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Shand, Wayne; van Blerk, Lorraine; Prazeres, Laura; Bukenya, Badru; Ibrahim, Rawan; Hunter, Janine

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The effects of limited work opportunities on transitions to adulthood among young refugees in Uganda and Jordan

Wayne Shand, University of Manchester
(Corresponding Author) wayne.shand@manchester.ac.uk

Lorraine van Blerk, University of Dundee
Laura Prazeres, University of St Andrews
Badru Bukunya, Makerere University, Uganda
Rawan Ibrahim, German-Jordanian University
Janine Hunter, University of Dundee
Aida A. Essaid, Information and Research Center, King Hussein Foundation
Rogers Kasirye, Uganda Youth Development Link

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Abstract

Young people constitute more than half of global refugee populations, yet there has been limited research into the impact of displacement on transitions into adult life. With the average period of protracted displacement extending beyond 20 years, there is a need to examine how the experience of being a refugee shapes the expectations and life courses of young people. This paper examines the effects of weak and restricted labour markets on the transitions of young refugees into adulthood. Drawing from research undertaken with displaced children and youth in Uganda and Jordan, the paper explores how a lack of work opportunities impacts on individual ability to achieve financial independence and more widely to obtain the social recognition associated with adulthood. The research finds how a dependence on precarious work and the effects of legal restrictions on employment curtail transitions to adulthood, highlighting the importance of national and humanitarian policy support to help young refugees establish stable livelihoods.

1. Introduction

Prolonged periods of conflict in the Middle East and in central and east Africa, alongside ongoing instability in Afghanistan and Myanmar, have contributed to some 65 million people being displaced, as either cross-border refugees or internally in their own countries (UNHCR 2017a). Alongside rising numbers of refugees globally, is the increasingly protracted nature of displacement, defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as: “a situation in which 25,000 or more refugees of the same nationality have been in exile for five years or longer in an asylum country” (UNHCR 2016: 8). With around 6.7 million people considered to be in a protracted displacement situation at the end of 2015 and the average period of exile being over 20 years (UNHCR 2016), in most circumstances there is a low probability of durable solutions for refugees (Zetter 2011). The lengthening average period of displacement has particular implications for young people and their ability to construct adult lives. With over half of refugee populations under 18 years old (UNHCR 2016), protracted displacement has a fundamental impact on the life course and the transitions of youth, disconnected from stable pathways into adulthood.

The great majority of refugees are hosted in low- or middle-income countries (UNHCR 2017a), where prevailing issues of poverty and weak labour markets affect the ability of young refugees to build the material assets and establish the status necessary to realise social adulthood (Langevag 2008; Jeffrey 2010). For young refugees, the impact of displacement and legal restrictions on employment, within the already strained economic conditions of host countries, narrows the opportunities and culturally diverse routes available to complete education, to access meaningful work or to marry to substantiate adulthood. Increasing numbers of refugees are locating in urban areas to find safety, have greater autonomy and improve access to livelihood opportunities (UNHCR 2009; Crawford et al 2015; Darling 2016). However, as Haysom (2013) finds, expectations of improved conditions in cities, compared to camps, are often unrealised as refugees become part of, and compete with, established populations of the urban poor (Pantuliano et al 2012) or take on additional risk by working illegally.

Despite the difficulties, the flight from harm to safety as a refugee is infused with positive expectations of reaching for a better life. Stenvig et al (2018: 8) identify, in their research with South Sudanese refugees, hope for new beginnings: “gaining freedoms extends to expectations and anticipation of pursuing education, to enable finding better-paying jobs and to assist families remaining in South Sudan”. However, the effect of lengthening periods of displacement more often
leads to a narrowing of available pathways to adulthood, frustration of life goals and a sense of ‘permanent temporariness’ (Brun and Fabos 2015). Individual inability to realise aspirations due to the limited opportunities open to young refugees, within host countries, can lead to risky decisions such as being smuggled abroad (Kvittingen et al 2018) or undertake illegal work (Women’s Refugee Commission 2012) as a way to exercise a degree of agency. Barbelet and Wake (2017) argue there is a strong case for states and donors to invest early in capacity of refugees to establish stable livelihoods and build assets, as a way to help young people cope with the structural and personal challenges of displacement. It should be noted that we use the term ‘livelihoods’ here to signify personal, economic and social gain from some form of regular work, including entrepreneurial self-employment to paid employment (Scoones 1998; 2009).

