

# 24 UNDER 24

Insight Paper: Voices of  
Syria's Youth

May 2020

*Photo: Sojud, mother of two, aged 23*

#24under24  
#countme



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## Acknowledgements

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The Norwegian Refugee Council is an independent humanitarian organisation helping people forced to flee. NRC works in crises in 31 countries, helping to save lives and rebuild futures. NRC has been providing learning opportunities for Syrian youth, both inside Syria and throughout the Middle East since 2013.



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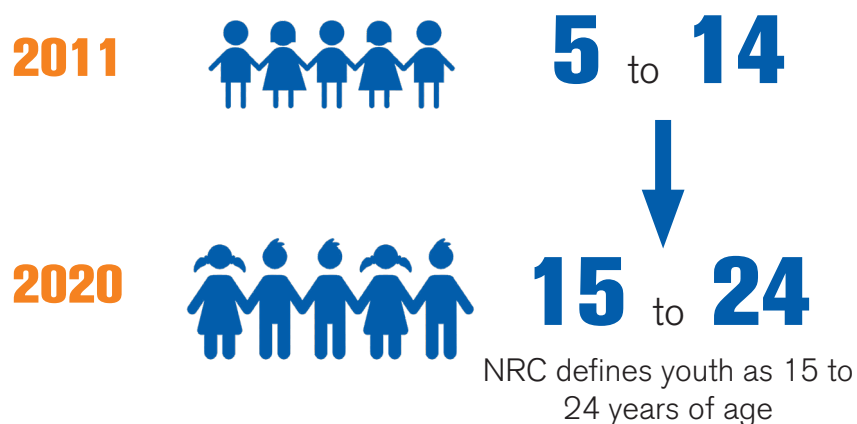
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## INTRODUCTION

“Youth who are 15 to 24 years old today, were 5 to 14 years old when the conflict in Syria began in 2011.”

The conflict in Syria has changed the trajectories of so many young people, whilst they continue to hope and dream, many of them have been forced to leave school, move away from their communities and start working at an early age. Since the beginning of the conflict youth in Syria have had to stop following their dreams and take on new responsibilities, support their families, make money and survive. Humanitarian responses often overlook the unique needs of youth. However, responses that are built on listening directly to youth to provide appropriate and timely support can help the youth of Syria to realise their dreams.

The information in this Insight Paper is compiled from interviews NRC conducted with 24 youth (ages 15 to 24) in Syria – 24 interviews with people under 24. The interviews provided an opportunity for Syria's youth to tell their stories, be heard and document the challenges they face in realizing their goals.<sup>1</sup> This paper provides insight into what Syria's youth themselves say about their needs, their wants and the future they envisage for themselves. From these, lessons are drawn and ways forward suggested for the international community to best support these youth to again, have access to relevant pathways for learning, and to confidently and safely shape their futures and those of their families and country.



<sup>1</sup> Youth interviewees were selected to capture a range of experiences, geographic locations and viewpoints, as well as perspectives from male and female youth. Interviews were conducted in Arabic by NRC staff and national NGOs. Names of interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.

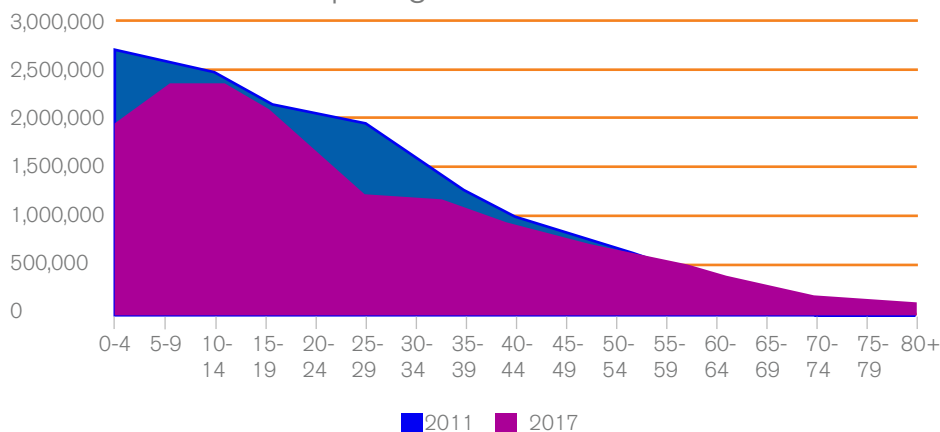
*“When things are calm in Syria again, I will be able to open a shop downtown and everyone will be back...one day. Things are difficult, but nothing is impossible.”*

**(Shahin Shahin, 19)**

Since the start of the conflict, the overall population inside Syria has declined by approximately 12 per cent due to out-migration, reduced fertility rates and, for men, higher mortality rates.<sup>2</sup> According to the 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview for Syria, there are still 6.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria, meaning that approximately one-third of the population inside the country is displaced, with movement and displacement ongoing. Roughly 3.8 million youth aged 15 to 24 remain inside Syria and comprise approximately 21 per cent of the country's population.

