



Refugees in Lebanon

Palestinian children's voices



Save the Children
Sweden

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Text and Photographs:

Mia Gröndahl

Save the Children Sweden fights for children's right. We deliver immediate and lasting improvements to children's lives worldwide.

ISBN-10: 91-7321-218-0
ISBN-13: 978-91-7321-218-2

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The photo on page 14 is from UNRWA's photoarchive

Contents

Foreword	7
Interview with Farah	8
History of the Refugees.....	14
Lack of Protection	15
Interview with Elham	16
The Girl Child's Rights.....	20
Interview with Muhammed	21
The Refugee Child with Disabilities	26
Interview with Ahmed	27
The Right to Quality Education and Protection.....	31
Interview with Mahmoud	32
The children in this reports come from four of Lebanon's 12 Palestinian refugee camps	38
Life in the Refugee Camps.....	39
Interview with Jamila and Azab	40
The Refugee Children's Future.....	45
Save the Children Sweden calls for	46
Save the Children Sweden's Partner Organisations in Lebanon	47
Reference Material	48

Foreword

Save the Children Sweden (SCS) works to promote and protect the rights of the child in Sweden and abroad. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation for all our work. The Convention formulates the child's right to express his or her opinion on all matters that concern him or her. One of SCS's most important objectives is to make the child's voice heard.

This report is part of a series of reports about Palestinian children's rights. The Swedish journalist Mia Gröndahl has met and interviewed Palestinian refugee children residing in Lebanon in order for them to tell us, in their own words; what it is like to be a Palestinian refugee living in Lebanon. The children talk about how they experience daily violations of their rights and how they feel hopelessness and frustration; but also about the things they enjoy and that make them happy in life, as well as about how they are dreaming about and aiming for a better future.

Save the Children Sweden hopes that this report will initiate a debate in Sweden, Lebanon and internationally about the Palestinian refugee child's situation. We would also like to see this report as a demand to stakeholders to take their responsibility for the implementation of these children's rights.

Save the Children Sweden would like to thank all the children and their parents and our partner organizations Naba'a and Children and Youth Centre for their contribution and support for the realisation of this report.

Beirut June 2006



Elisabet Brunnberg Johnsson
Regional Representative
Middle East and North Africa Region
Save the Children Sweden



“My dream is to become an English teacher, but sometimes my mother says that people can’t have dreams if they live in Shatila. What if she’s right?” Farah, 14.



Farah has a beautiful, slightly bashful smile and curly hair that is brushed back and tied in a bushy ponytail. Like any 14-year-old girl, she's conscious of her appearance. She doesn't bother with makeup but every morning, she wants to be able to take a shower, wash her hair and put on a clean, white shirt and a pair of nice jeans beneath her school uniform. Only then does she feel ready to go to school. The problem is that the camp seldom has water or electricity. Sometimes Farah cannot wash her hair for several days.

"I don't feel good if I feel dirty," she says. "When I wake up in the morning I always check to see if the electricity is back on. Without it, we can't pump water either. Sometimes it's so dark in the flat that I can't see my face in the mirror, so I have to brush my hair in front of a candle or paraffin lamp."



We are sitting in the living room of the Kachane family's flat. The room, which also doubles as hall and kitchen, has a comfortable feel to it, with old-fashioned armchairs and pictures decorating the straw-coloured walls. Farah and her mother Chadja, who has just entered the door with a paper bag crammed with onions, tomatoes and rice, are the only family members at home this early in the afternoon. Her father has found temporary work as a blacksmith and the other children are at school. Chadja is keen to join in the conversation and shuttles between the sofa and kitchen, which are partitioned off by a curtain. Farah is the middle child and her siblings are Muhammed, 9, and sisters Ola, 17, and Nancy, 15. There was once another girl, also named Nancy, whose beautiful framed portrait has pride of place on the wall.

“My first Nancy died when she was only seven,” Chadja explains. “She was killed in a bomb attack during the civil war in late 1982. I was hit by shrapnel in the back and my mother in the stomach, but Nancy was hit in the head and died instantly. The photo was taken just a couple of days before her death. Nancy never got to see it.”

Many families in Shatila suffered during the civil war. The photo of little Nancy is not merely testimony to a loved child but serves as a lasting reminder that war and death are never far away from the camp. Farah reveals that many of her friends have lost loved ones.

“I’m so glad and thankful that both my mother and father are alive. I know many people who only have one parent left.”

Farah is in her second term as an eighth grader at the UNRWA school in Shatila. The school has two names, both derived from Palestinian towns. Thus, when the girls have their shift the name is Hemeh, and when the boys arrive for the afternoon it changes to Ramallah. Farah’s ambition is to become an English teacher, and she works hard in order to pass her exams and move up to the next class. But this is no easy task in a school with too few teachers and too many pupils.

“At one point there were 47 of us in my class,” Farah says. “It was really tough – chaotic actually. I could hardly keep up with the work because everyone kept talking all the time and you couldn’t hear what the teacher said. More than a third of my classmates didn’t get good enough grades and had to leave the school.”

Farah feels sorry for the girls who were forced to leave, saying she thinks their grades would have been good enough if the teacher had explained certain things better and given them more time. Some of the girls have found work as hairdressers and shop assistants, but most are at home waiting for marriage. In Lebanon, it can be difficult for a girl without a good education to find a good husband.

“The men here prefer an educated woman,” Farah says, adding that she plans to help her own children with their lessons so they can do well at school.

Farah is not prepared only to be a teacher to her own children, which is why she is working to get herself a good education. Most important is that she finishes her studies and finds a job. Only afterwards will she get married, she says, adding that she would like two children – a girl and a boy. And she does not plan to stop working when she becomes a mother.

“Why would I stop working if I had a job with a good salary? I’ll only be at home when the children are ill.”

But what if her husband insists she stops working?

“If he forces me to choose between my work and him, then maybe I’ll have to stop. Otherwise he might divorce me.”

Farah loves English and offers to read a passage from her textbook for me. The words come a bit haltingly but she says she will not give up. One day she wants to be standing in front of a class teaching English, though not in one of Shatila's UNRWA schools.

