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## **Youth transitions in protracted crises: conceptualising the ‘rupture’ of refugees’ pathways to adulthood in Uganda and Jordan**

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### **Abstract**

Youth displaced from home by war, civil conflict, and poverty face a difficult transition into adulthood. Their ability to access education, employment, and social adulthood is often disrupted, restricted and delayed. Yet, despite youth making up a large percentage of refugees in Africa and the Middle East, their specific circumstances are rarely considered. While international humanitarian and development programming aims to respond to the disrupted lives of youth affected by prolonged displacement, little is known about how these conditions affect transitions as youth struggle to create adult lives in contexts of multiple and competing survival pressures. This paper conceptualises youth transitions to adulthood for young refugees

growing up in situations of protracted crisis, suggesting that major global challenges such as conflict, not only delay, modify or disrupt certain life events but in fact can have a rupturing effect on young people's capabilities and aspirations for the future. The paper draws on research with over 500 10-24 year olds growing up as refugees in Uganda and Jordan, from five different national groups and located in camp and urban settings. Analysis of their in-depth experiences highlight that current thinking around youth transitions has not yet accounted for the ruptures they experience, located outside of their home countries for extended periods of time. This 'rupture', as an accumulation of the effects of displacement itself; the extended temporality of displacement; and the life course phase effected, more fundamentally impacts on the key phase for creating adult lives than has previously been understood.

**Key Words**

Youth, Transitions, Protracted Crisis, Refugees, Uganda, Jordan

## INTRODUCTION

This paper develops conceptualisations of youth transitions for young refugees growing up in protracted crisis and suggests that major global challenges such as conflict, not only delay, modify or disrupt expected life events but *rupture* young people's capabilities and aspirations for the future. The paper draws on research with over 500 10-24-year olds growing up as refugees in Uganda and Jordan, from five different national groups and located in camp and urban settings. Analysis of their in-depth experiences highlight that current thinking around youth transitions has not yet accounted for the experience of rupture on young people displaced outside of their home countries for extended periods of time during formative years of life. While this is not the first time 'rupture' has been used to describe refugees' experiences (see, for example Baerwaldt 2018; Shackel and Fiske 2017; Anderson et al. 2013), we apply it here in the context of youth transitions conceptualising 'rupture' as a severing of expected life pathways and an extirpation of past social and cultural connections, current opportunity and future aspiration. This is particularly the case due to the protracted nature of crises with most refugees now remaining outside of their home nations for over 20 years. This rupture more fundamentally impacts on the key phase for creating successful adult lives than has previously been understood and offers new insight into the complexities of youth transitions to adulthood.

The paper begins by examining how refugee youth transitions are explicated conceptually, drawing out gaps in the theoretical application of transition pathways to adulthood in the global context of young refugees. The contexts and youth-led methodology employed in the research are then explored, linking to the wider academic debate, policy and practice and illuminated through evidence from the research. Finally, we discuss how the concept of rupture

can contribute to re-theorising youth transitions for refugees and youth more broadly, and the implications for policy and practice.

## **CONCEPTUALIZING YOUTH TRANSITIONS**

Transitions to adulthood have come to be understood as a complex process that young people journey through, stretched across space and time, and individualised for each young person. Such transitions are generally associated with the liminal period of youth, where young people consider and engage with various life events such as leaving home, starting employment, cohabitation and having a family, rather than a singular fixed stage where adulthood is attained at a special age or time (Valentine 2003). While “the nature and experience of these transitions are likely to vary according to various markers of social difference” such as age and gender (Hopkins 2006: 241), transitions to adulthood for young people growing up in protracted crises is relatively less understood. This paper contributes to debates and research on youth transitions undertaken in global South contexts (van Blerk 2008; Gough et al. 2013; Punch 2015) and particularly explore experiences of transitions, where young people are growing up in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East under duress and protracted displacement.

In the global South, the school-to-work transition has gained prominence among donor and NGO communities, as a focus for interventions, in a bid to reduce youth unemployment (Locke and Lintelo, 2012). Yet, the focus on this linear pathway from education/training to employment has been unproblematically positioned within development policy (Morrow, 2013), ignoring a multitude of other important contextual factors, including the dominating presence of informality in the global South which creates precarious transition routes. For example, focusing

on education into employment as *the* marker of transition to adulthood can result in young people perceiving their lack of formal employment as ‘failure’. As Abebe (2020) indicates, this prevents educated youth from hopeful futures as they wait for the fulfilment of aspirations in stable employment that does not match the reality of informal labour markets. Yet, some youth innovatively create non-traditional work survival strategies (Shand et al, 2016) that enables them to support themselves and often newly created young families. Placing a narrow focus on education-to-work also neglects young people’s voice, as well as their ambitions, desires, and realities as part of a broader social, economic, and cultural understanding of transition to adulthood that covers all aspects of life. Research also explores the complex, disrupted, and varied transition journeys many youth experience, recognising that such pathways are influenced and shaped by historical, political, social and economic contexts. This research considers the impacts of marginality and a reliance on informal work, under/unemployment and illegal income sources (Monteith and Lwasa, 2017; Locke and Lintelo, 2012; Crivello, 2015) as well as exploring the social and relational aspects of transitions in contexts of poverty (van Blerk, 2008; Punch, 2015).