As the below graph reflects, between 2011 and 2017 some of Syria's demographics changed more dramatically than others, notably the age brackets between 20 and 34 years' old which decreased by 26 per cent over the period. Although, during that timeframe, the youth population reduced dramatically by nearly 400,000 people, it still represented nearly the same percentage of the overall population inside Syria in 2017 (21 per cent) as it did during 2011 (20 per cent), indicating that the relative proportion of youth within the total population remained constant, despite the decrease in the overall size of the population. Similarly, even with the number of adolescents (15 to 19) remaining steady across the period, before the conflict this had been a growing demographic, again highlighting the breadth of the youth population bracket notwithstanding the conflict. A 2019 World Bank paper notes that the conflict has pushed younger people away from Syria disproportionately to other age brackets, meaning that a large proportion of Syrian youth have been pushed into neighbouring countries and are now uncertain of their futures and whether they will ever return home.

Population changes in Syria  
comparing 2011 and 2017



Prior to the conflict, Syrian education systems had made significant improvements in educational attainment for males and females in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Nine years of conflict have seen the national education system and duty-bearers struggle to consistently provide quality, safe and accessible education to children and youth across Syria. Host communities have not been able to absorb the influx of IDPs into schools or adequately provide a protective environment in which IDP and host community children can gain an education. School enrolment has drastically declined, as have Grade nine and Grade 12 exam passing and completion rates. There is a significant lack of qualified teachers and an estimated one in three schools are damaged or destroyed, while others are used for purposes not related to education such as shelter for displaced persons.<sup>3</sup>



Many displaced youth lack the documentation (government-accredited certificates of completion and achievement) required to prove their educational attainments from both before, and during, displacement. Due to shifting lines of control in many parts of the country and often multiple displacements, a significant proportion of Syrian youth have had to attempt one or more different curricula and sets of exams<sup>4</sup> in the course of their learning, with the curricula they previously studied often not being recognized in the new location. Even students who have stayed within the same governorate or city, suffer from changing curricula when lines of control shift from one actor to another, and checkpoints regularly inhibit students from continuing their education or attending exams.

None of the displaced youth interviewed for this report felt that they will be able to return to their home now or in the future. Reasons for this include: their homes having been destroyed or fears for their own safety or for a member of their

<sup>3</sup> Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 pg. 61.

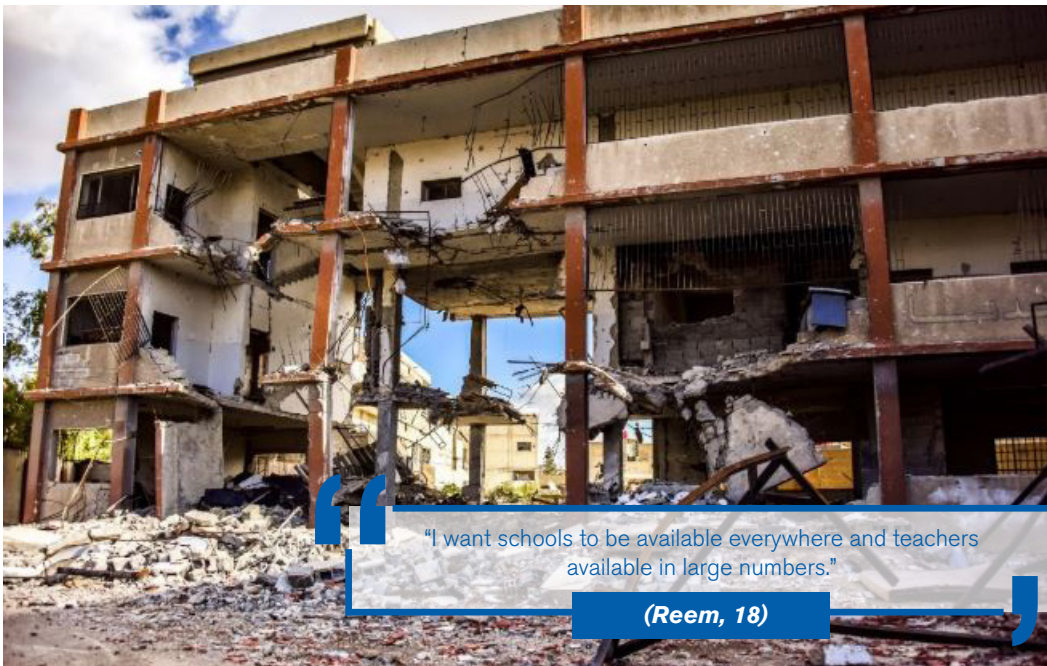
<sup>4</sup> Five different curricula are currently taught in Syria, four of which are in non-government controlled areas.



family. Additionally, the 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview for Syria indicates that schools in returnee areas are similarly unable to cope with the demand for education.<sup>5</sup> The continued burden on schools and systems in this protracted displacement context requires sustained humanitarian assistance and longer-term investment, at multiple levels.

