



An adolescent girl in Lebanon © Marcel Saleh/GAGE 2025

## Adolescent transitions in crisis: insights on voice and agency from longitudinal participatory research in Lebanon

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### Introduction

A decade on from the 2015 Global Girls Summit at which global leaders met in London to discuss how best to fast-track social justice for adolescent girls globally, the world is facing a critical historical moment characterised by multiple and intersecting challenges. This polycrisis is profoundly affecting young people's current lives and future trajectories, including the legacy effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic malaise with high levels of youth unemployment and compounded by climate shocks (Lawrence et al., 2024). At the same time, increasing levels of violent conflict and forced displacement are disproportionately affecting young people (UNHCR, 2024), while the growing proliferation of disinformation and hate through digital platforms that should facilitate open and transparent debate is exacerbating the challenges that young people must navigate (Lahti et al., 2024).

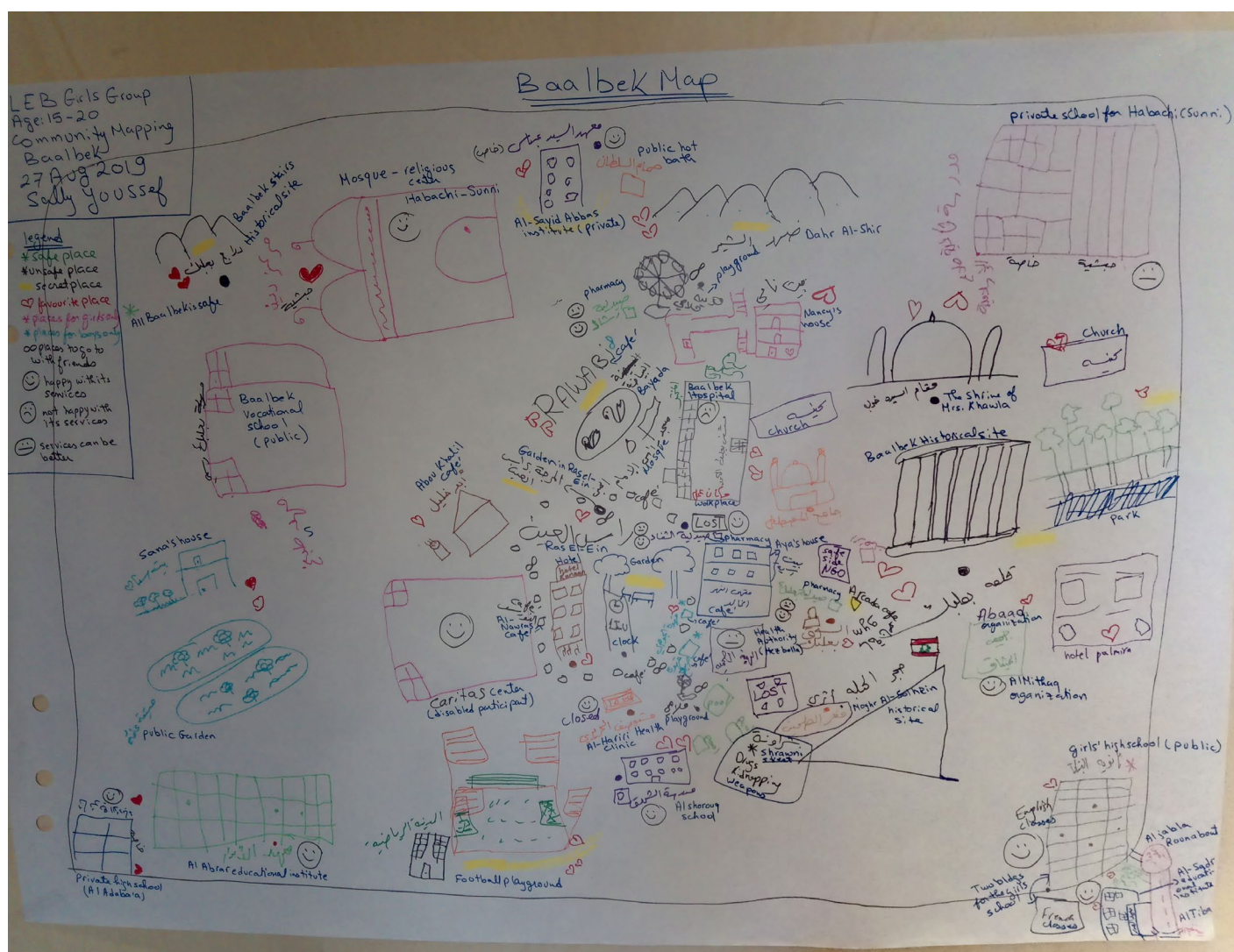
However, conversely as we approach the final years of the Sustainable Development Agenda there is also greater recognition of young people as agents of change who can offer new perspectives to solve global challenges. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 focuses on the critical importance of strengthening female decision-making while SDG 16 champions greater youth participation so as to build inclusive societies (Sucunzo and Berehe, 2025). Moreover, in light of fact that the current youth cohort is the largest cohort of young people in history – approximately 1.8 billion – the 2024 Pact of the Future signed by leaders around the globe explicitly committed to youth empowerment and to promoting their meaningful

participation to ensure equity, accountability and sustainability (United Nations, 2024). And indeed we are seeing evidence of this with many young people engaged in youth movements spearheading political change whether it be through the international School Strike for Climate Change or on the streets of Bangkok, Dhaka and most recently Kathmandu.

Reflecting this increasing global momentum around the importance of including young people in policy dialogues and programme design, there has been a concomitant burgeoning interest in participatory research initiatives with young people in multiple contexts. Accordingly this policy brief builds on evidence from a unique longitudinal participatory research initiative with young people in Lebanon (2019–2025) to examine how overlapping crises have reshaped young people's voice and agency.

The brief begins by outlining the Gender and Adolescent: Global Evidence (GAGE) study's design and methods, and situates findings within Lebanon's crisis-affected context. It then introduces the GAGE Lebanon sample and the participatory visual and narrative research approaches used, focusing on participatory photography and 'day-in-my-life' narratives. The brief traces changes in agency at the individual and household levels (focusing on educational ambitions, work transitions, and shifting view on marriage and family formation) and at the community level (including both offline and online spaces and interactions). It also explores young people's sense of belonging and identity in the civic and political arenas, highlighting similarities and differences between youth from Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian communities. The brief concludes with reflections on the implications of the findings for actionable policy and programming interventions to strengthen safe spaces, participatory programming, psychosocial support, gender-transformative practices, and institutional inclusion of youth voices.

**Figure 1: Community mapping with adolescent girls**



## Lebanon context

Lebanon's political and social context is marked by deep structural fragility, which directly shapes young people's lives. The country has long faced political and economic instability, underpinned by entrenched sectarian divisions that permeate both governance and everyday interactions (Baumann 2016; Traboulsi 2012). At the same time, Lebanon hosts the largest refugee population per capita worldwide, yet refugees continue to face significant restrictions on access to basic civil rights (El Daif et al., 2021). These overlapping pressures – economic collapse, political paralysis, sectarian fragmentation, and the protracted refugee presence – have contributed to heightened social tensions, both between host and refugee communities and within sectarian groups themselves (World Bank, 2019). Such dynamics are acutely felt by young people navigating daily life. This illustrates how adolescents are socialised into an environment where silence and self-censorship are often framed as necessary strategies for survival, underscoring the complex interplay between structural exclusion, sectarian politics, and intergenerational coping mechanisms.

