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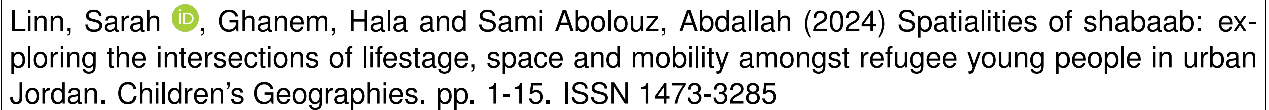

Linn, Sarah, Ghanem, Hala and Sami Abolouz, Abdallah (2024) Spatialities of shabaab: exploring the intersections of lifestage, space and mobility amongst refugee young people in urban Jordan. Children's Geographies. pp. 1-15. ISSN 1473-3285

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2024.2359704

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

Version: Published Version

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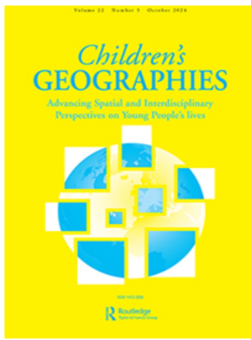

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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cchg20

Spatialities of *shabaab*: exploring the intersections of lifestage, space and mobility amongst refugee young people in urban Jordan

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To cite this article: Sarah Linn, Hala Ghanem & Abdallah Sami Abolouz (08 Jun 2024): Spatialities of *shabaab*: exploring the intersections of lifestage, space and mobility amongst refugee young people in urban Jordan, Children's Geographies, DOI: 10.1080/14733285.2024.2359704

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2024.2359704

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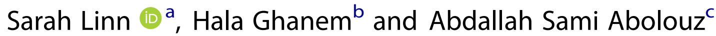
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ABSTRACT

Refugee young people in countries of first asylum navigate daily life through a set of deeply challenging, and often traumatic, structures, circumstances, and expectations. Attending to the complex interaction and relationship between identities, structures of legality, space and place facilitates an important critical lens to examine and understand refugee young people's experiences, including their sense of belonging, hopes for the future and their conceptualisation of life stages of *murahik* (adolescence) and *shabaab* (youth) in shifting transnational spaces.

Based upon participatory and exploratory research conducted in 2022 with Syrian & Iraqi refugee *shabaab*, this paper uses a socio-spatial justice framework which centres young people's voices and explores the everyday places and spaces that these young people access, inhabit, frequent and avoid within the cities of Amman and Zarqa, the urban and economic heartland of Jordan.Using an approach which is sensitive to the role of identity, policy and structural constraint ensures plural insights into the spatial and mobile lives of young people and illustrates the diversity of their experiences, particularly highlighting the role of gendered identities and diverging refugee policies in impacting these diverse experiences, contributing to the growing research field on refugee youth and spatiality.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 17 December 2023
Accepted 6 May 2024

KEYWORDS
Shabaab; Jordan; youth; refugees; socio-spatial justice; lifestage

Introduction

The Kingdom of Jordan has one of the largest youth populations in the world: two in every three people is under the age of 30 (UNICEF 2023). In addition to this significant youth population, the Kingdom is one of the largest refugee-host nations in the world, with an estimated 89 refugees to every 1000 Jordanians (Sahin Mencutek and Nashwan 2021). Alongside its historic and significant Palestinian refugee community, Jordan hosts large numbers of Syrian and Iraqi refugees, with half of these estimated to be children or young people (UNHCR 2022a; 2024). Many of these young people are living in protracted crisis, having arrived in Jordan in their early childhood, and have spent most of their formative years and adolescence as a refugee. A majority are not encamped, but living in socio-economically deprived urban areas (UNHCR 2022b) and navigating their youth-hood within complex interacting social, political and economic structures that shape their lifestage transitions, future trajectories and aspirations. Young people are valid social agents who live, work,

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make and change the cities in which they reside. The surfacing of their experiences, negotiations and aspirations is needed as these young people offer important vantage points to understand social, political, and economic shifts and continuities across transnational and translocal boundaries (Skelton 2013).

Emerging studies that have focused on refugee young people's experiences in Jordan include the challenges of transitioning to adulthood amongst rural border communities (Van Raemdonck 2023; Wagner 2017) the difficulty of embedding in political urban life (Aytug et al. 2023) and the complexity of education and employment (Morrice and Salem 2023). This paper builds on the theoretical framing and findings of these works, by examining the socio-spatial realities, experiences and practices of Syrian and Iraqi young people living in two Jordanian cities: Amman and Zarqa. The study uses a socio-spatial justice framework (Fainstein 2014; Soja 2009) which offers an embodied and lived insight into the socio-spatial (in)justices that refugee young people navigate in the everyday. This enriches understanding of how structural constraints shape opportunities and oppressions and offers insights into how refugee communities co-constitute space and social relations (Aytug et al. 2023; Ghanem 2022). Using this framework alongside critical conceptions of the lifestage of 'youth', this article demonstrates two points: Firstly, that such an approach enriches understanding of the spatial nature of life stages, and secondly that the interplay between identity and structural constraints shape complex relationships with spatiality, mobility and (in)justice.

