Adolescents
between
Siege and Hope

**Research on the Educational and Social Factors
Leading to Secondary School Dropouts
Among Vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian Refugees**

Executive Summary

Introduction

School dropout remains a significant global concern, affecting both developed and developing countries at varying rates. Currently, 250 million children are out of school, despite extensive international efforts to address this issue[1] . In fragile and conflict-affected areas, the situation is even more dire, with lower secondary school-aged youth being two-thirds more likely to be out of school and facing a 50% lower chance of completing secondary education[2]. In Lebanon, a history of political instability and economic crises compounded by the Syrian refugee crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Beirut port explosion, and the ongoing financial crisis since 2019 have significantly impacted the education sector. Families are grappling with the financial burden of education, leading to increased dropout rates, especially among vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugee communities.

The enrollment rate in educational institutions dropped from 60% in the 2020-2021 academic year to 43% in 2021-2022[3] . According to the Central Administration of Statistics (CAS), nearly 19.6% of Lebanese youth were not enrolled in 2022. Among Syrian refugees, approximately 430,000 are currently not enrolled in formal education, constituting 60% of the displaced population[4]. Existing literature highlights the push factors leading to dropouts, such as the deteriorating socio-economic status of the family, increasing education costs, a fragmented education system, and unclear education pathways. Most studies and data focus on primary education, as international and national support prioritize retaining children in primary education, with limited information on transitioning to secondary education.

Therefore, this research aims to identify the educational and social factors influencing school dropouts among Lebanese and Syrian refugee youth in Lebanon who are transitioning from primary to secondary education, with an emphasis on girls. The primary research question revolves around identifying the factors influencing these vulnerable students' educational outcomes and ability to complete their education.Additionally, the research investigates students' perspectives on alternative pathways to formal education and addresses sub-research questions outlined in the findings section.

1.UNESCO. (2023, September 18). UNESCO: 250 million children now out of school.
https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/09/1140882#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20children%20missing,and%20Cultural%20Organization%20(UNESCO)

2. Secondary Education Working Group. (2022). Evidence on Learning Outcomes for Adolescents in Fragile Contexts: A Landscape Analysis.
https://inee.org/resources/evidence-learning-outcomes-adolescents-fragile-contexts-landscape-analysis

3. UNICEF. (2022). Searching for hope: A grim outlook for youth as Lebanon teeters on the brink of collapse.
https://www.unicef.org/lebanon/media/7746/file#:~:text=Enrolment%20in%20educational%20institutions%20dropped,a%20US%241%20a%20day

4.OCHA. (2023). Escalating needs in Lebanon a 2023 overview.
https://lebanon.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Escalating_Needs_Lebanon.pdf

Methodology

The research methodology employed a qualitative approach, integrating both primary and secondary data to address the research question. Initially, a comprehensive desk review of relevant literature was conducted to inform the research rationale and methodology. Primary data collection was carried out through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with adolescents aged 15 to 18, encompassing both vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugees.

A semi-structured FGD guide was developed to explore educational and social factors affecting youth schooling across three dimensions: educational, social, and demographic, with defined indicators for each. Additionally, the FGDs were supplemented with a questionnaire to gather basic demographic information from the respondents.

To ensure national representation, the research team selected four different regions in Lebanon: Beirut, Bekaa, South, and North, focusing specifically on the most vulnerable areas within each region. The sampling strategy was purposive, with participants identified through an outreach campaign in the selected regions, facilitated with the support of key community leaders and NGOs. The selected sample included adolescents both enrolled and not enrolled in education, divided according to nationality and gender (equally split between males and females).

Fieldwork was carried out by trained field researchers in the four regions over a three-month period, from July to September 2023. Quality assurance measures were rigorously implemented throughout the data collection process, including field visits, follow-up on data processing, and debriefing sessions with the facilitators. Subsequently, the team employed a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns and themes within the data.

It is worth noting that the methodology received approval from The American University of Beirut's Institutional Review Board, and ethical considerations were adhered to at all stages of the research.

