

Policy brief

# The Transition to Adulthood in Jordan: Supporting Youth Aspirations

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## Key Messages

- Young people typically associated adulthood with personal development, such as maturity, rather than with the completion of specific life steps. Yet they have specific aspirations for education, employment and marriage.
- Young people view completing education as foundational for other steps in the transition to adulthood both because education leads to better employment opportunities and because it fosters personal development.
- School-to-work transitions are slow and difficult for young people. There is a wide gap between youth employment aspirations and the realities they encounter in the labour market.
- Young women, both Syrian and Jordanian, rarely transition into work. Even among young Jordanian women with a higher education, less than half of them ever work.
- The experience of ‘waithood’ is common; young people often wait a number of years after exiting school before they obtain their first job. This may delay other steps in the transition to adulthood. For instance, men need to find employment, ideally in a good job, before they can marry.
- Syrians and female Jordanians rarely obtain formal employment (with social insurance coverage). Ten years after leaving school, just over half of educated male Jordanians have obtained formal jobs.
- Young Jordanians are marrying later than they would like. The ideal median age at marriage for Jordanian women was 24 and their actual median age at marriage was 27. The ideal median age at marriage for Jordanian men was 25, whereas fewer than half of men have married by the age of 30.
- Young Syrians are marrying closer to their ideal ages, but not necessarily living independently due to their difficult economic situations.
- Early marriage for Syrian girls remains a persistent problem, with 28 per cent marrying before the age of 18.

## Objectives and overview

Jordan’s population is relatively young, with nearly a third of the country’s population aged between 16 and 30 years old. This policy brief relies on new data – both nationally representative quantitative (survey) data and qualitative (focus group discussion) data – to better understand the aspirations of young people for adulthood in Jordan. The policy brief focuses on gendered dimensions of adulthood and

how ideals and realities may differ for young Jordanians and young Syrians in Jordan.

## What does adulthood mean to young people?

The period of life between the ages of 16 and 30 encompasses the transition to adulthood, when individuals go from childhood to being regarded as adults. Young people’s experiences during these

ages are critical for establishing their later-life outcomes, including labour market trajectories, family structures, and their health and wellbeing. This is an important period for young people's ability to achieve their aspirations in terms of finishing their education, transitioning to the labour market, and forming their own families.

There is no universal definition of adulthood. Around the world, culture plays an important role in shaping how young people and their societies view adulthood. Adulthood may be understood in terms of personal development or in terms of achieving specific steps (such as finishing school or getting married).<sup>4</sup> New data from a survey of Jordanians and Syrians in Jordan aged 16–30 (the Survey of Young People in Jordan [SYPJ]) and associated qualitative Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) demonstrate that young people in Jordan primarily understand adulthood in terms of personal development rather than achieving specific life steps. They emphasized that being an adult means demonstrating maturity, making one's own decisions and accepting responsibility for the consequences of those decisions, whatever they may be.

*"[Adulthood means] I have the full competence to take decisions that I want. Whether they are right or wrong, I am the one responsible for them. If they are wrong, I will be held accountable, and if they are right, I will go through with them."*  
– Young Jordanian woman, aged between 21–25

Social support was seen as very important in the transition to adulthood. Young people who participated in the FGDs said

that having a good relationship with one's family, and finishing one's education, were the first steps towards becoming an adult. Young respondents to the survey similarly prioritized a good relationship with God and parents (Figure 1) as among the three most important steps to becoming an adult. This pattern of prioritizing relationships is true across nationality and gender, with respondents reporting that this was important for both men and women.

Young people's views on the importance of the other steps in the transition to adulthood were more gendered. All young people who responded to the survey were asked about the three most important steps for both young men and for young women (Figure 1). For women, finishing education was seen as a critical step, although this was more so the case for Jordanians than Syrians. Young Jordanian women who participated in the focus groups emphasized university education in particular as an important step for them. Getting married was seen as the next most important step for women, in this case, somewhat more so for Syrians than Jordanians. Having a job, achieving financial security and having one's own home were not seen as among the most important steps for young women to achieve. Young women in the focus group discussions explained that they did want to work. However, they said that employment and achieving financial independence are not expected of women in Jordanian society, and besides they faced many challenges in transitioning to the labour market, as discussed further below.

