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A Right not a Luxury

Formal and informal education in Northern Syria – challenges and opportunities

Editor: Ola Saleh
Reviewer: Oula Ramadan
Think Space Facilitators: Badael Team
Think Space documentation: Badael Team
Graphic Design: Ali Mustafa

Badael is a rights-based organisation founded in 2013 with a mission to foster transformative justice as the basis of a genuine and sustainable peace in Syria. Championing locally-owned alternatives, we endeavour to buttress the scope and impact of inclusive grassroots civic action and foment the development of holistic truth and understanding within and around the Syrian context.

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Background

Creating spaces that foster learning, activism, co-thinking, and civic engagement among young people is a top priority for Badael. Such spaces are crucial for the development of societies. This emphasis arises from the need to protect and empower the excluded majority in Syria, especially youth, enabling them to lead grassroots citizen movements and initiatives within their communities. It is under this strategic priority that Badael initiated a youth platform to empower and mobilize young Syrians as pivotal change agents, whose perspectives are integral to the growth of a robust grassroots civil society.

The youth platform also aims to enable Syrian youth in cultivating greater social resilience and enhancing their ability to shape discourse and thinking on topics and priorities key to young people within the Syrian civil society. During the platform's establishment meeting, five topics, "Safe Spaces", "Social Cohesion and Inclusion", "Militarism and Destructive Spaces", "Formal and Informal Education" and "Political Participation and Civic Engagement", were identified by participants as urgent issues for Northern Syria's youth. These issues were addressed through think spaces, and the outcomes have contributed to the development of 5 knowledge papers.

The think spaces served as non-prescriptive, deductive environments where 16-20 youth from Al-Atareb, Darat Azza, and Killi, aged 18 to 30, unpacked the conceptual and practical aspects of each issue. They built on their lived experiences, creativity, and peer exchange in a space facilitated by Badael. This paper reflects the outcomes of the first think space, focusing on the youth's conceptualization and analysis of the topic; Formal and informal education in Northern Syria, challenges and opportunities.

Generally speaking, access to (quality) education is a challenge in conflict contexts. Therefore, it is crucial to situate this Think Space in the context of Northern Syria. At the beginning of the uprising in Syria, children used to miss school for weeks on end due to military escalation. Interrupted education became the norm for most of the past decade. In the past two years or so, violent escalations became normalised, and schools would go on even under bombardment. This has left a generation torn between interrupted education (if at all accessible) and staying alive.

Conceptual Unpacking

Participants view formal education in Northern Syria to be a rigid, and traditional space, where students are listeners and passive recipients of information rather than active participants. It enforces gender segregation and prohibits women from pursuing certain specialisations such as engineering, and veterinary degrees. Formal education is believed to be politicised, the funding backers or authorities pass their ideology through the formal education institutions by controlling the curricula, adding ideological topics to scientific specialisations, and introducing free lectures by prominent conservative ideologues without offering the same opportunity to other schools of thought.

The formal education environment is seen as a repressive one where the student has no say about the learning design. A participant shared her experience where the principal met with female students to listen to their demands, when the students started making demands about changing the timing of the lectures, the principal refused to engage and he went on to specify the issues he would be willing to listen to.

> ''if you come to listen to our demands, you cannot determine the nature of our demands'' (think space participant)

On the other hand, informal education through civic providers[1] was viewed more favourably. It is seen as a more consultative and flexible space which offers freedom for exchanging ideas and opinions. It is close to youth's interests, enables effective participation and facilitates opportunities for youth to interact with the broader community. Unlike formal education, informal education is perceived to be based on needs assessment. Informal education through civil society providers was celebrated for building women's confidence and participation and providing access to regional (Arabic-speaking) expertise in the areas of human rights, tech, and psychosocial

1 Civil society organisations, libraries (physical and electronic), and volunteer groups.

support. However, it is also seen to be elitist as it often requires a certain level of education (high school or above) which might not be accessible to the majority of the population.

Mosques and religious institutions were mentioned as other avenues for informal education but with limited educational content and overly prescribed methods.

Cultural centres allegedly lack credibility among youth. Young people feel co-opted by the ideological agenda of the lectures and seminars, which they feel are trying to promote an alien more conservative and exclusionary version of religion to what they grew up with.