Limitations

Although the findings of this research do not encompass the entire demographic of the studied age group, they do shed light on critical trends and perceptions articulated by the adolescents themselves, thus addressing the main research question and sub-questions. However, it is essential to note that data collection concluded before the events of October 7. Consequently, the results do not account for subsequent developments related to internal displacement and its specific effects on education in the South of Lebanon.

Profile of participants

A total of 40 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were carried out, engaging 370 adolescents from four distinct regions: North (104 participants), Bekaa (99 participants), South (88 participants), and Beirut (76 participants). The average age of participants was 16.2 years. The demographic breakdown is provided in the table below:

Overall, more than half of the surveyed population (55%) are currently pursuing their education. This percentage slightly favors males, with 57.3% of male participants continuing their education compared to 54.1% of female participants. However, a notable discrepancy emerges between Syrian and Lebanese respondents: only 42.9% of Syrian adolescents are continuing their education, contrasting starkly with the 68.6% of Lebanese adolescents who are doing so.

Main Findings to the six Sub-Questions of the Main Research Question

1 Role of Socio-Economic Circumstances in Determining Adolescents' Educational Futures

The majority of adolescent respondents reported that their economic circumstances are poor, especially in the North region where the crisis appears to be more severe. In contrast, a smaller group in Beirut described the economic situation as tolerable. Despite regional differences, the majority of adolescent boys and girls in both Lebanese and Syrian groups recognized a clear deterioration in their overall economic situations. This has heightened their vulnerability and led them, in some way, to internalize their worsening living circumstances, as manifested in their resigned statements and passive complaints about income scarcity and increased deprivation.

> "It's difficult for me to go back home and find one of my siblings needing something, and my dad and I can't get it for them. It really weighs on me, you know. I'm 18 years old now, and I've never owned a phone in my life. Even the simplest things that kids my age have or have experienced, I don't have or haven't experienced. It's just work and home for me."
>
> (North, Male Lebanese)

While adolescents expressed frustration over increased sense of deprivation, they also exhibited resilience by adapting to the status-quo. Accounts of coping mechanisms included parents resorting to borrowing money, relying on aid, or cutting expenditures. Of all the mentioned coping mechanisms, the most prevailing as appeared in 27 out 40 FDGs, was the pressure on adolescents to dropout out of school to work and support their families despite the strong support of the parents for their children's education. This was predominantly among boys, while girls were often kept at home to mitigate educational expenses and assist with household responsibilities, including caring for younger siblings. It is crucial to highlight that 44% of the total sample were out of school (160 out of 361), with Syrian participants constituting a significant portion, primarily girls (67 out of 104). Among those continuing their education, a notable trend emerged towards vocational education for economic viability, while others reconsidered their preferred educational paths due to cost considerations, opting for more affordable alternatives.

Finally, it is worth noting that while it is established that adolescents' lived economic circumstances appeared to be a key push factor for dropout from schools, the strong family relationships and the outstanding support of the parents for their children's education formed a counterbalance and a crucial influence on the adolescents' continuation of school education.

Quality of Education

According to the adolescents, the second most significant factor influencing their decision to discontinue schooling, following economic reasons, pertains to issues associated with the school itself. This aspect was deliberated in 28 out of 35 group discussions. Common barriers highlighted encompassed lack of transportation, school proximity, recurrent school closures, teacher absenteeism, increasing educational expenses, curriculum difficulties, and hurdles related to documentation, particularly challenging for Syrian adolescents. However, the adolescents' narratives extended beyond mere challenges concerning access to education to address the quality of education and the school environment. When specifically asked about their perspectives on educational quality, the adolescents were evenly split between two viewpoints: those who perceived their school education as satisfactory and those who regarded it as "bad".

