

**Early Marriages Among Syrian Refugees in Lebanon
- A Case Study from the Old City of Saida**

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Introduction

Globally, 12 million girls get married before they reach the age of 18 every year.¹ The practice of early marriage affects young girls in several ways, such as their physical and mental health, education, financial status and their vocational opportunities. Moreover, early marriage is more common in countries with high levels of poverty and conflict; “Child marriage and teen pregnancy appear to be particularly high in insecure environments. Nine of the top 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage are considered fragile states,”² according to Rima Mourtada et al. in their qualitative study about the incentives that motivate early marriage among Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon.

A report by Save the Children from 2014 concludes that the practice of early marriage drives many girls into depression, particularly if they are separated from family and friends and end up living a life in isolation after the marriage. Domestic violence is also more likely to occur within early marriages. Consequently, seeking help turns out to be more difficult for the young girls as a result of the separation from their previous social networks.³ Souad Belhorma, a specialist in women’s and gender studies, considers this practice a form of gender-based violence. In an article about early marriage in Morocco, she claims that “early marriage of young women and girls exposes them to different forms of gender-based violence, including social, physical, psychological, and financial violence,”⁴ referring to the article 1 of the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women from 1993.⁵

Currently, a considerable amount of the literature on early marriage explains the practice as a result of gender inequality and gender-based violence. According to this view, early marriage is considered a form of “forced marriage,” since “by legal definition a child cannot give consent.”⁶ The practice is also frequently referred to as “child marriage.”⁷ Poverty, conservative attitudes and the lack of education are often assumed to be the main motivating factors by the researchers. While most of the literature sees these factors as the main reasons

¹ *Girls Not Brides*, accessed 26 November, 2018, www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/

² Rima Mourtada, Jennifer Schlecht, and Jocelyn DeJong, “A qualitative study exploring child marriage practices among Syrian conflict-affected populations in Lebanon,” *Conflict and Health* vol.11(Suppl1) (2017): 54.

³ “Too young to wed: The growing problem of child marriage among Syrian girls in Jordan,” Save the Children (2014): 2.

⁴ Souad Belhorma, “Two months of marriage were sufficient to turn my life upside down’: early marriage as a form of gender-based violence,” *Gender & Development* vol.24(2) (May 2016): 219-220.

⁵ Belhorma, “Two months,” 220.

⁶ Robert Jensen, and Rebecca Thornton, “Early Marriage in the Developing World,” *Gender and Development* vol. 11(2) (July 2003): 10.

⁷ “Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice, A Statistical Exploration” UNICEF (2005), 4.

for early marriage, the voices of the young girls often disappear in the academic discourse. Sonya EM Knox presents a different picture of why Palestinian girls would marry before reaching 18 in a post-conflict environment. Most of the girls she talked to in her article “How they see it: young women’s views on early marriage in a post-conflict setting,”⁸ stated that they themselves decided to get married in order to relieve their families in a difficult situation, or to escape poor living conditions.

In situations of conflict, families are not only dealing with limited recourses and financial burdens, but also a lack of safety. Refugees in new host countries are in most cases trying to overcome a new reality in an environment of fear and desperate need for survival. Facing new difficulties, some families see early marriage as a solution to give their daughters an improved and more secure life. However, the outcome is generally different than envisioned. Many girls drop out of school, and the girls are left without the ability to improve their financial situation and “as a result, child brides – who are more likely to come from poor families in the first place – are likely to remain poor.”⁹

Based on my fieldwork in the Lebanese city of Saida and the current literature on early marriage and Syrian refugees in Lebanon, I will in this report try to describe *how the conflict in Syria has changed marriage patterns among young Syrian refugee girls and their families*. I will look further at *how early marriage is linked to poverty and the hardships the people in this small community are facing*. I will also look at *the role of family reputation and honor as contributing factors to early marriage*. In addition, I will bring forward *how these young girls themselves regard the practice of early marriage*. I consider the girls’ opinions to be of utmost importance to broaden our understanding of this topic. My case study will mainly focus on the Syrian refugee families residing in the old city of Saida, located in southern Lebanon.

Method

The fieldwork in this report is based on the observations I have made during regular visits, interviews and meetings in the old city of Saida over a period of two months. With the help of the Maarouf Saad Social and Cultural Foundation (MSSCF) I was able to find potential

⁸ Knox, Sonya EM. “How they see it: young women’s view on early marriage in a post-conflict setting.” *Reproductive Health Matters* vol. 25, sup. 1 (2017): 96-106.

⁹ “Too young,” Save the Children, 2.

respondents to my interviews and attend several sessions for women and children at their clinic and center, both located in the old city of Saida. The majority of the participants at these sessions are Syrian refugees, but there are also residents with Palestinian and Lebanese nationality from the old city attending their activities. I have also conducted interviews with:

- 7 Syrian women and girls between the ages of 16 and 35, married.
- 13 Syrian girls between the ages of 11 and 15, unmarried.
- 2 Syrian men, 22 years and 25 years, both single.
- 2 social workers at the MSSCF.
- Hiba Hamzi from Naba'a, a local Lebanese organization, and as Malala Fund's Gulmakai Champion, Hiba works to keep girls in school and to raise awareness about early marriage.

