



# Syria's next generation: youth un/employment, education, and exclusion

Elizabeth S. Buckner

*School of Education, Stanford University, Stanford, California, USA, and*

Khuloud Saba

*Syrian Trust for Development, Damascus, Syria*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine the educational and employment opportunities of Syrian youth. It examines findings from a number of nation-wide surveys of Syrian youth to investigate the educational and labor market conditions Syrian youth face amidst economic and social changes.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study summarizes numerous nation-wide surveys conducted by Syrian and foreign organizations concerning the employment and educational opportunities of Syrian youth and their attitudes to their future opportunities and other social and economic issues.

**Findings** – The study finds that class gender and regional background significantly impact the educational and employment opportunities available to Syrian youth. It also finds that Syrian youth express real concerns about their living conditions and future opportunities.

**Practical implications** – The study argues that future research on Syrian youth must disaggregate findings by background and demographic characteristics. It also argues that more research is needed to understand how youth perceive recent economic and employment changes, including an emphasis on identifying risk factors for marginalization and social and economic exclusion.

**Originality/value** – This study summarizes findings from the newest and most comprehensive nation-wide surveys on youth in Syria. Such is often available in Arabic, in hard copy, and to researchers in Syria only. Scholars of the contemporary Middle East and policymakers directly invested in the fates of Syrian youth have a very real need for detailed and current research on youth in Syria.

**Keywords** Syria, Youth, Education, Unemployment, Labour market, Economic change

**Paper type** Research paper

## I. Introduction

In 2000, after nearly five decades of state-led development, Syria instituted a number of ambitious economic and educational reforms as part of its transition to a social market economy. By decreasing dependence on the public sector, growing the private sector, and expanding access to higher education, these reforms are changing the nature of the experiences and opportunities available to Syrian citizens (Abboud, 2009; Selvik, 2009).

Syria's young people are those most directly affected by these recent employment and educational reforms and therefore, much attention has focused on Syrian youth. High levels of youth unemployment, however, have led to concerns over youth exclusion in Syria. A growing body of research has examined how institutional configurations, social norms, and governmental policies shape young people's

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future opportunities. While, a number of these studies emphasize the role of gender (Kabbani and Kamel, 2007), few focus on the effects of class and region. Moreover, while the concern over youth exclusion is very real, exclusion and alienation are broad, sweeping terms that are hard to define precisely. Little research to-date has probed how young people actually perceive their future educational and employment opportunities or lack thereof.

This paper overviews of the conditions of Syria's youths' lives, arguing that generalizations about Syrian youth are difficult to make, as gender, class, and region largely shape youth opportunities and experiences. It argues that rather than treating Syria's youth as a homogenous population, Syria's youth initiatives must recognize the wide diversity in Syria's youth and future analyses must disaggregate findings by demographics, while also focusing specifically on youth perceptions of opportunity and exclusion.

## II. Literature review

Since the 1980s, the nations of the Middle East have been experiencing a huge youth bulge (Dyer and Yousef, 2008; Laipson, 2002). Syria is no exception. Its youth population has been growing rapidly over the past two decades, peaking in 2005 when youth aged 15-24 composed 25.8 percent of the population (Kabbani and Kamel, 2007). As of 2008, there were slightly more than four million Syrians between the ages of 15-24, accounting for 21 percent of the population (Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 2009).

Many nations, including Syria, have had a difficult time absorbing youth into the labor market. Substantial literature exists on unemployment and youth exclusion in the Middle East and Syria specifically (Street *et al.*, 2006; Huitfeldt and Kabbani, 2007). Researchers have examined how institutions and policies shape, and often constrict, the options that youth have. Salehi-Isfahani and Dhillon (2008) argue that mediating structures, including labor laws, higher education policies, and strict credit controls contribute to youth exclusion from the labor market in the region. Similarly, Kabbani and Kamel (2007) examine how economic policies, social norms, and institutional factors interact to exclude youth from the labor market in Syria. The authors explain that labor policies tend to incentivize public sector employment with better salaries and benefits. Similarly, the education system fails to prepare youth well for private sector employment. They also find that social factors, such as gender norms and family networks, create barriers to employment for women and young people with few connections.