This paper begins by building a theoretical framework that draws on conceptualisations of youth, socio-spatial justice and refugee young people's lived experiences. It goes on to introduce the context of this study, briefly detailing legal policies that structure refugee opportunities and livelihoods within Jordan and outlines the urban landscapes of Amman and Zarqa. Following the methods section, the paper presents spatial and mobile experiences of Iraqi and Syrian refugee young people living in Amman and Zarqa, exploring their urban lives and reflecting on how identity, lifestage and structural constraints shape these experiences both in the contemporary and in the aspirational.

Conceptualising youth and surfacing a spatial framework of social justice

This work is undergirded by Edward Soja's conceptualisations of socio-spatial justice and the socio-spatial dialectic (Soja 1996; Soja 2009). This approach demands an examination of the ways in which exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence have spatial characteristics and are spatially (re)produced at various scales, from the local to the global (Fainstein 2014; Soja 2010; Young 2011). The term socio-spatial justice encapsulates both the 'equitable distribution of resources and services' and 'the procedural justice of access to basic human rights' (De Backer et al. 2023, 7–8) and calls on scholars to identify and understand the underlying processes which produce (un)just geographies, which are in continual flux (Massey 2005). These underlying processes can be better thought of as structural constraints: political, economic and social forces which shape scalar opportunities and oppressions at various scales, illuminated by an examination of the granular everyday, particularly at the urban scale. This approach enriches the understandings of refugee young people and their lived experiences in urban areas of the majority world, contextualising these spatial experiences within wider structural frameworks which shape opportunities and oppressions. It encourages a critical examination of young peoples' gendered, classed and racialised identities (Soja 2009) alongside broader structures including political economy, social norms and legal policies and how these are spatially co-constituted.

A socio-spatial justice approach answers calls from global south scholars to attend to the diverse structural conditions that shape the experiences of young people in the majority world, including exclusion from political and economic networks and flows, violence and social precarity (Cooper, Swartz, and Mahali 2019; Khan 2021; MacDonald and King 2021). 'Youth' is an embodied social concept, characterised by social meanings that shift over time and space, but broadly encapsulates a biological life course between childhood and adulthood (Holt 2009; Jones 2009; Spence 2005). In the South West Asia and North Africa region (SWANA) young people are estimated to make up

third of the population (Sukarieh and Tannock 2018). Many young people in the region experience an extended 'waithood'. This term, coined by Singerman (2020) and applied extensively in studies with young people in the majority world, describes an increasingly pervasive stage of life between childhood and adulthood which is dominated by joblessness, restricted futures and an inability to transition into independence of adulthood because of complex interrelated structures of social, economic and political factors exacerbated by legacies of colonialism and the adoption of neo-liberal policies (Nuseibeh 2022). Conceptually, the term can encapsulate negative connotations of stasis and lack of autonomy. However, many scholars have emphasised the capacities of young people as they actively navigate the liminal timeframe of 'waithood', including how they might strategize and 'hustle' in order to tactically ensure their best outcomes (Thieme 2013). Looking to the specific experiences of refugee youth in Jordan, Wagner (2017) has highlighted how 'waithood' requires resources, which many marginalised refugee young people do not have at their disposal. Rather, their waithood is 'frantic', desperately moving between NGO courses and volunteering opportunities to try to secure a future. Adding to this, Van Raemdonck (2023) has argued that some young men find themselves in a 'double waithood', waiting for both legal status and economic stability in order to marry. Lastly, van Blerk (2022) have argued that refugee 'waithood' is complicated by restrictive institutional legal structures. They describe young refugees experiencing continual 'rupture' during their transitions to adulthood, exacerbated by the temporariness of their situations, the trauma of their movement across borders and the breaking of social and cultural ties and networks. In such contexts, where frantic or double waithood, rupture, strategy and hustle may be the primary feature of refugee young people's transition to adulthood due to conflict, flight and asylum, Sukarieh and Tannock (2016) emphasise the need for critical engaged scholarship on young people which begins by asking questions such as:

> Whether individuals come to see themselves and be seen as youth, and also how and whether this positioning as youth is variously relevant (or not) to these individuals' experiences of and engagements with the social worlds around them. (1285)

This paper draws together these theories and critiques of urban space, lifestage and identity to think critically about the spatial (in)justices that refugee young people navigate in the everyday in the context of Jordan.

Structuring opportunities and outcomes: Jordan's approach to Syrian and Iraqi refugees

Jordan is not a signatory of the 1951 UNCHR Refugee Convention, nor its 1967 protocol. Rather, the agency operates in the country under a Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) signed in 1998 (UNHCR 2023). This MoU underpins an ongoing working agreement for the protection and lawful presence of all non-Palestinian refugees within the Kingdom registered with UNHCR (Twigt 2022). Whilst the policy advocates are *non-refoulment*,[1] this is not strictly abided by and refugees do experience deportation (Frelick 2017). The MoU with UNHCR enables Jordan to approach refugee protection politically and strategically through a 'hospitality regime' where refugees are referred to as 'guests' (Mason 2011). This results in an uneven application of protections, opportunities and access to services across different refugee communities with the Jordanian government and international agencies creating a shared assemblage of responsibilities for funding, registration and material assistance to these groups (Lenner 2020; UNHCR 2023). This also creates a structural landscape of rights, opportunities, and oppressions for refugee communities to navigate.