Thus, youth are conceptualised as navigating pathways that are in flux, not always simple, sometimes cyclical, and often challenging rather than having a straightforward mapped out route to adulthood (Thomson et al., 2004). Conceptualised as journeys to be navigated, transitions are spatial, but also temporal and social, taking place in specific places, or stretched across space through migratory pathways, over time and within complex social structures. Therefore, it is essential to consider how different pathways are produced spatially and temporally enabling failures and successes to be connected and obstacles encountered to be overcome. Transitions

to adulthood can then be conceptualised as on-going containing both a real and imagined future for youth (Worth, 2009). This is perhaps more pertinent where youth experience hardships and difficulties, including financial worries, irregular or informal work, lack of access to quality education and unexpected life events such as pregnancy (van Blerk, 2008).

More recently a plethora of work has added to critiques of transitions, as attaining status, particularly for youth in the global South, through discussions of hope, and waiting. Stasik et al. (2020) highlight that youth in Africa wait; for economic development, for growth and maturation, for expectations to be met; all as part of frustrations where their aspirations do not match their lived realities. This notion of waithood (Mains, 2012) is described as an unintentional prolonged period for youth struggling with the frustrations and marginalisation of poverty and unemployment, often leading to boredom and shame. Waithood is created by what Mains (2012:1) says happens when 'hope is cut': the disappointment of failed aspirational formal education-to-work transitions. Yet, even in such contexts, life happens, and young people still socialise, build relationships, pursue economic survival strategies, and create homes and families (Ungruhe and Esson, 2017; Abebe, 2020; Stasik et al, 2020). Such nuanced critiques add weight to the spatial, temporal, and relational complexity of youth transition experiences.

The complexity of youth transitions has been further developed through the impact of vital conjunctures, as critical moments where key life events no longer occur in a specified order; may be delayed, accelerated, stretched or unattained (Johnson-Hanks, 2002; Jeffrey, 2010, Evans, 2014). This reflects the changing circumstances of growing up within global South contexts including increased life expectancy, improved health and access to education, coupled with a growing youth population, rural to urban migration and a permeation of social, cultural and



economic globalisation. For rural youth lack of access to paid livelihoods or land can also act as a critical moment of change in their transitions (Abebe, 2020). The important conceptual distinction here is that it allows for critical life events to produce opportunities, constraints, and transformations for youth transition pathways. Additionally, it includes young people's own perspectives, demonstrating how they may resourcefully respond to adversity creating strategies for income generation, that do not correspond to expected patterns of economic activity (Omata and Kaplan, 2013; Shand et al., 2016).

Despite this nascent theorising around youth's position within their own transition journeys, the potentiality of critical moments and the injection of waithood as a prolonged transition process; protracted crisis conditions are rarely discussed where crisis results in cross-border migration. Where migration has been discussed in the youth transitions literature, this has tended to focus on relocation as a critical moment, for example, where young people in contexts of poverty employ their mobilities to create positive opportunities for work and independence (Crivello, 2011), and does not account for the longer-term impacts on refugees. Yet refugee youth are increasingly growing up in situations of protracted crisis, where precarity goes beyond the economic realities of living in poverty and marginalised situations (Abebe, 2020; Stasik et al 2020); to social, political and legal precarity where everyday freedoms are curtailed (Johnson and Gilligan, 2021; Chase, 2020). The legal and social status of being a refugee prevents (or at least limits) youth's ability to go back or forward. They are spatially and temporally 'stuck'. Being a refugee is supposed to be temporary but for many, refugee status is an (almost) permanent state, isolating young people even from the social relations that are drawn upon as part of waithood and can create access to potential pathways outside of being a refugee. This

paper's examination of refugee status and experiences adds depth to conceptualisations about the fractured course of youth transitions as outlined by scholars exploring youth living in poverty (Abebe et al 2020; Crivello, 2015). Refugees face many similar issues to other poor youth, but their experience is ruptured: more engrained and difficult because of the additional social, institutional, psychological and temporal challenges they face. Rupture therefore indicates greater severity of disrupted transition.

The remainder of the paper unpacks the nature of ruptured youth transitions for refugees beginning with a discussion of the contextual refugee situation, outlining the research and methodology before exploring transition experiences in detail for explaining the concept of rupture.

## **REFUGEE YOUTH: THE GLOBAL SITUATION**

Forced displacement is a critical global issue. UNHCR (2021a) data shows 82.4 million people were displaced due to conflict and violence at the end of 2020 – 2.9 million more than in the previous year. Young people constitute around two-thirds of global refugee populations; half of refugees are aged under 18, and an additional 13% aged 18-24 years (Ibid.). These figures reflect demographics in the populations as a whole; with 62% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa and 47% of the population North Africa and Western Asia aged under 25 (UN DESA, 2019). These areas also host the largest number of displaced people, with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region being the largest generator of refugees globally (IOM, 2019). Displaced children and youth, with poor prospects for adult life are facing economic difficulties, contextualised by situations of civil war, political tensions, environmental crises, and protracted conditions of

poverty. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and international lockdowns have restricted the informal economy with a disproportionate impact on young people (ILO, 2020a). While humanitarian and development programming has invested in education and vocational training initiatives targeting youth affected by protracted displacements, evidence for direct benefits is limited (Moser-Mercer, et al. 2016). For example, on the Thailand-Myanmar border where host community youth are also facing challenges regarding access and opportunities to education and livelihoods, and where the return on investment in education is often questioned, the influx of refugees often shifts the prioritization of the international community (Johnson and Gilligan, 2021). Further, in Jordan, Palestinian refugees are no longer the highest priority of the international and donor community in terms of the share of global resources with the recent significant influx of Syrian refugees. Although Palestinian and Syrian refugee youth face many of the same challenges, Palestinians now have even less access to services and opportunities (El-Ghali, 2019). Therefore, where crises have brutally impacted economic growth and formal employment, understanding and enabling youth aspirations to be met is challenging (Lenner and Turner, 2019).

