LESSONS FROM PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH WITH ADOLESCENTS

March 2022

Adolescent lives in Lebanon: what are we learning from participatory research evidence?

GAGE consortium

Since 2019, Lebanon's economy has been caught in an accelerating downward spiral, which the World Bank predicts will rank in the top three most severe global economic crises in the last 150 years. Food prices have now climbed more than 500%, over half of the country is living below the poverty line and the electrical grid is on the verge of collapse as fuel has become unavailable. For the 1.5 million Syrian refugees and nearly 200,000 Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon, the situation is even more dire. They have extremely limited access to work, due to legal restrictions on their employment, and poverty, food insecurity and fractured social cohesion are now all but universal.

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 Lebanon, GAGE is running participatory research groups with 83 vulnerable Syrian, Palestinian and Lebanese adolescents. These young people are between the ages of 15 and 19 and live in host communities, formal refugee camps served by UNRWA (Palestinians), and informal tented settlements (ITS) (Syrians). The participatory research groups were established in 2019 and meet every four to

Adolescent boys in Wavel Camp, Lebanon © Elie Matar

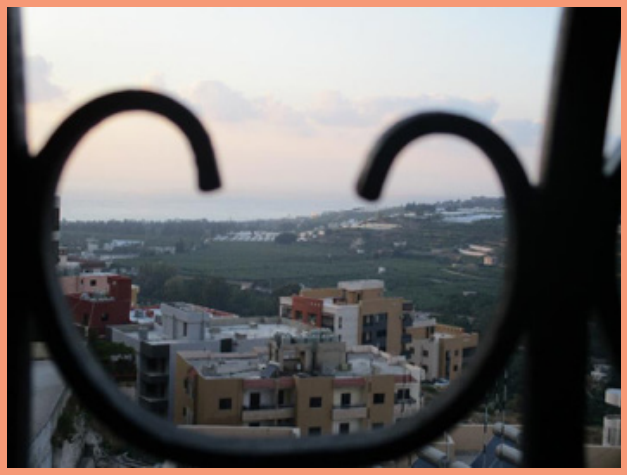
six weeks (either in person or remotely) to discuss themes related to GAGE's conceptual framework – which focuses on the intersecting capabilities that adolescents require to meet their full potential. These include: education and learning; bodily integrity and freedom from age- and gender-based violence; health and nutrition; psychosocial well-being and social connectedness; voice and agency; and skills, training and assets for economic empowerment. This brief highlights headline emerging findings and provides links to fuller publications.

What are we learning?

» Refugee adolescents have only limited access to education and work

GAGE findings underscore that refugee adolescents' access to education is shaped by the broader Lebanese context – in which the majority of children attend private schools because the quality of government schools is so poor – as well as by their nationality, their gender and where they live. Young people's access to decent work is shaped by similar factors. Lebanon's youth unemployment rate is very high, the law limits the types of work in which refugees may engage and few women work outside the home. Nearly half (45%) of Syrian youth were unemployed in 2020, and on a national basis only 23% of women are in the labour force.

Lebanese adolescents' access to secondary and post-secondary education is generally good, though it should first be noted that uptake of upper-secondary school is low (66%) considering that Lebanon is an upper middle-income country and second that learning outcomes are poor by international standards. Of the Lebanese young people taking part in GAGE, and mirroring official enrolment statistics, girls tend to have better access to education than boys. There are two primary reasons for this. First, educated girls are seen to be better mothers than uneducated girls. Second, it is not possible for women to find work unless they are educated. Although men continue to be seen as primary breadwinners and women are comparatively unlikely to work for pay, if a woman needed to find work, education is a prerequisite. Men, on the other hand, can find work without having advanced education – especially given that most of the jobs generated by the Lebanese economy are relatively low-skilled.



