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Schooling Judy: Falling Through the Gaps in Jordan's Education System

Jordan has committed to education for all, but some Syrian refugees still struggle in the country's public school system. As part of our series on the education crisis among Syrian refugees, we meet Judy, who has been to four schools in the past four years.

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Judy's family came to Jordan from Damascus in 2012. Since then, her mother has struggled to find a school with space for Judy, that isn't too far from the family's apartment and that has a good standard of education. [Elspeth Dehnert](#)

NAOUR, JORDAN – In a quaint, hillside district outside the heart of Amman, dozens of Syrian refugee children gather in the courtyard of the local Latin Patriarchate School. Their ages, ranging from six to 13, vary like the sizes of their overstuffed backpacks. Standing at the rear of the crowd is 10-year-old Judy. She seems to want to go unnoticed, but her puffy pink jacket makes her hard to miss.

After about two minutes, at exactly 4 p.m., Judy and her schoolmates – who include her younger sisters, Jana, 8, and Roza, 7 – form a line and march haphazardly into the sand-colored building. Once inside, they disperse by age group into six

classrooms to learn an array of subjects. There's English, Arabic, math, science, and even an outdoor activity class.

Judy learns multiplication tables in a window-lit classroom alongside 10 other students. One of them, a small boy with a hearing aid, walks up to the board to solve a problem as their teacher shushes his classmates' distracting murmurs. It's important that she move things along quickly since there isn't much time to spare before the start of the next class.

While the pressure to keep up the pace is a bit jarring, Judy seems unfazed. This is, after all, the fourth school she's attended in Jordan since her family fled to the country from Damascus in 2012. But there's one key difference between this one and the rest: except for the physical building, it's not technically a school. Rather, it's an informal education program run by [Caritas Jordan](#), a Catholic charity.

"The most important thing I care about is the high level of humanity," says Jumana Neamat, principal of the Naour program. "In our eyes, these children are blessed, and this is our mission."

In 2012, Caritas began implementing the program at private Christian schools across Jordan in order to provide free learning support services – all secular in nature – to Syrian refugee children, regardless of faith. In fact, most, if not all, of the 8,000 children who are enrolled in the program across 24 schools are Muslim.

The classes Judy and her sisters take are based on Jordan's national curriculum and are taught for three hours a day, three days a week, for about two semesters per year. They act as an academic bridge of sorts until, ideally, the children enroll in a public school. It's something that Caritas constantly encourages the parents to do, since public schools can provide their children with a formal education and, subsequently, a high school diploma certified by Jordan's Ministry of Education.

"Instead of staying at home and being at risk of forced early marriage or child labor, it's better for these children to come to a safe place, get some education and do some psychosocial activities until they're able to be enrolled in a certified pathway," says Samar Bandak, Caritas' educational unit coordinator.

The Second Shift Solution

After Jordan began opening its schools to Syrian refugees in 2011, Caritas and other aid organizations in the country created informal education programs to help fill the gaps in a public school system that wasn't equipped, physically and otherwise, to take on the gigantic task of accommodating roughly 226,000 additional children.



The school run by Catholic charity Caritas Jordan aims to act as a bridge for Syrian children until they are able to enroll in Jordan's public schools. Classes run three hours a day, three days a week. (Elspeth Dehnert)

Since then, the Ministry of Education has created more space by implementing a second shift in the afternoon at 200 of its public schools and now [claims](#) it can guarantee a seat to every single child in the country, including Syrian refugees. But,

as with any enormous challenge, there is still no shortage of problems. And some of them are causing Syrian children to either drop out of public school or avoid enrolling in the first place.

While an estimated 167,000 Syrian refugee children are enrolled in public schools for the 2016-2017 school year, there are around 64,000 Syrian children registered with the U.N. Refugee Agency (UNHCR) who are not and remain without a formal education.

As UNICEF Jordan Representative Robert Jenkins explains, one of the main issues is the absence of a bussing system for public schools. He says this is a major barrier for Syrian refugee students – especially younger children and girls – who live a long distance from the nearest public school and whose parents can’t afford the commute. “It’s not an easy one to solve,” says Jenkins. “We’re still in consultations and discussions on how to solve the transportation issue.”

Four Years, Four Schools

Jenkins says UNICEF is also working with the Ministry of Education to improve the quality of the education at public schools after some Syrian refugee parents expressed concerns about it. “Syrian parents have a high demand for high-quality education,” he says.

Judy’s mother, Zainab, is one of those parents. “I registered Judy in public school, but I didn’t like it,” says the 31-year-old former English teacher.

In the spring of 2013, Zainab went to enroll Judy in the nearest public school – only a 10-minute walk from their apartment – but she was put on a waiting list. The only other public school in the area with space for Judy was a 15-minute drive away, and although Zainab knew the transportation logistics would be difficult for her to manage, she decided to enroll her daughter there for the time being.

