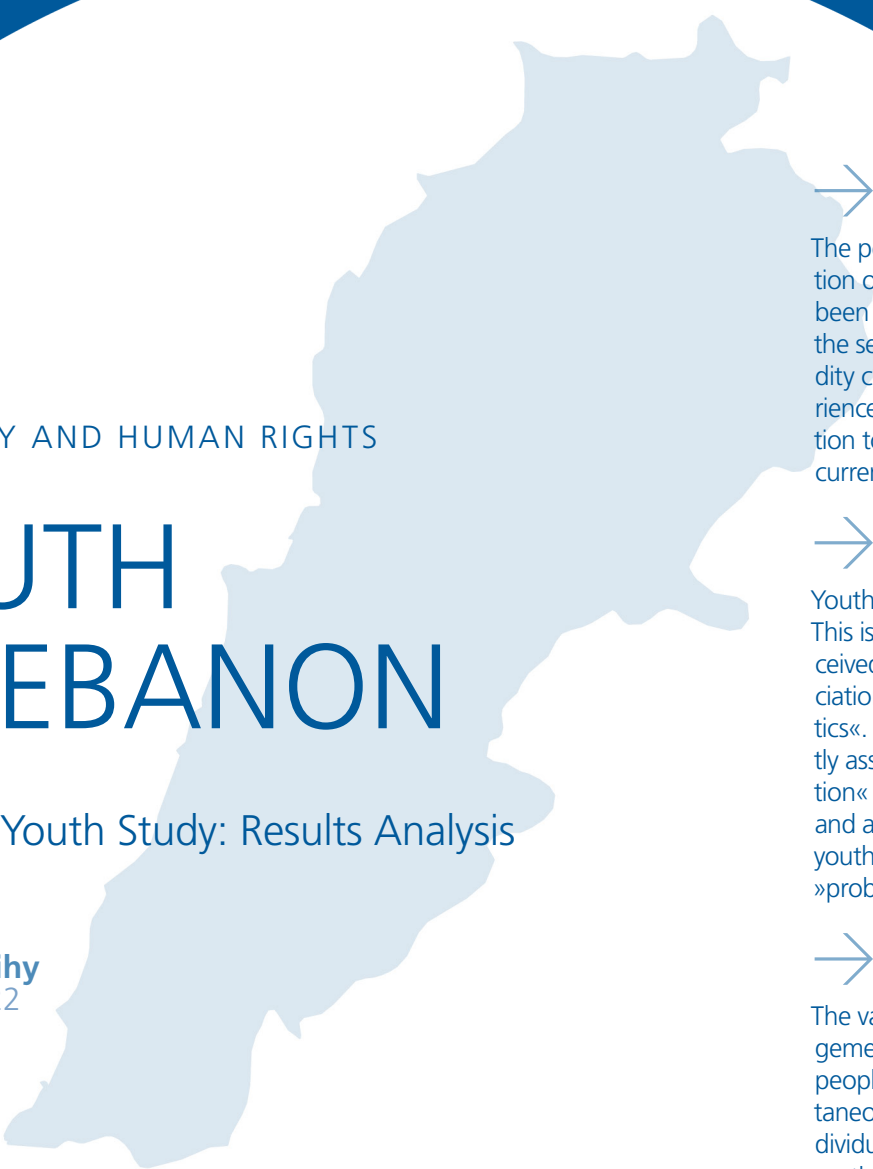


DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

YOUTH IN LEBANON

FES MENA Youth Study: Results Analysis

Michel Doueihy
December 2022



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YOUTH IN LEBANON

FES MENA Youth Study: Results Analysis



Based on a survey carried out among young people in Lebanon aged between 16 and 30 years, this study finds that the personal economic situation of youth in Lebanon has been dramatically affected by the series of financial and liquidity crises the country experienced. They are not in a position to save money, given the current level of inflation. Access to health insurance among youth is worryingly low. Several of the young people surveyed reported not having health insurance, and an overwhelming majority reported not having access to free healthcare services.



The situation has led to young people in Lebanon losing the luxury of freely choosing or switching between jobs, let alone taking up unpaid internships which many cannot afford, and which are quickly becoming unavailable for the majority of aspiring young people. This clearly affects career choices and completely changing career paths for the sake of urgent income has increasingly become the norm in Lebanon. Youth's interest in politics is low. This is associated with the perceived connotations and associations with the word »politics«. Most young people directly associate the word »corruption« with politics in Lebanon, and an extremely large share of youth associated politics with »problems«.



In addition to this, the vast majority of civic engagement reported by the young people surveyed was spontaneous, non-institutional or individual, with youth becoming involved on their own initiative and preferring a kind of unsystematic volunteer work rather than being organised within an institutional framework. This choice is due to internal discriminatory practices within institutional initiatives and venues for engagement. Many young people believe that only strong men have a say in internal decision-making, and that the work only benefits a small number of elites, raising questions about the credibility and purpose of certain political initiatives.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

<https://mena.fes.de/topics/youth-study>

<https://lebanon.fes.de>

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

YOUTH IN LEBANON

FES MENA Youth Study: Results Analysis

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1

INTRODUCTION

This report is part of the FES MENA Youth Study, which addresses youth livelihoods in 12 MENA countries.¹ Based on the results of a long-term survey, launched in 2016, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) seeks to provide insight into young people's situation in the MENA region.

In 2021, the FES launched its second large-scale representative survey in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, as well as in Tunisia and Yemen. With the 1,000 in-depth interviews conducted for each country, the FES MENA Youth Study generates a large database of responses to around 200 questions concerning the personal background of the interviewees and their views on a variety of topics.

This report focuses on Lebanese youth in 2021. Lebanon is experiencing one of the worst crises in recent history. In light of this, an in-depth look at how young people are adapting is needed, given that members of the younger generation are among those worst affected by the deteriorating conditions and emigration has increased.

This report focuses on three main aspects, the first being the personal economic situation of young people in Lebanon, covering issues such as economic stability, employment, work income, savings, health insurance, access to health-care services, and others. The second aspect is politics and engagement, which includes measurements of young people's interest in politics, their association with political groups, and their civic engagement, as well as many other factors. Finally, the report looks at youth's personal life and experiences, along with their stance on emigrating and day-to-day stability.

In addition, the report adopts a gendered perspective throughout the different phases of the study, highlighting the intersectional nature of the impacts that the crisis has had on the country.

Finally, the report contextualises the Lebanese crisis within an increasingly neoliberal MENA region, and takes into consideration regional social, political, military and economic factors to better understand the situation in Lebanon generally and specifically with regard to youth.

¹ For more information on the FES MENA Youth Study: <https://mena.fes.de/topics/youth-study>

2

METHODOLOGY

2.1 SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

For reasons of feasibility, a nationwide quota sampling method was chosen, with the aim of conducting a total of 1,000 interviews per country. This sample size is considered adequately representative of the target group as well as socio-demographic and regional subgroups (e.g., age, gender, level of education).

In Lebanon, the local institute responsible for fieldwork and sampling was ARA Research and Consultancy based in Beirut. The institute has an established set of methods for selecting sampling points and identifying eligible households to survey, with the aim of randomising the selection process as much as possible. The aim was to ensure a geographic spread of respondents that was as close as possible to the distribution of the survey universe in the respective country. For each geographic area, the institutes provided a list of sampling points.

The fieldwork phase was conducted between September and November 2021. The survey ultimately reached 1,007 Lebanese women and men aged between 16 and 30 years. The data was collected in face-to-face interviews conducted with computer-aided personal interviewing (CAPI) technology. All interviews were carried out in the local Arabic dialect. Interviews were held at respondents' homes or in such public places, such as cafés, community centres, and the like. It was of major importance that the respondents felt comfortable and the interview locations were chosen accordingly.

The data collected was transferred to and stored in a central CAPI database. During the fieldwork, Kantar Public, a specialist research, evidence and advisory business, carried out data validation with sets of interim data via Excel and SPSS (statistical software program) syntaxes. In parallel, Kantar Public and the University of Leipzig conducted the final comprehensive data check. To ensure that the final structure of the sampling reflected the structure of the survey universe, differences were reduced with factorial weighting. The survey data was weighted for all target groups with respect to the structural variables of age, gender and region, based on the available statistics.

2.2 SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

This methodology resulted in a sample where 52 per cent of respondents were female, and 48 per cent male. The respondents are distributed across three age categories with around 35 per cent in the 16-20 age range, 35 per cent in the 21-25 age range, and around 29 per cent in the 26-30 age range.

Regions were divided according to demographic and geographic criteria, with 36 per cent of respondents residing in small settlements, 25 per cent in cities up to 100,000 residents, and 39 per cent in large cities.

3

CONTEXTUALISING THE LEBANESE CRISIS

Lebanon has been experiencing one of the worst social and economic crises in recent history, with the country's GDP plummeting from about 55 billion US dollars in 2018 to 20 billion US dollars in 2021 (World Bank 2021), pharmacies and healthcare centres lacking medical supplies, fuel prices rising daily (National News Agency 2022), education facilities significantly cutting their budgets, and the Lebanese pound losing over 90 per cent of its value (ReliefWeb 2022). In addition, emigration has been on the rise, as the population, especially youth, seeing no end to the crisis, have started seeking careers or higher education opportunities elsewhere.

Soaring unemployment rates and daily economic and social uncertainty have meant that young people face a plethora of destabilising factors affecting their livelihoods on a daily basis. From having to work several jobs to ensure basic needs are met, to losing all access to luxury items and recreational activities, young people are impacted disproportionately by the crisis. It is therefore crucial to examine youth livelihoods in Lebanon, as well as the MENA region more broadly, to get a better grasp of the multifaceted crisis impacting the country and the region.

On the 17 October 2019, the government proposed a new tax on WhatsApp, one of the country's most widely used digital communication platforms. This was the last straw that led hundreds of thousands of residents to take to the streets. In what is now commonly referred to as the 17 October Revolution, famous locations such as Martyrs' Square in Beirut and Sahet al Nour in Tripoli, and many other areas all over the country were filled with protestors. Demonstrations included actions such as setting up tents, holding public discussions on what system was needed to resolve the current crisis, setting tyres alight to block roads, organising strikes.

The political demonstrations significantly died down after the resignation of Prime Minister Saad al Hariri's government in November 2019, and even more so after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which many believe was exploited by the ruling class to impose curfews and limit political organisation.

Youth were among the most prominent participants in the 17 October Revolution, with many connecting it to the series of Arab Spring uprisings over the last decade and considering it to be part of a larger Arab endeavour for democracy and social justice. Chants and slogans used were also heavily inspired by Egyptian, Syrian and other Arab revolutionary uprisings, highlighting a sense of shared fate between those living in the region.

Indeed, it is essential to first contextualise the current economic and social uncertainties within the framework of increasingly neo-liberal transformations in the Arab region. This shift has been driven, in particular, by processes such as the International Monetary Fund negotiations and the conditions imposed by international funders on governments in crisis.