“I want to teach in a good school. Here, the communication between teacher and class usually isn't very good, which means things can easily get out of hand,” she says. “Teachers aren't supposed to hit pupils but it happens almost every day. If you're a troublemaker and disrupt class you'll get the cane. You can also get hit if you fail an exam, to make sure you don't make the same mistakes again.”



Farah has herself experienced physical punishment at school, but she and her school friends would never criticise a bad teacher. Pupil democracy is an unknown concept. Farah says the only thing that would stop a teacher from hitting children would be if all the mothers in the class went to the head teacher and complained. But she is not sure even that would help. What she is certain about is that she would never hit her pupils.

“It’s better to talk to them. I don’t think they’d like me anymore if I hit them, and then I’d be afraid they wouldn’t like English anymore either. That would be awful.”

Chadja beams with pride as her daughter talks about her ambitions. The two have a warm and close relationship. Chadja wants nothing more than for Farah’s dreams to come true; her own aspirations of an education and happy, comfortable life came to nothing. Chadja, who was born in Shatila and has spent her entire life there, says:

“We hoped that our children wouldn’t have to live as refugees, but things have actually turned out worse. Unless we get help we won’t be able to afford to send Farah to university. I’m not even sure if we’ll be able to let her complete ninth grade and get her grades. We have three other children to think about besides Farah, and it’s expensive to buy uniforms, books, pens and school bags for all of them.”

Another major headache is the ban on Palestinian refugees from working in Lebanon. Unless the law is changed, Farah will never be able to apply to work in a school outside the camp. Teaching vacancies in Lebanon are reserved for Lebanese citizens.

Chadja is reluctant to go into details with her daughter about all the obstacles she will face as she grows up.

“I don’t want her to worry,” she says. “I just want her to be able to get on with her studies in peace and quiet. The most important thing is that Farah gets an education.”

History of the Refugees

After the end of the Second World War, the UN proposed partitioning the British mandate of Palestine into two independent states, one Palestinian Arab and one Jewish (UN Resolution 181). During the Arab-Israeli War that followed in 1948, over 700,000 Palestinians were forced to flee from their homes and villages that became part of the new Jewish Israeli state. Many of the refugees ended up in Lebanon, but intended to return home when the violence had ceased. Israel did not allow this to happen when the war was over, and today 58 years later, these refugees are still residing in Lebanon. This population has grown since then; by natural population increase and additional refugees arriving in Lebanon during the 1960s, 70s and 80s.

Today there are around 400,000 Palestinian refugees registered with the UN in Lebanon, but around one third of these refugees have left Lebanon for a third country. There are also around 35,000 refugees who arrived in Lebanon in 1967, but have not been allowed to register with the UN, as the UN census covers only those who arrived in Lebanon in connection to the 1948 war. In the absence of precise statistics, estimates of the number of actual residing Palestinian refugees in Lebanon today range from 200,000 to as many as 400,000. That equals approximately 10 percent of the Lebanese population.



Photo by UNRWA

Lack of Protection

CRC article 2:

All rights apply to all children without exception. It is the State's obligation to protect children from any form of discrimination and to take positive action to promote their rights.

The Palestinian refugee child in Lebanon is denied civil and social rights, which means that it cannot claim citizenship and is denied health and social services that Lebanese children are entitled to. In the labor market, Palestinians have limited possibilities to find work as the Labor Law allows Palestinians to work in Lebanon, but only after getting a work permit, which entails very complicated requirements. Also and more importantly, the law forbids Palestinians to take up 73 professions, mainly those that have syndicates. In 2005, the Minister of Labor issued a decree that makes it easier for Palestinians to obtain work permits. This decree is not lasting as it was issued by a minister, and not endorsed by the Council of Ministers. Practically, Palestinians are left with the only choice of taking informal and unstable jobs that do not enable them to provide life's basic demands. This has resulted in a situation where at least 60 percent of the Palestinian refugee population lives in poverty.

In order to support the Palestinian refugees that fled their country in 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution No. 302 (IV) on 8 December 1949 creating the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The agency was mandated to provide education, health and relief to the refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, the West Bank, and Gaza. Today, 58 years later, the agency is still active in providing these services to parts of the refugee populations in these areas. UNRWA's mandate, in difference to UNHCR's (Office of the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees), does not provide protection for the refugees; instead, UNRWA is only providing relief services. Palestinian refugees are consequently without international protection and depend on the policies of the host countries they live in. However, Palestinian refugee children have the right of protection as stated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).



“I wanted to finish school but my parents said, ‘Are you joking, what’s the point? You won’t need an education when you’re married’.” Elham, 16

Three months ago there was a knock on the door of the Hindawi family's home in the Ein Al Hilweh refugee camp. On the doorstep stood a young man with his parents. He had come to ask 16-year-old Elham to marry him.

“I'd never seen him before! I didn't have a clue who he was,” Elham says, her eyes wide with surprise. It transpired the young man had caught sight of her the day before, when she was walking home from school.

His offer came as a shock. Eighth-grader Elham had not even considered the idea of marriage before. A few of her friends had been promised to suitors at the age of 14 and then married at 15, but Elham had other plans for her future.

“I was planning to continue my studies and train to be a nursery teacher,” she says. “My great dream is to work with children, but that's not going to happen now.”

Elham's parents saw the offer of marriage as a gift from heaven. For years they had lived with financial worries because Elham's father, a stone polisher, could never earn enough to feed ten hungry mouths. Elham recalls many nights when she and her brothers and sisters went to bed hungry. Well aware that her parents could not afford to pay for further studies, she understands why they accepted the marriage offer straight away. What she cannot come to terms with is that nobody asked what she wanted.

“When you're young, your opinion is worth nothing in this society,” she says. “Suddenly I was promised in marriage, but no one asked me what I wanted or what I thought about it.” She continues: “I wasn't even allowed to stay on at school. I asked my parents if I could at least graduate from high school but they just said, ‘Are you joking, what's the point? You won't need an education when you're married’.”

