

Executive summary

Youth Transitions to Adulthood in Jordan: High Aspirations, Challenging Realities

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Jordan’s population is relatively young, with nearly a third of the country’s population aged between 16 and 30 years. Jordan’s youth population also grew substantially with the influx of Syrian refugees after 2011, a refugee population that is overwhelmingly young.⁴ The success – or struggles – of Jordan’s youth during the critical phase of adolescence and young adulthood will shape the future of a generation – and the country.

⁴ Krafft, Razzaz et al., 2019.

This report has the following objectives:

- to explore the economic and social aspirations and the experiences of Jordanians and Syrians aged between 16 and 30 in Jordan by analysing a new, nationally representative youth survey that took place in 2020 and 2021 and qualitative focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted in 2019 and 2020.
- to understand youth transitions to adulthood, including progression through the education system, the transition from school to work, readiness for the labour market and skills acquisition, achieving economic independence and its link to family formation, and opportunities to obtain stable employment and decent work.
- to investigate the opportunities and risks associated with youth entrepreneurship, migration aspirations, civic engagement, youth gender norms, and the use of media.
- to generate evidence-based implications for policies and programmes relating to education, training, employment, entrepreneurship, family formation, and the civic and social engagement of young people, while taking into consideration the different experiences of Jordanian and Syrian youth and the different experiences of male and female youth.

Methods

This report relies on new data – both quantitative (survey) data and qualitative (focus group discussion) data.

1. The quantitative data were based on a nationally representative survey of Jordanians and Syrians in Jordan aged between 16 and 30 years. We refer to this survey as the Survey of Young People in Jordan (SYPJ).⁵ The resulting sample reached 2,854 households and 4,538 young people.
2. The qualitative component of the study consisted of 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) held with Jordanians and Syrian refugees aged 16–30 years old. The FGDs were separated by sex and nationality (Jordanian or Syrian), and two focus groups were held specifically with Jordanian young people with disabilities (YPWD).

Summary of findings

Key findings on educational aspirations and achievements

- Jordan’s young population is increasingly

⁵ This is similar to the Survey of Young People in Egypt (SYPE) (Roushdy and Sieverding, 2015; Population Council, 2011).

educated and has corresponding aspirations with regards to employment and adulthood more generally. Jordan made important progress in increasing educational attainment over the past 30 years, especially among young women.⁶ In fact, we show that 60 per cent of young Jordanian women go on to higher education compared to only 40 per cent of their male counterparts. Although young people emphasize the importance of higher education, they do not have a clear sense of the career paths from different specializations. Improving youth understanding of labour market outcomes for different specializations may facilitate school-to-work transitions.⁷

- Almost all Syrians have been able to access basic education after their arrival in Jordan, but the combination of lower educational attainment in Syria prior to arrival and difficult economic conditions in Jordan lead to 30 per cent of young Syrians dropping out of school prior to completing the compulsory basic stage. Only 44 per cent of Syrians continue on to the secondary stage and 22 per cent continue on to higher education. Both Jordanian and Syrian youth value education greatly, but Syrian youth also face barriers to educational progression. Key barriers to school progression include poverty, bullying, struggles with academic success, and early marriage.⁸
- Within secondary education, the most common educational track is the arts. Although nearly a fifth of Jordanians pursue the vocational track, only 6 per cent of Syrians who went to secondary schools do so. The vocational track is also less common among Jordanian women than Jordanian men.

⁶ Assaad, Krafft and Keo, 2019.
⁷ Jensen, 2010.
⁸ Sieverding et al., 2018; UNICEF, 2018.

Key findings relating to the challenging transition from school to work

- While education has raised youth aspirations for improved livelihoods and economic independence, the reality of young people’s transition to adulthood has generally not met their aspirations. The jobs that young people aspire to have not been forthcoming, leading to extended and difficult school-to-work transitions and thus delays in their transition to financial independence, marriage, and starting their own families.
- The transition from school to work in Jordan takes a long time for young men and occurs only infrequently for young women. Even five years after leaving school, less than three-quarters of young men, whether Jordanian or Syrian, have obtained a job that lasts for longer than six months. Although, by five years after leaving school, 35 per cent of Jordanian women with higher education obtain a job that lasts for longer than six months, the proportion of those at other levels of educational attainment ever obtaining a job never rises above 15 per cent. Overall, young Jordanian women reach a peak employment rate of 17 per cent at the age of 25–30 years. The transition to employment is even rarer among young Syrian women, with a peak employment rate of only 8 per cent among those aged 25–30 years.
- Transitions to formal employment – employment that is covered by social insurance – are substantially more challenging. Only Jordanian men with secondary or higher education, and to a lesser extent basic education, have an appreciable probability of getting such work. The probabilities of getting formal employment are much lower for young Jordanian women, even when educated, and almost non-existent for

Syrians. Young Jordanians and Syrians recognized the difficulty of obtaining their preferred types of employment. The gap between their employment expectations and their subsequent experiences was a key factor contributing to their view that their transitions to adulthood were far from the ideal transitions they envisioned.

