

POLICY BRIEF



Photograph: Ghia Osseiran

LABOUR MARKET INCLUSION: HOW ARE DOM YOUTH FARING?

BY GHIA OSSEIRAN

Dom, also known as ghajar or nawar, are underrepresented in the formal labour market and subject to systemic discrimination. Legal, cultural and institutional barriers to labour market access must urgently be addressed to promote Dom labour market inclusion.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Dom youth are triply disadvantaged in the labour market for being Dom, growing up in multidimensional poverty and being a young person seeking decent work opportunities in Lebanon. Some Dom have been naturalized whilst others remain stateless even though they were born and raised in Lebanon and have no second nationality.

KEY RESULTS

- Over 40% of the Dom surveyed were stateless and did not have any formal citizenship papers.
- The majority of Lebanese Dom did not feel they had equal rights as other Lebanese citizens.
- The vast majority of Lebanese Dom (just under 68%) reported having felt discriminated against because they were Dom, including in education (66.3%), employment (just under 70%) and healthcare services.
- A further 67.5% of Lebanese Dom felt discriminated against at work by colleagues because they were Dom.
- Close to a third of Lebanese Dom respondents surveyed (32.3%) admitted they would sometimes hide the fact that they were Dom with non-Dom.
- The majority of Lebanese Dom surveyed (almost 66%) did not speak Domari or they understood Domari but did not speak it (7%).

In addition to their being denied basic legal rights, Dom are victims of widespread discrimination.

Dom youth who were raised in Hay el Gharbeh, an informal settlement with high Dom concentration in the Southern outskirts of Beirut, have grown up in unequal standards of housing and living conditions even though they live only a few minutes away from the heart of the capital Beirut. Disadvantage has been perpetuated by a complex set of mutually reinforcing legal, institutional, and cultural barriers that have constrained youth freedoms to achieve education and labour market choices they may have reason to value.

A multidimensional policy response is required to address the multiple barriers Dom youth face in accessing formal education and employment.

RESEARCH APPROACH

This research investigates the education and labour market aspirations and trajectories of Dom youth living in an informal settlement in Beirut, Lebanon. It draws on the results of a household survey, which was administered by Tahaddi Lebanon in Fall 2019. A total of 897 households were included in the sample, with 897 primary respondents providing information on a total of 3,843 members. Of all surveyed households, approximately 35% identified as Dom.

In-depth individual and group interviews were also held with a total of 61 Dom youth to probe further into identity, education and employment choices and aspirations.



If I had an ID, you would not know I was Dom.

KEY FINDINGS

- Structural inequalities have led to the “structural marginalization” of Dom youth, particularly stateless youth who have inherited their status (Powell 2013).

STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES IN THE LEGAL SYSTEM DEPRIVED DOM YOUTH WHO WERE BORN IN LEBANON AND WHO DIDN'T HAVE A SECOND NATIONALITY OF THEIR RIGHT, AS PER LEBANESE NATIONALITY LAW (DECREE NO. 15) TO ACQUIRE LEBANESE CITIZENSHIP.

Being stateless, in turn, deprived individuals of many of their basic rights including the right to benefit from social security benefits in formal employment, the right to mobility and the freedom to travel and the right to benefit from public social safety nets.

- The vast majority of Lebanese Dom surveyed reported feeling discriminated against in access to education, healthcare and employment. Dom youth were not only discriminated against when trying to access employment, but they were also discriminated against in the workplace. 67.5% of Dom surveyed felt discriminated against by colleagues because they were Dom. Two Dom youth reported having been expelled from their jobs on account of their being Dom.
- Dom youth were acutely aware of the wider population's negative stereotypes of them. In Lebanon, Dom were often referred to as “nawar,” a derogatory term in Arabic suggesting a lack of civilization. As a result, most Dom youth interviewed preferred not to disclose they were Dom in interactions with non-Dom Lebanese to protect themselves from discrimination. Some youth had internalized these negative stereotypes, associating the Dom with activities they found shameful but believed were typical of the Dom, begging being foremost among those.