In addition, I have also talked to local friends and people that I have had the chance to meet throughout my stay in Lebanon. By attending awareness sessions at the MSSCF's center and clinic, I was able to observe many interesting discussions about the topic of early marriage, sometimes without participating. At other times I was given the opportunity to be an active participant. Even though my main focus in this report is early marriage among Syrian refugees and how this practice have been affected by the conflict and their resettlement in Lebanon, I have tried to get to know the people living in the old city, regardless of their nationality.

As an intern for NORWAC, a Norwegian humanitarian foundation that works with local partners on medical challenges in several regions and countries in the Middle East, I became familiar with the MSSFC and their work in Saida. As a foundation that works on the ground with the people in the old city, I was introduced to most of my informants, which I interviewed during the two months I regularly visited Saida. Dalal Chehade, the Projects' Coordinator and Mental Health for Children Projects' Director was my main contact and introduced me to MSSFC's social workers. Because of the trust that people find in her and her social network, my transition into the community in the old city turned out to be much easier than I expected. I chose to conduct my fieldwork in the old city of Saida because of MSSCF's network and the high percentage of Syrian beneficiaries at their center and clinic. Since I wanted to study and obtain a comprehensive and concrete picture of the social dynamics of a smaller area, the old city seemed to be an ideal place for my research.

Most of the interviews were conducted in Arabic. However, since my Arabic knowledge is somewhat limited, English words were used in combination with the help of Dalal Chehade, and Amineh Mohebbi Sadeq as translators. This was done in order to ensure full comprehension during my interviews. I conducted two interviews in English with two men, who had a high level of proficiency in English. Not being able to carry out all my conversations in Arabic was a challenge. My limited knowledge in Arabic was sometimes shocking to some of my informants because of my Middle Eastern appearance. However, this also stirred curiosity, and created a setting where I was able to tell them about myself, and my background. This was helpful in building more trust between my informants and me, especially in the beginning of my fieldwork.

Due to age variations, difference in attitudes, and my question's personal nature, I decided to conduct my interviews in the following ways to create a more relaxed atmosphere; with girls from 15 years and above, I did in-depth interviews in more private settings. With the younger, unmarried girls, we met in larger groups together with their friends. In addition, the social workers from the MSSCF were also present during these sessions.

I was not able to interview older, married men in the old city, since many of them were either working or looking for work, and therefore not available to the same extent compared to the women. Furthermore, most people in this area do not interact with the opposite sex spontaneously unless they are family members. This might have become easier if I had more time to continue my fieldwork. I felt towards the end of my stay that most people were used to seeing me in the old city, and that my presence did not attract much attention anymore.

Ethical challenges

Many Syrian refugees are not able to fulfill all the requirements to stay legally in Lebanon. I never asked direct questions to my informants about whether they were registered with the Lebanese government or with UNHCR during my conversations and interviews. However, throughout my whole stay I met Syrians expressing the fear of either losing their permit or being arrested if their status were to be revealed. This fear of being recognized had a noticeable impact on my interviews and even led to some hesitation during our sessions and my fieldwork in the old city of Saida. This was particularly obvious when I asked the young girls if they would accept that I took notes from our conversations, mainly when questions

regarding safety and belonging were raised. Some had to be reassured on several occasions that they would remain anonymous, and that I had no intention of revealing their identities. This got easier with time as I eventually stopped asking questions about their background and current residency. Simultaneously, I was able to build trust and the conversations would float more easily. Some of my interviewees did not find my questions problematic, and even stated that I could use their names in my work. I have however decided to keep all my informants' identities hidden, with the exception of some of the interviews with social workers or employees from NGOs – always with their consent.

The Syrian refugees in Lebanon

The conflict in Syria started in 2011, and the following year massive numbers of Syrian refugees had fled to Lebanon. By 2014, over one million Syrians had crossed the border to their neighboring country.¹⁰ In September 2018 the number had decreased to fewer than one million, estimated at approximately 950 thousand.¹¹ However, these numbers are believed to be much higher due to the many unregistered refugees. Although most of them have settled in the eastern Beqaa Valley, Tripoli in north Lebanon, and in Beirut, the southern cities of Saida and Tyre also host large numbers of Syrian refugees.¹² They mostly live in informal tented settlements and rented apartments in the cities.¹³ Others have settled in the existing Palestinian camps for financial reasons such as cheaper rent, but also as a safety measure since many Syrian refugees and Palestinian Syrian refugees are unregistered and the Lebanese security forces usually do not patrol these camps.¹⁴

Almost 60 per cent of Syrian refugee families in Lebanon are now living with less than 3 dollars per person per day.¹⁵ Their daily survival is difficult due to the impact of the conflict, leaving many with injuries, mental health problems and the absence of basic health services in

¹⁰ Sarah E. Parkinson, and Orkideh Behrouzan, "Negotiating health and life: Syrian refugees and the politics of access in Lebanon," *Social Science & Medicine* 146 (2015): 325.