The vast majority of displaced people live in parts of the world with high levels of poverty and inequality (Guterres and Spiegel, 2012). Protracted displacement has become normalised with some states in a constant cycle of perpetual crisis due to civil and political insurgency (Zetter, 2011). Long-term episodic conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) for a decade has resulted in continual waves of internal and cross-border displacement of Congolese refugees, with many entering Uganda. Further, periods of relative calm in-between conflict have not always witnessed return migration. Many people choose not to, or cannot, return home due to poverty

and limited support in both home and host countries (Omata, 2014). Across the Middle East, renewed waves of displacement are complicating the lives of refugees already affected by protracted crises. For example, Jordan has been significantly affected by conflicts in neighbouring states; including the security crisis in Syria and by events in Iraq and Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). UNHCR figures (2021b) state that there are 665,834 registered Syrian refugees' resident in Jordan and that 56% of camp residents are under 18 years old (Ibid). In addition, of the 2,272,411 registered Palestinian refugees living in Jordan, 370,000 live in ten Palestinian refugee camps (UNRWA, 2019). Pressure created by continuing conflict in adjacent countries and the impact of large numbers of displaced people exacerbates poverty in a difficult socio-economic situation, directly affecting youth transitions.

People displaced within or across borders are not only based in camps and rural settlements, but also in urban centres proportionately hosting more displaced people. Omata and Kaplan (2013) highlight cities as crucial for understanding the lives of those experiencing forced displacement. In 2009, almost half of the world's refugees settled in urban areas compared to only one-third in camps (UNHCR, 2009) and this figure has disproportionately increased with an estimated 61% of the global refugee population living in urban settings in 2018 (the latest figures available) (UNHCR, 2019). Crisp et al. (2012) note that urban self-settled refugees are more likely to survive despite little access to humanitarian assistance, due to their location outside of rural camps. In many cities, local communities of displaced people have developed in particular areas. Büscher (2012) found that national groups have settled in specific areas of Kampala, Uganda, while Grabska (2006) and Campbell (2005) highlight that displaced people gain employment from others of similar ethnic origin, demonstrating the importance of

social networks for securing livelihoods. Such strategies are necessary with high youth unemployment in areas with large numbers of refugees. Kiwan (2014) notes that whilst there has been investment in education in the Middle East, there is a mismatch with employment opportunities. Northern Africa and the Arab States have the highest rates of youth underemployment globally, 44% and 36% respectively, compared to a 20% global average (ILO, 2020b: 37).

Cultural strategies of civic integration for refugees by western governments and international organisations have been critiqued for promoting a 'depoliticised' and decontextualized citizenship (Staeheli and Nagel, 2013). However, across the MENA region youth are increasingly constructing themselves politically through street protests, social media and other forms of cultural expressions (Kiwan, 2015). Social and cultural relations are therefore important for understanding youth transitions. Further, and dependent on political, gender and cultural contexts, youth are not necessarily siloed to camps or discrete urban localities but engage in (sometimes unofficial or unsanctioned) mobility between camps and urban settlements. The protracted temporality of displacement means transition pathways are not spatially fixed, with displaced peoples' survival strategies including mobility and the social relations that exist between spaces (De Haan and Zoomers, 2006). Considering social relations across temporal and spatial dimensions are critical for understanding how youth transitions are ruptured for refugees.

## **RESEARCH CONTEXT**

The research sought to explore the complex transition experiences of young people aged 10-24

growing up in situations of protracted crisis. UNHCR (2021a: 20) indicate that a protracted refugee situation “is one in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same nationality have been in exile for five consecutive years or more in a given host country”. This formed the basis for selection of nationality groups within Ugandan and Jordan but utilised a three-year period for young people in this research due to the limited temporalities of adolescence. Both countries have a long history of providing asylum to refugees fleeing conflicts across their borders and have hosted several waves of refugee populations from neighbouring countries. They have longstanding experience of the nature of protracted crises yet, their contexts remain significantly different.

Uganda is hailed as having one of the most progressive refugee policies globally through the 2006 Refugee Act, which provides many citizenship rights to refugees including the right to work. However, the country experiences high poverty levels, impacting on living conditions and placing pressure on resources and services (Hovil and Gidron, 2018; Al-Husban and Adams, 2016). A history of conflict in Northern Uganda between 1986 and 2006, particularly between the rebel group the Lord’s Resistance Army and the Government of Uganda, contributed to extreme poverty in the region and conflict impacts on youth, including their social relations, education, employment and marriage practices (Dixon, 2021; Nutte, et al 2017; Oosterom et al 2021; Schlecht et al 2013). In Jordan, contrastingly, there have been a number of waves of refugees, with each one governed by tailored policies and differently able to access services and institutions. For example, the Palestinian refugees from 1948 were given Jordanian citizenship, while those from 1967 were not; so third and fourth generations still have refugee status (Khalidi, 2010[1997]); most refugee populations (Syrians and Iraqis) are supported by UNHCR, except

Palestinian refugees who fall under the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). As Feldman (2012) illustrates, for different waves of refugees, the status of being a refugee brings people together yet can also distance them from each other depending on whether or not they receive aid; lives are therefore shaped by the politics of humanitarianism. After over 50 years of exile, the 1967 generation that knew Palestine is disappearing; yet due to their legal status, young Palestinians are still experiencing the rupture of refugee status on their transitions to adulthood. In Uganda, participants were drawn from both camp (Nakivale Settlement) and urban settings (a low-income neighbourhood in Kampala) and from two national groups: Somali and Congolese. UNHCR (2016) figures at the time of data collection indicated these were the largest protracted refugee groups.