Since 2019, Lebanon has experienced overlapping crises. The October 2019 uprising against government corruption and economic decline marked the start of mass mobilisation. This was quickly followed by Covid-19 lockdowns and the Beirut Port explosion in 2020, which intensified poverty, unemployment and public distrust in state institutions (Dandashly, 2023). By 2021, the World Bank had declared Lebanon's economic collapse among the world's three worst crises since the mid-19th century, with inflation skyrocketing and subsidies withdrawn, pushing households into extreme precarity (World Bank, 2022). These structural shocks were

accompanied by increasing deportations and backlash against refugees and other marginalised groups, deepening already tense intercommunal relations (Human Rights Watch, 2023a; 2023b).

The fragility of the state became even more evident in 2022 and 2023, as violent clashes in Ein el-Hilweh camp displaced thousands (UNRWA, 2023), while power sector collapse and nationwide blackouts eroded already fragile social services (Human Rights Watch, 2023). At the same time, political and sectarian divisions constrained governance reform, leaving Lebanon unable to respond effectively to spiralling humanitarian needs (Government of Lebanon & United Nations, 2023). By 2025, the situation had deteriorated further. The Hezbollah–Israel conflict escalated, resulting in large-scale displacement and destruction of infrastructure (OCHA, 2025), while the fall of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024 triggered a new wave of refugee arrivals into Lebanon (UNHCR Lebanon, 2025a). Against this backdrop, the Lebanese government, along with United Nations (UN) agencies, announced a Voluntary Return Plan for up to 400,000 Syrian refugees (UNHCR Lebanon, 2025b).

Taken together, these events underscore the multi-layered and protracted nature of Lebanon's instability. Economic collapse, state fragility, sectarian fragmentation and geopolitical shocks have interacted to produce a context of chronic crisis – one in which young people and their families face profound uncertainty, disrupted services, and shrinking opportunities for protection and empowerment (Proudfoot, 2025).



A Syrian adolescent boy, ITS  
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When we first came here, sectarianism was a problem. My father warned me not to talk or interfere in anything related to sects or politics.

(Syrian boy, collective shelter, Baalbek)



## GAGE research design and methods

The Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme is a 10-year, mixed-methods longitudinal study (2016–2026), following more than 20,000 adolescents aged 10–19 at baseline across seven low- and middle-income countries. As the largest study on adolescents in the Global South, GAGE seeks to provide robust evidence on ‘what works, for whom, where and why’ in order to improve adolescent well-being and drive social change. The programme pays particular attention to the most vulnerable groups, including refugees, married girls, and adolescents with disabilities, who are often excluded from mainstream development agendas. By adopting a multi-country and multi-crisis lens – working in contexts such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan, Lebanon, Nepal, Palestine and Rwanda – GAGE situates young people’s experiences within broader structural inequalities and overlapping crises. Its emphasis on generating evidence to reduce poverty, address exclusion, and maximise adolescents’ capabilities underscores the programme’s central aim: to support girls and boys in achieving their potential, both now and in the future.

The GAGE programme is underpinned by a conceptual framework that identifies six interlinked capability domains essential for a healthy and empowered adolescence: education and learning; health, nutrition, and sexual and reproductive health; bodily integrity and freedom from violence; psychosocial well-being; voice and agency; and economic empowerment. These domains reflect the programme’s commitment to a holistic understanding of adolescent development, positioning young people not only as individuals in need of support but also as agents with the potential to transform their own futures. GAGE emphasises that these capabilities cannot be achieved in isolation; adolescents’ opportunities are shaped by their families, communities, and wider national and global contexts. Consequently, sustainable change requires a dual focus – empowering adolescents directly while also transforming the structural and systemic barriers that constrain them. This framework aligns with capability and rights-based approaches, recognising that adolescent well-being, opportunities and collective capabilities must be strengthened simultaneously in order to tackle entrenched poverty and social exclusion.

In order to explore these questions, a key GAGE workstream involves participatory methods whereby adolescents are brought directly into the research process through peer research, participatory photography, and social network mapping (Neumeister et al., 2024). These approaches establish collaborative, non-hierarchical with young people so as to enable them to document and analyse

their own realities, highlighting shifts in capabilities and agency over the course of adolescence and as they transition to adulthood. By adapting sampling strategies and tools to each country context, GAGE ensures the inclusion of socially marginalised adolescents, thereby amplifying the voices of those most often excluded from research and policy-making.

## GAGE methods and sample in Lebanon

In Lebanon, GAGE conducted longitudinal participatory research with more than 100 vulnerable young people (aged 15–19 at baseline), including those from host communities, Syrian refugees, and Palestinian refugees, between 2019 and 2025. The research combined focus group discussions, individual interviews and participatory photography, offering both breadth and depth of insight into young people’s lived experiences. The sample purposefully included adolescents at heightened risk of marginalisation: out-of-school adolescents, those at risk of dropping out, married girls and those at risk of early marriage, working adolescents, and boys vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups.

Fieldwork was carried out in two of Lebanon’s most fragile and conflict-affected areas: Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley, and the Ein el-Hilweh refugee camp for Palestinians in the south of the country. In Baalbek, research engaged two groups of married Syrian girls (one living in informal tented settlements and another in collective shelters) alongside a group of Syrian boys, two groups of Lebanese adolescents (one for girls and one for boys), and a mixed group of Lebanese and Palestinian boys from Wavel camp. In Ein el-Hilweh, the research involved two groups of Palestinian adolescents (one for boys and one for girls). Altogether, these eight groups provided a diverse yet deeply vulnerable cohort, whose trajectories reflect the compounded challenges of displacement, poverty, social exclusion and entrenched inequality.

GAGE employed a number of innovative visual and narrative methods to capture young people’s voices and lived realities, including participatory photography, day-in-my-life photo narratives, blogs, podcasts and videography. These creative approaches not only generated rich qualitative data but also offered young people alternative avenues for self-expression and reflection. More detail can be found in Youssef et al., 2025.

## GAGE findings in Lebanon

We now turn to a discussion of our finding on young people's exercise of voice and agency, beginning with individual and household levels, before turning to the community and civic and political arena levels. We highlight gender and nationality similarities and differences throughout.

### Exercising voice and agency at individual and household levels

The overlapping crises that have engulfed Lebanon in recent years have profoundly disrupted young people's educational trajectories, narrowing their imagined futures and forcing difficult trade-offs. Education – once viewed as a reliable pathway to stability and social mobility – has become increasingly unstable and contingent. The compounded effects of Covid-19, the economic collapse, and the 2024 war undermined both in-person and online learning, leaving many students with prolonged interruptions and significant learning losses. As one young Palestinian woman from Ein el-Hilweh camp explained:

*When the war started, we were only a week or two into our studies... Imagine studying nursing online... We didn't understand anything... I passed but I don't know if my answers in the exams were right or wrong... I started thinking it is better to stop studying.*

Economic collapse further compounded these challenges, forcing families to prioritise survival over education. For many, financial barriers (including tuition fees, transportation costs, and the lack of institutional support) pushed them to drop out of school or abandon higher education ambitions altogether. A young Lebanese man from Baalbek reflected how educational decisions are increasingly shaped by cost rather than preference:

*I would have loved to complete my education... Education is a good thing, but... instead of paying college tuition, I thought of starting a small business with that money... Perhaps I could continue my education abroad.*

These dynamics have widened the gap between public and private education, with public universities often chosen for their affordability, despite limited resources and quality concerns. Meanwhile, the scarcity of scholarships – sometimes tied to political affiliations – further complicates access, pushing some young people into clientelist networks to secure opportunities. For those who persist, education is still viewed as valuable, yet its meaning has shifted: resilience for some, and a stepping stone for others to seek opportunities abroad rather than within a local system

perceived as failing. In this way, educational ambitions in Lebanon remain deeply strained, reflecting both the precarity of national systems and the resilience of young people determined to reimagine their futures.

