Young in the Arab World: Egypt

More than half the 250 million people in the Arab world today are under the age of 25 - but many Arab countries offer their young people little in the way of jobs and involvement in politics.

The BBC Arabic Service's Mounira Chaieb visited four contrasting Arab countries to find out what it means to be young in the Arab world today.

After Lebanon, my next stop was the Egyptian capital Cairo - a city of about 18 million people.

Because of the sheer numbers, I got a sense of the pressures on people who live there - and the uphill struggle for young people who are trying to embark on their working lives, or even those who are still in full-time education.

Seventeen-year-old Karim Talaat is so overwhelmed and saturated with homework that he gets only five hours sleep every night.

He is at secondary school and preparing for the very demanding final exams, called Thanawiya Ama.

"While you're growing up everyone tells you about Thanawiya Ama and how it is hell on earth," he said.

"It creates fear, I never rest. I can't."

Even though Karim's school is a private one and he has additional tuition after school, he is scared of failing his exams and not achieving his dreams of becoming a computer programmer.

The stress that the exams put pupils and their families under even features in the storyline of a long-running popular drama series on Egyptian TV - Behind Closed Doors.

Even if the student gets the required grades to pass the exams and a coveted place in the university or faculty of his or her choice, 700,000 new graduates in Egypt each year are chasing about 200,000 jobs.

So many end up with jobs that do not correspond to their qualifications - if they get jobs at all.

Unemployment

Eskander Nabil, 23, is so pressed for time he can hardly speak to me as he has to get back to work - even though it is after 1900.

From a Coptic-Christian family, he does marketing for a small IT company. Like young people in many Arab societies, he lives at home.

Eskander studied commerce at Ein Shams university in Cairo, but that and countless training courses in IT have not led to a satisfactory job.
He feels exploited and earns less than $50 a month. Eskander hasn't given up and spends every waking hour on the internet looking for a better job anywhere in the world - including Iraq.

With 72 million people, Egypt is the most populous of the 22 Arab states. Officially the nation's unemployment rate is only about 9%.

But studies that specifically monitor youth unemployment - in a nation where the median age is 20 - estimate that 25% of men and 59% of women are without work.

And unemployment is only one way to understand the plight of young people in this large country.

Privacy

In a society where the family is so important, the young are eager to start their own. Marriage is often the only way of getting to know someone from the opposite sex.

Eskander has been engaged for more than two years - but cannot afford to get married.

And it is made more difficult by a recurring theme in Cairo - the impact of interfering neighbours. Keeping an eye on what Egypt's youth get up is something many feel is their right or even their duty to do.

The situation is even more acute in the countryside.

In the village of Sanhor, two hours' drive from Cairo, Nahed, a 28-year-old woman, is in a terrible state.

Her husband disappeared two years ago from his job at a jewellery shop. The whole community point the finger of blame at her, saying it is her fault that her husband disappeared. In rural Egypt the woman is usually to blame.

It is astonishing that 23-year-old Lilian Wagdy is a product of the same society.

A strong, independent woman, she doesn't shy away from open physical intimacy with her boyfriend - yet male reaction in Egyptian society can be surprising.

"Most men don't appreciate girls with brains, they don't treat girls as their equal and I wouldn't accept that," she says.

"I'm an equal partner. It's all or nothing"

Politics

I had arranged to meet a student who took part in a demonstration in a public square in 2003 - but he didn't show up.

It seems that young people are afraid to talk about anything political, even retrospectively. This is a striking contrast to Beirut, where I just couldn't stop young people talking about politics and they felt free to do so.
Yet Lilian disagrees: "I don't think it is the idea of being scared. People are so wrapped up in what they do they don't have any time to think of anything else."

Another set of critical issues is the distribution of power - which in Egypt largely coincides with the distribution of wealth - and the perception that the distribution is unjust.

Social gaps everywhere between rich and poor, young and old, educated and illiterate, urban and rural reinforce the corrosive perception that the society does not reward its citizens on merit alone.

*The second in a four-part series, "Young in the Arab World" - will be broadcast on the BBC World Service on 16 February.*