In Jordan, the historical and geo-political context of the region has shaped the institutional response to multiple waves of displaced populations, of which the most major groups experiencing protracted displacement are Palestinian, Iraqi and Syrian refugees. Although the focus is currently on the response to the Syrian crisis, Syrian refugees are the only group to be located in both a gated camp (Za'atari as the largest and oldest camp of the Syrian crisis) and urban (East Amman low income neighbourhood) settings. Therefore, Palestinian refugees from the Gaza Jerash Camp and Iraqi refugees from Zarqa urban area (north and north-west of Amman respectively) were included to provide different camp/urban contextual settings and the experiences of a wider range of refugee youth. In total, 505 young people were involved as research participants with diverse nationalities, locations and experiences; in order to assist in the analysis of youth transitions across contexts rather than simply the production of comparative data.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research adopted an in-depth participatory, youth-led process for data collection and analysis which is sensitive to young people's lives and changing needs. Participatory research is considered more respectful of participants but has been criticised as not always achieving the levels of empowerment initially desired (Tisdall and Punch, 2012). Further, to understand the complex processes and contextual factors that affect young refugees' transitions to adulthood, strong researcher-participant rapport is critical particularly because they have experienced social exclusion, duress and displacement (Staeheli and Hammett, 2013; van Blerk et al, 2015).

A participatory approach, coupled with youth-led collaboration, aimed to facilitate rapport and develop new ways of communicating through active engagement on young people's terms and in their places. Building on leading practice of research with youth (see Tisdall, 2017; van Blerk et al., 2015), young refugees in each setting were asked to engage in the research, undertake training, and reflect on the personal, ethical and emotional implications of becoming a youth researcher. Their involvement included input into the research design, undertaking data collection with peers, and contributing to analysis and knowledge exchange with stakeholders. After training, young people remaining interested were interviewed and sixteen youth researchers were employed, in a part-time capacity with salary, across national groups and locations with a female and male researcher in each location for each national group. Youth researchers carried out the data collection. They were supported by local researchers working for NGO/academic research partners, who were on hand in the vicinity of surveys and interviews and reachable via mobile phone if required. Debriefing took place each time a method was



completed. Ethical approval was gained from the University of Dundee and relevant institutions in each country. Youth researchers were trained in ethics and best practice.

The research process began with methods enabling a broad understanding of youth transitions in protracted crises involving many participants, subsequently narrowing to engage more in-depth techniques. A questionnaire developed using ESRI software Survey123 and administered by youth researchers using handheld tablets, gathered 258 responses in Uganda and 247 in Jordan. Following initial analysis using SPSS, 49 (Uganda) and 44 (Jordan) young people aged 15-24 from different national groups, locations, and genders participated in in-depth interviews exploring their transitions and refugee experiences. Sampling was purposeful to ensure all groups were represented, but also employed a snowballing strategy due to the hidden and transient nature of refugees, particularly in urban settings. Interviews were analysed using NVivo and coded according to transition pathways, gender and location. Workshops discussing the NVivo analysis with youth researchers resulted in the development of detailed descriptions of particular transition pathways, which were compiled into an online interactive multi-media story map for dissemination. This paper draws on the in-depth interviews, which provide the nuanced experiences of transitional rupture.

## **REFUGEE TRANSITION EXPERIENCES IN PROTRACTED CRISES**

Despite this new emergent theorising around youth's position within their own transition journeys, situations of crisis conditions have rarely been discussed (see Oosterom et al, 2021 for a recent exception on internally displaced youth in Uganda), and particularly neglected where crisis results in migration across borders (Dixon, 2021).

This research demonstrates that the lived reality of situations of protracted crisis shapes the present and the possibility of imagined futures. While youth experience education, gaining work or livelihoods and marriage/family life differently based on various markers of social difference such as gender, age, race, and social class; the data indicates that refugee status has a particular impact that is *more than* a vital conjuncture or wait period. The protracted nature of refugee status cuts hope not just in the singular dimension of hope for the future (Mains, 2012), but across temporal, spatial and social dimensions, particularly through severing of social relations and the disruptions to place and time thereby *rupturing* young refugees' real and imagined futures in a fundamental way.

This commonality of the experience of rupture came from participants across differences of gender, urban/camp settings and ethnic groups, where rupturing of social identities through discrimination is directly social, spatial and temporal; internalised loss of self-esteem through the protractedness of being a refugee. As Jean illustrates, *"it is not about religion or gender. It is all about the identity that we have. The identity we have of being refugees [...] we refugees are taken as inferior; they treat us like we are inhuman"* (Jean 23. Congolese, Kampala, Uganda).