Insights from both factions unveiled that educational quality is primarily contingent upon the caliber of teachers. According to them, the teacher's role encompasses two dimensions: firstly, possessing requisite competence and experience in teaching skills and subject knowledge, surpassing outdated teaching methodologies by embracing innovative and interactive approaches; secondly, demonstrating care, attentiveness to students' needs, well-being, and academic performance, treating them with dignity and empathy. Some of the most distressing experiences recounted by the adolescents revolved around instances of neglect, disrespect, severity, and even violence perpetrated by teachers.

The adolescents who had the privilege of encountering compassionate teachers expressed strong attachment to schools and gratitude towards the educators who motivated them to excel academically.

"Teachers still use outdated methods and don't know how to explain. Beating is their language."
(Bekaa, Male Syrian)

School Environment

The school environment was predominantly shaped by the governance of the institution, which extended beyond providing basic services and operational management to encompass leadership that fostered safety, order, and a nurturing, protective environment. Adolescents' experiences varied: some benefited from attending schools that fostered a nurturing and secure environment, while others described their schools in negative terms, equating them to prison-like settings. For those with negative experiences, the school environment was depicted as chaotic, characterized by various forms of disrespect, humiliation, including violence, bullying, and discrimination perpetrated by both teachers and peers, and where their needs and voices were stifled. While group discussions indicated no significant disparities between Lebanese and Syrian adolescent boys and girls regarding their perceptions of the school environment, it is noteworthy that bullying was predominantly raised by Syrian adolescent groups. Additionally, the severity of violence, proliferation of drugs, and occurrences of school altercations were particularly pronounced in the North region.

"My school is a real battlefield. It is filled with drugs, fights and knives. I used to like education; they made me hate school."
(North, Male Lebanese)

These accounts were prevalent among both Lebanese and Syrian boys and girls, indicating a common experience across demographics. They underscored a clear divide between encounters with either proficient and empathetic teachers or those who fell short of these standards. These contradicting experiences appeared as well with encounters with either friendly or adverse school environments. This discrepancy points to systemic deficiencies in ensuring teachers' as well as school principals qualifications and accountability within educational institutions, highlighting an overall absence of standardization and uniformity across the system.

3 Role of Peers in Influencing Adolescents to Drop out or to Continue Their Education

Peers played a significant role in the lives of adolescents. While school peers constituted a substantial part of their social circle, it was often peers from their neighborhoods, villages, or camps, along with family relatives, who held a more prominent place in their lives.

The influence of peers was more pronounced outside the school environment than within. Interactions with school peers were closely correlated with the quality of education and the overall environment of the schools they attended. Those who had the opportunity to attend schools offering safe and friendly environments also had the chance to develop positive and supportive peer relationships. The influence of peers on adolescents' decisions to drop out or continue their education did not emerge strongly in accounts where peer interactions naturally occurred in a supportive and convivial manner. However, adolescents attending schools that did not provide conducive, safe environments were exposed to what can be termed as "bad peers," who influenced many adolescents to leave school, especially in the region of North where youth gangs engaged in drugs and violent activities within schools, acting as a direct push factor for school dropout. Mentions of gangs and violence were also reported in the South. Some adolescents expressed profound regret for associating with such negative influences, leading them to abandon their education. Others, particularly boys, cited the influence of peers who had left school to work, encouraging them to follow suit.

"My friends are my cousins we do everything together. My school peers, I don't see them anymore and I forgot them." **(North, Female Syrian)**