*“When I was in Grade nine, during class we heard the sound of a warplane and my school was bombed. A group of students died and some students were injured by the shattered glass. After the incident I was in bad shape mentally and I became afraid to go to school.”*

**(Sham, 19)**



*“I want schools to be available everywhere and teachers available in large numbers.”*

**(Reem, 18)**

*“My school had two shifts. I used to go to the afternoon shift. I used to wake up at 5 a.m. and go to work until noon, then to school. I used to be late most of the time. I was working in a sewing workshop, working to support my family financially. The work affected my life and my relationships with my friends. Because of my absence, they started ignoring me. And because I was tired after work, I started neglecting my homework and my lessons.”*

**(Khaled, 19)**

<sup>5</sup> OCHA, 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) for Syria, March 2019

The conflict has increasingly forced young people to assume adult responsibilities due to the inability of households to meet basic needs. Instability continues to underpin crippling levels of poverty across the country, with 87 per cent of the population living below the poverty line and unemployment at 55 per cent.<sup>6</sup> To respond to these pressures, youth are regularly forced to leave school early because the family cannot afford school costs (such as transportation, uniforms and fees), and to earn money to support their families. Early and forced marriage are increasingly common with families reporting that female youth are often married early to reduce the financial burden and responsibility on families, and 'to keep them safe'.<sup>7</sup> According to a recent World Bank report, "The share of marriages among female minors is reported to have surged from 7 per cent in 2011 to around 30 per cent in 2015, with an estimated 60 per cent of child marriages going unreported".<sup>8</sup> Additionally, young men face the prospect of mandatory military conscription or threat of detention, with those avoiding conscription or detention reporting limited mobility that forces them to drop out of learning and miss out on work opportunities.

*"The crisis has affected all the youth including me. We have the feeling as if we are lost. It has affected our personality, our feelings. We don't know any more what we should do in our life. We don't have a goal."*

**(Watan, 17)**



*"With our low financial status, along with displacement and me leaving school, my mother and my step-father forced me to get married. I tried to tell my mother that I didn't want to get married but she used to beat me a lot until I said yes, at 11 years old."*

**(Soaad, 20)**

When youth do not access their right to learn and cannot complete recognized learning opportunities, this negatively impacts both future employment options and earning potential. Compared to the overall Syrian unemployment rate, youth unemployment is significantly higher. Female youth reflect the highest rate of unemployment with 84 per cent unemployed,

6 OCHA, 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) for Syria, March 2019.

7 Inter-sector findings: Humanitarian Planning Figures, IDPs and MSNA Findings; OCHA September 2017.

8 The World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, 2019.



and an already low labour force participation rate.<sup>9</sup> For youth who complete their formal education, there remains a mismatch between the skills taught in school and the demands of the labour market. A UNICEF enquiry into the impact and cost of students forced out of education reveals that leaving school early significantly reduces lifetime earnings for males and even more so for females. It will also result in significant economic losses for the Syrian economy as a whole.

To inform this Insight Paper, youth interviewees were asked a range of questions including, “When you were growing up, what was your dream job?”. Some of their responses are compared with what the youth are actually doing now in the coming pages. This highlights their lost opportunities and the overwhelmingly unskilled nature of their current vocations. Many youth interviewees are married or widowed, and some have children. Most of those not employed are actively looking for work, yet are currently homebound, reportedly carrying out ‘home duties’.

*“This is the reality. Deep inside I wish to be so many things: a driver, a teacher... But financially I can’t. I see things I want but I can’t get. I wish to be a football player. I joined a club and my family started questioning me: ‘Why do you play football? You should instead find a job and support the family.’ Then I stopped going and went back to work.”*

**(Shahin Shahin, 19)**



9 The World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, 2019

CURRENT VOCATION	<div>Tailoring</div>	<div>Studying</div>	<div>Tailoring</div>	<div>Home Duties</div>
Name	Reem	Khaled	Farah	Ahlam
Sex	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>
DREAM VOCATION	<div>An Arabic teacher</div>	<div>I used to dream of becoming a teacher like my father, but now I want to be an engineer.</div>	<div>An English language translator.</div>	<div>A lawyer, to protect human rights.</div>
	<div>Home Duties</div>	<div>Home Duties</div>	<div>Tailoring</div>	<div>Home Duties</div>
	Rema	Soaad	Yasmin	Sojud
	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>
	<div>A lawyer, with the power to help vulnerable people.</div>	<div>I wish I could become a paediatrician because I love children.</div>	<div>I wanted to be a doctor because I like to serve vulnerable people in need of care.</div>	<div>A nurse. I wanted to learn nursing to help people. It's a great feeling when you can help someone in need.</div>
	<div>Home duties and weaving handwork</div>	<div>Looking for a job</div>	<div>Nurse in health clinic</div>	<div>Barber/hairstyling</div>
	Hala	Watan	Eman	Mahmoud
	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>
	<div>I wish I could become a doctor</div>	<div>A psychologist.</div>	<div>A nurse.</div>	<div>I wanted to continue my education and become an engineer.</div>
	<div>Home Duties</div>	<div>Home Duties</div>	<div>Home duties and studying to be a teacher</div>	
	Salma	Sami	Sham	
	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	
	<div>A secretary.</div>	<div>I wish I could become a photographer. I love photography.</div>	<div>I wish I could become an architect.</div>	

10 Names of interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.

## VOICES OF YOUTH

NRC interviewed 24 youth in Syria to inform programming and this Insight Paper.<sup>11</sup> The interviews provided the opportunity for Syria's youth to tell their stories and to document the challenges they face in realizing their goals.<sup>12</sup> Below are some of the key moments and stories they shared, spanning their needs and wants, and the futures they envisage for themselves. The stories demonstrate the complex and compound challenges youth have faced over the past nine years, especially their repeated attempts to remain in learning, engage in their communities, and keep themselves and their families safe. These stories highlight the psychosocial traumas the youth continue to suffer in protracted conflict and displacement. They also highlight gender-related issues, especially early marriage and safety concerns for female youth. For male youth, expectations of them to provide financially for their families as well as the threat of military conscription or detention forces them to stay home and therefore limit their opportunities to learn, socialise and be safe.