About six months later, Judy was accepted into the nearer public school, but Zainab made the tough decision to pull her out after a year due to concerns over her daughter’s education. “I didn’t like the educational quality or the system,” she says. She was frustrated by the lack of communication between parents and teachers. She says it was difficult to book one-on-one time with anyone at the school to discuss Judy’s lack of progress and she couldn’t call up a teacher whenever she had a question about her daughter’s studies.

Zainab was worried about other things, too, mainly the overcrowded classrooms, what she perceives as a lack of organization, and the men and teenage boys she saw lurking outside the schools. “I was afraid, and I didn’t like it,” she says. Judy, on the other hand, says she was most bothered by the punishment she saw inflicted on other students: “The teachers used to hit kids with a stick,” she recalls.



Judy’s younger sisters, 7-year-old Roza, left, and Jana, 8, also attend the Caritas school. Roza wants to grow up to be an Arabic teacher, while Jana hopes to become a

vet. (Elspeth Dehnert)

Zainab is cuddling with her three daughters on the couch in their small apartment a short car ride from Naour. They're in the living room, which is filled with family photos and wooden sculptures that Zainab's 28-year-old brother carved by hand. He's played an important role in their lives ever since her husband quit his maintenance job and left Jordan to claim asylum in Sweden two years ago.

Zainab says she plans to join her husband there with their daughters as soon as their request for family reunification is approved by the Swedish government. The process, she adds, hasn't been easy, and money has been very tight.

While Zainab's husband was still in Jordan, she had enrolled Judy in a nearby private school that turned out to be a good fit for both of them. But, when her husband left, she had to pull Judy out of that school, too, since she could no longer afford the tuition. That was when she heard about Caritas' informal education program from a neighbor, and enrolled Judy and her two youngest daughters, who were by then school age, at the end of 2015.

"They used to depend on me for education," Zainab says of the times her daughters were out of school. "Now, they're really happy. You can't imagine how our lives have changed."

Some Barriers Are Hard to Break

Unlike Jordan's public schools, Caritas provides Syrian refugee students with school supplies – backpacks, pens, notebooks and other stationary – and, more importantly, a bussing system that shuttles them from door to door.

"I've had to convince one girl's father not to take her out about five times now ... He tells me, 'She's 12, she's too old, and she has a little brother to help out with at home.'"

While these may seem like simple gestures, principal Neamat says they are the only reason most of her students are able to show up to class three days a week. Otherwise, she says, many of their parents couldn't afford to send them at all. If public schools provided these same things, she adds, the children would likely be receiving their educations there instead.

"We are the only option for many of them," says Neamat. "About 30 of them are living on a strawberry farm that's far away from everything, so we send a bus to pick them up."

Like Judy, many of the children in Caritas' informal education program are public-school dropouts. For many of them, the problem was money, but Neamat says bullying, harassment and a feeling of being unsafe on school grounds were also factors that led to some of them leaving.

Though, Neamat adds, even the support that Caritas provides is not always enough to ensure that girls won't be pulled out of the program by their parents once they hit puberty. "I've had to convince one girl's father not to take her out about five times now," she says. "He tells me, 'She's 12, she's too old, and she has a little brother to help out with at home.'"

Everyone involved knows the major barriers to education for Syrian refugees – like early marriage and child labor – can't be solved simply by creating a bussing system, providing supplies or ensuring a safe school environment. UNICEF representative Jenkins says those deep-seated issues can only be tackled through assistance from the international community, which he says is not doing enough to help.

"The current level of support the international community is providing to families is not sufficient to bring them out of the level of vulnerability where we still see these negative coping mechanisms," he says.

Keeping the Dream Alive

Fortunately for Judy and her sisters, forced early marriage is not something they'll ever have to worry about. Zainab is sure of that. Their father received his Swedish residency three months ago and, before long, they plan to start a new life in a

new country – one that they can finally call home. Zainab is aware they'll have to navigate an entirely new school system, but she says the inconvenience is worth it.



Judy, Jana and Roza at home. Their dad has claimed asylum in Sweden, and the family is hoping to join him soon. Once there, their mother Zainab says, the girls will finally be able to get the high-quality schooling they deserve. (Elsbeth Dehnert)

“There will be more regularity, a home and the existence of a family,” says Zainab. Yes, she says, switching schools so much over the past four years has affected Judy’s education. But, “the situation will improve.”

Zainab hopes that by settling, for good, in Sweden, Judy can pursue her dream of being a fashion designer, Roza can work towards becoming an Arabic teacher, and Jana can funnel her love for animals into becoming a vet. “They dream a lot. They plan a lot. They tell me, ‘I want to do this’ and ‘I want to become that,’” says Zainab. “And I want to support them in any way possible.”

But many Syrian refugee children aren’t so lucky. And, for them, formal education might be one of the only chances they have at a brighter future.

As advocates, NGOs, policymakers, and other stakeholders are acutely aware, there’s a lot more that needs to be done to ensure every child in Jordan is able to utilize his or her right to an education.

“That’s our mission,” says Jenkins. “But it’s a medium- to long-term process to ensure that every child – girl and boy – is realizing their full potential.”

“Mobilizing an entire system takes time,” he says.

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