

Bridging youth and power: the Youth Advisory Board in Cairo

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Experience gained in developing a Youth Advisory Board within Saint Andrew's Refugee Services in Cairo highlights the importance and the challenges of including the voices of unaccompanied refugee children and youth in discussions about issues that directly impact their lives.

Our goal in writing this article is to raise awareness about the issues facing unaccompanied children and youth (UCY)¹ and to inspire greater inclusion of their voices – our voices – in decision-making and policy discussions. We also hope to highlight the need to recognise knowledge and skills that do not fit into traditional educational pathways but that complement and are of equal value to standard types of education. The authors are current and former members of the Youth Advisory Board and refugee youth staff at Saint Andrew's Refugee Services (StARS), a refugee-led organisation providing legal, psychosocial, medical and educational services to refugees and vulnerable migrants living in Egypt. As refugees, our lives often face disruptions that may hinder our ability to pursue traditional

qualifications – but this should no longer be a barrier to inclusion and representation.

Challenges facing Unaccompanied Children and Youth

Egypt is home to more than 285,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers,² of whom over 4,000 are unaccompanied and separated children (UASC).³ Unaccompanied refugee children and youth in Cairo face particular challenges accessing education, health care and financial resources, as well as trauma from migration journeys, discrimination and protection concerns.

Education: Access to education is one of the main challenges UCY face in Cairo. Students from Sudan, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen can legally attend public schools

in Egypt on an equal footing with Egyptian students⁴; however, many do not attend due to documentation issues, discrimination, or language and financial barriers. UCY of other common refugee nationalities in Egypt, including from Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia, do not have guaranteed access to Egyptian public education. Private education is very expensive. Some UCY attend refugee community schools following the Sudanese curriculum but also face significant financial or language barriers and limited school capacity, making formal education certification extremely challenging. UCY often therefore enroll in life skills courses provided by local NGOs but these do not qualify UCY to access higher levels of education.

Health and medical care: UCY face several challenges to accessing public health care in Egypt, including language barriers, documentation requirements, finances and discrimination. Private hospitals are very expensive. These challenges particularly affect those with chronic diseases who need ongoing treatment. Some unaccompanied girls and young women who become pregnant as a result of sexual violence are turned away from hospitals because they cannot present proof of fatherhood or marriage.

Basic needs and staying secure: Many UCY struggle to cover their basic needs, including rent and food. They often live in overcrowded and unstable housing situations. UCY are only eligible for financial assistance from UNHCR until the age of 18 and not all unaccompanied children are able to receive financial assistance due to their asylum claims being incorrectly processed as an adult claim.⁵ Where UCY are unable to cover their needs, some work in unsafe jobs where they are subjected to long hours without pay, discrimination, and arbitrary dismissals. Once UCY turn 18, they are left with little to no support to establish an independent life, exposing them to further challenges.

All these factors exclude the voices and knowledge of UCY from most academic and policy-level debates.

Role of the Youth Advisory Board

The Youth Advisory Board (YAB) is composed of eight unaccompanied youth aged 18 to 21 years old who work at StARS. Its members are mixed in nationality and gender but all have lived experience of displacement. We therefore share similar challenges. The YAB serves as a bridge between youth, UCY clients, the management staff at StARS and external audiences. The YAB is designed as a pathway to meaningful youth participation in StARS' organisational development. We meet with youth staff and UCY clients to discuss challenges, brainstorm solutions and create advocacy strategies that are then presented to senior staff.

The YAB also meets with external stakeholders (such as donors and visitors from other local or international NGOs) to share our personal journeys and experiences in Egypt and to discuss the challenges that UCY face in Cairo, the YAB's achievements, and our ideas for improvement. We bring unique value to the conversation and help visitors better understand and empathise with the struggles of young refugees. We propose solutions by imagining ourselves in the visitors' position of power and by giving practical examples of the struggles UCY face on specific issues. Both within the organisation and with external stakeholders, the YAB raises the voices of youth and is an example of successful integration of youth into decision-making at an institutional level.

Successes

The YAB's efforts to directly advocate for the needs of UCY and include the voice of unaccompanied youth in StARS' programming have been successful in several areas. For example, in early 2019, the YAB identified that unaccompanied single teenage mothers were facing challenges in attending the StARS' Unaccompanied Youth and Bridging Program⁶ (UYBP) classes because they did not have anyone to care for their children. The YAB developed a proposal that they presented to StARS' management to establish a nursery for the children of these young mothers so they could attend class while having their children cared for.