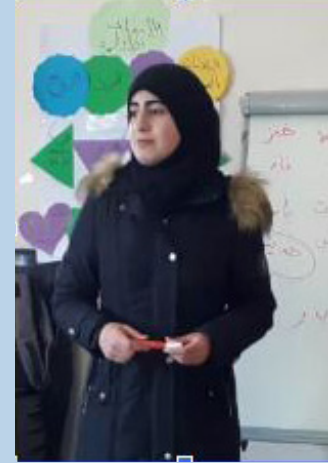
<sup>11</sup> Names of youth were changed to protect identities.

<sup>12</sup> Youth interviewees were selected to capture a range of experiences, geographic locations and viewpoints, as well as perspectives from male and female youth. Names of interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.

### Yara, 19 years old

*"The clashes between [various forces<sup>13</sup>] over controlling neighbourhoods caused schools to close and we lost safety in the streets which was accompanied with mortar shells. I left my school and my home and moved to another neighbourhood... There were no services, and it was very hard to go to school considering that there was no school nearby and the streets weren't safe. I spent a whole year with no education.*

*"Due to the conflict, [the new neighbourhood] suffered from a lack of electricity and water, even food. The people there found limited alternatives. They used generators to supply two to three amps for each house for a few hours a day, which was very expensive. For water, they dug wells in the streets where they had to drink salty water, not to mention the lack of food and its high prices".*



*"Under these circumstances, a school for girls was opened, for Grades 9 to 12 only, due to the low number of students. I completed Grade nine, trying to catch up after one year out of school. During Grade 10, while still living in this neighbourhood, the shelling in civilian areas increased. A siege was imposed over areas of the city with the aim of destroying it..."*

*"My school was bombed and several students were injured. The school closed. I was forced to go to school in [another neighbourhood], which is three kilometres from my house. The school was a basement and we suffered from a lack of qualified teachers. One of the teachers did not have a college degree and one of them was a pharmacist. There was a lack of textbooks due to the besiegement. The route to school was not safe. Most of my classmates dropped out of school due to the aerial bombardment. In the end, I didn't finish Grade 12 because the road was closed and some teachers got injured."*

As the siege and clashes intensified, Yara left the city with her family, leaving everything behind. They moved to a camp for IDPs. There was a school in a village neighbouring the camp where Yara tried again to complete her formal education.

"It was a long way to the school across fields. I used to come back to the camp at night. The people of the village and the camp didn't like the idea of girls leaving during the night and they talked about the ones who did and harassed me. The students and the teachers of the schools also looked down on me for being an IDP. In the end, the camp became crowded due to the increased numbers of IDPs and we were forced out. We moved back to the village where my school was.

**"I've since left school to work and help my younger brother in a hairdressing shop in the village where we took refuge after the displacement. The people in this village have a good life and don't think of others who are suffering in [my old city]. They are living in paradise compared to us. I decided to leave school to work because of the harassment in the school and the mockery of teachers towards IDPs. The students of the village aren't at risk of losing their right to education and they don't care much about learning. The teachers notice this, which makes the teachers even more aggressive towards IDPs. They started treating me like I wasn't there, despite my interest in education."**

Yara now works for a Syrian humanitarian organisation and facilitates first aid training. She also volunteers, providing lessons to students who have left school and encourages them to continue their education. Her own educational future is uncertain. Like countless IDPs, Yara has lost her documentation proving what formal education levels she has completed. The changes of curricula in different locations where she attended school also complicates her ability to prove her own achievement.

<sup>13</sup> The names of places and armed actors have been omitted, and indicated as such by [parentheses], in order to present an objective picture in the stories. One exception to this is the name of ISIS, which has remained in the text because the conservatism of the group is relevant to the story being shared.

### Sami, 19 years old

Sami described the difficult situation in his village, as control of the area shifted between various armed groups. Sami was forced to leave school in 2017 when his school was destroyed and students lost their lives. He described the complications of the various armed actors vying for control of his village at the same time, which eventually led him to be displaced with his family. **Although students like Sami dream of returning home, he is unable to return home due to the fear of being conscripted or of being wrongfully accused of affiliation with one of the armed actors that previously controlled his village.**

Throughout the conflict, Sami has felt increasingly disconnected from his community: *"Community means nothing to me because the community has not provided me with any comfort and safety."*



### Hala, 24 years old

After Hala completed Grade 12, she started studying economics in college. Each day she had to travel from her rural village to the city to attend classes. Transportation became an obstacle due to violence, checkpoints and harassment. Eventually she moved to an apartment in the city with her sister and three other students in order to continue studying.

*"I packed all of my things and I lived in a rented house in [the city] where I could keep going to college. I couldn't see my family for about five months. Then the clashes and the shelling reached the city and I couldn't go to college nor back to [my village] where my family was.*

***After I heard that my family was displaced to [another governorate] due to the bombardment, I left [the city] and went to stay with my family. They prevented me from going back to [the city] fearing for my life—from being kidnapped or getting hurt in the clashes, so I didn't finish my first year of college."***

Eventually, Hala went to Turkey with her mother and sisters where they worked for nine months on a farm before returning to Syria. Hala's siblings were also forced to leave school. One brother worked for a time in Lebanon before returning to Syria where he was later killed in the conflict. Another brother completed school in Lebanon for Arabic Literature. When he returned to Syria, he was not able to find a job because his qualifications were recognized by Lebanese authorities, but not recognized in Syria. He now lives with Hala's mother and younger sisters, working wherever and whenever opportunities are available.





