

# Policy Brief

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Twin brothers, 15, never attended formal school, used to attend Makani, Jordan © Nathalie Bertrams / GAGE 2024

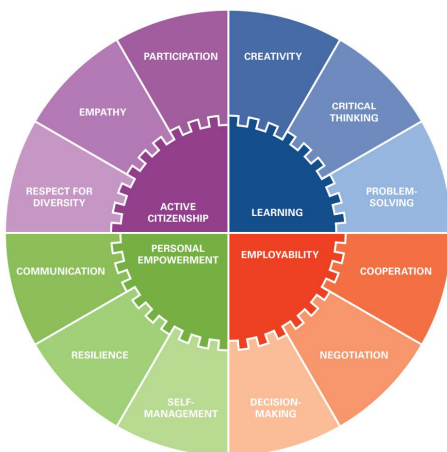
## Adolescent psychosocial well-being and Makani integrated programming

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### Introduction

The Makani ('My Space') programme, implemented by UNICEF and its national partners, has been providing young people living in Jordan with a variety of age-tailored programming since 2015. Originally designed to provide child protection and informal education to the 100,000 school-aged Syrian refugee children who were not able to attend school – because government schools had not yet been scaled up to meet needs – Makani centre programming evolved as classrooms were built and Syrian children were included in the Jordan education system (UNICEF Jordan, 2015; 2022). Today, 114 centres serve disadvantaged young people of all nationalities and offer an array of courses in children's rights; transferable life skills aimed at improving learning, employability, personal empowerment and citizenship (see Figure 1); learning support designed to complement formal education; and recreational opportunities designed to improve emotional and social outcomes (UNICEF MENA Regional Office, 2017; UNICEF Jordan, 2022). This brief, which draws on data collected by the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research programme in 2022 and 2023, aims to contribute to the growing body of evidence that Makani centres support young people to thrive.

Figure 1: Twelve core life skills<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF MENA Regional Office, 2017

## Sample and methods

GAGE is a mixed-methods longitudinal study following approximately 3,000 Syrian, Jordanian and Palestinian young people living in Jordan as they move through adolescence and into young adulthood. Our sample is approximately half female and half male and is divided into two age cohorts: a younger group (mostly aged 10–12 years at baseline, in 2018), and an older group (mostly aged 15–17 years at baseline). This brief draws on midline data, which was collected in 2022 and 2023, and focuses on the experiences and outcomes of young people who had taken part in Makani programming since 2019, when the programme was re-organised to serve a broader population.

Of the just over 1,000 sampled young people who had participated in Makani programming since 2019, a minority (21%) were still participating in programming at the time midline data was collected. The average young person, who was aged 16 at midline, had attended a Makani centre for approximately 8 months, starting when they were 12.5 years old. Most (72%) were Syrian; the remainder were either Jordanian (13%) or Palestinian (14%). Approximately half (49%) of the Syrian young people in the sample lived in formal refugee camps run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); the other half lived in Jordanian host communities, including informal tented settlements (47%). Of all the participants sampled, 10% reported having a disability<sup>2</sup>. Participants' families were socially and economically disadvantaged in myriad ways. Most owned few household assets (7.5/18 on an asset index) and there were relatively high rates of female-headed households (17%) and illiteracy (14%).

### ► For girls everything is forbidden.

(A Palestinian mother)

## Findings

**Surveyed young Makani participants reported taking an array of courses and trainings aimed at fostering psychosocial well-being and agency** (see Figure 2). Some 58% had taken a life skills course, and a similar proportion (56%) had taken part in psychosocial support or recreational activities. Rights-related trainings were also common. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of young people had taken up training on children's rights, 49% had taken up training on safety, and 26% had taken up training specifically on how to stay safe online.

**Most young participants (76%) reported that they shared learnings from these Makani programming sessions with family and friends** (see Figure 3). Of those that did, most shared learning with their mother (71%). Young people also reported sharing learning with siblings (37%), friends (42%) and their father (34%).

