

Youth contribution

'Although the camp has changed as compared to the old times, I don't think it has changed enough'

'Amal' with Sarah Al Heiwidi

'Amal' is from Jerash Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan, one of the most socially deprived camps in the country, as the refugees have no citizenship identification due to their family origins from Gaza. Amal has a significant visual impairment but focuses primarily on the gender norms that prevent her participating in her community. In this chapter, she highlights that only further education offers her the potential to interact with peers. Otherwise, for older adolescent girls like herself, the only other legitimate social outlet is religious education classes, which she struggled with due to her impairment. Even in the case of online participation, she only feels comfortable posting anonymously.

At the moment, I don't really interact with anyone outside my family and haven't for a while. I don't go out because of my 12th-grade examinations. I passed, but I decided to retake them because I did not get high enough grades to get into a government university. I started to stress about everything and now I study for more than ten hours a day. I have retaken the exams once before. My father was supportive of my first attempt but he is opposed to me re-sitting the exams again. He said that this is my last attempt, and that

it isn't in the cards for me to study in a university. He said 'so you won't say that I prohibited you from studying, so this is your last chance'. My mother also told me to study at the university, as my elder sisters weren't able to study. When my brother started to study medicine, my sister was directly in the following year after him. That's why she couldn't study. My father pays for all my brother's expenses. There was financial pressure and she didn't pass. My second sister married in 12th grade.

I do feel that I get control over my decision to study, unlike many girls my age. I feel that at times some families prohibit them. I know two girls who scored about 90% but their parents didn't let them study. It's not always a financial thing – it's related to thinking and customs. I know girls whose fathers didn't educate them. It is so in our society, for a lot of people. But overall, now the society is more open, they have started to get girls educated. My paternal cousin's sister was born in 1999. She scored a strong mark in 12th grade but her father didn't let her continue her studies, even though she received a scholarship. Fourteen years later, it is different. They have started to get girls educated now....

More girls can also take decisions on marriage. Previously it was forceful, but now they consider the opinion of the girl. As for us, my father said that each one of us is free to marry or if we don't, it is fine. The decision of marriage is 100% mine. He didn't even force my sister; he told her that she can think about whether she wants to marry or not. For other tribes, there is more pressure. Previously, they would make the girl quit school in 6th grade, but now, she can study up until 12th grade.

The problem is that I don't go out much. I used to go to a centre but I don't go out now. I don't know what changed, I didn't go this year. I am not in the mood to go.... I am not able to commit now. I used to go to the advanced recitation courses at a fixed time at the centre, where you learn to perfect your recitation of the Qur'an. I repeated it twice. I came out exhausted and stopped going. They said I could go again but I don't want to. I don't think there are any other centres I can attend locally, except other courses that also teach women and girls the Qur'an. We used to attend some activities at a local NGO [non-governmental organisation] that helps the community. However, now that I am older I wouldn't go. It is for children. I think if I had more interaction, I would open up more. I feel that if I would have been a boy, I could go and work. I asked my father if I can work, he said no. He might let me work in a Qur'an centre or the like. What my father means is that if one will go for a job in any shop or factory, he will refuse it.

In 12th grade, your attitude changes. You enter a period of sleepiness, heaviness. I will wake up at 10, put off the alarm and go back to sleep. During the 12th grade period, I have stopped talking to anyone, the whole

family. There is only one other student I talk to at school. She is also re-sitting the 12th grade. However, we only discuss our decisions; we don't ask each other for advice. I had a good friend, but during corona [virus], we lost communication and our friendship was affected as we didn't spend time together. Now she has gone to university and we stopped talking to each other. I have Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp, but I don't speak to many people – I mainly use it for learning. I follow some pages, like Maram al



FIGURE 17.1

14-year-old refugee girl with a physical disability, Jordan.

Zu'bi. She is a public figure on social media. She shares religious advice and general advice. Once she spoke about bullying. I faced bullying when I was younger due to my spectacles. At first, I would reply back. But later, I started to ignore it. Now, it's stopped. Because of the internet and so, many people are now wearing glasses in the community. It is widespread.

If I had an idea that would be helpful in the camp, or a solution to a problem affecting girls my age, there is a Facebook page for the camp where you can share ideas. I only recently began to participate. If you comment, not only your name shows up, but you can also post anonymously, which is better. Everyone knows each other in the camp, so I feel there will be a problem if you add your name to a post. To make changes, you need support from an NGO or the government. If I was going to start my own initiative, it would address problems facing adolescent girls such as studies and marriage, the obligations we have. However, I don't know of anyone who has participated in something like this. We would need a safe space, and a person not too much older who is clear and makes us feel at ease to participate, who could provide good advice. A space where girls are listened to would make girls stronger. But although the camp has changed compared to the old times, I don't think it has changed enough for such an initiative to have an effect on the way things are done in the camp.