In Lebanon specifically, the interim government of Prime Minister Hassan Diab decided to default on a Eurobond in 2020 and developed plans to restructure public debt as well as the financial sector. None of these plans came to fruition, however, and following the formation of Prime Minister Najib Mikati's government almost a year later, a political deadlock seems to be preventing any possibility of economic recovery.

Several political parties and affiliated groups have proposed bailout plans for banks and have also suggested selling state assets to recover the losses incurred by the financial sector, instead of holding bank owners responsible. The suggestion to sell state assets has become a public opinion issue, heavily contested from both sides, those wanting the banks to bear the costs of financial recovery, and those wanting the state or the public sector to bear them.

It is important to understand the intersectionality of the different factors affecting youth livelihoods in Lebanon and to recognise the complexity of civic engagement in the country, as well as the different factors influencing people's decision to emigrate, stay, or to opt for certain personal and career paths.

The series of economic crises have been accompanied by alarming rates of sexual harassment and assault against women in the country, mass expulsions and violent crackdowns

on refugee camps, direct threats and suppression of LGBTQ+ activities, and an increasingly limited scope for marginalized communities to organise and practice daily activities.

»The livelihood security of young families is threatened, and even the states of the MENA region can barely offer adequate jobs or social security for young adults and their families. An entire generation thus moves, delayed by a time lag and for the moment still almost invisible, into social marginalisation« (Gertel/Hexel 2018:161).

3.1 AUSTERITY AND THE APPROPRIATION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT

The 2016 FES MENA Youth Study (Gertel/Hexel 2018) is useful in that it highlights a cycle, or a certain pattern of economic activity, which shows certain similarities between Arab states. The absence of welfare states, as well as increasing privatisation schemes and general neo-liberal policies, have been impacting youth's access to job security. These developments have been slowly chipping away at the middle class as the divide between the upper and lower classes widens, and hindering young people's access to proper higher education, forcing them enter the labour market early or stripping away their prospects and chances of acquiring qualifications for decent (or any) form of employment.

The transformation of state institutions, such as ministries and public offices, into clientelist networks where ruling class parties practice exclusive nepotism or sectarianism has resulted in a decline in public employment in the last few decades, and has also prevented any form of meritocratic recruitment.

3.2 »FRESH DOLLARS« AND THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE LEBANESE MIDDLE CLASS

There are many factors behind the disintegration of the middle class and these differ between the countries in the region. In Lebanon, a specific distinction has been made over the last few years between youth whose families have income in or access to »fresh dollars«, i.e., amounts denominated in US dollars that are collected either in cash or via international electronic payments without restrictions and those who not.

With the devaluation of the Lebanese pound, everyday commodities are being insidiously priced based on the equivalent black-market LBP/USD rate. Consequently, as wage adjustments (particularly those in Lebanese pounds) are not based on black-market exchange rates, wages priced in Lebanese pounds are losing most of their value, leading worried families into more insecurity and precariousness. On the other hand, those working with international organisations or whose wages were originally priced in US dollars,

have been benefitting from the increasing exchange rates for a while. This situation is, however, unsustainable in the long term, as commodity prices continuously increase, undermining financial security even of those with access to »fresh dollars«.

The »fresh dollar« issue is also relevant regarding the employment terms offered to Lebanese youth by employers in the Gulf countries and others. The young people interviewed noted that contract offers from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) take the country's exchange rate crisis into account, thus resulting in Lebanese citizens receiving wages that are lower than usual due to the attractiveness of foreign currency salaries and overall lower standards.

Finally, the most important factor remains connections to the ruling political class, whose networking schemes pervade most public offices, as well as private enterprises via connected businessmen. When analysing the disintegration of the middle class, it is important to understand the assurances those affiliated with powerful political figures have, given how entrenched their presence has been in various sectors of both the private and public spheres.

3.3 VIOLENCE

Socio-economic conditions in Lebanon are much worse than in 2016 (Gertel/Hexel 2018), with food insecurity and violence in the MENA region increasing dramatically. During the uprisings, many demonstrations turned violent, and brutal oppressive measures were used by governmental or para-governmental security forces, such as the Internal Security Forces, the military and the parliamentary guard.

Another development is the rampant sale of counterfeit food brands in Lebanese supermarkets causing an increase in cases of food poisoning. This has led to a general fear of eating outside and avoidance of certain products such as baked goods containing cheese from local bakeries. Fish, meat and chicken have also become luxury foods that not everyone can afford, except if we consider low quality and possible dangerous variations of non-monitored fast food.

There has been a worrying escalation in daily violence, including an increase in cases of harassment and assault, especially during the series of Covid-19 lockdowns. Here, it is important to note the intersectional nature of many of the protests that took place in Lebanon, with feminists leading demonstrations and calling for the safety of women and marginalised communities to be prioritised. This is very different from other Arab countries where the politically active are »less interested in political freedom and civil rights—including minority rights—than in the security of basic needs and the absence of violence« (Gertel/Hexel 2018:30).

3.4 SOCIAL MEDIA AND MOBILISATION

The 2016 report also highlights the importance of the roles played by social media platforms, referring to terms such as »Facebook Revolution«, »Twitter Protest«, and others coined in the organisation of political activities, especially among youth (Gertel/Hexel 2018). While this was also the case during the Lebanese uprising, it was not the reason the latter was termed the »WhatsApp Revolution«. The origins of the latter were a tax proposal by the government on the digital communication platform WhatsApp which triggered the social movements.

WhatsApp groups were necessary however, as they allowed many protesters to organise activities and even secretly plan sit-ins in highly secured public institutions such as the Central Bank in Beirut. As part of their counter-efforts, security forces also weaponised unlocking protesters' phones and accessing their chats to determine who was leading a certain riot or organising rebel activities.

3.5 ORGANISING AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

Finally, it is important to highlight the variety of venues young people used for their political engagement: University student clubs, such as the widely known »secular clubs«, were able to challenge classic political parties' hegemony within university campuses, and even won the majority of seats in numerous elections to student faculty committees against student clubs affiliated or directly pertaining to the ruling class parties. These clubs set out to take young people's demands to the national level, not content with limiting them to technical university campus reforms.

These same clubs also led protests on the ground, both inside and outside campus, demanding a more democratic, socially just and secular political system, opposing the current sectarian formula, developing and presenting detailed political papers and a legislative proposal for more accessible education, and even supporting protests in neighbouring countries, such as the Syrian uprising in 2011.

Another venue of political engagement following the October 2019 uprising were syndicates, with syndicate elections involving oppositional pro-change candidates and lists running against coalitions of ruling class parties, and even winning majorities of council seats in the Engineers and Architects' Syndicate, for instance. This represents a significant shift from the ruling class co-opting the workers and limiting their autonomy and ability to democratically mobilise for their rights.

Needless to say, the parliamentary elections also saw the involvement of a significant number of youth volunteers, including those under the voting age of 25, many of whom took a leading role in the campaigns.

In addition to the upcoming municipal elections, it is worth noting the importance of politically engaged young people mobilising on different levels. For them, the focus is on the multi-level dismantling of a hegemony and rule which are well entrenched in all sections of society, especially those that involve civic engagement and human rights.

To better understand the economic stability, political engagement and personal experiences of Lebanon's young people, we need to be aware of the multiplicity of factors impacting daily decision-making and overall mental states.

4

PERSONAL ECONOMIC SITUATION

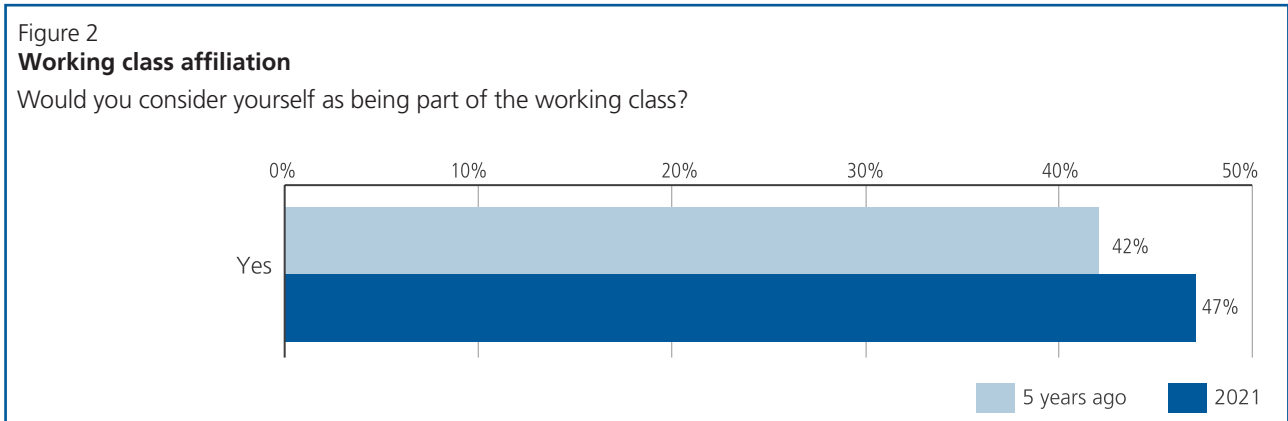
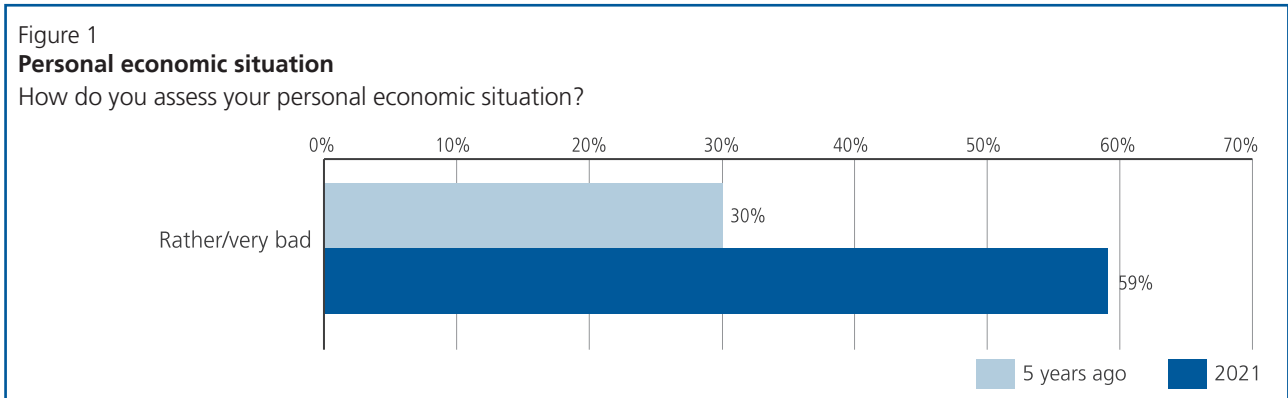
The personal economic situation of youth in Lebanon has been dramatically affected by the series of financial and liquidity crises the country experienced. This impact, however, has varied significantly depending on several factors, including but not limited to gender, the level of education, place of residence.