This paper draws upon research undertaken with young refugees in Uganda and Jordan to examine the effects of limited livelihood opportunities on transitions to adulthood. Using data collected from children and youth aged 10 – 24 years old, resident in camp and urban settings, the paper shows how the expectations and early experiences of adulthood are shaped by becoming and being a refugee. Evidence from the research demonstrates how protracted displacement has a profound impact on work as a pathway to adulthood. This is both in relation to disrupting young peoples' aspirations for future employment and careers and the immediate needs of youth to earn income. The loss of work opportunities has far-reaching implications for all key pathways to adult life and for the design of humanitarian-development policy and refugee support services. The paper proceeds with an overview of current discussions on transitions to adulthood, with particular reference to young people living in countries of the global South. This is then refined to look more specifically at work as a primary transition pathway and the issues arising for young refugees. The paper then moves to discuss empirical data, starting with an outline of the research methodology and context. The discussion of evidence addresses three issues: first, the significance of work in the context of displacement; second, the position of young refugees in respect to labour market access; and finally, the consequences of limited work opportunity on transitions to adult life. The discussion is followed by conclusions for theory and policy.

2. Transition pathways to adulthood

Current discussion on the social processes and markers that constitute adulthood recognise the complexity of individual, disrupted and divergent routes that lead from childhood to adult life (Hopkins and Pain 2007). Valentine (2003: 38) states: “while the transition from childhood to adulthood is often assumed to be linear as young people move from school to work, leave the parental home and so on, many people do not move neatly from a state of dependence to independence.” Life course events do not necessarily occur in the ‘right’ order, with young people moving through and back across boundaries as they substantiate their social position. Adulthood in this sense can be viewed as a formative process, rather than a fixed destination (Worth 2009). This conceptualisation of youth transitions highlights the fluidity of status and social identity within a life course, but also signals the potential risks for youth unable to make progress towards their aspirations for adulthood.

Changing patterns of social organisation and economic opportunity have contributed to the breakdown of traditional pathways from childhood to adulthood. For many young people these new conditions have created uncertainty, characterised as a state of waiting, where ambitions for the future are provisional and the present an exercise in ‘timepass’ (Jeffrey 2008). Honwana (2005: 20) discusses ‘waithood’ as the “inability [of youth] to access the basic resources to become independent adults” and establish themselves as “full-fledged citizens”. While uncertain about pathways, youth are not passive as they seek to define themselves and navigate potentially circuitous routes towards meaningful adult status. Punch (2015) for example highlights, in the
context of migration choices among rural Bolivian youth, how young people practice a limited form of agency to assert some control over the direction of their lives. The loss of familiar pathways to adulthood places greater reliance on individual decisions and personal resilience, as growing up becomes a challenge of assembling the pieces of a socially valued status. The unexpected difficulty of transition has consequences for what age adulthood is realised, but also shapes individual sense of self-worth and efficacy in the world.

Studies that consider the changing patterns of transition in contexts of poverty, among youth in the global South, highlight how transitions occur differently in different contexts (de Boeck and Honwana 2005). For young people reliant on informal and illegal livelihoods, the operation of traditional routes to adulthood through education, formal work and marriage are more fragmented that those of youth in more privileged circumstances. Langevang (2008), for example, draws on Johnson-Hanks (2002) to examine the non-linear experiences of young people in Ghana, who move back and forth between boundaries of childhood and adulthood in different spheres of their lives. They are working towards an ideal of ‘respectable’ adulthood determined by age, achievement and the social recognition they expect to gain through success in work or through marriage. This is also observed in the experiences of Ethiopian girls engaging in sex work as a means to create livelihoods and support their families (van Blerk 2008). By engaging in illegal and high-risk income generation, these girls are able to meet their social responsibilities as adults, albeit through compromising their own wellbeing.

The relationship between adult status and the ability of individuals to fulfil intergenerational responsibilities is central to understanding transitions (Punch 2002; Evans 2015). Jeffrey (2010: 498) provides an important reminder that in “many parts of the world adulthood is imagined in terms of interdependence rather than autonomy, and people are considered to become less rather than more independent as they mature.” Adult responsibilities relate to making financial and practical contributions to the wellbeing of the household, but moreover are about accepting duties commensurate with adult status and, through this, obtaining a position of respect within the community. Where structural changes in the economy and in social relationship close off traditional pathways to adulthood, young people risk being ‘stuck’ in a culturally subordinate condition of youth. The limited options available to obtaining stable and rewarding employment or to realise the anticipated economic benefits from completing education (Jones and Chant 2009) frustrate the ability of youth to take on the responsibilities that would lead to a realisation of adult status; a condition that is arguably more complex for young refugees that no longer have the option of traditional pathways, due to displacement.

