



Photo Credit: Mercy Corps

ADOLESCENCE LOST

Forced Adulthood and a Fragile Future for Syria's Next Generation

FEBRUARY 2019



Acknowledgements

This research was conducted to elevate the voices and experiences of young people living the crisis inside Syria. First and foremost, our deepest gratitude goes to the 227 adolescent girls and boys who generously shared their lives with us. We are eternally grateful for their time and openness, and in awe of their ongoing determination. We sincerely hope that this report does justice to their voices and experiences. Secondly, none of this would have been possible without the dedicated staff and humanitarian partners inside and outside Syria who took great care listening to and documenting the lives of young people, and invested time and effort in capturing the nuances of their stories. Their efforts were unrelenting, despite the many challenges they faced in an ever-shifting and complex context.

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“Life was very beautiful before the war, but now, after the death of my brother we’ve grown desperate, and we wish dearly for those days to come back.”

**- Mohammed, 14-16 year old boy,
Aleppo governorate (Menbij subdistrict)**



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Executive Summary

After eight years of war, many adolescents have spent more than half of their young lives amidst conflict, violence, and shattered dreams. And yet, these same young people will be responsible for writing the future of Syria and rebuilding a war-torn nation. Evidence has shown the extent of violence and the depth of trauma experienced by many still inside Syria, and in particular the effects of the war on the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of children.¹²³ This study aims to build on that body of research with a focus on older adolescents, aged 14-19 years, to understand the conflict from their perspective and its consequences for their individual futures and the future of Syria.

How are Syria's adolescents perceiving and coping with their current reality, and how has that challenge transformed their individual identities, family and community roles, and personal dreams? After years of unrelenting conflict, how do adolescents feel about being Syrian, and how do they see the future of Syria? Do they see a role for themselves in rebuilding their country, and if so, what is it?

Humanitarian actors engaging with adolescents have an important opportunity to support them in building a better future. To do so successfully, we must first listen to the complexities of adolescents' past experiences, current realities, and future aspirations. This research is intended to provide insight into the experience of Syrian adolescents and inform effective humanitarian interventions that address actual adolescent needs and provide pathways for adolescents to build a better future for both themselves and for Syria.

Why Adolescence?

Adolescence, defined as ages 10-19 years by the United Nations,⁴ is a period during which the foundations and roots for cognition and behavior are further developed and carried far into the future.ⁱ Similar to the years of early childhood, adolescence is also shown to be a period when young people are particularly sensitive to prolonged periods of toxic stress⁵ – defined as strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity without adequate adult support.ⁱⁱ And yet, the teenage years are powerful and uniquely transformative – a time when everything is changing, from



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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How are adolescents inside Syria thinking about their identity, future, and engagement in (the rebuilding of) their communities or country?
2. How are adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing and emotions regarding their reality affecting their desire to personally develop, give back to their community, and invest in their own future?
3. What should humanitarian actors do (or not do) to support Syrian adolescents in pursuing positive pathways for their individual development and community's future?

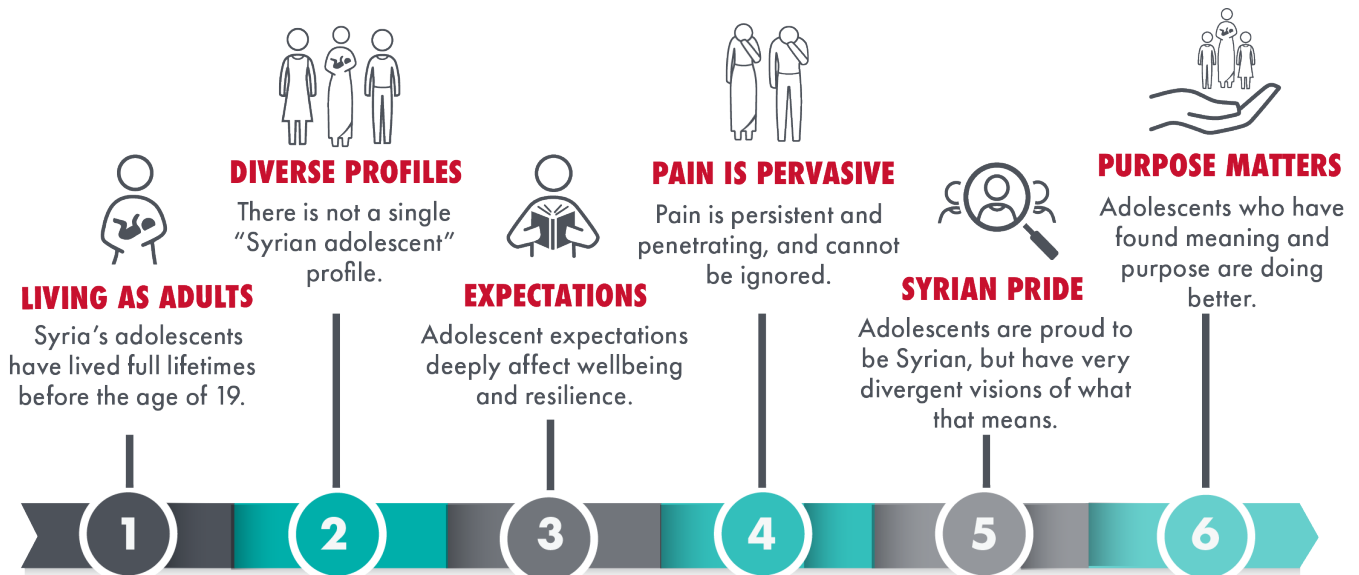
i In line with the United Nations definition, Mercy Corps similarly defines adolescence as the developmental period between the age of 10 and 19 years old, emphasizing however that the period between childhood and adulthood is influenced by factors such as culture and socioeconomic status, therefore the stated age range should serve as a guideline.

ii Toxic stress response can occur when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity – such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship – without adequate adult support. This kind of prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems, and increase the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment well into the adult years. Reference: Harvard Center on the Developing Child, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu>

physical and emotional transformations to the way that adolescents are treated and interact with society. It is a time when the brain is still more “plastic” than it will ever be in the future, capable of remarkable adaptability and creativity in light of the many social, physical, sexual, and intellectual challenges unique to this developmental phase. Imagine, then, managing an already turbulent period of puberty and the general trials and tribulations of one’s teenage years, while also navigating survival and meaning in a war zone.

Adolescents inside Syria have grown up navigating one of the most complex conflicts in the 21st century. A Syrian child born in 2002, who was 9 years old when the war started in 2011, is now 17. All Syrian adolescents today have likely seen, heard, and experienced significant violence, and have lost close family and friends, even their own spouses and children, to armed conflict or displacement. They themselves may have been injured or displaced, perhaps more than once. Education is considered a privilege or a long-lost opportunity, and if they are not already working, they are desperate to find any source of income to support their family. Their entire childhood and adolescence has been engulfed by conflict. And yet, despite the magnitude of challenges and suffering they have faced, they will determine the future of Syria.

What have we learned?



Over the course of this study, 227 adolescents living across five governorates in Syria – Aleppo, Al-Hasakeh, Hama, Homs, and Idlib – shared with us their hopes and fears for themselves and their country. These young people, aged 14 to 19 years old, demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of extreme adversity. And yet this resilience has come with clearly expressed emotions of deep pain and suffering, resulting not only from their lived experiences but also from the loss of the lives they could have lived. And so their stories are multidimensional, layered, and painful, and require us to listen and respond to the complexity of their new realities. Below is a summary of what we learned from these young people, and what it means for current efforts to support their growth, development, and prospects for a productive future.

1 - Syria's adolescents have lived full lifetimes before the age of 19.

While no longer children and not yet adults, the 14-19 year-old adolescents in this study are carrying the weight of a lifetime of experiences - they have lived through bombings, lost their homes and family members, have been widowed, and some have even lost their own children. They know how hard life can be, and carry much, if not all, of the burden of supporting their households on their shoulders. They come to the table not as children but as young people with incredible experience, and should be treated as such.

- › *Programs cannot treat adolescents as children, and must be designed to address their lived realities and increased familial responsibilities through the building of relevant skills and meaningful opportunities that recognise and validate their adult responsibilities.*

2 - There is not a single "Syrian adolescent" profile.

The diversity of adolescents' experiences is inextricably linked to the complexity of the war in Syria itself. Each adolescents political opinions, personal wellbeing, and experiences depend greatly on where one comes from, one's experience of conflict, the political orientation of one's family or community, gender and family order, and one's socioeconomic status. For example, a 15 year-old girl who is married and pregnant with her first child in central Syria, and a 16-year-old girl in secondary school in northeastern Syria have very distinct needs.

- › *Partner with adolescents in program delivery through provision of regular, active feedback to help programs stay responsive and relevant to the diversity and complexity of the adolescent experience.*

3 - Adolescent expectations deeply affect wellbeing and resilience.

Adolescents are acutely aware that the last eight years have robbed them of time that should have supported their personal development. They had expectations of their teenage years and how this phase of life would contribute to who they would become and to their future. How adolescents have adapted their expectations to their lived realities is directly linked to their resilience and wellbeing. Our data shows that adolescents' mental health outcomes were linked to how well they had been able to accept their reality and, accordingly, redefine or restructure their life choices. For example, some adolescents are still struggling to accept the fact that Syria will never "return to the way it was," and their denial is an obstacle for them moving forward. In contrast, those who have accepted (albeit often with deep sadness) their new adult roles are able to develop skills, focus their energy on ways to invest in themselves, and seek meaningful pathways forward.ⁱⁱⁱ

- › *Programs must be conscientious in managing expectations with adolescents. This means building realistic expectations as an explicit program outcome, and measuring adolescent expectations as an indicator for resilience in addition to other traditional mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) measures. Programs should also support adolescents to reframe their goals, build plans for concrete progress in the short- and medium-term, and channel their grief and anger towards investing in their own future.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Resilience in this study is defined as "the attainment of desirable social outcomes and emotional adjustment, despite exposure to considerable risk." Reference: (Betancourt & Khan, 2008); endnote 25.

4 - Pain is persistent and penetrating, and it cannot be ignored.

Adolescents have shown remarkable strength, but at a tremendous, often invisible cost — of stress, exhaustion, allostatic load,^{iv} and ultimately diminished dreams. Adolescents told us directly that they are depressed and exhausted, and we also know this from provision of ongoing support to adolescents throughout the conflict. The fact is, the psychological toll of this conflict is unimaginable and there is not one way to address psychological wellbeing. However, one thing we do know is that humanitarian approaches must address the desire for skills and mental health and psychosocial support needs, together.

- › *Ensure programs address psychosocial and emotional wellbeing across sectors through direct interventions or built in referrals to onsite or remote services.*

5 - Adolescents are proud to be Syrian - but have very divergent visions of what that means.

