

Early Marriage. The impact of the Syrian Crisis on young girls in Jordan



Since the beginning of the Syrian Crisis in 2011, many changes have occurred in the lives of young female refugees in Jordan. Faced with harsh and challenging circumstances in a new country, characterized by grave uncertainty about the future, young refugees are forced to develop new coping mechanisms.

Six years on from the beginning of the crisis, 4.8 million Syrians have sought refuge in neighboring countries (1). Of all the Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR, 6.5% of them are between the ages of 12 and 17, with many of them at risk of early marriage (2). As they are one of the most vulnerable groups within the refugee population, this article will shed light on the issue of early marriage for girls in Jordan.

We will also highlight the role of advocacy campaigns in reducing the prevalence of early marriage and explore plausible and viable solutions.

Early marriage has always been a widespread phenomenon in Syria even before the beginning of the current crisis. According to available data, 13% of girls in Syria under the age of 18 were married in 2011 (3).

According to the UNFPA, it is anticipated that more than 140 million girls will be married between 2011 and 2020, with on the average 47,700 girls at risk of early marriage globally (4).

Early marriage is defined as official marriage or informal union where one party is under the age of 18, i.e. a child, as defined by UNICEF (5).

Early marriage is recognized as one of six core forms of (6) gender-based violence. Many humanitarian actors hold a number of awareness campaigns yearly throughout the 16 days of activism against Gender Based Violence.

Legal Status of Early Marriage

According to Jordanian Law, marriage under the age of 15 is considered illegal and cannot be registered in a Jordanian Court.

This poses a significant challenge, as in addition to other risks, those that marry below the age of 15 are also exposed to high levels of legal risk as there is no legal protection for mothers under the age of 15 and their children. According to Jordanian law, marriages of those between the ages of 15 and 18 can be registered in court. This measure goes some way in providing legal protection for early marriage of underage children between the ages of 15 and 18.

In the Jordanian Personal Status Law, Article 10/A states that the legal age for marriage shall be over the age of 18. Article 10/B does however, allow for exceptions to this rule whereby a judge may permit marriage on a discretionary basis between the ages of 15 and 18 under exceptional circumstances.

The second challenge lies in the reluctance of Syrian Refugees to register their marriages in the Sharia Court*. In order to address this, humanitarian actors launched numerous awareness and advocacy campaigns in the refugee camps and host communities, to raise awareness among married couples and those planning to get married about the importance of registering their marriage, particularly during the exemption periods arranged by UNHCR that allowed for registration, whilst also waiving fines.

These campaigns appeared to be highly successful as the Shariah court in Zataari camp witnessed an increased number of refugees presenting to register their marriages.

During a meeting with ARDD-Legal Aid, we learned about the overwhelming success of the work of the Shariah Court in Zaatari Camp, which provides a potential model for other camps worldwide. There is a Shariah Judge, a Family specialized Judge and a representative from the Ministry of Interior who is in charge of facilitating the process. This was met by great acceptance and approval by the refugee community.

*Sharia court: is a religious court for Muslims. This courts are responsible for disputes over personal status (marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance) and communal endowment among their respective communities.

Complicated issues in court take a lot of time to be resolved. For instance, many husbands return to Syria before registering their marriage. It then becomes impossible for their wives to have birth certificates issued for their children or to apply for divorce. The same applies for husbands who abandon their families or pass away

“I do not appreciate early marriage for girls but our traditions, customs and the family pressures were more powerful than my own will. I tried but the decision was not mine. I wish we had stayed in Syria, then I could have placed pressure on my husband to let my daughter continue her education.” As stated by Um Ali, the mother of an underage married daughter.

Why cases of early marriage have increased among Syrian Refugees in Jordan

Early marriage is a reality that exists in many countries due to a range of complicated and inter-related factors; including gender inequality, poverty, cultural traditions and customs. In many cases, the parents arrange the marriage without engaging the girl in the decision-making process. (4)

Um Khaled is a Syrian Refugee, forced by the crisis, to come to Jordan 3 years ago. After the death of her husband; she had no idea that her stay in Jordan would continue for many years. Faced with the challenges of supporting herself and her four daughters, she resorted to having them married at an early age in an effort to provide them with protection and meet their needs, as she was no longer able to.

