

Syria's Next Generation: Youth Un/Employment, Education, and Exclusion

By Elizabeth Buckner and Kholoud Saba
Stanford University and the Syrian Trust for Development

Abstract**Purpose**

This study examines 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.

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, Economic Transition, Education, Unemployment, Youth Exclusion

Classification: General Review/Research Paper

Acknowledgements: This research was supported in part by a Stanford Graduate Fellowship. The authors would like to thank Mr. Nader Kabbani for his expertise and guidance. All errors are the fault of the authors alone.

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 future opportunities. While a number of these studies emphasize the role of gender (see 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 article 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% of the population (Kabbani and Kabel, 2007). As of 2008, there were slightly more than four million Syrians between the ages of 15-24, accounting for 21% of the population (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; Sheve and Slaughter 2008; 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 article 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 article 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 (see Table 1). 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% of all working youth, while young men account for 84.9% (UNFPA/SCFA, 2008). While the labor force participation rate for men remains above 90% between the ages 25-45, women's labor force participation rate peaks in their late twenties at 21.3% 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% 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%), housework (31.5%), and child care commitments (12.2%) (Alissa, 2007).

Table 1
Labor Force Participation by Age and Gender

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%

Socioeconomic status also affects young people's decision to work. A 2008 survey by the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs 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% are employed in full time jobs, 33.2% part-time and 13.2% 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% of working urban youth have full-time jobs, but only 42% of employed rural youth do. In comparison, 21% of employed rural youth work seasonally, compared to only 7.7% 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% of all employed females (15-29) and 13% of employed males worked in the public sector (Kabbani, 2009). Moreover, only 2% of females with less than a primary education worked in the public sector, as compared to 90% of females with a degree from an Intermediate Institute (2-year vocational college) and 68% 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% of males with a degree from an intermediate institute and 59% 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% of the unemployed youth and 90% of unemployed young women were interested in public sector work; yet, a 2009 poll indicates that only 55% of Syrian youth say they prefer public sector jobs (Gallup, 2009). This finding 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 Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, 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%), the fact that it is an appropriate and secure job (17.4%) and the fact that there is no better job opportunity (17.1%) (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% of working youth were planning to change jobs, with the primary reason for wanting to change being desire for more money (62.7%) (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, 2006) (approximately 143 USD) compared to around 10,000SP (approximately 217 USD) 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% make less than 5,000SP a month, while 50.6% make between 5,000-10,000SP. Only 5% make more than 10,000SP monthly (Alissa, 2007). Moreover, a 2006 Shebiba Annual Report on Syrian Youth found that 66.8% of youth said they suffered from difficult work conditions, with 63.4% reporting that they suffer from long work hours, 62.3% from long commutes to work and 36.5% 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%, 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

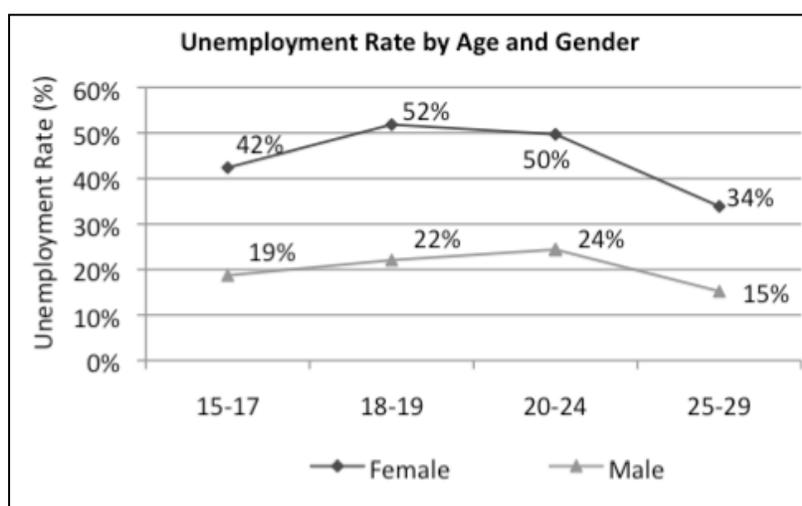
access. Jobs in the public and formal sectors, and those with good working conditions and decent wages seem to be out of range for many Syrian youth. And yet, it is exactly these types of jobs deemed most acceptable for women and middle class Syrians, resulting in huge percentages of educated females 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 labor force statistics (2008) report the unemployment rate for youth 15-24 to be 22.4%. 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 Kothari, 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% of unemployed, and those 15-29 years old comprising 70.7% of all unemployed in 2008 (CBS, 2009). While still high, these figures indicate an improvement from 2007, when youth 15-24 accounted for 57% 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% for women between the ages of 18-24. Unemployment rates for young men range from 15% for men over age 24 to 24% 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% for men and from 50% to 34% for women (CBS, 2009). (See Graph 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% of total unemployment, compared to 45.8% for urban areas. And while unemployment is as low as 5.1% in the semi-urban areas around Damascus and 7.4% in Damascus itself, it reaches 17.5% in Al-Rakka, 17.6% in Al-Sweida and a high 24.0% in Al-Hasakeh (CBS, 2009).

