'I Dream of Going Home': Gendered Experiences of Adolescent Syrian Refugees in Jordan's Azraq Camp

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Abstract

Although the influx of Syrian refugees in Jordan initially attracted considerable international humanitarian support, funding has declined recently, and labour market restrictions have tightened. Adolescents in Azraq refugee camp face particular challenges due to its unique characteristics, including strong surveillance and security measures and a remote desert location, which affords only limited mobility and income-generating opportunities. Instead of offering protection and security for displaced Syrians, the camp has become a 'violent space'. This article explores the experiences of younger (10–12 years) and older (15–17 years) adolescent girls and boys in Azraq camp. It provides insights into their gendered experiences in four capability domains—education, voice and agency, bodily integrity and freedom from violence, and psychosocial wellbeing—highlighting key vulnerabilities that need to be addressed to deliver the Leave No One Behind agenda. The findings suggest that when planning programmes and services, the government, international community and civil society actors working with adolescent refugees in Azraq need to take into consideration spatial dimensions of vulnerability. Such efforts should ensure that programmes are designed and implemented in an inclusive and accessible way so that male and female adolescents in specific camp settings can overcome the constraints that they uniquely face.

Keywords Adolescent · Syria · Refugee · Camp · Capabilities · Leave no one behind

Résumé

Même si l'afflux de réfugiées Syriens au Jordan a initialement attiré un soutien humanitaire internationale considérable, plus récemment ce soutien a baissé, et les restrictions du marché du travail se sont resserrées. Les adolescents du camp de réfugiés

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d'Arzaq sont confrontés à des problèmes particulières liées aux caractéristiques du camp, y inclus une forte surveillance, des mesures de sécurité, et son emplacement distant et désertique, qui n'offrent que des opportunités très limitées de mobilité et de génération de revenu. Au lieu d'offrir de la protection et de la sécurité pour les Syriens déplacés, le camp est devenu un « espace violent ». Cet article explore les expériences des jeunes adolescents (entre 10 et 12 ans, et entre 15 et 17 ans) au camp d'Arzaq. Il offre un aperçu de leurs expériences genrés dans quatre domaines de capacités – éducation, voix et agence, intégrité corporelle et exemption de la violence, et bien être psychosocial – mettant l'accent sur les vulnérabilités-clés qu'il faut adresser afin de livrer l'agenda « Leave No One Behind ». Les conclusions suggèrent que les dimensions spatiales de la vulnérabilité doivent être prises en compte dans la planification des programmes et services par le gouvernement, par la communauté internationale, par la société civile, et par tous les acteurs qui travaillent avec les réfugiés adolescents à Arzaq. Ces efforts devraient assurer que les programmes soient conçus et implémentés d'une façon inclusive et accessible, afin que les adolescents mâles et femelles dans certains milieux spécifiques arrivent à surmonter les contraintes uniques auxquelles chacun d'eux fait face.

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) make a commitment to 'leave no one behind'. Five key factors have been identified to understand which groups of people are left behind and why: geography, discrimination, shocks and fragility, governance, and socioeconomic status. Individuals who are disadvantaged by one or more of these factors 'face reinforcing and compounding disadvantage and deprivation, making them likely among the furthest behind' (UNDP 2018, p. 10). Adolescent refugees face multiple and intersecting disadvantages during this critical life stage and face particular vulnerabilities as a result of displacement (DeJong et al. 2017). According to the Leave No One Behind agenda, adolescent refugees are especially disadvantaged as they face risks related to war and displacement (shocks and fragility), reside in refugee camps (geography), have limited access to education and employment opportunities (socioeconomic status), and are likely to face discrimination due to their status as refugees (discrimination) (UNDP 2018).

The Syrian refugee population in Jordan is a young one: 21.5% of registered refugees in the country are aged 5–11, 13.8% are aged 12–17, and 28.9% are aged 18–35 (UNHCR 2019b). This means that many refugees are currently transitioning into adolescence or early adulthood.

In humanitarian contexts, adolescents tend to be ignored, seen as passive victims, or potential threats to security. Caught between childhood and adulthood, their needs and capabilities are often overlooked (Cahill et al. 2010). This is also the case with the response to the Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan, highlighted by the Government of Jordan itself when it noted that adolescent and youth refugees are the most neglected (Norwegian Refugee Council 2016a, b).

Syrian adolescent refugees living in Jordan's Arzaq camp face additional vulnerabilities due to its unique characteristics, including strong surveillance and security

measures, and a remote desert location, which limits mobility and income-generating opportunities. These characteristics give Azraq camp a very unique atmosphere, especially when compared to other gated Syrian refugee camps in Jordan, such as the well-known Zaatari camp. Azraq camp's desolation and seclusion makes it a hazardous environment for all those living there, including adolescents.

This article presents baseline findings from a mixed-methods longitudinal research programme, Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE), and explores the experiences of younger (aged 10–12) and older (aged 15–17) Syrian refugee adolescents in Azraq camp. It provides insights into their gendered experiences in four capability domains: education and learning, voice and agency, bodily integrity and freedom from violence, and psychosocial wellbeing. Generating evidence on the situation and wellbeing of adolescent refugees will help shape more effective policy and programme responses to enhance adolescent wellbeing and support a successful transition to adulthood.