'No one likes their chains, even if they are made of gold. Freedom is a sun that must shine in our society every day. The girl in our society is forbidden from many things. She can only enjoy freedom from behind the bars that confine her. The girl cannot share her opinion on any matter, men make the decisions on behalf of women, just as my ex-fiancé did and forbade me from studying. The girl's life passes from the father's hand to the husband's hand while she is just a silent bystander. This has been the case for my grandmother, my mother and continues to be so for my sisters and me.'
(18-year-old Palestinian girl)

'When we came to Lebanon, we started working to help our families … I wish I can go to school, but the financial situation does not allow it … I lost my childhood and my education, it was destroyed due to the war in Syria. I am not talking about myself only, I am talking about all young boys because we are living in the same conditions.'
(16-year-old Syrian boy)

Palestine refugee adolescents almost exclusively attend schools run by UNRWA. As with their Lebanese peers, girls' access to secondary and post-secondary education is generally better than boys'. GAGE participants identify legal restrictions on Palestinians' work as the primary reasons that Palestinian boys leave school in early and middle adolescence. As they are prohibited from undertaking professional occupations, they drop out to begin learning work-related skills. Boys are also pushed out of school by rampant violence. Although child marriage forces many girls to terminate their schooling (often at the time of engagement), girls' education is often valued more than boys' because it helps them to be better mothers. Very few Palestinian girls and women have paid work, due to social norms that see breadwinning as the purview of males.

Syrian refugees' access to education is especially limited, even at the primary level where the most recent figures indicate that one-third of children are out of school. This is because of households' desperate economic conditions (which force boys into child labour from middle childhood), the high cost of education in Lebanon (including transportation for girls), the limited value of formal education for Syrians (who are legally allowed to work only

in agriculture, construction and sanitation), a mistaken belief that Lebanese educational credentials are not recognised in Syria, and the fact that courses are not solely taught in Arabic (but also in French and English). Access is also shaped by where young people live. Those living in ITS tend to drop out before those living in collective shelters in host communities, often as soon as they can read and write. Even in host communities, however, it is extremely rare for Syrians to attend secondary school. Boys' enrolment is higher than girls', because although social norms position boys as breadwinners (leaving them vulnerable to child labour), girls are regularly made to leave school in early and middle adolescence for marriage. Some girls marry immediately – even years before adulthood; other girls are kept secluded at home to ensure that they remain chaste for adult marriage. Regardless of whether they marry in childhood or adulthood, Syrian girls and women who live in host communities have little access to paid work, due to restrictions placed on them by their marital families. This is not the case in ITS, as whole families work together in agriculture.

'I do not like children and my husband did not want to have children now because we are both very young … but my mother-in-law wants children because she married her son early because he is her only son and she wants him to have sons … she forced us to have a child at first and when it was a girl, she wanted me to get pregnant again to bring her a grandson … she told me that if it is a girl, then I will keep having children every year to get sons or she will get her son a second wife.'
(17-year-old Syrian girl)

» Syrian girls are highly vulnerable to child marriage – and adolescent wives are at risk of intimate partner violence

With the caveat that Palestine refugee girls can be engaged as early as middle adolescence – which results in decision-making power over their lives being handed off from their parents to their fiancés – GAGE research underscores that it is Syrian girls who are most at risk of child marriage in Lebanon. Although customs vary, depending on which region in Syria girls' families came from, many of the girls in GAGE participatory research groups were married in middle adolescence. Some were forcibly married but most were persuaded that marriage was in their own best interests. Some were married to cousins; others were married to men from the same region of Syria. Marriage decisions are often made by the oldest man in the family (the grandfather or oldest uncle) – not girls' own parents. Syrian adolescents note that child marriage has become far more common in displacement, as girls have lost access to secondary school, families have begun relying on marriage to protect girls (in part from the more liberal Lebanese culture that now surrounds them) and peer pressure to marry early has grown. Although Lebanese law allows child marriage, many marriages among Syrians are not registered or are registered years after the fact.

Almost without exception, married girls find their lives exhausting. They must juggle the demands of housework and childcare and – if they live in ITS – agricultural labour. Some girls admit that they are so overwhelmed that they resort to beating their children because they cannot cope. Adding to girls' distress is their lack of agency over their own lives. Their marital families control what they wear, where they go and who they speak to. Girls report that it is rare for young brides to be allowed to use contraception, because marital families demand children. Although marriage is perceived to protect girls from violence, reality does not bear this out. Married girls report that sexual violence often starts on the wedding night, and that emotional – and sometimes physical – violence is common. Both husbands and in-laws are perpetrators. Consanguineous marriages, far from offering girls the most protection, are often the most violent, because girls are afraid to speak up for fear of causing family conflict.