### Maya, 19 years old

Maya is determined to be a medical doctor. She has had this goal since she was a child, a wish of her mother who is now deceased. However, since Grade six, Maya has had to stop and start formal schooling continually, often moving houses to stay with family when fighting in her area intensified.

*"We were in class when my school was bombed. One student was injured because we were in the basement of the school. After this hit, most of the students dropped out of school. Only 25 students kept going from a total number of 350 students."*

Although determined, Maya has suffered from changes in curricula introduced by each actor that took control of her city. Maya needs a high Grade 12 exam score to study medicine as she hopes, but she has faced difficulty completing the exams. **In addition to the stress of school, Maya feels the weight of the conflict on her shoulders. Her family has been separated and their house destroyed. She lost her mother during this period as well. "It caused me to study grade 12 for the third time. This has affected me psychologically. I lost my enthusiasm to study like before. Every time I open a book, the sad memories come back."**

### Ahlam, 20 years old

**Ahlam is a widow who left formal education at age 15 when the Islamic State (IS) group entered her village and forced girls out of schools. She was married shortly after. "My life turned upside down."**

Ahlam's husband was killed by a bomb that landed on the grocery store where he worked. Ahlam's house was bombed shortly after, leaving her and her youngest daughter seriously injured. Ahlam and her family were not able to get appropriate medical attention for many months because the IS would not allow people to leave the area. After considerable time, Ahlam and her parents were able to move from the IS-controlled area with Ahlam's two girls and get medical attention.

Ahlam said that only her family supported her during these difficult years and feels that the "community" did not provide her with "any comfort and safety". She felt "desperate" and said, **"I want to feel safe and secure."**



### Soaad, 20 years old

When Soaad was growing up, she wanted to be a paediatrician because she loves children. When she was in grade 7, her house was destroyed, and following this, her father was killed as a result of the conflict the family no longer felt safe and moved to another governorate. *"After we moved and the death of my father, my mother became a widow, which is not socially acceptable for a woman. My mother was forced to marry my cousin (the son of my father's brother). I didn't accept the idea of her getting married and him taking my father's place. My mother married him to support us and be the provider. Since then, my life has changed as a result of the beating and the pain I have endured from them both. My mother didn't have any other choice. He also hit her if she defended me. I couldn't adjust to this new life, unlike my younger brothers."*

*"With our low financial status, along with the displacement and me leaving school, my mother and my step-father forced me to get married. I tried to tell my mother that I didn't want to get married but she used to beat me a lot until I said yes, at eleven years old. When my fiancé used to visit us, I told him 'I don't want to marry you'. He told my mother and she used to beat me after he left. This situation continued for a year and a half. My fiancé was 18 years old at the time. Every time I tried to say 'no', [my mother] hit me and said that this is fate and there is no escape from it."*

Eventually the engagement was called off and the family was displaced again to another new governorate. **"We lived there for a while and my younger brothers started going to school. I wanted to go too but my mother and her husband didn't allow me to go because I am a young girl, and young girls shouldn't leave the house. After three months, I was forced to be engaged again to a 35-year-old man. He was divorced and had children. My mother liked him because he had money, unlike us. We were poor."**

When Soaad was 13 years old, her mother and stepfather coerced her to marry a divorced, older man. "I wasn't a wife. I was a maid for him and his kids. He took away my freedom and favoured his children at the expense of my rights." After a year, Soaad's mother moved yet again and the family has not been in touch with Soaad since. Soaad has a sister who was also forced to marry early. She lives in Turkey and is mistreated by her husband, isolated in a foreign country.

Soaad gave birth to two children, after which her husband remarried his ex-wife (in addition to Soaad). Soaad now lives with her husband, their two children, his ex-wife and the children of his ex-wife. Her husband is not employed. Their financial situation is dire, and they borrow money to make ends meet. Soaad is often prevented from leaving the house or from furthering her education. She still suffers from physical abuse. They have since been displaced again to a camp. Soaad hungers for education and the chance to work.

***"I need my husband and community to accept the idea that I am a mother who wants to complete my education. And I need sufficient money to complete my education and have the educational qualification to secure a job."***

Soaad has been able to attend short trainings with a local organisation. The connection she has felt being a part of such trainings, left her feeling less isolated and more optimistic about her future. Soaad describes her idea of a positive future: *"Leaving my married life and living with my children. Improving my ability to build a new life free of suffering. An independent life free from fights and beating, with me engaging in work to provide for my children, with stability away from war."*

### Mustafa, 24 years old

"I don't have a home anymore after the bombing of our village. I want things to go back to the way they were, me back in my house, and people having normal lives. I want to see young people going to school and college, mothers raising their children and fathers able to provide for their families.

**"Unfortunately, society is disintegrating and doesn't support its own members. The only support we have is from our families. Our families have become the only ones who care about us. Our families help us as much as they can and, if they can't, at least they support us morally."**



### Shahin Shahin, 19 years old

Shahin Shahin was born in 2000, the youngest of eight children. He describes his primary school: *"It was very beautiful. I used to love school and in primary school, I was among the top students. Even in Grades seven, eight and nine, I was among the top students."* Shahin Shahin admired his teachers. *"All of them were loveable."* He describes how the teachers explained lessons clearly in a way that helped the students genuinely learn.