- A recent survey carried out by Tahaddi Lebanon revealed that 91.7% of Dom Lebanese households residing in Hay el Gharbeh lived in multidimensional poverty in 2020. The MPI rate increased to 98.2% among Lebanese Dom households when we introduced to the MPI additional dimensions related to basic rights (legal status and discrimination) and employment. The vast majority of Dom, therefore, struggled with multiple deprivations on a daily basis that impeded their basic freedoms, including education and labour market choices.
- In the absence of a state that guarantees basic social protection, extreme poverty compounded with low educational attainment rates and statelessness had pushed some Dom to the streets. Panhandling and street trading were presented in some interviews as a “profession” that the Dom did not find degrading but rather chose. This research, however, argues that Dom youth resorted to panhandling and street trading not due to an “aspirations failure” (Ray 2003) on their part, nor due to an individual preference for begging as a livelihood mechanism, but because of the concrete lack of viable alternatives. This led to “adapted preferences” where some Dom upgraded their view of panhandling and street trading, resigning to the status quo.
- This research also shows that youth aspirations were not shaped independently of their social context. In forming their aspirations, youth turned to their “cognitive neighborhood” (Ray 2003, p.1), consisting of people or peers with similar life trajectories. The realities and living conditions of the physical neighborhood also played a role in shaping aspirations, particularly when the neighborhood was one like Hay El Gharbeh, where the vast majority of the population lived in multidimensional poverty. Culture and group affiliations also shaped youth aspirations, with group attitudes towards education and employment influencing individual choices.
- Dom youth who had acquired Lebanese citizenship preferred to use their national affiliation instead.

Interviews with Dom youth who had an ID suggested that citizenship made group boundaries between the Dom and non-Dom seem more permeable, legitimating their primary association with their country of citizenship. The freedom to choose one’s social affiliation was itself a freedom that Dom youth gained upon acquiring citizenship. Passing as Lebanese opened the possibility of eschewing social discrimination.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Urgent efforts must be made to improve employment opportunities for Dom youth who are excluded from the labour market. To “change the odds” for Dom youth (Powell 2003), policies must tackle the structural inequalities at the heart of their “failed aspirations”:
- **Access to basic legal rights:** Inheriting a stateless status or not being legally registered at birth are the main culprits in perpetuating statelessness (Trad and Habib 2016). Stateless Dom youth who were born in Lebanon and who don’t have a second nationality have the right to citizenship, as per Lebanese nationality law (Decree no. 15).

In practice, however, a child born to a stateless father will inherit this status, unless proof of right to citizenship is provided or the child is granted citizenship through a public decree. The Lebanese nationality law also discriminates against women, not allowing Lebanese women to pass on their nationality to their spouses and children.

The nationality law should urgently be amended to guarantee the right to citizenship to children born in Lebanon, who have no second nationality, and to ensure that the children and spouses of Lebanese women have an equal right to citizenship.



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- **Raising awareness:** Civil society actors also have a pivotal role to play in preventing statelessness, by raising awareness and providing local support at the community level to ensure the registration of all children at birth.
- **Social protection:** 91.7% of Dom Lebanese households in Hay el Gharbeh lived in multidimensional poverty in 2019 (Tahaddi 2019). The most vulnerable families have the right not to be dependent on charities for the provision of basic services. The Lebanese government should prioritize the gradual implementation of a social protection floor, providing minimum social security guarantees, including universal healthcare, old age pension, unemployment insurance and disability benefits.
- **Inclusive world of work:** The labour law must include specific provisions explicitly prohibiting discrimination at work based on personal characteristics. Structural changes are also needed at the micro level to ensure that discrimination based on personal characteristics at the enterprise level does not take place. Employers have an important role to play in promoting the participation of diverse groups through adopting inclusion as a core value. Fair recruitment and advancement policies serve to ensure that employers do not discriminate against potential candidates based on personal characteristics.
- **Decent work opportunities:** Employers can help combat poverty through providing decent work conditions for their employees, including disadvantaged youth who may be recruited in low-skilled occupations. Providing formal contracts with social security benefits, ensuring occupational safety and health and paying a living wage help prevent in-work poverty. Through the provision of training and apprenticeship opportunities, employers are also able to enhance youth employability, supporting the integration of youth excluded from the labour market.

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- **Access to formal education:** Equalizing access to formal education opportunities is also crucial to address lower educational attainment rates among the Dom population in comparison to the general population. This requires targeted interventions to ensure access to affordable quality early childhood education that will in turn increase the probability of integration in primary education. Schools also have a role to play in establishing inclusive learning spaces, where there is no discrimination based on personal characteristics in registration, teaching and learning.
- **Combating stigma:** The unwillingness to reveal Dom identity is due to the stigma associated with being Dom. Civil society organizations have a role to play in combating stigma by increasing knowledge and public awareness of Dom culture, language and heritage and combating the negative stereotypes.
- **Research and knowledge:** Education centers that have a significant share of Dom students could play a key role as well, by actively teaching the Dom language, history and culture. Research centers also have a role to play in promoting research and knowledge about the Dom in Lebanon.
- **Data:** Data on the total number and distribution of the Dom population in Lebanon is limited. Introducing questions related to ethnic origin in household and labour force surveys would allow for the study of Dom outcomes compared to the wider population to inform targeted policy interventions.

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Photograph: Jenny Gustafsson

Opinions stated in this brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the partners.

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