Although Lebanon's overlapping crises have disrupted educational trajectories, many young people have developed adaptive strategies to sustain their aspirations and navigate uncertainty. Those who remained in education often enrolled in multiple institutions (academic and vocational), switched majors, or kept back-up options to ensure continuity in case of closures or financial barriers. A notable shift emerged toward vocational and practical education, which was perceived as more reliable and directly linked to employment opportunities. As one young Lebanese man from Baalbek explained, '*I studied several professions [vocational training programmes] ... If I couldn't find work in one, I'll have other options.*' His account underscores how diversification of skills has become a strategy to manage risk, reflecting the precarious nature of the labour market and young people's diminished trust in the potential of academic degrees alone to support a decent standard of living.

For many young men, in particular, aspirations have shifted from formal education to self-employment and running small businesses, which are viewed as pathways to greater autonomy and stability. Others who were forced to leave education entirely continued to demonstrate resilience by pursuing alternative learning opportunities. A young Palestinian woman from Ein el-Hilweh camp shared that:

*I had to leave my education because of the situation... I had to start working... I never gave up on my dream to become a nurse... I am saving up money every month to collect the registration fees and register.*

Across groups, young people showed remarkable flexibility in responding to systemic failures. Some combined work and study to cover basic costs, whereas others turned to free online courses, language learning, and vocational or economic empowerment programmes provided by NGOs. Online learning, although challenging, was still embraced by some as a way to keep their education on track. These adaptations highlight how young people have continuously recalibrated their plans, prioritising pathways that offered not only income but also a sense of security and independence. Education, while under severe strain, remained valued; yet its pursuit was increasingly shaped by pragmatism, resilience, and the need to hedge against an uncertain future.

The experience of a Lebanese young woman from Baalbek (see box1) vividly illustrates how overlapping crises have reshaped youth ambitions in Lebanon.

### Box 1: Different paths of adaptations: case study of a Lebanese young woman

In 2019, the young woman had articulated a clear vision for her future: *'I want to be like my older sister, I want to study and work in Beirut.'* At that time, higher education symbolised both personal advancement and social mobility. However, the cascading effects of economic collapse, political instability and the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic quickly eroded her confidence and narrowed her imagined future. By 2020, her ambitions had already shifted: *'I just want to finish school now... I don't know if I will be able to go to university... I stopped dreaming about anything.'*

The financial collapse that intensified in 2021 forced her to assume new responsibilities. With her family barely able to cover her siblings' school fees, she abandoned the idea of pursuing university and instead began providing private lessons to school students to generate income: *'I cannot go to university... my younger sisters are in school and their education is more important. My family can barely cover theirs... I started working.'* The reprioritisation of her siblings' education over her own highlights the familial responsibilities that often shape adolescent girls' trajectories in fragile contexts.

In 2022, she attempted to pursue a vocational path, enrolling in a TVET institute (technical and vocational education and training) as a compromise between her ambitions and financial constraints: *'I am working and I registered in a [TVET] institute... It's closer than the Lebanese University and transportation costs are cheaper.'* Yet, by 2023, rising costs once again curtailed her education: *'I had to leave the [TVET] institute because the fees are too high... I can't pay it anymore... I am learning skincare.'*

What followed was a gradual pivot toward entrepreneurship, enabled by family support and personal determination. In 2024, she and her sister began providing skincare services at home and selling beauty products online: *'My sister and I started working in skincare [from home] and selling beauty products [online]... My family helped us start our work.'* By 2025, this small initiative had expanded into a modest business: *'My sister now works in candles and I work in skincare... I opened a small salon in a room above our house... I am also learning make-up... Our business is doing well.'*

Her trajectory encapsulates the shift from education-based dreams to survival-driven choices, shaped by systemic collapse and intersecting crises. Although the disruption of her formal education reflects the precarity of young people's trajectories in Lebanon, her persistence and entrepreneurial pivot highlight resilience, adaptability, and the capacity to reimagine futures even within constrained environments

### Palestinian youth: educational ambitions under structural restrictions

For Palestinian young people in Lebanon, ambitions around education and work are profoundly shaped (and often curtailed) by structural exclusion. Restricted access to universities, limited fields of study, and exclusion from many professions collectively undermine the perceived value of education. As one Palestinian young woman explained: *'I didn't study psychology at all because I don't have rights in Lebanon, so I didn't study... Even if you studied and got a degree, not everyone would hire you... Even if you work, your salary is small.'* For many young people, such systemic discrimination means that even higher education cannot guarantee economic security, reinforcing the belief that investing in education is futile.

Consequently, many Palestinian boys leave school early, turning instead to trades, small businesses or informal work as strategies to build independence and stability. These choices, however, remain precarious, shaped by instability both within the camps and in Lebanon more broadly. One young man reflected:

*I had been thinking about opening a second barber shop, but all of that got cancelled... because we need to see what's going to happen. The money I have now is for food and daily needs. If I invest all my capital in merchandise and war breaks out again, I'll starve.*

Such testimonies underscore how conflict and economic uncertainty force youth to prioritise immediate survival over long-term planning, stalling entrepreneurial aspirations.

For girls, structural barriers intersect with entrenched gender norms to further limit opportunities. Families may deprioritise girls' education, yet the economic crisis has also forced some to enter the workforce as household financial pressures deepen. Nonetheless, their pathways are shaped by high tuition fees and constrained educational and professional opportunities, which compel many to settle for fields with little future. The 2024 war exacerbated these challenges: disrupted semesters, poor-quality online learning, and unprepared exams pushed many students to abandon their studies, leading to heightened dropout rates and psychological stress.

Ultimately, Palestinian young people's stories reflect a pervasive sense of disillusionment with formal education. Seeing their educated peers being unemployed or underpaid reinforces mistrust in the system, while repeated crises erode ambitions further. Yet, even within these constraints, resilience is evident: some persist in reopening businesses, supporting their families or building modest futures. Still, their aspirations remain fragile, continually reshaped by systemic exclusion, economic collapse, and recurring instability inside the camps or in Lebanon more broadly.

### Syrian youth: interrupted educational ambitions during displacement

For Syrian young people in Lebanon, displacement has been the decisive rupture that has reshaped their lives and ambitions. Dreams of education, home-building or marriage were replaced by a sense of life 'on hold'. As one Syrian young man living in a collective shelter in Baalbek explained:

*If you were in Syria... you would study, build something for yourself, buy a house, buy a car, get engaged and married... It's different when you come as a refugee and you're stuck and things are difficult... You find that every day, late at night, you have worries, responsibilities... You can't sleep comfortably.*

His testimony captures how displacement has prematurely forced boys into adult responsibilities, burdening them with the pressure of work, financial survival, and constant worry rather than allowing them to pursue long-term aspirations.