Factors Influencing Youth Education

Several factors affect youth education and their access to it in Northern Syria. This includes but is not limited to:

- Economic hardship – in general, and in particular for (male or female) heads of households of orphaned siblings or children.
- Costly university fee[2]s despite the so-called rent/taxes imposed by de facto authorities on goods entering the North via the Bab Al-Hawa and Al-Ghazawieh crossings to support education
- Physical insecurity due to recurrent bombardment
- Recurrent displacement
- Security considerations on the road due to weak rule of law
- High rates of illiteracy with limited opportunities to re-join an educational track
- Classism – participants experienced university professors put down rural students and discourage them
- Living conditions in refugee/IDP camps and hot spots lead to deprioritising education and prevent young students from accessing digital education due to lack of electricity, equipment, and the cost of internet
- De facto authorities prohibit political education and play a censorship role in curricula-setting in formal and informal education. They impose security checks on those who propose such activities. This deters education providers from political topics and prevents youth from accessing them

2 University fees have reportedly increased in the past 5 years.

- Authority figures encourage youth to pick up arms instead of acquiring a university degree. A local governance official reportedly said: ''Pick up a gun instead of this meaningless piece of paper''
- Lack of regional and international recognition of degrees issued by universities in the North and North West Syria.
- Politicisation of recognition inside Syria including in areas outside government control: Northern Aleppo and Idlib universities do not recognise each other's degrees. This means graduates cannot use those degrees to apply for work before getting local recognition which often entails sitting a few additional subjects and extra costs.

The international university for science and progress in E'izaz is not recognised in Idlib due to a disagreement between the Interim and Salvation governments. This means students between two neighbouring cities are required to equivalate their degrees to be able to work and use their degree

Factors that Specifically Influence Women's and Girls' Education

In addition to the above mentioned factors, women and girls are affected by a set of factors that influence their access to education, educational choices, and their opportunities.

- Customs and traditions that undermine women's and girl's independence and attribute their financial burden or potential income to their husbands. The prevalent mental mode is "if we educate the boy, his income will stay in the family, while the girl will marry and if she works her income will go to her husband"
- Distance of home residence[3] to universities can be a determining factor due to women's and girls' restricted mobility; they cannot travel long distances without a chaperon .
- Excluding women from engineering and veterinary studies
- The potential of interaction with the other sex
- Discrimination based on outfit choice and whether or not it is modest enough
- Absence of women leadership from the educational sector
- Child marriage
- Family authority: families might prohibit women and girls from attending informal education depending on the topic of those educational sessions

3 This also adds on to the economic hardship factor.

Gender norms and power imbalance

The differential access to education between men and women and the general discrepancy of social, economic and political privileges for men over women, are reflected in greater exclusion of women and more power for men to exercise decision-making, express opinions, and participate in public life. Furthermore, the impacts of gender segregation of women from early age to professional life impede their ability to fulfil their potential. For example, female teachers now fear entering schools that have male principals, and their self-confidence and worth are shaken by male presence.

The allocation of certain educational tracks to men only creates a vacuum in certain professions, such as engineering and veterinary jobs. This is counter-intuitive since women are often the ones taking care of the cows in rural areas but are not allowed to study for a veterinary degree. Similarly, female farmers who have practical experience and can benefit greatly from an agricultural engineering degree are not allowed this specialisation. While segregation runs through most aspects of life, there is an obvious lack of female doctors due to the social stigma against women in the medical field, which can seriously impact women's and girls' access to healthcare.

Participants underscored the importance of women's and girls' education due to an assumed higher likelihood of knowledge transfer to the community. The justification is that women are more woven into the social fabric than men because of the care roles ascribed to them.

Social norms around professional status can affect men and boys, women and girls. Coupled with the gender bias towards boys in medical and engineering professions social norms can inhibit boys' and men's ability to set their professional trajectory. A couple of participants shared anecdotal examples about boys and girls. The first is about a person who was forced into medical studies by his father, which led to his academic failure. The

second example was about a kindergarten girl who was encouraged by her teacher with wishes for her to be a doctor in the future, in what her mother viewed as a complete disregard to the age appropriateness of this question or the wishes the girl might have at that very young age. In the mother's view, this can set up the girl for a great sense of failure if she does not manage to become a doctor.

Solutions

First and foremost, degree recognition should be depoliticised. Youth education should not be used as a bargaining chip between de facto authorities.