3. Transitions through work

While access to ‘good work’ remains central to imagined adult futures, real economic conditions in low- and middle-income countries are dominated by precarious and informal labour markets. These conditions constrain the ability of youth to establish stable livelihoods (Banks 2016), forcing reliance on hazardous and often age-inappropriate forms of work (Hansen 2005; Sommers 2010; Shand et al 2016). ILO (2018) data underlines the importance of the informal sector, as a primary source of work, showing 71.9 per cent of non-agricultural employment in Africa as being in the informal sector, 62.8 per cent in Asia and the Pacific and 63.9 per cent in Arab countries. Levels of informality are higher in urban areas (76.3 per cent in urban Africa) and higher still among younger people. For those aged 15 – 24 years, nearly all employment in Africa is in the informal sector (94.9 per cent), a pattern mirrored in Asia and the Pacific (86.3 per cent) and in Arab countries (85.1 per cent). In contexts of fragile labour markets or post-conflict situations youth rely on enterprise formation in an already crowded informal sector or, where lacking capital, work in petty trading or casual wage labour as part of a bricolage of economic activity (Langevang and Namatovu 2019).
This situation becomes more difficult for refugee youth that are severely limited not only in their access to formal work, but by the additional effects of discrimination and legal constraints to economic participation. Pavanello et al (2012: 2) note “palpable frustration and a sense of despair among displaced youth stemming from their lack of economic, political and social opportunities and their inability to become self-reliant, get married and provide for their families.” Barbelet and Wake (2017) similarly find, in their study on Cameroon, Jordan, Turkey and Malaysia, that the combined effects of refugee policies set by host country governments outweigh the ability of refugees to build sustainable livelihoods, using their own resources and social networks. These conditions reproduce patterns of marginalisation, preventing refugees from stabilising household income, creating a long-term cycle of ‘temporariness’ (Brun and Fábos 2015). When located as part of the process of transition, the lack of work has impact beyond livelihoods to affect other dimensions of social life that rely on the ability of young refugees to accumulate financial assets and establish themselves as economic actors.

Across a range of contexts, refugees experience formal restrictions that limit the right to work and informal barriers to employment, created by discrimination and exploitative work practices (Women’s Refugee Commission 2012; Crawford et al 2015; Field et al 2017). Zetter (2011) suggests that without the possibility of a durable solution, regulations that protect the interests of host nation populations are a cause of ongoing insecurity for refugees that can weaken formative connections to host populations and labour markets. These challenges are increasingly recognised in policy and practice, with agreement of the Global Compact on Refugees in 2018 and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework. These policies are intended to encourage international co-operation and responsibility-sharing for large refugee populations, to reduce the burden on host nations and support refugees to lead productive lives. In a context of lengthening periods of protracted crises, practical interventions form part of a humanitarian-development nexus, aimed at boosting resilience and the ability of refugees to integrate into host nation labour markets. With employment and vocational training at its core, assistance is geared to reduce refugee reliance on aid. However, the effectiveness is questionable as it may lack coherence in relation to established humanitarian and development practice (Zetter 2019) and take insufficient account of the realities of labour market demand and national political contexts of host countries (Jacobsen and Fratzke 2016).

Pressure on refugees is heightened by the policy expectation that they can and should be self-reliant, when supported by livelihood programming (UNHCR 1997; 2011). The increasing focus on refugee self-reliance creates a contradiction for young refugees, who want to access ‘good work’, as a vital pillar of their independence and transition to adulthood, however have limited opportunity to become self-reliant within contexts of displacement. Policy narratives assume that problems of accessing work can be resolved through programming, when in reality self-reliance is contingent on institutional and labour market conditions (Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018; Betts et al 2019) outside of the control of refugees. While there are positive aspects to policies that encourage refugees to have greater control over their lives, building the expectation of economic self-reliance without creating the corresponding opportunity, is a source of frustration that lead to feelings of failure, undermine the efficacy of refugees and the transition of youth to adulthood.

4. Research Method

Data for this paper have been drawn from participatory research, funded by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID), with refugee children and youth located in Uganda and Jordan. These countries are located in regions of the world with long histories of instability and conflict. Both countries have hosted successive waves of refugees over the last 60 years, as people have sought places of safety from conflict. Uganda and Jordan were selected to explore the experience of refugees in countries that have large refugee populations, but have
developed different institutional responses to coping with the costs and the challenges of hosting large numbers of refugees.

The central purpose of the research was to understand how growing up in contexts of protracted crises affected youth transitions to adulthood. Fieldwork was undertaken during 2016 and 2017, with Somali and Congolese (Democratic Republic of Congo) participants in Uganda and with Syrian, Iraqi and Gazan Palestinians in Jordan. In Uganda, research was undertaken in the capital city Kampala and in the Nakivale settlement located in the south-western part of the country. In Jordan, research was undertaken in four sites: in the eastern part of the capital city Amman and Za’atari refugee camp with Syrian refugees; in the town of Zarqa with Iraqis; and in the UNRWA camp at Jerash, with Palestinian refugees originating from Gaza. In both countries the research team partnered with local organisations that had deep experience of working with young people.

