access to mobility and communications technology. Married girls in our research are the most likely to report increased household violence. They also note difficulty accessing sexual and reproductive health care.

» Climate change is putting adolescents at risk

Jordan is already one of the world's most water-constrained countries, and this is [expected to get worse as a result of climate change](#). Adolescents living in camps and host communities observed that water shortages are already making their daily lives more difficult. In camps, scarcity and contamination were dominant themes in our research, with several adolescents reporting having had waterborne illnesses. In host communities, themes were scarcity and

cost. Adolescents living in ITS noted that households' livelihoods were at risk due to climate change, as agricultural workers are not needed when crops fail. GAGE is finding that girls are generally more impacted by water shortages than boys, due to their personal needs for water (for menstrual hygiene) and their domestic responsibilities, but boys living in camps sometimes noted that they spend so much time collecting water that they do not have enough time to study. We are also finding that climate change is exacerbating tensions between communities – with Syrians sometimes blamed by Jordanians for causing water scarcity.

The temperature swings associated with climate change are also impacting adolescents – especially refugees living in substandard shelters or working as daily labourers. Several adolescents reported becoming dehydrated and having heat stroke while working in the fields.

Implications of GAGE findings for international actors

Prioritise investments in quality, relevant and affordable education, with particular attention to addressing boys' disengagement from education

- The decade-long partnership established between the government of Jordan and donors is paying off in terms of improved access to education. However, given that school dropout rates in adolescence remain high, it is important that donors redouble efforts to support the Ministry of Education's efforts to deliver quality education for all children. This requires a multi-pronged approach. At a systems level, it is important that Jordan move towards full-day school and more participatory pedagogies. To address boys' disengagement from education, especially after more than a year of distance education, there is a need to invest in teacher training for male teachers in particular, to more consistently enforce policies that forbid violent discipline and to improve teacher pay. To better meet the needs of older refugee adolescents there is a need to scale up – and make affordable – technical and vocational training that is linked to actual labour market opportunities.

Invest in integrating programming with adolescents, caregivers and the justice sector to tackle discriminatory gender norms that perpetuate child marriage and GBV

- There is an urgent need for aid-funded programming to directly tackle the gender norms that lead to the prioritisation of marriage and motherhood over education and work and deprive girls of agency over their own lives. This should include programming for the parents of girls and boys that emphasises the value of girls' education and the importance of delaying adult transitions until adulthood. It should also include programming for girls (including those already married) supporting the development of skills and voice, and programming for boys and young men aimed at shifting masculinities and reducing sexual and gender-based violence. UNICEF Jordan's Makani programme is well placed to lead on this if funding is made available. Efforts to shift gender norms should be paired with efforts to strengthen the Jordanian justice system – to ensure that laws meant to prevent child marriage are more consistently enforced and that married girls' (and women's) rights to and in divorce are not abrogated.

Scale up social protection, including educational stipends, to support the most disadvantaged in the wake of the covid-19 pandemic

- As the Jordanian economy falters in the wake of the covid-19 pandemic, donors should invest in stepped-up access to social protection. This should include educational stipends that are scaled for need (e.g. are large enough to cover the transport costs of those with disabilities), are inclusive of marginalised groups regardless of status (e.g. Palestinians and Dom, not just Syrians and Jordanians), and are offered to secondary-age students who are pursuing either academic or technical education. Educational loans should be made available for post-secondary study.

Advocate for refugees' improved access to the labour market in line with Jordan Compact objectives

- Given that most Syrians, like their Palestinian peers, are likely to stay in Jordan for the foreseeable future, it is important to encourage refugee families to invest in education with broader efforts to expand the Jordanian economy. In line with the objectives of the Jordan Compact,¹ this should be paired with advocacy and support aimed at removing legal restrictions on refugees' work to improve resilience over time.

Ensure an integrated approach to programming for young people given complex and intersecting development needs and vulnerabilities

- Development goals – and funding priorities – require a more integrated approach to adequately address adolescents' complex development needs. They should acknowledge that goals cannot be siloed on an individual basis (e.g. unhappy young people are unlikely to perform well in the classroom). They should also recognise that longer-term 'adult' outcomes often depend on foundations laid in childhood and adolescence (e.g. open societies are supported by young people's exposure to participatory programming).

¹ The 2016 Jordan Compact is a joint agreement between the Jordanian government and the international community to work together to support both refugees and vulnerable Jordanians. Jordan agreed to allow Syrian refugees the right to work (at least in some sectors) in exchange for stepped up financing and trade concessions.

Further background

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year (2015–2024) mixed methods longitudinal research and evaluation study. It follows the lives of 20,000 adolescents in six low- and middle-income countries in Africa (Ethiopia and Rwanda), Asia (Bangladesh and Nepal) and the Middle East (Jordan and Lebanon).

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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- » Find out more about our work in Jordan at <https://www.gage.odi.org/countries/jordan/>
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