*"In my view, marriage comes before having financial independence since I, as a woman, am not responsible for*

<sup>4</sup> Nelson and Luster, 2015.

*it. It is not my responsibility to get a house and provide for my partner. He is the one responsible for all of these, he is the one who should be financially independent.” – Young Jordanian woman, aged between 22–30*

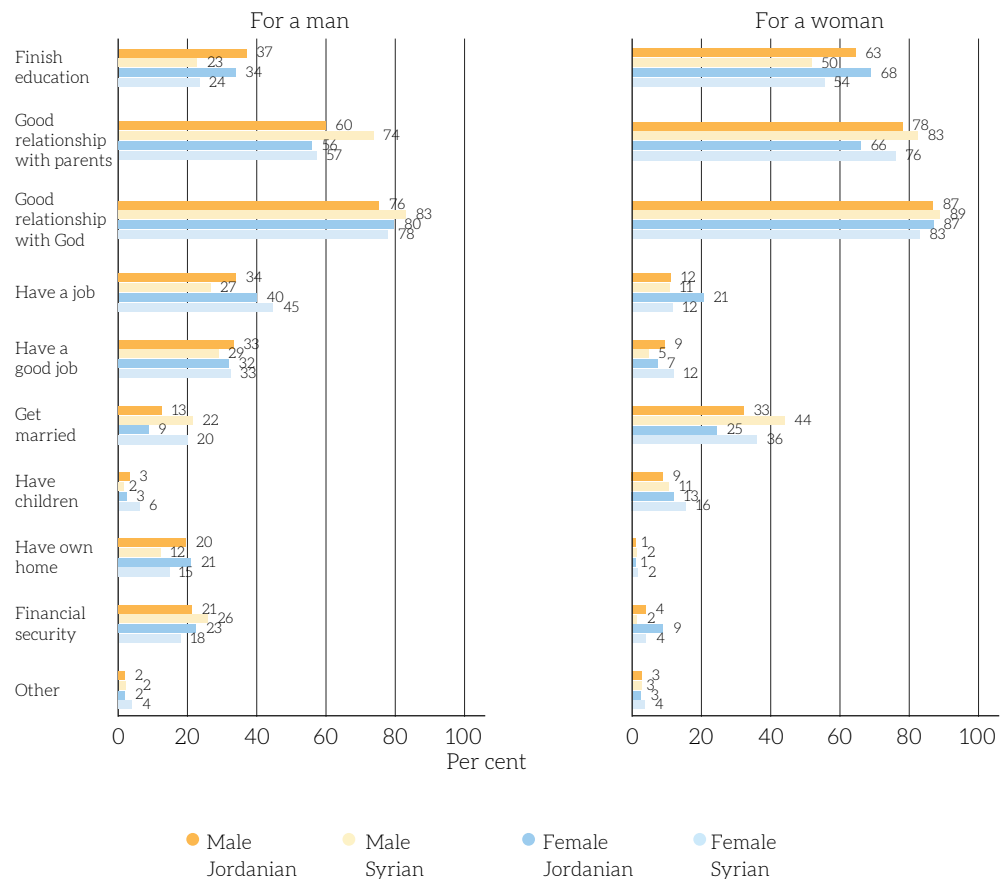
important for men than for women. Focus group participants again explained this in terms of gendered social norms, which place on men the expectation that they will secure the financial means to marry and provide for the household.

For men, by contrast, having a job, having a good job, and financial security were viewed as key additional steps in the transition to adulthood, along with having a good relationship with family and God. Education and marriage were seen as less

*“The whole sequence [of steps in the transition to adulthood] is for the purpose of marriage; securing financial independence and achieving every step are for the sake of getting married.” – Young Jordanian man, aged between 21–30*

Figure 1: **Three most important steps for a woman or a man to become an adult, by respondent gender and nationality (percentage)**

Source: Authors’ calculations based on SYPJ.