Although demographically difficult to determine, there are an estimated 100,000–200,000 Iraqi refugees living in Jordan (Stevens 2013). The first gulf war saw a significant arrival of Iraqi refugees which was further exacerbated by the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the spike in sectarian violence in 2006–2007 and the rise of ISIS in 2014 (Chatty and Mansour 2011). There is a cultural perception of Iraqis as wealthy and privileged migrants who have bought residency permits, and have

the right to live, work and access public services in Jordan (Chatelard 2009; Mason 2011). Whilst this accurately describes a small percentage of Iraqis in Jordan, there are thousands of marginalised and vulnerable Iraqi refugees who do not have rights to work and cannot afford residency permits or access affordable health services, relying heavily on aid and assistance from UNHCR and other agencies.

Jordan hosts approximately 650,000 Syrian refugees, displaced by the Syrian civil war, which began in 2011. A fifth of these refugees are housed in camps; most are self-settled in urban and peri-urban areas. Policies towards Syrian refugees have differed over the past 12 years; however, the most significant changes occurred in 2016 with the introduction of the Jordan Compact, a political commitment to integrate Syrian refugees into Jordans' labour market (Lenner and Turner 2019). This has seen increased opportunities for Syrian refugees in Jordan in contrast to other refugee communities, to pursue employment legally, although the policies have not been without critique (Al-Mahaidi 2021). Currently, Syrian refugees have access to some labour opportunities, state primary and secondary education and healthcare; however, most live in highly economically precarious and marginalised situations.

These differentiated policies have a prolific structural impact upon everyday life for refugee communities within Jordan, shaping and reproducing socio-spatial inequalities. Refugee young people are not without agency within these contexts, but encountering and navigating different life stages within such restrictive legal frameworks undoubtedly shapes their capacities, opportunities and aspirations.

Amman and Zarqa: The urban and economic heartland of Jordan

Most Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Jordan have self-settled near land borders or in the Amman–Russeifa–Zarqa (ARZ) economic corridor (UNHCR 2022a). The ARZ corridor is fundamental to Jordan's economic growth and development, is home to a majority of the nation's population and is also highly heterogenous and diverse (Ababsa 2013; Chatelard 2010; UNHCR 2022b).

Amman is the Kingdom's capital city, its economic, cultural and social hub. The city is characterised by socio-spatial inequalities, exacerbated by neo-liberal policies, and roughly demarked into a social construction of 'East' and 'West' Amman, with household income, population density and built form differing notably between the two (Potter et al. 2009). East Amman is the traditional and more informal part of the city, with several Palestinian refugee camps present. It is home to lower-income, marginalised, refugee and migrant communities living in high density and often structurally compromised dwellings. Amman suffers from a lack of open public spaces, particularly green public spaces, for the city's residents to enjoy.

Zarqa is situated to the north-east of Amman, on the edge of al-Badia (desert) which stretches towards the Iraq border. The inner-city areas suffer from a lack of public and green spaces, poor housing structures and infrastructure, resulting in high housing and commercial densities, and an erosion of the quality of life. There are significantly fewer green or public spaces than Amman (Jamhawi, Alshawabkeh, and Alobaidat 2020).

In recent years, Zarqa has experienced significant urban and social decline due to a considerable municipal debt issue which has been compounded by structural underfunding by the Jordanian government which has impacted the urban and social character of the city (Price 2020). Zarqa has a poor standing within Jordan and is associated with crime, militarism, industrialism, poverty and radicalism due to its links with Al Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS (Braizat, Speckhard, and Shajkovci 2017).

Methods: workshops, interviews and 'pop-up' ethnography.[2]

This exploratory study is informed by 'pop-up' ethnographic observations and vox pops with young people in Amman and Zarqa, two workshops with Syrian and Iraqi young people between the ages

of 16 and 26 in Zarqa and Amman, and interviews with key informants in Jordan. However, the richest data emerged from the two workshops, and therefore, most of the methods section and discussion reflects this.

Pop-up ethnography has been recognised as an effective method for conducting research in public urban spaces where a researcher can merge ethnographic observations of a space whilst eliciting quick responses and insights from people in-situ by conducting short interviews or 'vox pops' (Degen and Lewis 2020; Radice 2022). Conscious of limited time in the field, this approach allowed for opportunities to hang out or observe young people, whilst posing brief questions about spaces and places that were important to them and why, when opportunities arose. This technique received a warm and engaged response from refugee young people, who were happy to discuss life in the city. These vox-pop type interviews aided in informing further workshop content, where more focused and engaged work could take place, and in providing a more detailed picture of young people's lives in Amman and Zarqa.