Security and Protection Considerations Impacting Refugees in Azraq Camp

As of October 2019, there were 654,955 registered Syrian refugees in Jordan (UNHCR 2019a), of whom 18.7% live in three refugee camps: Zaatari camp (62%), Azraq camp (32.6%) and Emirati Jordanian camp (5.2%) (UNHCR 2019b).

Zaatari was the first camp to open, in 2012; it developed very rapidly as many refugees were arriving every day. Today, Zaatari camp is more like a city, with many opportunities for residents to participate in 'cash-for work' programmes or set up informal businesses (Norwegian Refugee Council 2016a, b). When Zaatari became overcrowded late in 2012, plans were made for the construction of a second camp, Azraq, which is located in a remote and arid area, far from urban centres and economic activity (Norwegian Refugee Council 2016a, b). However, during its development, several changes arose that resulted in the government increasing restrictions on Syrian refugees entering Jordan, which reduced the pressure to expand the new camp quickly:

- Since the onset of the crisis, most Syrian refugees had come from Dara'a; however, in 2016, there was an influx of refugees from Hama and Aleppo (Jordan INGO Forum 2016), which were considered rebel strongholds (BBC News 2020).
- In that same year, a suicide bomb attack in Rukban (on Jordan's north-eastern border) led to tighter border restrictions. The border was closed officially on 21 June 2016, leaving between 40,000 and 50,000 Syrians who had been attempting to seek refuge trapped in a demilitarised zone between the two countries (Jordan INGO Forum 2016).

As a result of the tighter border restrictions, Azraq camp (which was officially opened in April 2014) was more carefully planned and sited in a more remote area; it also has stronger surveillance characteristics than other refugee camps (Norwegian Refugee Council 2016a, b). According to UNHCR, Azraq camp is home to

36,298 Syrian refugees (as of January 2020). Most of its residents (61%) are children (including 122 unaccompanied and separated children), one in four households are female-headed, and 2.95% of residents have a disability. Most refugees are from Aleppo (20%), Homs (19%), Dara'a (14%) and Ar-raqqa (9%) (UNHCR 2019c, 2020, Van Blerk and Shand 2017).

While Azraq, sited 90 miles from Zaatari, did not end up being a 'spill-over' camp, refugees who are considered a security risk are sent to one of the four villages in Azraq: 'Village 5'. Village 5 is a confined area fenced with barbed wire. They cannot leave before undergoing security screening by the Jordanian authorities, which is reported to be a lengthy process. Additionally, Syrian refugees who live outside camps and are identified by the police as lacking documentation or working illegally are forcibly relocated to Azraq camp (Jordan INGO Forum 2016). Between 2014 and 2017, around 25,600 Syrian refugees were forcibly relocated to Azraq—comprising 44% of the camp population (Jordan INGO Forum 2018).

For camp residents—even those living outside Village 5—freedom of movement is limited, as permits required to leave the camp are difficult to obtain (Jordan INGO Forum 2018). Involuntary relocations, strong surveillance, and the existence of a detention centre (Village 5) inside the camp combine to shape daily life for camp residents, including limited mobility and generally conservative and limited personal interactions. This inability to access services and opportunities or interact with others further constrains adolescents' daily life and future aspirations, making them even more vulnerable than Syrian refugee adolescents in other camps or in host communities.

Azraq Camp: A Secure vs. Violent Space

Analysts such as Ramadan (2013) argue that once displaced, an individual's identity becomes dominated by being a refugee. In addition, refugees are commonly considered 'a security threat' to the states that host them, therefore these states resort to confining the refugees into a space that is surrounded by a 'violent and repressive geography of walls' (Lui 2002; Perera 2002), or in other words, camps. Unlike the urban camps of Palestinian refugees in Jordan, the Syrian refugee camps are meant to be temporary spaces where humanitarian relief and protection can be provided to them until a solution to their crisis can be found. (Ramadan 2013). However, these same camps that are meant to provide the safe space for this to happen can also be spaces of insecurity and violence (Loescher and Milner 2004, p. 11).

The conceptual and operational dynamics between the elements of space, protection and humanitarian agency are often unclear. This is especially true in humanitarian settings where there is a tendency, post-conflict, to focus on the legal aspects (such as rights and responsibilities) when it comes to the vulnerable spatialities as opposed to the matters of physical and social protection. Even though priority is always given in humanitarian work to material and physical deliverables, space is always conceptualized as being newly created for refugees without any effort to link

refugee vulnerabilities as outcomes rather than the causes that lead to the production of those new spaces (Boano 2011, p. 37).

Even in ideal circumstances, living in a closed camp space can hinder refugees' wellbeing and mental health, especially when living in that space for a long period of time, their confinement and dependency compounded together leads them to abandoning their social responsibilities (Clark 1985, cited in Harrell-Bond 1998, p. 22). Unlike Zaatari camp's busy surroundings and markets just outside its perimeters, Azraq is isolated, surrounded by barbed wire, and has heavy security at all gates—all factors contributing to the exclusion felt by its residents. This is further intensified inside the camp; there are several empty shelters, there are large empty spaces between shelters and facilities, and there are no vehicles for transportation. The lack of trade and economic opportunities further compounds residents' feelings of exclusion and isolation.