¹¹ "Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response," UNHCR, accessed October 10 2018, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>

¹² Parkinson, and Behrouzan, "Negotiating health and life," 325.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ UNHCR, "Survey finds Syrian refugees in Lebanon became poorer, more vulnerable in 2017," January 9, 2018.

Lebanon.¹⁶ The situation for the Syrian refugees in the old town of Saida seems to be quite similar to the other resident in the area, both the Palestinians and the Lebanese. This area is small and there are approximately 1400 families that are living below the poverty line of less than three dollars per person per day. The old city is overcrowded and there is almost no access to basic services like schools, primary health care and mental health services. Since the Hariri foundation closed its facilities in 2016, the Maarouf Saad Social and Cultural Foundation (MSSCF) is the only NGO that provides primary healthcare in this neglected area. The birthrates are high and early marriage is very common. The majority of the girls are married between the ages of 13 and 16 years.¹⁷

Refugee rights in Lebanon

Lebanon has the world's largest number of refugees per-capita with approximately one fourth of the population consisting of refugees.¹⁸ However, it has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, and thus;

...[Lebanon] does not assign refugee status to those who would otherwise qualify for it under international law. Palestinians are the only population considered refugees, while other refugee populations, including Syrians, are referred to as 'displaced' or 'non-Lebanese' in official discourse.¹⁹

This creates many barriers for an already vulnerable population. There is a widespread fear of arrests, increased risk of exploitation, reduced mobility and exclusion from the work sphere.²⁰

Since there is no national Lebanese refugee law, Syrians and other refugees are not able to integrate in their host communities. This has also been the case for most of the Palestinian refugees who fled to Lebanon 70 years ago, during the Arab-Israeli war in 1948.²¹ The fear of permanent settlement of refugees is often explained as a result of the sectarian political division in Lebanon. The highest political positions are reserved and allocated to the

¹⁶ Susan Andrea Bartels et al., "Making sense of child, early and forced marriage among Syrian refugee girls: a mixed methods study in Lebanon," *BMJ global health* vol.3(1) (2018): 2.

¹⁷ This information is taken from NORWACs application for financial support to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 2018.

¹⁸ Rola Yasmine and Catherine Moughalian, "Systemic violence against Syrian refugee women and the myth of effective intrapersonal interventions," *Reproductive Health Matters* vol.24(47) (2016): 27.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Buckner, Dominique Spencer, and Jihae Cha, "Between Policy and Practice: The education of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon," *Journal of Refugee Studies* fex027 (December 2017): 4.

²⁰ Elizabeth Buckner, Dominique Spencer, and Jihae Cha, "Between Policy and Practice," 4.

²¹ Marwan Khawaja, and Laurie Blome Jacobsen, "Familial relations and labor market outcomes: the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon," *Social Science Research* Vol. 32(4) (December 2003): 582.

particular religious sects in Lebanon based on the census from 1932.²² Since the majority of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon belong to the Sunni sect, there are widespread worries that their possible integration will disrupt the delicate sectarian balance in an already unstable political environment.²³

Up until 2015, Syrian refugees were allowed to enter Lebanon legally and freely for up to six months and prolong it by 6 more months. After their first year, they had the option of going back to Syria for 24 hours and then return to Lebanon. As the war intensified, going back to Syria became more difficult. At this point, the Syrian refugees could pay a fee of 200 dollars to avoid returning to Syria in order to renew their visa. However, as the Lebanese government inserted new regulations in 2015 and legal stay required registration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or sponsorship by a Lebanese citizen in addition to the 200 dollars fee, they were also obligated to

...present valid ID and an entry slip obtained upon entry into Lebanon at the border, submit a housing pledge confirming their place of residence, and provide two photographs stamped by a Lebanese local official, known as the mukhtar.²⁴

If these requirements were not followed, their stay was considered illegal and they could risk harsh penalties such as prison detention. This creates fear and uncertainty among the many unregistered refugees.

Due to this system, the refugees can easily be exploited. A young Syrian refugee explained that the fear of harassment at the checkpoints, and the possible rejections when re-entering Lebanon had led him to search for a Lebanese sponsor after 2015. Through acquaintances, he managed to find a family friend of Lebanese nationality who was willing to sponsor his stay in Lebanon. He was able to find work with a local NGO and to manage his life in Lebanon, despite a relatively low salary as a result of his status as a “displaced person.” However, after a while, the Lebanese sponsor started to blackmail him for money, threatening to cancel his sponsorship if he didn’t pay. The demanded sum could sometimes reach as much as 700

²² Suad Joseph, “Political Familism in Lebanon,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* Vol.636(1) (July 2011): 154.

²³ Robert G. Rabil, *The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon: The Double Tragedy of Refugees and Impacted Host Communities* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 111.