Similarly, Harith notes how lack of an identity number (indicative of citizenship) in Jordan has implications that crosscut all aspects of young refugees' lives as transition to adulthood. The long-term nature of Harith's refugee identity, due to protracted displacement (his family became refugees in 1967) impacts this transitional journey and future life course trajectories:

*"It affected me so much as a refugee, because I don't enjoy any civil rights or any human rights. Because first of all, I don't have a national number, and this is the biggest dilemma; because this number plays a huge role. You can't do anything if you don't have a national number, you can't*

*own a house or a car; no, you can own a car but you can't own anything else, not a house nor land, and secondly (laughter) we cannot do anything, we can't work in the public sector or as drivers. We are under huge pressure, we can't study, or we can study but we can't work or apply our field of study in Jordan because we don't have a national number, so we are forced to study here and travel abroad" (Harith, 22. Palestinian, Gaza Camp).*

This paper therefore re-theorises youth transitions for young refugees as undergoing rupture: pathways are simultaneously broken by temporal, social and spatial disruption in young people's lives. We argue that their experience goes beyond the physical experience of living in a new country (migration as a critical moment), or situation in conditions restricted by poverty (where waithood occurs), but that rupture affects the construction of self-identity and aspiration at a formative life point. Having experienced this rupture, young people may not have the necessary capitals to realise their future aspirations. The research identified four key processes that impact on young refugees' transitions and help to unpack the nature of this transitional rupture: the lasting traumatic experience of displacement; the temporal effects of lives lived on a 'temporary' basis, beyond waithood (Ungruhe and Esson 2017); limits to the formation of social relations; and the institutional conditions that govern everyday life. The next sections examine these processes to illustrate how they shape the re-theorising of transitions as a rupturing for those with protracted refugee status.

### **The lasting traumatic experience of displacement**

The majority of young people had vivid memories of becoming a refugee and their journey to the host nation. Youth recall feelings of fear and isolation as they fled from Al Shabab (Somali), from

rebel activity in their villages (Congolese) or from continued military action in their towns (Syrian). They feared being caught in the crossfire and on several instances experienced violence towards themselves and their families. Particularly Congolese, but also Somali and Syrian youth, talked of losing family members due to conflict or separation along the way. Others recounted leaving loved ones behind including mothers, siblings and grandparents; and not knowing where they were, or if they were safe. Journeys included risky decision-making regarding modes of travel and direction; unable to take possessions, money or important documents with them, or losing these on the way. Young people illustrated vividly how their experiences of violence and loss had a deep effect on their psychological wellbeing and sense of self. As Shayma, a Syrian refugee in Jordan explains, the change in circumstance from being a 'normal teenager' to a refugee was dramatic:

*"My life changed drastically. I turned from being a citizen in my country to a refugee in another. [...] Suddenly, everything has changed. I am now a refugee living in a tent in the desert"* (Shayma, 18. Syrian, Za'atari).

The trauma of border crossing can have deep-rooted effect that impact on young people's future expectations and need to be accounted for (Barbalet and Wake, 2017). They no longer see realistic goals as achievable and rather lower their expectations. Both Regis and Arthur illustrate that their expectations no longer fit their current lived experience and so they need to change their imagined future to one that fits their new refugee status.

*"I am not sure if I will be the kind of person that I wanted to be in the future"* (Regis, 16. Congolese, Nakivale).

*“Being a refugee has affected my plans, I have been taken backwards [...] I turned to zero I am like a young child starting afresh” (Arthur, 18. Congolese, Kampala).*

The emotional upset experienced is also compounded through feelings of alienation from the host community. In Uganda in particular, where language was a barrier, youth talked of being unable to communicate in English as an exclusionary factor. Despite Uganda’s legal framework of rights, refugee experiences of integration were such that they felt marginalised, highlighting their experience to be a ‘partial life’.

Crossing borders was not essential for this emotional impact to manifest in young people’s lives. Palestinian youth who are third or fourth generation refugees in Jordan, also noted feeling as outsiders to host country communities. Samer outlined that he had no idea he was a refugee living in a camp until he did well in an UNRWA-run primary school and was offered a place in a Jordanian secondary school outside the camp.

While the connections across education and livelihoods are clear, the emotional trauma associated with becoming a refugee impacts all transition pathways, including on intimate relationships. Although young people give serious thought to these issues and aspire to be married and raise a family (Amira), they explained that their aspirations for family life and marriage are affected by their refugee status; feeling that they have nothing to offer a potential partner (Aude); or that it will impact on their ability to return home (Shayma).

*“Every girl dreams of stability and becoming a mother and having a house and a husband” (Amira, 15. Syrian, Za’atari).*

*“I see myself as a useless person.” (Aude, 15. Congolese, Nakivale).*

*“Others have given their children in marriage so they cannot return to Syria” (Shayma, 18. Syrian, Za’atari).*

The impact of becoming or discovering refugee status has long-lasting impacts on young people’s identities and ultimately directly impacts their future plans: socially, economically and legally. An event such as border crossing, fleeing war or discovering refugee status may be an important moment in a young person’s transition pathway; but unlike a vital juncture, protracted refugee status continues to pervade all aspects of life long after the moment is over. The deep-rooted emotional trauma of refugee status ruptures the social networks and relations within families and communities, disrupts economic opportunities and introduces new legal implications for adult life, which do not dissipate.