Current and former members of the Youth Advisory Board and refugee youth staff meet at StARS premises (Credit: StARS)

In 2020, youth staff noticed that a lack of job opportunities, recreation activities and education put UCY at risk of alcohol and drug use in the streets. The YAB advocated to address this by opening a game centre at StARS so that UCY clients and UYBP students could spend more time in safe spaces.

The YAB also draws attention to the concerns of StARS refugee youth staff to address specific gaps and advocate for change. For the vast majority of us, English is our second language; consequently, youth staff requested to have access to regular English classes to strengthen their communication skills. After this was approved, the YAB advocated to hire two English teachers under regular contracts instead of volunteer positions. This was important because paid positions offer more reliability and accountability. Currently, more than 50 youth staff are being taught by two full-time teachers. The YAB also advocated for more computers and the creation of a resource library.

Traineeships at StARS help smooth the transition from a part-time youth assistant job to a regular full-time adult position (including into teachers, caseworkers and officers). In 2019, the YAB identified that youth would often lack the additional skills needed to compete with other adult refugees for certain job positions. Therefore, the YAB advocated for more traineeships for youth to be available across StARS departments. The trainee programme has been very successful, with many StARS programmes recruiting youth trainees.

Challenges: limited space, high expectations and the pandemic

Despite the YAB's ongoing efforts and successes many challenges remain. Within StARS, the YAB has successfully pushed for more space and recognition; however, advocating for issues affecting UCY beyond StARS remains a challenge. We know that, as unaccompanied refugee youth, we have something valuable to contribute to global discussions. Yet there are limited platforms

and spaces to include the voices of youth staff, both within programming and decision-making processes among service providers in Egypt and in wider humanitarian contexts.

One of the main challenges is managing the often high expectations among the youth staff of what the YAB can do to address the multiple challenges youth staff and UCY face. As refugee youth staff ourselves, it is difficult to manage these expectations, as we know and also experience these difficulties. In order to deal with these added responsibilities and pressures, the YAB receives ongoing support from higher management at StARS, but we also require time and support to continue strengthening our mediating and problem-solving skills.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many of YAB's plans, including plans for in-person meetings and community outreach. The YAB adapted by moving to mobile outreach, using WhatsApp and phones to talk with refugee youth staff. Identifying mental health support as a large gap, the YAB developed activities for UCY within StARS programmes and provided awareness-raising sessions through conference calls, using phone calls to get updates. The goal was to implement a peer-to-peer model for the early identification of mental health issues faced by UCY so they could receive timely psychosocial support.

Conclusion and recommendations

The YAB can be a model for other NGOs and service providers on how to include the voice not only of refugee youth staff but of all UCY. Institutions and service providers working in Egypt and globally should create safe spaces for youth to participate in decision-making processes on programmes and policies, and should prioritise harnessing their knowledge, voice and power. This includes recognising the potential that UCY have and supporting their ability to advocate for their needs in creative ways. Refugee-led community-based organisations should also prioritise engaging refugee youth. For true ownership of and agency in these processes, it cannot be others creating solutions for us, without us.

Using knowledge, being a voice and having power also means that we have

responsibility. Our achievements as the YAB can motivate and encourage other youth to play the same active role and to take their place in discussions affecting their lives, especially given the many challenges that come with being an UCY. More importantly, our experiences prove that refugee youth should be recognised as actors of change and their input seen as having equal value to that of other stakeholders involved in the decision-making process, particularly when it impacts the lives of UCY.

We are young but we want to become adults who listen to youth. We will propose better solutions and planning because of our personal experiences. With our knowledge, voice and power we will be the right people to implement sustainable change to improve the living conditions of displaced youth and to advocate for their rights, freedom and peace in Egypt and beyond.

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1. An unaccompanied child and youth is a person who is under the age of eighteen or 21 for StARS programming, and who is separated from both parents.
2. UNHCR (May 2022) 'Egypt Monthly Statistical Report' bit.ly/Egypt-May-2022
3. This number does not include unaccompanied youth over 18. UNHCR, Child Protection bit.ly/UNHCR-child-protection
4. Hetaba A., McNally C. & Habersky E. (2020), 'Refugee Entitlements in Egypt', *Cairo Studies on Migration and Refugees*, Paper No. 14, p.144, bit.ly/refugee-entitlements-egypt and Joint Platform for Refugees and Migrants in Egypt (2022), Common Situation Analysis: Education and Health Services for Migrants and Refugees in Egypt bit.ly/education-health-egypt
5. Folache Z and Ritchie (2020) 'Age assessment for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Egypt', *Forced Migration Review* issue 65 bit.ly/age-assessment-Egypt
6. The UYBP is a five-month educational programme that aims to help UCY develop skills to become independent. It includes courses in Maths, English, Arabic, IT and life skills.