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%, respectively) were

less than half the unemployment rate of males with a degree from an intermediate institute (29%). 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% respectively) compared to university unemployment rate of (30%) (Kabbani and Salloum, 2009). (See Table2)

Table 2
Unemployment Rate by Gender and Education for Youth 15-29 in 2006/2007

Education Level	Total	Female	Male
Primary	13%	32%	10%
Preparatory	20%	59%	14%
Secondary	33%	62%	20%
Int. Institute	41%	51%	29%
University	27%	30%	24%
Total	18%	42%	12%

Source: Kabbani and Salloum, 2009

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% of unemployed youth (15-24) reported being unemployed for more than a year (Alissa, 2007) and over 40% 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%) have been unemployed for more than five years, which suggests that a substantial portion of the workforce may be permanently excluded (Shebiba, 2006). The 2005 School-to-Work Transition survey found that approximately 11% of youth were discouraged workers, meaning that they have stopped looking for work because of the lack of opportunities. 7.5% of them said they stopped because there were no opportunities available and 2.8% reported that they could not find appropriate work. Of discouraged workers, 82.1% said that it was unlikely they would become active in the future, while only 9.5% said they hoped to enter the labor market again and 8.4% 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 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.

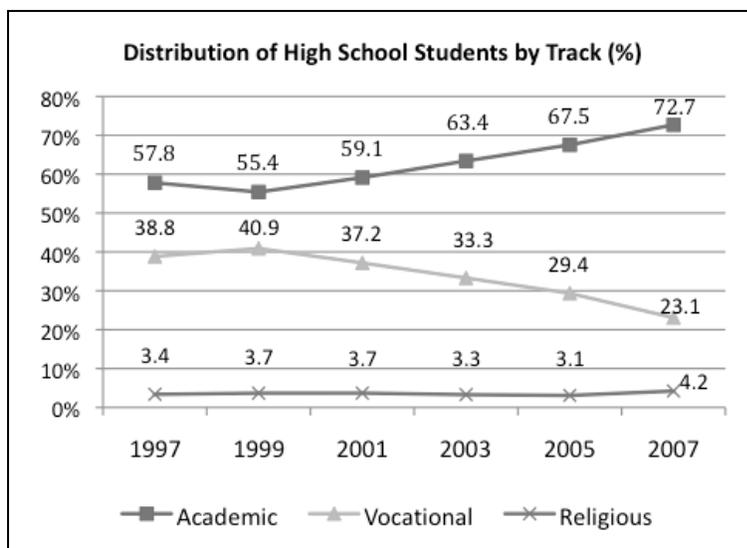
While Syria has historically had low levels of education, more youth today are going to school than ever before. Today, 64.6% of 15-16 year olds, 51.1% of 17-18 year olds, and 43.5% of 19-20 year olds are in school. This rate falls to 25.9% for 21-22 year olds and 14.5% for 23-24 year olds (UNFPA/SCFA,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

As of 2007, approximately 91.4% of 10-14 year olds were enrolled in middle school (grades 5-9). Nonetheless, completion rates remain quite low. Approximately 38.7% 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%, meaning that of the

more than half million youth entering the first grade in 1998, only 42% 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% of the age cohort in 2007 (UNESCO, 2008). The female enrollment rate in high school now surpasses that of males, with 35% of female students in high school compared to 34% of males. Of Syrian youth enrolled in high school, 72.7% are in general education, 23% in vocational education, and 4.2% 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%, while the percentage of students in vocational education fell from 38.8% to 23.1% in the same period (CBS, 2009). (See Graph 2)



Since 2000, the proportion of students enrolled in scientific tracks has decreased significantly. In 2000, enrollments in scientific tracks accounted for 51.3% of total enrollments, but by 2005, scientific enrollments accounted for only 35.3% (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 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% of males were in vocational education compared to 19.9% of females (Shebiba, 2006).

Approximately 43% 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% of all higher education students (UHES, 2008).