**Makani programming is also fostering social cohesion and encouraging the inclusion of those with disabilities** (see Figure 4). Nearly half (45%) of young participants reported that they had interacted with someone of a different nationality at a Makani centre, which is particularly important because children of different nationalities attend different schools and different shifts, and report rarely interacting with one another in the community. In addition, more than a third (37%) of participants reported that they had interacted with a peer with a disability through Makani centre activities. This is vital given that disability remains highly stigmatised in Jordan.

Regression analyses found that recent Makani participation (2019–2023) is associated with several improved well-being and agency outcomes. Compared with their peers who had never attended Makani centres – and when controlling statistically for important background differences including age, gender, nationality, residence location, disability and economic status<sup>3</sup> – **participants who recently attended Makani sessions were significantly<sup>4</sup> more likely to have voice and agency over key decisions in their life**. More specifically, they were more likely to have talked to their mother about education (7 percentage points) and future work (9 percentage points) and to have talked to their father about education (12 percentage points), future work (11 percentage points) and personal aspirations (9 percentage points).

<sup>2</sup> Disability status was determined by using the Washington Group Questionnaire: <https://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/question-sets/wg-short-set-on-functioning-wg-ss/>

<sup>3</sup> The linear regression analyses controlled for all of the following: residence (host, camp, or ITS), household size, household head is female, household head is literate, household assets index.

<sup>4</sup> The following variables were significant at the  $p < .01$  level: talked to mother about education and future work, and father: about education, future work, and aspirations. The variables 'knowledge of support places' and 'input into education decision-making and household decision-making' were significant at the  $p < .05$  level, while 'resilience' was significant at the  $p < .1$  level.

Figure 2: Courses and trainings taken

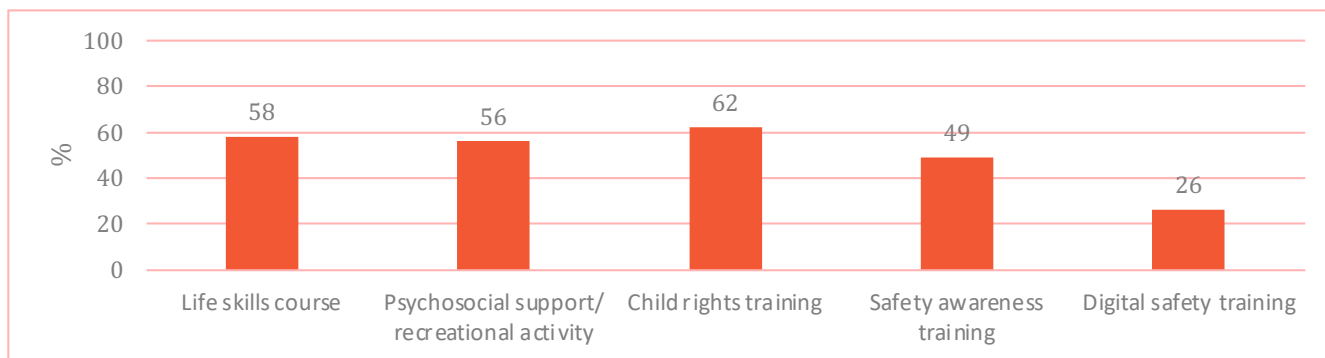


Figure 3: Person with whom Makani participants have shared learning (of those that have shared)