Economic pressures and poor-quality education drive most boys out of school into precarious work, while many girls are pushed into early marriage. For married girls, early marriage not only puts an end to their dreams but also reshapes their imagined futures for any children they have. Survival consumes every resource, leaving little space for education or long-term investment. As one Syrian young mother reflected:

*We live day-by-day. I don't think about educating my children or about the future. Perhaps in Syria, we can build a house and educate our children, because it is our country. We hope the situation in Syria will become safe so we can return.*

Legal restrictions in Lebanon deepen this sense of stagnation. Syrian youth cannot easily own property, register assets or secure rights that would allow them to invest in their futures. This lack of recognition reinforces the perception that no matter how hard they work, their aspirations will remain unfulfilled. For young men, this often results in feelings of futility and frustration.

For young women, facing additional gendered restrictions, the double rupture of war and exile has meant interrupted studies, abandoned training and collapsed opportunities. Their ambitions were deferred first by conflict in Syria and then by restrictions in Lebanon. Yet some married girls, through persistence, have managed to negotiate and gain more freedom to participate in NGO-run vocational education opportunities that were themselves repeatedly interrupted by ongoing crises.

### Syrian girls reimagining futures amid change

For many married Syrian girls, the political shifts linked to the fall of the Assad regime revived ambitions that had long been suspended. The possibility of return to Syria has reignited hope that interrupted studies could be resumed, recognised, and translated into employment opportunities. As one Syrian young mother living in an informal tented settlement in Baalbek explained:

*The fall of the regime meant there was hope that we would return... that those who studied before and did not complete their studies would complete them, and they would be given salaries... So we have a little hope that we will return and complete our studies on our own.*

This testimony highlights how education remains deeply valued, not only as an individual aspiration but as a pathway to stability and social recognition.

Ambitions, however, extend beyond education. For some married girls and young women, the prospect of return to Syria has also opened up space to imagine futures that had been restricted by their husband or in-laws in Lebanon. For instance, one Syrian young mother living in a collective shelter in Baalbek explained that: 'I told my husband that I want to work and earn an income because he doesn't send me money [he migrated]. My husband told me that when we return to Syria, he'll allow me to open a beauty salon.' Her account reflects how geography and political context fundamentally shape women's agency: although life in Lebanon is experienced as constraining, return to Syria (even though still fragile) offers the imagined possibility of independence, entrepreneurship and social mobility.

Beyond the anticipation of return, the economic pressures of displacement – debt, rising expenses and precarious livelihoods – have pushed some girls and young women to rethink their futures. The burden of survival labour in agriculture or domestic work has generated aspirations for more sustainable income-generating roles, such as running small projects or businesses. These emerging ambitions highlight a shift from passivity to agency, as girls seek to reduce their dependence on unstable, underpaid work, and secure greater control over their futures.

In short, Syrian girls' reimagined futures reveal both resilience and constraint. Economic pressures have sparked new forms of ambition rooted in survival, while political shifts have revived long-standing aspirations for education and independent livelihoods. Yet these hopes remain contingent, shaped less by individual will than by the broader dynamics of war, displacement and return.



### Young men's transitions and the unemployment crisis

Transitions to adulthood, particularly for young men, are strongly framed around work, which is widely seen as a marker of dignity, maturity, and the ability to shoulder family responsibilities. Employment not only provides material stability but also affirms young men's social role as breadwinners, shaping their sense of identity and belonging within their families and communities.

However, Lebanon's economic collapse and protracted instability have severely eroded these pathways. Widespread unemployment blocks ambitions, leaving young men in prolonged states of joblessness that feel corrosive and purposeless. The absence of decent work opportunities has pushed many away from career-building trajectories toward short-term survival strategies, undermining both their self-worth and their long-term aspirations. As one Lebanese young man in Baalbek explained, *'Unemployment affects everything, and it also affects our psychology. We feel like we're wasting a lot of time for no reason. Unemployment makes us constantly think negative thoughts.'* His words highlight how unemployment extends beyond material deprivation, affecting psychological well-being and feeding cycles of frustration and despair.

Another young man reflected on his stalled transition to adulthood, linking years of education to a lack of tangible opportunities:

*I've never done anything in my life. Since I met you [GAGE researcher] six years ago, I've never done anything in my life... All I did was study at university, but I couldn't find a job. I don't see a clear future ahead of me.*

His narrative underscores how higher education – once seen as the primary route to employment – has become increasingly disconnected from labour market realities. Instead of providing opportunities, it often culminates in disappointment and disillusionment.

Together, these accounts illustrate how economic collapse has reshaped young men's imagined futures. Rather than envisioning stable careers or long-term goals, many now orient themselves toward precarious, short-term strategies for survival. In this context, unemployment is not merely an economic challenge but a profound disruption to the life course, eroding young men's ability to achieve social recognition, undermining their psychological well-being, and preventing them from fulfilling key markers of adulthood.

### Marriage under crisis: a fading milestone for youth

In Lebanon's protracted economic collapse, marriage – once a central milestone of adulthood – has become increasingly unattainable for young people. Widespread unemployment, low salaries and rising living costs have transformed what was once a normative expectation into a distant aspiration, with many now perceiving that creating their own family is financially impossible.

Young men, in particular, expressed the burden of needing stable employment and housing before marriage – prerequisites that have become almost unattainable. As one Lebanese young man from Baalbek reflected:

*There are specialised job opportunities but the salaries are very low. Salaries are only enough to cover the expenses of one person and it is not enough to build a future with it... I mean to build a house, to get married, to have children and give them a better life than mine. See how simple our dreams are, and we cannot achieve even these simple dreams.*

Women's accounts also highlight how men's economic struggles indirectly constrain their marriage prospects, contributing to what some describe as a rise in *'spinsterhood'*. As one Lebanese young woman put it, *'There is a problem now with spinsterhood... Girls are not getting married because young men are not able to afford marriage.'* Here, marriage delay is not rooted in shifting cultural values but in the structural collapse of men's ability to meet economic expectations, which reverberates across gendered life trajectories.

For many young people, marriage is no longer seen as a secure or aspirational path but as a high-risk endeavour in a collapsing economy. Rather than entering unions burdened by debt and instability, some young people expressed disinterest in marriage altogether, prioritising short-term survival, income generation and individual autonomy. This signals a significant reorientation of youth aspirations: whereas marriage was once seen as the natural marker of adulthood, it is increasingly sidelined in favour of strategies that focus on coping, resilience, and maintaining independence amid crisis.

### Impact of overlapping crises on family relationships

The overlapping crises in Lebanon since 2019 have profoundly reshaped how young people perceive and enact their roles within their families. Successive shocks, including the pandemic, the deepening economic collapse, and the 2024 war, have intensified young people's awareness of their families' struggles and pushed them to take on greater responsibilities for household survival. Tasks and roles traditionally held by parents have increasingly fallen to adolescents and young people, who have become active contributors to family income, caregiving, and emotional



support, even if the income-generating opportunities are often poorly remunerated and precarious (see discussion above).

These experiences have redefined agency within families. Whereas before the crises, many young people articulated a desire for independence and personal autonomy, hardship has shifted aspirations toward collective security and solidarity. As one Lebanese young man from Baalbek reflected:

*We went through a period where we wanted independence and freedom, but after the war, I felt that I didn't want independence or freedom, and my attachment to my family and my people increased... I feared for them being harmed... I felt that a person without a family is nothing.*

His words reveal how overlapping crises have reinforced the primacy of family as a source of safety, belonging and identity, reorienting youth agency around protection and responsibility rather than autonomy.