There are a number of factors that increase the likelihood of early marriage among Syrian Refugees. In light of the unstable circumstances many refugees find themselves in, early marriage is often seen as a way of providing financial security. From this perspective, marriage can be a means of alleviating social and economic burdens on families, according to a study conducted about early marriage in Zataari Refugee Camp by Israa' Shaqbo'a, a researcher from the University of Jordan. A second key factor that the study cited is the lack of employment opportunities in the camp. Other family factors include; the heightened risk of girls where they have lost their parents and the desire of some families to wed their children in the circumstances there are many families living together in one home (7).

From an economic point of view, the aspiration for a better quality of life, fulfilling the needs of the girls, and poverty were among the most common economic factors (7).

During one of the dialogue sessions held with families of underage married girls in Zaatari Camp, many parents emphasized the fact that the situation had become more critical. When children reach adolescence, families seek to wed them at an early age due to their inability to provide adequate space that respects the needed privacy. This has contributed to turning to early marriage.

Impacts resulting from Early Marriage

Health Effects:

There are challenges faced by girls as a result of lack of awareness about sexual matters at an early age whilst not having reached yet a physical maturity. There is also a lack of access to information about sexual and reproductive health (10).

“Married girls at an early age are most subject to the dangers and complications of pregnancy and delivery, anemia and giving birth to babies of extremely low weight and many other consequences (8).

Child marriage is not only wrong, it is dangerous. It exposes a young girl to profound health risks from early pregnancy and difficult childbirth and it exposes her baby to complications of premature birth,” **says Anthony Lake, Executive Director of UNICEF** (9).

According to Syrian customs, women must conceive at the earliest possible time after marriage takes place. This subjects girls to the risks of early pregnancy which gives rise to a great challenge for the health sector in providing health care for mothers at early age, and protecting them from the risks and complications of pregnancy at early age.

“I was going to die during delivery as I suffered from severe bleeding. After giving birth, I stayed in the hospital for a week. I was only 14 years old then.” Safa’

Psychosocial Effects:

“I always feel scared as I feel incompetent to undertake the new responsibilities and to deal with my in-laws especially throughout my pregnancy. Now, my mother-in-law is the one who is raising my daughter as I lack the knowledge about parenting.” Amal from Zaatari Camp.

Girls are subject to different pressures by their husbands and their family in ways that often negatively impact their freedom to make decisions, thereby also significantly impacting their social and psychological health.

Girls are more subject to gender-based violence, but **why?**

Fatimah, “my cousin has been married for many months and she has not conceived yet. Her husband gave her only one year to bring him a child or he will get a second wife.”

Due to the challenge of moving from dependency on parents to becoming a responsible housewife, the girl develops the chance of becoming socially isolated, with no ambitions and thus more likely to endure gender-based violence (11).

Refugee.. I was forced!

“I passed the tenth grade while I was in Zaatari Camp. I was a top student and I loved studying. My dream was to go to college but the situation in the camp prevented me from doing this. It was much harder than I imagined. I could not continue my education in the camp as my parents were extremely worried and they feared that I might be sexually harassed on my way to school. I did not want to get married at that point but circumstances were extremely difficult and harsh. A few months later, one of my relatives proposed to me. I did not like him so I decided to break up. I was astonished by the gossips that I had a boyfriend who pushed me to break up with my fiancé’. I had zero chance to go back to school so another person from the camp proposed to me and we got married. He was 18 years old then and I was 15. I was expected to get pregnant right after the marriage, which is what actually happened. I had no idea about the difficulties associated with pregnancy. I did not know what delivery was and how it would be. I had no clue about what was dangerous and what was fine or when I had to visit the doctor. I was completely ignorant. The ninth month of pregnancy was tense with lots of problems with my husband and his family with whom I lived in the same tent before moving to a caravan. The delivery was so difficult that it required me transferring to a public hospital outside the camp. I endured domestic violence at the beginning of my marriage. The situation has improved now.

I do not wish to talk about raising my first baby as it was extremely hard. Without my mother’s help and guidance, I would not have been able to keep going. I am now expecting my second baby in two or three weeks and I have no idea how I will manage two children. I will work hard. I sense the big responsibility of providing for their needs in this camp. This is our reality and we do not know how long this will continue for.”



During the visit to the camp I visited Nour Al Hussein Foundation – Family Health Institute. With the support of UNFPA, Nour Al Hussein Foundation works hard to train the providers of psychosocial services and actors working in the field of early marriage to provide safe spaces for women and children. Moreover, it provides mentoring services, support groups, empowerment programs and awareness-raising activities.

