

Human Rights of Youth: Working with and for youth in vulnerable situations including conflict, violence and insecurity

Youth Consultations | Middle East and North Africa Report

Dates: The consultation was launched with an online questionnaire to participants on 1 June, followed by two online sessions, held on 9 June and 14 June.

Participants: The consultation brought together a total of 19 participants from the Middle East and North Africa, including 10 women and 9 men. The event was facilitated by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) – Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa.

Human rights barriers and obstacles for youth and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

Young men and women from the Middle East and North Africa region identified multiple areas in which they face discrimination, including social, economic, and cultural rights, in addition to political and civil rights. Main areas of discrimination that witnessed a consensus among participants were:

- Decision making processes, particularly at the political level
- Employment
- Religion

In this light, these three areas were discussed in more detail by the participants.

Decision making processes, particularly at the political level

Youth from the MENA region relayed that political participation is impeded by multiple factors.

The first factor lies on a legal level, where laws restrict the voting age and the age for running for office. For example in Lebanon, candidates should be of the age of 25 and above. As for voters, the latter should be 21 and above.

In this light, participants relayed the issue of bullying that young candidates endure if they run for elections by older candidates. Additionally, it has been noted that young people do not often reach the parliament or even hold a place within municipalities. Further, young people belonging to political families hold more chances to enter the political life than regular candidates.

Participants also explained that older generations hold prejudice against younger generations, noting that the latter are reckless and irrational and unable to make decisions. Participants relayed that in Jordan for instance, youth have no role on the political level.

Young people also relayed that some countries stand against the youth movement and impose strong limitations on their participation. This issue was particularly witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic where military regulations had been imposed, affecting the political life. One participant indicated that only 1% of youth participate in the political life of Morocco, citing data from the Moroccan Economic, Social and Environmental Council.

Participants also highlighted the fact that young people lack the required funds that would enable them to engage in the political life. Further, young people often lack of practical experience in the latter field given the absence of programs that could prepare them to enter political fields.

Employment

Participants relayed that age holds a primary aspect when it comes to employment in the MENA region, with many young people deemed too young for certain job openings, regardless of their actual qualifications. Most of the participants who are fresh graduates noted that they are not deemed as credible candidates for the job market. Additionally, the social background plays another vital role, increasing or decreasing the chances of young people being employed, without taking into consideration a person's skills. Participants noted that some countries ban veiled women from entering certain job sectors such as security forces. Further, housing holds an impact on employment as well, given that young people living in rural areas often face more difficulties in securing a job than young people living in urban areas.

Participants also explained that the job market is changing swiftly, in a way that fresh graduates are struggling to keep up with the requirements of the market. Required skills for the job market are not included in school and university curriculums. The latter do not include practical, communication and leadership skills. Hence, these curriculums are not tailored to the needs of young people and do not prepare them to become attractive candidates for the job market.

Participants also complained that volunteerism is not accounted for as a job experience in some companies/institutions. Additionally, most internships that young people undertake are unpaid, which demotivates them. In this light, the credibility of fresh graduates is compromised.

Some participants relayed that employers take advantage of the capacity and drive of young people at work, without a proper financial compensation. Discrimination was also seen on a gender level, between men and women. Further, discrimination was witnessed when it comes to wages. Additionally, in Lebanon in particular, the economic crisis had a tremendous effect on the job market.

Finally, participants noted that refugees are not hired in the job market of the host country (e.g. Syrians and Palestinians are not always hired by Lebanese companies/managers), particularly in order to evade insurance.

Religion

Participants relayed that social norms in the MENA region impede the society's ability to separate between religion and society and place restrictions on the freedom of opinion and expression regarding religious issues.

The issue of religion intersected with the issue of employment and decision making processes in the MENA region. Young people also relayed their experience when it comes to discrimination on the basis of religion, particularly young veiled women who face tremendous difficulties in finding a job, particularly in the judiciary. Additionally, some countries in the MENA region, including Lebanon for example, adopt a sectarian system, even when it comes to employment, regardless of one person's skills, which impedes young people's capacities. Hence, belonging to a certain sect makes it more difficult to obtain a job in areas where another sect is dominant. Sectarianism is also witnessed in political life, noting that candidates are obliged to run for seats that represent specific sects.

Participants discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted young people's rights across the above three areas. In general, participants noted that young people were unable to showcase their abilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Decision making processes, particularly at the political level

Participants noted that engagement in the political field was put on hold during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some relayed that during the pandemic, youth had a role in placing the country on the road to recovery, particularly in Lebanon following the Beirut Port explosions of August 2020.

Employment

Young people were the victims of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic, given that the latter were discharged from their jobs for the benefit of older colleagues. In fact, participants highlighted the flaws in Labor laws and the insufficient protection from forced job evictions. Labor laws place limitations on young people, specifying that employees who were last recruited were the first to be discharged during the COVID-19 pandemic as per laws in place. In addition, lockdowns that were imposed by countries were not monitored, which led to an increase of such discharges. The latter discharges also caused an abundance of expertise in the job market, hence, fresh graduates stood little chances to score new jobs in the presence of such an abundance of expertise.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, youth relayed that the job market was changing fast. In fact, the youth explained that some jobs disappeared due to the pandemic, and eventually resulted in a brain drain. Young people also noted that the COVID-19 pandemic that forced the world to turn online allowed companies to explore capacities beyond the borders of their countries, and sometimes favoring foreign expertise over the local one.