### **The temporariness of being a refugee**

In addition to refugees’ experiences of trauma, the temporariness of this status compounds rupture in their lives. Refugee status, by its very nature, drawn from historical perspectives of humanitarian policy and the desire of individuals to belong (Huizinga and van Hoven, 2018), positions young people as non-permanent in host nations. Even despite the increasingly protracted nature of displacement, temporariness remains central to policy and refugee expectations. When positioned alongside the ordeal of becoming a refugee, young people highlighted a keen desire to engage in further mobility, whether that be to return home or to permanently settle in another place (often the USA or Europe were mentioned). The key to this onward movement is the potential for permanency and a more fulfilled adult life, as envisioned by Nala:

*“If I leave this refugee life and reach somewhere good, I believe I can be someone good and independent and leave this life where people look down on you” (Nala, 19. Somali, Nakivale).*

The ongoing temporary state results in young refugees’ withholding investment in adult life until after onward travel, thus delaying young people’s engagement in education, livelihoods and family life in their current location, adding to feelings of hopelessness and alienation as described above. Protracted displacement results in protracted temporariness, which contributes to the rupture of transitions to adulthood. Qasim highlights how initially refugee status is seen as temporary and life in the host nation not worth investing in, yet the protracted nature of conflict in Syria extends the period of disinvestment.

*“When we came here we used to say that we were going back to Syria every week. We kept saying that we were going back and we haven’t until now. Four years and we didn’t go back” (Qasim, 18. Syrian, E. Amman).*

While experiencing waiting (Stasik et al., 2020), young refugees engage in a temporariness while investing in aspirations for a different life elsewhere, outside of their current situation in the host country. Unlike other youth who wait in African countries due to poverty and high unemployment (Stasik et al., 2020), refugees are waiting for a life elsewhere, one that is increasingly unattainable as the time-period outside of their home nation lengthens. This particular form of waiting fundamentally impacts their imagined futures and decision-making not just around employment but also education, work/livelihoods and family life, and ultimately their aspirations. Any social networks and relationships developed are considered temporary. Jamilah notes how she stopped investing in education when she became a refugee because of her expectation of resettlement:

*“I did not continue [in education] because I was hoping for a resettlement” (Jamilah, 17. Somali, Nakivale).*

The notion of temporariness is not specifically linked to a particular time-period. Young third or fourth generation Palestinians in Jordan still plan for returning to Palestine.

*“if we go back to our country, everything would be available to us, and we can do what we want without any confusion. We can secure our future” (Sana, 18. Palestinian, Jerash).*

The temporary position of refugee status, the lack of a nationality number, and all that is tied to it, demotivates youth, especially girls, from completing their education. A desire to go back to Palestine is linked to identity but also to financial security and aspirations for the future.

Intergenerational lack of economic opportunity due to their legal status has kept Palestinian refugees in Jordan (who are not Jordanian citizens) in constant poverty. Unlike Syrian refugees, who have more hope to return to Syria and sectors opening up to them in Jordan, for Palestinians the legalities of what professions and sectors they are permitted to work in has not changed for several generations. As Maysam points out:

*“We stop pursuing our education after the tenth grade because we know we are not going to be doctors or engineers. Everyone who has finished university works in olive farms, construction sites, or opens a shop. They have degrees but cannot be employed at a hospital or law firms” (Maysam, age unknown, Palestinian, Jerash).*



Others attempt to overcome temporariness with new permanency by creating new transition pathways. In these cases, young men and women noted that they were delaying the prospect of marriage because of the unsettling temporariness of their status:

*“I cannot get married when I have no peace. When I have peace, I can get married” (Dominique, 19. Congolese, Kampala).*

For others, particularly young women, early marriage has become a strategy to overcome everyday difficulties and to access resources. Progress towards reducing the number of young people married under the age of 18 has stalled, with 700,000 new young brides each year in the MENA region (Sahbani et al. 2016; UNICEF 2019). Among Syrian participants it was acknowledged that some girls married as a survival strategy, or as an attempt to create permanency either in the host community or abroad.

*“Some girls tried marriage and failed, some finished their education and travel abroad to succeed” (Natalie, 19. Palestinian, Jerash).*

The cost of temporariness can lead to frustration for young people and high-risk decision making, such as illegal working or onward migration. As Emir states, without taking such risks, it is not possible to realise any ambitions:

*“Everyone has ambitions to be the best, but to be honest, in the current situation, wishes and ambitions can’t be achieved” (Emir, 18. Palestinian, Jerash).*

This leads some to pursue more risky working conditions. For example, Jahmir’s refugee status does not allow for formal work, so he engages in unregulated informal work to support himself, with emotional consequences:

*“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, 19. Iraqi, Zarqa).*

Therefore, temporariness results in a rupture of transition pathways to adulthood, where young refugees find that they are caught in a state of ‘in-between’. They have left one life behind, their aspired pathways to adulthood disrupted, and are unable to create permanent settlement and establish new achievable aspirations. Education is interrupted and potential work opportunities are limited. Life paths involving (informal) marriage and having children are accelerated for survival reasons or postponed because of lack of financial resources. Although the reasons and outcomes may differ due to location in a camp or urban setting, with more informal opportunities in cities, and between the implications of marriage and childbearing for young men and young women; the overarching rupture of temporariness to all aspects of transition is constant. For young refugees protracted displacement is therefore a constant temporariness with no perceptible end, contributing to the notion of rupture as the extirpation of past social and cultural connections, current opportunity, and future aspiration.

### **Breaking and creating social relations in host communities**

Social relationships play a key role in young people’s transitions to adulthood; in forming family life, completing education and training, as contributing to access to work and livelihood opportunities (Evans, 2011, Bowen, 2018). Punch (2015) explains that in her research young people reacted quickly to opportunities that emerged through their social networks; opening doors to new situations but confident that families were a source of support should new relationships dissolve. For our participants, the rupture that occurs upon becoming a refugee can

reduce social and cultural networks and relational connections; either through losing relatives or leaving them behind, breaking familial sources of support.