## Education is seen as the foundation of the transition to adulthood

For multiple reasons, young people saw education as foundational for later steps in the transition to adulthood. Education was seen as essential for obtaining a job, and especially a good quality job with the characteristics that young people aspired to. Yet education was also seen as important for overall personal development and as an important individual achievement. Young Jordanians in particular had high aspirations for their education and saw university education as important to opening employment opportunities. In the survey, 62 per cent of young Jordanians said that the most important purposes of higher education were that it provides knowledge, 51 per cent that it makes one eligible for public employment, and 40 per cent that it enhances personal development. In the focus groups, young Jordanians also noted that Jordanian parents value education highly.

*“There are people who have achieved higher levels of education, this is what decides what kind of job you will have, any job or a good job.”*  
-Young woman, Jordanian, aged between 22-30,

*“Education is the most important step [to becoming an adult] ... At university ... [a young person] will develop their personality and build their character.”* -Young Jordanian woman, aged between 22-30

Although young Jordanians viewed university education as very important

for determining a young person's later job prospects, they noted that young people do not necessarily have accurate information about the labour market when they choose their university specialization. They viewed this as leading to a surplus of graduates in some prestigious and popular fields, such as medicine and engineering, and to young people pursuing specializations without understanding their later career prospects.

*“There is also not enough information about the labor market, you only get to know more about it when you finish your secondary education and you start applying for university. Even after you pass the tawjihi, you have little information...”* – Young Jordanian man, aged between 21-30

Young Syrians in Jordan face numerous barriers to educational progression, including poverty, academic and integration challenges in Jordanian schools. While pressure to work to help support their households is often a hindrance to educational progression for Syrian young men, early marriage is similarly a barrier for young women.<sup>5</sup> Previous studies have found that 41 per cent of Syrian girls aged 12–15 and 45 per cent of boys in this age group are out of school.<sup>6</sup> Results from the SYPJ confirm that Syrians have lower rates of completion in secondary and tertiary education in particular. Only 44 per cent of Syrians pursue secondary education and 22 per cent continue to higher education, compared to 81 per cent of Jordanian youth continuing to secondary and 50 per cent to higher education.

<sup>5</sup> Sieverding et al., 2018.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Children's Fund and Ministry of Education (Jordan), 2020.

## Difficult school-to-work transitions

Young Jordanians and Syrians face difficult school-to-work transitions in Jordan. Figure 2 shows the percentage of young people with a first job, by the number of years since they left school (or the number of years since they turned 15, if they left school earlier or never went to school). The figure also examines differences in school-to-work transitions by gender, nationality, and educational attainment. Very few Syrian or Jordanian women ever work, even 10 years after leaving school. Even among young Jordanian women with higher education degrees, less than half ever work. While some men start work immediately after school, it is a minority of young men who are able to do so. Young people often spend multiple years after school without employment before they have their first job. This period of delayed transition, common in other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, is often referred to as wait adulthood or “waitthood” for short.<sup>7</sup>

Even if and when they do work, young people rarely work in formal jobs that provide social protection or benefits. Almost no Syrians and few female Jordanians ever obtain formal jobs (jobs with social insurance). Among male Jordanians, some young men – particularly educated young men – obtain formal jobs. However, even ten years after leaving school, only slightly more than half of educated male Jordanians have obtained formal jobs.

The challenge of school-to-work transition in Jordan was well recognized by FGD participants, who saw the differences

between their labour market expectations and the outcomes that they experienced as a major component of the gap between aspirations and realities facing young Jordanians transitioning to adulthood. Young people aspired to transition to a “good” job, understood as a secure job that matched their educational qualifications, and preferably in the public sector, directly after completing education. This transition was seen as particularly important because a good job provides financial independence, which young people described as important before committing to the responsibilities of marriage and children, particularly for men.

*“If you get a good job, then you will have everything, you’d have money, you’d buy a house, you’d move out of the parents’ house, you’d get married...”* – Young Syrian man, aged between 20–27

*“A good job is what secures financial independence, marriage, and owning a house.”* – Young Jordanian man, aged between 24–26

Yet in reality, FGD participants agreed that obtaining a good job takes time and does not happen directly after graduation, if it happens at all. As a result, young Jordanians find themselves looking for, or working in, less preferred jobs while waiting for a good job to become available.