Shahin Shahin passed his Grade nine exam but was forced to stop attending formal school in Grade ten. *"Unfortunately, due to the bad financial situation, the war and the crisis, I had to drop out of school."* The principal of his school and many teachers have since left the area, often to foreign countries. Shahin Shahin's friends were also forced to leave formal education. *"Nobody continued their education. Some are in Turkey, others in Lebanon, Germany and Switzerland. It's rare to find someone who stayed here."*



Shahin Shahin, his family and wider community have been greatly impacted by forced conscription. Shahin Shahin's brother was conscripted. *"He was in his third year of college so had his conscription deferred. Then a conflict happened in [the area], and they immediately took him to self-defence. We tried so hard to get him out to at least finish his studies and even paid money till we succeeded."*

**During the conflict, Shahin Shahin has been forced to work wherever he can at unskilled manual jobs in restaurants, at construction sites and elsewhere, earning only 1,000 to 3,000 Syrian pounds per day (less than USD 2 to 6 per day). Given the chance in the future, Shahin Shahin would like to become a teacher or a lawyer.**

Shahin Shahin has since started studying barbering through a vocational programme supported by NRC. He now works at a barbershop with his cousins. Once he receives his 'barber kit' through the programme, he hopes to open his own shop in the city's downtown area where there will be more demand for his services. *"I'm single. I need to earn well, establish myself, and then get married. I would love to get married but I cannot now."*

### Salma, 21 years old

*"I'm Salma, I am 21 years old. I haven't completed my education since we left our house seven years ago. Nowadays, after all these years, we have settled into a new house, which makes me rethink my future. What can I do?"*

*"There are many youth like me. We are imprisoned; we cannot go out. We lost our education and we would like a chance to work. I'm 21 years old and, until now, I don't know my own goal or what I can do. I have already lost seven years. I wish I could participate in a training or do something that would be useful to build my future."*

***"I hope for all the children, youth and for myself to be able to have more opportunities and to have the right to build a better future for ourselves and for our society. If each young person learns just one thing that benefits our society, we will be able to rebuild our country again."***

### Mutaz, 20 years old

Mutaz is 20 years old and left school four years ago. He wanted to be an English teacher when he was younger. Although he completed Grade eight, he does not have the documentation to prove it. When he and his family moved to another village near his home, their financial situation deteriorated and the schools in the new village lacked teachers, preventing him from returning to school.

Through vocational training provided by NRC, Mutaz is now making an income working as a barber in his community and describes his situation today as "financially stable".



When asked what resources are needed for youth in terms of education or skills leading to employment, Mutaz says, ***"The youth play an important role in changing society and advancing it. We need job opportunities and training qualifications. I play a role in serving my community by providing barbering."***

### Eman, 20 years old

*"Many girls like me have a conservative family and my family became more difficult after this crisis." Eman left school when she was 14 years old and was married shortly after. Her husband died in the conflict, leaving Eman to provide for their children. Eman now attends vocational training organised by NRC.*

***"I think before doing any vocational training we should have training that focuses on how to believe in ourselves, strengthen ourselves and plan for our futures. Trainings should raise our self-confidence to be able to solve our own problems. After that we need vocational training to find job opportunities."***

*"I participated in a training course organised by NRC. I learned a lot of new things that have increased my self-esteem. I have gained the power and the bravery to ask for a job. I have finished this training full of confidence in myself. I was certain that I would find a job. Because of that I kept looking and, in the end, I found it."* Eman is now a nurse who works in a clinic.

### Yousef, 20 years old

Yousef, father of one, was 12 years old when the Syria crisis started. He left school when he was 13 years old because his family could not afford the expense. Instead of going to school, he took daily work on farms and construction projects. In 2016, he travelled to Lebanon but returned to Syria after six months because of the difficulties he faced as a Syrian in Lebanon. Syrians in Lebanon, are not formally recognized as refugees, they cannot work, often facing harassment and detention if they do. Upon his return to Syria, he worked in various labour-intensive jobs on farms and in factories. At these jobs, Yousef was usually paid only 1,000 Syrian pounds per day (less than USD 2 per day), working morning until evening.

*"All people are facing conscription which is one of the obstacles of finding a job opportunity because most people cannot move and access job opportunities. Someone may come and tell you that there is a job in another area, but you cannot go there because of checkpoints. There are people wanted for military conscription and they cannot go out of their houses."*

*"Then one day I learned of an opportunity from my friends via WhatsApp that a vocational training centre was opened in [my area]. I came to the training with the intention of learning a vocation but, in the end, I gained not only barbering skills but also life skills and small business skills as well."*

***"Before the training, I thought I knew nothing about life; I knew no profession, no vocation, but now after graduation I have my own vocation. Previously, I lacked the ability to engage with people, but now I have become a different person. I communicate with others, respect them, and they respect me."***

Today Yousef has his own barbershop 'full of customers'. He now earns between 20,000 and 35,000 Syrian pounds each day (USD 39 to 68), enough to support himself, his wife and their young child. Yousef believes that his future is more secure as a result of his vocational training and the opportunities it has presented. He says he does not have any more fears for the future.