Forming new social relationships can be problematic and, particularly in Uganda, language was a crucial factor in inhibiting opportunities. Lack of social relationships further creates suspicion and young people in both countries felt that they are viewed differently by host communities, as Nala, Hani and Haya point out:

*“Every Somali person they see they tell them that they are Al-Shabaab” (Nala, 19. Somali, Nakivale).*

*“If you are a refugee in a foreign country and you don’t know anyone here then you can’t do anything for yourself” (Hani age unknown. Somali, Kampala).*

*“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” (Haya, 16. Syrian, E. Amman).*

The fear of discrimination, or as Haya shows, the perception of it, was pervasive and not isolated to specific groups. Even in Jordan, where both Syrians and Palestinians are ethnically more similar than other groups involved in the research, it was apparent that all groups were equally stigmatised. In Uganda, the intersectionality of refugee status with gender, age and religious identity meant that Somali women felt more conspicuous.

This type of discrimination can impact on young people’s abilities to form marriage relationships. Across several of the refugee populations cultural tradition results in families making decisions on who someone can marry. Where refugees want to marry, they may be refused, as Farid points out:

*“If you propose to another girl, they would tell you that we can’t accept you because you are from Gaza camp and it’s full of bad boys” (Farid, 15. Palestinian, Jerash).*

The perception of refugee men as being “bad boys” precludes individual and social relationships and results in refugee populations being ghettoised, jeopardising the integration of refugee communities. It is supported by gender discriminatory legislation that stipulates that Jordanian women cannot pass their citizenship on to their non-Jordanian spouse and/or children, only Jordanian men can give their foreign spouses and children citizenship. Palestinian women refugees can therefore marry a Jordanian man, and their children would be Jordanian; she herself could eventually qualify for Jordanian nationality. However, a Palestinian refugee man can never change his legal status by marriage to a Jordanian woman, and worse, his children would inherit his refugee status. This discriminates against Jordanian women and ruptures refugee men’s possibilities for creating new desired transition pathways.

Discrimination, as a form of relational poverty, has implications for young people’s pathways beyond primary social connections. For example, the provision of education to refugees is often considered of poorer quality than that provided to local populations. Teachers are perceived as investing less in educating refugees, due to structural issues or the perception of refugees’ temporariness, as Yves in Uganda and Sana in Jordan illustrate:

*“The teacher who was teaching us stopped because we were poor and could not pay the money so the teacher stopped teaching us.” (Yves, 24. Congolese, Nakivale).*

*“The teachers don’t pay attention to the classes, and don’t care if anyone participates or not. A class has a minimum of 50 students.” (Sana, 16. Palestinian, Jerash).*

Social relationships are important for work and livelihoods. In Uganda, high rates of unemployment mean that young people, regardless of nationality and status, struggle to access formal work. In both sites, refugees are also limited in the types of work they can access and compete with local young people for informal work. Refugees are turned down in favour of nationals who have better social connections; and if they do embark on work or training, as Milad points out, the employer may treat them differently:

*“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” (Milad, 19. Iraqi, Zarqa).*

The stigma and discrimination accompanying refugee status creates impedes youth from being able to provide for themselves, their families, and build successful adult lives. Arthur reports that in Uganda refugees find it hard to access the same work opportunities as ‘nationals’:

*“There is a lot of discrimination here in Uganda. They look and compare us to the nationals. Good jobs are given to nationals and tiresome difficult jobs are given to us, the refugees” (Arthur, 18. Congolese, Kampala).*

Although experienced at particular moments, for example when a refugee loses out on employment, the impacts of discrimination are not temporally fixed. Rather, they are ongoing and pervasive, affecting refugees’ self-esteem and investment in work and personal relationships. This further exacerbates a lack of social connectedness; creating rupture for transitions.

### **Living through institutional and legal conditions**

The effect of institutional conditions; rules and regulations that determine rights and govern everyday life; is a final strand in the rupturing of transitions. While the institutional conditions in Uganda and Jordan differ, many of the refugees experienced similar challenges. Laws applying to refugees shape the landscape of what is possible, with youth navigating pathways to adulthood around legal frameworks. For some, like Filsan, the restrictions refugees are bound by negatively inhibit their choices.

*“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” (Filsan 18. Somali, Nakivale).*

The effects of institutional conditions on transitions can be observed by considering access to work and livelihoods. Refugee youth identified difficulties in accessing work which they could be proud of, a key concern which limits both career development and income. In Uganda, the Refugee Act 2006 guarantees refugees equal access to the labour market. However, in practice, weak economic conditions, competition with Ugandans for jobs, alongside specific barriers of language, skills and discrimination mean that young refugees are restricted to low quality or informal employment. In Jordan by comparison, labour market access is highly regulated through a patchwork of rules for different refugee groups, where refugees have no automatic right to employment without work permits. While economic conditions are stronger than in Uganda, young refugees in Jordan also have limited access to quality work, with Syrians and Iraqis relying mostly on informal employment and Gazan Palestinians prevented from working in certain professions and public sector roles, as illustrated by Adnan. Therefore, unlike young people who are ‘waiting’ for employment in contexts of high unemployment and poverty

(Stasik et al 2020); young refugees barred from certain employment have nothing to wait for, pushing them further towards precarity.