According to Hoffmann (2017, p. 100), there are three security claims that explain the presence and silhouette of Azraq camp: 'the claim to secure Syrian refugees, the claim to secure the Jordanian state and the claim to secure aid workers themselves'. So, what is meant to be a secured camp to those on the outside has resulted in the creation of a space filled with violence, fear and insecurity to those on the inside. Syrian refugees are socially stigmatised as a security risk, even to other refugees within the broader Azraq camp. For example, camp residents are often fearful of those in Village 5, a secluded detention area within Azraq, as they are there because they are perceived as high risk. Therefore, the different levels of isolation—Azraq from the rest of Jordan, and Village 5 from the rest of Azraq—have been intensified by the concept of different levels of security. In fact, the greater the level of security and isolation, the more violence occurs in that space, affecting all inhabitants but especially children, adolescents and women.

Compared to Zaatari camp which was built with the intention of being temporary, Azraq had more time to be planned and was intended from the start to be a long-term (Alshawawreh et al. 2017, p. 1751). However, Azraq has stricter policies about what residents are allowed to change (for example, changes to their shelters). While both camps have communal toilet and shower facilities, in Zaatari, some refugees have chosen not to use them for privacy purposes, whereas in Azraq, lack of use is more due to the distance, harsh weather (muddy grounds when it rains), and (especially for women and children) lack of security and safety.

Adolescent Syrian Refugees in Jordan: Existing Evidence

There is very little research that focuses on the experiences of adolescents in Azraq camp, with the exception of the GAGE baseline research in Jordan (Jones et al. 2019). Other literature refers to camps in general or provides a comparison between the situation of refugees in camps and host communities (Krafft et al. 2018; Culbertson et al. 2016). The following summarizes findings from literature in the four capability domains.

Education

Several factors—in many cases linked to economic deprivation—are known to prevent Syrian refugee adolescents from accessing education, including the high cost of transportation and stationery supplies. Other barriers differ between boys and girls. For boys, these include the need to contribute to family income and risks associated school violence (Adawia et al. 2017), and for girls these include distance to school, the need to help with household chores and concerns about violence. Research shows that adolescent refugee boys are less likely to be enrolled in school than girls, mainly due to their involvement in child labour (Presler-Marshall et al. 2017) and adolescents (aged 12–17) are less likely to be in school than children (aged 6–11) as the risks of child labour, early marriage and school violence intensify as they age (Krafft et al. 2018). Adolescent refugees in camps are less likely to be enrolled in school than their peers living in host communities due to overcrowded schools, bullying, inexperienced teachers, lack of transportation within the camp, and concerns about children's safety while travelling to and from school (Culbertson et al. 2016).

Bodily Integrity

Early marriage and adolescent pregnancy are quite prevalent among the Syrian refugee community in Jordan. Data from the Demographic Health Survey (2017–18) showed an increase in marriages for individuals under the age of 18, in comparison to previous years (UNICEF and Higher Population Council 2019). Additionally, data from the Chief Justice Department as well as the Department of Statistics confirms that child marriages are increasing and in particular among Syrian females (Higher Population Council 2017).¹

Research shows that child marriage and gender-based violence (GBV) threaten girls' bodily integrity, with the impact of GBV being largely unexplored. Drivers of early marriage include rising poverty levels, protection against harassment and rape, and protection of family honour, while it is also used as a mechanism to obtain citizenship and/or leave camps (Presler-Marshall et al. 2017).

As for adolescent boys, bullying, school violence, and child labour are among the main threats to their bodily integrity. Evidence shows that many Syrian refugee boys experience school violence and bullying, with those living in host communities at great risk as they experience bullying and violence as they travel to and from school (Presler-Marshall 2018). Evidence also suggests that adolescent boys are at risk of sexual harassment in public spaces (Presler-Marshall 2018)—as they have a higher degree of mobility than girls and are at greater risk of encountering sexual predators (Brun 2017).

¹ It is difficult to infer prevalence rates at a population level, as the Chief Justice Department reporting only includes registered marriages. Sieverding et al. (2020) examine the drivers of early marriage among the Syrian refugee population in Jordan and show that there is no increase in early marriage rates after refugees' arrival to Jordan. These rates were higher than pre-conflict national rates and have remained the same post-displacement.

Voice and Agency

Research also shows that Syrian refugee girls have limited voice and agency as they lack mechanisms to voice their opinions and have little say in family decision making (Presler-Marshall et al. 2017). They also have little say in choosing when or who to marry, and have very limited mobility outside the home (UNFPA 2016). Similarly, boys have limited access to programmes aimed at encouraging agency and participation (Presler-Marshall 2018).

Psychosocial Wellbeing

While many studies have explored the psychosocial wellbeing and mental health of Syrian refugee girls, most have not focused on girls living in Jordan, and/or do not provide sex- or age-disaggregated data. Research by UNICEF and the International Medical Corps (IMC) in 2014, which included more than 2,000 Syrian adolescents living in Zaatari camp and in host communities, found that the most common concerns included poor treatment by Jordanians, fear of violence, lack of education, and feelings of sadness about family left behind in Syria. The same study found that adolescent girls are more likely to experience emotional distress than boys, as they feel unsafe away from their parents, as well as feeling isolated and confined (UNICEF and IMC 2014).