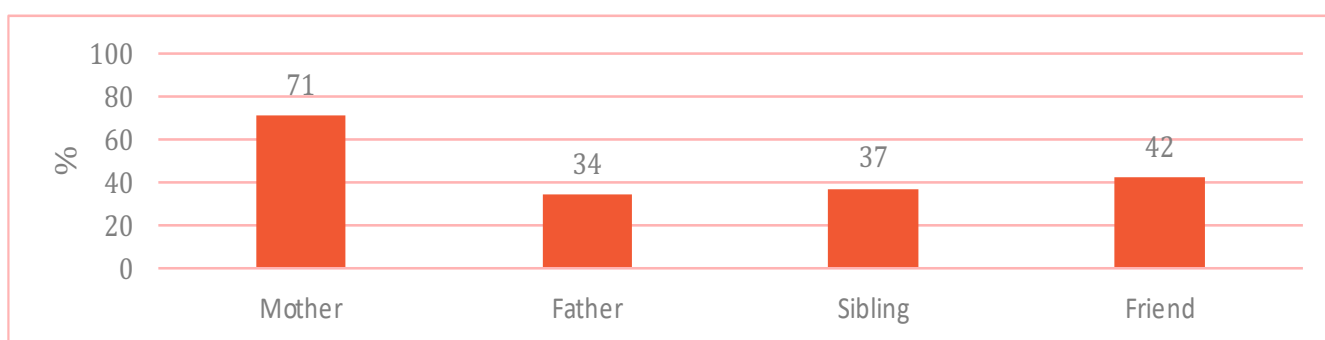
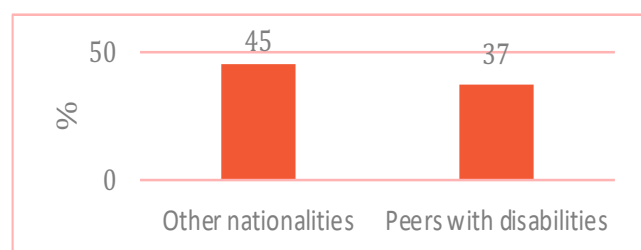


Figure 4: Interactions with others



They educated us to have will and persistence... I mean that I finished Tawjihi, and I insisted on my goal.

(A 19-year-old Jordanian young woman)

### Box 1: Trusted friends over time among new Makani participants

Young people who reported first participating in Makani between 2019-2023 in the midline survey maintained a trusted friend between the baseline (2018-2019) and midline (2022-2023) surveys. On the other hand, those who never participated in Makani saw a decline in having a trusted friend over time.

	New Makani participants	Never Makani participants
Any trusted friends at baseline	65%	71%
Any trusted friends at midline	66%	63%

They were also more likely to have input into how much education they<sup>5</sup> will get (5 percentage points) and household decisions (on an index of 8 measures<sup>6</sup>), to be highly resilient<sup>7</sup> (4 percentage points) and to know where to seek support if experiencing violence (5 percentage points).

#### Stratified regression analyses found differences in the association between recent Makani participation and voice and agency outcomes by disability and gender.

Among young people with a disability, there was no difference between recent participants and those who never participated in the likelihood of talking to their mother or father about their education or future work. However, recent participants with a disability were more likely to talk to their father about personal aspirations (11 percentage points), have input into how much education they will get (9 percentage points) and household decisions (on an index of 8 measures), and know where to seek support if experiencing violence (11 percentage points) than their peers with a disability who never participated in Makani<sup>8</sup>. Among girls, recent participation was associated with having more say in how much education they will get (5 percentage points) and say in household decisions (on an index of 8 measures). Among boys, there was no difference between recent participants and those who never participated in their say in how much education to get or household decisions. However, boys who recently participated in Makani were 10 percentage points more likely to have talked to someone about experiencing peer violence at school than boys who never participated in Makani<sup>9</sup>.

Qualitative research findings reinforced and further nuanced the survey findings. In-depth interviews with adolescent participants found that **Makani programming is helping young people build connections with peers, and to feel better about themselves and their lives**. A 15-year-old Palestinian boy reported that he loved attending sessions with his friends: *'My friend and I used to talk to each other*

*and laugh and joke.'* A 20-year-old Jordanian young woman added that the chance to socialise with peers had been vital to improving her well-being: *'We girls shared things and confided in each other and talked... I feel at ease and happy, it feels like it took a burden off my heart and I don't feel sad anymore.'* Respondents noted that the social opportunities provided by Makani are particularly important for girls, many of whom are not allowed to leave home except to attend school and Makani. A Palestinian mother explained, *'For girls, everything is forbidden.'* A 16-year-old Syrian girl agreed and added, *'I always say that if Makani closes, I'll never go anywhere else.'* Quantitative findings suggest new Makani participants maintain a trusted friend over time (see Box 1).