Successful practices contributed in limiting early marriage

Combatting early marriage is one of the priorities set by the Sexual Gender Based Violence sub working group, under the UNHCR Protection Working Group which will dedicate a series of specific sessions relating to early marriage. This includes all organizations working on programs related to prevention and protection from gender-based violence. The first session will commence in January 2017 and will focus on providing technical support, developing programs and enhancing the skills of service providers, in addition to improving the system of referrals in camps, civil society and others.

Many international and local organizations operating in Jordan have held awareness and advocacy campaigns in relation to the risks and consequences associated with early marriage with the aim of reducing the incidence of early marriage. Two campaigns were held in a comprehensive and integrated manner covering legal, religious, health and psychosocial aspects.

UNHCR and international organizations used the 16 days of activism as held yearly through the organization of awareness-raising campaigns with the engagement of leaders from the local community and religious leaders such as Al-Mukhtar or Sheikh. Women's empowerment programs took place as well in and outside the camps. Dialogue sessions relating to early marriage were held too. All of these contributed to limiting early marriage and raising awareness about the importance of registering marriage, divorce, death and newborns.

What remains? What are the challenges?

Controlling the prevalence of early marriage is one of the success stories in protection programs that have been provided to Syrian refugees in Jordan. However, awareness campaigns must be conducted in a more comprehensive and systemic way by all stakeholders, which include the various categories of the society such as the parents and the youth and adolescents in schools.

Joint and integrated awareness programs should be developed by all parties working on protection programs covering all different aspects including health, psychological factors, as well as the religious, social and legal aspects related to early marriage.

The lack of alternatives available to refugees which help them to cope with the circumstances of refuge is still one of the key challenges.

One of the phenomena that result from early marriage was the multiple times a girl gets married in case the first marriage fails. There is no detailed study that illustrates to which extent this phenomenon is widespread according to ARDD-legal aid.

A mother whose young daughter recently married said 'We are afraid of going back to Syria, our future is unknown and we do not feel stable. We do not know where we will be tomorrow and for this reason we prefer to wed our daughters at an early age as the situation in Syria is very bad and no one could risk keep their young daughters unmarried. We see and hear in the media about cases of rape by multiple parties in Syria. This is not the right time for any girl to return to Syria. All of us would like to go back but not now as it is very dangerous'.

Recommendations

- **Provision of livelihoods alternatives** for Syrian families to help them to provide their daughters' life requirements and avoid turning to early marriage as a method of coping with the reality of refuge, poverty and vulnerability that those families live.
- **Financial aids for girls who have lost both or one of the parents**, in addition to considering foster care. Loss of a parents being among the key factors behind the increase of early marriage.
- Financing the work of **conducting a comprehensive and systematic study** by governments, organizations and local associations and all partners to meet the needs of girls. This way we could avoid turning to early marriage as an alternative.
- Financing **children's empowerment programs** and enabling free education to all children. Provision of grants to support education expenses, including transport and school supplies, to encourage families and girls to pursue their education.
- Providing opportunities for **higher education** and scholarships for young girls and boys.
- **Support married girls** through specific education, empowerment, and life skills programs.
- Reinforce programs that **support widowed or divorced early married girls** through empowerment programs to protect their children.

- Systematically **conduct training workshops for community leaders** in order to assist in awareness campaigns and send joint and comprehensive messages around this practice and its consequences.
- Raise **awareness about risks related to early marriage** in schools, social media, and leaders and through positive parenting programs.
- **Enhancement of lines of dialogue between parents and children targeting families** with girls at risk of early marriage, and engaging them in the positive parenting programs and family counselling

References

- (1) <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>
- (2) UNHCR- Inter-Agency information sharing portal, December 2016
- (3) UNICEF, The State of the World's Children 2013, Table 11, p 142. It is also worth noting that child marriage also existed across the region, such as in Lebanon and Jordan, before the Syrian refugees arrived
- (4) www.unfpa.org/child-marriage
- (5) www.unicef.org/protection/57929_58008.html.
- (6) Gender based violence classification tool; [http://gbvims.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/Classification Tool_Feb20112.pdf](http://gbvims.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/Classification_Tool_Feb20112.pdf)
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For further information please contact

Esraa Majd
Handicap International
 Inclusion Supervisor

☎ +962 78 05 111 95

✉ inclusion.region@hi-emergency.org



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