Betawi (2019) is the only other study of Syrian children in Azraq camp, focusing on the psychological wellbeing of under-12 s. This quantitative research examined the impact of children's exposure to violence on their psychological wellbeing; however, it focused on violence in terms of children's exposure to conflict, and how this increased the risk of traumatic symptoms that affected their psychological wellbeing. In terms of gender and age, the study found no major differences between boys and girls, or between children aged 0–6 and those aged 7–12. The only significant gender difference identified was in physical traumatic symptoms, which were greater among girls than boys. But it should be noted that the research did not examine the effects of violent spaces within the camp itself.

Methods and Conceptual Framing

This article is part of a mixed-methods longitudinal research programme, involving quantitative research with 4000 adolescents and caregivers and qualitative research with 220 adolescents, caregivers, and key informants from refugee and Jordanian communities in Jordan. The research targeted the most disadvantaged refugees, including married girls and adolescents with disabilities in Amman, Mafragh, Jarash (Gaza camp), Irbid, Azraq and Zaatari camps.

This article is based on the qualitative analysis of 42 in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 6 focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted with younger (10–12 years) and older (15–17 years) Syrian refugee adolescents in Azraq camp (including 11

disabled adolescents and 4 married girls). The IDIs and FGDs explored the experiences and perspectives of adolescents, focusing on GAGE's six capability domains: education and learning, economic empowerment, health and nutrition, bodily integrity and freedom from violence, psychosocial wellbeing, and voice and agency. This article focuses on four of these domains with the most relevance for an analysis that focuses on 'violent spaces': these were education and learning; bodily integrity; voice and agency, and psychosocial wellbeing.

Data collection was undertaken by experienced male and female researchers² in early 2019. Prior to the data collection, the researchers received a research training by GAGE Director on the research instruments and research ethics.

The study participants were recruited with the assistance of Makani centers in the research sites [*Makani means "My Space" in Arabic. It is a UNICEF integrated programme providing education, child protection, adolescent and youth participation activities to vulnerable children and adolescents*]. Makani provided the researchers with a list containing the contact information of beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, from which participants were selected randomly.

Participants were invited to participate in interviews or focus group discussions, which were held in Makani centers. The researchers chose the Makani centers because they are well known and trusted community centers which are accessible to the community. Focus groups were age and gender specific and included 4–8 participants. On average, interviews were 1–1.5 h long and focus groups were 1.5–2 h long.

The sessions were conducted in Arabic and were all recorded, having gained consent. All records were transcribed verbatim in Arabic, then translated to English. Translated transcripts were coded and analysed using MAXQDA software. Thematic analysis was based on the six GAGE capability domains. The same research team who was involved in the data collection conducted the analysis. Given that the team was bilingual, they were able to go back to the original Arabic transcripts to ensure that no data was lost as a result of translation.

Ethical considerations of this research were based on the UK Department for International Development's (DFID) Ethics Principles for Research and Evaluation (2011), the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Framework for Research Ethics (2015), the OECD's Fragile States Principles (2011), and the World Health Organization (WHO) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) guidelines on researching violence against women and children (2005). The research was ethically approved by the Overseas Development Institute's (ODI) Research Ethics Committee and the Institutional Review Board of the George Washington University. The research team was committed to a 'do no harm' policy. IDIs and FGDs were conducted by researchers of the same sex as the participant(s). All participants were provided with information sheets detailing the objectives and scope of the study, privacy and confidentiality assurances, as well as relevant hotlines.³ For participants under the age of 18, parental informed consent and informed adolescent assent was obtained.

² The researchers are from Jordan and Palestine, and native Arabic speakers.

³ Participants were provided with the contact details of the research team, as well as the UNICEF and UNHCR hotlines.

Ethical approval and permits to conduct research in refugee camps were secured from the Protection Working Group in Jordan, coordinated by UNHCR which has jurisdiction over research with Syrian refugees. The GAGE programme in Jordan also had a Memorandum of Understanding with UNICEF Jordan which facilitated referrals when young people in need of child protection or mental health services were identified.

Conceptual Framing

The conceptual framing for this paper draws on the GAGE '3 Cs' conceptual framework which focuses on: (1) Adolescent capabilities: examining the individual and collective wellbeing of adolescents in six capability domains, (2) Change strategies: investigating different strategies to maximise the impact of programmes targeting adolescents, and (3) Contexts: exploring how adolescents' lives and experiences are shaped by context at the local, national and international levels (GAGE consortium 2019).

Findings

Our findings indicated challenges in the four capability domains: education and learning, bodily integrity and freedom from violence, voice and agency and psychosocial wellbeing. In what follows, we describe the main risks faced by adolescents in Azraq camp in these areas.

Education and Learning

Most adolescents in this research—boys and girls, from both age groups—strongly valued education as a means to achieve future aspirations, especially in the context of a protracted crisis. As an older adolescent boy stated, *'The only thing we, the Syrians who live here, have is education'*. Some adolescents reported that the strong value placed on education was shared by their parents, for whom social norms such as early marriage or other socioeconomic factors prevented them from completing their education:

My mother was married twice, once at 14 and a second time at 18, and she encourages me not to get married young and to finish my education ... (older adolescent girl).