Research workshops were facilitated by researchers' ongoing relationships and networks within Jordan. One Jordanian-based NGO in Zarqa and one refugee-led CBO in Amman assisted in recruiting participants. An outline of the research proposal, research questions and methods was sent to the organisations in advance, accompanied by further discussions and/or face to face meetings with one of the research team. Potential participants engaged in the work of these organisations were then approached and given an outline of the research and asked if they would like to participate. In addition to the risk assessments and academic ethics processes that our own institutions required us to follow, organisations also had their own codes of conduct for ethical practice which we were required to sign and abide by. Working through gatekeepers brings its own set of ethical and methodological complications of power hierarchies, access and representation (McAreavey and Das 2013). However, in the context of this project, the research team felt that working through existing institutions provided appropriate ethical accountability and support. Young people participated as autonomous individuals (Heath et al. 2007), but had only been approached if the NGO/CBO had already assessed that they were resilient enough for the content of the workshops.

All young people were given a stipend to cover their travel costs and were provided lunch. In the Zarqa workshop most young people were Syrian, with only a few Iraqis' present. In Amman, most of the participants were Iraqi, with only one Syrian young woman joining the workshop. Workshops were predominantly conducted in Arabic, with occasional questions posed in English which were then translated to Arabic. The workshops used a variety of creative and participatory methods to engage young people's interest. This included cognitive mapping, visual methods, and sticky note brainstorming which allowed young people to reflect on spaces and places that they used or avoided in the city, their mobility and use of public transport, and their daily spatial relationships. Such methods have been found to be both effective and empowering with young cohorts, and are an effective means of engaging participants with diverse understandings, uses and experiences of space and place (Trell and van Hoven 2010). As the workshops were predominantly led in Arabic, once completed all content was translated from Arabic to English and transcribed by the research team and read through for familiarisation. Content was then roughly manually coded for patterns aided by reflective notes from the research team, and then entered into NVivo for more thorough and systematic reflexive thematic analysis.

Consent for participation was gained verbally at the outset of each workshop and was revisited at the close of workshops (Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007). As all young people were refugees, we were conscious that many would be nervous or reticent to engage in an unfamiliar bureaucratic activity that required them to sign their names and identify themselves (Johnson, Ali, and Shipp 2009). In addition, some young people may not be literate, and therefore enforcing participation in written consent processes can be alienating, confusing and embarrassing (Block et al. 2013). As such, and with the agreement and advice of the support organisations, we proceeded with verbal informed consent, agreed that all young people would use a pseudonym, and that no images would be used that showed participants faces.

The research team is all experienced in working with refugee communities and CBOs in the region (Ghanem 2022; Linn 2020). The team all hold different social positions and identities and we were aware that this would shape young people's responses towards us, and different opportunities within the research space (Denzongpa, Nichols, and Morrison 2020). Following fieldwork, the research team recorded debriefs to discuss observations and reflections that emerged during fieldwork and to reflect more broadly on ethical issues of power and positionality (Huisman 2008).

It was expected that topics such as puberty, sexual development, marriage, responsibilities and public harassment might emerge during discussions. Therefore, workshops were intended to be single sex, to mitigate this and to ensure the personal comfort of participants. However, fieldwork rarely plays out as intended. In both Amman and Zarqa, on the days in question, young men were reticent to attend workshops. Some had secured informal work opportunities for the day, a few expressed a desire to be paid, and one stated that he couldn't see how he would benefit from the workshop. The decision not to attend by some young people, and the active communication of this, serves as a reminder of young people's individual decision-making capacities and autonomy about participating in research (Skelton 2008). This resulted in both workshops being dominated by young women, with two young men joining in Amman and just one in Zarqa. However, a mixed cohort led to the observation of some interesting dynamics and outcomes. For example, discussions that emerged between young men and women as they contrasted their lived experiences and knowledge were rich with insights about different spatial and social realities as young people oscillated between sympathy and competition about who faced greater pressure, restriction and responsibilities. However, some topics were quickly dropped, with young people shrugging off responses or discussing a particular topic (such as puberty) in abstract and depersonalised terms. In such situations ,we did not pry further. Rather, conscious of the gendered and social dynamics, and potential traumatic emotions at play, we let the young people's responses or engagement drive conversation to respect what they were comfortable sharing. Consequently, not all conversations could ethically be pursued to their natural end, and this did limit the exploration of some potentially rich and insightful discussions within the restrictions of this project. However, beyond exploratory research, and with deeper trust and relationship building, these topics could potentially be explored further in the future.

At the outset of the study, we emphasised to young people that this was an exploratory study, with the intent to build a critical foundation on which to base future participatory and collaborative studies with marginalised young people in Zarqa and Amman based on key topics and issues that they had identified (Block et al. 2013). Most expressed a desire to remain updated and to be involved in ongoing opportunities that might emerge. The workshops also acted as a space of sociability and connection.

Murahik and *Shabaab*: Reflecting on the spatiality of lifestages

As explored above, the age of adolescence, youth and adulthood are contested and socially, politically and economically constructed terms relevant to different contexts and regions. A key aspect of this study was using the provocation by Sukarieh and Tannock (2016) above and echoed in Wagner's (2017) work with rural Syrian refugees, to explore how refugee young people understood, defined and experienced the terms *murahik* ('adolescence') and *shabaab* ('youth')[3] within their own lived experience and the socio-spatial implications and experiences of this lifestage.