First, an extremely large share of young people considers their personal economic situation in general to be rather bad, at the very least, with this share being slightly higher for male than for female respondents. This represents a considerable deterioration compared to 2016, with the share having increased by one quarter. Given the systemic shock the country is experiencing and the accompanying series of turbulences, this was to be expected, however.

majority of those with low levels of education considering their personal economic situation to be rather bad, at the very least, which was slightly higher than those with middle to high levels of education. Completing education, however, is now another daunting task for young people, as private education institutions, primarily the country's leading universities, have increased tuition fees to prohibitive levels, forcing many to drop out or transfer to cheaper alternatives.

In terms of their household, over the last five years, more and more respondents have come to consider themselves part of the working class, with an increasing number of households positioning themselves within the lower working-class range, a significant shift in class affiliation.

The assessment of personal economic situation also varied according to the respondent's level of education, with the



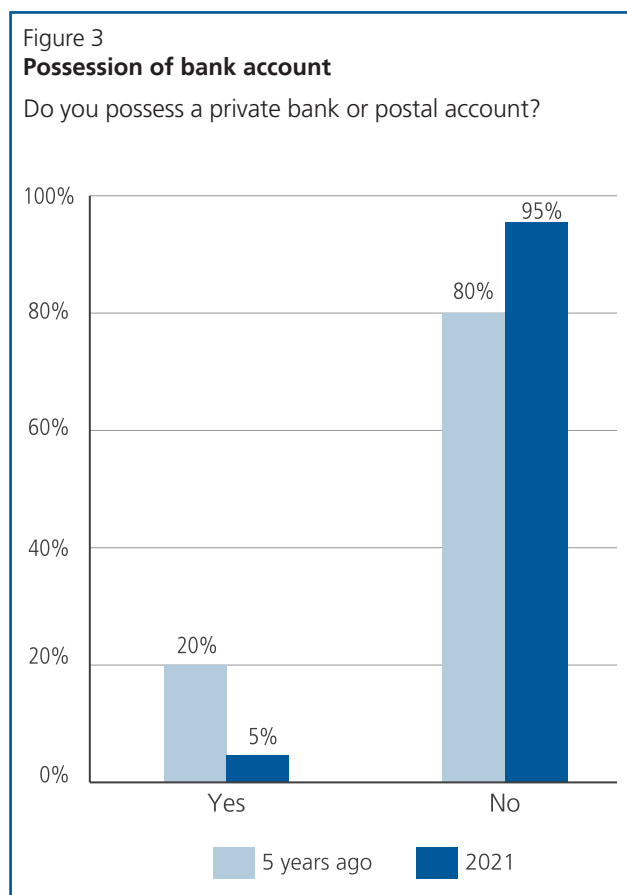
4.1 PAYMENT SYSTEMS

An increasingly complicated banking crisis in Lebanon has meant that opening new bank accounts or accessing already existing deposits have become ever more difficult tasks. The majority of young people have not yet opened their own accounts, and may in fact be well advised not to do so.

While accessing funds remains an issue for those staying in Lebanon amidst the deteriorating conditions, it also means that students and young people looking to leave are struggling to complete the necessary papers.

Visa applications are hindered by the lack of digitally proven funds (since people prefer to keep their money in cash as opposed to depositing them in a bank account). This affects a range of endeavours, including applying for undergraduate or postgraduate education outside the country, immigration applications, and many other attempts to escape the crisis.

To highlight the magnitude of the issue, an overwhelming majority of young people does not possess a private bank or postal account, and this share increased significantly between 2016 and 2021. Naturally, the share of those with a private credit card has remained almost the same. As a result, a large proportion of the population no longer has the option of buying items from online stores, including basic goods and medicine, which are becoming increasingly unavailable in local pharmacies across the country.



4.2 INCOME SOURCES AND AVAILABILITY OF FUNDS

In an attempt to achieve some form of financial security, Lebanese residents, especially youth, have started relying on different sources of income. This means that university or even school students are obliged to work while studying, with some even taking on different jobs at the same time.

With wage adjustments being negatively disproportionate to the increase in the prices of food, medication and other basic goods, diversifying one's income has become a necessity, with work frequency also significantly higher than the global average.

Respondents listed three main sources of income: their own work, support from family members or study-related scholarships.

The nature of the sources of income reveals a lot about the existing economic and social power dynamics in Lebanese society, with some relying on their work as a source of income, and others relying on family support. From a gender perspective, almost two thirds of male respondents who have a budget cited their own work as the main source of income, with this portion being less than one third for female respondents, who mostly cited their families as their main sources of income. It is crucial to note that the number of female respondents relying on family income (as opposed to their own work) has increased by almost one quarter since 2016, which could be an indicator of social responses to crises, and how members of different social groups adapt to such crises in the face of existing patriarchal norms and structures.

Naturally, it is clear that differences were also significantly related to age, as respondents still in the process of continuing their studies relied more on family sources of income, and those of working age or those who had completed their studies relied more on income from their own jobs.

It is also worth pointing out how inconsistent and irregular this income was, which reflects the instability of respondents' financial status. In fact, more than two thirds of the young people questioned reported that the funds from family members or other sources, independent of their own main jobs, were mostly not received consistently or on a regular basis. This also applies more to graduates who are no longer regularly receiving money from family members to pay their tuition fees and college expenses.

Youth are often unable to save money on a long-term basis, with almost two thirds reporting having no money available, despite having different sources of income. This represents a dramatic shift from 2016, where this share comprised only one third of those interviewed. It is also important to note that this number varies considerably between youth living in large cities, where the availability of funds is usually lower, and those living in rural areas.

In addition, most youth (86 per cent) are not in a position to save money, given the current inflation and numerous other reasons that might affect their saving tendencies, the most important of which are pre-emptive reasons related to personal security (52 per cent of those who are still able to save money).

We also need to examine the relationship between the state of funding institutions, mostly banks, and young people's debt, as only a quarter of respondents reported having debts with either institutions or individuals, and an overwhelming majority reported never having taken out a microcredit (86 per cent). This is also related to the fact that banks have stopped giving out loans over the last three years given the ongoing liquidity crisis.

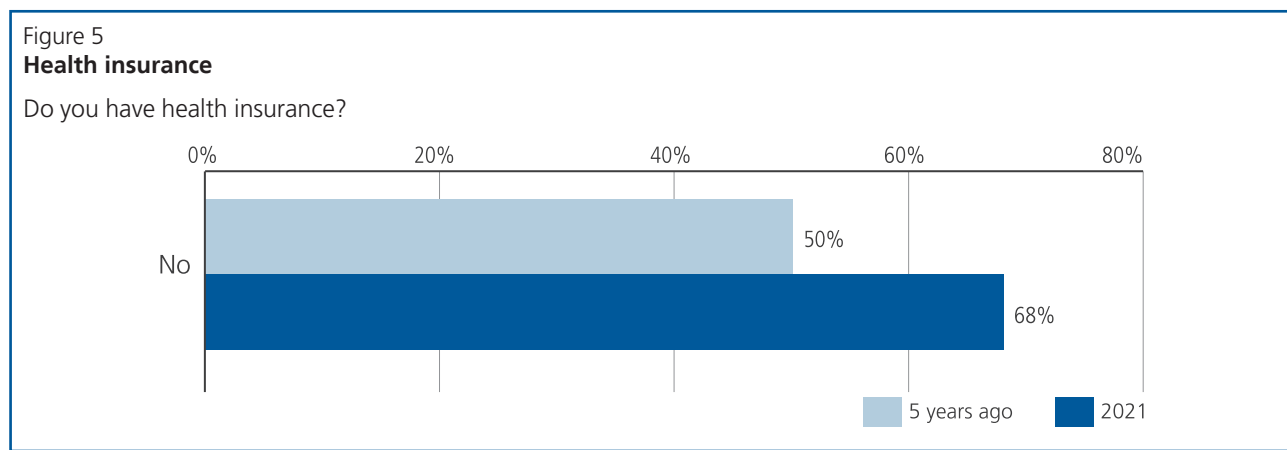
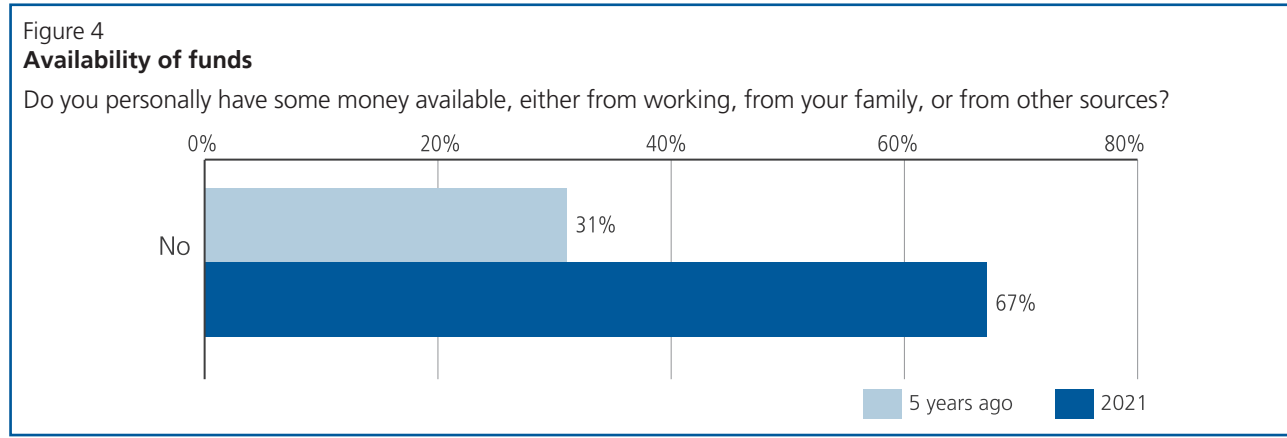
All in all, financial security and instability within the banking sector have been among the most important topics of discussion in the country and areas of contestation between policymakers and government officials, and the above-mentioned lack of financial security and regular income among young people have a huge impact on their personal decision-making processes.

Lobby coalitions of parents of students abroad were created to allow parents to finance their children's studies in foreign countries, as current banking regulations make transferring money very difficult or do not allow it at all. Evidently this impacts young people's opportunities to pursue studies abroad.

4.3 ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE SERVICES

Access to health insurance among youth is worryingly low. Indeed, more than two thirds of young people reported not having health insurance, and an overwhelming majority reported not having access to free healthcare services. This constitutes a major shift from 2016, where almost half of all respondents reported having health insurance, a strong indicator of the security risks the economic crisis has led to.