Despite this, older adolescents are still at greater risk of being out of school than their younger peers. The dire financial situation of many families in Azraq camp, and the restrictions on work permits and mobility, push many older adolescent boys to drop out of school to help their families financially. As an older adolescent boy reported, *'I started working after he [the boy's father] stopped working at Makani... Yes, my father doesn't have a job'*.

For girls, conservative social norms around marriage and the fear of harassment in public spaces around the camp were the most commonly cited reasons for dropping out of school. As an older married adolescent girl noted: 'I left school because it was a great responsibility to manage between marriage and school. How can I go to school and also cook for my husband?'

Married or divorced girls seemed to be the most disadvantaged by having to leave school at a young age. They all expressed regret at dropping out, even though it had not been their decision. When asked about aspirations, one married girl spoke of her wishes for her children: 'My dream is for him [son] to complete his education, I won't stop him from completing his education. I want him to have big dreams... I want her [daughter] to complete her education and have a future. I don't want what happened to me to happen to her.'

In general, younger and older male and female adolescents who were in school had high aspirations. While some were interested in vocational training, others wanted to pursue law, medicine and engineering—specialties they cannot legally practice in Jordan. Some adolescents were aware of the restrictions placed on them—for being refugees, and for living in Azraq camp, and indicated the need to leave the camp in general, and move back to Syria in particular, to secure a better future for themselves, and in the case of married adolescents, for their children.

I can't study law here because I'm Syrian and the laws in Jordan are different. Anyway we're going to move back to Damascus as soon as my mother finishes her work in a few months. My entire family is in Damascus, so we're going back to them. A married older adolescent girl reported, My dream is to raise my children well so that they have a bright future. There is no future inside this camp, but if they finish school, they could have a chance at a college education, but no one here would be able to afford college tuition. We don't have a future here.

There was a clear gender difference between adolescents' experiences in school. Regardless of age group, female adolescents spoke more positively about the school environment and their relationship to their teachers. Younger and older male adolescents spoke extensively about violence in school, with some reporting that male teachers and principals verbally and physically harass students, while others described teachers as unhelpful:

They call us by names like donkey, foal, shoe, tar and so on. (Younger adolescent boy)

Sometimes I get hit with a plastic tube when the teacher is very angry and starts hitting everyone. (Younger adolescent boy with a visual impairment and diabetes)

While disabled adolescents face similar risks, their access to school is further constrained by the characteristics of Azraq camp. Lack of transportation inside the camp makes the journey to school for particularly difficult for some disabled adolescents: 'It was very hard for me to go to school, especially in the winter time. The

roads were very muddy and full of rocks' (an older adolescent boy with an amputated leg).

Younger and older disabled adolescent boys also spoke about being bullied by male peers at school for having to wear glasses or use a wheelchair.

Bodily Integrity and Freedom from Violence

Azraq camp presents several risks to adolescents' bodily integrity. Girls (younger and older) spoke extensively about their fear of harassment and kidnapping. Many said they have been instructed by their parents not to speak to strangers because of stories about kidnapping, harassment and, in some cases, murder. While most girls repeated stories they had heard from their families, one recounted something she had actually witnessed. In general, adolescent girls felt that public spaces around the camp are unsafe for them.

Sometimes, I see them harassing other girls, so I worry. That's never happened to me, but I hear stories where a boy harasses a girl... As long as I have my family around me, I feel safe. (Younger adolescent girl)

I am afraid that somebody may kidnap me or something. I mean, there are many people walking on the street. This makes me feel frightened. (Younger adolescent girl)

There were many cases of adolescents raping children in bathrooms. I heard of adolescents aged 19 or 20 years old who took little girls and raped them in bathrooms, it happened a lot... People talk and it spreads around. (Older adolescent girl, married)

This fear of harassment has several implications for younger and older girls. First, it restricts their mobility. While girls are not completely homebound, they are only allowed to go to certain places, like school, or to visit relatives and friends in neighboring caravans (shelters). Girls are not allowed to travel alone to more public spaces like the shopping mall or bread distribution points—because such places are crowded. Girls are also not allowed to travel alone after dark.

Second, fear of harassment is leading some parents to marry off their daughters at a young age, or take them out of school, to protect them from harassment and other risks associated with displacement. Older adolescent girls spoke about early marriage, noting that many of their peers are already married. As one adolescent said: 'We found out that many of those who were with us in the eighth grade last year are either married, engaged or have kids now, and we think that these poor girls are still very young to get married'.

The four married or divorced adolescent girls interviewed as part of the GAGE study had married at ages 14 and 15, and two of them have children. They were mostly engaged in arranged marriages, in some cases to a relative. While three of them dropped out of school to get married, one older girl was forced by her husband to drop out of school after they were married because of harassment: 'They could

harass any girl on the street and could try to touch her. So, my husband doesn't want that to happen'.

