

Education and child labour: the duality of young refugees in Lebanon

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In Homs, Syria, 10-year-old Hiyam Mkheber was walking the streets with her aunt looking for her cousins.

“In this moment I can hear the sound of a bomb falling. I ran and hid behind an olive tree and curled up. I heard the bomb, and then I could not hear anything,” she remembers.

After impact, Hiyam was not yet aware that heavy shrapnel had badly injured her arm. An initial operation removed much of the debris from the injured area, but some major veins still needed treatment and she was at risk of losing the arm in question.

Her family would then flee Syria soon after, resettling in northern Lebanon. Here, they began to receive assistance from NGO Relief and Reconciliation (R&R), which had begun its operations that same year. Ten years later, Hiyam remembers how the organisation first supported her.

“We came to Lebanon, and I still had a problem with my injury. I had another operation here and R&R paid for this,” recalls Hiyam.



Hiyam travels to Tripoli several times a week for her university studies, receiving money from R&R to fund this transport. Image credit: Callum Sutherland

This was one of the first instances in which R&R was able to transform the life of a young Syrian refugee. Now, general secretary of R&R, Friedrich ‘Fritz’ Bokern, continues this mission.

Not only did the organisation save Hiyam’s arm, it also provided essential education to help with her move from Syria to Lebanon. In the context of Lebanon’s economic crisis, support like this is crucial for young Syrian refugees hoping to succeed in the country amidst a flurry of socio-economic issues.

Transformation through education

Upon arrival in Lebanon after her family fled Syria, Hiyam initially struggled with the transition into the new school system. Lessons in Syria are taught in Arabic, but Lebanese classes are taught entirely in French. Hiyam explains: “We studied with R&R from 7 in the morning until 12, learning maths, science and French.

“Then from 12 to 6pm we went to the public school. The education was not really good as we were tired, the teachers were tired, and they did not take their responsibility seriously. Some teachers were even violent to the students,” she continues.

Despite this, with this extra support from R&R, Syrian children like Hiyam were able to succeed in Lebanese schools, allowing them to pursue further studies. The 20-year-old is currently studying medicine in Tripoli, with transport costs covered by the NGO.

The next generation

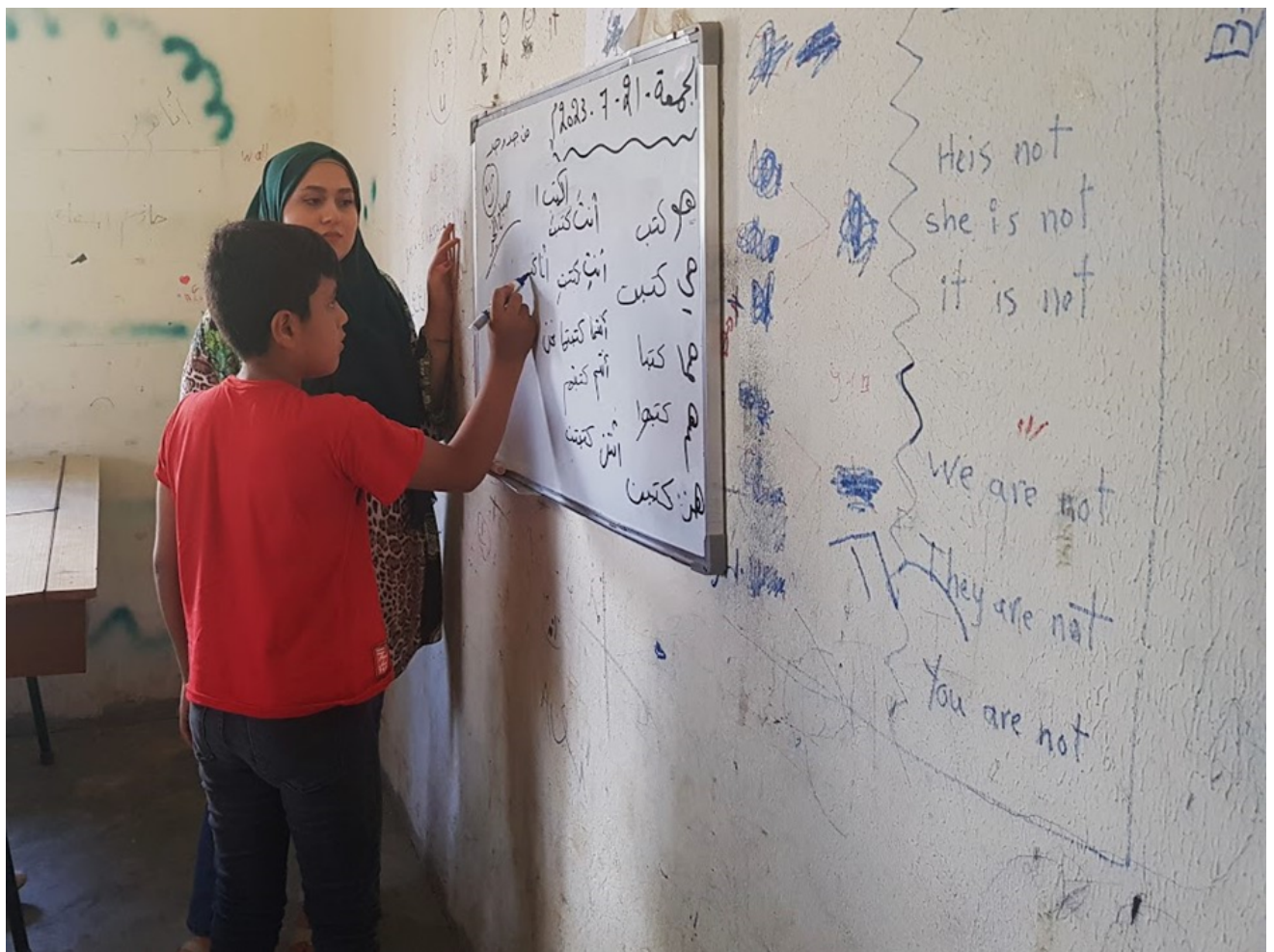
Zaynab Al-Awad is another refugee who arrived in northern Lebanon over 12 years ago and has had to adapt. Again, with NGO support, she is also studying medicine at university. Both women now continue to work with Relief and Reconciliation, doing regular outreach to those living in refugee camps.

