

How to Prevent a Lost Generation: Jobs for Refugee Youth in Jordan Our Learning

Lily Chan and Maureen Kantner, two graduate students from the Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University, reflect on the findings from their report on Employment Trends, Challenges and Opportunities for Refugees in Jordan

Before conducting our fieldwork in Jordan, we had a distinct vision of what we wanted to accomplish during our three weeks of research there: what, exactly, were the legal restrictions impacting refugee workers in Jordan, and where, exactly, were those job opportunities that fell within that legal realm? These questions seemed fairly straightforward, and we were confident in our direct approach to tackle the issue.

Yet, our first interview with UNHCR was a wake-up call to the complexity behind our research questions. There are many factors influencing where refugees can work, like education, shifting legal parameters, and logistical problems. Refugee youth have been particularly hard hit by the political crises, with interruptions to their schooling severely impacting their ability to pursue and complete their education.

Although response efforts by humanitarian agencies and the Jordanian government have recently shifted from rapid responses to a focus on more long-term opportunities and solutions, it is difficult for the government to manage the influx of almost 800,000 registered refugees while simultaneously trying to control a national unemployment rate that topped [18%](#), and that was over [37%](#) for youth specifically, in 2018. One of the efforts the Government introduced to address this issue was instituting a number of “[closed occupations](#)” that only Jordanians are allowed to work in, such as highly skilled professions and administrative roles. The goal was to provide a pathway to employment opportunities for refugees while still securing jobs and protecting the needs of Jordanian workers.

So what jobs *can* refugee youth in Jordan legally work in that will provide sustainable, long-term employment? What are the best practices for education and training programs and what is still needed to build the necessary skill sets for these targeted job opportunities?

As we sought answers to these questions, we were overwhelmed by the factor upon compounding factor that created barriers to employment for refugee youth. The application process for a work permit can be extremely expensive and time-consuming, requiring layers of bureaucratic paperwork, annual renewals and renewal fees, and typically requiring an employer to sponsor the application.

But acquiring a work permit is only one of many legal, economic, educational, and other barriers that stand in the way of refugees. During one of our focus groups, we were fortunate enough to meet a young Syrian refugee who put a number of these barriers into a concrete example for us. This Syrian refugee had passed the Tawjihi secondary exam back in Syria prior to the outbreak of the conflict. This meant that he *should* have been allowed access to a tertiary education. However, because his required documentation was in a conflict zone and inaccessible, he was unable to

provide it to Jordanian education officials. He quickly fell into informal employment, working as a cook to provide supplemental income for his family. He was lucky enough to be accepted into a vocational training school, where he entered a three-month program for pastry chefs. However, this program mainly focused on soft skills, like interview preparation and resume writing and did not assist with any hard skills or direct job-matching. Upon graduation, he quickly fell back into the informal sector because he was no more prepared for a formal job than when he started the program. He then applied and managed to obtain a scholarship for a longer pastry chef vocational training program. This two-year program was centered around extensive hard skills training and job-matching services that helped him qualify for a job as a manager at a well-renowned pastry shop in Jordan.

While the young man was eventually fortunate to get a work permit in a growing industry, many refugee youth are not so lucky. His career path took several winding turns, and he was thrown off by commonly occurring obstacles for refugee youth: an inability to access educational documents, an inability to access quality education, and a vocational training system that didn't necessarily prepare him for the workplace. The time and financial burden of navigating through work permit regulations only adds to the frustration of refugees seeking jobs.

Overall, our interviews with various stakeholders = as well as the subsequent data that we collected highlighted four opportunities to create some pathways to sustainable livelihoods for refugees in Jordan. These are:

1. **Formalizing employment** for those currently working in the informal sector.
2. Highlighting the **growing occupations** within the formal work permit process, such as food and hospitality and craftsmanship.
3. **Exploring legal opportunities for alternative forms of employment**, such as remote work or entrepreneurship.
4. **Investing in necessary support structures for refugees**, such as partnering with employers for more training programs, aligning education with livelihood opportunities and offering scholarships and funding accordingly.

With the Abdul Aziz Al Ghurair Refugee Education Fund aimed at supporting secondary, we hope that these recommendations will inform local efforts on the range of educational pathways that can lead to steady, stable livelihood opportunities for refugees. As no single agency or entity will be able to accomplish all of these recommendations, it will take a concerted, coordinated effort across agencies and platforms to work towards the shared goal of empowering refugee youth and connecting them to long-term, sustainable jobs that allow them to meaningfully support themselves and their communities.

Lily Chan and Maureen Kantner are graduate students at the NYU Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at the New York University where they completed their Master of Public Administration in Public and Nonprofit Management and Policy in 2019. This article is based on a research study on Employment Trends, Challenges and Opportunities for Refugees in Jordan that they conducted with the support of the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education.