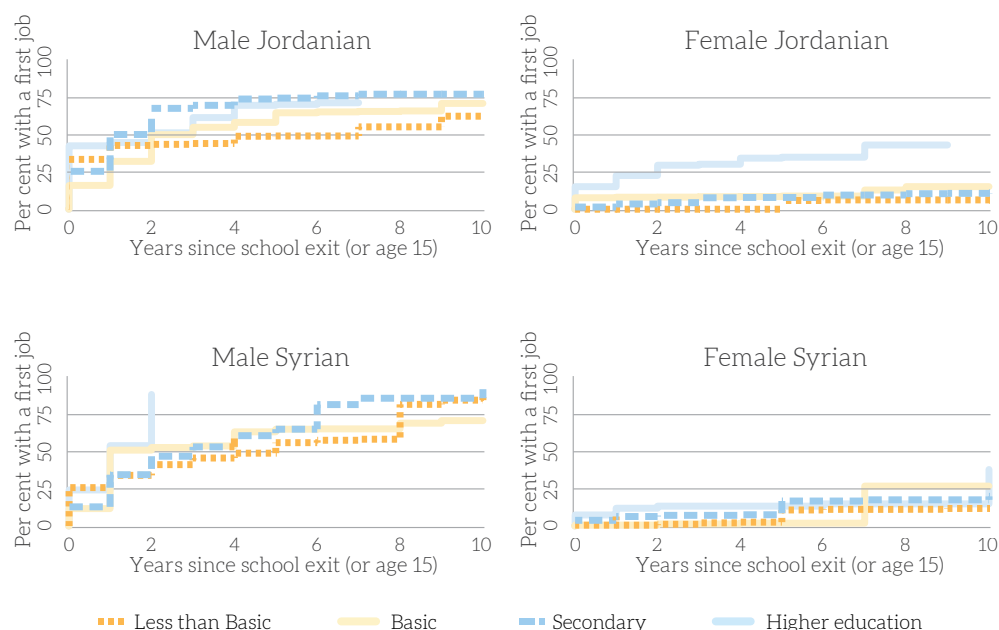
*“At first, when you finish your education, there is a period where you will not find a job directly. In the meantime, in the period between graduation and finding the good job you want, you will have any job for sure, for example, you can tutor, or work in a beauty salon, or anything.”* – Young Jordanian woman, aged between 22–30

<sup>7</sup> Dhillon and Yousef, 2009.



Figure 2: **Percentage of young people with a first job, by years since school exit (or since turning 15 years of age), by educational attainment, gender, and nationality**

Source: Authors' calculations based on SYPJ.



As shown by the quantitative data, young women often stay out of the labour market while waiting for a suitable employment opportunity, which in many cases may not materialize. Young Syrians also noted that, as refugees in Jordan, their options for obtaining good jobs were extremely limited due to legal restrictions.

### Financial independence and age at marriage

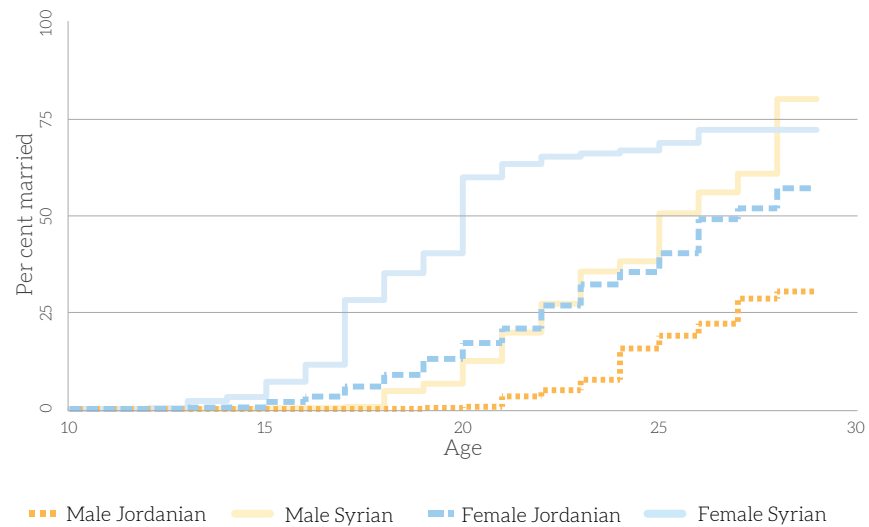
As a result of the challenges they face in school-to-work transition, young people viewed achieving financial independence as very difficult in Jordan. These factors have contributed to a situation in which the average age at marriage is rising for young Jordanians and is later than they would like. Figure 3 shows the percentage of young people ever married, by age,