Facing a global pandemic, two major explosions, an economic crisis, the deterioration of food security, intermittent violence, water shortages and power supply issues, it is safe to say that the healthcare sector in Lebanon is under unprecedented pressure. The 4 August explosion in Beirut alone damaged four hospitals and more than 20 primary care facilities (ReliefWeb 2020). The lack of accessible ventilators caused a major crisis for vulnerable members of the population during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, financial security plays a significant role in accessing proper healthcare services, with some, in extreme cases, deciding to forego sports or recreational activities for fear of sustaining injuries.



4.4 SECURITY AND THE INFORMALITY OF THE LEBANESE LABOUR MARKET

The Lebanese labour market is historically characterised by its extreme informality. While, in the past, this has usually been the case for refugees and migrant workers, informality is now also increasingly affecting legal Lebanese residents.

Youth are amongst the most affected and exploited by labour structures in the country. An overwhelming majority of working youth reported not having signed written work contracts, with this number being considerably higher for male than female respondents. Incidents of violence against child labourers, especially from migrant communities, have significantly increased, with security forces largely absent from any monitoring activities and those with connections escaping any form of accountability for failing to ensure decent working conditions.

There are also a range of informal agreements and conditions in the labour market. A similar share of young people reported not being entitled to a retirement pension or not receiving continuous sick pay, with these rates reaching an alarming 98 per cent (pension) and 91 (continuous sick pay) per cent for working youth between the age of 16 and 20.

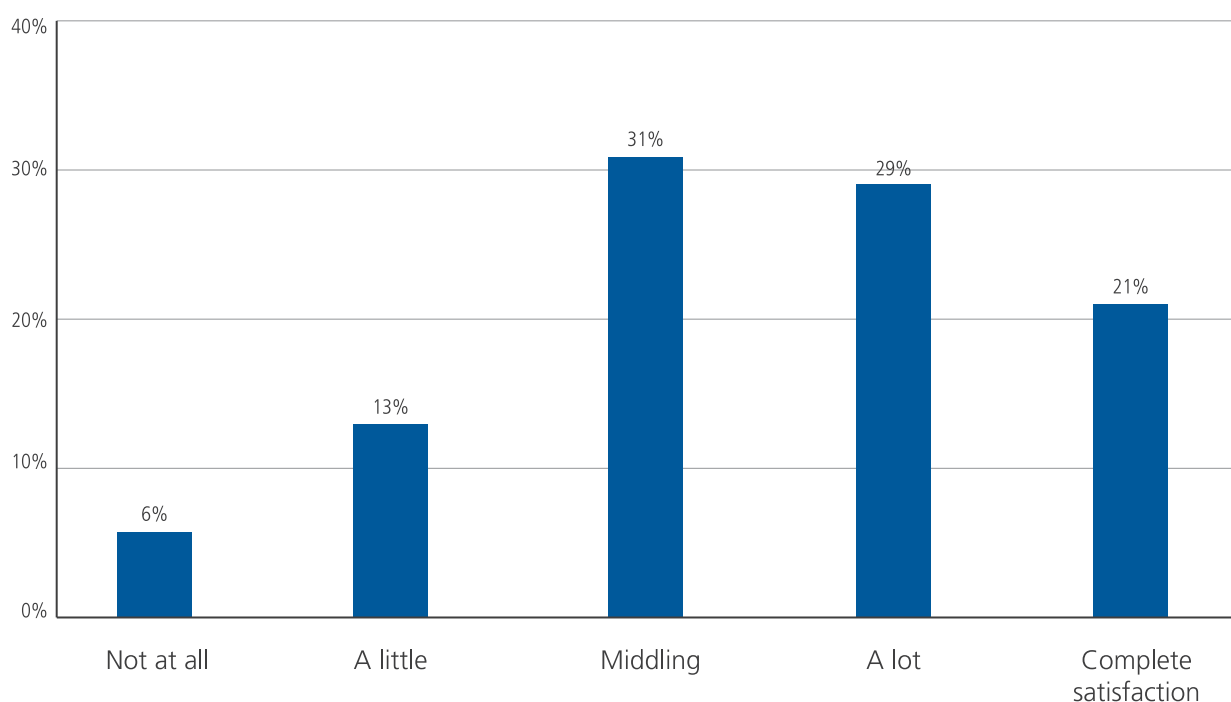
It is important to note that the lack of retirement pension and sick pay are also issues widely faced by young people's parents, as around three quarters of respondents reported that their working parents do not receive sick pay and are not entitled to a retirement pension.

Furthermore, official syndicates which have, in the past, provided points of reference post-retirement stability were unable to adapt their rates to the plunge of the Lebanese pound. This includes the fate of retired medical doctors, for example, whose retirement income comprises around two million Lebanese pounds, worth around 70 US dollars at the time this report was written.

Given the instability of the country's political and economic situation and faced with a decline in the number of decent and stable options available in the job market, there has been an increasing trend of young people pursuing »secure« jobs, positions where one can establish themselves in the organization and have less fear of being fired or displaced. People in secure positions are less likely to quit their jobs as work-related risk aversion in the Lebanese economic context witnessed a significant increase in recent years. Youth have lost the luxury of being able to freely choose or switch between jobs, let alone take part in unpaid internships which many can no longer afford, and which are quickly becoming unavailable for the majority of aspiring young people. This clearly affects career choices and completely changing career paths for the sake of urgent income has increasingly become the norm in Lebanon.

Social perception and interaction can also be important factors influencing whether or not someone accepts or stays in a job. Positions that are »socially acceptable«, or where youth can engage with friends and colleagues are more sought after. While »socially acceptable« can mean a lot of things, it is usually dependent on the individual's context

Figure 6
Job satisfaction
Do you like your work?



and the norms that prevail in that environment. Culture, in its patriarchal, classist, elitist and discriminatory aspects, plays an important role in »guiding« (or to be more accurate »changing«) young people's career choices.

On a positive note, long-term planning and growth can be important criteria as well, as the majority of our respondents believed they could learn a lot from their current positions, or they believed there would have opportunities to upgrade their positions in the future. Whether this is a form of realism adapted to the current situation or unfettered optimism is yet to be verified. In conclusion, half of our respondents reported liking their job a lot or being completely contented with it, and slightly less than a third reporting feeling neutral about their jobs, with the rest liking their jobs only a little or not at all.

This can have a significant impact on youth's perception of their career direction amidst the need for financial security and making ends meet.

Lastly, it is necessary to note that access to job opportunities in Lebanon is heavily reliant on connections, with more than half of the young people surveyed hearing about their jobs from a friend or family member. Personal initiative also plays an important role, with a quarter of respondents describing their current position as a result of their own resourcefulness. With this being said and on a positive note, more than two thirds of respondents felt rather confident (43 per cent) or totally confident (31 per cent) that they would be able to realise their professional aspirations, and almost half (40 per cent) finding that they are able to maintain a good balance between work and leisure.

As the mental health of young people deteriorates, an increasingly notable phenomenon of youth isolation, heightened feelings of depression and anxiety, and an inability to maintain social relations can affect the ability to maintain the necessary professional connections, which consequently impacts young people's career aspirations.

5

POLITICS AND ENGAGEMENT

Lebanon has been in a state of extreme political instability for several decades now. Over the last three years, the country has witnessed a nationwide uprising in October 2019, a pandemic that crippled an already deteriorating economy, explosions in Beirut and Tleil in August 2021, as well as geopolitical factors playing an important role in domestic politics.

This has forced many young people to become politically organised, continue their university studies or look for jobs abroad, or has caused them to lose all hope of seeing any form of stability anytime soon, leading many to leave the country. It is important here to differentiate between the state of affairs around late 2019 at the peak of the uprising, and the situation in 2021 when systemic shock was crippling most sections of the population and official institutions, yet the political system remained seemingly intact.

5.1 INTEREST IN POLITICS AND INFORMATION

To begin with, an overwhelming majority of youth (89 per cent) reporting having little to no interest in politics in Lebanon, and most respondents added that they do not actively keep themselves informed about politics. This represents an increase in disinterest compared to 2016. It is important to note that these responses were given against the backdrop of a post-uprising Lebanon, where the excitement of participating in large demonstrations had significantly withered and a sense of political powerlessness pervaded politicised groups, especially youth-based ones.

Youth's interest in politics could be associated with the perceived connotations of and associations with the word »politics«. From a psycho-linguistic perspective, more than half of the young people surveyed directly associated the word »corruption« with politics in Lebanon, and an extremely large share of youth associated the word with »problems«.

Among the 16 per cent who actively inform themselves about politics, the lion's share of the information received comes from social media (73 per cent), followed by television (53 per cent), the internet (46 per cent) and face-

to-face conversations (27 per cent). Bearing this in mind, it is important to analyse how the different forms of media affect young people's perception of the status quo and their civic engagement.

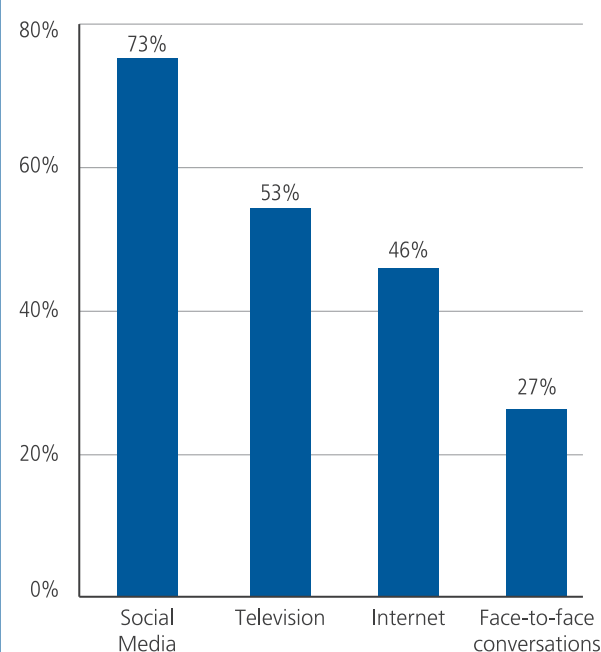
The role of social media, as is the case in most Arab and indeed global uprisings, was crucial for the mobilisation of youth and the organisation of gatherings and large-scale demonstrations. For more »proactive« activists, this engendered a feeling of resentment regarding the phenomenon of »slacktivism«, whereby youth would support a political or social movement via online petitions and social media shares, as opposed to being actively engaged on the ground and investing notable effort and commitment.

Phrases such as »Where are the revolutionaries?« were widely heard when demonstrations saw limited attendance or socio-economic conditions reached historical lows without sparking active contestation.

Figure 7

Sources of information

What sources and means of information are you using?



Opinions were also divided as to the answer to the question: »Who are we opposing?« Many felt that all parties that had been in positions of power over the last 30 years (since the Civil War) were culpable, and therefore none were free from criticism or attempts of subversion. Others absolved some parties of responsibility. Consequently, what started as a rights-based movement now involved, to a large extent, ideological, identitarian, and tribal components. When demonstrations began to target leaders of certain political parties, there was a significant decline in the number of demonstrators, as supporters of these very same parties who had participated in what they believed to be a movement they could relate to no longer felt as though it concerned them, or even felt personally targeted.