- COVID-19 has created additional challenges for both schooling and work. Schools were shut down for most of the pandemic in Jordan. While lessons were (theoretically) offered online, youth spent less time on their schooling. Unemployment rates rose in Jordan as hiring froze,⁹ particularly affecting young labour market entrants. Young people also experienced substantial increases in job losses.

Key findings relating to challenges in achieving economic independence and marriage

- The inability to become economically ready for marriage has substantially delayed marriage for Jordanian young men and to some extent for Jordanian women who must wait for their prospective spouse to become ready. Ages at marriage were consistently above what was considered the ideal age of marriage for Jordanians, and young people viewed financial independence as unobtainable within the age-ranges at which they would have liked to get married.
- Although Syrian men expressed the same aspirations to be economically independent by the time of their marriage, given their challenging

economic circumstances, waiting until they were economically ready to marry was not realistic. In fact, only 62 per cent of married Syrian young men were employed compared to 91 per cent of married Jordanian young men.

- While financial independence and the ability to live independently from one's parents was a strongly expressed preference prior to marriage among both young Jordanians and Syrians, among Syrians, between 56 per cent and 73 per cent of couples had to live with their parents or parents-in-law at marriage.
- The longstanding practice of early marriage has continued for Syrian girls in Jordan, so that 28 per cent of them are married before the age of 18. Although some of the earlier ages at marriage observed for Syrians can be attributed to their lower ideal ages for marriage, few young Syrians considered marriage before the age of 18 ideal. Interventions that address longstanding norms of early marriage and particularly families' concerns about girls' sexual and reputational safety are critically important.¹⁰

Key findings relating to training and skills

- A substantial proportion of young people in Jordan engage in some sort of training outside the setting of formal education, but it is not always clear how much this training contributes to their labour market readiness. About 28 per cent of young Jordanians and 24 per cent of young Syrians had one or more training experience, and Syrians living in camps were much more likely to engage in training (45 per cent) than Syrians living in host communities (19

per cent). Syrian women, in particular, were likely to participate in multiple trainings, with a quarter of those receiving training engaging in two or more trainings, compared to less than 15 per cent of their Jordanian male counterparts.

- Young people found trainings valuable for their personal development and for their efforts to find a job, but not necessarily for leading directly to a job and rarely for starting a business.
- Young people generally report having a series of hard and soft skills that are potentially valuable in the job market. Some interesting patterns emerged indicating relatively weak literacy and math skills among young Syrian men. Young Syrians generally reported having lower levels of computer, management, and language skills than their Jordanian counterparts. However, there is no clear correlation between young people's self-reported skills and their employment outcomes.

Key findings relating to employment and unemployment

- Young people in Jordan face substantial challenges in transitioning to employment, if they are able to do so at all. The share of young men who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) does decline with age, but rates are still quite high at ages 25–30, with 24 per cent of Jordanian men and 35 per cent of Syrian men in this age group still in the NEET category. In contrast, women's NEET rates increase with age as they leave school, marry, and assume more unpaid care work responsibilities. NEET rates of Jordanian women increase from 47 per cent at ages 18–24 to 80 per cent at ages 25–30, whereas Syrian women's NEET rates, while also rising with age, remain above 80 per cent throughout. This does

not mean that women do not want to work. About 27 per cent of Jordanian young women and 16 per cent of Syrian young women actively participate in the labour market, but the vast majority of them (79 per cent of Jordanian and 82 per cent of Syrian women) are unemployed and seeking work rather than working. Unemployment rates among women aged 18–24, in particular, are around 90 per cent for both Jordanians and Syrians.

- Women's employment is severely constrained by the availability of jobs that meet women's reservation working conditions or reservation prestige. Some of the focus group participants spoke of the difficulty of finding jobs that are considered appropriate for young women in the prevailing "culture of shame." Focus group respondents expressed positive views about women's employment in general but thought that women's employment was subject to specific conditions that were rarely present in the private sector.
- The vast majority (over 80 per cent) of respondents of either sex and nationality said teaching or being a health professional were ideal occupations for women, occupations that are primarily found in the public sector. Only 14 per cent of employed Jordanian young women were actually employed in the public sector. Notably, however, those in public sector employment expressed very high levels of satisfaction with it, considerably higher than the levels of satisfaction expressed by those in formal private sector employment, in which another 30 per cent of employed Jordanian women were engaged.
- Public sector jobs are closed to Syrian women, leaving them with few culturally acceptable employment opportunities. Almost 97 per cent of Syrian women

⁹ Department of Statistics (Jordan), 2021.