These studies, however, are policy oriented and do not incorporate a discussion of how youth perceive their opportunities and exclusion. In fact, very little research has focused on young people's attitudes or perceptions of their opportunities. This is a much-needed area of research, as scholars in many disciplines have pointed out that the trend to neo-liberalism increases complexity, uncertainty, and instability for ordinary citizens (Polanyi, 1944; Scheve and Slaughter, 2004; Hermans and Dimaggio, 2007).

Many recent nation-wide studies, however, have examined the attitudes of Syrian youth generally towards educational, work, and family conditions, as well as their attitudes to social, economic, and political issues. These studies offer up-to-date research on youth in Syria, yet they are often hard to access outside of Syria, as most are available only in Arabic or in hard copy. This paper summarizes the most current research from numerous nation-wide surveys, offering a detailed examination of the educational and labor market conditions youth face in Syria and their perceptions

of access and opportunity. As such, this paper is a crucial first step to understanding how Syria's economic transition is affecting youth.

### III. Employment and the labor market

#### A. *Employment and working conditions*

Labor force participation rates in Syria vary substantially by age, gender, and socioeconomic status (Table I). There is a considerable gender imbalance in the labor market due to both women's low labor force participation rates and their higher rates of unemployment. Consequently, young women make up only 15.1 percent of all working youth, while young men account for 84.9 percent (UNFPA/SCFA, 2008). While the labor force participation rate for men remains above 90 percent between the ages 25-45, women's labor force participation rate peaks in their late 20s at 21.3 percent and then falls back into the teens for women over 30. This is most likely the effect of marriage, as married women are much less likely to work than single women. Consequently, women under age 30 make up 58 percent of women in the workforce (Abdel-Wahid, 2009). According to the 2005 school-to-work transition survey, the most common reasons for female inactivity are: family refusal (33.3 percent), housework (31.5 percent), and child care commitments (12.2 percent) (Alissa, 2007).

Socioeconomic status also affects young people's decision to work. A 2008 survey by the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs (SCFA) found that youth from poorer families tend to enter the labor market earlier. The average age that youth from poor families enter the labor market is 13, while those from middle class tend to start working at age 15, and those from wealthy families start at age 17. This is attributable to the fact that most youth state financial need as the primary factor behind their decision to search for work (UNFPA/SCFA, 2008).

The types of jobs young people find also differ by class and region. Of employed youth between the ages of 15-24, 53.6 percent are employed in full-time jobs, 33.2 percent part-time and 13.2 percent as seasonal employees. Rural youth, however, are much more likely to work in part-time or seasonal jobs, while urban youth are more likely to work full-time. For example, 61 percent of working urban youth have full-time jobs, but only 42 percent of employed rural youth do. In comparison, 21 percent of employed rural youth work seasonally, compared to only 7.7 percent of working urban youth (UNFPA/SCFA, 2008).

Many youth are drawn to work in the public sector, considering wages in the public sector tend to be higher on average than those in the private sector, while also offering more job security and better benefits. However, rates of public sector employment differ by gender and education level. In 2007, 31 percent of all employed females (15-29) and 13 percent of employed males worked in the public sector (Kabbani, 2009). Moreover, only 2 percent of females with less than a primary education worked in the public sector, as compared to 90 percent of females with a degree from an Intermediate

Age	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
15-17	27.7	4.3	16.6
17-19	49	8.7	30.4
20-24	72.4	18.1	46.3
25-29	92.7	21.3	55.8

**Table I.**  
Labor force participation  
by age and gender

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Institute (two-year vocational college) and 68 percent of females with a university education. These figures indicate that higher education helps women access the public sector to a greater extent than it helps males. In 2007, 61 percent of males with a degree from an intermediate institute and 59 percent of those with a university education worked in the public sector (Kabbani, 2009). While substantial, these numbers are much less than those for females. Clearly, the value of a university diploma in the labor market varies for males and females.