This pattern has also been reflected in marital relationships. For some Syrian women, shared hardship and fear of loss have strengthened bonds with their spouse, transforming relationships marked by tension into ones characterised by renewed closeness. A Syrian young mother in Baalbek explained the impact on her relationship with her husband:

*Before the war, I always argued with my husband, but the war brought us closer together. I was afraid of losing my husband, my children, or one of my family members. I felt I needed to renew my bonds with my friends and family.*

At the same time, the valorisation of family responsibility has come with some trade-offs. Although stronger family ties have offered comfort, stability and collective coping in the absence of effective state, institutional or community support, they have also postponed or curtailed individual ambitions. Adulthood and maturity have increasingly been defined not by autonomy and independence but by fulfilling obligations toward family. This has reinforced interdependence as a form of resilience, but also created tensions between the pursuit of personal goals and the imperative of sustaining family solidarity.

### Multi-crises reduce youth ambitions to mere survival

The cascading crises in Lebanon have progressively eroded young people's capacity to imagine futures beyond survival, leaving ambitions narrowed to the most basic goals of safety and survival. Youth increasingly describe their lives as reduced to '*living day by day*', with each crisis wiping out not only material resources but also the psychological energy to aspire. As one Palestinian young man from Ein el-Hilweh camp put it starkly, '*We feel exhaustion. Exhaustion. Exhaustion. Exhaustion. And lots of exclamation marks around all what we went through since 2019 until now... We feel anxiety and stress.*'

Constant exposure to instability and fear has left many young people feeling prematurely aged, comparing themselves unfavourably with peers abroad who achieve milestones that now seem unattainable. A Palestinian young woman from Ein el-Hilweh camp explained how this has affected her:

*It affects my psyche and affects my life and I get angry... It means our lives are no longer like those of young people. Seriously, I see people my age achieving things in their lives, but I haven't done anything yet... In Lebanon, we work to eat and drink, waiting for war to come and for us to die.*

This narrowing of horizons has reshaped young people's daily lives: keeping emergency bags permanently packed with documents and clothes, hoarding cash at home, and viewing employment as fragile and easily disrupted. Ambition itself has been reframed away from traditional milestones (such as education, career-building or marriage) toward the modest goal of maintaining stability in the face of repeated shocks.

Despite this deep disillusionment, some youth articulate conditional forms of hope tied to small, tangible improvements. Salary adjustments or brief periods of economic relief generate optimism and spark short-lived aspirations for development. Yet this optimism remains fragile and situational, quickly eroded by the resurgence of conflict or the absence of structural reforms. The inability to recover from past crises – particularly the 2024 war – has left many young people unable to imagine a future in the long term. Instead, youth fluctuate between fleeting moments of optimism and entrenched pessimism, reinforcing a sense of being trapped in cycles of instability where the future appears '*more ruined*'.

Ultimately, the repeated layering of crises has produced a generation whose ambitions have been hollowed out and whose agency is curtailed by conditions beyond their control. What persists is not a vision of progress but the determination to endure, even if only one day at a time.

## Exercising voice and agency in the community

War and displacement have deeply fractured the social fabric of Baalbek and Ein el-Hilweh, eroding trust and reshaping patterns of solidarity. The arrival of new refugees alongside the departure of others has disrupted long-standing networks of familiarity in Baalbek, leaving youth surrounded by strangers and engulfed in a sense of crowding and social chaos. This rupture has undermined continuity and belonging, particularly for Syrian young people who feel suspended between two places: Lebanon, which has become socially familiar but precarious, and Syria, which feels increasingly distant and uncertain.

Crises have exposed the fragility of solidarity networks. Support was often limited to the nuclear family, as extended kin and neighbours withdrew assistance under conditions of scarcity. For many youth, this withdrawal bred profound disillusionment, fuelling feelings of betrayal and abandonment. A Syrian young mother in Baalbek described how, *'During the war, I found out that no one really loves you... I told you that one no longer trusts anyone, that you can't trust anyone... This is what changed me the most.'* Her testimony highlights how repeated crises have not only destabilised livelihoods but also corroded interpersonal trust, pushing young people to rely solely on themselves or their immediate families.

Lebanese young people, too, articulate fear of rising extremism and polarisation, underscoring how fragile social cohesion has become. As one young man from Baalbek put it:

*What we fear is waves of extremism... There's more fanaticism, more extremism. I'm telling you – The Lebanese people need something to latch onto – anything they can grab to dive into the conflict.*

This observation points to how political and sectarian fragmentation amplifies the erosion of solidarity and magnifies perceptions of insecurity.

For Palestinian youth in Ein el-Hilweh, these fractures are felt through heightened sectarian divides, which often leave them feeling unwelcome. One young woman recalled:

*I don't know, I felt people hated each other more after the war... There wasn't much love, and people drifted apart. People kept saying, 'This one is Shiite, this one is Sunni, this one is Christian, this one is Palestinian.'*

The battles in Ein el-Hilweh camp also deepened stigma within young Palestinians' community, making them feel further isolated. Many now see the camp itself as fragmented, hostile, and trapped in cycles of mistrust. One young woman stated, *'The lack of security in the camp makes you feel that you've become worthless, and many other ugly feelings.'* This highlights how conflict has eroded young people's sense of safety, dignity and belonging, even within their own community.

Geographic inequalities further sharpen these divides. Young people, especially Lebanese young people, perceive stark contrasts between regions, viewing some areas as safer or offering better prospects, while their own communities are marked by violence, deprivation and stagnation. These perceptions feed dissatisfaction and generate dreams of mobility, with migration to other parts of the country seen as a potential escape from fractured and unequal social worlds.

Together, these experiences underscore how crises have left young people navigating fragmented and hostile social landscapes. Trust has eroded, solidarity has weakened, and belonging has become conditional and fragile. What remains is the urgent search for spaces of inclusion and recognition in contexts that increasingly feel defined by division and exclusion.

## Impact of crises on youth perceptions of mobilisation

Years of overlapping crises in Lebanon have left young people profoundly disillusioned with the prospects of collective action. Whereas earlier moments of protest carried aspirations for change, today they are remembered primarily as moments of collapse and loss. For many, mobilisation has become associated not with transformation, but with deepening crisis, sectarian division and economic deterioration.

Lebanese young people reflect on the October 2019 uprising with bitterness. What was initially embraced as a national call for reform is now seen as ineffective and fragmented. As one young man from Baalbek observed there is a growing view that only rupture through conflict can upend Lebanon's entrenched sectarian system: *'That was not a revolution. It does not work in that way. They were not serious... Only when there is violence can we achieve something... Or a war can change the situation, nothing else.'*

For Syrian refugees, mobilisation is perceived as not only futile but dangerous. Memories of conflict and displacement reinforce fears of repression, while their precarious legal and social status in Lebanon heightens the risks of participation. A Syrian young man gave his view of why the failed revolution in Lebanon was actually for the best:

*The revolution you have... thank God you didn't complete it, otherwise you would have fallen into the same mistake as us... Not a single positive thing came out of the revolution... such as the rise of the dollar at the time, the rise in prices, fuel and gasoline, the diesel crisis...*

Palestinian young people expressed similar disillusionment about collective action. Linking the 2019 protests directly to cascading crises, one young woman from Ein el-Hilweh reflected that, *'In 2019, the protests began, and then coronavirus began, and then the dollar rose... It all destroyed us... We're still living, but our lives have changed... I mean, one lives, but there's no longer life.'*

Across groups, political engagement is increasingly seen as a privilege reserved for those who can afford to take the risks involved. For many young people, the daily struggle to secure income and survive ongoing crises takes precedence over mobilisation. The result is widespread withdrawal from political life, driven by a belief that participation is either useless or actively harmful. As these testimonies show, disillusionment has replaced earlier optimism, and the notion of revolution has shifted from hope for transformation to a symbol of instability, poverty and loss.