Hegemonic discourses and dialectics throughout the uprising also included the popularisation of the term »wave riding«, whereby certain political parties seemed to capitalise on the revolutionary environment to identify with the general protest movement and point the finger at other parties they had been sharing positions of power with.

5.2 POLITICAL ACTION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

There is a wide array of activities that could be categorised under the umbrella of »political action«, specifically centred on people making their voices heard. Youth respondents in Lebanon were able to identify several actions that could help make their voices heard on a political level, such as participating in demonstrations (37 per cent, a +24 increase compared to 2016) or strikes (41 per cent, a +27 increase),

participating in elections (33 per cent), boycotting certain goods (33 per cent, a +23 increase), becoming a member of an association (31 per cent, a +18 increase), mobilising other young people to act via the internet (24 per cent, a +16 increase), or informing themselves via the internet—or Twitter—about an existing group to join (19 per cent). Only a small percentage, however, considered joining an organised political party (10 per cent).

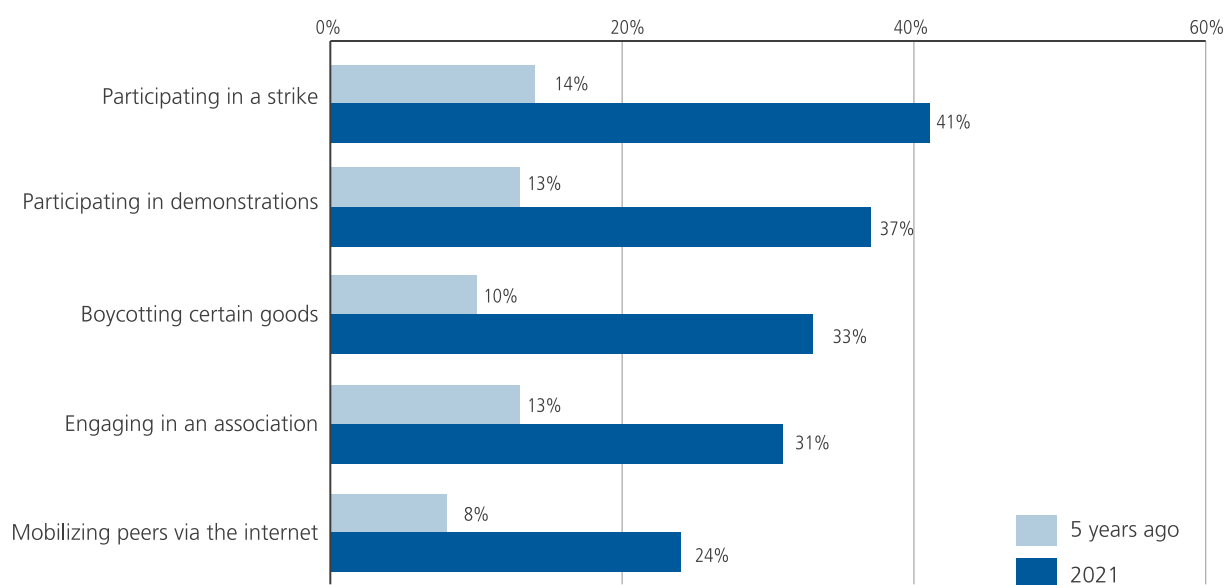
The actions outlined above mostly accompanied the October uprising, as part of wide campaigns targeting the offices of specific politicians, the active boycott of certain shops and chains owned by or affiliated to political figures supporting the status quo and attempts to disrupt their activities, and preparation for the 2022 elections in which many had invested high hopes of political change.

The reasons behind youth's social and political engagement can vary. One of the main reasons identified, however, is becoming actively involved for the benefit of other people, and this includes helping the poor and vulnerable (52 per cent) and the elderly (49 per cent), improving the situation of disabled people (48 per cent), guaranteeing neighbourhood safety and order (46 per cent), striving for a better and cleaner environment (45 per cent), improving the integration of migrants/refugees (22 per cent), and many other reasons.

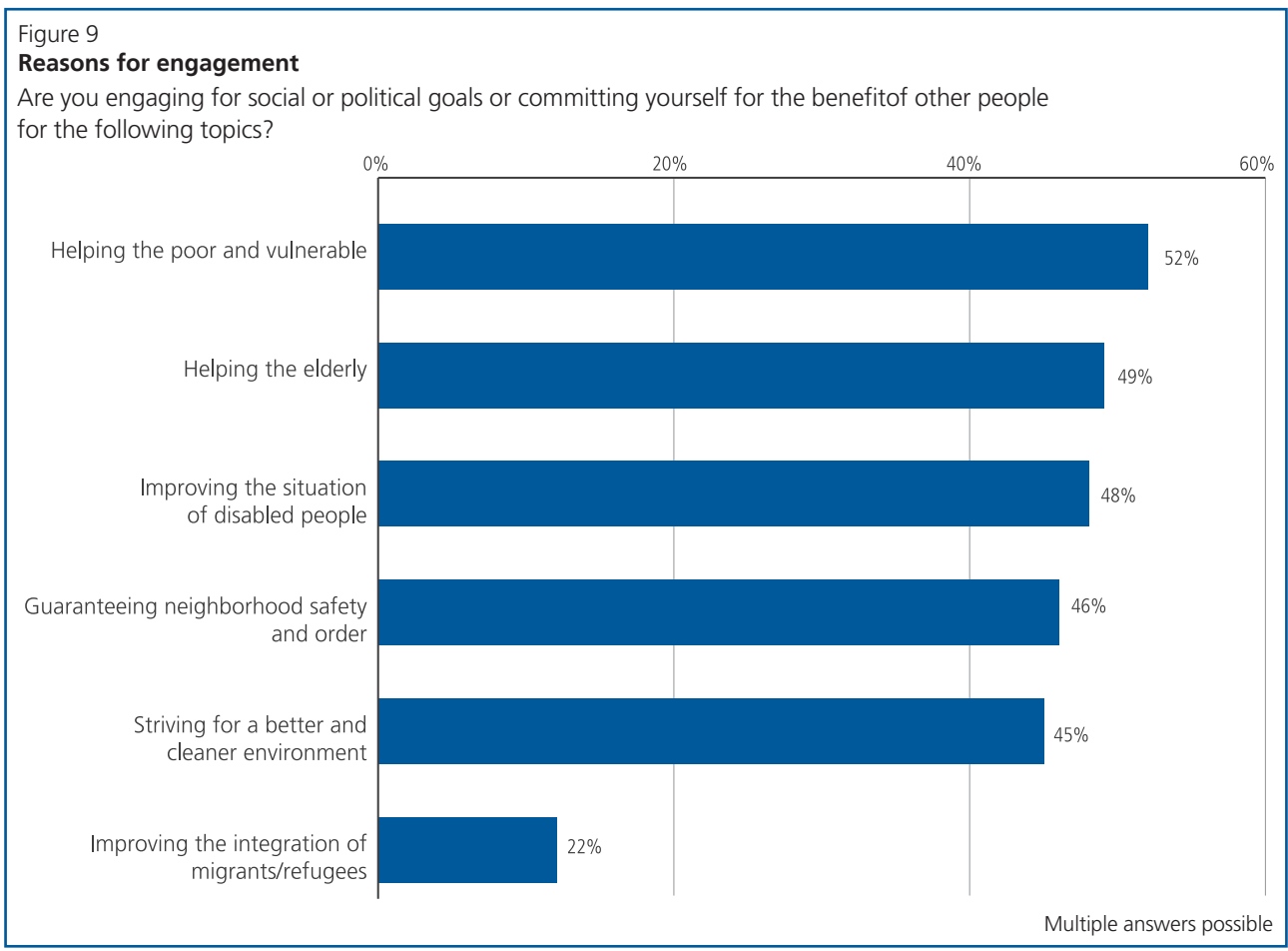
Figure 8

Political actions considered

Which of the following possibilities would you probably or probably not consider doing? Would you...



Multiple answers possible



5.3 UNIVERSITY CLUBS AND ASSOCIATIONS

Given the scope of the research, it is to be expected that a significant share of the young people engaged in politics carried out their activities in schools or on university campuses and in student associations. Engagement through becoming a member of a youth organisation, however, has witnessed a significant drop of 25 per cent since 2016 (17 per cent).

Historically, university campuses have been centres for the political organisation of young people in Lebanon. In the mid to late 20th century demonstrations were largely led by student activists, as was the 2005 Independence Uprising against the presence of the Syrian army, the 2011 »Movement to overthrow the sectarian system«, the 2015 garbage protests, and more recently the 2019 uprising.

Today's university clubs were largely inspired by years of student activism, and this includes clubs directly affiliated to Lebanese political parties, clubs that were inspired by previous movements, and ideological clubs such as commu-

nist or feminist university clubs. The previously mentioned »Secular Clubs«, for example, developed complex political and position papers demonstrating high degrees of political maturity considering the age range of club members, and also provided some of the leading figures in the 2016 municipal election campaign Beirut Madinati (Beirut My City), as well as many 2022 parliamentary election campaigns.

5.4 THE CHAOTIC NATURE OF THE OCTOBER UPRISING

The vast majority of civic engagement reported by the young people surveyed was spontaneous, non-institutional or individual, with youth engaging on their own initiative and preferring unsystematic volunteer work to being organised within an institutional framework. This significantly impacted the formation of solid »oppositional« groups or political parties, as well as the creation of coordination or organisational centres, and, to some extent meant the general protest movement remained »directionless« or »anarchic«.