Elham managed to persuade her parents to agree to one thing: that the wedding wouldn't be until after her 18th birthday next spring. That would have allowed her to finish her high-school studies by then, but this remained out of the question for her parents. Elham's mother never attended school and cannot read or write. Her father dropped out after the seventh grade. Her fiancé gave her no support, either. He himself left school after the eighth grade and now works as a municipal refuse collector.

“He just agrees with everything my parents say,” Elham sighs. “He says, ‘Your parents are right. Soon you're going to get married and have children and you can't look after the children while you're studying or working’.”

Even so, Elham has not given up. Her family may have barred her from attending school but she refuses just to sit around at home waiting for the wedding and is determined to make the best of the months ahead. She works every day at the after-school centre, where she helps younger children with their homework and organises activities. She has also signed up for a computer course at the centre. At least her father has not forbidden her from going there.



“A computer course will always be useful and I’m going to make sure I get a certificate once I’ve finished it,” she says. “It’s important I take this chance now because once I’m married I won’t be able to go to the centre anymore. My husband will forbid me; he has already told me. I asked why but he didn’t answer.”

Since the engagement, Elham meets her fiancé once a week when he visits her house on Friday afternoons. Her mother supervises these meetings closely. Elham says she has mixed feelings about the wedding. She still wishes she could make her own choice but admits she looks forward to those Friday visits.

“I had no feelings at all for him at the beginning but I’ve got to know him now – his name is Muhammed – and I can see he’s a good man. He’s very good to his parents and I think he can actually give me a good life.”

Gold glitters round Elham’s neck and wrists. For the engagement, Muhammed gave her not just a single ring but several gold rings, necklaces and earrings as well as a gold clock. She proudly shows off the jewellery, which she chose herself. The elegant white coat she has on was also a present from her fiancé.

“My parents are very pleased and happy: they don’t need to buy anything for me anymore,” Elham explains. “Muhammed will buy me everything I need.”

During their Friday meetings Elham and Muhammed discuss their future life together: where they will live and what their home will be like. They have even decided how many children they want and what sort of parents they will be. Says Elham:

“We only want two children. We’ve talked a lot about how difficult it is to be Palestinian here in Lebanon, so after we’ve had our first child we’ll wait many years before the second one. We’ve agreed that our children will have better lives – better than mine, anyway. We’ll listen to what our children say and support them if they want to study. Muhammed has also promised not to force them to marry against their will.”

Elham has also used the Friday chats to discuss her own life as a married woman. She dreads the thought of becoming isolated at home with nothing to do other than her work as a wife and mother. Since she will not be allowed to attend the after-school centre, she plans to get the children to come to her instead.

“I’ll be a day-care teacher in my own home,” she reveals. “Many children need help to pass their exams and with their homework. It’s also important to have time to read books for pleasure. I will tell the children wonderful stories that they can’t hear elsewhere. Muhammed isn’t against the idea. As long as I’m at home it’s fine with him.”



The Girl Child's Rights

CRC article 2

It is the state's obligation to protect children from any form of discrimination and to take positive action to promote their rights.

Many Palestinian refugee girls face discrimination at different levels. Girls' mobility becomes more restricted when they reach puberty, and they have less freedom to go outside the house. This deprives them of playing in the alleys of the camp with their peers or participating in NGOs' programs and activities, such as summer camps, trips, sports and extracurricular activities. At home, girls are often victims of domestic violence practiced by both parents and male brothers. They are also often treated as adult women and are expected to play social roles as such. Some are married away before they reach the age of 18 years.



“I get upset when grown-ups tease me or are unkind. It doesn’t bother me if children say or do stupid things because they don’t know any better, but a grown-up should understand my problem and not make fun of me.”

Muhammed, 13.



The youth centre staff are starting to get worried. Where's Muhammed? He should have been here half an hour ago. There is usually no cause for alarm if a 13-year-old is late, but Muhammed has been blind since birth and walks the long distance between school and the youth centre by himself. One of the staff suggests he might have gone home and rings Muhammed's family. But he is not there and the phone call only spreads the anxiety to his mother, who bursts out: "What if my boy has fallen into a hole in the street and hurt himself?"

Just then Muhammed suddenly appears in the doorway and everyone heaves a sigh of relief that he is safe and sound. Muhammed, though, does not understand what all the fuss is about and says he does not want to be treated like a kid.

"My mother's always worried about me," he says. "As soon as I'm late she sends someone out to look for me. I say to her, 'Don't worry about me. I can look after myself'."

Muhammed lives with his six sisters, younger brother and parents in the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp in northern Lebanon. He shares his handicap with two of his sisters, Ola, 16, and Rawiya, 20. Many families in the refugee camp would be ashamed to have three sight-impaired children and might perhaps even try to hide them away, but Muhammed's parents have never drawn any distinctions between any of their seven children. All have been encouraged to be active, develop their interests and do well at school. Muhammed is not made to feel he is handicapped.

“I don't feel any different from other children my age. Maybe some of my classmates feel I'm different from them, but I don't feel that,” he says. “I don't want to be treated differently. I want to be treated like everyone else, and I don't want anyone to feel sorry for me.”



Muhammed's first five years of schooling were spent at a school for the blind and sight-impaired in Beirut. Since Beirut is a couple of hours away by car from Nahr el-Bared, Muhammed was a weekly boarder and only returned home at weekends. He missed his parents, but the fact that Ola and Rawiya were boarders at the same school made life easier. In fact, Muhammed was very happy there. The teachers were specially trained and lessons were adapted to his needs. But, last year, Muhammed was told he could no longer continue there.

“UNRWA said I couldn't go there anymore. My father told me that UNRWA didn't have the money to pay for me, and my family doesn't have the money either. So I had to move back home and start at the local school here in the camp.”

While Muhammed is happy to be at home again, he misses his old classmates and the school in Beirut. The UNRWA school at Nahr el-Bared is rough and overcrowded, he says, and he doesn't think he learns as much in lessons – especially in his favourite subjects of maths and science. Some of the lessons he has had in the past are not even on the timetable. What Muhammed misses most is music. By the time he had to leave the school in Beirut, he had learnt to play the violin and was about to join a music group.