Another factor driving girls towards early marriage is the family's financial situation. Many girls said that parents marry off their daughters to reduce the economic burden on the family, while others marry their daughters off to receive their dowry:

I know a girl who's 20 years old. She's been married and divorced three times already and her parents keep marrying her by force for the money. She has one child from the first husband, two children from the second husband and she's already divorced from the third, but she's pregnant. He divorced her when she was three months pregnant. (Older adolescent girl)

Adolescent boys also spoke about the risk of harassment facing girls in Azraq camp. Younger and older boys narrated stories of harassment and murder that they heard, with a younger boy saying: 'They kidnap the girls and they take them to the desert because there is no one in the desert'. Another boy recalled: 'One day, the police found two dead girls' bodies in the desert; the dogs ate their remains'.

There was general consensus among the boys that they are not subject to the same risks as girls, as 'all places are safe for boys' (older adolescent boy). However, some boys stated that certain playgrounds, roads and vacant areas are not safe, especially for younger adolescents, as they are at risk of harassment or violence from older males: 'the boys harass each other... There are some bad boys, we will be happy if they exit them out' (older adolescent boy).

As mentioned earlier, adolescent boys are also subject to verbal and physical violence from teachers and school principals. Several younger and older adolescent boys, including boys with disabilities, spoke about teacher violence—something they only experienced from male teachers:

They hit a student who is naughty or who does not pay attention. They start addressing him using bad words. (Younger adolescent boy)

When asked whether they reported such violence, some boys said they did, but it was not well received. Those who reported it to the principal were asked to go back to class; one boy who told his parents he wanted to drop out because of the violence was slapped by his father. In focus group discussions, some adolescent girls agreed that many boys still go to school just to get the free lunch meal, indicating the difficult economic conditions facing many families in Azraq camp. One older adolescent girl explained that her brothers do not have breakfast at home and the only meal that they have is the free one served in school.

Voice and Agency

Conservative social norms govern the way girls act, dress, and move around the camp. Girls are expected to obey their parents, especially parents' decisions regarding dress, mobility, and marriage. Younger and older adolescent girls spoke about the restrictions girls face, especially as they enter their adolescence years: they are not supposed to talk to boys in public; it is unacceptable for them

to ride a bicycle; and they should not walk anywhere alone or after dark. If they do not abide by these social norms, they risk tarnishing their reputation.

When we girls grow up, it will not be acceptable for us to raise our voices... These are the morals and traditions that we have. (Younger adolescent girl)
When a girl is young, it doesn't matter if she talks to other boys, but once a girl is old enough, then it becomes a problem for her and for the people around her, who will instantly talk about her. (Older married adolescent girl)

If I wanted to go out to get something, I could just take permission from my husband and go. I started to learn more about life after marriage. I learned what's right and what's wrong and what's allowed and what isn't. (Older married adolescent girl)

Male and female adolescents also spoke about marriage norms, which seem to impact girls more than boys. Parents are the main decision makers about marriage—including who and when their daughter will marry. Most adolescents thought that the ideal age for a girl to marry was between 18 and 20. Some adolescents also spoke about customs and traditions which gives the priority of marriage to the girl's cousin.

When a girl is getting married, the decision is by the father first, then the mother, then the girl if she approves of him or not. (Older adolescent boy)
Some people think that if the girl was more than 18 years old, she is too old to get married. Unless if the man was very old, it will be okay. (Older adolescent boy with a visual impairment)

One older adolescent spoke about how she is fighting conservative social norms. She practices Taekwondo, a sport considered inappropriate for girls, and rides a bicycle around the camp, which is also exclusively a male activity:

My brother started teaching me how to ride the bicycle at night. He asked me not to ride it in front of others, but I was sometimes forced to because I'd be late for class and needed to ride it to get there... I'm the first girl of my age to ride a bicycle... Whenever someone criticises me, I just ignore them...

Many people thought that I was a big girl and shouldn't be learning Taekwondo. My relatives, especially my aunt, told me... that it's inappropriate. I didn't listen to them and told my parents if I listen to what people say, I won't do anything.

Adolescent boys have a greater degree of agency than girls. They can move around the camp freely and are less restricted by social norms. However, boys have to help ease the economic burden on their families, so many end up dropping out of school to find work. Some older boys talked about the difficulty of finding employment, with one explaining: 'We are 12 members in the family and no one has work... I search for work and they refused to employ me'.

Psychosocial Wellbeing

Younger adolescents spoke about painful memories of the war in Syria and its impact on them and their siblings. They recalled the sound of planes and bombs and hiding underground with their families. Some expressed their worry about going back to Syria and having to experience or confront these painful memories again.

My sister, when she was young, a rocket had fallen in front of her... She fainted, so she feels afraid from the plane since then. (Younger adolescent girl)

If I go back to Syria, I would feel afraid to go to school, because they bombed my school and my friend died. (Younger adolescent boy)

Despite this, most younger and older adolescents, male and female, wanted to return to Syria, comparing it to their current situation. Younger adolescents also spoke about their parents feeling sad, especially when they remember 'the old days' in Syria.

I dream that... we can go back to live there, to meet with my sisters and the whole family. I just hope that we can go back to gathering every Friday and we can sit in my family's house, I hope that those days will come back and we will meet again. (Older married adolescent girl)

How I am going to spend the rest of my life and living in the camp? I think about whether I will keep living in the camp or I will move to another place. I wish I could travel or return to Syria. (Older adolescent boy with a disability)

However, some recognised the challenges they may face upon their return.