Research participants were either born into their refugee status, due to parents or grand-parents displacement, or had been a refugee for at least three years, to be in a position to reflect on their experiences of growing up in a host country. There was an equal mix of female and male participants who were aged between 10 and 24 years old. This age group was selected to obtain diverse perspectives of expectations and experience of transitions to adulthood across a broad cross section of children (10 – 14 years) and youth (aged 15 – 24). Regardless of age, participants were encouraged to share their own feelings about being a child or adult in relation to their experience.

The research adopted an in-depth participatory and youth-led approach in order to explore the complex processes and contextual factors that shape transitions to adulthood for young refugees living in contexts of protracted crises. The direct involvement of young refugees in both data collection and analysis was considered vital as a means to respect the experiences and knowledge of participants and to create a supportive framework, within the project, to enable children and youth to reflect upon traumatic events associated with becoming a refugee and subsequent effects of displacement and exclusion (von Benzon and van Blerk 2017; van Blerk et al 2016). Eight young refugees (aged 16 -24) in each country were engaged through an open selection process and provided with structured training as Youth Researchers to undertake data collection with their peers, contribute to analysis of research results and take part in knowledge exchange workshops with stakeholder organisations. The Youth Researchers played a key role in the project providing access into refugee communities and, through using their own experiences, contributing to the dataset and offering insights into the analysis and final reporting of results.

Data collection was in two phases. The first involved a tablet-based survey with young refugees, carried out by the Youth Researchers within their own nationality groups. The questionnaire was co-produced with Youth Researchers, to collect information on the socio-economic status of young refugees, identify potential barriers to transition and select prospective participants for stages two and three of the research. In total 505 questionnaires were completed across the two countries. The sample was not representative, but engaged a random cross-section of young refugees with participation in the survey stratified by age (10 – 14; 15 – 19; and 20 – 24), gender, refugee group and camp or urban location. Second, in-depth semi-structured interviews, led by Youth Researchers, which explored the challenges of youth transition as a refugee. Across the two countries 93 interviews were completed, with youth participants aged 15 – 24 years old. The younger age group of children (10 – 14 years) were invited to take part in focus group discussions, rather than interviews. Eight focus groups were run to allow children to discuss their expectations and

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aspirations of adult life, to complement responses from 15 – 24-year olds, who were asked to discuss their experiences of transitions.

The youth-led participatory method, adopted for the research, was essential to explore the complexities of transitions to adulthood, but presented a number of challenges. Working with young refugees as researchers provided unique access and insights into the lives and experiences of young people. While this approach increased the amount of training and support needed to undertake the data collection, the close involvement of young refugees at all stages of the project added to the quality of output. Key ethical issues were the physical safety and emotional wellbeing of researchers and participants and obtaining informed consent. During fieldwork, Youth Researchers operated in pairs and only in their own refugee communities, with the support of an experience youth worker. Their familiarity aided engagement with prospective participants and ensured places of danger were avoided. Due to the trauma of displacement, training included sessions to help Youth Researchers to cope with their own emotional response and that of participants sharing personal information during interviews and focus groups. In accordance with the ethical approvals obtained, informed consent was secured from participants and, where appropriate, parents and guardians. The research design was respectful of cultural requirements by allowing girls and boys to gather data from participants of the same gender. While challenging high quality data was collected and the Youth Researchers feedback that they benefited both from new skills, but moreover from the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences.

5. **Context – Uganda and Jordan**

During the last two decades Uganda has hosted refugee populations fleeing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Somalia, Rwanda and Eritrea. In May 2017, UNHCR reported that Uganda had a population of 1.2 million refugees and asylum seekers, with the largest group (some 74 per cent) fleeing from the ongoing conflict in South Sudan (UNHCR 2017b). Uganda is recognised globally as having one of the most progressive legal frameworks defining the rights of refugees, set out in the Refugee Act 2006 and 2010 Refugee Regulations. Refugees have statutory protections covering the right to work, relative freedom of movement, identity documents, agricultural land in settlements and access to education and health services. These rights form part of a national commitment, in conjunction with international humanitarian agencies, to offering refugees a place of safety. Refugee populations are located in settlements, rather than camps, managed jointly by the Ugandan Office of the Prime Minister and UNHCR, and in urban centres, most notably the capital city Kampala. The spatial distribution of settlements reflects the entry points into Uganda, with the largest numbers in the north west districts of Yumbe, Adjumani and Arua used primarily by South Sudanese refugees. Nakivale, located in the south west, is one of the oldest and largest settlements with Congolese, Somali, Burundian and Rwandan refugees. Kampala has a population of over 90,000 refugees registered with UNHCR (UNHCR 2017b), concentrated in the low-income areas of Kisenyi, Katwe, Makindye and Masajja (Women’s Refugee Commission 2011).