For young people, there was a clear distinction between the lifestages of *murahik* and *shabaab*, and young people perceived that each had clear characteristics. One of the most common phrases used to describe the lifestage of *murahik* was *tysh* (recklessness). Many young people saw adolescence as a time of 'wildness' and 'self-centredness', when young people were sensitive and prone to influence by those older than them. In contrast to the connotations of 'irresponsibility' with *murahik*, the lifestage of *shabaab* was described as a time of excitement, possibility, productivity and contribution to wider society:

> *Shabaab* is when … we want to do something with ourselves [when] we want to achieve our ambitions and our dreams. (Laila, 20, Zarqa)

Many young people described *shabaab* as a 'mindset', whereby an individual was perpetually energetic, optimistic and 'hustling' through exploring new opportunities and possibilities to make a life for themselves (Thieme 2013). It was perceived as an extended lifestage and mentality, largely dependent on an individual, the way they behaved and the responsibilities they took on.

Shabaab carried a sense of being accountable, and 'accepting responsibilities' was one of the key differentiations for young people between adolescence and youthhood. Both young men and young women felt that they were *shabaab* when they took ownership of something. This could be shaping the direction of their life through education or employment. It was also perceived as a lifestage that should feature excitement, fun and exploration. However, structural restrictions loomed over this temporality of life and some young people commented that their responsibilities and day-to-day lives had quashed their opportunity to 'enjoy' their youth. Masud reflected on his daily activities looking for informal work in the city of Amman, commenting:

> I never lived my *shabaab* period, because I have worked from a young age until now. I have no choice … it's supposed to be fun. And I missed all the fun. (Masud, 18, Amman)

Others echoed his perspective:

> All I do is work, work, work. I am no longer in the *shabaab* phase because there is no fun'. (Hiba, 25, Amman)

Young women identified the *murahik* period as a time when their social positions and spatial relationships shifted with the oncoming of puberty. There was an increased pressure on young women to not bring *ayb* (shame) upon themselves or their families through their behaviour, dress, and mannerisms in public. This was directly related to their socio-spatial positioning and how they were perceived by their community in public space. Some young women contrasted the significant amount of freedom they had as children: spending the day 'playing in the streets' within their neighbourhoods, in mix-gendered groups. However, as they entered the period of *murahik*, this became frowned upon, or even forbidden. One participant described the need to 'watch yourself' and be more conscious of how you dressed and behaved in public spaces. Another discussed her active sports participation and how she was no longer 'allowed' to participate in such activities since her childhood had passed and it would be considered socially and culturally inappropriate, particularly in public (Keuss 2020).

Young women were conscious of their changing social positions and the intense societal scrutiny they endured. In workshops they continually drew attention to the double standards held between the genders, noting the weight of their decisions and actions at this age carried into future temporalities:

> A male teenager will not be held accountable like a female. If a female did anything wrong, she will be held accountable for this for the entirety of her life (Hiba, 25, Amman)

This contrasted starkly with the young men who perceived this as a time of experimentation:

> Adolescence is [about] learning from your mistakes. I am learning from my mistakes for my future … (Daoud, 18, Amman)

Young men acknowledged the spatial immobility and scrutiny that pressed down upon women as they entered adolescence and commented that as *murahikeen* and then *shabaab*, their autonomy and socio-spatial independence steadily rose. There was no longer an expectation for their family to know their daily movements or activities. They explained that they would easily disappear into the fabric of the city for days at a time and would only contact their family out of 'courtesy', not expectation. Young men were often spatially mobile to pursue and secure work opportunities, many having supported their families from a young age through this informal opportunity. Young men expressed a far more detailed knowledge of the city, particularly

other low-income, migrant-hosting neighbourhoods, as they visited them to explore informal job opportunities.

Although young women expressed frustration with spatial restriction, they acknowledged that compared to Iraq or Syria, their socio-spatial lives were very different. Iraqi young people discussed how traditionalism, 'eastern' values, tribalism and conflict resulted in heavily restricted mobilities and community scrutiny in Iraq. Young men acknowledge that their spatial mobility would be restricted in the evening because of insecurity and ongoing sectarian conflict. Young women recalled the necessity of wearing the hijab with the onset of puberty, or earlier, contrasting this with their arrival in Jordan, where this was no longer considered necessary. Syrian participants noted a familial and cultural relaxation towards gendered dress and behaviour compared to their (or siblings) experiences in Syrian society. This shift in public dress and behaviour is largely understood to relate to the weakening of social ties within communities whereby the power of social stigma and scrutiny is lessened, but also demonstrates the fluid nature of identity, culture and spatial relationships.

