

February 2018

www.fmreview.org/syria2018

## Child marriage in Jordan: breaking the cycle

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**In seeking to combat the growing phenomenon of child marriage among Syrian refugees, it is vital to engage the whole range of actors involved, and to recognise that girls and boys have the capacity to address this issue in their own communities.**

The protracted displacement caused by the Syrian conflict has exacerbated pre-existing drivers of child marriage. The practice of child marriage is rooted in gender inequality; however, high levels of poverty and lack of opportunities for girls also contribute to the practice, and displaced Syrian families are increasingly resorting to child marriage to cope with economic and social pressures. Yet child marriage is far from safe.

Both boys and girls who are married as children are vulnerable to dropping out of school early, while girls are at risk of early pregnancy and a range of serious reproductive health concerns.<sup>1</sup> Young girls married to older men are often socially isolated and disempowered, heavily dependent on their husbands to secure their rights. High levels of trauma facing the Syrian refugee community have also increased the risk that child spouses may end up in abusive or exploitative situations. This is reflected

in the Jordanian Higher Population Council's report that 60% of recorded female victims of violence have been subject to forced and child marriage.<sup>2</sup> Since they have limited, if any, educational and economic opportunities, married underage girls have been identified as the group with the lowest participation in the Jordanian economy and are thus more likely to live in poverty.

In the Jordanian context, what constitutes child marriage is a complex question.

According to the Jordanian Personal Status Law, the legal age of marriage is 18, with marriage involving minors aged between 15 and 17 years of age only permitted by sharia courts in circumstances deemed to be in the 'best interest of the child'.<sup>3</sup> In practice, however, these marriages are frequently approved. In July 2017, nine new restrictions were added to the Personal Status Law in order to limit the discretionary power of sharia court judges to approve a marriage involving a child. While some have criticised the amendment for failing to completely outlaw child marriage, it is hoped that this will lead to a decrease in legally sanctioned child marriages.

Girls and boys who are married unofficially by local sheikhs find themselves in an extremely vulnerable situation, without documentation and liable for a fine of 1,000 Jordanian dinars (US\$1,410). Without proof of the marriage of parents, births cannot be registered, with potentially serious

future child protection implications. In the four years since she was married at the age of 14, one young woman we interviewed, Layla, has given birth to three children; her second child died at two months old with neither the birth nor the death registered, while the births of her first- and third-born children have also not been registered.



UNHCR/Annie Sakkeab

A 15-year-old Syrian refugee girl in Za'atari camp runs painting and acting classes to educate young girls and parents about underage marriage. "I started hearing about girls as young as 12 or 13 getting married. They would come to the school to say goodbye. I remember thinking they were making a big mistake, even before I knew the facts."

Yet many men and women in the Syrian community continue to advocate for the practice of child marriage. A 40-year-old Syrian woman justifies her decision to marry her daughter at the age of 14: “The men in our community want to get married between 18 and 21 years old. And the men will always want a younger bride. This is the way it works. If you wait too long you will miss out.”

Understanding the different manifestations of consent of minors is important to combatting the practice. While many marriages take place overtly against the expressed will of the bride, the notion of will is often blurred. A hidden element of coercion may be involved in otherwise seemingly willing brides who are under great familial, social and economic pressures. Girls may have little exposure to other life options or understanding of their life choices, and thus ‘willingly’ accept marriage as their fate.

### Recommendations

The International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) has been working with refugees in Jordan since 2007 and with Syrian refugees since 2012. Its activities focus on both prevention of and response to child marriage, taking account of the diversity of circumstances in which child marriages take place, the multiple drivers of child marriage, the range of actors involved in decision making, and the potential negative impacts. From its experience of programming come the following recommendations:

#### Change the behaviour of key actors:

Awareness-raising messages about the risks involved in child marriage and the benefits of waiting until children reach legal maturity should be tailored to be appropriate for all key actors – girls and boys, parents and caregivers, sheikhs, community leaders, courts and judicial staff.

**Keep girls and boys in schools:** When girls are enrolled in school, parents are less likely to consider marrying them before the age of 18; early school drop-outs are directly correlated with increased risk of being married.

#### Engage girls and boys as peer-to-peer educators:

It can be too easy for interventions to focus entirely on parents and caregivers and ignore the agency of young people themselves. Awareness-raising sessions and support groups can help to empower young people and also to identify potential leaders and change-makers who can speak to their peers and their community at large on the issue of child marriage.

**Address basic needs:** The provision of non-food items and emergency cash can help eliminate immediate financial need that might encourage early marriage to be used as a negative coping mechanism.

**Increase livelihood opportunities for the whole community:** Enabling skills development that leads to income generation for the refugee population can help mitigate the longer-term economic drivers of child marriage.

Through initiatives that support girls and boys as leaders and enable their voices to be heard in their own communities, young people can positively influence harmful perceptions and practices surrounding child marriage, thereby creating sustainable social change. A young Syrian woman who attended ICMC’s awareness-raising sessions captures how this influence from within takes place:

*“My grandmother was married as a child, my mother was married as a child, and I was married as a child. Before attending these sessions, I would have probably also married my daughter as a child. Now I understand that this will harm my daughter, and I want better for her. I will break the cycle.”*

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1. While child marriage is a reality for both girls and boys, girls are disproportionately affected. ICMC data indicates that 89% of identified child marriage cases involve girls.
2. Higher Population Council (2017) *Policy Brief – Child Marriage in Jordan* www.share-net-jordan.org/jo/?q=en/node/12144
3. It is worth noting that the legal age of marriage is as low or lower in many other countries. Many countries also provide for multiple exceptions allowing marriages to take place under the age of 18.