Recognizing the inability of the public sector to absorb more workers, however, the Syrian Government has been trying to promote employment in the private sector for the past few years. A recent Gallup poll indicates that their policies may have been working. In 2003, over 80 percent of the unemployed youth and 90 percent of unemployed young women were interested in public sector work; yet, a 2009 poll indicates that only 55 percent of Syrian youth say they prefer public sector jobs (Gallup, 2009). This findings could suggest changing public opinion about public sector work.

*Perceptions of employment.* Most policy studies tend to example employment without addressing youth perceptions of their actual employment opportunities. The SCFA, however, recently surveyed working youth on their attitudes towards their current employment. Only one-third of working youth report being very satisfied with their job; the main reasons for their satisfaction include the psychological security it provides (24.1 percent), the fact that it is an appropriate and secure job (17.4 percent) and the fact that there is no better job opportunity (17.1 percent) (UNFPA/SCFA, 2008). The commission suggests that being satisfied with employment because there is no better employment opportunity conveys an underlying dissatisfaction with one's job.

In addition, a quarter of working youth report being very dissatisfied with their job. Their most common reason for their dissatisfaction is low pay. It is not surprising, therefore, that the 2005 school-to-work survey reports that 23.3 percent of working youth were planning to change jobs, with the primary reason for wanting to change being desire for more money (62.7 percent) (Alissa, 2007).

A number of studies also find that youth face difficult working conditions, long hours and low pay. Salaries of young people tend to be low, with the average salary for youth aged 15-35 approximately 6,600SP a month, (Shebiba Youth Union, 2006) (approximately \$143) compared to around 10,000SP (approximately \$217) a month for the Syrian population as a whole (CBS, 2009). The 2005 school-to-work transition survey reports that of youth age 15-24, 44 percent make less than 5,000SP a month, while 50.6 percent make between 5,000-10,000SP. Only 5 percent make more than 10,000SP monthly (Alissa, 2007). Moreover, a 2006 Shebiba Annual Report on Syrian Youth found that 66.8 percent of youth said they suffered from difficult work conditions, with 63.4 percent reporting that they suffer from long work hours, 62.3 percent from long commutes to work and 36.5 percent from bad relations with their supervisor or boss. In addition, small, but significant percentages of youth report verbal or physical abuse from employers (7 and 9 percent, respectively).

These statistics suggest that youth exclusion from the labor market cannot be interpreted narrowly as simply unemployment, but must also examine what types of jobs young people can access. Jobs in the public and formal sectors, and those with good working conditions and decent wages seem to be out of range for many Syrian youth. And yet, it is exactly these types of jobs deemed most acceptable for women and middle class Syrians, resulting in huge percentages of educated females in the public sector.

These statistics suggest that the high levels of unemployment among Syrian youth must necessarily be seen as both a lack of jobs and as a reflection of social norms governing what the acceptable jobs are for different types of young people. A comprehensive youth policy, therefore, must not only seek to expand employment opportunities for young people, but must also examine how young people perceive the different opportunities available to them, their employment preferences, and labor market segmentation.

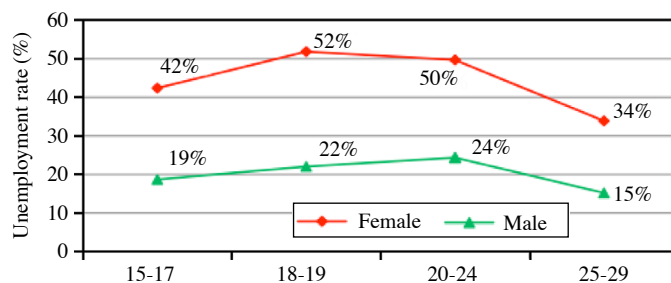
### *B. Unemployment*

High levels of unemployment continue to affect Syrian youth. The most recent CBS (2008) report the unemployment rate for youth 15-24 to be 22.4 percent. Many factors contribute to high-youth unemployment including demographic factors such as high-population growth and urbanization, as well as economic and educational policies that have led to a lack of coordination between the education system and the labor market and lackluster economic growth, which has not created sufficient job growth.