*“I am not allowed to work in anything... or as a cleaner or something” (Adnan, 17. Syrian, E. Amman).*

Institutional conditions also have a more subtle impact on how young people understand their social status and construct plans for the future. In Jordan, Nasim comments that due to legal requirements, *“I am not completely free to plan for my future” (Nasim, 20. Iraqi, Zarqa)*; while in Uganda, Fawsia felt that being a refugee meant *“not being able to achieve all the plans that I had” (Fawsia, 21. Somali, Nakivale)*. Legal status and social position define available options and the decisions that young people take in their pathways to adult life. As Emir points out, legal and institutional frameworks pervade all aspects of young refugees’ lives, further illustrating the rupture experienced by protracted refugee status, preventing or at least dissuading young people from engaging with the formal social intuitions of adulthood.

*“There is no difference between Jordanians, Palestinians, Syrians or Iraqis; we are all Muslims, but the laws are the ones affecting us” (Emir, 20. Palestinian, Jerash).*

## **RE-THEORISING YOUTH TRANSITIONS FOR REFUGEES: RUPTURE AND REALITY**

As conflict and crises in certain parts of the world are likely to persist for the foreseeable future, young people will continue to experience prolonged situations of displacement and the rupturing of their transition pathways to adulthood in a myriad of ways. Through a nuanced understanding of the transitional stories of young refugees in Uganda and Jordan, this paper has demonstrated the complexity of growing up in protracted displacement and the emotional and practical impacts

this has on young people's aspirations. Rupturing of transition pathways through refugee status is shown to have pervasive effects on all aspects of life including relationships, education, work and livelihoods, in ways that are spatially significant through location outside of a home nation; temporally undefined, and isolated where social connections are disrupted.

This paper, therefore, extends the conceptual understandings of youth transitions to adulthood as fluid, iterative and ongoing processes that are contextualised by spatial, temporal, social, political and economic situations through considering the particular effects of protracted displacement. We illustrate that youth transition is a process in which young people actively navigate pathways that are often disrupted, complex and divergent. For all young people, transitions to adulthood are contextually situated and take place over the liminal period of youth (Hopkins 2006; Thomson et al, 2004). Their pathways are also unique depending on the intersectionality of characteristics such as gender, race, sexuality, socio-economic status, and place. Life events, appearing as critical moments or vital conjunctures, further shape the complexity of transition journeys (Evans 2014; Morrow, 2013; Johnson-Hanks, 2002). However, through our analysis we demonstrate that the conditions of being a refugee create a rupture with these, albeit complex and unique, normative pathways into adulthood; where long-term decisions concerning education, work/livelihoods, and family life are carefully and deliberately navigated in order to achieve particular adult lives, even if there are twists and turns taken on that journey.

Forced cross-border migration, resulting in protracted displacement, severely disrupts plans for the future, which are *ruptured* by various underpinning spatial, temporal and social disruptions. Young people are compelled to adjust their aspirations and rebuild plans for a



successful adult life into a new constrained spatial, cultural, political and socio-economic context and over new timescales. The impact of refugee status on emotional well-being and identity, particularly where young people have encountered trauma coupled with feelings of being out of place, temporary or in-between, in a context where legal frameworks and a lack of social networks and resources restrict opportunities, means their future aspirations have been ruptured from present realities. Young refugees face structural formative challenges which physically and relationally restrict their possible pathways. For example, where humanitarian policy contains refugee populations within settlements or camps, it forces refugees into insular pathways (for example, establishing relationships and informal marriage within the camp) or risky pathways ('escaping' to other, less regulated contexts). Even in cities where there are more work opportunities, these tend to be informal and often illegal, and refugees are more likely to settle in city locations where other refugee from their national group have previously settled. Therefore, although there is a diversity of experience among refugee youth, they all experience trauma, temporariness, broken social relations, legal and institutional constraints, which together act as a rupturing event in their transitions to adulthood.

The research has shown that despite the different national and cultural contexts, young refugees share similar experiences of rupture and challenges in building successful futures. This supports recent challenges to the notion of youth transitions as linear and continuous and repositions the concept as far more complex, divergent and disrupted, fluctuating in times and spaces of precarity (Morrow, 2013; Punch, 2015).

More than a delay, period of waiting, critical moment or vital conjuncture, protracted displacement is a rupture to young peoples' transitions to adulthood. Transitions are not simply

paused or accelerated (where a pathway can be picked up where it was left off in a different location). Rather, the ordeal of displacement, the continued temporariness of their lived circumstances at a formative time in the lifecourse, limited social networks and the institutional conditions of their host country; all provoke a rupture to transitions. This rupture means that young refugees must navigate new sets of pathways with unforeseen difficulties and constraints to build anew their plans for future adult lives, reconfiguring transitional pathways that make sense of their own self within a new life trajectory.

By deepening understanding of transition pathways and the conditional factors that affect opportunity and decision making, this paper offers new insight into the ways in which refugee youth are impacted in the longer-term and also fills a vital gap in knowledge needed to target assistance to support their efforts to build adult lives. The research has shown that the status of being a refugee is indicative of a rupture with fundamental implications for young people where their displacement is protracted. Transitioning to adulthood is a time when aspirations are realised, and future lives are actioned in the present (Crivello, 2015); regarding long-term decisions around education, work/livelihoods and family life. Displacement ruptures young people's plans and specific support is required to ensure that changes to transitions are positively impacted with as little disruption as possible. Humanitarian policy and development programming must allow for young people's futures to be actioned during displacement with targeted support across all areas. Cross-sector coordinated planning between international agencies, donors and governments must involve youth in the planning for their own futures, supported by expanded psychosocial counselling and life-coaching with targeted interventions and policy that accounts for the critical period of youth and seeks to mend the rupture in their

transitions to adulthood.

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## **DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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