Young people often identified themselves with Syria and demonstrated love for their country in spite of the ongoing conflict. However, just as there is not a single adolescent profile, there are many visions of what Syria is and what it will be, and remorse for how the Syrian identity and reputation has been corrupted, both within national borders and abroad. These divisions run deep and will be a powerful force in shaping the future.

- › *Programming must directly engage adolescents in rebuilding their country through the channels that they have identified and see as ways to give back to their country and provide for their families and communities.*

6 - Purpose matters.

The adolescents who demonstrated the greatest resilience in the face of ongoing adversity are those who have found meaning in their lives and ways to feel ‘purposeful,’ typically through supporting the survival of their family. However, as their context shifts and the immediate survival of the family becomes less acute, adolescents will need to reorient themselves and find purpose once again. At this juncture, which will be different across the country, adolescents will need support to identify and access purposeful pathways to support their families, engage in their communities, and build their future.

- › *Provide adolescents with paid, safe, and decent work opportunities and pathways to build relevant, useful skills that provide for their families and give them hope for their futures.*



“I feel like I am doing something to improve my situation, especially my family. I’d like to be treated as an adult.”

- Doa’a, 17-19 year old girl, Homs governorate

iv Allostatic load is “the wear and tear on the body” that accumulates as an individual is exposed to repeated or chronic stress. (McEwen and Stellar, 1993)

Background and Context

As the conflict in Syria grinds into its ninth year, the humanitarian situation remains dire. Despite the decrease in hostilities throughout much of the country, over 6 million Syrians have been internally displaced and the vast majority are struggling to meet their essential basic needs, with 11.7 million people requiring humanitarian assistance.⁶ Continued hostility and conflict as well as systemic violations of human rights, overlaid with complex geopolitical rivalries and proxy wars, have together driven over 5.7 million Syrians into neighboring countries.⁷ Millions of Syrians continue to live under a cloud of uncertainty and fear, not only of what today might bring, but also for the future and security of their families.

Adolescents in our study have reminded us that this was not always the state of Syria, and that they are acutely aware of what their lives could have been, compared to what they are now. Indeed, studies show that the war has undone 35 years worth of progress.⁸ For instance, Syria's economy has contracted by more than 50 percent since 2011, and the proportion of the population living in extreme poverty, defined as less than US\$1.90 per day, has more than doubled.⁹ In 2017, an estimated 90% of households were spending more than half of their income on food, and 75% of households inside Syria had at least one child working, almost half of whom were joint or sole breadwinners.¹⁰ In terms of intellectual capital, before the outbreak of conflict in 2011 Syrian youth were among the most educated in the Middle East region, with Syria having achieved near universal primary education enrolment at 97%, a secondary school completion rate of 74%,¹¹ and over 93% literacy rates for both females and males.¹² In contrast, today almost one-third of all school-aged children in Syria (aged 5-17 years) are out of school, with an additional 1.3 million at risk of dropping out.¹³

Adolescent boys and girls in Syria are battling multiple layers of loss – destroyed homes and forced displacement, death of loved ones and the separation of families. Indeed, some two-thirds of children in Syria are reported to have lost a loved one, had their house damaged, or suffered conflict-related injuries.¹⁴ The level of violence perpetuated and experienced inside Syria is staggering, particularly against children, which includes adolescents. Grave violations against children have progressively increased since 2013,^v including the killing and maiming of children, recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, detention of children associated to parties of the conflict, and abduction and sexual violence against children,¹⁵ with high levels directed against boys, particularly those who have been held in detention centers. In the first nine months of 2018, 631 incidents of recruitment and use of children were verified, with 92% used in combat roles, and around a quarter under the age of 15.¹⁶ To this end, it is critical to understand that the trauma and loss experienced by these adolescents is not a figment of the past, but an ongoing struggle to survive, which in turn has implications for adolescents' wellbeing and decision-making. Indeed, our study highlights adolescents' loss of childhood and normalcy, loss of personal security, loss of certainty in the future, loss of faith in the people around them, and loss of hope.

Humanitarian actors may never be able to fully comprehend the everyday experiences of Syrians, and the hollow void left by years of conflict. We are faced with a fluid, dangerous context full of complex crises and insurmountable needs, to say nothing of the accessibility to the most vulnerable populations in hard-to-reach areas. Nevertheless, those of us with the privilege to safely step into the conflict, even as impartial and non-political actors, commit to giving voice to the complexities of the experiences of individuals we wish to serve. Mercy Corps has sought to better understand the adolescent experience inside Syria, a population too often overlooked or considered passive recipients of support rather than influential stakeholders. We see adolescents not as those who others can speak for, but as transformative change agents critical to the fabric of Syria whom are capable of speaking for themselves.

^v The MR4Syria was established by the UN Security Council in 2005 to document grave violations against children in armed conflict with the aim to provide for the systematic collection of "timely, objective, accurate and reliable information" on grave violations committed against children in situations of armed conflict.

Methodology

This research was initially conceptualised by Mercy Corps’ humanitarian teams working in Syria in early 2017. Teams felt the humanitarian response required a more nuanced understanding of the adolescent experience to inform impactful and relevant programming that could be successfully implemented in Syria. As a result, Mercy Corps staff alongside six humanitarian partners in Syria listened to and documented the experiences and aspirations of 227 adolescent girls and boys aged 14-19 years, 55% of whom were girls and 45% of whom were boys. This was done by conducting 41 focus group discussions (FGDs) over the course of five months, from late 2017 to mid-2018.

FGDs were conducted in 7 research sites across 5 governorates – Aleppo, Al-Hasakeh, Hama, Homs and Idlib governorates. Data collection took place from December 2017 to April 2018. Mercy Corps selected locations according to where programming was currently underway or where there was an immediate need to launch humanitarian programming. Mercy Corps and partners were limited to locations where humanitarian access was feasible, and even then faced regular challenges throughout the research period and across all governorates related to security, accessibility, and identification and support of remote partners.

The experience of the conflict in Syria is varied and has played out differently across the country. Thus, we anticipated that the geographical location where an adolescent lived or was displaced to would have shaped his/her direct experience, as this dictated one’s exposure to armed conflict, access to life-saving services, freedom of movement, and levels of toxic stress. Accordingly, we identified four different geographic regions where data was collected, the grouping of which (presented in Table 1.1 below and the map of Syria on the next page) also informed our analytical lens and reporting:

Table 1.1 Geographic Groupings for Data Analysis^{vi}

Central Syria: Homs, Hama & Idlib^{vii} Homs (Taldou subdistrict) Hama (Madiq Castle subdistrict) Southern Idlib (Sanjar subdistrict)	3 partners	Area that was opposition-held prior to and at the time of data collection, and which shifted to Government of Syria control.
Northern Syria: Aleppo (Menbij subdistrict)	1 partner	Area that was under ISIS-control and then shifted to the Kurdish Self Administration.
Northwestern Syria: Aleppo (Atareb subdistrict)	1 partner	Area that has remained under the control of various opposition groups since the outset of the war, with some shifts between the dominant opposition group.
Northeastern Syria: Al-Hasakeh (Al-Hasakeh subdistrict)	1 partner	Area that has remained under the control of Government of Syria and the Kurdish Self Administration throughout the conflict.

vi To ensure confidentiality, this report does not include the names of communities where the study took place.

vii Data from Idlib governorate’s southern subdistrict of Sanjar is included in the central Syria grouping because a) adolescents interviewed in Sanjar subdistrict were displaced from Hama governorate and as a result interviews were held in temporary camps b) Sanjar subdistrict has shifted to Government of Syria control like other governorates categorized under the central Syria grouping, however unlike other subdistricts in Idlib.

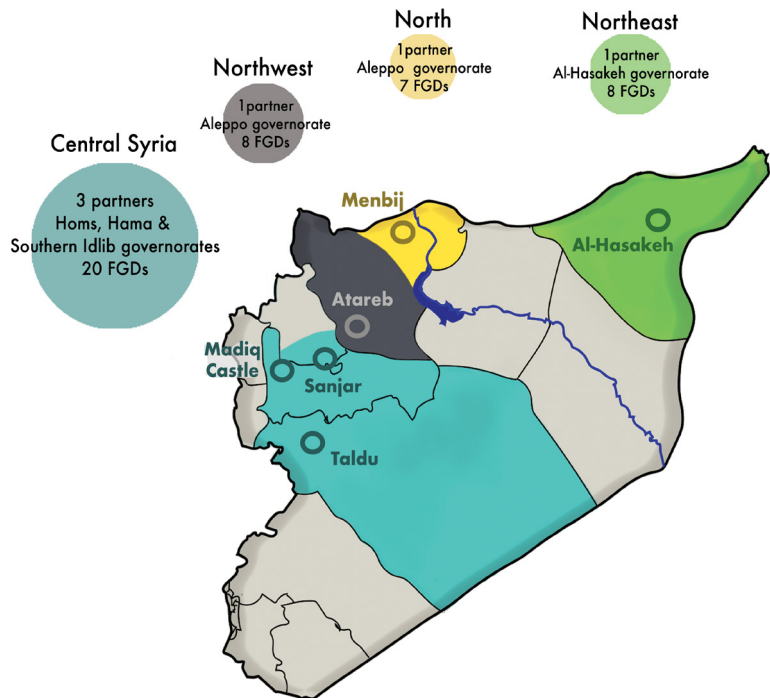
DATA COLLECTION

A total number of 41 FGDs were conducted with adolescents, split almost evenly between FGDs with males (20) and those with females (21). FGDs were typically convened according to the age grouping of participants such as 14-16 or 17-19 years, with some exceptions. Exceptions were mainly due to the security situation and cultural practicalities – for example, siblings who attended the FGDs together and requested to stay together, and represented different ages within a group.

Focus groups were sex-segregated and sessions were facilitated by same-sex facilitators to respect cultural norms and build safe spaces for participation. Each FGD was run by one facilitator, and had either one or two notetakers. This study included 49 total facilitators (24 male, 25 female) between the ages of 20 and 40 years old, themselves all Syrian. Each FGD was audio-recorded where possible (adolescents could select to opt out), transcribed into Arabic or Kurdish, and then translated into English by contracted freelancers. All participant data was anonymised for this report.

Each FGD began with an icebreaker including questions about adolescents' daily lives and family structures. This was followed by discussions about their experience of the war and related friendships, education, and work responsibilities, and how they perceived their individual and communal roles and identities, their mental and psychosocial wellbeing, future hopes, and what they wanted from humanitarian actors. Though each FGD facilitator was trained to use the same set of pre-designed questions, they also received extensive training to conduct semi-structured interview discussions that probed topics of interest that arose organically.