“I miss the violin,” he confides. “I'm afraid I've already forgotten how to play. There aren't any violins here in the camp. My father is looking around for one but I don't think we can afford it. Violins are expensive.”

Instead, Muhammed plays the youth centre's electric organ, practising on it every day after school. He is just about to have a lesson with Wajdeh, a young after-school helper – provided the electricity comes back on. The power supply is never reliable, coming and going just as it does in all Lebanon's refugee camps. Many things need to be improved at Nahr el-Bared, most of all the overcrowding and the untreated sewage that runs into the sea on the beaches where children play during summer and where the camp's fishermen empty their nets. But Muhammed does not see the shortcomings, misery and ugliness at the camp; to him, Nahr el-Bared is a beautiful place.

“I feel at home here,” he explains. “If I go somewhere else I never think it's going to be as nice as it is here.”

Muhammed can get around by himself almost everywhere in Nahr el-Bared. From the age of six his parents allowed him out by himself. He gets lost from time to time, though this is easily done among the camp's labyrinthine streets and alleys. He never carries a white stick and feels no need for one since he is not totally blind and sees buildings, cars and people as shadows lining his path. Even so, he has fallen into holes dug in the road and often bumps into people. Mohammed has learned the hard way that there are grown-ups who make no allowance at all for his disability.

“Sometimes they sound really horrible and shout ‘Watch out where you’re going, you blind idiot!’ It doesn’t bother me if children say or do stupid things because they don’t know any better, but a grown-up should understand my problem and not make fun of me.”

He wishes there were more helpful grown-ups out there to guide him. There are no proper pavements in the camp, so Muhammed sometimes has to venture into the traffic. Crossing a street without assistance is difficult and forces him to rely entirely on his hearing.

“I listen for cars among all the different sounds but sometimes it’s really difficult. The electric generators around the camp are often so loud that I’m not sure if I can hear cars even though I’m concentrating. It makes me a bit scared of getting run over.”

Muhammed uses touch to “see” about him, which he combines with hearing to form pictures of the people he encounters. He does not understand exactly how, but he knows exactly what his friends look like. When meeting someone new, he says, there is much to be learned from a simple handshake.

“I can tell immediately what sort of person it is. I notice how they press my hand, the shape of their hand and how it feels. Then I know if they’re a happy or sad persons, or a good or a bad persons.”

By now the electricity is back on and Muhammed wants to start playing the organ and get some practise done before the next power cut. But before he goes off to play I ask him what he wants to do in the future. What are his plans?

“I want to keep going with my studies,” he replies. “Maybe go to university like my sister Rawiya. If not, I’ve always got my music.”

The Refugee Child with Disabilities

CRC article 23:

A disabled child has the right to special care, education and training to help him or her enjoy full and decent life in dignity and achieve the greatest degree of self-reliance and social integration possible.

The Palestinian refugee child with a disability faces different kinds of discrimination as there is often a negative attitude towards persons with disabilities in the refugee community and the Arab community at large. They are not entitled to educational, health and rehabilitation services available to Lebanese children with disabilities. The Palestinian refugee child also suffers from a lack of extra-curricular activities that could ensure joy, dignity and self-reliance.

UNRWA has a policy of inclusion of children with disabilities into the same schools as children without disabilities attend. Some children have positive experiences of this policy and have enjoyed and benefited from being included in a class with children without disabilities. However, many children with disabilities have negative experiences of this policy as they feel they did not get the extra support and understanding they needed. This limited understanding is the main reason why many children with disabilities drop out of school. There is a need to give support to these children to provide them with qualitative education, access to schools and to accomplish attitude change towards people with disabilities among teachers, social workers and others in the child's surrounding.



“I’m never going back to school again. It hurts too much when you get the cane.” Ahmed, 13

Ahmed is a little boy with a tough-guy attitude and kind, brown eyes. He looks much younger than his 13 years, and even though he is wearing platform shoes he is barely taller than his little sister. We meet at an after-school centre in the Rashidieh refugee camp. It's here that children and young people who live in the camp go for activities or simply to get help with their homework. But Ahmed has no school books or homework. One day three years ago he ran away from school, and never went back.

“I didn't dare to,” Ahmed admits, his tough façade softens. At first, he doesn't want to concede that the reason he didn't go back was because he was frightened. He says initially that “it was nice not to have to go” and that “I'd been planning for ages to stop going”.

Ahmed was just ten years old when he fled the school in panic one day, finally driven away by the black cane the headmaster kept in his office.

“Each stroke feels like an electric shock on your hand,” Ahmed says. All the teachers at the school used the cane, not just the headmaster. The implement, he says, is made of a wooden strip like those around doors and windows and fitted with numerous drawing pins covered by black insulating tape. The drawing pin heads poke through in places where the tape has worn thin.”

Ahmed's life disintegrated when his parents divorced. Islamic Sharia law dictates that sons must live with their fathers, while daughters who are still minors reside with their mothers. As a result, Ahmed's family split in two and his mother moved back to her family, taking Ahmed's beloved younger sister with her. Ahmed and his elder brother stayed with his father, who remarried shortly after the divorce.

Ahmed was often teased at school about his unsettled home life, and some children called his mother terrible names. Ahmed declines to say exactly what insults were used, but says they dishonoured his family. When his little sister was taunted with the same insults he couldn't restrain his anger.

“I hit a boy in the playground, and he ran to the headmaster and complained. When the headmaster came after me with the cane he looked so angry I thought he was going to kill me. I just dropped my books and ran home to my mother.”

In his three years at the school Ahmed had already been beaten several times by the black cane. Most of his classmates had experienced the sting of its blows and the humiliation of being punished in front of their friends. The cane was used to punish many different things a pupil might do wrong, ranging from fighting in the playground to answering questions wrongly in class. Sometimes you only got a couple of strokes, but Ahmed was hit so many times it made him cry out in pain.