gender and nationality. The ideal median age for a man to marry, according to male Jordanians, is 25. Yet the SYPJ results showed that less than half of Jordanian men are married even by the age of 30 (only 25 per cent marry by the age of 27), five years later than the ideal. The ideal median age for a woman to marry, according to Jordanian women, is 24. Half of female Jordanians marry by the age of 27, three years later than the ideal. Marriage is thus delayed relative to Jordanians' aspirations.

*"If you wait to have a good job, achieve financial independence, or buy your own house, you would never get married. By then, you would reach the age of 40 or 50!" - Young Jordanian man, aged between 24-26*

Figure 3: Percentage of young people ever married, by age, gender, and nationality

Source: Authors' calculations based on SYPJ.



Note: Kaplan-Meier failure estimator.

The median age of marriage for female Syrians is 20 years of age, which was the same as the ideal median age at marriage reported by Syrians. Likewise, the ideal median age of marriage for male Syrians was 24, close the actual median age of 25. Although Syrians were more often marrying closer to their ideal ages, they often did so without achieving financial or residential independence. Additionally, for female Syrians, early marriage remained a problem. Fewer Syrians considered early marriage (i.e., marriage before the age of 18) to be ideal compared to the 28 per cent who were actually married by 18 years of age.

### Concluding Remarks

Young Jordanians aspire to modern transitions to adulthood, which involve economic and residential independence. Living as a nuclear family from marriage

onwards is now a norm in Jordan, with over 80 per cent of newly married couples living independently.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the transition to employment and the transition to marriage are closely connected for Jordanian men, due to the importance of employment in making it possible to achieve residential independence (renting or buying a house). Although historically, Jordan has had earlier ages at marriage and a more affordable housing market than other Middle East and North Africa countries,<sup>9</sup> the Syrian refugee influx has placed additional pressures on the housing market.<sup>10</sup> Delays in men's transitions to employment end up delaying marriage for women as well, as they wait for their preferred marriage partner to become economically ready for marriage.

8 Sieverding, Berri and Abdulrahim, 2019.

9 Assaad, Krafft and Rolando, 2017.

10 Al-Hawarin, Assaad and Elsayed, 2021.



With their ability to achieve economic independence severely constrained in the Jordanian context, young Syrians have lower expectations for either economic or residential independence upon marriage. They are therefore less likely to delay marriage to achieve these goals. In fact, a substantial proportion of Syrian women marry early, well before their expressed ideal age at marriage. Early marriage is linked to norms maintained from Syria, to poverty and financial insecurity, and as a way for their families to safeguard their reputations in an inherently insecure environment.<sup>11</sup> Extended family living arrangements make it possible for Syrians to partially break the link between marriage and employment.

To support Jordan's young people in achieving their aspirations, youth policies should consider the transition to adulthood holistically. For young people, education,

employment and marriage are closely interlinked, and more or less successful transitions in one domain can have an impact in other domains as well. It is critically important to keep young people in school through secondary level and to ensure that tertiary education is accessible to those who wish to pursue it. This is particularly important for young Syrians in Jordan, who experience major gaps in educational attainment. For young people who are in school, interventions to facilitate the transition to employment – such as career counselling, and the development of skills that are applicable across fields – should begin early.<sup>12</sup> Ensuring young people have decent work opportunities and can achieve financial independence and can afford housing are important<sup>13</sup> but challenging. These steps can allow them to marry and form families, and thus complete their transitions to adulthood and achieve their aspirations.

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, 2014; Sieverding et al., 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Specific policy recommendations to support youth employment are covered in the second policy brief in this series, "Barriers to Economic Participation for Young People in Jordan: A Gendered Analysis." See also Assaad, Krafft, and Sieverding, 2021 for the full report and additional details.

<sup>13</sup> Assaad, Krafft and Rolando, 2021; eidem, 2017; Krafft and Assaad, 2020.

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