Adolescents were identified through the Population Council's^{viii} "I'm Here" approach,¹⁷ a program tool initially conceptualised to "find, listen, and design" programming according to the needs of the most vulnerable adolescent girls. The methodology was adapted to identify a more representative sample of adolescent girls and boys between the ages of 14 and 19 ("older" adolescents), and adjusted to operational restrictions inside Syria. For example, the team did not conduct the "find" phase of the approach through door-to-door assessments, which would have been operationally hazardous and impractical, but rather worked with community leaders and partners on the ground to identify participating adolescents.



^{viii} The Population Council is an international, nonprofit, non-governmental organization. The Council conducts research in biomedicine, social science, and public health and helps build research capacities in developing countries.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when reviewing our findings:

Representation: First, this study looks at the experience of adolescents across 5 governorates in Syria and cannot be considered fully representative of the Syrian adolescent experience nationally. Second, while field teams worked to include hard-to-reach adolescents during participant recruitment, we recognise that this study does not include all voices. Thus our sample is likely a representation, to some degree, of adolescents who were better off, as these individuals were physically able to attend the focus groups and psychologically well enough to share their experiences. Thus, the results of this study must be analysed with a lens that accounts for the fact that the uncaptured voices are likely in more dire circumstances.

Data Quality and Consistency: Different Mercy Corps partners managed FGDs and data collection across different sites. As a result, quality and depth of note-taking was better in some places than others. Additionally, not all adolescents, especially in north Syria, especially in north Syria's Aleppo governorate (Atareb subdistrict), were willing to be audio-recorded. Thus, several sites did not have audio-recordings for cross-reference and additional depth of context.

Social Desirability Bias: Due to the ongoing political dynamics and fragmentation in the country, we were reminded by FGD facilitators that some groups of adolescents may have been careful not to fully share their experiences or political opinions. This was particularly apparent in some sites, and especially in Aleppo governorate (both Atareb and Menbij subdistricts), where adolescents' answers were much shorter and there was a lack of comfort with elaborating or providing additional details in front of their peers. Indeed, the level of familiarity that participants had with one another was not the same across groups – often, adolescents knew neither the facilitator nor other participants, while in some cases they knew each other very closely. Thus, while we are inclined to believe that the adolescents who spoke did so truthfully, there were occasions where 'group think' or peer pressure may have influenced young people's responses, and others where some participants remained silent or reluctant to express their thoughts, perhaps so as not to express an unpopular opinion in public or within the audio-recording.

Changing Context: Since this study was conducted, the country has gone through additional changes that will impact the lives of adolescents going forward. Given the complexity of the context, it is imperative to continue to engage adolescents in the feedback loop to stay continually updated in such a volatile situation.

Photo Credit: Mercy Corps



“We are not young anymore and our toys don't suit our age anymore. We couldn't accomplish anything we wanted in the last while. We didn't finish our education so the girls didn't have a chance to learn...even the guys didn't have a chance to learn.”

- Safa'a, 17-19 year old girl, Hama governorate

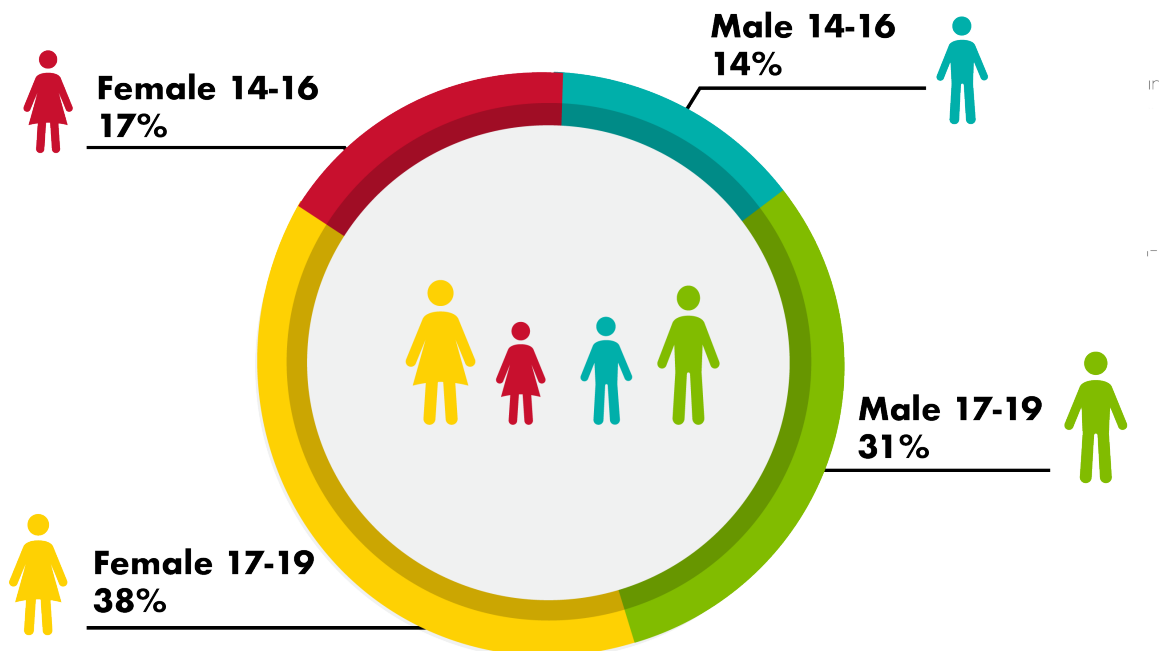
Findings

Adolescence is a transitional stage in life between childhood and adulthood when young people are going through intense and radical shifts across multiple spheres, including physical, cognitive, and psychosocial changes.¹⁸ It is often classified as the second window of opportunity for growth,¹⁹ and it is during this period that adolescents assume more adult responsibilities, adopt new behaviors, develop critical thinking skills, and begin to make decisions that will affect their entire lives. To better understand how adolescents in Syria have experienced this phase of transition and change, we spoke to 227 adolescents inside Syria to learn more about their lives and what eight years of conflict means for their future, and the future of Syria.

Following extensive analysis, it is evident that findings must be viewed through a prism that takes into consideration gender, social context, exposure to trauma, and experience of conflict and displacement. At an individual level, each adolescent's life is different depending on how old one is, where one lives, and the family's socioeconomic status. It matters if one is a boy or a girl, the eldest or youngest in the family, whether their family is still intact or certain members have been displaced, imprisoned, or killed. Each adolescent's feeling of belonging and security within their current environment also depends on where it is they grew up or where they were forcibly displaced to, and whether they are originally from an urban or rural community. It matters what the political or ethnic orientation is of their family and where they have grown up, such as whether their hometown was under the control of ISIS, opposition forces, the Kurdish Self Administration, or the Government of Syria. While complex, these prisms do not preclude the possibility of quality adolescent programming in Syria. In fact, they are incredibly important when considering what programming options are best suited to the needs of a particular group.

The following summary of our findings takes into careful consideration the aforementioned individual and social contextual factors to accurately reflect the significant diversity of experience of adolescents inside Syria today. The summary considers what this diversity means for both humanitarian programming and the future of this generation.

Figure 1.2: Age and Sex Segmentation of Adolescents Across all Research Locations





“I do not go out of the house and feel suffocated inside. I do not have friends to mix with, deal with, or complain about my worries to. It is a feeling beyond description.”


- Marwa, 17-19 year old girl, Al-Hasakeh governorate

Security and Mobility

Violent conflict in Syria, both past and present, has had a significant impact on adolescents’ individual security and mobility. The impact of conflict on their mobility has been well-documented, particularly in regard to the experience of adolescent girls inside Syria and among Syrian refugee communities abroad.^{20 21} Similarly, at a communal level, in areas most impacted by ongoing conflict, the mobility and services that stable communities would often provide have diminished or been completely disrupted and destroyed. This study further validates these findings and highlights important nuances.


Our study confirmed that adolescents’ personal safety continues to be under threat, but that this threat level varies depending on several factors. For instance, the level of armed conflict, an adolescent’s gender, as well as his or her comfort level and frequency in accessing services within the community or outside the home, play important roles in determining the extent and way in which their mobility and security have been affected. For example, in central Syria in formerly opposition-held areas that were experiencing high levels of open conflict and displacement at the time of the data collection (Hama, Homs and southern Idlib governorates), mobility decreased significantly for both boys and girls. Adolescents were both very aware of and frustrated by this loss. Indeed, all adolescents interviewed expressed concern regarding the risks they were taking to get to work, go to school, or to move around within their community in general. However, in line with other studies’ findings, girls were often kept at home for their protection, while boys had to take extremely risky routes to find work to support the family.^{22 23} Specific to adolescent boys, mobility was limited due to checkpoints, risks of conscription and arrests, and bombardments.

This lack of mobility was particularly stark when considering the situation of internally displaced adolescents compared with host community adolescents. Even in areas that have been less impacted by active conflict over the years, such as the northeastern Syrian governorate of Al-Hasakeh, host community adolescent boys and girls had significantly more mobility and were regularly accessing services and connecting with friends, while internally displaced adolescents remained very restricted. Restrictions across all governorates for internally displaced adolescents were caused by several challenges, such as security concerns related to the distance between homes, schools and work, or the prevalence of multiple checkpoints. Additionally, the lack of trust between the host and displaced community, as well as the latter’s lack of knowledge about the host community and its existing services played an important role in restricting the movement of adolescents.



“We don’t go out because we’re refugees. It’s not our village, nor our relatives. We don’t visit anyone, and no one visits us.”


- Rahaf, 15-16 year old girl, Hama governorate



“This area used to be the most free; we used to go out at ease, fearless, but now we cannot be out of the house after the sun sets.”

- Ruwayda, 17-19 year old girl, Al-Hasakeh governorate

Concern for and experience of both real and perceived violence also defines adolescent movements. Violence against women and girls, and in particular sexual violence, is a common thread and serious threat throughout the conflict which limits their movement considerably. In addition, a recent UNHCR study also revealed high levels of violence, specifically sexual violence, perpetrated against men and boys in the Syria context.²⁴ Sexual violence is another one of the often unspoken threats that face adolescent boys in conflict settings. While sexual violence is considered highly taboo, it is an ever looming threat, particularly as men and boys have to navigate the community in search for work. While experiences of sexual violence did not explicitly come up in our study – being neither within the scope of the research objectives nor a personal disclosure that was expected to be revealed in a group setting – it is essential to take into consideration when accounting for the threats to adolescents’ day-to-day lives and reasons for the level of fear adolescents repeatedly articulated in this study. (More details in the section on Mental Health and Wellbeing.)



“Just this morning a tractor was hit, sometimes even a single person standing alone will get shot at. I’ve changed my usual track so I avoid getting shot. I now walk around 15 kilometers to go back home. And if I wanted to go home there is a chance I might not [make it].” - Issam, 18-19 year old boy, Homs governorate

What does this mean for adolescents and humanitarian action?

