

POLICY BRIEF

Syrian Refugee Youth in Jordan: Early Marriages in Perspective

BACKGROUND ON EARLY MARRIAGE IN JORDAN

The case of Syrians in Jordan shows how attention for gendered practices has been broadly mainstreamed in humanitarian protracted displacement contexts. Currently, the number of registered Syrian refugees – “people of concern” -- by UNHCR in Jordan totals 660 393, making up for 11,7% of the Jordanian population. The government of Jordan has made much higher estimates but those numbers cannot be verified and are therefore considered unreliable (Bank, 2016, 3 ; Lenner & Schmelter, 2016). An overwhelming majority of refugees, about 80 %, lives in urban areas in the Northern governorates of Mafraq, Irbid, Zarqa and the capital Amman (Lenner & Schmelter, 2016, 124). Others live in five camps that have been set up to address the Syrian refugee crisis and are located in the Northern governorates as well.

Reports have been dedicated to the plight of women and children from early on in the crisis (UN Women, 2013) and showed that the number of registered Syrian marriages involving women under the age of 18 had increased remarkably (Higher Population Council Jordan, 2017; Save the Children, 2014; UNICEF, 2014). The percentage of registered marriages among underage Syrian women in Jordan rose especially between 2011 and 2015, notably from 18,4 % in 2011 to 34,6 % in 2015 (Higher Population Council Jordan, 2017, xv - xvi). Among those early marriages, the great majority in Jordan is between the age of 15-17 at the time of marriage (UNFPA, 2019; UNICEF, 2014, 8), and only 2% of women in Jordan get married under the age of 15 (Department of Statistics/Jordan & ICF, 2019). Literature points at the higher health risks (especially under the age 15) (WHO, 2018), higher likelihood of experiencing domestic abuse (Save the Children, 2014, 2), and broader social and psychological problems for early married women in general.

Living in displacement, in protracted uncertainty and under precarious socio-economic conditions, Syrian refugees have shown a higher tendency to marry their children at a younger age. Early marriage has been a common practice in many parts of pre-war Syria. Refugees in the North of Jordan have often come from Syrian rural regions at the borderlands and upwards where early marriage has been a common practice for generations. Studies argued that a lack of general safety, worsening economic conditions and disrupted education for girls are important reasons behind this rise (Mourtada et al, 2017). Child marriage has been defined as an instance of Gender Based Violence (GBV) that humanitarians seek to address and integrate in their responses (ESCWA, 2015; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2015).

ON THE NATURE OF THIS STUDY

While there are many studies available on the causes and consequences of early marriages among Syrian refugees in Jordan, the study addressed the sexual and reproductive health of Syrian refugee youth in more general terms and in doing so put early marriages in a broader perspective. Qualitative research, including in-depth interviews, ethnographic fieldwork and PAR methods were used to study the perceptions, experiences and strategies of Syrian refugee youth in Jordan with regard to their SRHR, and the role and impact of marriages on SRHR in particular. The project was implemented in cooperation with two practitioner organizations, namely Caritas Jordan, a large international NGO working in eight centers across the country and Ahel Al-Jabal, a Jordanian NGO working in Mafraq. The project's main aim was to give insight in the agency, resilience and coping strategies of Syrian refugee youth in Jordan with regard to (early) marriage and having children and contribute to more effective policies and practices.

The research was carried out by a team of Jordanian, Syrian and Belgian researchers, affiliated with Yarmouk University in Irbid, Jordan, and the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands. In total 124 interviews were held with women of which 62 with (early) married women, 40 with unmarried women, 19 with divorced women and 3 with widowed women. 20 interviews were carried out with unmarried men. 5 parents were interviewed (together). In total 37 PAR meetings were held of which 14 with a group of 8 married women in Ramtha, 11 with a group of 8 married women in Zarqa, 6 with a group of 8 unmarried women in Zarqa, and 6 with 7 (2 married and 5 unmarried) men in Mafraq.

The qualitative and in-depth nature of this research brings us to certain insights that are not always easy to capture in recommendations for policy. Or it may result in rather unusual policy suggestions. For this reason, we find it important to highlight the core research method that the team relied on, Participatory Action Research (PAR).

Setting up Participatory Action Research (PAR) among Syrian refugees in Jordan proved to be very challenging for several reasons. In two locations, Zarqa and Ramtha, two groups of eight Syrian married women met twelve times over the course of one year. A crucial feature of using PAR as a research methodology is that initiative and agency lies in the hands of the target group or community. Participants in a classical PAR guided research are all considered co-researchers who co-design and co-conduct the research project. Local inhabitants in a particular area or community gather together to address a particular social issue that they perceive as a problem. They decide to study this issue and eventually undertake some form of action. In our project, we already had an established research question: What does early marriage mean for Syrian refugee women and what is the relationship between early marriage and sexual and reproductive health consequences? So, the participants in our research didn't act as co-creators. Yet, we aimed to have their active involvement in pointing us to their main concerns, questions and struggles within the frame of our research question.