²⁴ Sanyal, “Managing through *ad hoc* measures,” 71.

dollars; “I have borrowed money from friends or asked for an advance on my salary to be able to pay him.”²⁵

The rapid increase of military checkpoints that often, but not always require presentation of ID-papers around Lebanon is also problematic for many refugees, even for those trying to cross one area to another with the purpose of registering with UNHCR. I experienced this during a field visit with NORWAC foundation on October 30, 2018 to the city of Aarsal (ʿIrsal in Arabic), a Sunni town in the northeast of Lebanon. The presence of several Lebanese military checkpoints were blocking both the entrance and exit of the small city that now is overpopulated with over 65 per cent Syrian refugees.²⁶ Permissions are required at these checkpoints whether entering or leaving the city. Restrictions implemented by the government and in the different municipalities create a continuously static living situation that affects the refugees’ optimism and residency.²⁷

Saida and the political division in Lebanon

There are approximately 49 000 registered refugees residing in Saida.²⁸ The Syrian refugees have impacted their host communities in different ways depending on where they have settled in Lebanon. Because of financial barriers, many Syrian refugees have settled in regions that are less developed economically and socially, such as North Lebanon, the Bekaa, and the Palestinian camps. The refugees are struggling in line with their vulnerable host communities over jobs, services and resources. Some reports show that the impact of the refugees varies. In cities like Saida, the Syrian refugees are willing to take on the less lucrative jobs that the local Lebanese population is not willing to undertake.²⁹ Hence, the refugees’ presence is not considered threatening to the host population’s vocational opportunities.

²⁵ The author’s conversations with a male, Syrian refugee, age 25, October 2018.

²⁶ These numbers were given to us (NORWAC) by the employees at the Union of Relief and Development Associations (URDA), one of NORWAC’s local partners in Lebanon. According to URDA staff, the city of Aarsal had a population of approximately 30-35 thousand inhabitants prior to the Syrian war, but has now exceeded 100 000 with the arrival of the Syrian refugees. As we passed several checkpoint to enter Aarsal, we were required to pull over and show our passports and our names were registered at two of the checkpoints, although we had applied for permission and sent copies of our passport beforehand and traveled with employees of URDA. We also feared trouble at the checkpoints on our way back to Beirut, in case of changing of military guards and had to rush back within a few hour to leave while the same guards were working their shifts. We were also told that many Syrians fear leaving Aarsal and feel trapped inside this small city, even if they need urgent medical help, because of harassment at the checkpoints and in the surrounding cities.

²⁷ Sanyal, “Managing through *ad hoc* measures,” 73.

²⁸ “Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon,” *UNHCR, UNICEF, and WFP* (December 15, 2017): 27, map 2.

²⁹ Sam van Vliet, and Guita Hourani, “Regional differences in the conditions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon,” *Civil Society Knowledge Centre, Lebanon Support* (April 1, 2014): 3.

Because of the sectarian division in different regions in Lebanon, the local political climate also determines where the Syrian refugees decide to settle. However, cities like Saida “are attracting Syrian refugees due to greater work opportunities especially in construction.”³⁰ The Shia sect, mainly under the control of Hizbullah, dominates most of South Lebanon with the exception of Saida, which is primarily dominated by the Sunni political party the Future Movement.³¹ The political climate in Lebanon is exceptionally sectarian. In addition, Syria and its army have also played a role in further reinforcing this political division throughout the Lebanese civil war between 1975-1990, and the Syrian occupation from 1976 to 2005.³²

During those years, the Syrian-Hizbullah relationship grew stronger, and before the withdrawal of Syrian army from Lebanon, the Sunni Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was assassinated in February 2005. As the murder of the prime minister was immediately blamed on Hizbullah and the Syrian intervention in Lebanon, Syria’s President Hafiz al-Assad declared a retreat from Lebanon on March 5. Following the Syrian army’s withdrawal, Hizbullah and their supporters demonstrated in the streets of Lebanon in support of Syria on March 8. This was followed by a counter-demonstration on March 14 led by their main Sunni-opposition, the Hariri Future Movement Party.³³ The March 14 movement and their allies are today the main political force in Saida. Since Saida is surrounded by Shia controlled areas, the city “carries disproportionate symbolic importance as a symbol of the Future Movement’s political heft.”³⁴ The ongoing tensions between the two political and sectarian fronts often come to the surface in various parts of Lebanon, leading to violence and armed conflicts. Saida is one of the cities where such conflicts have occurred since Saida is a city “where Sunni and Shiite populations live close together in relatively poor neighborhoods.”³⁵

Despite differences in political, social, ethnical, and financial background, most of the Syrian refugees belong to the Sunni sect.³⁶ Due to practical reasons, most of the refugees decide to settle in those areas of Lebanon which provide an easier access to humanitarian assistance,

³⁰ Vliet, and Hourani, “Regional differences,” 3.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Nora Berneis, and Julia Bartl, “Understanding the heightening Syrian Refugee Crisis and Lebanon’s Political Polarization,” *Carthage Research and Information Center* 1/2013 (June 2013): 7.

³³ Rabil, *The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon*, 76.

³⁴ Sima Ghaddar, “Machine Politics in Lebanon’s Alleyways,” *The Century Foundation*, May 6, 2016, <https://tcf.org/content/report/machine-politics-lebanons-alleyways/?session=1>.

³⁵ Berneis, and Bartl, “Understanding the heightening,” 8.

³⁶ Ibid., 11.

more job opportunities, and lower rents. Nevertheless, “the close link between religious belonging and political opinion” also plays a big role in the Syrian refugees’ decision on which regions in Lebanon to settle.³⁷ This seems to be the case in the old city of Saida where all the Syrian refugees I met during my fieldwork belong to the Sunni sect.