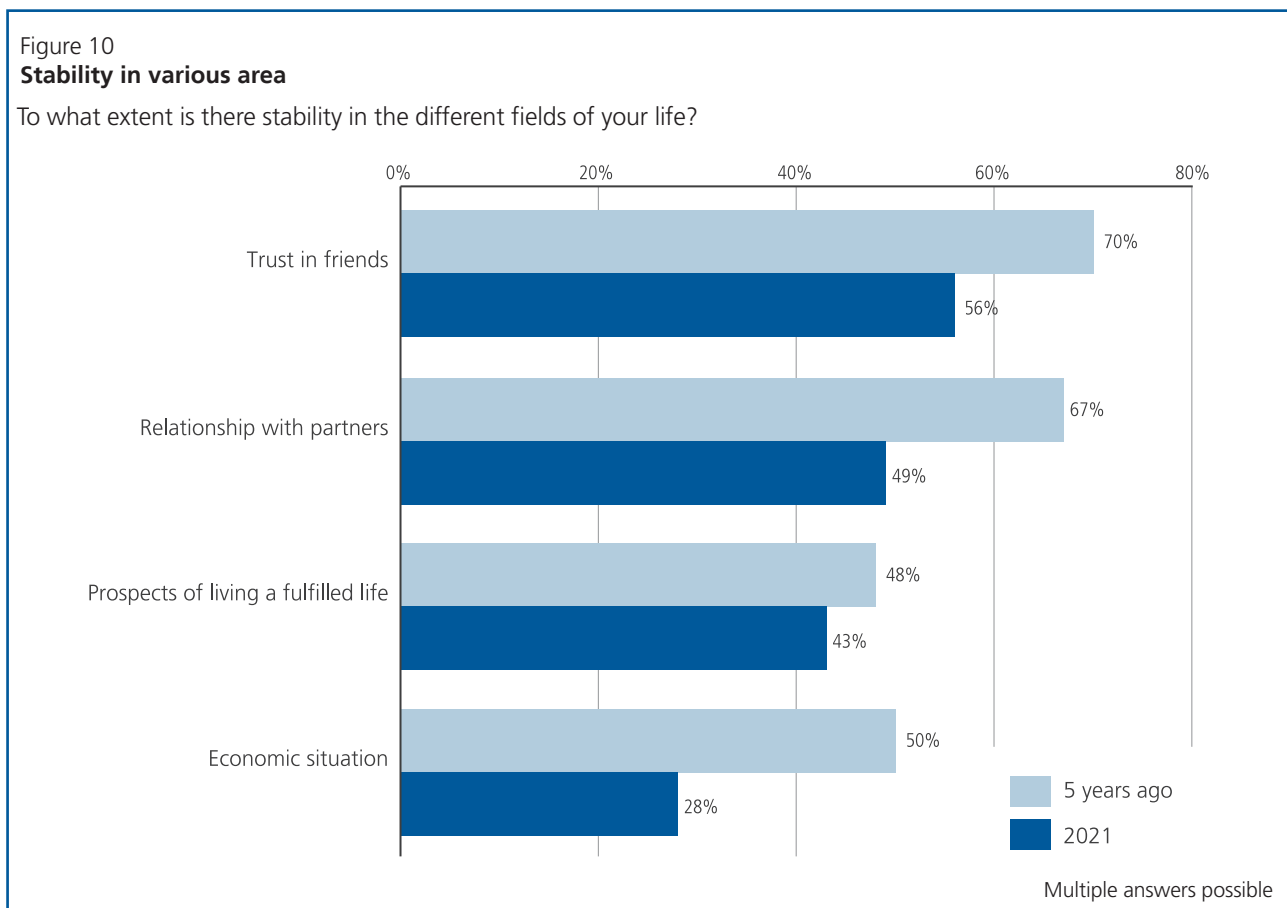
6

DAILY LIFE AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

A plethora of crises affects the daily lives and personal experiences of young people, as well as their personal and career choices. An overall feeling of insecurity pervades all areas of life, from school and work experiences and financial status to political transformations and future developments.

To begin with, the economic crisis—along with accompanying issues such as supply shortages, insecurity and hunger—remains an increasingly worrying factor for youth in the country, most of whom consider their economic situation to be unstable, a worrying increase from 2016. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the intermittent armed conflicts in the country and the systemic shock at governmental level were unprecedented in the country's history, let alone among politically engaged young people.

Over the last few years, there has been a significant deterioration in the stability of the personal lives of youth in Lebanon. This lack of stability affected young people's perceptions of the »prospects of living a fulfilled life«, their economic situation, and even their trust in friends and relationship with partners.



6.1 EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE AND THREATS

Worryingly, young people in Lebanon are increasingly experiencing and witnessing violence. In general, and this is an upward trend over the last few years, a quarter of respondents have witnessed violence with a large share experiencing direct psychological violence. The sources of violence in the country are also numerous. From armed conflicts to sexual harassment, from demonstrations that turned violent to expulsion and displacement, hunger and more, what constitutes violence can vary greatly between young people.

Here it is important to point out the lawlessness behind the activities of certain security forces, most notable of which are the parliamentary guards, notorious for their use of force against protesters (Megaphone 2020).

Tensions in public spaces and in the media have also been escalating, negatively affecting the mental health of youth in the country, especially those active in the public sphere, with many respondents expressing strong fear of armed conflicts and clashes threatening their lives and their families.

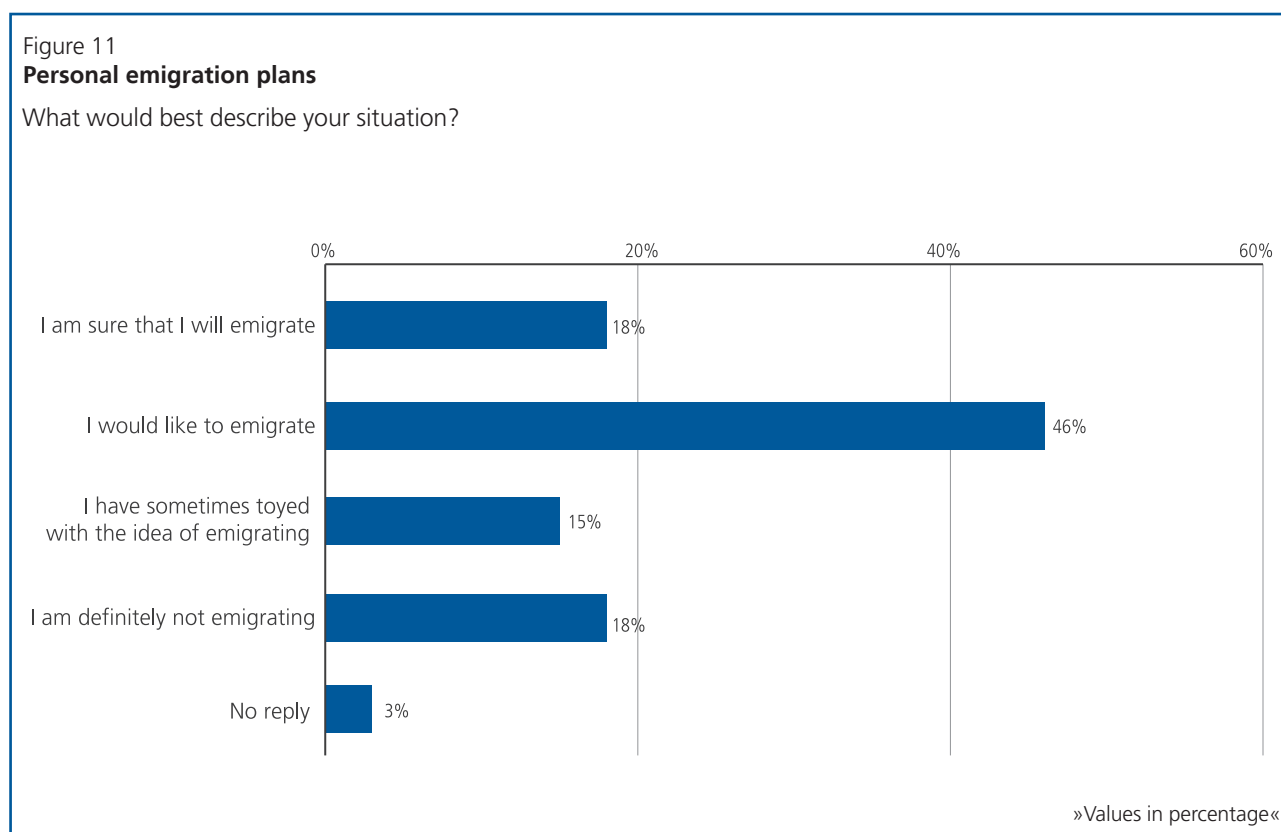
6.2 EMIGRATION

Lebanon has been witnessing unprecedented waves of emigration, affecting all communities and social groups in the country. More than a quarter of the young people surveyed

were able to identify a family member who had migrated to a foreign country, and slightly more than half of these saw the emigration as having had an important impact on their personal lives. Young people most affected by emigration were more prevalent in large cities than rural areas and their numbers have generally increased over the years.

Emigrants destinations vary but are mostly concentrated in Europe, Gulf countries or North America. Their view on family members' emigration has led most young people to have mixed feelings on the subject. On a personal level, only a few reported that they would definitely not emigrate (compared to a majority of youth in 2016), with the rest either wanting to emigrate, being certain about the prospects of emigrating, or at least toying with the idea of emigrating sometime in the future. The increase in the willingness or propensity of people to emigrate to another country is highly indicative of the hopelessness and desolation in the country.

From an economic perspective, remittance money is a very important factor for the Lebanese economy. Naturally, youth often benefit from their relatives sending them money from abroad, and vice versa, and this has often been cited as a deliberate tactic enabling the ruling class to maintain the current economic system and preserve the accompanying economic benefits, possibly even to strengthen clientelist networks.