I regret having the friends I had because that pushed me to leave school."
(Beirut, Male Lebanese)
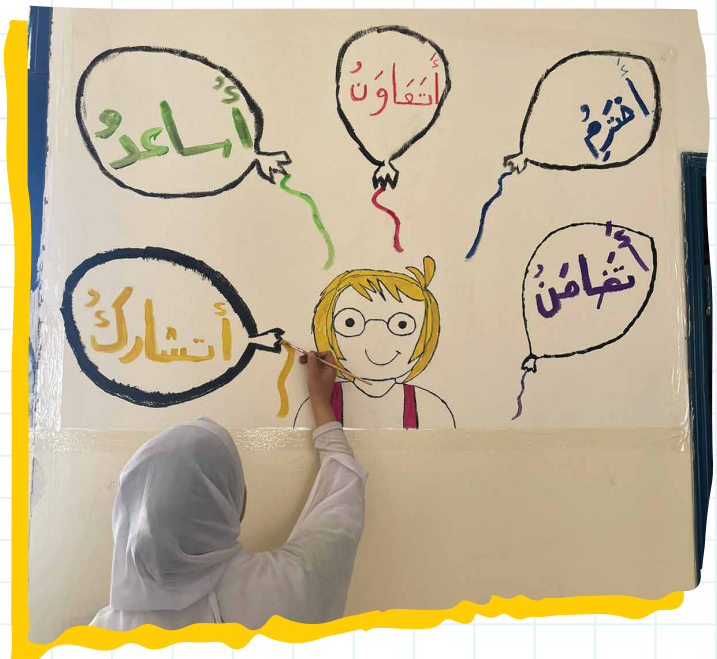
"Students in schools are basically gangs." **(South, Male Syrian)**

4 Main Factors Affected Adolescents' Choice in Staying in School Including the Desire to Overcome Deprivation

The motivation of adolescents who opted to persevere with their schooling, despite facing push factors and temptations to drop out, stemmed from their own determination for self-growth and their desire to transcend conditions of deprivation. This resolve was often complemented by strong support and encouragement from their parents.

> "I want to continue my education but my parents cannot afford it and yet they still want me to go to school. It breaks my heart to see my parents suffering for me. That's why I decided to study in the morning and work at night because I don't want to disappoint them."
>
> (North, Male Lebanese)

The perceived value of education varied among the adolescents. The majority perceived education as a means for higher end purposes which represented a major incentive to commit to school and seek ways to navigate the economic and educational challenges. For some, its significance resided in practical applications, such as the ability to read road signs and medical prescriptions or to provide education and support to their own children in the future. For many girls, education was viewed as an emancipatory tool, enabling them to gain empowerment and liberation from men's financial dependence and authority. Consequently, this group of adolescents demonstrated a remarkable "transformative sense of resilience." Those adolescents and their parents believed in the value and power of education as a way to overcome deprivation, build better lives and future, and achieve "social mobility".

> "Education is a boundary that must not be crossed. My parents aspire to see us in top positions, achieving great things, and excelling. My mother, raised without a father, understands the challenges of a tough life. She doesn't want us to experience the same hardships or be diverted from opur education."
>
> (Beirut, Female Lebanese 33)

> "Education is essential for the future of girls and their security especially if they get divorced, they will be able to find a job and be self-dependent."
>
> (South, Female Lebanese)

Crucial factors in maintaining school attendance included access to free public education, simplified registration processes, schools being easily reachable in terms of proximity and seating capacity, as well as the provision of aid from organizations to cover transportation and school materials.

5 Educational Alternative Pathways to Improve Educational Opportunities, As Suggested by Adolescents

The adolescents expressed a strong preference for practical learning over traditional educational achievement, which they felt lacked the provision of applicable skills and contemporary knowledge. Learning, for them, was hindered by a flat and outdated curriculum, alongside a didactic teaching approach that emphasized rote learning, memorization, and a standardized approach that failed to address their specific needs and aspirations.

In response, the adolescents advocated for more educational guidance and a differentiated approach that aligns with their various learning levels. They called for an interactive, hands-on educational experience that incorporates projects, group work, and modern subjects such as digital literacy and robotics.

> **"Mobile phone is the best way to learn at our own pace. There is so much content on Instagram and YouTube is like an encyclopedia. I also like the trainings and workshops because we learn from them."**
> (North, Female Lebanese Participant)

> **"I was learning technology because it's a very important field to keep up with the world's development."**
> **(Beirut, Male Syrian Participant)**

Hybrid learning, which integrates self-paced learning, was also praised because it helped adolescents, especially those who work to support their families, to have more flexibility to learn at their own pace. Furthermore, extracurricular activities for youth, including art, music, and sports clubs, were highlighted by the adolescents as a source of enrichment and a need for peer bonding and self-development experiences that were lacking in their formal education.