#### Caught between protection and peril: Palestinian youth debates on weapons

Palestinian young people in Ein el-Hilweh camp articulate profound ambivalence regarding weapons, caught between the desire for safety and the recognition that arms perpetuate cycles of violence. Their perspectives reveal the precarious balance between protection and peril, shaped by both lived insecurity and historical trauma, where weapons embody both risk and necessity.

For many young women, weapons are seen primarily as drivers of fear and instability. They argue that arms should be regulated or restricted to state control, emphasising the destruction that unchecked weapons bring to their communities. Yet, disarmament is not straightforward. As one young woman expressed, *'In the end, either Israel will kill us, or we will kill each other... So I feel that there's no future for the camp, we will all die in it... The battles never end in the camp, they're still going on.'*

Male perspectives often draw sharper distinctions between types of weaponry. Although heavy arms such as RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades) are associated with organised clashes between factions, personal firearms are viewed as the root of everyday violence and insecurity. A young man from the camp explained the limitations of the state's selective priorities in disarmament:

*Personal weapons aren't monitored or tracked. If I argue with you, I could just go grab my pistol and shoot you... Heavy arms and RPGs – they're only used in battles. Personal weapons are the problem. But the state primarily wants to go after heavy and medium ones.*

This division reflects a wider tension in Palestinian youth narratives. On the one hand, weapons are seen as sources of chaos that undermine community security; on the other, the prospect of disarmament raises fears of defencelessness against persecution or forced displacement. Calls for disarmament are thus often conditional; youth argue that such calls must apply equally to all armed actors in Lebanon, not just to Palestinians, otherwise it risks further entrenching their vulnerability.

Ultimately, these debates illustrate how young people in Ein el-Hilweh camp live in an enduring state of insecurity, where choices about arms are framed less as ideological commitments and more as survival strategies. Their ambivalence reflects broader mistrust in state neutrality, and highlights the impossible trade-offs youth must navigate in contexts where neither armed groups nor the state guarantee safety.



Ein el-Hilweh camp, Lebanon © Marcel Saleh/GAGE 2025



### Limited civic safe spaces

Young people across Lebanon consistently describe a profound absence of safe and trusted civic spaces where they can share opinions or engage in dialogue. Fear of judgement, harassment or even violence – particularly around politics and sectarian issues – discourages most from speaking openly. As one Palestinian young woman in Ein el-Hilweh camp explained:

*The idea of having a space for youth to talk freely together is scary because you're afraid someone might harass you or someone from the other side might stalk you... It's not good because it causes more problems.*

Community and institutional platforms are rarely perceived as inclusive or supportive. Instead, young people often confine their views to the private space of the family, where dialogue feels safer but limited in reach. Public forums, schools and community centres are described as hostile, unsafe or controlled by political factions, reinforcing youth disengagement. Political and sectarian tensions following the 2024 war and the fall of the Assad regime further discouraged many from expressing their views openly, making silence a form of self-protection. In contrast, spaces such as those provided by GAGE research were often seen as rare exceptions, providing uniquely safe, non-judgemental and supportive environments. However, youth stress that these are not part of their everyday lives and remain exceptional rather than systemic.

Palestinian young people, particularly girls, reported heightened fears of surveillance and harassment in community spaces, especially after episodes of conflict within the camp. This has deepened their reluctance to engage publicly, narrowing their social and civic worlds further. Similarly, Syrian young people often described a sense of invisibility, emphasising that their voices are not valued in Lebanon's public sphere. As one Syrian young man from Baalbek observed, 'Many young men and women have opinions and ideas, but no one here listens to them. Young people here don't find anyone to listen to them.'

The absence of safe spaces for civic engagement fosters self-censorship, fragments youth participation, and isolates young people, with girls especially excluded from civic life. This lack of voice not only undermines individual confidence and agency but also perpetuates broader patterns of exclusion. Many young people call for the creation of youth associations and independent platforms dedicated to amplifying young people's perspectives. Such calls highlight both the yearning for opportunities to participate and the structural barriers that deny young people opportunities to engage meaningfully in shaping their communities.



Photo by Adolescent Lebanese Girl, Baalbek © GAGE 2025



### Constraints on refugees participating in Lebanese society

Young refugees in Lebanon described living under conditions of near-complete political and civic exclusion. Their marginalisation is reinforced by fear of arrest, scapegoating and targeted violence, which silence their voices and prevent them from participating in protests, advocacy or decision-making processes. As one Palestinian adolescent boy from Ein el-Hilweh camp explained:

*We are living the same pain as the Lebanese because we are living in the same country... We are with the protests but we cannot go with them to the streets... They [Lebanese armed forces] will arrest the Palestinians first if they go. If anything happens [violence], they blame Palestinians for it.*

For Syrian young people, political silencing has been doubly reinforced – first through repression in Syria, and then through exclusion in Lebanon. A young Palestinian woman from Syria reflected on this continuity, stating, ‘*Since the time in Syria, we’re forbidden to talk about politics, the law, and anything else. The fear of talking is still implanted in me... I’m afraid they’ll take me to a security station, for example.*’ Fear of surveillance, arrest or harassment not only curtails public expression but also shapes deep internalised self-censorship. For many, silence becomes a survival strategy, even when Lebanon’s crisis affects their lives as much as those of Lebanese citizens.

Sectarian divisions and entrenched refugee status laws exacerbate these dynamics, positioning refugees as perpetual outsiders with limited rights. Although Palestinian youth sometimes have access to political structures through camp-based factions, Syrian youth lack even these minimal civic channels, leaving them particularly invisible. Both groups expressed frustration that their perspectives are unwanted in Lebanese society, with Syrians increasingly interpreting exclusion, corruption and dwindling aid as signals that Lebanon would rather see them return than engage locally.

The consequences of this civic exclusion are profound. Young people articulate a strong sense of invisibility, irrelevance and alienation, reinforcing withdrawal from public life. Despite living through the same economic collapse, political instability and social tensions as their Lebanese peers, refugee youth feel structurally silenced. Their exclusion underscores how displacement produces not only material deprivation but also the erosion of voice and agency, with long-term consequences for both personal development and social cohesion.

### Safe spaces nurture voice and agency

The creation of safe and supportive spaces has been central to enabling young people, and particularly girls, to gain the confidence to develop leadership skills and to actively participate. In contexts where gender norms, sectarian divides and displacement typically silence young voices, initiatives such as GAGE research activities have provided rare platforms where young people feel their opinions are heard, valued and respected. These spaces have allowed participants to experience self-expression as a right rather than a risk, with transformative effects on their sense of self and civic engagement.