In addition, youth are also often excluded from the labor market because of their lack of experience and inability to borrow money to start businesses (Kabbani and Kamel, 2007). Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that youth account for the majority of the unemployed, with youth aged 15-24 accounting for 47.9 percent of unemployed, and those 15-29 years old comprising 70.7 percent of all unemployed in 2008 (CBS, 2009). While still high, these figures indicate an improvement from 2007, when youth 15-24 accounted for 57 percent of all unemployed (Kabbani, 2009).

Youth unemployment, however, does not affect all young people to the same extent; unemployment rates differ significantly by gender, region and educational level. Unemployment is much higher for young women than men, actually reaching or surpassing 50 percent for women between the ages of 18-24. Unemployment rates for young men range from 15 percent for men over age 24 to 24 percent for men between the ages of 20-24. However, unemployment rates for both men and women drop steeply after age 24, falling from 24 to 15 percent for men and from 50 to 34 percent for women (CBS, 2009) (Figure 1).

Those in rural areas are also more likely to suffer from unemployment. While the Syrian population is now more urban than rural, unemployment rates for Syrians in rural areas account for 54.2 percent of total unemployment, compared to 45.8 percent for urban areas. And while unemployment is as low as 5.1 percent in the semi-urban areas around Damascus and 7.4 percent in Damascus itself, it reaches 17.5 percent in Al-Rakka, 17.6 percent in Al-Sweida and a high 24.0 percent in Al-Hasakeh (CBS, 2009).



**Figure 1.**  
Unemployment rate  
by age and gender

Youth unemployment rates also differ by educational level. In 2006-2007, unemployment rates for males with only a primary or preparatory education (10 and 14 percent, respectively) were less than half the unemployment rate of males with a degree from an intermediate institute (29 percent). For females, however, unemployment rates seemed to decrease with higher education. Unemployment rates were highest for those with just a preparatory or secondary degree (59 and 62 percent, respectively) compared to university unemployment rate of (30 percent) (Kabbani and Salloum, 2009) (Table II).

Prior studies recognize that youth and first time employees are more likely to experience difficult transitions to the labor market because of their lack of experience and barriers to entry such as lack of information or networks. A 2005 school-to-work survey found that 74.8 percent of unemployed youth (15-24) reported being unemployed for more than a year (Alissa, 2007) and over 40 percent of the unemployed aged 15-24 had been out of work for at least two years (UNFPA/SCFA, 2008). In addition, more than a quarter of unemployed youth (26.6 percent) have been unemployed for more than five years, which suggests that a substantial portion of the workforce may be permanently excluded (Shebiba Youth Union, 2006). The 2005, school-to-work transition survey found that approximately 11 percent of youth were discouraged workers, meaning that they have stopped looking for work because of the lack of opportunities. About 7.5 percent of them said they stopped because there were no opportunities available and 2.8 percent reported that they could not find appropriate work. Of discouraged workers, 82.1 percent said that it was unlikely they would become active in the future, while only 9.5 percent said they hoped to enter the labor market again and 8.4 percent were unsure about their future employment prospects (Alissa, 2007).

Clearly, a number of studies recognize the high rates of unemployment among Syrian youth, and consider unemployment inherently inefficient and a detriment to economic growth, but as a social phenomenon, unemployment also takes its toll on Syrian youth psychologically. Studies find that the longer youth are unemployed, the more likely they are to report that they are not happy or optimistic, not appreciated by others, that their lives are empty of meaning, or that they were full of sorrow and worry (UNFPA/SCFA, 2008). We argue that the larger social consequences of unemployment must be investigated further.