Table 3
Overview of Higher Education Enrollments (2007-2008)

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

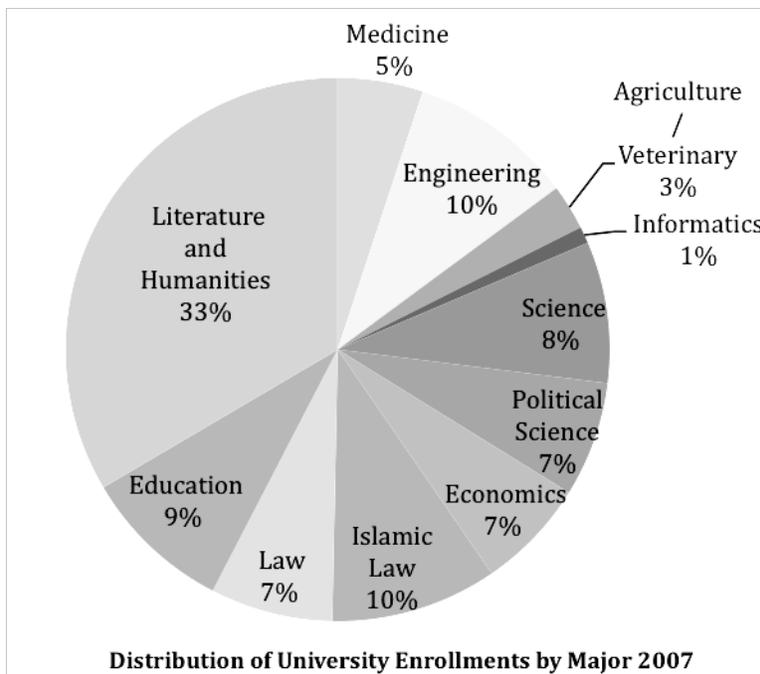
Since 2000, Syria has instituted numerous reforms to its higher education system. These programs have been successful at expanding enrollments in higher education (Abdel-Wahid, 2009). “Open learning,” which allows students who were previously not permitted or not able to enroll in a regular universities 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% of young people aged 18-23 (17.8% of boys and 17% of girls) are enrolled in university. This is up dramatically from 2003, when only 12.5% 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% higher in urban areas than rural areas. While 26% of youth from urban areas are enrolled in university, only 17% 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% of both males and females of university age are enrolled in university. In contrast, in rural areas, 18% of males are at university compared to only 15% 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%, but for youth from the bottom two income brackets do not reach 15% (Kabbani and Salloum, 2009).

At the public universities, men and women account for equal percentages of enrollments (50.5% men to 49.5% 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% are male and 46% are female. In Open Learning, 61.8% of students are male and 38.2% are female (CBS, 2009). Despite their lower enrollment numbers, however, women graduate higher education at higher rates. In 2007, 51.8% of public university graduates were female and 52.4% 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%). In contrast, only 8% of students were enrolled in science, 10% in engineering and 5% 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%, Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine (STEM) by 25%, Education by 8% and decreasing Humanities and Social Science enrollments by 8% (UHES, 2008).



Gender seems to influence the university concentrations youth pursue as well. A nation-wide survey found that 39.4% of females currently in university were enrolled in Literature or Human Sciences, compared to only 26.5% of males. Similarly, 13.6% of female students studied Psychology or Education, compared to only 5.8% of males. In contrast, fields such as medicine and engineering were more popular among males, with 9.3% of males enrolled in Medicine compared to 5.6% of females and 17.7% of males enrolled in engineering programs compared to only 10.8% of females (Shebiba, 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%) 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%) of boys said they left school to help their families financially, compared to only 4.5% of girls. In comparison, 11.9% of girls said they left school for marriage, while no men said the same. Approximately 10% of girls said they left school to help with housework and only 4.1% of males said this, and an even larger percentage of girls (12.4%) 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% of girls and 11.7% 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%), little use of computers (38.6%), lack of applicability of the curriculum (33.6%), long school hours (33.0%), lack of support or tutoring groups (30.0%), long distances to school (28.3%), difficulty balancing housework or familial duties (28.8%), poor quality textbooks (26.9%), difficulty in interacting with teachers (24.4%), and a lack of coordination among different teachers (23.7%) (Shebiba, 2006).

A recent study by the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs also found that 38.1% of Syrian youth are dissatisfied with classroom sizes and 35.5% 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% dissatisfied

or highly dissatisfied compared to 24.8% who are satisfied or highly satisfied). In addition, a 2007 UNICEF 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 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% of males and 42.2% of girls stating that

unemployment was a major concern. This was followed by: family unraveling (31.5% total), education (13.3% total), housing (7.2% total), and difficulties marrying (6.1% total) (Shebiba, 2006). Moreover, when asked about their current economic situation, only 38% of Syrian youth report that now is a good time to get a job (Gallup, 2009).

As for the situation of youth generally, 47% of young Syrians are satisfied with government efforts to increase the number of quality jobs and 71% 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.

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.