Measuring mobility for adolescent girls is directly reflected by their access, or lack thereof, to social circles and services. For Syrian girls in high conflict or insecure settings, contact is limited to immediate family members. As security increases, so does their access to other networks, starting with extended family members and then friends, teachers, healthcare workers, and others. In contrast, the sphere of mobility for Syrian adolescent boys, while also diminished in areas of ongoing conflict, almost always includes people beyond the immediate family. This contrast demonstrates that girls’ security and sphere of support grows as conflict decreases, while boys maintain a high level of interaction in the community regardless of the level of insecurity they face. As a result, boys consistently face many (often unspoken) threats, regardless of, and often because of, the level of insecurity they are experiencing.

For both boys and girls, the lack of networks and the introduction of unsafe movement not only has an impact on their physical safety but on their emotional and psychological wellbeing. Adolescence is a critical development phase and a number of studies indicate that social support and connections within the community, schools and other environments are associated with positive mental health outcomes.²⁵ In the context of conflict, these networks can

disappear or become unsafe or uncertain. Interventions should aim to not only create opportunities for adolescents but also to increase positive social networks for adolescents.

Additionally, interventions need to be designed so they do not increase risk to adolescents and do not compete with adolescents' responsibilities to their family; in high-risk cases, as is the situation in Syria, this can be a recipe for failure as survival will always come first. For example, safe spaces programs are often a go-to format for children and adolescents, and this has certainly proven effective in many cases and should be one of the options to consider for adolescent engagement in the right security conditions. However, in some cases safe spaces through physical communal platforms (i.e. community centers) may actually increase risks for adolescent boys and girls because movement outside of the home is particularly dangerous. For girls, this means that families are hesitant to allow them to attend due to real fear of violence and other security risks. For boys, additional travel could result in increased risk, and in some cases even require adolescent boys to manage the security of their siblings if they are traveling to safe space activities together – which is often the case.



“Before the war, studying was the most important. Now it’s working and helping my parents out. War changed a lot for us. We used to be able to study, now our responsibilities grew and we have to work to help our parents.”

- Faten, 14-16 year old girl, Hama governorate

Education and Work

Adolescents' radically shifting relationships with education and employment were foundational to the adolescent experience across the whole of Syria. Consistent with United Nations reports and the 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) protection data,²⁶ our data also showed shockingly high out-of-school rates, with over two-thirds of both male and female (78% male, 69% female) adolescents not attending any type of educational programming. It is critical to remember that these young men and women, who are now between 14-19 years old, were children between 7-11 years old when the conflict began. Given that primary education in Syria typically begins at 7 years old, this means that for the youngest in our sample, it is not surprising for some to have received minimal or no education at all. Our data showed that all adolescents interviewed had been out of school for a sobering average of 4 years at the time of data collection, and some were even illiterate. School enrollment trends between the two sexes were also complex – on one hand, girls who had dropped out had done so on average 2 to 3 years earlier than boys (in third or fourth grade); on the other hand, girls were 10% more likely than boys to be in school across most research locations. However, the few adolescents in our dataset who were registered as never having enrolled in school were all girls from central Syria governorates – likely as a result of multiple displacements. For all adolescents, however, it was evident that their lives and education have been irrevocably disrupted, and in many cases, dreams destroyed.

Reasons for adolescents’ absence from formal education were remarkably varied and deeply challenging. Echoing previous studies, the most common reason adolescents cited for their disrupted education was the war, or what they referred to with a combination of grief, irony, disdain and exhaustion as “the situation”.²⁷ Specifically, their primary barriers to education included a) school buildings being destroyed, damaged or inaccessible due to wrecked roads or unfriendly military checkpoints; b) displacement to areas that lacked schools, especially secondary education options; and c) chronic insecurity that made travel too risky. In addition, poverty meant that the cost of tuition or transportation costs were prohibitive for many, and that most adolescents needed to work full time and long hours to feed their families. Similarly, displacement meant that the few schools that existed were often too far from their homes, or that adolescents lacked the correct paperwork to be enrolled.

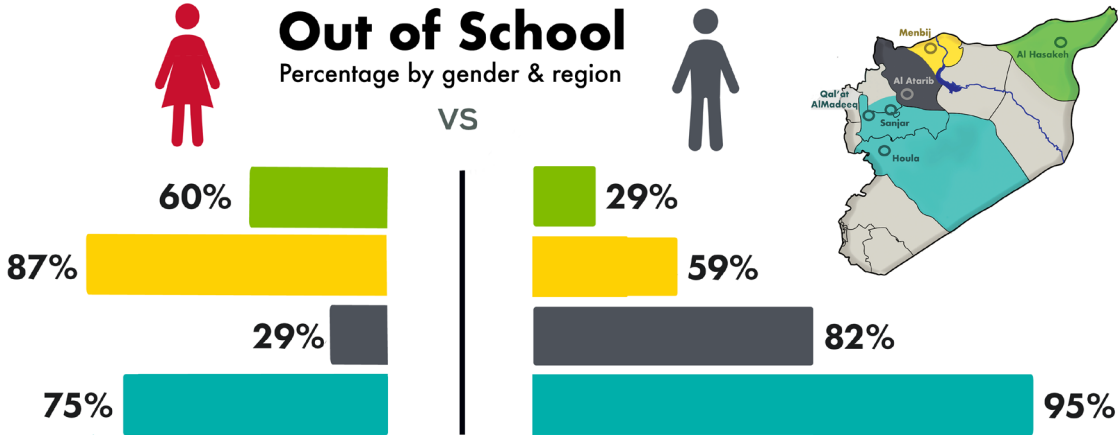


“I left school in first grade, since the events started.”

- Samir, 15-17 year old boy, Aleppo governorate (Atareb subdistrict)

Even in circumstances where all the aforementioned barriers were addressed, however, many adolescents refused to attend school, either because schools offered low-quality education, or because they felt learning was now a far-gone dream. They saw it as both embarrassing to learn basic literacy and numeracy from scratch at 17 or 18 years old, and impractical to try and catch up after missing four to seven years of school. In Al-Hasakeh governorate adolescents cited linguistic barriers, such as a lack of Arabic-language curriculum/schools. In central Syria governorates (Hama, Homs and southern Idlib) adolescents cited political barriers, whereby they refused to go to school because there was a lack of ‘opposition-schools.’ Indeed, these adolescents expressed a clear preference to attend schools run by the opposition, and some even felt it would be life-threatening to attend Government of Syria schools. Perhaps most importantly, however, was how some adolescents emphasised the loss of importance education had in their new lives, a prevailing theme described in more detail below.

Figure 1.3: Out-of-School Rates for Male and Female Adolescents by Research Locations



In examining the confluence of factors impacting Syrian adolescents’ radically transformed relationship with education, we found that adolescents’ educational experience in Syria was predominantly shaped by three forces – the violence of conflict, stresses of (internal) displacement, and societal scripts for their respective genders. Adolescent boys were more likely to be out of school than girls because both the need for them to work and

the societal expectation that they would work was substantially greater. This was exemplified in central Syria governorates, which reflected the highest out-of-school rates for boys, with 95% not attending any form of education. Boys in the central governorates generally expressed little interest in continuing formal schooling; while they valued education intrinsically, school seemed to be a luxury. Their most pressing priority, especially if their fathers had been imprisoned or killed, was finding employment and income in a very limited job market. In fact, only 15% of boys in central governorates reported to be working, but the majority were seeking work. Contrastingly, Atareb subdistrict in Aleppo governorate (which has been under opposition control until now) reflected the highest working rates, with over 90% of young men participating in some form of labor and the second highest out-of-school rates. Boys who were working regularly expressed a mixture of pride and exhaustion – pride in their ability to contribute to their family, and exhaustion due the conditions, hard work, and associated responsibilities.



“I work as a hauling labourer. I leave at 6 a.m. then I come back in the late afternoon.”

- Ahmad, 19 year old boy, Aleppo governorate (Atareb subdistrict)


It was also common to find adolescent boys who were studying and working simultaneously, although this was more prevalent in Al-Hassakeh and Menbij subdistricts. In Menbij, previously ISIS-held and now under Kurdish Self Administration, adolescent boys were accessing education at just over 50%, while 41% were working. The majority of those in school were from the Kurdish host community. Similarly, in Al-Hasakeh governorate, which demonstrated the highest in-school rates across all sites, the majority of boys in school were from the host community. Those attending school placed a high value on education which they linked to a better future for themselves and their families. Importantly, however, even adolescents who have stayed in school were tempered in their optimism, expressing deep concern about their employment prospects and the state of the nation. There was also a small number of young men that said they were not doing anything – neither school nor work, just ‘hanging around’ and ‘climbing walls’ in Hama and Aleppo (Atareb subdistrict) governorates. Education was not of interest to them, and their time was mostly spent with friends.



“I work every day but what is important at the end of the day is securing an income that allows me to help my parents with the household expenses.”

- Ara, 18 year old boy, Al-Hasakeh governorate


Adolescent girls’ experiences of education and employment painted several different pictures. We found that the majority of girls were not in school for three main reasons: a) security – adolescents’ parents, siblings and spouses did not want them to attend because they felt it was not safe either from bombardments, general unrest or sexual harassment; b) family obligations – many were already married, had their own families, or were taking on the role of a lost loved one; c) low priority – in some instances, girls felt that education was not a priority because their roles should be focused on homemaking and housekeeping, especially in the case where a parent or spouse was overwhelmed. Even though on average adolescents girls in our study had less pressure to work than their male peers, among the girls who did drop out, these individuals were more likely to have dropped out earlier than boys, due to aforementioned reasons.



“I left school after I got married. After the divorce I had no more desire, nor had the opportunity to continue my education.”

- Slava, 19 year old girl, Al-Hasakeh governorate

As a result, girls’ out-of-school education rates did not mirror the geographic locations of their male peers. The highest out-of-school rates for adolescent girls were recorded in northern Syria in Aleppo governorate, Menbij subdistrict – which also showed the highest prevalence of early marriage in our study, at 20%. In northwestern Syria in Atareb subdistrict, also in Aleppo governorate, which demonstrated the highest out-of-school rates for boys, we also found the lowest out-of-school rates for girls with 71% in school, as well as the second highest recorded marriage rates for girls at 18%. In a context where it is often assumed that boys’ education is a priority over girls, and adolescent girls are out of school and married early and against their will, our findings highlight the nuances that this research was able to discern, and the ways in which Syria’s adolescents have vastly diverse experiences depending on the different cross-sections of their identities and experiences.