#### IV. Education

##### A. Differential access and quality of education

Education plays an important role in opening employment opportunities to youth. Higher education is being framed as an essential component of this transition, which

Education level	Total (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)
Primary	13	32	10
Preparatory	20	59	14
Secondary	33	62	20
International Institute	41	51	29
University	27	30	24
Total	18	42	12

Source: Kabbani and Salloum (2009)

**Table II.**  
Unemployment rate by gender and education for youth 15-29 in 2006/2007

will help build the foundation for a future knowledge economy and vibrant service sector (Lesch, 2005). Therefore, access to education generally, and higher education specifically, must be considered part of the dynamics of youth exclusion and inclusion.

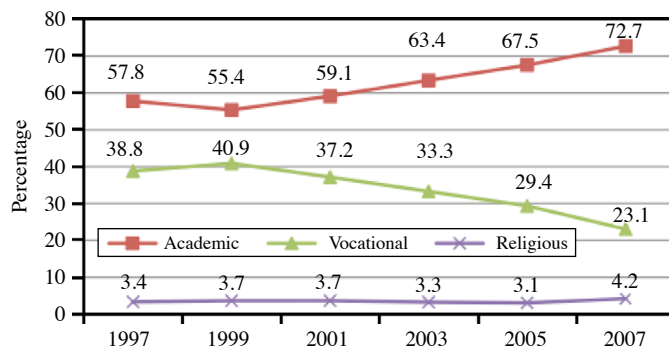
While Syria has historically had low levels of education, more youth today are going to school than ever before. Recently, 64.6 percent of 15-16 year olds, 51.1 percent of 17-18 year olds, and 43.5 percent of 19-20 year olds are in school. This rate falls to 25.9 percent for 21-22 year olds and 14.5 percent for 23-24 year olds (UNFPA/SCFA, 2008).

As of 2007, approximately 91.4 percent of 10-14 year olds were enrolled in middle school (Grades 5-9). Nonetheless, completion rates remain quite low. Approximately, 38.7 percent of youth (15-24) received only a primary education diploma, meaning that they did not complete ninth grade. And national statistics show that the middle school completion rate is 53.7 percent, meaning that of the more than half million youth entering the first grade in 1998, only 42 percent had graduated middle school nine years later (CBS, 2009).

Approximately, half a million Syrian youth were enrolled in high school (Grades 10-12) in 2007, accounting for nearly 34 percent of the age cohort in 2007 (UNESCO, 2008). The female enrollment rate in high school now surpasses that of males, with 35 percent of female students in high school compared to 34 percent of males. Of Syrian youth enrolled in high school, 72.7 percent are in general education, 23 percent in vocational education, and 4.2 percent in religious studies (CBS, 2009).

In 1998, Syria revised its vocational education policy to direct more youth towards the academic track. As a result, the percentage of youth enrolled in vocational education as a percentage of all students has been declining steadily over the past ten years, while the percentage of students in academic tracks has been increasing. Between 1997 and 2007, the percentage of students enrolled in academic tracks rose from 57.8 to 72.7 percent, while the percentage of students in vocational education fell from 38.8 to 23.1 percent in the same period (CBS, 2009) (Figure 2).

Since 2000, the proportion of students enrolled in scientific tracks has decreased significantly. In 2000, enrollments in scientific tracks accounted for 51.3 percent of total enrollments, but by 2005, scientific enrollments accounted for only 35.3 percent (UHES, 2008). This has raised concerns among Syrian and international observers, who believe that greater investment in scientific and technological fields will be crucial to Syria's



**Figure 2.**  
Distribution of high school students by track (percent)

economic future (UHES, 2008). Also concerning is the gender difference in high school track, as females are less likely to be in science and vocational tracks. For example, a nation-wide survey found that approximately 31.0 percent of males were in vocational education compared to 19.9 percent of females (Shebiba Youth Union, 2006).