### Sojud, 23 years old

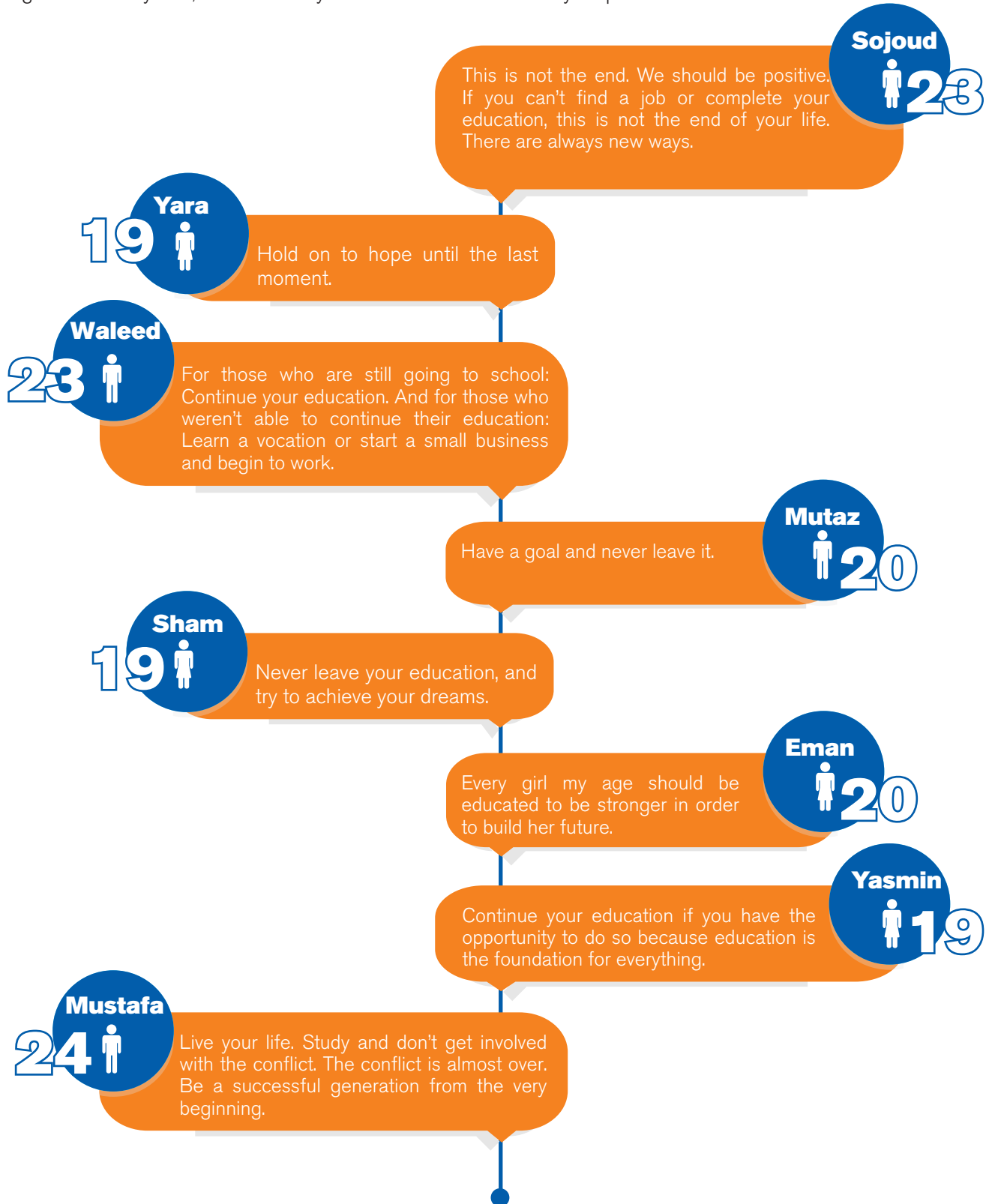
Sojud (photo front cover), mother of two, emphasizes the need for educational opportunities for parents, *"to have flexible opportunities that can allow the chance to manage both raising children and completing study or work."*

*"Through the NRC training I have done, I proved my skills and learned new things. [It was] a very good step that could support me to find a job, especially as we get a certificate. It's a nice feeling. It is like I did something good and I can share this experience to help my community and my family and, even more, to help myself to be able to help others. **It's proof that I am still here and I have the power to do things.**"*



## Youth Messages for the Future

At the end of each interview, youth were asked, 'What advice would you give to the next generation of youth, to ensure they achieve their dreams?' They responded:



## Lessons Learned

Humanitarian responses in a protracted conflict are different from those needed in an acute, emergency setting. Nine years of conflict in Syria requires continued humanitarian services, which address both the immediate protection needs of youth as well as their unique longer-term developmental needs, especially for education, safe employment and community engagement. Despite the considerable efforts which have been undertaken to ensure that the children of Syria do not become the lost generation in the region, the plight of Syrian youth has received limited attention and been less prioritised by the international community. Humanitarian programmes for children and for adults are well established but, as youth straddle the developmental bridge between childhood and adulthood, their unique needs are often overlooked and youth programming is consequently under-funded. Youth implore us to #countme to ensure that they receive adequate services and opportunities relevant to their unique needs. (Youth in Syria are often challenging to identify as data collected is not disaggregated to include 15 to 24 year olds. Data needs to be disaggregated to ensure that youth can be both consulted, targeted and given an opportunity to actively contribute to humanitarian responses).