“School was also the most important to me. I wanted to fulfill this ambition but my parents were against it because of this situation and for our own good. I like being at home, it has now become normal for me. The last thing I think of now is school.” - Nada, 15-17 year old girl, Hama governorate

Our analysis also showed that the outlook of many adolescent girls towards education was more evenly split than their male peers’, and was often influenced by their marital status, even as teenagers. Girls who were in school saw education as not only a practical investment for their future, but also very important to developing their individual identities, making their parents proud, maintaining hope for their futures, and even allowing them to teach the next generation. In fact, some girls were already doing so through teaching or tutoring kindergarten or primary school. Overall, unmarried adolescent girls, whether in or out of school, were more likely to emphasize the desire for education, and many were interested in exploring skills-based programs, particularly related to nursing and teaching. For instance, many adolescent girls who were not attending school in opposition-held areas at the time of the research including central Syria (Hama, Homs, and southern Idlib governorates) and northern Syria (Aleppo governorate and Menbij subdistrict) still had great faith and hope in education, viewing it as a potential tool to support their family, community and country. As for married participants, however, although some still spoke of the importance of education and were hoping to attend catch-up classes, the majority of girls seemed resigned to education being something of the past and were focused instead on their role within the family and the household, especially if they were already mothers of young children.

In addition to societal expectations for boys and girls, it is important to note how the experience of internal displacement introduced yet another layer of challenges to those affected. Internally displaced adolescents have different experiences across the country and in some cases were living in informal camps or tents – for example, Sanjar subdistrict (Idlib governorate) at the time of research – or rented and unfinished buildings without heat, water or electricity, conditions which some endured for several years. To this end, girls in central Syria (Hama, Homs, and southern Idlib governorates) and northeastern Syria (Al-Hasakeh governorate), albeit areas displaying two very different security contexts, cited displacement as the greatest barrier to education.

How do adolescents feel about their disrupted education?

Overall, our data showed that the most mentally- and psychosocially-protected group of young people were those who were still enrolled in formal schooling. This was not only because being in an education system allows one to learn, feel progress and thus be more hopeful. Rather, most of the Syrian adolescents who are still able to attend school are, by definition, already more “privileged” than their peers who have dropped out, as they typically do not have family members in need of caretaking, are able to afford the transportation, tuition, and associated costs of schooling, have their family’s permission and support to continue learning, and most importantly can prioritise education over the need to work to survive.

Given that over two-thirds of young people were not attending school, we wanted to understand if they would go back if it were possible and safe to do so. In other words, would they still be interested in attending school, if all the other pressures disappeared? Overwhelmingly, we found that most young men and a large number of young women felt that there was no longer any point in pursuing formal education. Indeed, the most salient theme on education that emerged from our study was that adolescents, regardless of whether they were sad about losing their education, often expressed reluctance or even refusal to go back to school even if the opportunity were presented to them. The primary reasons included a) feeling they had missed too much schooling to be able to go back and catch up, 4-7 years later; and that b) traditional education was no longer relevant nor practically leading to much-needed income, both immediately and in the future. On the fringes, a number of girls also expressed indifference to ending their education, and one boy admitted he only went to school on days his friends were there. In this way, the Syrian adolescents are perhaps just like any adolescents around the world – with some who love school, and others simply not so fond of it. Overall, however, conflict has so disrupted these adolescents’ education that “going back to enroll” seems impossible and ludicrous to most given their life circumstances.



Photo credit: Mona, Adolescent youth program participant

The most salient theme on education that emerged from our study was that adolescents, regardless of whether they were sad about losing their education, often expressed reluctance or even refusal to go back to school even if the opportunity were presented to them.

Q: “If they open a school here, would you consider continuing?”

A: “No, for I have already missed a lot.”

- Hazem, 17-19 year old boy, Aleppo governorate (Atareb subdistrict)

Interestingly, however, while in some cases both adolescent girls and boys may have given up on education for themselves, many had not given up on educating future generations, and felt that education was still vitally important for their younger siblings or children. Thus it is evident that Syrian adolescents’ willingness to pursue education is now a race against time – having already diminished significantly among adolescent boys who are working and married adolescent girls who are parenting. Education’s place in Syrian adolescents lives is rapidly waning as employment prospects, even for those with degrees, becomes more clouded and uncertain.

In the meantime, however, adolescent boys and girls and especially the former have found ways to find income for their families, even without a diploma and/or stable employment. We asked adolescents about different ways in which they are engaging with the community, and found out that those who are not in school are either working, volunteering, spending time with their friends, relatives and neighbours, or are bored and trapped at home, in that order. Note that these activities are not mutually exclusive, and often overlapping. In fact, more than half of our adolescent respondents were already working, and in many instances engaged in serious adult jobs, including teaching (only adolescent girls), farming and agriculture, as well as various forms of informal and hard labor (construction, hauling, shoe repairs, mechanic repairs, etc.) among adolescent boys. Some also were engaged in their family's trades, keeping their father's and grandfather's crafts alive, such as carpentry, ceramics and tailoring. In all cases, it was evident that immediate survival and family needs have trumped education.

Finally, in addition to working, a few adolescents, primarily young women, spoke of their passionate efforts to volunteer with their community and all were from formerly opposition-held areas in central Syria governorates. Those who did, did so through nursing, providing vocational training for women, or teaching young children literacy, numeracy or religion. For them, volunteering had become their main avenue for self-determination when school and paid work were either not feasible or culturally-supported options. While few participants explicitly mentioned supporting or resisting the Government of Syria, many implied that their work, training or education served as a means of resisting the oppression they experienced and a concrete motivation for rebuilding their future Syria.



“I tutor children in religion at the mosque... once per week... I love tutoring children and teaching them the Qur’an and the Prophet’s Hadiths.”

- Hiyam, 14-16 year old girl, Hama governorate

What does this mean for adolescents and humanitarian action?

The traditional understanding of the adolescent experience in conflict settings is that a) young people who are not in school are not present either because school is unavailable or inaccessible, and that they would re-enroll if only schools were rebuilt or funding provided; and b) young people who are prematurely assigned adult roles and families adopt negative coping strategies, such as entering the workforce as children or are forced to marry early. This in turn carries the assumption that child labor is necessarily oppressive, or that adolescents either completely accept or feel oppressed by cultural expectations.

The reality is much more nuanced and takes into consideration what adolescents are telling us about their realities and feelings. Across all locations, adolescents have prioritised the needs of their families, and their actions are directly related to how those needs manifest in their homes, and the severity of those manifestations. They are also quite clear that they take pride in their contributions. While they have expressed sadness regarding the loss of what adolescence ‘should be’ in terms of going to school, making friends, and building skills, in the same breath they recognise – and many have found fulfilling roles within – their current situation, giving them some level of pride and meaning. Thus, the solution is not as simple as “eradicating child labor”, for example, but rather addressing the security circumstances that make it impossible to pursue an education on the one hand, and finding ways for adolescents to build relevant skills on the other, albeit likely not through formal education.



“I lost my mother and I have 4 siblings who are younger than me. I don’t know if I can replace our mother whom we love.”

- Nour, 18 year old girl, Idlib governorate (Sanjar subdistrict)

Family, Marriage, and Children


An overwhelming finding of our study is that the hardship of adolescents’ experiences inside Syria, regardless of location, has often far exceeded their physical development and age, and many have lived entire lifetimes even before they are 19 years old. While a minority of adolescents (mostly in Al-Hasakeh governorate with the largest proportion in Aleppo governorate in Atareb subdistrict) were able to continue in their lives to some degree as “children”, be provided for by their parents, have limited family responsibilities, and go to school – the vast majority of boys and girls in our study had to take on adult roles as sibling caregivers, labourers, breadwinners, heads of household, spouses and even parents of their own children. Overwhelmingly, the need to take adult roles (and consequently, view oneself as an adult) had been triggered out of necessity, because the adolescents’ fathers and brothers had been killed, disabled, or their businesses destroyed in the conflict, rendering their financial circumstances quite difficult. For instance, adolescent boys whose fathers and/or older brothers who had been killed or paralysed had needed to make the rapid transformation into serving as the primary breadwinner, often as young as 15 or 16 years old.

“My brother and I are breadwinners and this is a recent change because my father passed away.”

- Bader, 15-16 year old boy, Aleppo governorate (Menbij subdistrict)

One aspect of the adolescents’ identities that our research did not explicitly inquire about but that emerged as a strong theme in our data was that many of the adolescents, despite all being between 14-19 years old, were already married, have children, and some were even divorced or widowed. This was voiced by one adolescent boy (who at 15 years was already married and had a family in Atareb subdistrict in Aleppo governorate) and a plurality of the adolescent girls interviewed. The incidence and increase of early marriage is a well-documented concern in Syria; the 2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview reported that 69% of families perceived the occurrence of early marriage, demonstrating an extreme increase from 13% reported prior to the conflict.²⁸ And while our study

also found a high incidence of early marriage – notably in Aleppo governorate with 20% of girls married in Menbij subdistrict and 18% married in Atareb subdistrict – it also revealed critical and often surprising nuances. For example, while the number of divorced or widowed adolescents was not high (3 divorced and 2 widowed) it suggested additional cases that may have not been shared or recorded. This is particularly shocking when considering this is the experience of girls as young as 14 to 19 years old. Adolescent girls’ feelings towards marriage were also very mixed – many married adolescents cited their responsibilities to their spouses or their children as the centre of their universe, and some seemed happy and secure with these circumstances, speaking about their identities as wives and mothers normally, matter-of-factly, positively. Some, however, expressed concern and fear of getting married – one married girl reflected that she wished she could go back, as she did not feel ready for marriage. For a few others, motherhood was a source of stress and even trauma. One adolescent girl in our focus groups had already lost her baby daughter to the conflict before the age of 16. Indeed, across all data collection sites, adolescents shared the pain of losing a parent, close family member, spouse, or child, and if they had not already experienced direct loss, it was a daily, persistent fear. However, our findings overall show that a) early marriage is not always perceived as negative by adolescents, and that b) a significant portion of Syria’s adolescents have nevertheless lived entire lifetimes and carry the burdens of adults and as parents, even though they are biologically still teenagers.



“I started to take care of many responsibilities, plenty of them, I had to help my father. It changed me a lot... as a provider I have to do anything I can to support my family since no jobs are available.”

- Zain, 18-19 year old boy, Hama governorate

The evolving structure of the family and its consequences for the roles adolescents must take on differed by community within Syria. For instance, in areas where there was ongoing violent conflict and the community had experienced layers of displacement – conditions unique to the central Syrian governorates – families appear to have remained together with their adolescent daughters playing important roles in maintaining the nuclear family, including performing household chores and caregiving for younger siblings, as well as in some cases taking on the role of a lost family member. Early marriage rates appeared to be lower in these locations as well. What is interesting is that early marriage is usually practiced as a negative coping strategy by families in the wake of conflict for a variety of reasons,²⁹ but in central Syria where conflict was most intensified (particularly at the time of research), early marriage was less common. In contrast, in areas where security was better or there had been longer periods of relative stability, both rates of early marriage and school attendance were higher. This was most noticeable in Aleppo governorate in both Atareb and Menbij subdistricts, where girls were attending school at increased rates in contrast to their male peers, and there were also higher rates of reported early marriage. Given the dangers associated with early marriage for adolescent girls, understanding the triggers of this practice is important. These results demonstrate the diversity of motivations for early marriage across geographic locations in Syria, and how negative coping strategies can manifest differently according to levels of conflict and displacement.