Married girls report very limited sources of support. Some have not seen their own families for years, because they still live in Syria. Others are not allowed to communicate with either family or friends, due to restrictions on their mobility and use of mobile phones. Strict social norms about marital privacy also limit girls' support. Girls are socialised to believe that what happens in the marital home must stay in the marital home. Many also understand that reporting

'They know we are Syrians. . . It is clear from the way we dress. . . The Lebanese people don't wear this [the abaya]. . . When people see us on our way back from the fields, they laugh at us. . . They tell us in our face, 'you are gypsies'. . .They make fun of us in our face.'
(19-year-old married Syrian girl)

risks angering marital families – which would only serve to make girls' lives more difficult. Access to formal services is particularly rare. This is due to restrictions on girls' mobility, girls' lack of knowledge about services and girls' negative interactions with Lebanese service providers – who often treat Syrians pejoratively.

» Refugees are being left behind – Syrians because they are the most excluded and Palestinians because they are surrounded by escalating political violence

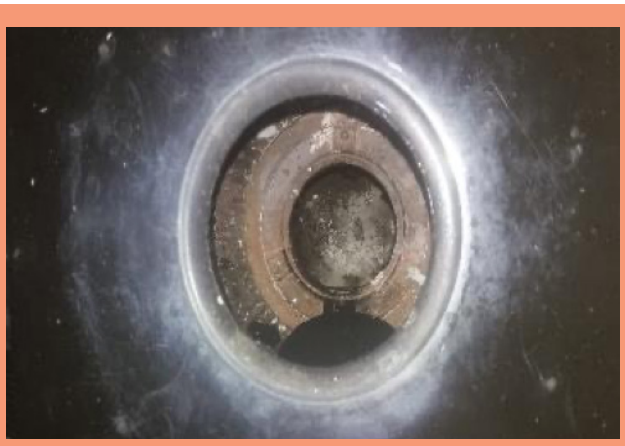
The government of Lebanon has endeavoured to ensure that Syrian refugees do not look upon Lebanon as their home. It has not allowed UNHCR to establish formal refugee camps, it has prohibited UNHCR from registering new refugees since 2015 and it requires that each Syrian over the age of 15 purchase an expensive annual residency permit. The young people taking part in GAGE research, however, highlight that alongside legal exclusion from life in Lebanon, social exclusion shapes their day-to-day lives. They are often blamed by the Lebanese for high unemployment, for having driven down wages, for increased crime and for having overtaxed educational and health services. Many reported being harassed by officials at checkpoints and by citizens in their community, and feelings of social exclusion had intensified among the research participants during the pandemic because of a perception that refugees, being poor and having less access to WASH facilities and protective means, might transmit the virus.

For many of the Palestine refugees taking part in GAGE research, extreme violence – fuelled by political factions fighting for control of formal camps and nearby host community neighbourhoods – is increasingly defining and limiting their lives. Because the Lebanese government provides no policing inside camps, which are often physically walled off from neighbouring communities, there are frequent gun battles on streets as rival factions seek dominance. Many adolescents in Ein el-Hilweh Camp, for example, are afraid to leave their homes, for fear of being hit by a stray bullet. Escalating violence is having gendered impacts as well. Girls note that arranged marriages to men outside the country are becoming more common, as parents look for a way to get girls out of harm's way. Boys, on the other hand, are increasingly pulled into violence as it becomes a normalised way for them to demonstrate masculinity. Several adolescent boys taking part in research groups openly carry weapons and admit to having severely injured members from rival factions.