“I cried too,” he says. “It was impossible to keep back the tears. It hurts so much when the cane hits your hand. You have to stand in front of the class holding out your hands with your palms open. Then the headmaster raises the cane and hits you ten times on each hand. If you try to cup your palm or pull back your hand you get double the number of strokes.”

When Ahmed’s mother heard what had happened in the playground, she went back to the school with Ahmed to speak to the headmaster. The headmaster told her not to worry and assured her everything would be alright.

“But as soon as she left the room, he started to beat me with the cane,” Ahmed says. “Then he took me back to my classroom and told the teacher not to let me go out at break time. I realised then that he was planning to beat me again then, so I jumped out of a window and ran away. Right then I hated the headmaster so much I could have hit him. I found a stone that I threw at the building where his office is. After that I never went back to school again.”



Ahmed's mother and father have both urged him to give the school one last chance, but he refuses to go back while the headmaster is still there. Several of his former classmates have also left. If Ahmed were to start the fourth grade now, he would be among ten-year-old boys – kids, in his eyes. Even so, he envies his friends who have continued their schooling. They can now read and write the difficult Arabic language, while Ahmed can only pen his own name and those of his brother and father. And he cannot read more than a few words.

“It feels bad, especially when I’m with my old classmate Majid,” Ahmed says. “He’s not taller than me but these days I somehow feel smaller than him.”

Since dropping out of school Ahmed has worked at a car repair yard and collected scrap metal. Mostly, though, he has drifted aimlessly around the camp. Unemployment is rife among Palestinian men in refugee camps and a 13-year-old has little hope of finding work. Unless he is prepared to work for free.

“I got to do everything at the repair yard,” Ahmed says. “I jacked up the cars, changed the oil and brakes, helped out the mechanic, cleaned his tools and kept the whole place clean and tidy. But I didn’t get paid a penny.”

Ahmed is pinning his hopes on the after-school centre helping him to join a course on repairing air-conditioning systems. It is not exactly what he dreamt of doing. He would prefer to be a taxi driver if he was older. And if he had not dropped out of school he would have studied to become a doctor.

That idea feels a long way off now, though Ahmed says he still wants to learn to read and write. “Provided I can find somewhere where I can learn – apart from the school.”

The Right to Quality Education and Protection

CRC article 28:

The child has a right to education, and the State's duty is to ensure that primary education is free and compulsory, to encourage different forms of secondary education accessible to every child and to make higher education available to all on the basis of capacity. School discipline shall be consistent with the child's right and dignity.

CRC article 19:

The State shall protect the child from all forms of maltreatments by parents or others responsible for the care of the child and establish appropriate programmes for prevention of abuse and the treatment of victims.

Palestinians have traditionally seen education as important and as an investment for the future. But at present, the education level among the Palestinian refugee children in Lebanon is declining. UNRWA is the main provider of basic education for the refugees (95 percent of the refugee population attends UNRWA schools). A decreasing budget per refugee has restricted the agency's possibilities to hire new teachers and the number of children per classroom is growing; at present, the average is 43 students per class. UNRWA's limited resources have also led to lack of equipment. In addition, the Lebanese government's restriction of permission to build schools outside the refugee camps led to a limitation in suitable school facilities.

As much as 96 percent of the refugee population start school, but after the age of 10 many start to drop out. At the age of 14, 20 percent are not attending school, and at the age of 16, as many as half of the students dropped out. Teachers' violence, such as corporal punishment, and violence between students make many leave school. Others have problems of understanding the lessons and keeping up with the class, and they leave school because they fail exams or because they are not moved to the next grade. It also happens that children, especially boys, have to leave school to work and contribute to the family income.



“The worst thing about being poor is not having enough to eat. We often go hungry.” Mahmoud, 10

Brothers Wael and Mahmoud are inseparable. Wherever one goes, the other goes too. Yet today 13-year-old Wael has come alone to meet us at the Shatila youth centre. His younger brother had an asthma attack during the night and has stayed behind to wait for us at the family's rented flat inside the Shatila refugee camp.

“Mahmoud is ill almost every week,” Wael says. “He’s sensitive to the damp air in the camp.”

Wael is in a hurry to get home and we follow him, watching the hood of his blue jumper flap up and down as he weaves his way between piles of rubbish and a stinking open sewer. The further we walk into the camp, the darker it gets on the narrow streets and alleys. Ground-floor flats at the foot of the high-rise blocks never see the sun at all.

Wael and Mahmoud live in a tiny flat with their mother Reehab and elder brother Ibrahim, 17. Their parents divorced some years ago. There is little natural light in the spartan living quarters, which have become even murkier since the camp's electricity supply broke down (along with the water supply) a few months ago. We feel our way through the hall, catching sight of the kitchen to the left, where a candle is burning. The family is waiting for us in the room ahead. Here, Mahmoud and Ibrahim, who also has asthma, are lying fully clothed beneath blankets on thin mattresses placed directly on the cold concrete floor.

Reehab is sitting in a chair beside the window, the only source of natural light in the flat. She spends her days here doing embroidery until her eyes hurt, though her efforts earn her less than \$ 12 a month. Reehab recently turned 40 but has the tired, lined face of an old woman. She has much to worry about. The exorbitant \$100 rent for the flat is due soon, her violent and brutal ex-husband is a continual threat and the children's futures are uncertain. But her biggest worry at present is how she will be able to afford the expensive medications that Mahmoud and Ibrahim need for their asthma.

“I’ve been to UNRWA lots of times and asked for help but nothing happens,” Reehab says. “When I was married I was always told it was up to the husband to provide for his family. I was separated from him but it didn’t make any difference. Now I’m divorced but I still don’t get any support. UNRWA just says that Ibrahim will be 18 in a few months time and then it will be up to him to provide for the family.”

The problem is that Ibrahim is often sick and cannot always work. Reehab shows us a doctor's certificate and a prescription for medicine she cannot afford to buy him. Mahmoud and Ibrahim now share the last inhaler, though they have different types of asthma and need different medicines.