“These students are the product of R&R work and their own hard work,” says Mohammad Ghiye, treasurer of the organisation. He explains: “As native Syrians, they can connect better with people at the camps, and we benefit from that connection. We can do better in our services.”

Roukaya Charaf Al-Dein is another beneficiary of Relief and Reconciliation’s educational support. After her home in Homs was destroyed in 2013, Roukaya moved to the Lebanese town of Koucha.

She is now pursuing her dream of becoming a journalist, studying Arabic literature at university and teaching Arabic to the next generation of students at R&R. Not only this, but she also coaches the local girls football team.

“I can help students with grammar, reading and listening. R&R acts as a bridge between families and the management of the [Lebanese] schools, also between Syrian children and the future,” she explains.



Roukaya teaching Arabic to a class of children at a school in Koucha, Akkar. Children also need to study French alongside Arabic in order to attend public school in Lebanon. Image credit: Callum Sutherland

The sobering choice of work or education

This cycle of former students providing the same education that gave them their own opportunities is an effective method of continuous support for disadvantaged Syrian refugees. Despite this transformation for some young people, there are still many who cannot access education so easily.

Khalil Al-Wadi fled Syria with his wife and children in 2019. After securing work at a local petrol station, his daughter has been able to attend classes with Relief and Reconciliation as well as the Lebanese public school. However, his oldest sons were not able to receive the same support.

“Me and my son work together at the petrol station, from morning to afternoon I work, and until the evening my son works there,” he explains. His other son, Brahim, works at a local restaurant. Both he and 19-year-old Hamad, who works with Khalil, were not able to attend the Lebanese public school.



Khalil at home with this two youngest children. He hopes to return to Syria one day and open a restaurant, back to his previous work as a chef. Image credit: Callum Sutherland

Because of a lack of household income, many Syrian families in Lebanon cannot send some or any of their children to school. Instead, children work a variety of jobs to provide money for the family, something which has become increasingly difficult due to the ongoing economic crisis in the country.

Nadim Bulbul is another Syrian, from Aleppo, who was displaced during the war, forcing him and his family to relocate in Akkar, northern Lebanon. After attempting to work across several sectors, Nadim ultimately began selling sweets. However, he was not earning enough money working just by himself.

The father of three says: “We came from a very miserable economic situation in Syria, we lost our house and we no longer had anything.

“My children started working with me, selling traditional sweets in the streets, by the sea or inside restaurants. We spend blood to eat, without asking anyone for money,” he continues.



Nadim and his sons patrol Akkar's streets and beaches, looking for potential customers. Image credit: Georg Gassauer

Because many Syrian refugees in Akkar are not properly registered as such, finding official work has always proved extremely difficult. According to the UN, less than half of the estimated Syrian labour force in Lebanon have employment. On top of this, over two-thirds of those with a job work no more than 15 days a month.

Coupled with an absence of a state pension, access to welfare and other essential support, Syrian families look inward to find a solution, as Nadim has done.

Mr Bulbul's 11-year-old and 8-year-old sons both work for him on the streets of Akkar. "They need a suitable environment for them that embraces them as children. They spend their childhood working with me. I am happy that they are with me, but I am sad that they have to do this," says Nadim.

"We continue until relief comes from God and we return to Syria," he concludes.

The future prospects and realities of childhood for young Syrians in Lebanon is a mixed bag. Some receive desperately needed support, whilst others sacrifice education to ensure the lights stay on and food is on the table. Regardless, each case requires incredibly hard work with limited resources, all in the pursuit of a better opportunity later in life.

As for Hiyam Mkheber, she hopes to help those who find themselves in the same situation that she did as a 10-year-old. She says: "I want to become a doctor and help people, to become a heart surgeon because of what happened to me."