In terms of how the conflict has affected adolescents’ day-to-day lives and roles within their families, then, the overarching theme is the survival and security of the family unit. This is the purpose that drives adolescents’ daily activities; often, this precludes opportunities or time for them to invest in their own pathways. Note, however, that this is often a choice that adolescents themselves are making, and not the by-product of “not having a choice,” as the war has made them deeply value the integrity and wholeness of their family, which they need to survive.

How do adolescents feel about their new roles?

Perhaps surprisingly, many of the adolescents accepted their situation, and with panache, a perspective articulated most commonly by our male participants. Many adolescents were happy to fill adult roles not only out of necessity, obligation, or filial piety (a significant element of Syrian and Arab culture), but also because they felt it was an honour to be able to contribute to the household. This feeling was expressed by both young men and women, but the source of this pride was often different for each gender. For instance, both felt that bringing in an income gave them confidence, but young men in particular talked about how working made them feel proud of being “the man of the house,” and more masculine. For some adolescent girls, working also allowed them to more fully support and feel equal with their spouses, especially in providing for their young children.

Both young men and women also enjoyed working because they felt doing so gave them increased respect, empathy and even love from their parents, as well as a greater measure of independence. Indeed, when explicitly asked, “Do you like to be treated like you are an adult or do you wish that you are still a child?”, the majority of our respondents, around two-thirds, said that they much preferred to be treated as an adult. This preference for their adult identity was observed among some boys who preferred to be called “Abu Samir” or “Abu Abed” (“Father of Samir”, or “Father of Abed”, a societal honorific in Arabic typically given to older men) instead of their first names, and they bore these titles with pride.



Photo Credit: Mercy Corps

“I love being old (adult) and helping my husband with what he wants and with money to spend on our daughters. I hope I find a [full-time] job so I can make my daughters happy.” - Fadwa, 19 year old girl, Hama governorate

Nevertheless, several adolescents felt deeply burdened by the very adult roles they had to shoulder as young teenagers, expressing exhaustion and despair, especially from debilitating financial burdens. These voices came predominantly from younger adolescents in central Syria governorates in Hama, Homs and southern Idlib who expressed hints of bitterness or resignation for having to shoulder adult responsibilities given their circumstances, although their feelings were also directed towards the Government of Syria or the conflict at large. Consequently, some boys and girls expressed wistfulness for their childhood and the desire to be treated like a child again. Ultimately, it is important to consider these findings in the context of what it means to be in the developmental stage of adolescence, which is already a complicated time of transition, but for these adolescents is only further complicated by the crosshairs of war.

“There is nothing to do. My husband doesn’t work because of the conditions, he can’t pass the check-points and he couldn’t continue his education. If he did he would’ve found a job. We’re staying with his parents. He gets annoyed and upset from the money we spend on our daughter. We have to at least get her diapers.”

- Rana, 16-18 year old girl, Hama governorate

What does this mean for adolescents and humanitarian action?

First and foremost, a consistent thread that emerged in our data is that in an environment of conflict, particularly a protracted one, the family unit divides roles and responsibilities across its members in order to survive, and adolescents are no exception. For an adolescent, this need to survive often means that the traditional adolescent experience disappears and is replaced with the responsibilities and life of an adult while still in the body of a teenager. Traditionally, an adolescent’s responsibility would have been focused on personal growth, making friends, building networks and establishing foundations for the future, but in the wake of crisis, the family unit has become their reason to exist, often cited as their purpose in life.

As a result, interventions need to reflect the experience of these adolescents, who are living the lives of adults. In most cases, this also means ensuring that interventions provide them with tangible and useful outcomes and interventions are accessible given their responsibilities and roles within the home. Many studies have found that traditional safe space programs that focus on psychosocial activities and outcomes alone do not meet the needs of adolescents who are interested in formal education opportunities or more often, vocational training and skill development.³⁰ While psychosocial support is critical, adolescents both need and desire substantive skills to navigate their lives and their new and undefined futures.

Photo Credit: Mona, Adolescent youth program participant



“Most of my time is spent at work. My young age makes me feel that I am carrying burdens larger than my capacity. I feel proud for supporting my family but it is very daunting for me, for my income is small and I wish I was studying.”

- Jameel, 17-19 year old boy, Aleppo governorate, Menjib subdistrict



“I’m proud to be Syrian and demand my freedom. I am Syrian, this is my country and this jihad is virtuous.”

- Ahlam, 14-16 year old girl, Hama governorate

“Because of others controlling the country... I feel like Syria has become a joke.”

- Mahmoud, 18-19 year old boy, Homs governorate

National Identity

The majority of adolescents inside Syria have become increasingly proud of their identity as Syrians. Two-thirds of young people in our study described how to them, Syria meant home and belonging, and references to Syria as the ‘motherland’ was very common. For others, Syria was a familiar place that shared their language and cultural values. Still others loved Syria for its history, in particular for being both an Arab and Islamic country. Many expressed that their love of Syria had remained constant despite their experiences and hardship, that they have remained Syrian, and that they were proud to be Syrian. This sentiment was very strong and expressed across all data collection sites. Nevertheless, it is important to note that young people may not have felt comfortable expressing contradicting sentiments in a group, and may have been influenced by peer pressure and ‘groupthink’, particularly when discussing national identity.

“Sometimes I wish that I was not a Syrian and have not seen what has happened in Syria.”

- Shaden, 14-16 year old girl, Al-Hasakeh governorate

While less frequently expressed in comparison to feelings of pride, a small number of adolescents articulated feeling less Syrian today than they did before, or frustrated at what the Syrian identity has become associated with. These sentiments were primarily expressed by adolescents in Al-Hasakeh governorate who felt resentment toward how being “Syrian” is now perceived by the outside world, which made them feel shame and sadness for Syria. Some expressed a desire to dissociate themselves from their national identity, a sentiment expressed more clearly and vocally by young men, though also voiced by young women. Some adolescents also lamented their lack of mobility and status – how in the past, a Syrian ID meant something, but today, “it has no value. Now if you show your ID in another country they realise that you are Syrian, they will look at us as criminals.” Indeed, many felt humiliated that “Syrians” were now synonymous with terrorists or refugees, and were neither welcome in other countries nor able to live a decent life in their own homeland.

Interestingly, both adolescents who felt “more” Syrian as well as those who felt “less” Syrian voiced concerns regarding the prevalence of Syrians living abroad. For some young people, their personal pride in their own resilience was linked to a deep desire not to leave Syria, and they were proud that they had stayed throughout the war. Furthermore, some expressed underlying bitterness towards those who they perceived as having abandoned their motherland. In all cases, however, adolescents were aware that their identities and future prospects are inextricably linked to the future of Syria.



“My identity is Syria. I should live in my country and bear everything that is happening until this bad situation ends. Syria is my homeland.”

- Adnan, 18-19 year old boy, Aleppo governorate (Menbij subdistrict)

What does this mean for adolescents and humanitarian action?

As described in the above section, both young men and young women felt strongly about their association with Syria, and adolescents as young as 14 years old were able to clearly articulate their Syrian identity, whether positively or negatively. Complexly, however, and in direct reflection of the political fragmentation of the nation, young people also articulated very different ideas of what it means to be “Syrian” – with definitions ranging from a focus on ethnicity, to a focus on culture, and even political allegiance.

Additionally, many of their current actions that appear to be directly linked to adolescent resilience are in fact associated with the sense of purpose that is connected to their respective version of their homeland. Therefore, in the politically fragmented reality of Syria, it will be imperative to ensure that young people have opportunities to peacefully and meaningfully engage in the rebuilding of their nation through the channels that they have articulated – primarily through safe and decent work opportunities to physically rebuild what they have lost.



“Syria does not mean anything to me.”

- May, 14-16 year old girl, Aleppo governorate (Atareb subdistrict)

Photo Credit: Mercy Corps



“We’ve been refugees for about six years; when someone tells me I’m Syrian I get bothered [upset].”

- Hamada, 17-19 year old girl, Homs governorate



“My emotions have changed towards sadness because of all the displacement of my friends and relatives...I am thinking of things larger than my age. I have a feeling my future is gone because of this war.”

- Tarek, 15 year old boy, Al-Hasakeh governorate

Mental Health, Wellbeing, and Purpose

A central theme throughout this study is that adolescents were very aware of what they had lost in terms of family, future, and opportunity, and this weighed on them even as they did their best to cope. They shared their experiences of traumatic pain and loss which continue to be very present in their daily lives, and repeatedly described how they were depressed and exhausted. Indeed, the psychological toll of this conflict is unimaginable, and the most prevalent emotions that adolescents expressed were of fear and despair.

“Fear. Our generation grew up on fear, warplanes, and terror, on the enmity between regime and coalition.”

- Iman, 15-17 year old girl, Hama Governorate


However, it is clear that the young people who accepted and embraced their new roles in the household were able to adapt more successfully. They had redefined purpose in their lives, which could be seen in the careers they aspired to and the ways they wanted to contribute to their families, their country’s present, and their country’s future. And yet, this “resilience” comes at a cost – stress, exhaustion, increased allostatic load, and even diminished dreams. On the other hand, those who are in denial and living in the past appear less able to move forward, because it feels to them like they are abandoning hope and home. As a result, they experience more depression and express more anger in the present.

Thus it is critical to acknowledge that *resilience and vulnerability are not mutually exclusive*, especially for this population of war-affected and displaced Syrian adolescents. The same young people who demonstrated resilience in their daily commitment to attend class, go to work, or care for their families told us directly that they were traumatised, depressed, anxious, despairing, angry, and chronically fearful. They expressed suffering through their words, anguished facial expressions, flat tone of voice, and dejected, slumped body language when describing the reality of their lives. Indeed, while many adolescents would smile and some humor was often used by facilitators to engender camaraderie and ease among participants, it is remarkable that in our careful listening of the audio-

recordings no adolescents laughed in an expression of happiness or joy, even when the facilitators made attempts to be lighthearted and lift their moods.


The level of adolescents' psychological suffering also varied by region and worse mental health typically reflected higher levels of war-time violence and more extreme displacement conditions. For example, young people across the country often described themselves as having signs of depression, or explicitly stated that they were depressed. This was most pronounced in central Syria governorates where many adolescents had been recently displaced.

Syrian adolescents attributed their mental state to what they had lost, as well as the threat and deprivation which they continued to face. Across data collection sites, young people described their chronic anxiety and fear due to past trauma, ongoing violence, and uncertainty about the future. Additionally, across all governorates, adolescents' outlook was overwhelmingly bleak and despairing, with many expressing hopelessness. A few young people, particularly young men, openly expressed feelings of resentment, or described themselves and others as harboring anger towards their circumstances. However, it is possible that this was not expressed by others more broadly due to social desirability bias or fear of repercussions if it became known that they had expressed anti-government sentiment.