Despite the having established legal rights and investment in vocational training and self-employment, refugees in Uganda are reported to experience poverty and vulnerability. Research highlights problems of discrimination and limited social networks for refugees in camp and urban settings (Omata and Kaplan 2013); inability to access stable work creating a reliance on informal and irregular forms of employment (Omata 2012); marginal income levels that increase vulnerability to economic shocks (Women’s Refugee Commission 2011); too few school places and the hidden costs of attending primary and secondary school (UNHCR 2017b); and limited access to public services that result in a heavy reliance on humanitarian support (Ilcan et al 2015). While legal protections create a
framework of rights, labour market conditions and the limited capacity of state and donor agencies to service the scale of economic and social service support needed, shape the ability of refugees to maintain a minimum level of income to meet their basic requirements.

Jordan has hosted successive waves of refugee populations almost since its formation as a state in 1946. Palestinians from the Arab–Israeli conflict in 1948 and 1967; refugees from Iraq in 2003 and subsequent periods of sectarian violence; refugees fleeing conflict in Yemen, South Sudan and Somalia; and the conflict in Syria since 2011. In a country with a population of some 9.5 million people in 2015 (Government of Jordan 2015a) Jordan hosted 659,593 Syrians registered with UNHCR in 2017 (UNHCR 2017c), as part of a total population of Syrians that the Government of Jordan estimates at around 1.26 million (Government of Jordan 2016). The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) identifies more than 2 million registered Palestinian refugees resident in Jordan (UNRWA 2017). There were 63,024 Iraqis registered by UNHCR in Jordan in 2017 (UNHCR 2017c), forming part of a larger Iraqi population estimated at around 130,000, including those who are resident but not registered with UN agencies (Government of Jordan 2015b). The majority of refugees are located in the northern Governorates of Amman, Zarqa, Mafraq and Irbid, residing in urban areas and dedicated camps for Syrians and for Palestinians managed by UNHCR and UNRWA respectively.

While Jordan has a long track record of providing safe refuge for people fleeing violence and conflict in the region, it lacks a specific statutory framework defining the status and rights of refugees. To date the Government of Jordan has not ratified the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or the 1967 Protocol (Refugee Convention). The lack of a comprehensive legal framework, such as adopted in Uganda, has the advantage of enabling Jordan to flex its response to refugee crises within complex regional politics, although the resulting patchwork of regulations can lack clarity and be perceived as unfair by refugee groups. The rules governing access to work vary considerably by refugee group, with Syrian, Iraqi Gazan Palestinians all subject to different regulations that restrict employment to particular sectors or require specific permission. This extends to the provision of training and livelihood support, which is tightly regulated by government (Barbelet and Wake 2017). Research has highlighted a number of challenges for refugees including low educational participation and attainment, with Syrians reported to have low progression rates from primary to secondary school (ARDD-Legal Aid 2016). Limited labour market access is a problem, with the majority of Syrian and Iraqi workers engaged in informal activity characterised by low pay and poor working conditions (Stave and Hillesund 2015). Also, high poverty rates, with Palestinians originating from Gaza among the poorest people in Jordan, whose vulnerability is exacerbated by their legal status as ‘foreigners’, which severely limits work and educational opportunities (Tiltness and Zhang 2013).

6. The significance of work for young refugees

While the transition to adulthood through work is a normative pathway, this route has particular meaning for young refugees living in a context of protracted displacement. Child refugees (aged 10 – 14) in Uganda and Jordan associate adulthood with work and economic agency; a point in life when they have social authority and are able to gain greater control over their future. Focus group participants reflected on the chaotic effects of displacement and the difficulties experienced by their parents in coping with poverty and exclusion as refugees. They were concerned about their limited ability to contribute to the family, seeing adult work as a way to take on responsibilities and fulfill obligations to care for parents and siblings. They viewed adulthood as a time: “when I can provide for my family, work and help my family with expenses” (Syrian boy, East Amman focus group); and “it means that you can take care of your family” (Congolese girl, Kampala focus group). Children look forward to adulthood as a transformation to dispel the uncertainty and feelings of helplessness that
they have as children. The fragmenting of extended family, caused by displacement, gives added importance to meeting intergenerational responsibilities, as highlighted by Punch (2002), Evans (2015) and Jeffreys (2010), and a desire of young refugees, from an early age, to contribute to household wellbeing.