Reehab moved to Shatila to keep the family together and to protect her sons. She and the two youngest boys were abandoned in the Ein el-Hilweh refugee camp in southern Lebanon by her husband, who took Ibrahim, then 12, with him to Shatila. There, Ibrahim was forced to work instead of attending school. Reehab worried constantly about her son but her husband refused to reply when she asked about him. When her husband threatened to take Wael with him too, she decided she had to take matters into her own hands.

“It ended in divorce, but at least I’m with my boys now,” she says, pinning her headscarf firmly into place before getting ready to pay yet another visit to UNRWA.

The family lives in true poverty. Reehab and her sons have barely any possessions between them; there are no toys in the room, not even a football. The few items of furniture, given to them by a friend who was planning to throw them away, are old and worn. The only thing in good condition is a small television set in the corner – donated by an aid organisation. It is covered by a red prayer mat because the family cannot watch it without electricity. There is no radio or telephone, and Reehab can afford to buy clothes for her sons only once a year. She does so at Eid al Fitr, the holiday that follows the Muslim month of fasting and on which children traditionally receive presents.

“That’s when we get jeans and new shirts,” Wael says, standing up to show off his trousers. Mahmoud adds: “We wear them for a year, until next Eid al Fitr, but our friends get new clothes every month.”

Wael says he and his brothers are so poor they do not even have a cupboard for their clothes. Instead, they keep them in a cardboard box. A sad look comes over Mahmoud as he adds: “We’re much poorer than all our friends.”

We talk for a while about what is worst about being poor. The boys say their mother often cries because she has no money, and then they start to cry too. If they fail to pay the rent on time the landlady comes and screams at them, throwing their possessions into the street.

That, says Wael, is the worst thing of all: that people lose respect for them because they are poor. His brother, by contrast, raises something different; something felt more in the stomach than the heart.

“The worst thing is being hungry,” Mahmoud says. “I get a headache and pain in my stomach when I’m hungry, and then I’ve hardly got the energy to go to school.”

The family has not eaten a full meal for two months. They can afford meat only every second month, fruit once a month or sometimes once a fortnight, and the brothers cannot remember when they last had a glass of milk. Perhaps four months ago, perhaps longer, they say.



“Mum says that milk has got too expensive,” says Wael. “One litre costs about 4,500 Lebanese pounds, so we told her we didn’t need it anymore.”

Instead of milk, the brothers sometimes get a piece of cheese or an egg for their evening meal, but often they have to make do with a few biscuits. Mahmoud reveals he only had biscuits to eat the day before.

“Sometimes there are only enough biscuits for breakfast, and then we have to drink water for the rest of the day,” he says. “If we can’t afford to buy water we go and collect it from a tank that Hezbollah puts out.”

Sometimes Mahmoud and Wael dream about all the delicious food they could eat if they had enough money. Both have their favourite dishes: Mahmoud loves grilled chicken with pickled gherkins and Wael would love to get his teeth into a hamburger with French fries and tabouleh, a Lebanese salad. For dessert, they would both choose ice cream with fruit and biscuits.

“And I’d eat up every last crumb!” Mahmoud declares.

The two brothers plan to leave Shatila when they grow up, though they have no intention of moving back to the chaos of Ein el-Hilweh. Though still young, they have plans for the future and ten-year-old Mahmoud is keen to get a job at the first opportunity.

“I’ll finish school after grade eight or nine, because I won’t be able to go to university as we can’t afford it” he says. “When I’ve earned enough money I’m going to buy a flat for my mother. I’ll furnish it for her and then move in too. I won’t get married but if Wael does then he can live with us too. We’ll live in Tyre, where my mother’s sisters live. I really love my mother.”

“Mum is the best,” agrees Wael, who for once has different plans from his brother. His ambition is to become an engineer or teacher.

Mahmoud chips in: “Every time Wael talks about continuing his education my mother says ‘May God help us!’ because we don’t have any money.” But his brother reminds him:

“Education is the only thing that can save us. Mum says that too.”



Life in the Refugee Camps

CRC article 27

State parties recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

The camps

About half of the Palestinian population in Lebanon are living in refugee camps. There are twelve official UNRWA camps in Lebanon and many other unofficial gatherings. All the camps were severely damaged during the civil war that raged in the country between 1975 and 1990. As much as three quarters of the camps' infrastructure and community service buildings were destroyed, along with many peoples' houses and shelters. Living conditions in the camps today are still difficult. Surveys show that the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon face the hardest living conditions of Palestinian refugees in the Middle East.

Most of the houses in the camps and gatherings offer low standard of living; some of them are constructed of zinc sheet walls or roofs. Many houses do not have enough, if any, windows to let light in. The winters in Lebanon are cold and rainy, and most houses give little protection from leakage and the cold. In the summer, the sun makes the houses, which lack any kind of ventilation, humid and hot. Although most people have access to electricity, the electric current is unreliable because it comes and goes, leaving the houses and its residents in the dark for hours, days and sometimes even weeks. There are seldom in- or outdoor places where children can play in safety and with enough space. There is no option other than to play in the camps' narrow and crowded streets.



The children in this reports come from four of Lebanon's 12 Palestinian refugee camps.

Shatila refugee camp is located in a suburb of Lebanon's capital Beirut. The registered refugee population of the camp is 8.200 people, but the number of people who are actually living in the camp rises up to 18.000. In addition to the Palestinian registered and unregistered refugees there are also poor Lebanese citizens and refugees and migrant workers from other countries such as Egyptians, Syrians, Kurds, and Iraqis living in the camp. The camp is known for its six- or seven-floor high buildings, built in attempts to overcome the overcrowding in the camp. This has been at the expense of safe construction and limited possibility for daylight to enter the flats of the residents of the lower floors.

The worst atrocity of the Lebanese Civil War took place in the camp in 1982. Lebanese militiamen entered the camp and massacred hundreds of civilians, many of whom were women and children.

Nahr el-Bared refugee camp is located in the north of Lebanon close to the city of Tripoli. The UNRWA registered population of the camp is 30.000, but it is estimated that as many as 35.000 people live in the camp. The camp has poor infrastructure and suffer from overcrowding.