I want to return to Syria, but I don't want to take my Bachelor's in Syria because the transition from the Jordanian to Syrian system is very hard... I want to finish high school here so it would be easier for me to get my degree from here. (Older adolescent girl)

Our future? There's no future. If we go back to Syria, we go back to square zero. (Older adolescent boy with a visual impairment)

Some older adolescent girls have attended mental health support at a women's centre at the camp. One married girl explained how that had helped her deal with problems: 'It encouraged us not to resort to self-harm when under stress and anger. Also, they encourage us to talk about anything that's troubling us.' However, adolescent boys did not seem to have such support. One adolescent boy with a disability said he does not see friends or have access to centre activities because they are far and his disability makes it difficult for him to get there. When his mother died, he did not receive any support, stating "I think I only need to accept the reality." He was worried about what the future holds for him and his family.

Support System and Role Models

Younger and older adolescents alike reported being close to their parents and siblings and turning to their parents for support. Many cited parents as their role models. A young adolescent girl said her mother was her role model because 'she is compassionate and loves other people', and a young boy cited his brother as a role model because 'he is a good person and respects everyone'.

While some older adolescents cited parents and relatives as role models, others who have access to community centres cited teachers and trainers as role models. As one older adolescent girl said: 'I used to be my own role model. But now I think that my teacher from Relief (International) is highly educated, he knows everything and tells us about everything. I consider him my role model...'.

Married girls have limited access to support networks and were least likely to cite parents or families as a source of support. As they have to balance marriage and household responsibilities, few had access to community centre activities. Adolescents with disabilities also had limited access, mostly due to difficulty getting to the centres:

I would have gone to all of the activities and trainings. My problem is transportation. (Older disabled adolescent boy)

Older and younger adolescents who attended community centres and programmes (including academic support, recreational activities and life skills) felt they benefited from them, as well as spaces such as football fields and playgrounds:

I'm now more able to discuss things with others and make a conversation, I used to be really shy... also my project at Makani was really bad, but I didn't give up and they made me the permanent presenter. (Older adolescent girl)

It was clear that adolescent boys had a better relationship with the trainers at these centres than with their teachers at school. As one boy stated: 'We feel comfortable at Makani, we feel interested'. Another said, 'In Makani, we joke around with the teachers and the teachers joke around with us'.

For girls, such centres provide the only safe space to engage in activities that would otherwise be deemed unacceptable, such as Taekwondo, Zumba (dance) and sports.

Access to Technology

Older and younger boys have more access to technology (including social media) than girls, for whom some consider it socially unacceptable. While most boys interviewed had a phone or access to their parents' phones, very few girls did:

It's shameful for girls to have cellphones. There are a lot of cases of girls who were good, but when they held phones and had access to Facebook, Messenger and WhatsApp, they deviated. (Older adolescent girl)

Phones should be illegal for girls. (Older adolescent boy)

Mobility in Azraq Camp

Many adolescents spoke about the restrictions they face living in Azraq camp, comparing life at the camp with life outside. They were very aware of the mobility restrictions placed on them, and the difficulty in obtaining permits to leave the camp:

I keep thinking when it's all going to end... here, all I can ride is a bicycle. I can't go outside the camp unless I'm granted a leave, and I don't decide when to have it. (Older adolescent boy, disability)

We wish to have everything like outside, we want to improve the streets, we want to build houses. (Older adolescent boy)

Some adolescents compared the camp to other places such as Zaatari camp and Amman, in terms of the places they can visit or the amenities available there:

Outside the camp is more beautiful, there are many people and many places unlike here, and there are work opportunities and more money. (Younger adolescent girl)

Going outside the camp is one of my favourite things to do. I visit my husband's cousin, go to the market and see other places in Amman. (Older married adolescent girl)

In Zaatari camp, they have big playgrounds. Why don't they have them here? (Older adolescent boy)

Some adolescents interviewed lived in Village 5 for several months before being permitted to move to other villages. They spoke about the restrictions they faced there, with one boy recalling 'nothing was allowed'. Others told how camp residents were wary of them: 'They are afraid of people coming from Village 5... They think that the ones who came to Jordan two years ago or less are related to a scary group like Daish [ISIS]' (older adolescent girl).

Other adolescents had relatives or loved ones still in Village 5 who they cannot visit. One older girl explained how the boy she loved was sent to Village 5 and how she can no longer see him: 'There are no leaves granted now... He is not even allowed to take a leave... He wanted to work outside the camp, so he tried to escape one night, but they caught him. So they moved him to the Village 5 and kept his family here.'

Discussion

The capabilities of all refugee adolescents living in camps and host communities are impacted by their local and national contexts as well as the programmes and opportunities available to them. However, the capabilities of adolescents living in Azraq camp are largely shaped by the space that they are in—which for several reasons has become a 'violent space'.

This research has revealed the complex experiences and risks faced by younger and older adolescent girls and boys in Azraq camp. It showed that loss of educational opportunities due to displacement have impacted some adolescents (particularly older adolescents) more than others. Male and female adolescents recognised the restrictions they face in seeking higher education and employment opportunities, including limited scholarships, remoteness from urban and economic centres, and poor socioeconomic circumstances.