Work is significant as a means to create the future. Beyond the benefits of earning an income, young participants expected work to lead to new possibilities that include breaking the dependency of being a refugee and enabling them to be more mobile. A male Congolese focus group participant in Nakivale commented: "a good job can give you connections to Europe". Accessing skilled employment and professional occupations provides status and stability and is expected to open up a range of opportunities: “first get educated and then I get what I want to be” (Congolese girl, Kampala focus group). However, participants also have a sense that being a refugee is somehow incompatible with the adult lives that children imagine for themselves. Good jobs and careers will be 'somewhere else' and are associated with a resolution of the problems of displacement. Ideas of work and adulthood, for focus group participants, are bound together to be realised through a return to the home country, as highlighted by a Syrian boy in East Amman: "we do not have a future here; you have people to support you in Syria", or as a permanent resettlement in a new country where the young person can: “meet new people and find a better, nicer life” (Palestinian boy, Jerash focus group).

While young people have a strong desire to become self-reliant, they are frustrated by limited work opportunities. This is particularly evident among older participants (aged 15 – 24), who have direct experience of the realities of the labour market as refugees. The lack of 'good work', defined by research participants as offering sufficient income, contract stability, acceptable conditions and respectability, is a source of frustration and a primary cause of their inability to establish themselves as adults. In Jordan Jahmir (all names used are pseudonyms), an Iraqi male aged 19 in Zarqa, comments: "how could I build a future for myself with not being able to work? I cannot plan for my future because I am denied access to several things" including education and a majority of job vacancies. The lack of work opportunities undermines individual ability to create adult lives, as Filsan, an 18-year-old Somali male resident in Nakivale settlement, says: “I am a living person and my brains and heart are still working and I don’t want to sit around and be like a tree. I want to be person with goals and moving ahead”. The drive to build a future is constrained by legal status, with young people engaging in a bricolage of piecemeal activity to generate an income.

Limited work opportunities create a break in the continuity of growing up. The effects on transitions and the construction of social adulthood is explained by Thaer, a Palestinian male aged 16 in Jerash: "when you live in a place that allows you to develop your talents and develop your future plans, you would be able to achieve your goal. But when it doesn’t, like the camp, and when you are invisible in society, then your future would be lost". The consequence for young refugees is becoming stuck in ‘waithood’, where they can neither access ‘good work’ nor can they easily change their refugee status. This reproduces a sense of frustration and illegitimacy that breaks the connection with imagined futures and affects self-confidence. The lack of available routes to adult status undermines individual belief that they can shape their lives.

7. Accessing labour markets

Refugee access to employment is determined by the intersection of regulations that define the rights of refugees to work and the prevailing economic environment. Evidence from Uganda and Jordan demonstrate how refugee youth navigate their way through complex local conditions to secure an income, but can face exclusion and exploitation in the labour market. While Uganda has a progressive legal framework that guarantees rights to work, it has a weak economy that is dominated by informal subsistence activities. Similar to Langevang and Namatovu’s (2019) study, refugees creatively mobilise and engage in diverse forms of work to meet their needs, including
petty trade, manual work in agriculture and construction, hairdressing, taxi driving, begging and cleaning. While Jordan has a stronger economic base than Uganda, it places restrictions on access to work and movement, leading refugees to work illegally to generate a basic income. Compared to Uganda, young refugees in Jordan rely more on financial support from family and friends and less on forms of casual employment. This highlights how the complex system of rules, which differ between refugee groups, severely limits the types of employment available. But across both contexts, young refugees are restricted to forms of precarious and low wage employment that constrain their ability to build financial assets and social standing to substantiate an adult status.

A central concern for research participants is the lack of ‘good work’. Youth compare their idealised notions of employment and the benefits they expected to gain from work with the realities of marginality they experience: “because I am a refugee I cannot do the kind of work that I want to do. The fact remains that I can only get a chance to do the other small low paying jobs” (Sarah, Congolese female aged 16 Nakivale). This issue registers in both research contexts, with refugees in Jordan emphasising the restrictions created by regulations. For Gazan Palestinians, their formal status as ‘visitors’ and their lack of National Identity Numbers severely limits access to professional roles, public sector employment and jobs that have security implications, such as work at airports. Gazan Palestinian youth articulate their sense of injustice in the restrictions placed on them compared to other Palestinians and Jordanians. They characterise the available types of work as just: “factories, what else? Factories selling farm products” (Jameela, Gazan Palestinian female aged 24 Jerash). The narrow opportunities for labour market participation impact on the present, in the types of work available to refugee youth, but also dampen ambitions for the future. Maysam, a Palestinian female aged 18 from Jerash, said: “we stop pursuing our education after the tenth grade, because we know that we are not going to be doctors or engineers.” Regulations that limit workforce participation have a short-term impact on the transition pathways and longer-term consequences for the life course of young people.