Approximately, 43 percent of all high school completers go on to enroll in the free, public universities (Kabbani and Salloum, 2009). In 2007, the nation's five public universities enrolled 280,000 full-time government-sponsored students. In addition, another 41,000 were fee-paying students (through the parallel learning program). Open learning (weekend courses) enrolled another 152,860 students, bringing the total number of Syrians enrolled in public university programs to approximately 473,000 (CBS, 2009). In addition, there were nearly 82,000 students enrolled in the nation's 182 two-year vocational colleges (known as intermediate institutes). Vocational education comprises approximately 16 percent of all higher education students (UHES, 2008) (Table III).

Since 2000, Syria has instituted numerous reforms to its higher education system. These programs have been successful at expanding enrollments in higher education (Abdel-Wahid, 2009). "Open learning," which allows students who were previously not permitted or not able to enroll in a regular universities to take classes on weekends for small fees now account for one-third of all students enrolled in higher education. Private universities have also grown substantially in the past six years, growing from an initial 3,500 students at four institutions in 2003 to nearly 23,000 students in 15 institutions today (UHES, 2008; CBS, 2009). As a result, an estimated 20.8 percent of young people aged 18-23 (17.8 percent of boys and 17 percent of girls) are enrolled in university. This is up dramatically from 2003, when only 12.5 percent of the age cohort attended university (Abdel-Wahid, 2009).

Despite all of these substantial advances in access to higher education, substantial regional, class, and gender enrollments exist at university level. Enrollment rates are 54 percent higher in urban areas than rural areas. While 26 percent of youth from urban areas are enrolled in university, only 17 percent of youth in rural areas are likewise enrolled. Gender differences in university enrollment rates are also more pronounced in rural areas. In urban areas, 26 percent of both males and females of university age are

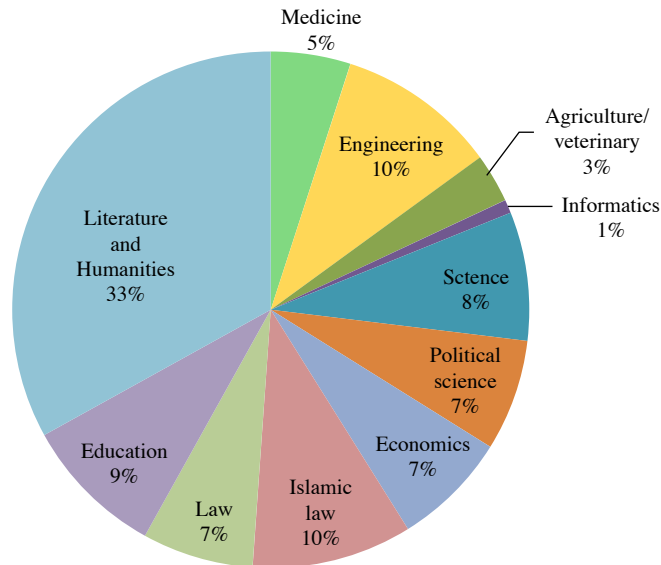
Public universities	Government sponsored	Fee-paying	Open learning	Total
Damascus	115,256	17,295	68,757	201,308
Aleppo	70,641	9,959	42,958	123,558
Teshreen	48,236	6,278	14,327	68,841
Al-Baath	34,473	5,056	20,807	60,336
Al-Furat	11,008	2,281	6,011	19,300
Sub-total	279,614	40,869	152,860	473,343
Other post-secondary				
High and intermediate institutes	106,319			
Ministries' training centers	46,929			
Private Universities	22,723			
Virtual University	9,499			
Sub-total	185,470			
Total post-secondary	658,813			

**Table III.**  
Overview of higher education enrollments (2007-2008)

enrolled in university. In contrast, in rural areas, 18 percent of males are at university compared to only 15 percent of females (Kabbani and Salloum, 2009). Class differences are notable as well. University enrollment rates for youth are twice as high for youth from the top quintile as those from the lower two quintiles. Specifically, for youth from the top income bracket, university enrollment rates are above 30 percent, but for youth from the bottom two income brackets do not reach 15 percent (Kabbani and Salloum, 2009).