The war in Syria and its impact on gender roles

The war in Syria and the following refugee crisis has affected both the gender roles in Syria, and in the refugee’s host communities. Before the outbreak of the war, Syria was a patriarchal society with well-established gender roles. Masculine responsibilities such as being the head of the family changed as a result of the war and displacement. Many men are no longer able to provide for their families like they had used to. This has led to frustration since their expected role as bread earner and protector of the family has changed,³⁸ and “for many men this change has triggered hyper masculine associated codes of behaviour in an attempt to reassert normative gender roles.”³⁹

The fixed gender-roles in Syria are breaking down in the refugee communities in Lebanon. In these communities many men feel like they have lost their position and power in a very unsettled situation. The breakdown of set family structures with fixed gender roles in the society in Syria has led to mental stress and an increase of a cycle of violence amongst the refugee families in Lebanon.⁴⁰ This shift in gender norms has led to an increase in domestic violence and worsened relationships within the families. In addition, many children suffer from increased violence perpetrated by both the mother and father. Young girls who decide to get married before reaching the age of 18 are not only living under extreme poverty, posttraumatic stress, and unsafe environments, but are also witnessing and experiencing increased violence within their own families.

A young Syrian refugee girl in Saida told me that violence in the home is a problem in her community, and claimed that it might have worsened after arriving in Lebanon.⁴¹ Increased violence in the families was not a topic that people would talk about during my fieldwork. The question of whether domestic violence has increased in Saida after the outbreak of the

³⁷ Berneis, and Bartl, “Understanding the heightening,” 14.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 103.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 104.

⁴¹ The author’s conversation with a unmarried Syrian refugee girl, 15 years, November 2018.

Syrian civil war remains unanswered. However, due to the overcrowded living situation for most of the families in the old city of Saida, domestic violence might have become more noticeable than it previously was in Syria. Both older and younger women mentioned the lack of privacy in Saida, compared to their houses and more spacious dwellings in Syria.

Early marriage and regional variations in Syria

There are also regional variations within the refugee communities in Lebanon, and variations based on the refugees area of origin in Syria. In the old city of Saida, I observed a difference between the families from the rural areas close to the Lebanese border and those from the big Syrian cities like Aleppo and Damascus. In addition, the difference between the attitudes in Beirut where I lived during my stay in Lebanon, and the conservative attitudes in the old city were clearly visible.

The families from the rural areas often expressed that they had a tradition of marrying girls at an early age, even before the conflict. This was mentioned on several occasions by the social workers at the Maarouf Saad Foundation. This distinction was also noticeable those times I attended midwife sessions at their clinic in the old city. Sometimes the mother and her daughter, both pregnant, would attend the same midwife session. Their community in the old city is also pressuring the families to marry off their girls before they reach an age which many considers too old for marriage. This is in many cases considered to be 20 years and above. Most of the people in the old city are from rural areas of Syria where girls usually are getting married not too long after puberty.⁴²

Nonetheless, some of the girls had a certain level of education from Syria and some were even married to husbands of their choices. Most of their husbands were of Lebanese nationality. These women were often older and more outspoken during different educational sessions held regularly for women at the Maarouf Saad Foundation clinic. The topic of early marriage was often brought up by these girls to be discussed with the session leader in order to speak on behalf of other young girls like neighbors or family members. One of the women I talked to was 24 years old and had finished two years at the university. She was from one of the larger cities in Syria and came to Lebanon when she was 16 years old. She married when she was 22 years old, and was now pregnant with her first child. She did not find it

⁴² The author's conversation with a Lebanese social worker in the Old City of Saida, October 2018.

problematic to wait with marriage until she reached an age that she and her family found appropriate. She could however see a change towards different attitudes regarding early marriage as a consequence of the conflict. She emphasized that the difference between the families' financial situations and background from Syria affect their views on early marriage. She stated that Syrians from the urban areas prioritize education over marriage for their young daughters.⁴³

Early marriage and the continuous cycle of poverty

There is a link between early marriage and poverty.⁴⁴ According to Naana Otoo-Oyortey and Sonita Pobi in their article "Early marriage and poverty: exploring links and key policy issues" in *Gender & Development*, the authors claim that "early marriage violates a girl's right to a future, and by doing so perpetuates the 'feminisation of poverty'." According to this theory, "feminisation of poverty" suggests that women are becoming disproportionately more vulnerable because of their poor financial condition compared to men, particularly among those who already live in poverty. Furthermore, in an article by the Innocenti Digest by the United Nations Children's Fund, it is also claimed that one of the key factors driving early marriage is poverty, and is therefore seen as a strategy for economic survival.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, early marriage rarely improves the economical conditions for the involved families, and is often considered to hinder economical growth.