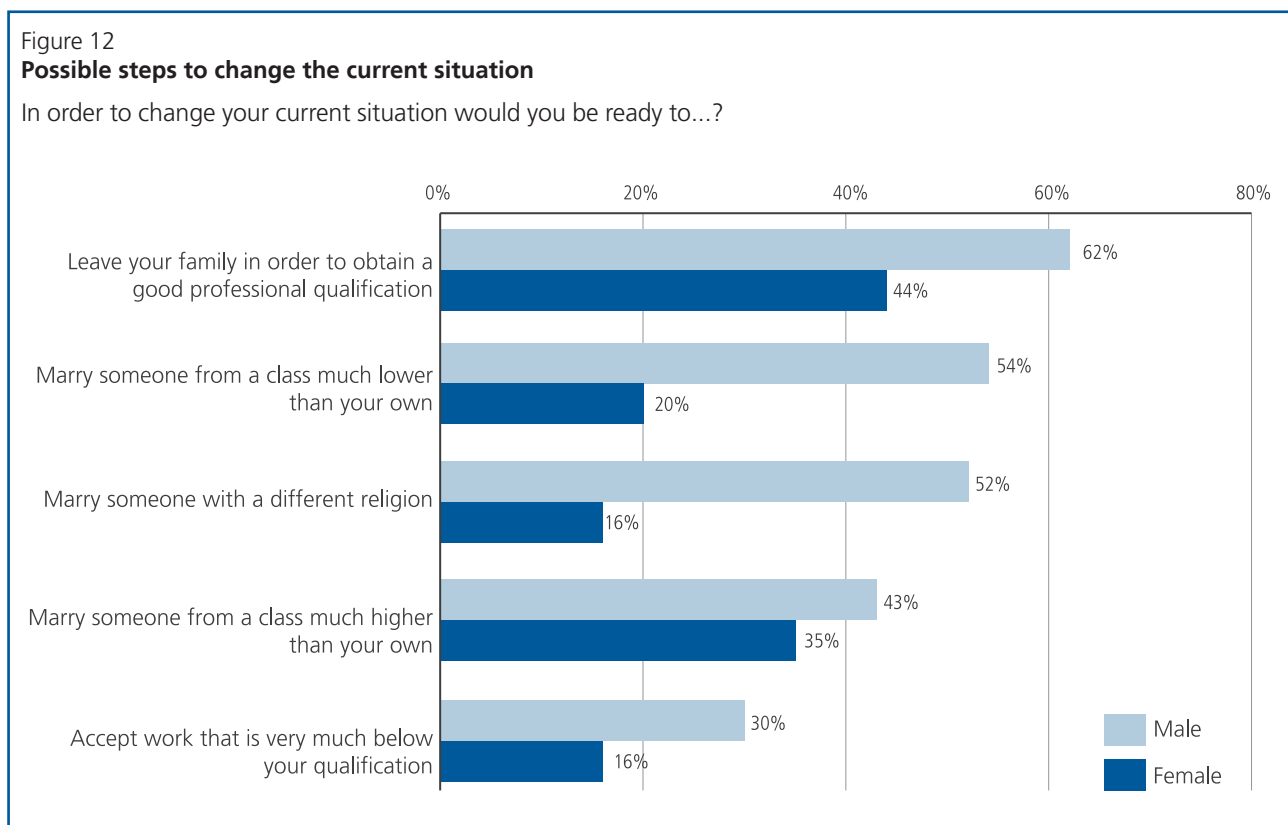


6.3 GENDER AND PERSONAL CHOICES

When it comes to risk aversion and personal steps to change, there were clear gender differences in youth's decisions. To begin with, while more than half of male respondents reported they would be ready to marry somebody from a different religion, the same answer was given by a minority of female respondents. With regard to readiness to marry someone from a class significantly below one's own, similarly gendered results were observed. This topic is particularly interesting in light of the controversial subject of legalising civil marriage in the country and proposals by new pro-change groups to implement a new civil personal status law (as opposed to sectarian personal status), which occupied public opinion during the last parliamentary elections and continues to do so amidst debates on the subject within the newly elected parliament.

In terms of risk aversion, almost a third (35 per cent) of the male youth interviewed reported they would leave their families even if it meant risking their own lives (a +18 per cent increase from 2016), while only a small portion of women expressed such readiness (17 per cent). The differences were similar when it came to young people's readiness to accept work significantly below their qualifications.

On an extremely worrying note, almost half of our respondents (45 per cent) agreed (16 per cent) or strongly agreed (29 per cent) with the proposition that »women dressing ›inappropriately‹ should not complain about sexual harassment«, and this includes 42 per cent of female respondents!



7

BEFORE AND AFTER THE COLLAPSE

A comparative approach to the crisis is helpful to pinpoint some of the changes youth in Lebanon have faced under the series of political and socio-economic crises.

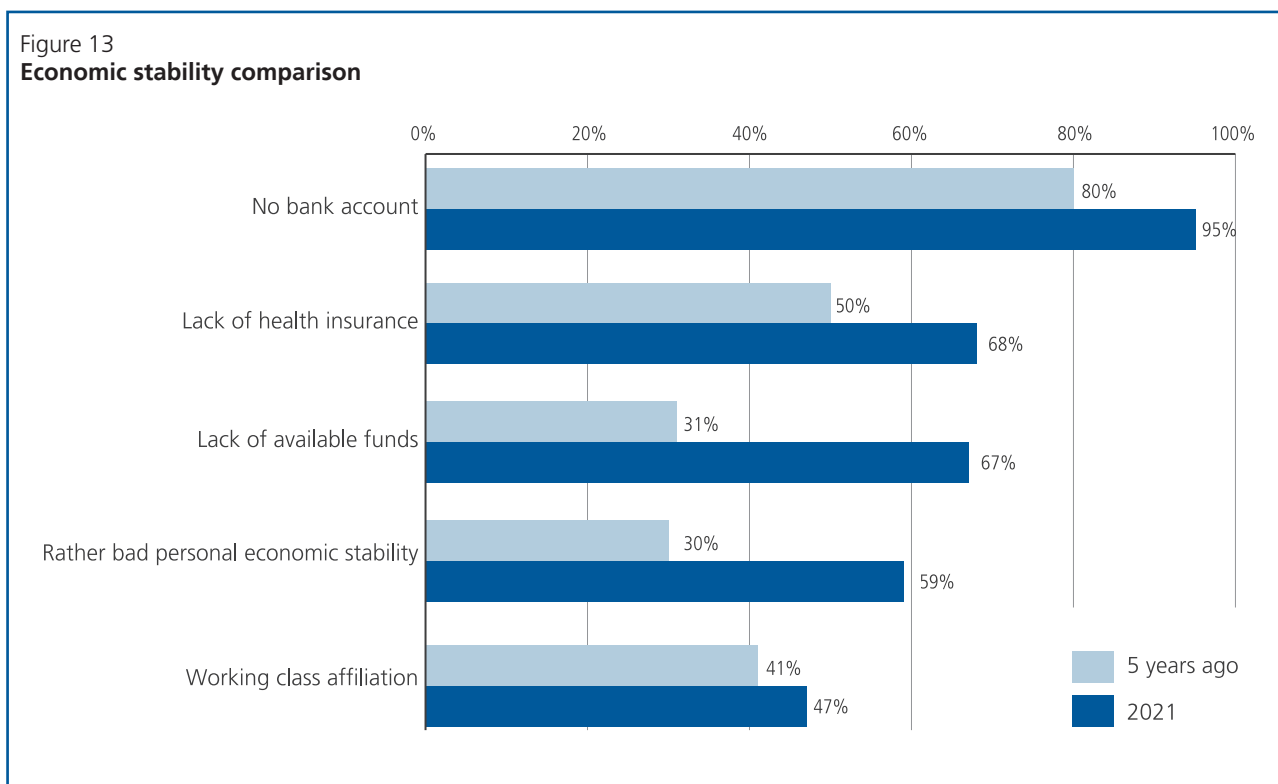
7.1 ECONOMIC STABILITY

We were able to highlight a number of areas of life that significantly worsened over the last five years. The most notable of these developments are the exponential deterioration of personal economic stability for youth, an increase in working class identification, lack of bank accounts and readily available funds, and lack of health insurance and access to free healthcare services.

Half of those interviewed for this study have never used payment systems via mobile phone, and only one per cent using them on a daily basis.

This sheds light on the overall inaccessibility of digital payment services in Lebanon, especially to school and university students or fresh graduates who have to perform numerous digital payment tasks due to the country's bureaucratic educational processes. It also reflects the lack of income-saving schemes for youth given the low chance of them being able to open a bank account or rely on financial institutions given the ongoing liquidity crisis. Of course, investments are also virtually impossible for most, as banks are no longer handing out loans and risk aversion remains at a historical high.

The rates at which the situation deteriorated in these areas is extremely worrying and reveals a much about the current state of affairs and the myriad social, political, economic and psychological implications for young people in Lebanon.



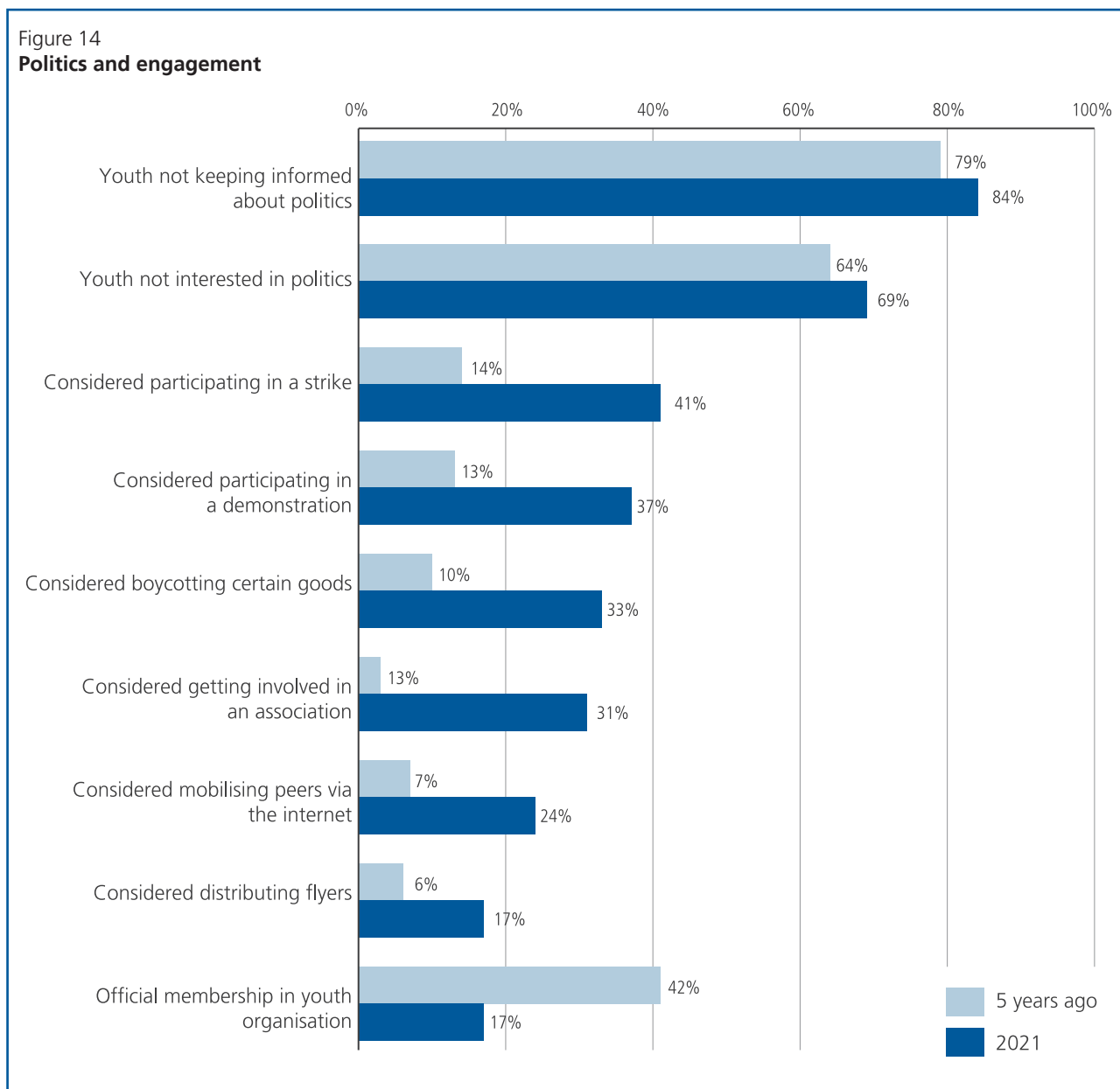
7.2 POLITICS AND ENGAGEMENT

The October 2019 uprising was largely led by youth activists and university/student groups. Their role was so central to the movements on the ground that the call to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 was one of the most recognised demands to come from the protests. However, the dismal state of the economy, combined with a series of events such as the August explosions, as well as a political deadlock, all played a significant role in crippling the general population's sense of vitality and action, throwing a major part of the country into a state of despair.