The adversity of the labour market demands significant resilience from young people, who accept forms of employment and conditions at odds with their idealised view of ‘good work’. Refugees in Uganda and Jordan have experience of exploitation in the labour market. In Uganda, a participant commented: “while working with nationals they [employers] pay you less money, which cannot be of much help to you and a refugee is not respected” (Warsame, Somali male aged 23 Nakivale). Similarly, in Jordan Milad, a 19-year-old Iraqi male in Zarqa, said: “we cannot work and we cannot learn a tradecraft. If you end up working at some place, the employer will shower you with insults and will exploit you because you are Iraqi.” The formal and social status of refugees places them at a distinct disadvantage in competing for work, leading to young refugees taking illegal forms of employment that increase their vulnerability. Zeina, a Syrian female aged 23 in Za’atari, says that not being able to access work “makes me feel depressed and I am hopeless.” In Kampala Lucien, a Congolese male aged 18, underlines the sense of disconnection saying: “I am in a country which is not mine and there is no way I can say that I will work freely, go to school and buy a house.” Despite negative experiences, participants found ways to cope, remaining hopeful about the future and the possibility of achieving their goals.

8. Implications for youth transitions

Limited access to work forms part of a rupture of transition pathways, caused by protracted displacement. Becoming a refugee and losing expected routes into adulthood is destabilising for young people, creating the sense of ‘permanent temporariness’ highlighted by Brun and Fábos (2015). Fractured transitions have consequences for the construction of identity and the choices that young refugees are able to make as they become adults. Work, as a means of both substantiating adult status within the community and building financial assets, is a key determining factor vital to other aspects of adulthood, including marriage, investment in education and housing. Without
stable sources of employment, young refugees face a number of consequences that curtail their aspirations for the future.

In both Uganda and Jordan, young refugees highlighted how a lack of ‘good work’ was changing their decisions about marriage. For young men and women, their weak financial position meant they felt they could not meet the costs of starting a family or accumulate the necessarily funds to meet obligations for dowry payments. Qasim, a Syrian in East Amman aged 18, talked about the costs of marriage: “the amount is big and we can hardly pay the house rent and marriage would make a new problem.” Traditionally, marriage is expected to improve the financial position of the family, but with most refugees experiencing similar levels of poverty, finding a good match is problematic. In Kampala, Hani a Somali woman aged 21, commented: “the boys here do not have any money and the parents say that we don’t want you to get married [...] they told me that I am bringing a man who is poor to a poor family.” The lack of financial stability and limited prospects to access employment is a powerful disincentive to marry, leading to delays in family formation and undermining alternative routes to establishing social adulthood within the accepted cultural norms.

The experience of financial instability and limited options contributes to a broader feeling, among young refugees, that they have lost their future. Regis, a male Congolese refugee in Nakivale aged 16, expresses feelings of loss as a refugee: “I am not sure if I will be the kind of person that I wanted to be in the future.” The lack of opportunities available to youth increase their willingness to exert agency by taking risks in order to obtain the status that appears unavailable to them. Such risks can take various forms including working illegally: “I am afraid of being caught by the labour office [...] I will be working undercover so that I will not attract attention [...] and risk the possibility of being investigated” (Jahmir, an Iraqi male aged 19 in Zarqa). It can also include more drastic decisions to be smuggled into Europe. Hibaaq, a Somali female aged 21 from Kampala comments: “there are many teenagers with whom we completed school together and they were also refugees and some of them have crossed the Mediterranean and reached Europe. They send money for their families and they risked their lives but their parents are proud of them.” Founded in the frustration of not being able to make an adult contribution to the family, the risk of undocumented migration is seen by some young refugees as a way to demonstrate their maturity and make their parents proud. Despite awareness of the dangers this, for some young people, appears to offer them a chance to take control of their lives.

The willingness to take such risks is justified in part by the experience of discrimination. The social and legal category of refugee sets individuals apart from the host populations, influencing both access to work and the wider process of integration. In Uganda Louis, a Congolese male aged 20 in Kampala, says: when you ask for a job from a national and he finds out that you are a refugee he sends you away”. Young Somalis face abuse and discrimination as they are said to be associated with the fundamentalist group Al-Shabaab, which claimed responsibility for the 2010 bomb blasts in Kampala. Nala a Somali female aged 19 in Nakivale, shared her experience, saying: “you go to the market and they call you that you are an Al-Shabaab and they want you to immediately leave the market and not stay there anymore”. In Jordan Syrians, Iraqis and Palestinians discuss experience of discrimination, as summed up by Haya, a Syrian female aged 16 in East Amman, who commented: “when I walk the street, I am afraid of how people look at me. They give me this ‘refugee’ look; they know that a Syrian means an outcast”. Discrimination is isolating and narrows the possibility of extending social contacts outside of the refugee community. Fear of harassment and rejection or physical assault as well as practical barriers, such as restrictions on movement and language, combine to constrain possible pathways to adulthood.