A Syrian mother, married at the age of 13, explained how she wanted things to be different for her daughters, based on her own experiences as a young mother. During our conversations she expressed grief over losing her childhood and being forced into the role of a wife, saying, "my life was ruined". However, despite her wish to give her daughters a brighter future, the worsened economical conditions following the civil war in Syria made them follow the same path. The mother asked several times during our conversations; "But what could we do under these circumstances?,"⁴⁶ referring to their harsh living conditions as refugees in Lebanon. One of her daughters married at the age of 15 and is now pregnant with her second child. She would have chosen to stay in school if she had a choice. "All the young girls we know get married at a young age now, even though we (the mothers) learned from our

⁴³ The author's conversation with a 24 year old Syrian woman in the Old City of Saida, November 2018.

⁴⁴ Naana Otoo-Oyortey and Sonita Pobi, "Early marriage and poverty: exploring links and key policy issues," *Gender & Development* vol.11(2) (July 2003): 42.

⁴⁵ "Early Marriage," United Nations Children's Fund, Innocenti Digest (March 2001): 1.

⁴⁶ The author's conversation with Syrian mother 35, and daughter 17, November 2018.

mistakes and wanted things differently for our daughters.”⁴⁷ Despite the fact they lived a modest life in rural Syria it was far easier to send their girls to school. In addition, their financial situation in Syria was far better than their current condition as refugees in Saida, Lebanon.

Furthermore, keeping the girls away from sexual relations outside of marriage in order to protect their families’ honor and reputation is also a contributing factor for early marriage. Early marriage is a way of controlling the girls and preventing interaction with men before they get married.⁴⁸ However, this control is not only perpetrated by men, but also by women. According to the Innocenti Digest, women, and particularly older women, are less likely to be exposed to new ideas and norms, and are thus “often the last to abandon the ideas that framed their own lives.”⁴⁹ This contributes to the cycle of early marriage and the “feminisation of poverty.” Due to patriarchal notions, especially present in conservative communities such as in Saida, harmful rumors are easily spread. A young man explained that if a young girl rejects a marriage proposal that the family considers as appropriate, she might be accused of having a relationship with someone else. These rumors can be harmful for the girl and her family’s reputation, and can easily be spread in a small and overcrowded area. The protection of the family honor is very important, and the fear of sexual relations outside of marriage often results in convincing the young girls to get married. He further explained that there also are prejudices regarding the Syrian women as “cheaper” than the Lebanese women. These prejudices put them in a higher risk of being exposed to harassments and assaults. This creates a situation of heightened fear among the Syrian refugees that was not present to this degree before the conflict. “It creates a state of backwardness, where their mothers would get a certain level of education, and marry at an older age, while their girls are now getting married as soon as they hit puberty.”⁵⁰ Thus, we can conclude that both economical hardships, and social control contribute to a vicious circle of early marriage, which hinders young girls ability to escape poverty.

Marriage as a survival strategy

The main job of all the women and girls that I talked to in Saida was to take care of the home and their children, if they had children. They all stressed that it is already hard enough for the

⁴⁷ The author’s conversation with Syrian mother 35, and daughter 17, November 2018.

⁴⁸ “Early Marriage,” Innocenti Digest, 6.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁰ The author’s conversation with Syrian, unmarried man, November 2018.

men in their families to find jobs, and therefore even harder for the women. One of the more outspoken women I talked to, a 22-year-old Syrian refugee who got married at the age of 18, expressed her desire to work and could see a future working as a hairdresser owning her private salon. She is married to a Lebanese man of her choice and seemed more optimistic about her future. It is easier for a Syrian woman married to a Lebanese man to get citizenship, and attain a work permit. Nevertheless, this was not an option for her at that time because of the high unemployment in Saida.⁵¹

However, not all the girls that I talked to had hopes of working in the future. A young girl of 16, who got married when she was 15, was now pregnant with her first child. She had dropped out of school after 7th grade and married a 24-year-old relative from Syria. She expressed how she would rather have continued her education, nonetheless, getting married seemed to be her only option. Additionally, her marriage helped her family financially to eliminate the burden of her costs. Her mother had married at the age of 22, and she would probably have chosen a different path if their situation was different.⁵² Early marriage deprives young girls from future prospects of education and distinctive progress by the rapid change from no longer being a child to taking on a wife's responsibilities. Many girls decide to marry early to take pressure off the families' strained living condition, hoping to achieve a better living standard for themselves and their families. However, the reality is often characterized by heavy domestic work, pressure of early pregnancy and a life in a vulnerable position due to her (in most cases) older husband as the decision-maker in the house.⁵³

Protection as an incentive for early marriage

Rumors of rape and sexual harassment are widespread among the Syrians in Lebanon. Many women have experienced threatening situations and harassment. This intensifies the fear of harming the family's honor. The notion of protecting a girl's honor existed before the civil war in Syria, and was often used as an argument to marry girls at an early age. Today, displacement and a new level of poverty in combination with the breakdown of known social structures and affiliations have strengthened this fear of harm to the family's honor and reputation. By marrying girls at an early age the burden is lifted from the families and becomes the husbands responsibility and furthermore eases the financial burden from poor

⁵¹ The author's conversation with a married Syrian refugee woman, 22 years, November 2018.