It also showed that protection concerns and constraints on mobility affect girls more than boys. Parental fears about daughters' exposure to strangers and harassment result in further confinement for some girls, and early marriage. Adolescent boys have a very high degree of mobility compared to girls, which in some cases may expose them to risks of harassment in public spaces. This was only reported by a few boys, possibly because of the stigma associated with talking about harassment or due to fear of reporting it. While girls are at greater risk of harassment and early marriage, boys in school are more likely to experience teacher violence than girls.

While there are several programmes and 'child friendly' spaces in the camp run by international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), not all adolescents can access them. The research found that two groups have least access: married girls, due to their limited mobility, social norms and home-related responsibilities; and disabled adolescents, due to lack of transportation and distance to centres. Many adolescents lack psychosocial support and counselling that could help them cope with problems arising from their experiences of war and displacement.

While the risks faced by adolescents in our study are similar to those faced by other adolescents living through protracted crises, including limited access to education and employment, risks of child labour and child marriage, limited agency and negative impact on psychosocial wellbeing (UNICEF and IMC 2014; Presler-Marshall 2018; Culbertson et al. 2016), adolescents in Azraq face additional vulnerabilities. The fact that thousands of camp residents were forcibly relocated there, with many perceived as criminals or belonging to terrorist groups, created a sense of fear and mistrust among camp residents. This in turn increased parents' concerns about their daughters' safety—putting girls at risk of dropping out of school, and early marriage. Furthermore, the remoteness of the camp and the lack of employment opportunities available places immense pressure on adolescent boys—putting them at risk of dropping out of school and engaging in child labour. Adolescents who have been residents of Village 5 have to cope with the stigma associated with that village—and need to learn how to integrate into the community outside of Village 5.

As the existing literature on refugees and the concept of 'violent spaces' highlights, a refugee's identity is usually perceived as a security concern by a host community and its authorities. While there is no doubt that forcibly displaced refugees need protection and security, especially when it comes to those who are more vulnerable, such as women and girls, it is often the case that spaces meant to provide refugees with security and protection are the same spaces that manifest violence. This is clearly seen in Azraq camp, where the sense of isolation—geographically, socially and economically—is keenly felt by residents, and where the closed, prison-like setting instills a sense of fear and insecurity. The remoteness and isolation of the camp, the socioeconomic exclusion of its residents, and restrictions on their

mobility combine to sustain a cycle of violence and insecurity at Azraq, which is likely to continue.

When looking at the GAGE capability domains within a violent space, adolescent refugees become even more vulnerable. Rather than living in a safe and friendly space where they can access education, they are put under more stress because of the violence they experience on their way to school and even within the classroom. Their aspirations are often quashed by the limitations of displacement, compounded by the additional limitations and dangers within the camp environment, which further impacts their psychological wellbeing. This is seen even more in the lack of voice and agency among adolescent girls living in the camp, as gender norms restrict their freedoms and opportunities; the violent space of the camp further restrains their capabilities as they know there is no hope of changing the status quo within the perimeters of the camp. The physical violence is perhaps the most visible, where bodily integrity is compromised and there is no freedom from violence. Violence is embedded and reproduced in the camp space, creating a dangerous environment for all residents, but even more so for adolescents.

Implications

To break this cycle of violence and insecurity, there needs to be a focus by international agencies and government through policies and programming on the four capability domains of education and learning, bodily integrity and freedom from violence, voice and agency, and psychosocial wellbeing.

Working on each capability domain in isolation will not change the ‘violent space’ that characterises the camp. However, when planning programmes and services, the government, international community, and civil society, working with adolescent refugees in Azraq, need to take into consideration the spatial concept. Their efforts should ensure that at every level, programmes are designed in a way that helps adolescents to overcome the constraints they face and to maximise their full capabilities.

The Jordanian government with the financial support of the international community need to scale up efforts to provide economic and employment opportunities inside Azraq camp, by permitting and facilitating refugees to set up home-based small businesses. This would limit adolescent boys’ engagement in exploitative child labour. Also, by providing economic opportunities, a more prosperous dynamic would be felt within the camp, leading to a more vibrant environment.

Existing programmes and ‘child-friendly’ spaces offered by international NGOs remain inaccessible for the most vulnerable adolescents, including married girls and adolescents with disabilities. International aid should be provided to civil society organisations to scale up programmes offering psychosocial support, life skills and extra-curricular activities, with innovative solutions to ensure that they reach and retain the most vulnerable adolescents. For example, providing a safe and reliable bus service inside the camp is one possible solution, as it ensures both safety and accessibility.

Conclusions

While all adolescent refugees face multiple and intersecting disadvantages, this study finds that adolescents in Azraq camp face further disadvantage due to the camp's nature as a 'violent space'. The camp's characteristics—which combine seclusion from the outside world and an increasing sense of fear and insecurity inside its perimeters—significantly impact adolescents in developing their full capabilities. Future research and programming—targeting all adolescents in the context of displacement—needs to consider the spatial concept to ensure that adolescents' realities and opportunities are understood and that their transition to adulthood is successful.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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