“Scarce job opportunities, price inflation, exile, airstrikes, seeking refuge makes me feel tired and depressed... Things are difficult [...and] keep getting worse day by day. There’s no time for us to rest. It just keeps getting worse and worse, prices get higher, people can’t find jobs and they’re suffering because of this. They’re drained. No outings, nothing. They never feel okay anymore.” - Adel, 17-19 year old boy, Hama governorate

Fear, “*khof*”, was the overwhelming, salient theme articulated by adolescents across all data collection sites, and was frequently associated with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In formerly opposition-held areas in central Syria, the number of times young people mentioned the sound of warplanes and airstrikes as their greatest fear was pronounced, reflecting the dominance of these violent hardships within their daily lives. During one FGD, an adolescent boy referenced this fear and the facilitator noted the sound of warplanes in the distance at that very moment, underscoring the ever-present threat. In both Al-Hasakeh governorate and Aleppo governorate (Menbij subdistrict), adolescents frequently articulated the fear of a return to conflict. For example, in Menbij subdistrict, a few young people referenced the ‘fear of ISIS coming back’ and one young man even talked about how he had no fear since he had already seen what ISIS had done, and now he could handle anything. Few young people explicitly mentioned fear of the government, however in opposition-held areas some young people referred to a ‘fear of the Syrian government forces and detention.’ Across all locations, adolescents struggled with the grief of losing family members and the constant fear of loss or separation from the family they still had left.



“Fear chases me in every step I take. I am constantly afraid for the future.”
- Louai, 18-19 year old boy, Aleppo governorate (Menbij subdistrict)



“Fear is that hopes will not materialise.”

- Jinda, 17-18 year old girl, Al-Hasakeh governorate

What does this mean for adolescents and humanitarian action?

Young people are experiencing not only the effects of persistent trauma exposure in the form of PTSD, depression, and anxiety, but also toxic stress in response to a persistently insecure and unstable environment. We heard this in the descriptions of their despair, deteriorating mental health associated with their past losses, their present fears, and continued uncertainty about their future. Studies have shown that the effects of toxic stress on the wellbeing and mental health of children and adolescents are substantial.³¹ In fact, developmentally, adolescents present a heightened physiological response to stress compared to children and adults, and toxic stress has been shown to increase incidence of psychiatric problems at this critical period of development and onward through adulthood.

Given the lasting adverse effects of trauma and toxic stress on adolescent wellbeing, it is crucial to not only address the trauma that young people face, but to also provide them with the tools to identify and manage their individual and collective stress. In the Syrian context, however, many young people have tried to “self-manage” through re-orienting their goals and purpose towards the family, but in doing so have neglected the self. We do not yet know if this reorientation has biologically addressed the level of stress hormones that young people are producing and how this could in turn impact cognitive functioning, but it is clear that any type of programming or intervention needs to address these persistent and toxic stressors.

Figure 1.4: Graphic Image Featuring Diverse Factors that Inform the Adolescent Experience of Conflict





“We hope to return to our homes and to gather with our families in one home and not a tent.”

- Mustafa, 15-17 year old boy, Idlib governorate (Sanjar subdistrict)

Hopes for the Future

Finally, we asked adolescents about their aspirations, seeking to learn both what hopes they had for themselves and how they envisioned the future. While adolescents initially struggled to answer, many could eventually clearly articulate what they wanted for themselves, even if they were not entirely confident or hopeful about those desires. Strikingly, most adolescents instinctively answered in terms of what they hoped for their country and community instead of their individual aspirations. In fact, young people across all data collection sites, almost unanimously, wanted Syria to return to security and stability. They wanted their families to be reunited and live together in a secure home, and those who had been internally displaced wanted specifically to go back to their lands, to their villages, and to rebuild what was destroyed. Many even noted that they wanted Syria to “return to the way it was before the war” an almost dreamlike wish for the past.

“I wish to become an engineer, and help my family and benefit my country.”

- Leen, 17-19 year old girl, Aleppo governorate (Atareb subdistrict)

When adolescents were asked to focus on their individual desires for their future, as distinct and separate from that of their country, community or family, a large portion of young people paused and appeared perplexed by the question, a response which was consistent across all geographic regions. This reaction reflects the bleak and despairing sentiment that dominated the adolescents’ descriptions of their daily lives throughout our research, as well as their complete commitment to and dependence on their current roles and responsibilities to support the family unit as their primary purpose and meaning in life. In many ways, then, it is as if the war that ravaged their country created a forced selflessness within the adolescents, in the process reducing and constricting their dreams in the process.

When probed, some adolescents expressed the general desires of wanting an education, though as described above, others found the prospect futile or not feasible. However, the majority wanted to secure a stable source of income to support their families. Overwhelmingly, and perhaps reflective of strong family values within Arab culture, adolescents expressed their goals in the context of making their parents proud – including expressing their desire to learn, to support their family, and/or to build a career. It is worth noting, however, that the desire to secure an income was distinct from the vision of building one’s career. Indeed, adolescents, and especially boys, seemed desperate to just “get a job” in order to provide their lives with purpose and meaning, and not just an income.



“I’d like to get involved in photography and media ... I did not work, but I have experience; I learned how to montage from the internet”

- Khalil, 15-17 year old boy, Hama governorate

Only when prompted a bit further did one-third of the adolescents articulate specific careers that they envisioned for themselves. Adolescent girls wanted to be seamstresses, hairdressers, tailors, nurses, teachers, pharmacists and architects, among other vocations. Adolescent boys’ interests included shepherding and farming, trade, electronic and mobile repairs, barbering, tailoring, among others. Both dreamed of becoming doctors and engineers. These respondents also voiced a strong desire to use their future professions as an avenue for helping others such as becoming nurses, paramedics, or pharmacists to help the ill and wounded - or pursuing work in construction, engineering or architecture to help rebuild their homeland. A few young people wanted to be photographers, perhaps to document what had happened to their lives and to their country, and what the future may hold. Lastly, some adolescents yearned for job opportunities that they had before the war, and adolescent boys in particular wanted to preserve specific trades and businesses that their fathers and families had built. These included running a shop, working in agriculture, or pursuing animal husbandry. It is possible that this desire to return to family businesses and trades was both a practical aspiration as well as a yearning for things to “return to the way they were.”



“I’d like to become a working woman to help my society grow and develop. I could become a seamstress or a teacher; there are plenty of things women can work in.” - Doa’a, 15-17 year old girl, Hama governorate



“Support me by buying construction equipment and I will open a concrete and iron factory.”

- Akram, 17-19 year old boy, Aleppo governorate (Atareb subdistrict)

As for support that adolescents needed to heal and be able to rebuild their lives, a few adolescents, both male and female and across all geographic areas expressly asked for psychological support and counseling. Fewer requested to have medical support for the severely wounded, and a handful of young people in central Syria specifically asked for support to maintain and secure their rent. The majority, however, asked for resources and trainings. Participants insisted on the importance of free technical/vocational trainings that would allow them to learn a new fruitful craft and were tied to employment opportunities. Indeed, for many adolescents, the establishment of training centres and the opportunities to train and/or volunteer seemed to represent agency and hope for the healing for their communities.



“I need mental support and guidance in order to become self-reliant.”

- Jiyana, 14-16 year old girl, Aleppo governorate (Atareb subdistrict)



“During this war, lots of people fell wounded and there was a great need for aid. That’s why I’d like to become a nurse and learn first-aid, most of all, because it’s what determines if a patient lives or dies.”

- Reema, 14-16 year old girl, Hama

Adolescents were also specific about which trades they wanted to master -- in addition to skills that built towards the aforementioned careers, some adolescent women wanted to learn crafts that would preserve the culture of Syria, or first-aid training to help others -- in all cases, earnestly asking us “to train us for work and help us rebuild Syria”.



“I wish to have a trade that benefits me, allows me to teach society through it, and also help my parents.”

- Rouseem, 14-16 year old girl, Al-Hasakeh governorate



“I want to learn the tailoring trade and teach it to others, and to take up my role within society.”

- Ahmed, 14-16 year old boy, Aleppo governorate (Menjib subdistrict)

Photo Credit: Kawther, Adolescent youth program participant



“I do wish they would open up something for us to benefit from, or for an institute or an educational center; one that could help me and my husband with the expenses.”

- Batool, 14-16 year old girl, Hama governorate

Reflections & Recommendations

This study has provided a precious window into the lives of Syrian adolescents, and a unique opportunity to capture their voices and experiences. Indeed, data from this research has demonstrated that many adolescents inside Syria can clearly articulate what they know about the past and what they wish for their present and future, and a critical part of the adolescent experience is the desire to be heard, to be listened to, and to be taken seriously. In response, we are committed to actively listening to what they have shared with us and responding meaningfully to their stated needs – even if doing so demands that the humanitarian community takes bold steps to support their aspirations via pathways that may be unfamiliar, experimental or require significant adaptations to our traditional models of engagement. Below, we distill five key reflections on the results presented above, pairing them with practical recommendations for humanitarian practitioners, donors, and policy makers serving adolescents inside Syria:



1 - Adolescents are fulfilling adult roles in their daily lives, evident through their decision-making, intentional sacrifices, and emotional responses to their lived realities.

Syrian adolescents' adoption of adult roles has emerged primarily to help their parents, siblings, spouses and children survive, and is true even for Syrian adolescents who are able to attend school, as they too must assume serious responsibilities in the home, or find ways to fund their educational needs. Thus, while biologically and physically still teenagers, and missing the security associated with their childhoods, the majority of adolescents have clearly expressed the desire to be treated as the responsible adults that they have already become.

› Humanitarian actors must meet adolescents where they are – experientially and emotionally.

Programs can no longer treat Syrian adolescents like children, or try to return them to a false childhood. Instead, programming needs to be tailored for young men and women who have already lived more than a lifetime, one entailing exposure to multiple traumas. Traditional interventions often employed in conflict and post-conflict settings – such as safe spaces that focus solely on building soft-skills and/or social networks, vocational training institutes that are not tied to employment opportunities, and accelerated school-based education programs that focus only on streaming children back into formal schooling – while important and successful in many contexts, will not meet the needs of Syrian adolescents. Additionally, activities that focus solely on play as a form of psychosocial support – while often relevant for children and younger adolescents – also will not meet adolescent needs in today's Syria.³² As our data shows, adolescents are acutely aware that they have borne and continue to endure difficult burdens, and that their time is valuable and needs to be spent developing professional skills or generating income. Specifically, humanitarian actors should consider the following initiatives:

1. *Prioritise skill-building courses* on topics that are directly relevant to adolescents' lives and that address their daily needs, such as first aid training and certification, nutrition and health, financial literacy and accounting, sexual and reproductive health (for both boys and girls), and breastfeeding and parenting for first-time parents.