⁵² The author's conversation with a married Syrian refugee woman, 16 years, November 2018

⁵³ "Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice, A Statistical Exploration." UNICEF (October 2015). Accessed September 18, 2018: 1.

families struggle to make ends meet. The absence of measures to support and protect Syrian girls and women in the Lebanese society is also a contributing factor to increased fear.⁵⁴ The pragmatic choice becomes clear to many Syrian refugees, as they don't see other options in their vulnerable situation.

The concept of "al Sutra," meaning the preserving of a woman's honor and dignity, is crucial in the Syrian refugee society where the frameworks and structures known to them from pre-conflict times has broken down and people are forced to live closely together and women quickly become the subject of harmful rumors. Interaction with new social norms for women in Lebanon might also contribute to a fear of changing values among the Syrian girls and increase the need for control of girls by encouraging early marriage.⁵⁵

Some girls decide to get married despite of their young age to escape the social control from several male family members. A social worker from MSSCF explained to me that, "Some girls believe that it is easier to live a life controlled by a single husband, compared to that of a girl under the control of an entire family."⁵⁶

According to a research by Bartels et al., the Syrian refugees in Lebanon feel a pressing need to marry their girls sooner, not just in terms of their age, but also to speed up the process of marriage. From their study it became clear that the engagement periods were shorter, compared to what was the norm in Syria where the families wanted to give this practice longer time to make sure that the groom was the appropriate man for their daughters.⁵⁷

Early marriage and conflict-affected families

In situations of conflict, all the above-mentioned factors for early marriage are intensified. Although early marriage existed prior to the Syrian war with an estimate of 13 per cent of Syrian women aged 20-24 years being married before reaching 18, the new estimates after the outbreak of the civil war are approximately 35 per cent.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Sulmone Anderson, "Child Marriages Rise Among Syrian Refugee Girls," *The Atlantic*, May 28, 2013. Accessed November 2, 2018.

⁵⁵ Mourtada, Schlecht, and DeJong. "A qualitative study," 6.

⁵⁶ The author's conversation with a social worker from MSSCF, October 2018.

⁵⁷ Bartels et al., "Making sense of child," 10.

⁵⁸ Susan Andrea Bartels et al., "Making sense of child, early and forced marriage among Syrian refugee girls: a mixed methods study in Lebanon," *BMJ global health* vol.3(1) (2018): 2.

Following the increased economical hardships on the families in conflict situations, girls are increasingly regarded as a burden on the family because of their fewer options to bring an income to an already struggling family, compared to the boys. In addition, armed conflicts increase the risk of rape and sexual violence, which would hurt the family's reputation. This creates not only an economic, but also social reasons for early marriage. Therefore, during conflicts, girls are less desirable for their families; however, they are able to bring children to their in-laws. Another contributive factor for early marriage is the girls' increasingly restricted mobility compared to the boys. Boys are expected to work and protect their sisters by setting rules for their freedom.⁵⁹

During time of conflict and displacement, many families see early marriage as a way to create protection and stability, because they are "vulnerable to sexual harassment, and occasionally even rape due to living in unfamiliar and sometimes insecure areas and the breakdown of social network."⁶⁰ A 19-year-old woman from a rural area in Syria married at the age of 13, and explained that due to safety reasons, it was more appropriate for her to get married when her family first had to flee to Jordan when the war in Syria escalated. She had to quit school and hoped to continue her education sometime in the future when she returns to Syria with her husband and kids. She also explained that even though she was happy with her marriage and her husband who is also her cousin, she wanted her children to be at least 20 and have an education before they get married.⁶¹

Loss of education

While primary school enrollment rates were as high as 95% in Syria prior to the war,⁶² the situation seems to be very different now. Estimates conclude that approximately 30% or less of the Syrian children in Lebanon are registered in primary schools in their host country.⁶³ Besides the financial struggles and the few public school opportunities, the Syrian refugee pupils are having a hard time to adjust to the Lebanese curriculum, which is more demanding than the Syrian equivalent. The Lebanese school system uses French and English as teaching

⁵⁹ Jocelyn DeJong et al., "Young lives disrupted: gender and well-being among adolescent Syrian refugees in Lebanon," *Conflict and Health* vol.11(Suppl1) (2017): 29.

⁶⁰ Rima Mourtada, Jennifer Schlecht, and Jocelyn DeJong. "A qualitative study exploring child marriage practices among Syrian conflict-affected populations in Lebanon," *Conflict and Health* vol.11(Suppl1) (2017): 58.

⁶¹ The author's conversation with a Syrian woman, 19 years, November 2018.

⁶² "Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in the Arab Region: Dynamics, Challenges and Policy Options," *Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)*, United Nations, New York (2015): 73.

⁶³ "Child Marriage," ESCWA, 73.

languages in addition to Arabic. While on the other hand, Arabic is the main language in Syrian schools.⁶⁴

Financial obstacles are also a problem for Syrian refugee families that wish to send their children to schools in Lebanon. Although the Lebanese government decided to introduce a waiver on school fees and cost of books, many Syrian refugee families are still struggling to finance transport to the schools if they are located far from their homes.⁶⁵ Under such harsh circumstances, many families see no other option than to send their children out to find jobs in order to contribute to the family income.⁶⁶ Boys are more able to find job opportunities, due to their better access to the public sphere and higher mobility compared to girls. Mixed-sex school systems are also new to many Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Primary and secondary schools are same-sexed in Syria and “many conservative Syrian families, especially fathers, are unhappy with their daughters attending mixed schools.”⁶⁷ Thus they do not always allow them to attend school.