¹⁰ Bartels et al., 2018; Sieverding et al., 2020.

who work are employed in informal wage jobs, most of which are outside of fixed establishments, the least desirable and most precarious types of employment. In the face of barriers to accessing their preferred, higher-quality jobs in Jordan, engaging in home-based production and sales activities were seen as the most accessible and appropriate forms of economic activity for young Syrian women.

- According to male respondents, the prevailing “culture of shame” also constrains men’s employment options, leading them to wait a long time for positions seen as socially acceptable and suited to their educational credentials. A slight majority of employed Jordanian young men (54 per cent) are in some sort of formal employment, either in the public or private sectors. They express strong preferences for jobs in the military, followed by the healthcare sector, or as other professionals, teachers, and managers.
- Formal jobs of any kind appear to be almost entirely inaccessible to young Syrian men, 92 per cent of whom when employed are in informal wage employment. Yet given the challenging economic situation for Syrian refugees in Jordan, focus group discussion respondents saw Syrians as much more willing than Jordanians to accept any form of employment, although young Syrian men themselves also noted concerns about exploitation in the precarious jobs in which they were often engaged.

Key findings relating to entrepreneurship

- Entrepreneurship or self-employment

is not much of an option for the vast majority of youth in Jordan. When asked, the majority of participants in focus group discussions did not know what entrepreneurship was. They considered projects that entail making a product and selling it, and thus generating income for the family, as entrepreneurship, and few young people associated entrepreneurship with notions of innovation and creativity.

- Although having one’s own business was, in the abstract, considered a positive idea, few young people were actually able to succeed as entrepreneurs. While 48 per cent of young people reported that they wanted to start their own business or project within five years, only 10 per cent reported they had ever had an idea for a business and tried to start one. Among those, half had tried to start a business but never actually started it, 42 per cent started a business which failed, 3 per cent started a business but closed it, and only 5 per cent started a business and had it continue.

Key findings relating to aspirations for international migration

- A substantial proportion of young people, especially young men, saw international migration as a way out of their employment predicament in Jordan. Just over a third of young Jordanian men and 43 per cent of young Syrian men expressed an intention to emigrate, with the intention to emigrate rising with educational attainment. Jordanians were particularly interested in emigrating to the Gulf, whereas Syrians were interested in going to Europe and North America. Few Syrians expressed a

desire to soon return to Syria, with most saying they did not know when, if ever, conditions would be safe enough for them to return.

Key findings relating to civic engagement

- Young people expressed interest in more meaningful civic engagement but often did not see ways to achieve such engagement. In focus group discussions, young people expressed strong positive views about civic engagement and volunteering, saying that it was both a good way to be an engaged citizen and to help others, as well as a way to build one’s personality, gain valuable skills, and a wider set of acquaintances.
- Many young people highlighted the obstacles to meaningful engagement, including a perceived lack of incentives and appreciation, and a lack of trust in the intentions of the organizations providing charitable and volunteering opportunities. Youth engagement primarily consists of charitable activities. The survey indicated that between 32 and 41 per cent of young Jordanians were engaged in some kind of charity and volunteering, as compared to 18–19 per cent of young Syrians. Young people were about three times as likely to engage in charity than in any specific type of volunteering. They stressed the importance of youth centres and other local organizations as venues through which they can engage in community activities, interact with others, and develop useful skills.
- Access to public social spaces is highly gendered for youth in Jordan, as elsewhere in the Middle East and North

Africa (MENA).¹¹ Less than half of young Jordanian women and less than a third of their Syrian counterparts reported meeting with other young people in any spaces outside their homes, compared to four fifths of young Jordanian men and three fifths of Syrians. The most commonly mentioned space for women to meet other young people was in friends’ and families’ homes, suggesting that public spaces remain fairly inaccessible or insecure for young women.

- Young people had clear political views, especially around the role of government in providing jobs. They recognized the importance of economic incentives, but they also believe that the government has an important role in promoting equity and opportunity as well as providing jobs. Generally, they were not very interested or knowledgeable about politics, but their knowledge tended to increase with their level of education.

Key findings relating to gender norms, sexual harassment, and women’s mobility

- Young people across sex and nationality groups generally expressed attitudes supportive of gender equality, at least in theory. While a majority of young people were supportive of women being allowed to work, a substantial fraction of young Jordanian men and especially young Syrian men were not. Again, a majority supported the idea that a husband must help with household chores, but, in reality, this did not at all align with patterns of actual time spent doing housework by men, which show the highly unequal gender distribution

¹¹ Brady et al., 2007; Sieverding and Elbadawy, 2016.

of household chores for young married couples. While young people often supported gender equity in areas such as women's leadership, they also generally agreed that when jobs are scarce, men should have the priority, reflecting a strong adherence to the norms associated with having a male breadwinner.