Girls described this shift as particularly profound. One Syrian adolescent mother from Baalbek reflected that:

*Before coming here [GAGE], I did not know what having an opinion means. Nobody asks girls about their opinions. I did not talk because I did not know I can have an opinion on anything. Now I know that girls too can talk and have an opinion, and that changed me a lot.*

Similarly, a Lebanese young woman from Baalbek explained how safe spaces enabled her to develop new methods of expression and to connect their personal reflections with wider political debates and moments of collective mobilisation:

*I used to be a timid girl, but with GAGE, I learned how to express myself and deliver my points of view to a group of people. I learned to do that using my voice by also through using photos and videography. During the 2019 [anti-government] protests, I used both methods to deliver my voice and express myself.*

Crucially, these safe spaces did more than enhance young people’s communication skills. They fostered critical thinking, problem-solving, and solidarity among peers, reinforcing the confidence to engage in decision-making and civic activities. By enabling young people to imagine themselves as contributors rather than passive observers, safe spaces nurture long-term civic identity and lay the foundation for leadership. In doing so, they challenge entrenched cycles of exclusion and silence, particularly for girls, who have generally been denied platforms for voice and agency.

### Digital civic voice

Although digital platforms might appear to provide new opportunities for youth engagement, in Lebanon they have often reproduced rather than mitigated offline divisions, fears and silencing. Young people consistently described social media as unsafe for political expression, fearing insults, sectarian backlash or even threats to their security. This perception has generated widespread self-censorship, with most young people and young adults avoiding political debates online and restricting such conversations to private family settings. As one Lebanese young man from Baalbek explained, *'I never talk about politics on social media... If we comment, post a comment, or share any topic on social media, we will receive insults from some.'*

For those who attempt to voice political critiques online, the consequences can be socially costly, leading to conflict within households and wider community networks. A Lebanese young woman from Baalbek reflected on the ways in which family and community surveillance on youth digital expression reinforces existing hierarchies and norms and discourages dissent:

*I keep sharing on social media quotes and videos that criticise the religious leaders and the politicians... This has caused me huge fights with my family as people would call them, complaining about what I am saying on Facebook and asking them to make me delete it.*

Gender further narrows these spaces: girls, especially refugees, face additional scrutiny and cultural expectations that stigmatise their public political voice, compounding risks of online harassment or familial pressure. Syrian youth also noted that entrenched sectarian divisions make political speech on social media particularly dangerous. As one Syrian young woman living in a collective shelter in Baalbek explained, *'We don't have the high culture that enables us to talk about political topics on social media. We're afraid to talk about political topics on social media. Because there are [sectarian] problems.'*

Rather than offering safer or more democratic avenues for social and political engagement, digital platforms mirror and amplify offline vulnerabilities, leaving young people cautious, isolated and largely absent from online civic debates. In this context, digital spaces have not expanded political voice but instead reinforced its fragility, reflecting the deep mistrust and risks shaping youth civic participation in Lebanon.



Photo by young Lebanese woman, Baalbek © GAGE 2025

## Exercising voice and agency in the civic and political arena

Young people in Lebanon consistently articulate a profound sense of disillusionment with the state, often encapsulated in the conviction that *'there is no state'*. The government is described as absent during moments of crisis and indifferent to citizens' suffering, reinforcing feelings of neglect and abandonment. As one Palestinian young woman from Ein El-Hilweh camp bluntly stated, *'There is no state... It's asleep.'*

This disillusionment is not confined to the most recent war but is understood as a chronic condition rooted in a long history of political failures. Economic collapse, Covid-19, armed clashes, and repeated episodes of violence are interpreted as evidence of systemic dysfunction rather than temporary weakness. For young people, these overlapping crises have cemented the perception of institutions as passive, inactive, and incapable of reform. A Lebanese young woman from Baalbek explained: *'After the war, the government didn't check us at all, they didn't care... We don't have governmental monitoring in Beqaa and Baalbek especially.'*

Young people also describe themselves as doubly unprotected – neither the state nor dominant non-state actors are seen as credible guarantors of safety. The army and powerful political parties, once considered sources of protection, are now perceived as equally indifferent. As one Lebanese young man from Baalbek put it: *'Today, neither the army will protect you, nor [a political party] will protect you. You'll have to defend yourselves. It's up to the people.'*

The alienation is so profound that the presence or absence of political leadership is increasingly seen as irrelevant to everyday life. Although the election of a new president in January 2025 and the formation of a government briefly raised hopes, this optimism quickly faded as youth realised that there would be no meaningful change in protection or governance. A Syrian young man living in a collective shelter in Baalbek summed it up starkly: *'Honestly... The Lebanese government is neither honest nor just toward the Syrians, nor the Palestinians, nor, indeed, the Lebanese people.'*

In this climate of abandonment, young people plan their lives as if the state does not exist. They normalise its absence, relying instead on family networks, communities or external actors for survival. This normalisation of state failure profoundly narrows how they imagine their futures: with no faith in institutions to deliver stability or justice, ambitions shift inward toward mere survival or outward toward migration, rather than being grounded in hopes of local reform. Disillusionment with the state is thus not only a political sentiment but also a structural constraint, shaping the horizon of possibility for an entire generation.

## Fragmented national identity and trust in community

Young people in Lebanon describe national identity as increasingly fragile, fragmented and contested, shaped by both sectarian divisions and the state's weakness. Sectarianism remains a defining fault line, eroding a shared sense of belonging. As one Lebanese young man from Baalbek explained:

*If you want to talk about belonging, you must talk about people's love for you and their acceptance of you. But in general, people don't accept each other... Muslims are divided into multiple categories, such as Sunnis and Shiites, while Christians are divided into several categories... All of these groups accuse each other of being infidels – a sense of belonging based on exclusion, hostility toward others, and this does not serve anyone's interests.*

Such reflections highlight how sectarian fragmentation deepened in the wake of crises and war, reinforcing a sense of exclusion and mistrust. Belonging becomes conditional on recognition by one's sect or community, but many youth perceive only rejection, leaving them ambivalent toward Lebanon as a national project.

For others, it is not only sectarianism but the weakness of the state that undermines a sense of collective national identity. A Lebanese young woman from Baalbek observed: *'We cannot call it a state because it cannot do anything and cannot protect its people... The Lebanese people are strong. We are the state... But, Lebanese people are divided. They are not united.'*

These accounts suggest that for many young people, 'Lebanon' no longer functions as a unifying category. National identity is fractured: some reject it outright, while others see it as an unrealised aspiration undermined by both sectarianism and chronic governance failure. The absence of accountability further deepens alienation, with some young people explicitly stating that *'it's not our country'*. In this context, belonging is redefined away from national institutions and toward narrower, more fragile forms of community rooted in family, sect or local networks.



### Resilience forged through hardship

In contrast to widespread disillusionment, some young people frame crises and war as moments that strengthened their attachment to Lebanon. Identity here is anchored less in state institutions than in homeland as an existential necessity. As a Lebanese young man from Baalbek reflected:

*I feel more attached to Lebanon now than before. Because a person without a homeland is considered a person without a presence... When any area is bombed, I feel my heart will stop... I always want Lebanon to be better, but this is the reality... Each of us has a responsibility.*

This sense of responsibility recasts agency: not as autonomy or state-supported citizenship, but as the duty to endure, contribute and persist despite uncertainty. In this framing, belonging is maintained through endurance and collective commitment rather than institutional guarantees.

Other young people emphasised resilience as rooted in the people themselves, not the state. One Lebanese young woman stated:

*This is what I saw in the Lebanese people: a strong people. We have endured many hardships and wars, but the people have remained patient. We are a mighty and strong people. The state didn't do anything. The people did everything... The war ended in November. In December, we celebrated Christmas because life must go on.*

These reflections highlight how resilience is socially and culturally forged, transcending sectarian and political divisions. Some youth articulate a vision of citizenship grounded in solidarity with fellow Lebanese – an aspirational form of inclusive citizenship that contrasts sharply with the fragmentation of everyday life. Even in contexts of state collapse and sectarian divides, resilience narratives reveal how young people reclaim dignity and belonging through collective endurance, perseverance and continuity.