References

- Abboud, S. (2009) "The Transition Paradigm and the Case of Syria" in *Syria's economy and the transition paradigm* by Samer Abboud and Ferdinand Arslanian. University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, Fife, Scotland, 3-31.
- Abdel-Wahid, N. (2009) "La Syrie" in *Enseignement Supérieur et Marche du Travail dans le Monde Arab*. Institut Francais du Proche-Orient, Beirut, Lebanon, 191-216.
- Alissa, S. (2007) "The School-to-Work Transition of Young People in Syria," Employment Policy Paper 2007/3. International Labor Organization, Beirut, 2007. Available at: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_policy/documents/publication/wcms_113894.pdf (accessed Nov. 1, 2009).
- Central Bureau of Statistics. (2009) *Statistical Abstract 2009*. Central Bureau of Statistics, Damascus.
- Dyer, P. and Tarik Yousef. (2008) *The Tyranny of Demography: Exploring the Fertility Transition in the Middle East and North Africa*. Working Paper, No. 08-11. Dubai School of Government, Dubai. November 2008. Available at: <http://www.dsg.ae/LinkClick.aspx?link=WP08-11.pdf&tabid=308&mid=826> (accessed Nov. 1, 2009).
- Gallup. (2009) *The Silatech Index: Voices of Young Arabs*. Accessed at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/120758/Silatech-Index-Voices-Young-Arabs.aspx> (accessed Nov. 1, 2009).
- Hermans, H. J. M., & Dimaggio, G. (2007). Self, identity, and globalisation in times of uncertainty: a dialogical analysis. *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 11 No. 1, 31–61.
- Huitfeldt, H. and Kabbani, N. (2007) *Returns to Education and the Transition from School to Work in Syria*. Working Paper, No. 1. American University of Beirut Institute of Financial Economics. Beirut, 2007.
- Kabbani, N. (2009) "Why Young Syrians Prefer Public Sector Jobs" Middle East Youth Initiative Policy Outlook. Brookings Institution, Washington DC. Available at: <http://www.shababinclusion.org/content/document/detail/1319/> (accessed Nov. 1, 2009).
- Kabbani, N. and Salloun, S. (2009) *Financing Higher Education in Syria*. Economic Research Forum Regional Conference on Financing Higher Education in Arab Countries, June 17-18, 2009, Amman, Jordan
- Kabbani, N and N Kamel. (2007) "Youth Exclusion in Syria: Social, Economic & Institutional Dimensions," Working Paper Number 4. Middle East Youth Initiative, Brookings, Washington DC, 2007. Available at: <http://www.shababinclusion.org/content/document/detail/537/> (accessed Nov. 1, 2009),

Laipson, E. (2002) "The Middle East's Demographic Transition: What Does It Mean?" *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 56, no. 1, 175-188.

Polanyi, Karl. (1985) *The Great Transformation*. Beacon Press, Boston.

Salehi-Isfahani, D. and Dhillon Navtej. (2008) "Stalled Youth Transitions in the Middle East: A Framework for Policy Reform." Working Paper No. 8. Middle East Youth Initiative, Brookings, Washington DC, 2007. Available at: <http://www.shababinclusion.org/content/document/detail/1166/> (accessed Nov. 1, 2009).

Scheve, K. and Matthew J. Slaughter. (2007) "A New Deal for Globalization" *Foreign Affairs*. Vol. 86, No. 4. 34-47.

Selvik, K. (2009) "It's the Mentality Stupid: Syria's Turn to the Private Sector in *Changing Regime Discourse and Reform in Syria* edited by Sottimano, A. and Selvik, K. Fife, Scotland: University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, Boulder, CO.

Shebiba Youth Union. (2006) *Second Annual Report on Youth, their Needs and Attitudes to Basic Issues in Syria*. Damascus, Syria.

Street, Richard, Nader Kabbani and Yamama Al-Oraibi. (2006) "Responding to Weak Labor Market Conditions Facing Youth: The Case of Syria," in *Youth in the Middle East and North Africa: Expanding Economic Prospects in Urban Areas – Technical Papers*, edited by Osman Nour, Rabat: Rabat Municipality.

Upgrading the Higher Education Sector in Syria (UHES). (2008) Volume 1: *Inception Report and First Annual Work Plan*. Damascus, Syria. Available at: <http://www.uhes-sy.org/Report/Volume1TheReport.pdf> (accessed Nov. 1, 2009).

UNFPA and Syrian Commission for Family Affairs. (2008) *Project to Support the National Youth Strategy in Syria: Empowerment and Social Participation of Youth*. Damascus, Syria.

UNICEF. (2007) *Just Listen to Me: A Report on Consultations with Adolescents in Syria*. UNICEF, Damascus, Syria.

World Bank. (2008) *The Road Not Travelled: Education Reform in the Middle East and North Africa*. The World Bank, Washington, DC, 2008. Available at: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMENA/Resources/EDU_Flagship_Full_ENG.pdf (accessed Nov. 1, 2009).