Despite a sense that Jordan allowed for more social, cultural and spatial freedom, young people didn't identify as 'Jordanian' or express a sense of belonging. They carried memories and emotions of childhood and adolescence with them to Jordan, and their identities as 'Syrian' or 'Iraqi' continued to dominate their lived experiences and future possibilities predominantly because of social and structural everyday experiences within Jordan of the everyday, but also possibly due to ongoing familial, social and cultural practices and linkages to their home countries. This mean that almost all expressed a sense of 'not belonging' to Jordan or to the cities in which they lived. Only one young person confessed that she remembered so little of Syria that she didn't really consider herself Syrian – she only had active memories of life in Amman. Despite the length of time that most young people had lived in the country, and even though many said they 'liked' Jordan, most felt that it was not their home. Iraqi and Syrian young people spoke pragmatically of ongoing racism directed towards them in public spaces, saying that 'it wasn't all Jordanians' but that there was 'a lot' of prejudice that they had to navigate. Whilst pragmatic about scrutiny and surveillance in public space in group setting discussions, several young men privately discussed their discomfort and fear about encountering security services in public space because of the intersection of their unregulated legal status and the positioning as 'young men'.

Spatialities of the everyday

Spaces and places that young people used and frequented were perceived in different ways. What some found to be safe and welcoming, others thought to be inappropriate or dangerous, and spaces shifted in meaning and affect over the temporality of day and night. Sensory, embodied, and affective experiences underpin perceptions of these spaces, and at times young people expressed intangible emotional responses about why a place was 'good' or to be avoided or described as strong sensory experiences. Across both workshops, there was an ongoing conflict amongst young people's responses in managing a youthful desire to be visible, present and mobile alongside a pragmatic necessity to also be invisible and discreet in cities that were ambivalent, if not occasionally hostile, to their presence.

Common themes emerged regarding refugee young people's spatial experiences and engagements with the spaces of their cities. Spaces and places that were public, free and welcoming in the city were important to refugee young people as these permitted accessibility and diversity. The diversity of a space, including a mix of gender, ethnicity and class, had a direct correlation on young people's sense of belonging and welcome. Whilst refugee young people detailed numerous places and spaces that they used and frequented, the necessity of these meeting the above criteria played a significant role in how frequently they used them and how safe they felt in them. Young people were drawn to public places where they could 'hang out' and 'have fun', that 'weren't expensive' or where you might see 'all faces and *aljinsiaat*' (nationalities). Like most young people

their age, they looked to places where they could see and be seen, predominantly in ways that were socially and culturally appropriate – protecting their reputation and standing within their wider community. Spaces that were popular included open plazas and traffic circles, spaces where there was movement, variety, interest and buzz. Young people also spent time at the homes of friends and family, socialising in private and comfortable spaces without scrutiny. Both workshops identified the bustle, affordability, accessibility and traditionalism of the *souk's* (markets) in Old Zarqa and the El Balad as good places to get food, go to a café or browse the shops and stalls. The El Balad and Old Zarqa have a similar built form being part of the affordable and social spaces of the city, where there is a strong mix of class, nationality, ethnicity and gender. Eating and drinking and frequenting cafes were also popular activities, with some young people stating that this was 'all' there was to do, indicating a lack of social activities and places for young people with limited resources. Parks and green spaces were rarely mentioned, but when they were, young people discussed their importance to their mental wellbeing, alongside a critique of the lack of these spaces in both cities.

In contrast, places that were expensive or prone to scrutiny and securitisation were infrequently used. Malls in West Amman or New Zarqa were only occasionally frequented by young people and were perceived as expensive spaces of scrutiny. Young men are often restricted from entering malls in Western Amman if they are single, or in a young, all-male group, and particularly if they are identified as migrant or refugee young men. In the workshops, young men explained that sometimes to access these 'elite' spaces, one would have to approach a family or mixed group and ask to 'tag along' in order to navigate mall security (which typically consists of a bag scanner and security guard). This was perceived as something disdainful and young people were quick to insist that they had their 'own means' of accessing malls without having a stoop to these tactics. Iraqi refugee young people discussed how stereotypical views of Iraqi refugees as wealthy economic migrants shaped their experiences of such places, stating that they were often overcharged or quoted higher prices. Urban-based cultural and heritage spaces were also seen as inaccessible. Young people described some of the heritage sites in Amman as places where their identities as 'refugees' were acted upon, and they were subject to scrutiny, suspicion, or being overcharged for entry as they were 'foreign'. Heritage sites were seen as pointless, unattractive and uninteresting, with one participant quipping: 'Jordan doesn't have any cultural sites'. Participants in Zarqa heavily critiqued the city's lack of cultural interest and social activities and many discussed visits to Amman to get out of the city and to see and do things that were more interesting.

When asked about what they perceived as typical youth activity and spaces, CBO's identified riding around or 'hanging out' in a car, listening to music and chatting with friends and gathering at viewpoints (*matal*). These are informal, reclaimed public spaces of Jordanian cities that offer striking vista views. Their informality and lack of scrutiny mean that they provide an insight into a city's 'public urban life when not controlled formally, including everything it entails – the good, the bad, and what lies in between' (Keuss 2020, 84). Whilst many young people, particularly those in Zarqa, did discuss these spaces, they appear to be used infrequently. Only one or two participants across the workshops knew someone who owned a car. Therefore, this seemingly 'typical' Jordanian youth activity of riding around in cars and hanging out at viewpoints was not common amongst refugee young people. In addition, during pop-up ethnography activities, many young men explained how they also reclaimed unused urban spaces (typically vacant lots) within their cities to meet others and play football. This reclamation of space is a de facto element of life in the city where there are limited public and green spaces (UNHABITAT 2022). However, amongst workshops which were dominated by young women, this description or use of space was not recognised to the same extent.