Photo by adolescent Palestinian girl, Ein el-Hilweh Camp © GAGE 2025

### Disillusionment and migration ambitions

Deep distrust in Lebanon's state institutions has redirected young people's ambitions outward. The state is widely perceived as absent, ineffective, and incapable of providing security, dignity, or opportunity. As one Lebanese young man in Baalbek explained: *'The state without a war doesn't do anything, let alone during a war. I wish I was outside Lebanon altogether... You're asking about identity and belonging, but I don't feel any in Lebanon.'*

Disillusionment reframes migration not as a luxury, but as a survival strategy. Youth describe leaving Lebanon as the only pathway to safety, dignity, opportunities and stability when hope at home has collapsed. A Lebanese young woman stated: *'If I have the opportunity to travel, I will. Lebanon is a beautiful country... I love Lebanon very much, but it lacks security and safety.'*

For many, migration ambitions coexist with lingering attachment to Lebanon. The desire to leave does not erase belonging, but reflects the impossibility of building secure futures under conditions of crisis and state failure. As one young woman from Baalbek observed: *'We want to emigrate to a respectable country. We want to emigrate to a country that respects its people. If things improve in Lebanon, all expatriates will return to Lebanon.'*

Migration thus represents both an escape from an unliveable present and a conditional hope – a vision of return that depends on systemic reform and the restoration of dignity at home.

### Palestinian youth and state indifference

For Palestinian young people, camps symbolise both physical and social isolation. Living in camps is perceived not only as a condition of exclusion but as evidence of state neglect, with limited safety, services and protection. As one Palestinian young man in Wavel camp explained:

*If we weren't living in the Palestinian camps, we would've felt more connected to Lebanon... We're not integrated in the society because we're living in a camp... We are not immersed in the Lebanese culture.*

Many young Palestinians believe the Lebanese state ultimately wants them to leave. This fuels mistrust, insecurity, and a sense of being unwanted. As a young woman from Ein El-Hilweh camp stated:

*I know that Lebanon wants the Palestinians to leave... Palestinians from 1948 have been in Lebanon... They're still the same, without rights, without dignity, without an identity, without anything, and without a future... At least the Syrians can go back to their country now. Where will the Palestinians go?*



Even after decades in Lebanon, Palestinians remain without recognised rights, dignity or identity. Unlike Syrians, who speak of return, Palestinians feel trapped between statelessness and exclusion. At the same time, many reject the idea of naturalisation, seeing it as erasure of Palestinian identity and betrayal of their cause. Instead, they demand dignity, protection and civic rights as long-term residents, while preserving their Palestinian identity.

Youth narratives reflect this tension: Lebanon is described with affection as the country that 'embraced' them, yet also as a place of systemic rejection. Experiences vary; whereas some young people describe isolation from their Lebanese peers, others highlight friendships and daily interactions. Crises have sharpened these contradictions, intensifying rejection in some cases, but also fostering moments of solidarity, such as when Palestinians sheltered displaced Lebanese families during the recent war. Palestinian youth thus navigate a paradoxical reality: feeling both at home and unwanted, tied to Lebanon yet denied a future within it.

#### Syrian youth: disillusioned yet torn between two homes

Years of displacement have left Syrian young people deeply adapted to life in Lebanon. They have built familiarity with its daily routines, schools, friendships, and even social norms, to the point where Lebanon now feels socially familiar and emotionally grounding. Yet this familiarity is accompanied by profound disillusionment: Lebanon is seen as unwelcoming, collapsing economically, and unwilling to offer Syrians security or belonging.

At the same time, Syria – imagined as the motherland – feels distant, uncertain, and fraught with barriers to return. Fear of renewed violence, political instability, lack of housing, scarce job opportunities, and the high cost of rebuilding all discourage the possibility of going back. As one Syrian adolescent boy in Baalbek explained: *'It's hard to return. In the end, you want a house, you want land, and you want money. That means it's very difficult and you're afraid to return... Our area is very rural in Syria.'*

This double positioning leaves young people feeling torn: Lebanon feels like the place that raised them, but it does not welcome them; Syria feels like their rightful home, but one they are estranged from. A Syrian young mother in Baalbek described this painful contradiction:

*Before, I used to feel like, yeah, I was definitely a refugee. But now, Syria is free... You feel this word [refugee] is humiliating... Here [in Lebanon], they make you feel like it is... 'These refugees' – that's how you hear it on the street. You feel diminished.*

The result is a layered identity of partial belonging and exclusion in both places. Young people imagine return as the *'ideal end'* to displacement, but it is often conditional on political change or economic recovery in Syria – hopes many view as unlikely. This liminal existence between two fragile systems creates heavy psychological strain, leaving young Syrians feeling stuck, unstable, and unsure where they truly belong or can build a future.



Ein el-Hilweh Camp © Marcel Ssleh/GAGE 2025

## Conclusions and implications for policy and programming

Building on the voices and lived experiences of young people in Lebanon, our findings point to a number of priority areas for action so as foster safe, inclusive and supportive environments where young people – especially girls and refugees – can nurture their agency, resilience and future ambitions. To achieve this, interventions by the Government of Lebanon and its development partners must tackle structural barriers, foster social cohesion, and amplify young people's voices at every level of decision-making. More specifically, there is a pressing need to:

- **Create safe, inclusive civic spaces to nurture young people's voice and agency.** Young people, and especially girls, need structured platforms where they can speak without fear of backlash, build confidence, foster dialogue, and counter the silence imposed by social and gender norms.
- **Scale up participatory and skills-based programming to help young people transition from passive recipients to active contributors.** When young people are engaged in meaningful roles, they develop purpose, responsibility and ambition; and girls gain mobility, self-confidence, and the ability to challenge restrictive roles.
- **Invest in cross-community volunteering and social cohesion initiatives to reduce prejudice and build trust** between Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian young people. Shared civic action shows young people they are valued contributors, fostering empathy and solidarity across sectarian and national divides.
- **Embed youth voices in municipal and national decision-making.** Institutionalising youth councils, adolescent advisory groups and consultation mechanisms can ensure that young people's perspectives shape policies that affect their futures.
- **Strengthen parenting programmes to build caregivers' understanding of adolescent development and the importance of listening to youth voices.** Training caregivers to recognise the value of dialogue and support can improve family relationships and create space for young people's voices to be heard.
- **Build the capacity of teachers, social workers and frontline staff to facilitate adolescent participation safely and respectfully.** Training on gender sensitivity, safeguarding and constructive dialogue can turn schools and services into safe platforms for youth expression.
- **Embed psychosocial support within civic and skills-building programmes to help young people overcome fear, trauma and self-doubt.** This is particularly critical for girls and refugees, who often internalise exclusion and stigma.
- **Integrate gender-transformative approaches across all youth programming.** Encouraging boys to support girls' participation and normalising girls' public roles can challenge restrictive norms and ensure that all young people are able to engage equally.
- **Strengthen digital literacy and safe online engagement skills** so that young people can express themselves constructively and manage any backlash.



A group of adolescent boys © Marcel Saleh/GAGE 2025



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