Rashidieh refugee camp is situated outside the southern town of Tyre. Rashidieh has a registered UNRWA population of 26.000 people, but there are estimates that less than that number of people are living in the camp. Rashidieh was heavily affected by the destruction of houses and infrastructure during the civil war. It has been hard to rebuild the camp after the end of the war because the Lebanese government restricted giving out permissions to build in the Palestinian camps in the south of Lebanon.

Ein el-Hilwe refugee camp is the largest camp in Lebanon, located next to the city of Saida. The UNRWA's registered population of the camp is 45.000 but it is believed that around 60.000 people live in the camp. Like the other refugee camps, Ein el-Hilwe witnessed violence and destruction during the civil war. The camp has also been affected by some intra Palestinian fighting since the 1990s.



“Sometimes I dream of leaving Lebanon. I’d take my sister with me and go to London, where my aunt moved to. I’m sure we’d both find jobs there.” Jamila, 15



The sea is stormy and clouds lie low over the Rashidieh refugee camp on the shores of the Mediterranean. We're at the home of the Ahmad family, sitting in simple plastic chairs in our coats. The coffee warms us a little, but not enough to ward off the cold in the room. The damp sea air means the concrete walls smell of mould all year round. The odour is especially strong during summer, and in winter the walls are as cold as a refrigerator.

The family of seven shares two rooms and a kitchenette. We've asked to meet the two eldest children, sisters Jamila, 15, and Azab, 16, to talk about school life and the future. In the absence of chairs in the sparsely furnished house, the girls sit on a simple straw mat on the cold floor. Conversation is hesitant at first. Azab is a little shy and often tries to catch her younger sister's eye to get help with her answers. Azab dropped out of school last year only a year before she was due to leave.

"I think that was a mistake," says the more talkative Jamila. "If anyone should drop out it should be me. My grades are much worse than Azab's."

The girls' mother contracted cancer four years ago, and her illness turned the family's life on its head. For almost a term, Azab and Jamila had to put their school work aside, and they say now that they never caught up. Things might have been different if they had received extra teaching and support.

“We got some help with our homework at the after-school club, but the teachers at school never had time,” Azab says.

Azab fell furthest behind in Maths, Chemistry and English. Her English goes only as far as being able to say, “My name is Azab. I live in Rashidieh.” Though English is taught from grade one at UNRWA schools, neither Azab nor Jamila can string more than a few sentences together.

“I studied English for seven years but I can hardly understand anything. Languages are difficult,” Azab says.

Jamila adds: “I’ve got the same problem with computer studies. I can’t understand how computers work. It’d be interesting to learn but the teacher doesn’t have time to show me what to do.”

Azab and Jamila were so close in age that they attended the same class – along with 43 other pupils. Two, or sometimes three, girls had to share the same desk, and Azab’s place was in the far left-hand corner of the classroom. Lessons were often chaotic, with pupils running in and out of the classroom at will. The girls in front of Azab spent most of the time perched on their desk, blocking her view. Sometimes they would climb onto the desk and sing and dance. If Azab was lucky she caught the teacher’s attention a couple of times a day, but mostly she was ignored when she put her hand up.

“The teacher only really bothered about the girls in the front row,” says Azab. “It was as if the rest of us weren’t there. Nothing was explained to us and we were hardly ever allowed to answer questions. On the few occasions I asked about something I didn’t understand I was scared to repeat the question. I was afraid the teacher would think I wasn’t keeping up with the work and give me a lower grade.”

Violence is never far away from the classroom. Jamila says the chaotic situation at the school remains unchanged and, in fact, deteriorating. Many teachers have fallen into a routine of demanding peace and quiet during lessons through threats, smacks and blows. Both she and Azab have suffered maltreatment at the hands of an out-of-control teacher.

“I was talking during class,” Azab recalls. “It was during English. The teacher was Russian and couldn’t speak a word of Arabic so she just concentrated on the pupils who were good at English – there were five of them. We started talking and doing other things during her lessons. Sometimes she called the head teacher, who came and punished us. Or else she hit us herself, with a cane or a piece of hose.”

Despite all the problems, Azab misses school and says she's lonely at home without Jamila. Sometimes she asks her sister to play truant so she can keep her company. Most of all she misses the two friends with whom she shared a desk, Fathen and Zeinat. The three of them don't see much of each other nowadays. Fathen is still at school and Zeinat is married.

“Zeinat had no choice,” Azab says. “Her mother died last year after being electrocuted by a loose cable here at the camp. Her father soon found a new woman he wanted to marry and then started to look for a husband for Zeinat. She's pregnant now and I think she's quite happy, even though her sisters-in-law criticise her the whole time. They say, ‘She's so young – we have to teach her everything!’”

The girls feel sorry for Zeinat, saying that at 16 she was too young to get married. Azab may be bored at home but she is determined not to try and solve her problems by marrying too young. In any case, she does not feel mature enough yet for the responsibilities of married life. Twenty is a good age to marry, Azab asserts. Jamila says she'd wait longer than that.

“I'm not going to get married until I'm 25. Not because there's anything special I want to do beforehand, but I want time to grow up and be a young woman first.”



But the fact is that most girls in the camp marry young. Marriage at 16 or 17 is more or less a rule of thumb if you're a girl. Azab and Jamila know girls who've become wives at the age of 14, but have never met one who wanted to. Behind these child brides are mothers who actively scour the camp for potential suitors for their underage daughters. Azab and Jamila are outraged by the lengths that some are prepared mothers are prepared to go, recounting stories of heavily made-up 13-year-olds forced to venture into the bazaar dressed in tops and tights that leave little to the imagination.

“It’s all about getting rid of your daughters,” says Jamila indignantly. “Girls here are seen as a costly burden and many families try to find someone else to pay for their food and clothes. I’d wouldn’t accept it if my parents treated my sisters and me like that.”