The lack of work opportunities and the experience of discrimination create tensions in the family, where young people are unable to meet their expected responsibilities. This can have a gendered aspect, where boys and girls feel they are competing for the limited work opportunities available. In
Jordan for example Jameela, a 24-year-old Palestinian in Jerash, recollects how she gave up a job because her male cousins were unable to find employment and it would be inappropriate for her to work when the male members of the family were unable to. Low household incomes and unstable employment create pressures on families that directly affect the wellbeing and the decision making of young people. Across both countries there is a clear sense that boys and girls sacrifice their ambitions in order to earn money for the family or care for siblings: “I was not able to achieve all the plans that I had […] the refugee life is not something that one can be happy about” (Fawsia, a 21 year old Somali in Nakivale). Where refugees have limited social networks, greater reliance is placed on children to act in adult roles, where taking early responsibility for earning income or caring responsibility may have lasting consequences on life courses.

9. **Coping with limited work opportunities**

Despite the variety of difficulties experienced by young refugees in establishing adult selves, this does not mean that young people are passive victims to their circumstances. Across the research it was evident how young refugees try to cope with the circumstances created by displacement to substantiate an adult status and build self-esteem and respect within their social group. For refugee youth, taking on community responsibilities through voluntary activity to support other refugees was an important way in which they could make an ‘adult’ contribution, gain status and be recognised by elders and by their peers. In Nakivale settlement, a participant with training as an electrician in DRC was unable to find regular work, but provided informal training for other young displaced people in the camp to assist them to repair computers and solar panels, as a way for them to earn money. Young Palestinian men in Jerash worked as volunteers building and maintaining a youth centre. Somali girls in Kampala and Nakivale supported other refugees with translation, using their English language skills to help people to complete official forms and communicate with refugee agencies.

While these forms of voluntary activity do not fully compensate for the lack of ‘good work’ available to them, involvement in the community does play an important role in transitions. These activities allow youth to establish adult persona, marking a difference from their status as dependent children. The patchwork of employment and voluntary activity clearly illustrates the non-linear trajectories of young refugees into adult life. It also highlights how they cope with uncertainty and the ‘waiting' time that young people have when excluded from education and work. Involvement in civic projects and community organisations provide a vehicle for young people to extend their social networks and gain access to new experience and skills that may be helpful in identifying future employment opportunities. Moreover, in contexts where adulthood is defined in relation to the norms and expectations of the community, voluntary work within settlements may provide one of the few sources of validation for young refugees that need to demonstrate their status as responsible adults.

10. **Conclusion**

This paper has examined how limited work opportunities have affected transitions to adulthood for young refugees in Uganda and Jordan. The research shows, across different contexts, the pervasive effects of protracted displacement on a loss of pathways to establishing social adulthood. For the refugee participants in Uganda and Jordan, the overlapping challenges of weak labour markets, institutional restrictions and discrimination result in livelihoods as patchworks of short-term casual labour and petty trade. Employment on the margins of the informal economy contrasts sharply with youth’s idealised desire for ‘good work’, as a respectable way to gain social status. The research also finds however, that young refugees resist the constraints of economic marginalisation through building social capital within their communities; undertaking voluntary activity; and using skills to train and support as ways to obtain responsibility and recognition. The lack of opportunity however
justifies decisions that can lead to illegal and dangerous activities, as a way to exert some control over the future.

The findings are consistent with the literature on youth transitions that highlight the frustrations of delayed or curtailed pathways into adult life and the compromises that young people make, in contexts of poverty and informality, to support their families. However, this research shows that protracted displacement and refugee status shape access to work and in-turn the whole transition journey, with young people experiencing multiple barriers, over prolonged periods, to establishing their adult status. Without the prospect of stable employment, the options for education and marriage are severely diminished, with individual decisions about the future delayed in the hope of a permanent resolution to refugee status. In the absence of established pathways, status is sought through a patchwork of social and economic activities, to progress towards adulthood. The research contributes to current discussions in the literature by highlighting the need to recognise the aggregate effect of protracted displacement, as an overwhelming rupture on transitions to adulthood, for young refugees.

The research also presents some challenges to humanitarian-development policy. With many young refugees spending their childhood and youth without realistic possibility of return or permanent relocation, it is vital that services and institutional frameworks are geared to enable young refugees to integrate into the economic and social structures of host nations. Lessons from Uganda and Jordan show that while national legal arrangements and economic contexts may differ, there remains a common challenge to invest in education, employment support and enterprise that enable young refugees to establish livelihoods. Among young refugees there is a strong desire to become self-reliant and contribute to the wellbeing of the families. However, where policy is disconnected from the reality of labour markets, self-reliance becomes an empty promise that builds resentment and encourages forms of negative coping. With growing numbers of young refugees and ever-lengthening periods of displacement it is essential that young refugees are positioned as assets to be cultivated, with their full potential realised for host communities and the construction of positive routes into adulthood.

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