**► We girls shared things and confided in each other and talked... I feel at ease and happy, it feels like it took a burden off my heart, and I don't feel sad anymore.**

(A 20-year-old Jordanian young woman)

<sup>5</sup> The Palestinians in the sample all live in Jerash camp. Few have Jordanian citizenship. Most attend schools run by UNWRA, rather than the Jordanian government.

<sup>6</sup> The index of 8 measures of household decision includes having a say in: time spent helping around the house, educational attainment, when and who to marry, who to be friends with, free time activities, leaving the house, and being involved in income generation activities

<sup>7</sup> Resilience is measured using the Child and Youth Resilience Measure scale. Participants were considered highly resilient if they scored in the top quantile of those sampled. See: <https://resilienceresearch.org/home-cyrm/>

<sup>8</sup> Among those with a disability who never participated in Makani: 36% talked to their father about personal aspirations, 75% had input into how much education they will get, the mean household decision-making index was 5 out of 8, and 54% knew where to seek support if experiencing violence.

<sup>9</sup> Among those who never participated in Makani: 73% of girls had input into how much education they will get, the mean household decision-making index of girls was 5 out of 8, and 25% of boys talked to someone about peer violence experienced at school.

**Connections to caring adults are also transforming young people's lives.** A 12-year-old Jordanian girl reported that she can talk to her Makani teacher about anything: *'I have also built a relationship with the teachers here because I come regularly to the centre, and I feel comfortable talking to my teacher and I can talk to them without any obstacle.'* A 19-year-old Jordanian young woman added that facilitators had helped her survive the stress of the Tawjihi (General Secondary Education Certificate examination): *'Makani classes helped me to strengthen my personality. They educated us to have will and persistence... I mean that I finished Tawjihi, and I insisted on my goal.'* Access to caring adults is especially important when young people are facing problems at home. A 15-year-old Syrian girl recalled that her life skills teachers had been critical to supporting her when she was having issues with her parents: *'I talked about my psychological state on that day, if I was happy or sad... Their [the teachers'] treatment of us was beautiful... I felt safe and confident in her, and I liked to tell her my secrets, it was a very nice feeling.'*

In line with UNICEF's framing of life skills as central to personal empowerment and active citizenship, **when asked to identify the 'most significant change' in their lives due to Makani programming, nearly all young people singled out self-confidence and its knock-on impacts on communication.** A 17-year-old Syrian boy stated, *'We learnt about self-confidence, how to express your opinion in the society, and of course, under the law, I benefited a*

**I always say that if Makani closes, I'll never go anywhere else.**

(A 16-year-old Syrian girl)

*lot from it, it helped me with my communication skills with people.'* A 17-year-old Syrian girl explained how it had helped her speak up for herself: *'I learnt how to stand up for myself because I had a weak personality before. For example, when someone would cross me, I would stay silent, but now I know how to respond in a good and respectful way.'* As was the case with the social opportunities provided by Makani, the boost to participants' self-confidence was especially important to girls, given that they are socialised to be docile. A 15-year-old Jordanian girl explained that, *'Boys have their own personalities, and they are strong from the inside. Girls don't socialise so you feel that they are shy.'* A 16-year-old Jordanian girl added that self-confidence is not only important to girls' day-to-day lives, including protecting their access to education and preventing child marriage, but also to supporting civic participation: *'The first thing I learnt is not to be shy and to be able to talk in front of everybody. Makani taught me how to be strong and taught me the sense of responsibility. Makani taught me good leadership skills and how to be a useful woman in the community.'*



Children playing outside of a Makani centre, Jordan © Nathalie Bertrams /GAGE 2024