Mobility and identity

For young people, walking or public transport was essential to getting around their cities.. In Amman and Zarqa, using a map to navigate the streets is not as easy as it appears. This is because

the transportation routes, stops, and networks are often not clear or systematic, making it difficult for people to find their way around. Public transport in Jordan has received scathing critique for exacerbating the vulnerability of the already marginalised groups that rely on it (UNHABITAT 2022). Irregular services are further hampered by poor urban planning and infrastructural development.

Young women typically stayed within their immediate neighbourhoods, only travelling for a purpose (to attend college, work or volunteering). Buses were considered affordable and the most common mode of public transport, but experiences were undercut by embodied, sensory experiences of smell, pollution, proximity to others and discomfort. Taxis and *services* (shared taxis) were unpopular forms of transport. These were considered both expensive and dangerous. Both workshops detailed urban myths about taxi's being involved in human trafficking, organ trafficking and kidnapping. This was then exacerbated by individual, negative experiences of harassment and unwanted touching, from both other passengers and taxi drivers. Young women avoided taxis whenever possible, or ensured they had others who could travel with them. In contrast to this strategized thinking, young men were unfazed by public transportation saying they would use whatever transport was available and cheap to them and stating honestly that they wouldn't give this a second thought.

Whilst mobility around immediate neighbourhoods and the wider city was typical in the daytime, spaces held different meanings at night. Young women felt that their presence in public spaces at night was socially and culturally unacceptable (Ababsa 2017). Many felt that they were interrogated by others about their mobility and presence outside of their homes:

> All kinds of people would talk [like this]! All of them will say things to you. [They ask] 'Where are you going? … It doesn't have to be verbal. You can feel it from their looks. I feel judged for being outdoors at night. (Asma, 21, Zarqa)

Later in the evening, as streets became more isolated, young people reported an increase in harassment and personal safety felt compromised. The groups discussed how the streets became 'scary' due to people's behaviour, particularly related to drunkenness and drugs. Whilst young people in Amman certainly conceded that they were more wary at night and also experienced harassment and comments, they still described late evening mobilities, as contingent on a chaperone and being in 'appropriate' spaces. Young people identified areas in their neighbourhoods that operated as functional, accessible spaces by day but with the compromised visibility of night, attracted antisocial elements and created environments of discomfort and danger that they would all avoid. Young people felt that their spatial navigations and encounters were determined by their identities as refugees, insisting that they adjusted their mobility and behaviours predominantly out of fear and insecurity:

> When you are Jordanian, a local, you can do all of this without being afraid. If you are 'an other' from a different country, you will always feel alienated. You will always feel you are a stranger. Even if you have lived here for 100 years. (Faiza, 20, Zarqa)

Here Faiza expresses the underlying fear that underpins the realities of being a young refugee navigating their host city with insecure legal status, political and economic exclusion and encountering harassment and prejudice.

Unknown futures: Spatialities of aspiration

For a refugee young person, spatialities of imagination, which facilitate a sense of existential mobility can be a powerful tool in conjuring an imaginary of 'where' one's future might be or what it could look like. Throughout workshops, young people demonstrated a critical understanding of how the opportunities afforded by their lifestage and their broader desires to propel themselves towards a hopeful future was underpinned (and undermined) by broader structural constraints (Hage 2009). They oscillated between optimism and pragmatism, discussing opportunities within

the Kingdom but also lamenting the political economy of Jordan which intersected with legal frameworks which shaped not only their daily lives but also their future spatialities of potential achievement and contribution.

Not dissimilar to Jordanian young people, education and migration were at the forefront of refugee young people's aspiration. Educational opportunities were perceived as securing futures, and half the workshop participants finished school or attended further education courses with much of their daily mobility revolving around attending these activities. But when discussing their education plans, future employment and livelihoods with their peers, their future imaginaries quickly unravelled and a sense of being 'stuck' loomed:

> I have applied for millions of scholarships … even if I studied at University, I will not get anything after that – there is no employment (in Jordan). (Jaliyah, 20, Zarqa)

Young women encouraged each other to pursue education and personal development and to not 'rely' on anyone else, including a future husband. When young men discussed the heavy societal expectations that 'Eastern culture' placed upon them to provide for their future families, women were quick to disagree as this exchange between Daoud and Amina demonstrates:

> In our Eastern culture, everything must be done by the men. [We have to provide] so, all the burden and responsibilities is on us. (Daoud, 18, Amman)

> I don't agree … It's not only about men … I [also] need to pursue my dreams and ambitions. (Amina, 16, Amman)

Young women were acutely aware that as refugees they were socially, economically, and politically vulnerable and that this vulnerability would continue to shape their futures. As a result, rather than a rush towards marriage, or frustration with an extended 'waithood', they expressed a strong sense of trepidation and caution towards matrimony, with their momentum more focused on establishing autonomous lives during the period of *shabaab,* shaped by lived experiences of being a young refugee.