Azab and Jamila have no special plans for the future. Azab has signed up for a computer course at the after-school club, and until it starts she will continue to help her mother at home. Jamila has no plans to continue her schooling past the eighth grade. With an air of near-resignation, she says there's nothing she really wants to do. “So what makes you happy – is there nothing you enjoy doing?” I ask.

Jamila looks taken aback and the room goes quiet. For the first time, Jamila looks to Azab for support.

“There are no prospects for us Palestinians here,” she says intently after a long pause. “What’s the point of dreaming? Sometimes I think about leaving Lebanon. It doesn’t feel like our country. I’d take Azab with me and we’d travel to London, where our aunt has moved. I’m sure we’d both find jobs there.”

The Refugee Children's Future

UN General Assembly Resolution 194, adopted in 1948, states that "...refugees wishing to return to their homes and live in peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practical date..." Fifty-eight years later, and despite this resolution, the refugees have not been able to return. Today, the fourth generation of refugees is growing up in the refugee camps in Lebanon. Most of these children know the name of the villages they originated from in Palestine. Many children also talk about Palestine and express the desire to return.

Just after Resolution 194 was adopted, there were negotiation attempts with the intention to solve the refugees' situation. However, Israel only accepted that a minority of the refugees were allowed to return, something that the refugees and their host countries saw as unacceptable. Despite various attempts, no solution has been found since then.

The Oslo peace agreement between the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organisation) and Israel in 1993 left the question of the refugees for the future. After the signing of the peace agreement, the international focus and support shifted away from the refugees toward the West Bank and Gaza in order to support the building of a future Palestinian state and the economy there. Many of the refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and other parts of the world, felt abandoned as they saw that their rights had been neglected.

A study carried out by Oxford University shows that the feeling of abandonment and uncertainty about the future has had its effects on the refugee children in Lebanon and has contributed to feelings of hopelessness and frustration among many of them. This is expressed through de-motivation in school or lack of other attempts to improve their future. But the same study also shows that the refugee children have developed coping mechanisms to handle their situation. Knowledge of their history helps them to create an identity and a feeling of belonging within their community. This identity, as Palestinians, is something the children feel proud of and they all carry a desire for a better future and entitlement of their rights.

Save the Children Sweden has in this report highlighted a number of violations of the Palestinian refugee child's rights. Other important articles in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are:

- Article 2 Non-discrimination
- Article 3 Best-interest of the child
- Article 7 Name and nationality
- Article 8 Preservation of identity
- Article 12 Child opinion
- Article 22 Refugee Children
- Article 24 Health and health services
- Article 26 Social Security

Palestinian refugee children in Lebanon have the right to have their rights fulfilled in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Lebanese government, as a signatory to the Convention, is responsible for fulfilling these rights. UNRWA also carries a responsibility for the fulfillment of these rights as it is the UN agency providing Palestinian refugee children with health services and education.

Save the Children Sweden calls for:

- The Lebanese Government to apply the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to all children living within its territory.
- The Lebanese Government and UNRWA to carry out a thorough survey of violations of the Palestinian refugee child's rights, and use the results as a basis for work for visualization of these rights.
- The Lebanese Government to offer better opportunities for Palestinian children to attend state schools and give full access for these children to the state health care and social service system.
- That UNRWA is given a protection mandate with regard to children.
- That UNRWA is given more resources and that these resources are used in an efficient way to provide qualitative education free of any kind of violence or abuse.
- That UNRWA takes preventive measures to limit the number of students that drop out of school and to support children that already have dropped out to return to school.
- That UNRWA facilitates access and support to children with disabilities so that these children can receive a full and qualitative education in UNRWA's schools.
- The Lebanese Government, UNRWA and the Palestinian civil society to work for the visualization of equal rights for girls and boys and for the prevention of early marriage.
- The Lebanese Government and UNRWA to jointly work to improve the living conditions in the Palestinian refugee camps and gatherings.
- The Lebanese Government and the UNRWA to provide support to the Palestinian refugee children and their families in order for them to live free from poverty.

Save the Children Sweden's Partner Organisations in Lebanon

Children and Youth Centre Shatila

The Children & Youth Center (CYC) was established in 1997 and is based in the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut. The center works with children and youth aged between 6 and 18. CYC's work is based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The CYC provides a safe space for children and youth to meet, express themselves, discover their potential and work together on issues that affect their lives. Through its work, the CYC aims at empowering children to make it possible for them to transfer their knowledge about their rights through the Child to Child methodology to other children. This happens in training workshops on issues such as the CRC, gender, health issues, non discrimination, and equality and in other daily activities at the centre. These activities include provision of remedial classes, recreational and extra curricular activities and trips, folkdance, sports, and handicrafts. The children at the centre also produce a quarterly newsletter developed and run by the children and youth themselves. The CYC also has an exchange program with European organizations in which foreign youth come to volunteer and share experiences with children and youth at CYC.

The children and youth in CYC are organized into elected committees whose role is to run the centre and develop its identity. Save the Children Sweden, as well as other donors, have been supporting CYC in Shatila since 1997.

Nabaa

Nabaa works in five Palestinian refugee camps and gatherings across the south and north of Lebanon and in the old city of Saida. The organization follows a child centered approach in working with children, but Nabaa also targets parents, teachers, and the community as a whole.

Founded in 2001, Nabaa aims to ensure the rights of the child with a focus on education and learning and provides safe centres for children to meet, play and learn. The organization strives to build long lasting partnership amongst different groups and sectors in the community to create a positive and friendly atmosphere for children. To achieve this, Nabaa trains children on a variety of topics and concepts, mainly the CRC, participation, the child to child methodology, conflict resolution, leadership skills and inclusion. The children are in those activities empowered to advocate for their rights and make their voices heard.

Nabaa has a variety of active and participatory learning methods and techniques in its programs and activities. The organization designs different projects to cater to the fulfilment of children's rights. These projects include remedial classes, prevention of school drop outs and support to children to return to school or participate in vocational training, a small grant scheme for youth, and community development projects targeting the community at large within the camps. Save the Children Sweden has supported Nabaa since 2004.

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