**Makani programming is also reducing young people's exposure to age- and gender-based violence.**

Makani training sessions around rights and safety teach young people that they have a right to bodily integrity – and how to protect themselves and report any incidents. A 13-year-old Palestinian girl reported that after she had taken up this training, she supported a peer who was being bullied at school: *'When I attended a lecture about bullying, I started to go to the principal and tell her.'* In some cases, participants reported that they are taught to eschew violence. A 15-year-old Jordanian boy, for example, reported that he had learnt that sexual harassment is wrong: *'I learnt that it is inappropriate and a mistake to harass and taunt people in the street.'* In other cases, young people reported that they learnt how to better regulate their feelings. A 13-year-old Syrian boy noted that he has learnt to deal with his anger without fists: *'I learnt how to control my feelings and how to achieve my ambitions. I*

**I learnt that it is inappropriate and a mistake to harass and taunt people in the street.**

(A 15-year-old Jordanian boy)

*also learnt how to curb my anger. I used to fight and beat anyone when I am angry, but when I took this programme, I changed.'* Reductions in violence are also due to Makani's impacts on social cohesion. A 17-year-old Jordanian girl, who stated that Makani participation had afforded her the first real opportunity to interact with Syrians, explained that this opportunity has helped her see refugees' humanity: *'We don't want the Syrian students to feel unwelcome and to be cast away. They should feel welcome, like at home, and that we are sisters.'*



**I learnt how to stand up for myself because I had a weak personality before. For example when someone would cross me, I would stay silent, but now I know how to respond in a good and respectful way.**

(A 17-year-old Syrian girl)

## Conclusions and implications for programming

GAGE midline research in Jordan adds to the growing body of evidence that Makani centres are supporting young people to thrive. Programming is strengthening social connections to peers, parents and other caring adults; improving participants' self-confidence and voice in ways that improve access to decision-making; and reducing exposure to violence. While the Makani programme emerged out of the urgent need to provide psychosocial support to Syrian children traumatised by war and displacement, over time the programme has grown and evolved, and is now supporting the broader well-being and agency of an entire generation of Jordan's young people. To continue and scale up Makani's transformative impacts, we suggest the following priority actions:

- **Continue to support centres in communities that have significant populations of socially and economically marginalised young people**, including Syrian refugees living in informal tented settlements, Palestinians living in formal refugee camps and among Jordan's ethnic minorities.
- **Step up outreach, with young people and their 'gatekeepers', to improve Makani enrolment of the most disadvantaged children and adolescents**, including young people who have dropped out of school, young people with disabilities, and girls who are (or have been) married.
- **Offer sessions over weekends when young people are out of school, to ensure that students attending double-shift or UNWRA schools have opportunities to interact with peers of other nationalities so as to foster peaceful co-existence and social cohesion**. Weekend sessions could also facilitate working adolescents' participation.
- **Ensure that life skills programming addresses gender norms and the myriad ways in which they shape—and limit—girls' and boys' lives**. Lessons should directly address discriminatory beliefs about girls' 'honour' and boys' 'toughness' and build on existent efforts to encourage reporting and help-seeking.
- **Ensure that life skills programming directly addresses the diversity of Jordan's population—working to reduce disability-related stigma, build respect for cultural differences and develop a shared identity**. In addition, tailored efforts are needed to facilitate meaningful inclusion of young people with disabilities (possibly through hybrid in-person and online modalities).
- **Expand the scale and scope of programming for older adolescents— including through volunteer opportunities** by integrating their ideas and perspectives into programming and providing them with age-segregated classes and content tailored to their developing interests and capacities.
- **Expand parenting education courses to cover adolescent development and the ways in which gender norms shape parenting**—and include practical tips on how parents can strengthen their relationships with their adolescent children and support their daughters and sons to thrive by proactively tackling gender stereotyping in the home.
- **Strengthen referral pathways between Makani centres and other services** by ensuring that facilitators are aware of what recreational, educational, health, psychosocial, protection and social protection services are available in the community and know when and how to get added support for the children and families they serve.
- **Reach young mothers** by providing them with parenting education courses that offer not only lessons on child development and best practices in childcare, but also culturally sensitive opportunities to socialise with peers and to access information and support.

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