Because of a desperate need for income as a consequence of poverty and fewer opportunities, Syrian refugees are losing what Charles and Denman refer to as “the economic loss of human capital for Syria,” referring to the human capital theory.⁶⁸ According to this theory, education has long-term benefits not only for the individual, but also for the whole society. Education improves the economy and forms “better citizens.”⁶⁹ The conflict in Syria has driven the conflict-affected families in Lebanon to prioritize their urgent needs instead of setting long-term goals that will benefit them and the society in the future. One of the neglected priorities as a consequence of these changed circumstances is school enrollment among Syrian children. Nevertheless, this leads to a vicious cycle of poverty since “without education, there is the propensity for high unemployment and underemployment.”⁷⁰

Most of the girls I talked in Saida had to leave school although most of them expressed a desire to continue their education when returning back to Syria when the war ends. However, many of these girls in Saida are already married or might go into early marriage, and the

⁶⁴ Lorraine Charles and Kate Denman, “Syrian and Palestinian Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: the Plight of Women and Children,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* vol.14(5) (December 2013): 98.

⁶⁵ Charles and Denman, “Syrian and Palestinian Syrian Refugees,” 98.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

⁶⁷ Charles and Denman, “Syrian and Palestinian Syrian Refugees,” 98.

⁶⁸ Charles and Denman, “Syrian and Palestinian Syrian Refugees,” 100.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

social pressure of brining children into the family could become a barrier for any future education.

However, the younger girls that I talked to, mostly between 11 and 15 years old and unmarried, were very aware of their rights, and stressed the importance of education throughout my conversations with them. They had a significant level of understanding on the subject matter of early marriage and the importance of education. They expressed their desire to travel and learn languages, and anticipated a different lifestyle in the future. The importance of education was often discussed with regards to the discrimination of women on the job market. These ambitions and aspirations are not always appreciated among some of the older and more conservative men and women in the old city. Many men and women from the older generations are afraid that their young girls are being affected negatively by the liberal attitudes displayed by the Lebanese women. As one young Syrian man explained, “They have brought their traditions from Syria, depending on where they come from, and many want to keep those traditions, and do not want to become more like the Lebanese.”⁷¹

We can from this conclude that early marriage and early child bearing deprive young girls from education. This often leads to limited work opportunities, lack of social mobility, and poverty. Furthermore, this practice keeps the tradition of early marriage alive.

Conclusion

Based on the existing literature on early marriage and my findings from the fieldwork in the old city of Saida it is possible to conclude that the practice of early marriage is many-faceted, and consists of many different stories. There are several factors contributing to its continued practice. Among those we find poverty and economical hardship, already established norms and practices, besides social control as a response to increased insecurity. All of these factors have been present in the stories I have been told by the Syrian refugee girls I met in the old city of Saida during my fieldwork. It is also possible to conclude that many of the consequences of early marriage reinforce the conditions that make early marriage seem like a viable strategy for the families.

⁷¹ The author’s conversation with Syrian man, age 22, November 2018.

As previously stated, poverty and economical hardships make families more willing to practice early marriage, even though they might have wished for a different future for their young girls. In some circumstances even the girls themselves have expressed their will to marry early in order to improve their own and their families' living conditions. This economical pressure is particularly present among the Syrian refugees residing in Lebanon. There are approximately one million Syrian refugees currently living in Lebanon. They have next to no juridical rights and suffer from a lack of access to basic welfare services and vocational opportunities. In addition, the political climate in Lebanon makes their possible integration difficult and the prospects for an improvement of their situation gloomy. Both the poverty and the insecurity that follow their new life in various parts of Lebanon have led to an increase in early marriages compared to the times prior the war in Syria. In addition, many young girls lose the opportunity to continue their education in Lebanon, which further makes them likely to remain in poverty, and also less likely to be exposed to alternative norms and practices. Nevertheless, it should be stated that there are variations in the practice of early marriage based on the refugee's background in Syria. Early marriage was more practiced in the rural areas of Syria, compared to the urban cities.

The increased insecurity among the refugees in the cramped areas and camps where they have settled in Lebanon has led to more early marriages due to the already existing norms of honor and reputation. In the old city of Saida, which is a small area, rumors can easily be spread, and any suspicion of young girls having relationships with men outside marriage can have grave consequences for the families' reputation. Some families therefore wish to marry their girls early to prevent the negative consequences of such rumors. Early marriage is increasingly being used to protect the families' reputation.

Saida is one of the areas in Lebanon where many Syrians have settled. During my two months of fieldwork in this city I heard the different stories, and saw the many different reasons behind the practice of early marriage. In the old city of Saida, all of the above mentioned factors have been present in various degrees. From my interviews, it was clear that the problems following the refugees' displacements, such as poverty, lack of education, changed gender roles and insecurity all contributed to the increased practice of early marriage.

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