

Syria's Youth: A Forgotten Case

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Most of the development discourse about Syrian refugees today is focused on leaving no child behind. Governments, international organizations and civil society groups are all working hand in hand to ensure that Syrian children enroll in one of the multiple channels that are now championed for them in Lebanon. However, youth is ultimately left behind in this equation even though they hold in their hands the torch for a future Syria at peace.

Today, Syria's youth in Lebanon have very little to live for. Having been out of school for many years, working as daily laborers in the informal labor market, involved in sex work and trafficking, or being married young to ease the burden of their families, there is very little space for dreaming left to them. Of the 80,000 registered Syrians between the ages of 15 and 18, only 5% are attending formal secondary schooling⁽¹⁾. The rest are mostly out of school or in some form of informal education with no ability to obtain certification, or pursue higher education or vocational training. To add to the challenges faced by youth, the NRC reports that about 90% of youth in this age group have no access to legal residency, leaving them more vulnerable, and with almost no access to services, which include education. This also means being subject to undignified treatment, raids on the camps and evictions, and limitations on their freedom of movement.

Could this situation for youth have been prevented? At the beginning of the crisis, the lack of action on education was mainly related to the lack of funds, and the expectation of the international and the host community that the war will end soon, and thus, children will be back soon to their schools inside Syria. Other obstacles emerged on the way such as the limited capacity of Lebanese public schools, open for public shifts to cater for the big number of children who need schooling, among other things. Is this a cultural issue? Do Syrians resist education? As a practitioner in the field, I still remember vividly how our first educational support center—the first in Lebanon, in fact— came to life. It was the beginning of 2012, and we were distributing food baskets to the newly arrived Syrian families. A young woman followed me in the camp, and called out my name. She went on, «Hello, my name is Omayma, and I was a teacher in Syria. I have two kids. I don't want a food basket. I want you to help me buy some books, and I am happy to host 20 kids daily in my tent to teach them.» Like Omayma, all Syrian families, even the illiterate amongst them, wanted

education for their kids first. Within one week from that day, 200 families had registered their kids with Omayma as news spread across the camps.

The same kids who were in the tented school Omayma had lobbied so hard for are today young men and women with no future ahead of them. But we can still do something to save Syria's youth. The space for civil society in Lebanon to support Syrian refugees should be preserved. Localization should be ensured through projects owned and run by civil society in collaboration with the communities themselves, and with close collaboration with international organizations and the government.

Programs addressing youth should be strengthened to support them in either re-integration into schools, joining vocational trainings or equipping them with professional and soft skills crucial for them to be independent and proactive agents in society. All such projects should be coupled with psychosocial support and initiatives that put the voices of the youth at their center, so that they are young people who have ownership of their lives and are able to design their future, and eventually, that of their country.

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(1) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/17/lebanon-positive-step-refugee-children>