- Young people were divided in terms of their attitudes towards sexual harassment, with nearly half agreeing that women should ignore harassment, that public transport was dangerous due to the risks of harassment, and that women who dressed provocatively deserved harassment.

- Young women, and especially young Syrian women, were restricted in their mobility. Almost a third of young Jordanian women and almost two-thirds of young Syrian women could not go alone to the local market. In contrast, men can usually go alone to such places having informed their families or entirely without permission. Young women's mobility is likely to be limited both by the perception and by the reality of harassment. A large proportion of young people, especially men, agreed that it was dangerous for women to walk alone or use public transport because of the risk of harassment.

Key findings relating to news consumption and social media use

- Almost no young people accessed news from traditional, print media, but instead relied on websites and online video media. Social media played an important role in connecting and informing young people, who most commonly spent 1

to 3 hours per day on social media. A substantial proportion of young people, especially Jordanians, spent a large part of their day on social media.

- The most commonly mentioned reason individuals use social media across all nationality and gender groups was to keep in touch, followed by relaxing, sharing information, instant messaging, and news. Job finding was an important function of social media for a fifth to two-fifths of young people across groups. Far more men than women reported that meeting new people and interacting with the opposite sex were important purposes of social media.

Key recommendations

- More generous **cash transfers linked to school enrolment** can help students remain in school.¹² For higher education, support in studying for the *tawjihi*, scholarships, and stipends that allow Syrians to pursue higher education studies are critically important.

- Understanding and addressing **boys' faltering learning and enrolment** is an important area for research and policy.

- Ensuring young people have **clear information on the benefits of different educational choices** can help them achieve their aspirations.¹³

- The funders of **training programmes**, especially those focusing on skills and not involving on-the-job training, need to rethink assumptions about the degree to which this training will lead to more and better-quality employment. Apart from

¹² De Hoop, Morey and Seidenfeld, 2019.
¹³ Jensen, 2010.

customer service skills, young people's skills match or exceed job requirements, suggesting that skills deficits on the labour supply side are not a key constraint on employment. Moreover, the global,¹⁴ MENA,¹⁵ and Jordan¹⁶ literature on skills training suggests that skills trainings are rarely effective. Apprenticeships¹⁷ and internships¹⁸ may be better models for helping young people to transition into the labour market. Participants in the focus group discussions underscored the challenge of finding a first job without past work experience, and apprenticeships and internships can overcome this important barrier to work.

- **Stimulating labour demand**, particularly in the private sector, is a challenging but critical step to ensure that young people are not permanently disadvantaged in their labour market trajectories in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Since private sector work has a number of disadvantages for women, including longer working hours and less job security, there is a need to **create women-friendly workplaces**, to make available secure but part-time jobs, and to provide transport to help women engage in work outside the home. Improving safety on public transport and in public spaces is an important area for government engagement, along with direct provision of childcare or childcare subsidies.¹⁹

- Syrians in Jordan face a very restricted set of labour market choices compared

¹⁴ McKenzie, 2017; Blattman and Ralston, 2015.
¹⁵ Bausch et al., 2017.
¹⁶ Groh et al., 2012.
¹⁷ Krafft, 2018; Monk, Sandefur and Teal, 2008.
¹⁸ McKenzie, Assaf and Cusolito, 2016.
¹⁹ Krafft and Assaad, 2015; Clark et al., 2019.

to their Jordanian counterparts. **Opening up a greater variety of sectors to Syrians** may be necessary to increase their chances of finding decent work.

- Programmes that attempt to promote **entrepreneurship** among young people should factor in a recognition of the very high failure rates among youth entrepreneurs and thus the risks to which such programmes may be exposing young people.

- Addressing inequitable gender norms, particularly around harassment, which limits young women's mobility and opportunities, is a critical area for future programming and policies. The education system can also be an important site for changing gender norms,²⁰ which remain persistently inequitable across generations.²¹

- Programmes and policies need to create **safe public spaces** for young women to get together, socialize, and create support networks. Although youth centres and Makani centres exist in Jordan, youth-specific spaces like youth centres or Makani centres were seldom reported by young people as spaces where they engaged with their peers. Ensuring all young people have access to such spaces is critically important. The opportunity to spend time in youth spaces that are specifically designated for girls – as are Makani Centres,²² and as has been tried in youth centres in other contexts²³ – along with safe transport (given the limited mobility for young women and especially Syrian women), is critically important.

²⁰ Dhar, Jain and Jayachandran, 2018; Levy et al., 2020.
²¹ El Feki, Heilman and Barker, 2017.
²² Abu Hamad et al., 2017.
²³ Brady et al., 2007.

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