Whether this also largely applies to youth is contestable. However, compared to the 2016 studies, young people showed less interest in politics and in keeping informed about politics overall. This may also be related to the connotations of the word politics, with young people associating it with terms such as »corruption« or »problems«.

Active political experience and civic engagement were widely observed however, as more youth considered participating in demonstrations and strikes, boycotting certain goods, joining an association, using the internet to mobilise peers to act, distributing flyers, and many other activities. On the other hand, official membership of youth organisations dropped significantly.

The data on politics and youth civic engagement in the country can help us understand certain patterns of mobilisation and how these have evolved over the last few years. An increase in physical activity (demonstrations, strikes, etc.), which are largely independent, individual-level activities, and a decline in membership of official organisations can be observed. This reveals a trend of spontaneous and disorganized political action, where youth tend to participate in activities based on trends or personal whims, rather than as a result of a commitment to a decision made by an organised group.

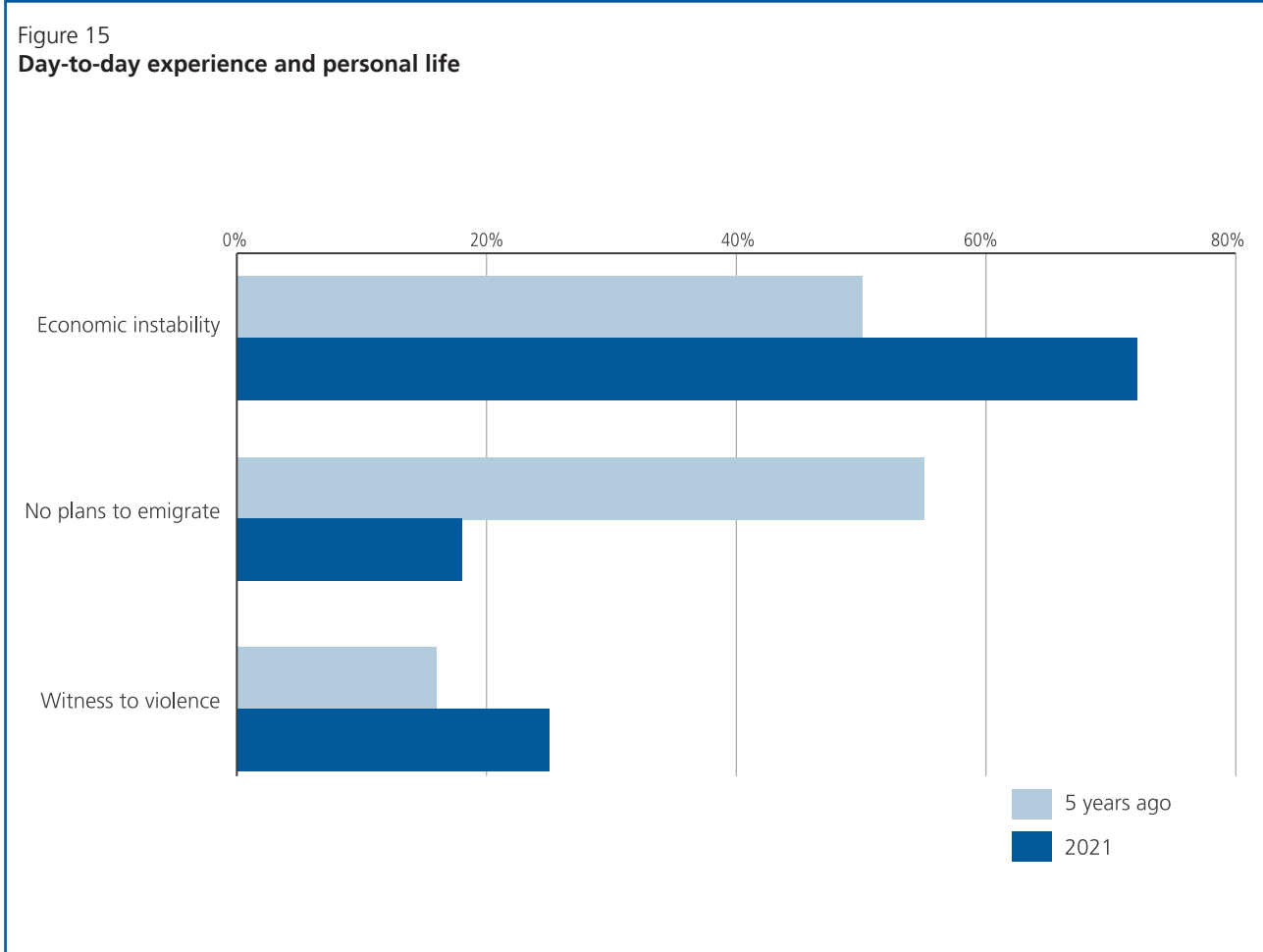


7.3 DAY-TO-DAY EXPERIENCE AND PERSONAL LIFE

Young people’s daily lives have been subject to a range of destabilising factors, whether economic instability, a rise in the violence and threats witnessed or personally experienced, the increased propensity to emigrate or the gendered impact of the crisis.

7.4 INCREASING UNCERTAINTY

In reference to Jörg Gertel’s usage of the word »uncertainty«, youth, as well as societies »constantly try to hedge against uncertainties, orienting certain aspects of everyday life towards the future in developing tactics and strategies in planning ahead« (Gertel/Hexel 2018: 23). This task has, however, become significantly more difficult for young people in Lebanon over the last few years, with their futures becoming more and more difficult to plan and predict. Youth are becoming less inclined to make long-term plans, preferring instead to stick to short-term planning or living in the moment as precarity in the country as well as social and security turbulences increase.



8

CONCLUSION

Many conclusions can be drawn from the results of the study on the state of youth livelihoods and young people's personal and career decision-making processes in Lebanon.

To begin with, it is important to analyse the career choices vis-à-vis the informality and instability of the Lebanese labour market, and the rapid disappearance of any work opportunities, let alone desirable ones. This has led youth to opt for more secure job positions, often at the expense of their personal enjoyment or chosen career direction.

Furthermore, the systemic shock that affected major governmental and financial institutions, has significantly limited young people's room for manoeuvre in terms of accessing liquid and regular sources of income and savings. With tensions in the country already at an all-time high, social realities were also impacted by a range of different factors magnifying the crisis, including the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Beirut port explosion, the Tleil explosion and armed conflicts.

There were also feelings of resentment against ruling class politicians or the ruling system as a whole and the prevailing patriarchal, classist and racist culture.

The decision to actively participate in social and political projects and to display a high degree of civic engagement was not shared by all youth however, as a significant share of young people wanted nothing to do with politics in general. This is often less of a choice and more down to the financial need to dedicate more hours to a paid job and allocate less time to volunteer work and unpaid labour overall. Things become even more complicated when a range of institutions, including those supposedly established to benefit society, involve ambiguous and non-transparent self-financing schemes or operations, leading many young people to doubt the integrity of such initiatives.

There were also worrying developments on several levels, in both private and public spaces, when it comes to young people's personal lives and their exposure to daily and intermittent violence. This, too, affected their willingness and opportunity to participate in civic activities and has impacted their personal and career choices on a more general level.

It is crucial to look at the developments affecting youth's situations in the country from a gendered perspective. Patriarchal structures were often reflected in the norms and decision-making processes on an individual level, on a familial level, where fathers are usually the head of the family, and on a social and political level, where youth often felt that social projects were dominated by male figures.

At a general level and for young people specifically, emigration has been a daily topic of discussion, with an overwhelming majority considering it at some point in time over the last few years and a large sharing with at least one relative living outside the country.

As more and more young people decide to emigrate in search of better job opportunities, educational experiences and stable livelihoods, it remains unclear what the future in the country will hold for those unable to leave, or those willing to return at some point in time when the crisis is over or at least mitigated, which does not seem to be something that will happen any time soon.

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WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE NEAR FUTURE?

A Crumbling Education Sector

While the medium to long-term future remains ambiguous, short-term developments that are likely to have an impact on youth's livelihoods have already been observed in several areas.

The most natural area to begin with here is education prospects. With the prices of everyday commodities adapting

to the black-market exchange rate, university supplies and amenities have seen significant price hikes. This has led many universities, under the pretext of the current crisis, to »dollarise« their tuition fees, a term coined to signify the adaptation of the fees to the black-market exchange rate. With wage adjustments trailing behind price hikes, this has left many students and their parents unable to afford the cost of higher education, especially in private universities.

The state of the Lebanese University, which hosts around half of the country's university students, is spiralling into disaster. The budget allocated by the government far from meets the basic needs of university amenities, professors' wages and proper course materials. The rise in fuel prices, with the price of one tank surpassing the official minimum wage, means that transportation to university alone might be difficult to afford for the most vulnerable families.

With public education being marginalised by the government and private education becoming largely inaccessible, it is safe to say that the education sector in Lebanon will remain in crisis for the next few years. While university administrations have announced the expansion of financial aid and scholarship schemes, these will probably be insufficient to offset the number of dropouts and transfers. Young people's career prospects and chance of finding decent employment continue to be precarious.

Political and Socio-Economic Instability

The multiplicity of factions and blocs within parliament, as has historically been the case in Lebanon, has led to the absence of the traditional majority-opposition division seen in representative democracies, instead contributing to the increasing distribution of quotas for public offices and decision-making positions between blocs (mostly on a sectarian basis). Even with the presence of more than 13 newly elected independent members of parliament, future events such as the presidential election, the formation of the future government and the planning of the upcoming municipal elections will most likely be subject to heated political contestation and possible deadlocks.

Historically, political deadlocks have been a major obstacle for any recovery and reconstruction plan and the implementation of reforms to rebuild the economy, which casts further uncertainty on the country's future.

On a regional level, Lebanon's fate is also dependent on geopolitical factors, such as Iran-US nuclear negotiations, the Syrian conflict and Gulf countries' interests in the Lebanese political scene given their historical involvement, all of which are far from stable.

Youth livelihoods in Lebanon thus plunge further into precarity, uncertainty and insecurity, descending into what can be called as ecologies of anxiety with a future that is hanging by a thread.

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ABOUT THE FES MENA YOUTH STUDY

The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) views young women and men as instrumental for democratic development in the region and is keen to strengthen their potential to initiate change in the world of politics and across society. Based on the results of a long-term survey, launched in 2016, FES seeks to provide insight into young people's situation in the MENA region.

In 2021, FES launched its second large-scale representative survey in 12 MENA countries: Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Tunisia, and Yemen. With its 1,000 in-depth interviews conducted for each country, FES MENA Youth Study generates a large database of responses to more than 200 questions concerning the personal background of the interviewees and their views to a variety of topics.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Lebanon Office
157 Marfa'a | Rue 73 (Saad Zaghloul) | Majidiye
Beirut 2012 7306

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