The stories in previous pages capture some unique challenges for youth, and some common suggestions for solutions. Despite the best intentions and commitment of young people in accessing education pathways, safe employment and meaningful engagement in their communities, the barriers often seem insurmountable. The challenges for this demographic in particular are overwhelmingly complex, and hence require comprehensive, multi-faceted solutions.

In seeking solutions, a consistent message from youth is that they long to be **listened to** and to be **active in designing their own solutions**. Youth consistently tell us that they want to be involved in **identifying their needs, their role** in Syrian society and **their potential** to positively contribute to their communities, wherever they end up living. They want to be regarded as **key contributors** to the humanitarian response in their own country.

Youth require **targeted and tailored services** to meet their specific needs, not as a 'cross-cutting issue' but as **a legitimate demographic** in their own right. Youth in Syria want to be the **drivers of the futures they dream** of and to be **leaders in their communities**. In actively improving their futures, youth consistently highlight the need for **opportunities for skill-building** and for **engaging in both education and employment as well as community, leadership and relationship building**. They want **services which plug them into learning, reconnect** them with their peers and foster their positive roles in their communities. They want **recognition and certification** of their learning and qualifications, and they want resources to be able to create their own opportunities. They want **safe spaces** in which to interact with their peers and to work on their **psychosocial health and self-confidence**.

*"The youth were disappointed at the start of the crisis but, nowadays, the security and safety situation in Syria has started to improve. This has led the youth to think about their futures, which have been forgotten through the crisis. Some of them have started thinking about completing their education."*

**(Noor, 19)**

*"I would like to build a good future for my children, to make up for their father being lost. Because of that I must be strong enough to build their future through my education and work."*

**(Rema, 19)**

**Female youth** want and need to be **supported by their families and communities to participate in learning and employment opportunities**, and young mothers need programmes, which will allow them **flexibility to meet all of their family responsibilities** while at the same time **invest in their own growth**.

Youth must secure **dignified employment, protection, security and mobility**. Although the labour market in Syria has decreased as a result of the conflict, there will soon be a growing number of jobs again as the country slowly recovers. The potential to **equip young people with the capacities that are in demand in the labour market** is significant. Youth are open to **vocational skill building through alternate pathways such as apprenticeships, volunteering, or technical and vocational education**.

Despite these clear lessons learned, youth programming is often **under-resourced** and focused, **not on what youth want** to do such as finish school and continue to tertiary education in a field they are passionate about, but rather **on what they seemingly have to do**, often focused on developing skills for daily labour which can result in the acceptance of low-paid work to support their families, limiting opportunities for future skill development. Youth programming in humanitarian contexts should adopt a **positive youth development perspective** to mobilise the potential inherent in this subset of the population. **Programming must seek to transform**, not only the **youth, their families and communities**, but also the **systems, governments and workplaces** in which they function, to ensure that youth are **safe and empowered** within these domains to reach their potential.

The youth of Syria need, and want, **pathways** that provide them with the **knowledge, skills, attitudes and support** required to **build a new future**, not only now when they are focussed on survival, but also in the decades to come when they can **stop doing what they have to do** and can start doing **what they have dreamed of**.

*"The youth play an important role in changing society and advancing it. We need job opportunities and training qualifications. I play a role in serving my community by providing barbering."*

**(Mutaz, 20)**

## Ways Forward

In light of these lessons, there are actions we can take to help ensure that the situation for youth inside Syria improves. To help address some of the challenges to this, international donors and humanitarian aid agencies should consider the ways forward recommended below:

1. **Insist that all data collection and reporting which informs decision-making is disaggregated with a bracket for 15 to 24 year olds.** Ensure that youth are considered as a discrete category with unique and complex needs to be addressed. #countme
2. **Consult youth directly to inform the design of youth programmes.** Ensure the specific needs and voices of young people in Syria are highlighted when decisions affecting them and their futures are being made.
3. **Acknowledge that youth have significant potential to contribute meaningfully to the creation of a stable and peaceful Syria.** Fund and implement actions built on a premise of the positive potential of young people and commit to supporting youth throughout all phases of a response, including in rebuilding and recovery, wherever they end up living.
4. **Insist that improvement in youth well-being is a targeted outcome of all youth programming, alongside skill building.** Ensure that psychosocial support services and referral pathways to youth-focused protection services are mainstreamed and integrated across all programming.
5. **For youth who wish to return to education, provide safe and supportive pathways to formal and non-formal education, ensuring certification or due recognition.** For youth who have been excluded from learning, provide flexible and innovative support especially to overcome challenges faced as a result of early or forced marriage, being a young mother, being the female head of household, or the demands of being financially responsible for a family.
6. **For youth who wish to work, ensure that livelihood interventions targeting youth are responsive to labour market needs and demands to ensure maximum employability.** Provide opportunities for new learning pathways such as apprenticeships, technical and vocation education.
7. **When youth programmes do not comprehensively address early marriage, form multi-sectoral partnerships to be able to offer the range of services and support to young women at risk of early marriage.** In particular, recognize and further support the work that community-based organizations in Syria are already doing to address these issues.
8. **Ensure that programming seeks to transform, not only the youth, their families and communities, but also the systems, governments and workplaces in which they function,** to ensure that youth are safe and empowered within these domains, to reach their full potential.

“*I’m one of the people who left their school and education to support their families. There was no time to learn.*”

**(Basem, 24)**





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