The alternative educational pathways that resonated the most with the adolescents' priorities appeared in 24 FGDs and referred to non-formal education, which focused on short-term training and courses in subjects such as English, digital skills, and entrepreneurship. Vocational education was also highly mentioned and was not limited to conventional specialties such as carpentry for boys and beauty care for girls. Instead, it evoked innovative tech-based and social media-related specialties that are increasingly in demand and linked to livelihood and income-generating opportunities, which appeared to be a key motivation for many adolescents.

> **"I prefer to learn things that are useful and help me earn money faster instead of struggling with school education and ending up with no job. All we care about is earning money."** (North, Male Syrian Participant)

6 Differences Between Boys and Girls, and Between Lebanese and Syrian Adolescents in Their Chosen Educational Paths and the Influencing Factors that Affected Their Choices

The majority of adolescents' accounts revealed no significant differences between boys and girls or between Lebanese and Syrian groups in their overall views and perceptions about their socio-economic living circumstances, school experience, and peer's life. However, certain distinctive elements were noted, particularly affecting adolescent girls and Syrian refugees.

Distinctive Aspects Concerning Adolescent Girls:

At the family level, girls appeared to experience a mix of conflicting situations. On one hand, they showed an increased level of awareness regarding their rights to education. However, they were still constrained by social norms and responsibilities, exacerbated by the deteriorating security and economic circumstances. These dynamics had two main implications for the girls' educational pathways:

1 increased girls' empowerment was evident in their boldness in voicing conflicts and tension with parents or siblings, particularly regarding discriminatory parental treatment between genders and the control exerted by older brothers over their movement and freedom.

In contrast, boys' groups generally did not experience such family struggles and conveyed a sense of support and solidarity with their parents and siblings. An additional factor contributing to girls' pursuit of education, particularly among Syrian adolescents, was the growing incentive to achieve self-independence and freedom from male financial control and authority.

2 Many girls, especially among Syrian adolescents who appeared to be the most vulnerable and represented the highest number of school dropouts in the participant sample, were compelled to leave school to reduce educational costs and assist with household chores and caring for younger siblings. School dropout due to early marriage was mentioned only seven times by Syrian girls' groups and was primarily cited as a socio-cultural norm that some parents still endorsed, rather than a coping mechanism for facing economic hardship.

> "My parents started introducing me to potential suitors for marriage because I am old enough now to have a family of my own." **(North, Female Syrian Participant)**

> "Girls reach grade 7 and then stop, they say why bother since i will end up doing dishes. But this shouldn't be the case." **(Bekaa, Female Lebanese)**

Distinctive Aspects Pertaining to Syrian Refugee Adolescents:

The impact of Syrian displacement on Syrian adolescents' educational pathways was only vaguely discussed in three sessions, which could indicate their adaptive resilience in enduring current challenges and internalizing them as coping mechanisms. However, the factors most vocalized by Syrian adolescent groups, which particularly affected their school education, were related to inconsistent registration regulations. Many Syrian adolescents mentioned continuous hindering requirements for official papers and a lack of clarity regarding available schools that could accommodate and enroll Syrian refugee children. Moreover, Syrian adolescents who experienced extended school interruptions and continued their education in the non-formal sector had no clear educational pathway beyond the BLN and YBLN programs implemented by many NGOs in the education sector. Many found themselves with no educational future but to work and focus on earning income. Those still attending school faced challenges such as lack of transport support and difficulties attending second-shift classes, especially during the winter semester. Many mentioned relying fully on aid to cover educational costs, primarily for transport and school supplies. Additionally, the issue of school bullying was predominantly raised by Syrian adolescent groups, who sounded resigned and accustomed to it due to increased fear and insecurity felt among Syrian refugee adolescents and their families.