Frustration with existing policy structures that shaped opportunities had created an understandable lethargy amongst some young people, with many expressing apathy towards ongoing quotidian struggles to study or find work. Iraqi young people were especially aware that they would not be able to create lives for themselves within the Kingdom and had placed their aspirations and hopes firmly upon third-country re-settlement because of the State's legal restrictions upon Iraqis and their rights to work. This was echoed by youth workers and CBOs, who expressed concern that some Iraqi young people had abandoned their studies and had disengaged from relationships or opportunities, seeing no hope or point in life in the Kingdom (Morrice and Salem 2023). The sense of existential immobility – the lack of possibility to 'move towards' a secure life within Jordan (Hage 2009) – reflected itself in some young people's reticence to explore or embed themselves in the city itself and constricted social and spatial lived realities in the lived everyday. This was captured through the reflections of Derifa, an Iraqi participant living in Zarqa who drew us a detailed picture of the internal dynamics of her home, saying her cognitive map only represented her home as she spent most of her time there. She commented on frustrations with UNHCR, the limitations of being able to work as she would lose her 'refugee' status and a wider sense of not belonging in Jordan stating:

> I lost my future, there is nothing to do here. I'm just waiting to immigrate … If I get a work permit (then I lose) the UNHCR document, the ID … All our dreams and hopes are linked to resettlement. (Derifa, Zarqa, 25)

Because of restrictions within Jordan, the imaginary of re-settlement or migration loomed large within young people's lives. However, there was a keen awareness that re-settlement in a third country might also result in further social injustices. Here we see the fallacy of a binary choice for young people and their future aspirations: either wanting to stay or wanting to leave share both complexity and challenge, and refugee young people rarely see either as ideal (Müller-Funk,

Üstübici, and Belloni 2023). Young people were keenly aware that they held refugee identities, and that the social injustices that they encountered in Jordan because of their status as refugees, would not dissipate in other contexts.

Conclusion

Drawing together reflections on lifestage, identity, mobility and spatiality provides rich insights and understanding about refugee young people's experience and navigations of socio-spatial (in)justice in Jordan and the underlying processes that shape these. By examining the granular everyday through creative and participatory workshops, we gain insights into shifting and fluid spatial relationships across borders and temporalities, and the structural constraints which shape these experiences.

The exclusion for refugee young people is exacerbated through legal policies that hinder employment, education and livelihood opportunities and constrict futures. Using an approach that is sensitive to the role of identity, policy and structural constraint ensures plural insights into the spatial and mobile lives of young people and illustrates the diversity of their experiences, particularly highlighting the role of gendered identities and diverging refugee policies in impacting these diverse experiences. This study in particular brings gendered identities to the forefront of differentiated experiences, finding that this sometimes dominated and dictated socio-spatial experiences and aspirations more than ethnic and national identities. There are undoubtedly shared experiences among Jordanian youth and refugee youth in Jordan, particularly related to political and economic exclusion, and educational and migratory aspirations that would benefit from further exploration (Nuseibeh 2022), in particular exploring this through a gendered lens might reveal some interesting contrasts and similarities between the two groups.

This work is exploratory, and its findings point to several concerns that would benefit from further research. Firstly, it explores the spatial nature of emerging life stages, and how spatial relationships determine and co-constitute lifestages, which would benefit from further examination in other contexts in SWANA. Secondly, it demonstrates a need for further work on intersectional experiences of youth amongst marginalised and refugee young people in the SWANA region living in urban areas, so that the potential and capacities of this generation are not lost or frustrated. With conflict and uncertainty continuing in Syria and Iraq, refugee young people from these countries will be a continued presence in Jordan and are facing a transition into adulthood in these contexts. They require genuine avenues of support and assistance, or risk becomes entrenched in urban marginalisation and spatial isolation. CBOs frequently advised the researchers on this project that refugee young people both *wanted* and *needed* to contribute to their communities, their cities and to programmes and opportunities that were presented to them. These need to be participatory, collaborative and scalar in order to attend to the socio-spatial (in)justices that young people continue to negotiate during 'ruptured and 'frustrated' waithoods.

Notes

1. *Non-refoulement* is a legal term, which refers to the principal in international law that prohibits a nation receiving refugees and asylum seekers from returning these groups or individuals back to a country that would harm them.
2. This research has been revised by the MMU Arts & Humanities Faculty Research Ethics and Governance Committee EthOS Reference Number: 45861
3. *Shabaab* has various contextual meanings. It translates to the English equivalent of the colloquial plural group term 'guys' and does have masculine connotations. Therefore, *shabaab* is a term, which holds contextual meanings, and understanding its use is important. For example, at the outset of each workshop during early discussion about what these terms meant to young people, the Amman group perceived *shabaab* as a lifestage, whereas the group in Zarqa was initially using the term more colloquially, associating it with the behaviours of a group of young men.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the young people who participated enthusiastically and graciously during workshops and pop-up ethnography. We would also like to thank the NGOs & CBOs that supported this research, scholarly colleagues at the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies for their input and support and anonymous reviewers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by RCASS funding from Manchester Metropolitan University.

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