Religion

Participants relayed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, some emergency measures that were imposed to combat the pandemic compromised the right to freedom of opinion and expression. Some noted the shrinking civic space for the LGBTI community. In Morocco, during the pandemic, there were attempts to out members of the LGBTI community, leading some to commit suicide.

Further, participants explained that during the COVID-19 pandemic, youth were unable to practice their freedom of religious practices by restricting prayer in mosques or churches due to the lockdown.

Recommendations and solutions to promote human rights for youth

Participants in the consultations came up with the following recommendations:

- Spread awareness on youth rights
- Work on the participation of youth in the political process
- Youth should be able to report human rights violations
- Inform and train youth on their rights
- Develop human rights standards for youth
- Include youth in public policy making
- Increase information sharing on the job market to inform youth of their career choice
- Youth should be empowered to meet the requirements of the local and global market
- Amending the laws in order to allow youth to participate at the age of 18 in the elections

- Provide support to Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), in particular youth CSOs
- Adopt national laws and international conventions that support youth rights in decision making
- OHCHR to support youth projects
- Have clear and inclusive opportunities
- Conduct periodic meetings for youth in order to discuss the latest developments related to them
- Conduct awareness campaigns targeting youth on freedom of expression and religion
- Adopt labor laws that contain training programs that companies should execute in order to train fresh graduates
- International laws should support youth employment disregarding their nationality, religion and gender

Good practice examples of youth rights advocacy

Participants discussed good practice examples of youth rights advocacy from their own experiences.

- Lebanon: Campaign to combat hate speech
- Morocco: Youth working group established for 25 years in Morocco that discusses obstacles for youth in Morocco and publishes periodic reports
- Syria: Young persons with disabilities group started a learning initiative to overcome the additional barriers they face in education and were able to obtain their baccalaureate
- Lebanon: awareness campaign for children in refugee camps on the importance of co-existence
- Lebanon: initiative to increase awareness of youth on enforced disappearance
- Lebanon: Initiative to empower Palestinian women living in Lebanon
- Syria: initiative to increase awareness of young women on sexual and reproductive health
- Jordan: initiative to include young refugees in the agricultural sector
- Palestine: empowering young people to start their own business
- Lebanon: engaging youth in dialogues to promote coexistence and challenge prejudice between communities.

According to the participants, successful actions for promoting youth rights had the following in common:

- Young people are involved in the implementation of the projects
- Guided by principles of humanitarian work
- Human-centred approach

Tips for youth rights advocacy included:

- When planning activities, choose a leading team that has experience and motivation in working in the human rights field
- Identifying the needs of youth and making sure designed activities target them with tangible results
- Setting achievable goals and adequate tools to measure them
- Be prepared and resilient to challenges such as budgetary concerns, harsh environments, and societal backlash
- Make sure the audience is open to learn and take in the information or service provided
- Distribute the resources, especially financial, in a practical way
- Highlight the different mediums through which youth can advocate for their rights (e.g. music, writing etc.)

- Increase networking between youth to connect them and facilitate their communication with national, regional, and international organizations
- Ensure that young people are involved in the implementation of the project and are the decisions makers who are providing solutions
- Ensure that young people believe in their skills and capacities to produce impact without limiting themselves due to societal standards
- Provide a safe environment for youth
- Conduct intensive research and planning when envisaging a project
- Ensure that young peer educators are communicating with youth, as it makes them more responsive to take in information and tips.
- Make sure to remove as many barriers impeding youth participation in events according to the context (e.g. covering transportation costs)
- Keep in mind that collaboration with people doing similar work will only increase the impact of the project and contribute to the implementation of the set goals

Challenges for youth rights advocacy

Participants discussed the main challenges for youth in advocating for/defending their human rights.

- Having to deal with older people instead of young people when talking and advocating about youth rights
- Transportation
- Lack of knowledge of many subjects (e.g. projects being made, like Michael Haddad - activist for young people with disabilities in Lebanon).
- Lack of knowledge on what youth rights are, what can be done if their rights are violated, tools for advocacy, etc.
- Security, social and economic situations in the country
- Non-sustainable ways of supporting young people: they teach them what their rights are but not in a sustainable and long term manner (what they can do, etc.)
- No contract or unpaid work, no health insurance, etc. when youth and fresh graduates are employed. Lack of provisions in labour law on this.
- Problematic laws or non-existent ones in relation to youth rights. Also some of the laws that support young people are not implemented. No understanding of the law for some, and also sometimes lack of confidence in the State in implementing these laws.
- Difficulty for young people to access justice and initiatives (in Syria)
- Difficulty in accessing information on rights and obligations
- Young people in Lebanon feel like they should politically or religiously be allied in order to receive any kind of support or a job and they abuse them (because of Lebanon's sectoral and religious division).
- Projects on youth rights and refugees are not sustainable. Example of a project aimed at empowering women who got killed because they started advocating for their rights

Participants identified the following as main duty bearers, noting that everything emanates from laws:

- States: they can impede young people who do not have sufficient knowledge to be able to take action and to what their rights as youth are
- The United Nations; countries have ratified international treaties

Participants discussed how youth can better be supported and empowered to advocate for their rights, and what the role of different stakeholders is.

- Collaboration between different stakeholders to recognize and implement youth rights
- More involvement of young people in the laws that contain provisions on youth rights and in brainstorming of solutions to empower young people
- Awareness raising on youth rights
- Amend the laws to better support youth rights, such as lowering the age from 21 to 18 years
- Build a safe environment for young people in order to be able to advocate for their rights

The present report summarizes key discussion points and topics raised by participants; it does not reflect the official positions of OHCHR, Education Above All or Silatech.