At the public universities, men and women account for equal percentages of enrollments (50.5 percent men to 49.5 percent women). Both vocational education programs and open learning, however, tend to enroll more men than women. Of the students enrolled in high and intermediate institutes, 54 percent are male and 46 percent are female. In open learning, 61.8 percent of students are male and 38.2 percent are female (CBS, 2009). Despite their lower enrollment numbers, however, women graduate higher education at higher rates. In 2007, 51.8 percent of public university graduates were female and 52.4 percent of intermediate institute graduates were.

In 2007, as shown in the chart below, approximately one-third of all university students were enrolled in literature and the humanities, while economics, political science and law accounted for roughly another third (31 percent). In contrast, only 8 percent of students were enrolled in science, 10 percent in engineering and 5 percent in medicine (CBS, 2009). As a result, Syria is trying to encourage enrollment in scientific fields. Admissions policies were changed in 2006 to increase enrollments in scientific fields, aiming to increasing enrollments in business and information technology by 9 percent, science, technology, engineering, and medicine by 25 percent, education by 8 percent and decreasing humanities and social science enrollments by 8 percent (UHES, 2008) (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.**  
Distribution of university enrollments by major 2007

**Source:** Distribution of university enrollments by major (2007)

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Gender seems to influence the university concentrations youth pursue as well. A nation-wide survey found that 39.4 percent of females currently in university were enrolled in literature or human sciences, compared to only 26.5 percent of males. Similarly, 13.6 percent of female students studied psychology or education, compared to only 5.8 percent of males. In contrast, fields such as medicine and engineering were more popular among males, with 9.3 percent of males enrolled in medicine compared to 5.6 percent of females and 17.7 percent of males enrolled in engineering programs compared to only 10.8 percent of females (Shebiba Youth Union, 2006). These statistics suggest that Syria still has a long way to go in equalizing opportunities for all youth interested in higher education.

### *B. Youth perceptions of education*

Despite substantial improvements in access to higher education, Syrian youth still face substantial barriers to pursuing education, and many express concerns over the quality of schooling. Prior studies of youth exclusion have discussed how the low quality of education in Syria contributes to youth marginalization by not preparing young people for the labor market. However, very little research examines demand for education. Recent studies suggest that many youth are choosing not to invest in intermediate levels of education. For example, nearly one-third (31.7 percent) of young Syrians enrolled in a level of schooling (middle school, high school or university) that they did not complete. However, reasons for leaving school differed substantially by gender. One-third (33.3 percent) of boys said they left school to help their families financially, compared to only 4.5 percent of girls. In comparison, 11.9 percent of girls said they left school for marriage, while no men said the same. Approximately, 10 percent of girls said they left school to help with housework and only 4.1 percent of males said this, and an even larger percentage of girls (12.4 percent) said they left school because their families did not allow them to continue whereas no male students said the same. In addition, a disturbingly large number of students from both genders said that they left school because of continued failure (11.9 percent of girls and 11.7 percent of boys) (UNFPA/SCFA, 2008).

In addition to repeated failure of a grade, substantial numbers of youth report experiencing difficulties with their studies. The most common problems youth report are: the breadth of the curriculum (39.8 percent), little use of computers (38.6 percent), lack of applicability of the curriculum (33.6 percent), long school hours (33.0 percent), lack of support or tutoring groups (30.0 percent), long distances to school (28.3 percent), difficulty balancing housework or familial duties (28.8 percent), poor quality textbooks (26.9 percent), difficulty in interacting with teachers (24.4 percent), and a lack of coordination among different teachers (23.7 percent) (Shebiba Youth Union, 2006).

A recent study by the SCFA also found that 38.1 percent of Syrian youth are dissatisfied with classroom sizes and 35.5 percent are dissatisfied with the infrastructure in educational institutions. In addition, nearly twice as many young Syrians say they are dissatisfied with their school's interest in foreign languages as who say they are satisfied (42.0 percent dissatisfied or highly dissatisfied compared to 24.8 percent who are satisfied or highly satisfied). In addition, a UNICEF (2007) report, *Just Listen to Me*, found that a majority of students in focus group sessions would prefer to learn life skills such as logical thinking and communication skills in school

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and would like the curriculum to be more practical and fun, more time devoted to music, sports, arts, computers, and the internet. On the other hand, the report finds young people are relatively satisfied when it comes to the costs of studying, school schedule/hours, testing program and the theoretical contents of the program and teaching methods (UNFPA/SCFA, 2008).

