

Youth and Poverty in Lebanon: What Do the Studies Tell Us?

Adnan El -Amine¹

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I will quickly review here the main topics presented by the studies in recent years about youth, and the main features put forward by them of each of the three poverty groups: Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian. I apologize for not naming these studies due to their large number and the limited space available. Living conditions.

Many studies address the living conditions of young people in terms of the standard of living, the poverty line, low school enrollment rates and dropout rates, high unemployment, poor health and social services, poor housing conditions, etc. These studies come to the same conclusion that there are legal barriers in host countries restricting or preventing the participation of young refugees in the job market.

Reports by governments, and international, regional and local organizations are mostly focused on the living conditions in poverty clusters. The reason is that these reports are either produced for documentation or statistics purposes or are part of policy formulation context. While academic studies rarely address this angle, taking the position that it is not wise to prove “scientifically” that young people of poor areas are actually poor and focus in particular on the tendencies of young people.

Social actors

There is a belated recognition in studies that young people are not merely a subordinate social group or a generation on the way to adulthood. I say “belated recognition” because the term “Generation X” gained popularity in Europe and America in the second half of the twentieth century. While young people in the Arab region emerged after September 11, 2001, then with the launch of the Arab Spring through social media, and later with involvement in the tragedies of armed conflict in Libya, Iraq, Yemen and Syria.

Some studies offer controversial ideas on the subject. Some claim that global neoliberalism has made young people more politicized or put them front stage, while at the same time charging young people with the responsibility for the Arab Spring and then the Arab winter that followed, as if young people had become a threat to regional and global security. Others claim that Arab youth became part of the narrative of exclusion and marginalization, and that there is continuity between the narratives of young people locally and globally.

Other studies draw attention to a strong tendency among young people today toward political and civic participation, and that they express more their desire to be present and to be seen, or to participate actively in the formulation and implementation of local programs, that is, entrepreneurship. Young people today have the will and the ability to think critically and to participate in the formulation and implementation of strategies. In the conditions of poverty and immigration, the two trends emerge together—participation in tragedies and sharing social responsibility. And of course, forms of despair, isolation and apathy also emerge.

Identity stigma and xenophobia

Among the subjects that attracted researchers is identity, especially in refugee communities. Having lost its spatial base (the original homeland), identity has been symbolically magnified, on the one hand, and it has

¹ Professor of Education, Lebanese University

become an anxious identity, on the other, always conditioned in relation to the other, as if the identity of the other is a mirror image of the identity of the self.

Some researchers use stigma to describe the extreme anxiety of refugees toward host communities. The term “xenophobia” is commonly used to describe the extreme anxiety of host populations toward refugees. These are mutual feelings, interacting positively and negatively, fluctuating over time and with developments in the relation between the two sides. Some studies, therefore, focus on the extent to which these developments have come under headings and terms such as: positive self-identity; sense of self-determination; adjustment; cultural identity; experiences of bias, prejudice and bullying; resilience; and the relation between collective memory, history, and identity-building. This includes refugee contexts and post-war societies.

Under the heading of identity, some studies have included the subject of gender. One of them has pointed out that immigration has led to fractures in masculine identity and that some have compensated with religiosity. They say that males in Palestinian refugee camps are working to rebuild their identity by engaging in Islam and participating in waves of international labor migration. Psychological studies have similarly linked despair and religiosity, noting that this relationship is at its highest among Gaza’s adolescents, while it is less prominent among the adolescents of southern Lebanon in 2006-war zones.

Citizenship

Citizenship was a challenge to researchers when it comes to refugees. The subject of human rights can be tackled on the basis of the Declaration of Human Rights, but the issue of citizenship is more ambiguous. On the one hand, the host country’s constitution and its laws do not allow refugees to be treated like other full-fledged citizens, and, on the other, they are outside the state of which they are supposed to be citizens. One of the studies solved this dilemma by reconciling culture and politics with the use of expressions like “Palestinian citizenship”. Others talked about civil society as a unifying framework for youth—refugee youth and host youth.

As for Lebanese youth, citizenship was the subject of great interest by researchers. They all tended to demonstrate the supremacy of belonging to the family and the religious groups over citizenship. But the measurement of “citizenship” was often arbitrary, and I did not find that there was a clear rule used to measure it, nor was there an accumulated understanding formed over recent years with the succession of studies.

Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese

If you look at the international publications, you will find that the Palestinian issue is the most widespread and the most “mature” in terms of theory. If you consider the international and regional reports drawn up in recent years, you will find that the Syrian issue is at the forefront. While you will find the subject of Lebanese youth in poverty areas in local reports produced under the supervision of international organizations, or in master’s and university dissertations, especially at the Lebanese University.

With regard to the Palestinian issue, in addition to the above, it was said that young people are looking for a political role and that they are community activists. They do not face only their identity issues, but also issues of power in the camps, where issues are overlap and clash between the Palestinian official authority, the Palestinian factions active on the ground, the political groups that emerge from time to time in the camps, the authority of the Lebanese State, and the authority of the parents. It is worth noting that one of the studies mentioned the tendency of young Palestinians to express the desire for change and a measure of optimism in their future. This is followed by studies on Palestinian cultural production in the diaspora, which highlight additional non-political ways of reinforcing identity.

With regard to Syrians, studies focus on living conditions, that is, housing, education, health, employment and population composition. The terms used included poor social and economic conditions, poverty, vulnerability, uncertainty, and the traumas of war before displacement. The studies also focused on the policies, programs and projects that were approved or implemented with this group, as well as the issues of return to Syria and its

conditions.

For Lebanese youth, emphasis was placed on measuring poverty and the importance of including social indicators in calculating the poverty index. This is with regard to reports. As for academic studies, the subject of youth political tendencies has attracted several studies, generally in the form of surveys and with a recurrent conclusion about the adherence of young people to their sectarian identities. Only one study analyzed the narratives of young people under the weight of political conflict, and another addressed their relationship to the place. Some studies have also focused on the culture of poverty. This included an examination of lifestyles, folklore, television and tradition, as well as a number of living conditions, such as early marriage, domestic violence, early school dropout and unemployment.

Of all the studies I have consulted, I did not find one comparing the three groups.

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