Recomendations

For the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE):

1. System Strengthening

• Reinforce the effective implementation and mainstreaming of the newly improved school protection policy by ensuring a robust monitoring system and accountability mechanisms are in place

• Re-assess and improve recruitment process of teachers and schools' principals and ensure its effective implementation through a robust monitoring and accountability mechanism.

2. Quality of Education

Rethink Quality Education in context of Crisis and Emergencies by addressing the following:

• Conduct comprehensive research to understand the specific needs and challenges of teachers and school principals to improve and expand teachers training and schools principals training within Lebanon's fragile context and in alignment with the national strategy of MEHE.

• Provide improved Teachers Training (ToT) by building on existing training packages and research findings of teachers needs and challenges to equip teachers with the needed higher order and complex skills in emergencies encompassing advanced pedagogy including digital and hybrid learning, differentiated learning, learning assessment, improved integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and transformative resilience.

• Design a comprehensive School Principals Leadership Training (ToT) program by building on the research findings of the schools' principals needs and challenges, and on best practices to equip them with advanced skills and knowledge in school governance and leadership that foster safe and enabling learning environments that enhance peer relationships and learning experiences.

3. Improved and Expanded Access for Adolescents Age Group in Emergencies

Rethink and improve educational pathways for vulnerable and out of school adolescents in context of crisis and emergencies.

• Re-assess the vocational education by conducting a national research to evaluate the relevance and impact of the current vocational education's offerings and identify effective improvements in programming and structure that are better aligned with the job market and livelihood opportunities as well as with the adolescents' aspirations.

• Develop a framework of alternative pathways that provide relevant and recognized educational opportunities in the Non-Formal sector that NFE actors can apply with Out of School adolescents.

• Re-activate and improve Accelerated Education programming based on learning lessons and best practices for vulnerable out of school adolescents who are keen to pursue their formal education despite the interruption of school education.

• In the case of the Syrian Refugees students:

o Strengthen the implementation of standardized and unified registration processes for Syrian refugee children in second shifts

o Provide educational trajectory beyond basic literacy and numeracy programs (BLN/YBLN) through a clear transitioning process from NFE to Formal Education.

For Institutions in the Education Sector:

① Implement Holistic Education Interventions that tackle the complexities of the context of crisis and emergencies:
In designing education programs, employ a comprehensive approach that addresses the multifaceted needs of vulnerable adolescents, including refugees by integrating protection, parental engagement and livelihood opportunities, cash for education, educational guidance and coaching to facilitate informed choices regarding educational pathways.

② Reassess Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programming & strengthen its integration in schools:
Reassess the impact of SEL in emergencies by enhancing its design and integration into the school curriculum, and strengthening the component of human relationships among students, teachers, and school leaders to transform school environments into enabling spaces that promote "human connections" and "transformative resilience." Youth clubs and extra-curricular activities are highly recommended to nurture peer relationships and foster a culture of school belonging.

③ Upgrade and Prioritize Educational Content with a Focus on Relevance and Skills-based Learning:
Upgrade school and NFE educational content by including most relevant subjects that resonate with adolescents' needs and aspirations such as advanced English, digital literacy, STEM, robotics, and project-based learning. And shift to skills-based learning by fostering competencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills.

For Donors:

① Allocate Funding for Secondary and Vocational Education:
Allocate funding specifically for secondary education, including vocational training, to support the educational advancement of vulnerable adolescents.

② Invest in Teacher Training to scale Quality Education Provision:
Support and fund teacher training as a key component in providing quality education at scale.

③ Finance the Provision of Holistic Education Interventions that tackle the complexities of the context of crisis and emergencies:

Finance Livelihood Opportunities:
Fund initiatives that create innovative livelihood opportunities for both parents of school-attending children and out-of-school youths striving to continue their education and enhance their educational skills and learning.

Support the Enrichment of NFE Content beyond BLN:
Provide funding for enriched and relevant educational content that goes beyond BLN and prepares for an effective bridging of NFE to Formal Education.

Fund Cash for Education

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