Clearly, demand for education must not be taken for granted and must not be generalized across different demographic groups. Social norms for early marriage seem to play a role in lowering demand for education among women, as financial pressures do for males, but the low quality of schools and repeated failure of youth also seems to play a role. More research on differentiated demand for intermediate and advanced levels of education need further examination.

### **V. Youth exclusion and attitudes**

The idea of youth exclusion is a potent point of analysis for those interested in demographic, social, and political processes in Syria, and yet, the idea of exclusion, and the even more charged term of alienation, seem to be abstract terms – difficult to discern and measure. What exactly is youth exclusion and how do youth perceive their alienation? While this is certainly an area for needed future research, a number of surveys have asked youth about their perceptions and attitudes towards important social issues, although not addressing alienation directly.

In terms of the major problems they face, unemployment was perceived to be the biggest problem for both males and females, with 50.8 percent of males and 42.2 percent of girls stating that unemployment was a major concern. This was followed by: family unraveling (31.5 percent total), education (13.3 percent total), housing (7.2 percent total), and difficulties marrying (6.1 percent total) (Shebiba Youth Union, 2006). Moreover, when asked about their current economic situation, only 38 percent of Syrian youth report that now is a good time to get a job (Gallup, 2009).

As for the situation of youth generally, 47 percent of young Syrians are satisfied with government efforts to increase the number of quality jobs and 71 percent of Syrian youth think that those responsible for the progress of society are maximizing the potential of youth. These statistics present a rather ambiguous understanding of how youth actually perceive their future opportunities and how they perceive the role of the government in their lives. Again, employment may not be the only important factor shaping youth perceptions of opportunity. It seems as though other factors, including government policies are also important.

### **VI. Conclusion**

Syria's youth are very much a generation in transition; their experiences seem to reflect the changes the nation as a whole is undergoing, balanced between traditional values and an increasing orientation to the larger world. A review of recent surveys, however, suggests that few generalizations can be made about the opportunities, experiences and attitudes of Syrian youth as a whole. It is clear that the life-paths open to Syrian youth are largely impacted by demographic characteristics, including gender, region, and class. A focus on research that disaggregates findings by sub-group is needed to provide researchers and policymakers a more nuanced understanding of youth attitudes, opportunities and experiences.

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A second area of needed research must focus on issues of youth participation in society, including an emphasis on identifying risk factors for marginalization and exclusion. The literature indicates that the emphasis on youth employment and the lack thereof, which has been the focus of most research on youth in the region, may be overlooking other pertinent factors that contribute to youth perceptions of exclusion and alienation, including satisfaction with work and schooling. We argue that understanding and taking youth concerns seriously is necessary for Syria's future prosperity. Young people will be at the center of issues Syria is facing in the coming decades including economic growth, urbanization, environmental concerns, and globalization. Their active participation will be required to influence the future direction of the nation and take advantage of recent policy changes for the benefit of all.

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### About the authors

Elizabeth S. Buckner is a PhD student in the International and Comparative Education program at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. Her academic interests revolve around how globalization and the transition to a knowledge economy are changing the demands of education in the Middle East. She was a Fulbright grantee to Morocco from 2006-2007, where she researched the growth of English language learning. She holds a BA in Sociology/Anthropology and Educational Studies from Swarthmore College. Elizabeth S. Buckner is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [ebuckner@stanford.edu](mailto:ebuckner@stanford.edu)

Khuloud Saba is a Research Analyst in Research Division in the Syria Trust for Development in Damascus, Syria. She holds a Bachelor in Dental Surgery from the University of Baghdad and has interned with UNICEF and UNHCR in Syria and Iraq.

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