Participants listed several solutions which can be classified under three categories:

1. Logistic and Economic Solutions

- Set up a digital Infrastructure for Virtual Education
- Build new higher education facilities or satellite offices in high-density areas far from urban centres to improve the access of rural youth to education
- Subsidising university transportation for the most economically vulnerable students
- Offer free online tuition for high school students
- Offer subsidies for university literature and stationary costs
- Offer subsidized university dorms
- Create a holding library for curricula literature collected from students who passed to the next year, so new students can borrow them

2. Collaboration with the civil society

- Scholarships - civil society organisations offer university scholarships and have access to the diaspora who can be instrumental contributors
- Encourage civic awareness about participation in formal and informal decision-making by granting civil society organisations access to universities
- Engage civil society in parents' awareness raising about the factors influencing youth education

It was noted that the Free Aleppo University which is under the temporary government already allows civil society access, while Idlib University does not allow such access because it is under the salvation government which is less favourable toward civic presence.

3. Education design

- A learn to act approach: credible, free space for the exchange of ideas and information, linked to opportunities for practical application in real-life settings.
- Appropriate for the environment: responsive to the local challenges for accessing education, from the choice of location (a lit, main street) to sensitivity to local customs.
- Motivational: offers webinars and recorded interviews with experts and people with inspiring lived experience
- Inclusive design for Persons with Disability (PwD)
- Human rights-based design: offers legal clinics, and basic legal awareness of rights and legal frameworks (including but not limited to: constitution, UNSCR 2254, inheritance, marriage and divorce, etc)
- Gender-responsive design: includes affirmative action, as women might need encouragement to participate and assert themselves in class or training sessions.
- Building self-confidence and expression: offers Public Speaking skills, Communication Skills, and Civic Engagement skills
- Breaks stereotypes about success and mental modes that create a hierarchy of social status based on educational background with medical doctors on top of the pyramid

Areas to Include in Youth Education

Participants highlighted crucial missing or not sufficiently available areas which can prepare youth to better engage in professional and public life.

- Cyber security and countering cyber blackmail
- Information technology
- Digital literacy
- Digital Design
- Critical thinking and civic education[4]
- Independent and political writing skills
- Political literacy, negotiation skills, advocacy and lobbying skills to enable youth to demand their rights
- Life skills
- Field visits to make theoretical studies relatable to reality
- Psychosocial support and trauma-informed education
- Exposure to other cultures to expand the limited horizons in hyper-local settings

Youth also underscored art, music, and recreational activities to humanise the educational and lived environment.

4 Currently, most faculties have 6 Sharia subjects per faculty

Conclusions

There is a marked tension between local governance bodies[5] and civil society organisations over the role and place of youth in society. The latter believe that youth should have access to quality education, free from structural barriers, and in an environment that enables critical thinking and civic engagement, while local governance bodies express a favourable position towards youth militarized involvement over education and seemingly treat education as an ideological preparedness ground with total disregard to civic engagement.

Notably, participants did not touch upon the issue of de facto authorities' run Sharia schools and institutes and their direct influence on formal education in Northern Syria. However, they were aware of the ideological competition over youth and the weaponization of gender segregation to further expand a politicised Sharia influence on youth. Youth were vigilant about the difference between their Islamic belief and the ideological effort exerted to influence them under the Sharia banner.

The marginalisation of education and lack of solution or ideation spaces were evident even to participants who are part of the education system. To conclude, below are five areas of priority to address by relevant stakeholders:

1. Urgently address child marriage, with girls 15-16 of age being the largest at-risk group.

2. A concerted national and international effort is needed to support local universities outside government-controlled areas to meet the requirements of the Lisbon Convention (1997)[6] is urgent not only to ensure an incentive for youth to pursue education but also as a prevention measure against alternative war economy dependent pathways.

5 Formal and informal

6 See more: https://rm.coe.int/168007f2c7

3. Exert pressure on the salvation government to protect the civic space as they are the main havens of self-expression and can prepare youth for participation in formal and informal decision-making.

4. Make psychosocial support, trauma healing, and counselling available for youth to identify their goals and priorities in education and life while navigating a volatile context.

5. Support multi-sectoral collaboration to develop innovative non-state centric approaches that can create links between unrecognised governance structures, educational institutions, civil society, and the private sector to respond to the compounded challenges to youth access to education (see pages 2-4).


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