2. *Ensure job-oriented skills development* is being delivered in safe and decent work environments through paid apprenticeships and internships in fields relevant for the local labour market, such as electronic repairs, construction, food preparation, administration, and accounting, among others.
3. *Provide quality ‘catch-up’ classes or accredited accelerated education programs* for those who have lost opportunities to access formal education and wish to gain new knowledge and skills such as basic literacy and numeracy, or gain formal education credentials.³³
4. *Ensure skills-building opportunities are accessible* to adolescents who have competing responsibilities, particularly for those who are working or not able to travel outside the home. For example, identify flexible or remote programming platforms that take into account the needs of differing schedules, such as flexibility for evening hours, supporting with day care for children, or coordination with employers.
5. *Offer externally accredited education programs that deliver relevant skills* – for example, nursing and teaching certification programs, in Arabic, with certain modules online or remotely accessible. While some of these platforms may exist, they will need to be intellectually accessible to all ages and tailored to learning levels.
6. *Expand training programs to leverage the networks and expertise of the Syrian Diaspora* across Europe and the Middle East. Many training programs, particularly those available online and accredited, are inaccessible to Syrian adolescents due to language, cultural, and technological barriers. Engaging the Syrian Diaspora can be a linguistically and culturally relevant way to actively support rebuilding efforts and employment opportunities inside and outside Syria.



Photo Credit: Raghad, Adolescent youth program participant

“How to support us? Benefit from youth power, not leave anyone unemployed.”

- Ramadan, 16-18 year old boy, Hama governorate

2 - Adolescents in Syria are widely diverse, and their diversity of experience and opinion also represents how Syria and her people are deeply fragmented.

No adolescents, much less those in a place as complex and socio-politically fragmented as Syria today, can be painted with a broad brushstroke. Indeed, the adolescents we interviewed have expressed different levels of psychosocial wellbeing, access to resources, and dreams for their future. They have also had very different experiences of the conflict through the prism of displacement, gender, family hierarchy, political orientation, geographic origin, socioeconomic status and exposure to violence. Furthermore, what it means to be “Syrian,” and their vision for “Syria” mean different things to adolescents today, not least because they have different political leanings. Most adolescents, in our sample, however, are proud of having stayed in their country despite the war and the majority do not seem to have immediate aspirations of leaving, escaping, or migrating.

- › **To be both effective and accountable, programming with adolescents inside Syria should involve regular and ongoing consultations with adolescents as part of the program design and throughout implementation.**

1. *Contextualising intervention design through consulting adolescents.* Intervention models – even those that prove successful with Syrian adolescents – cannot be copy-pasted, neither from programs that work with Syrian refugees outside of Syria, nor from one place in Syria to the next. Nuance in conflict settings can be overwhelming, but it is possible when working in partnership with other actors and with young people themselves.
2. *Engaging adolescents in active feedback.* Programs must engage Syrian adolescents as valued clients, not grateful beneficiaries, to ensure ongoing relevance and impact. Partnering with adolescents in program delivery by seeking regular, active feedback, can help programs stay responsive.³⁴ This calls for interventions, and especially their monitoring and evaluation systems, to be nuanced and responsive to adolescents’ diverse needs, wishes, and expectations for themselves and of us.³⁵

3 - Adolescents’ outcomes are governed not only by their biology and environment but also their expectations for their lives.

In scientific literature, a child’s genetic makeup (“nature”) and life experiences (“nurture”) are referred to as the two primary forces that define who that child will become, particularly in terms of learning and mental health outcomes. This study highlights a third important force in adolescent lives that directly shapes their wellbeing and development – adolescents’ expectations for their lives. From our research, adolescents’ mental health outcomes were linked to how well they had been able to accept their reality and redefine or restructure their life choices and resources according to their experiences of the war. For example, some adolescents are still struggling to accept that Syria will never “return to the way it was again” which was identified as an obstacle to them moving forward. In contrast, those who have accepted (albeit often with deep sadness) their new adult roles are able to grow and develop, focusing their energy on ways to invest in themselves in order to seek and find meaning, instead of only grieving for the past. Thus what adolescents need are not false hopes or deferred hopes (i.e. simply blaming the system), but critical hope and realistic expectations in their struggle to achieve personal goals despite extreme adversity.³⁶

› Recognising the power of adolescents’ expectations as a key influencing factor in their developmental outcomes has implications for research and programming , especially for Syrian adolescent mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS).

1. *Understanding the power of adolescents’ expectations should inform the sensitivity of communication between humanitarian actors and adolescents.* For example, if promises are made but expectations are only partially met, i.e. education becomes available but there are no jobs, even after adolescents have clearly expressed their deep desire and priority of finding employment, this mismatch can cause frustration and further divisions, distrust, and despair.³⁷
2. *Measuring adolescents’ MHPSS for monitoring and evaluation and program impact should not only inquire about their psychological symptomatology or even general levels of hope, but also evaluate adolescents’ expectations for their lives and whether they are realistic.* Adolescents’ life expectations are an indicator of their resilience. Mismatched expectations have shown to be a source of psychological suffering, whereas realistic expectations have enabled Syrian young men and women to mentally move forward, take pride in their decisions and contributions, and invest in their future, albeit in small ways. Programs should support Syrian adolescents a) to be neither in denial nor overtly despairing, and b) to channel their grief and anger into productive, short- and medium-term investments in their skills and current wellbeing.

ix Discussion of the three elements needed to provide “critical hope” to young people raised in adversity can be found in Duncan-Andrade, Jeffrey M. R. (2009). Note to Educators: Hope Required when Growing Roses in Concrete (see endnote 36 for full reference)

3. *Supporting adolescents to redefine their personal goals* in light of their complex and lived history, and develop realistic goal plans that facilitate concrete progress is critical to positive development. Goal planning and reorientation of adolescent expectations can not be addressed by transferring curriculums from other contexts or programs, especially those that address these issues at the surface through light-touch activities (which are more appropriate for younger children, or adolescents not adopting adult roles). Instead, such programming should advance goal planning by supporting adolescents to identify purpose, problem-solve their realities, safely express, track and regulate their emotions and thereby empower them to restore a small arena of control in their lives.



Photo Credit: Mercy Corps

“I want financial and emotional support in order to rebuild my country.”

- Asma, 17-18 year old girl, Aleppo governorate, Menbij

4 - Adolescents are exhausted and often despairing; this should not be ignored.

Adolescents inside Syria have shown us that resilience and vulnerability are not mutually exclusive. Indeed their resilience has come at a cost of their mental health and ability to dream. While they are surviving this crisis, they are suffering and they need support now, and likely long into the future. The developing adolescent brain is particularly sensitive to the effects of stress, and particularly toxic stress, which can have a lasting effect on learning, memory, emotional processing, and mental health over the long-term.³⁸ If we are able to reduce some of the stress facing adolescents, we can support better health outcomes and build their well-being.

› Programming should address the sources of adolescents’ distress by meeting their present needs practically and not engaging them in activities whose future benefit is unclear, as they cannot stay in survival mode much longer without ‘crashing’.

1. *Integrating MHPSS more rigorously* into adolescent programming across sectors; for example livelihoods interventions with adolescents can include direct or linkages to psychosocial programming and support.
2. *Designing interventions to help adolescents both process past trauma and manage the toxic stress and fear that permeates their daily lives.* An example is how Mercy Corps’ “Advancing Adolescents” programme successfully reduced levels of the stress hormone cortisol for Syrian refugee adolescents by 33% in Jordan, through delivery of a skills-based targeted curriculum over 8 weeks within a safe space platform.³⁹ Other resiliency programs that have focused on psychoeducation, or teaching adolescents about their brain and body’s response to stress have also been cited to successfully improve wellbeing outcomes.⁴⁰ While these models have demonstrated success, they will certainly need to be adapted to the relevant context inside Syria.
3. *Mapping referral pathways and services* is critical for adolescent programs, as much as possible ahead of program implementation, and should focus on establishing links with quality services across sectors such as MHPSS, livelihoods, and health. Pathways should prioritise adolescents’ safe access, and when referrals and related services are not available, humanitarian actors should invest in opportunities to leverage and develop alternative platforms, including technology platforms, which can be particularly relevant in the provision of psychosocial support and counseling services both on and offline.⁴¹

5 - Purpose is paramount for adolescents and is critical to how they demonstrate resilience.

Studies have emphasised the importance of ‘meaning making’ at the individual level for conflict-affected adolescents and children, and in particular the role of attachment relationships through family, caregivers, peers, and social networks.⁴² The adolescent brain is highly emotional and thus exceptionally responsive to social learning and the desire for acceptance, belonging, respect, and admiration.⁴³ As a result, their decisions are often influenced by those around them, motivated by acceptance and positive rewards.

As a result of the war, Syrian adolescents’ attachments have been focused at the family level and the importance of the family has been heightened in a culture where family was already central to one’s identity. It is important to note that while Syrian adolescents have certainly “grown up too fast,” many have intentionally chosen to embrace adult roles, not simply out of loyalty to family but also as a reason to persevere. Yet as the context shifts, adolescents’ purpose will also need to shift and having family as their sole purpose will soon not be sufficient. This risk of lacking purpose, then, could potentially increase levels of depression and exhaustion, and become a debilitating hurdle for themselves and their generation.

› Supporting adolescents in finding purposeful and meaningful pathways will be critical as they navigate new roles in a changing Syria.

1. *Building healthy attachments:* As adolescents expand their networks beyond the family, they will need to find new and additional avenues to build healthy attachments. In the immediate term, the building of healthy attachments can be embedded in skills-oriented programs that they have identified as a priority. One method is through mentorship – which should not be taken lightly both in terms of financial or time requirements – but by incorporating mentors into training programs for adolescents, there is an opportunity for exemplary individuals to not only provide guidance, but to serve as role models and support goal-oriented and purposeful pathways for adolescent development.
2. *Allowing adolescents to be adults, but safely:* Adolescents have told us that they are seeking purpose and ways to belong, particularly by rebuilding the things that matter to them – from schools and homes, to helping people heal by taking on roles in the healthcare system. They will require facilitated access to these opportunities which are often reserved for adults (18+). Any type of adolescent engagement in the rebuilding process will need a) to take into consideration protection risks of adolescents in a potentially volatile and competitive environment, and b) be designed so that adolescents will not be competing for jobs, or increasing their sphere of risk through program participation.
3. *Securing compensation for adolescents’ efforts:* Volunteer or community service programs can be a powerful way to engage and link adolescents to constructive efforts, however these campaigns can take advantage of adolescents’ vulnerability and instead be more effective when linked to skill development and/or payments and stipends for their efforts, which are particularly relevant in the Syrian context, and, critical for a majority of adolescents. Just because they are adolescents does not mean they have spare time or do not require compensation for their efforts, thus activities should emphasise purpose while providing ways for them to support both themselves and their families.



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