'I live in Ein el-Hilweh refugee camp, which is walled off – with barbed wire – like a giant prison for Palestinians. Our isolation is not only physical. The Lebanese government also prevents us from owning our own homes or working in most jobs. Some Palestinians register property in the names of Lebanese citizens, which exposes them to real estate fraud.'
(19-year-old Palestinian boy)

» Covid-19 has amplified food insecurity, household violence and social isolation

GAGE findings highlight that refugees' struggles for survival and inclusion have been amplified by the pandemic. Unemployment and poverty have exploded, as the Lebanese economy has spiralled downward, and households that first shifted to less nutritious foods have now resorted to skipping meals entirely because cash transfers and food vouchers have not kept pace with inflation. The near collapse of the Lebanese electrical grid has complicated daily life further still, especially for girls. It can take girls hours each day to source water and wash clothes by hand. In addition, young children already fretful from hunger and afraid of the dark, are less easily distracted without television. Household stress levels have risen accordingly, with men feeling emasculated because they cannot provide for their families, and girls simultaneously terrified about running out of food for their children and overwhelmed by infants' incessant needs. Adolescents admit that intimate partner violence and child abuse have also increased. Men vent their frustrations on their wives. Fathers and mothers vent their frustrations on their children. Syrian and Palestinian girls add that while boys and men may be able to rely on their friends for some degree of emotional support, even if only to know that their suffering is shared, girls and women are largely denied



'My life was difficult before the pandemic, but now it has become a black hole. I have a newborn who cries all the time. I do not know how to comfort him. My mother, who should be here teaching me how to care for him, cannot come. My husband has lost his job and is angry at me all the time because he is stressed about our financial situation. I am constantly worried about running out of milk and diapers for my son. I am so tired of life.'
(17-year-old Syrian girl)

this opportunity by social norms that limit their access to mobility and communications technology.

The refugee adolescents participating in GAGE research underscore that because services in Lebanon are fragmented and privatised, their access to and the quality of these services are often extremely limited. Covid-19 has served to exacerbate this, as even healthcare expenditure is now considered discretionary next to food, social distancing rules have made it more difficult to leave the home, and donor and NGO budgets have been exhausted. The situation is especially dire for Palestinians, given UNRWA funding shortfalls.

Implications of GAGE findings for international actors

Scale up social protection support

- Although the international community has begun responding to Lebanon's crisis, which has resulted in social protection being rapidly scaled up, there is an urgent need for more support. Given high levels of food insecurity, and limits on their labour force participation, this is especially the case for refugee households. Donors should pair cash transfers with direct food distribution, given Lebanon's inflation rate and fuel shortages. School feeding should also be prioritised, with attention paid to not only calories but vital micronutrients.

Advocate for expanded labour market access for refugees

- Given that many (even most) Syrians – like their Palestinian peers – are likely to make Lebanon home for the foreseeable future, it is important to encourage the Lebanese government to ease restrictions on refugees and to open more employment options. Efforts might be modelled on the Jordan Compact and should aim to enhance refugee resilience, support the broader Lebanese economy and improve social cohesion.

Address both education quality and cost barriers to promote educational access for all adolescents

- To ensure that all adolescents have access to quality education it is important that FCDO and its partners help the Lebanese government to expand and strengthen public education (and UNRWA to improve its offerings). This should include building and outfitting more schools, and investing in teacher training and revised curriculums. Efforts should be paired with messaging about the importance of education as well as with educational stipends. Stipends need to be scaled for need (i.e. large enough to cover the transport costs of students with disabilities and for girls given conservative gender norms around girls' mobility), to be inclusive regardless of nationality, and to be offered to secondary-aged students for both academic or vocational education. Educational scholarship and/or loans should be made available for post-secondary study.

Strengthen adolescent- and gender-friendly prevention and response services for adolescents at risk of violence

- Because of the high levels of age- and gender-based violence experienced by adolescents, it is essential that reporting channels are easily accessible (online, through phone hotlines and at community centres) and that funding for justice and survivor services is stepped up.

Invest in gender norm change programming for adolescents and caregivers

- There is an urgent need for aid-funded programming to directly tackle the gender norms that lead to the prioritisation of girls' marriage and motherhood over education and work, and deprive girls of agency over their own lives. This should include programming for parents that emphasises the importance of delaying adult transitions until adulthood. It should also include programming for girls (including those already married) to support the development of their skills and voice, and programming for boys and young men aimed at shifting masculinities and reducing sexual- and gender-based violence.

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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ISBN: 978-1-913610-68-5