Two main achievements of the method:

- 1) The psychological and emotional space the women found in the PAR sessions enabled them to talk more freely than in a close family circle
 - 2) The sessions helped the women to meet their actual needs and widen their social network.
- Many of the women said how helpful and supportive they found the sessions and they appreciated the opportunity to share their feelings quite openly.

Two main findings from the method: First, this approach revealed that there is an unresolved discrepancy between what PAR is supposed to be: communities co-creating the research questions and co-conducting the research, versus how funding actually works. Donors typically require a detailed set of research questions, an outline methodology and research methods before committing funds. This makes it more difficult to follow a radical PAR approach. Using PAR would mean that a lot of this information would remain unspecified and only become clear during the research process. Second, although the project did not use PAR in its radical form, by being flexible and adaptive in how we used it, the meetings started to gradually transform into what the participants most needed and wanted.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Prioritizing women's need through listening and dialogue

The study's findings result from a long-term anthropological engagement with the research questions and therefore allow for a critical rethinking of predominant policy responses.

- With regard to the rise of early marriage among Syrian refugees in Jordan, findings reveal a fundamental tension between *reproductive governance concerns* (i.e. laws, regulations and social norms concerning women's reproductive behaviour such as marriage age and family planning) and a *humanitarian response* (prioritizing girls' needs and early married women's needs in crisis context). This means that the political desire for a collective regulation of marriage and family planning may not align with actual refugee women's needs. The research findings illustrate this tension and raise the question to which side the balance shifts.
- Policy analysis and empirical findings show that the *problem of early marriage* is understood in various ways by different actors. This reveals important differences in underlying concerns: safeguarding children's rights (international), protecting family life to raise new generations of the future nation (Jordan), protecting kinship as an everyday social support system (Syrian women), and the promotion of modern cultural expectations of family life (health care workers). Those different underlying concerns are not necessarily in conflict and easily co-exist. The findings suggest that having insight into these differences may shed an important light on the overall socio-cultural, political context in which the rise of early marriage occurs, and may help to develop alternative routes of policy design.

- The *predominant format* in the response to the rise of early marriage consists of *training and education for target groups*, especially Syrian refugee women. Initiatives aim to train refugees by providing new models for reproductive behaviour (i.e. to marry at a later age, to have less childbirths). In other words, reproductive governance concerns may threaten to outbalance the humanitarian concern with understanding and addressing women refugees' needs. The priority of understanding refugees' needs becomes then overridden by development thinking and formats. This inherent risk results from the blending of developmentalist rationales and humanitarian emergency logics which often occurs in contexts of protracted displacement.
- Attempts to regulate social reproduction are not new to development actors, all cultures and societies have been creating sets of rules. Some of these rules are considered 'cultural' or 'traditional', while others are attempts to 'modernize' or 'civilize'. All these social and political prescriptions can be understood as a *politics of the womb* which structures and restricts women's agency and choice.
- Initiatives that address the needs of early married women or aim to prevent early marriages often rely on methods such as awareness raising. Prioritizing refugee needs, however, may mean that one does not follow a rather *passive model* training, education and awareness raising but could equally lead to *an active model that is based on an ethics of dialogue* in which care givers and care receivers are entirely equal participants. This means that the relation between trainer and participant is understood as a relation between equal partners. Developmentalist assumptions threaten to override an in-depth understanding of women's self-defined needs and strategies of coping and decision-making.

Many women told the researchers that they found great emotional and psychological support in the group meetings. "We calm down when we talk" (*nertah lama nehky*) was a recurring phrase of feedback. After a few weeks, Rania (aged 28), mother of four, came up to ask whether the meetings were part of a family support program that runs in the NGO (despite the initial explanation of the research nature of the project at each first individual meeting during recruitment and in the first group meeting). She added that she was attending a family support program at another NGO but "found ours much better and satisfying than the other one". In the other organisation, "the woman [facilitator] just talked and talked and was not really interested in listening to us". Rania missed being asked about what went on in their lives and missed the opportunity to talk.

2. Reconsidering the link between early marriage and SRHR complications

The interviews with service providers revealed that interlocutors responded negatively to the question of major medical complications occurring that occur particularly to early married

women who delivered babies under the age of 18. Instead, virtually all respondents reframed this question by moving away from medical language and reformulating it as “a problem of culture and education”. They understood the problem of early marriage/pregnancy in terms of culture, education, or in broader terms, in relation to narratives of modernity and normative understandings regarding family formation in Jordanian society. These findings correspond to the current debate among international agencies such as UNFPA on the design of interventions to efficiently respond to the rise of early marriage, specifically the question which role a discussion of potential health hazards should have.

3. Reviewing the singular category of early marriage

Findings point at the difficulties to grasp the *diversity of early marriage practices* and contain them in one fixed, generalized category. The multitude of understandings by Syrian women contrasts with the predominant use of early marriage as a catch-all umbrella term.

Syrian women in this study discussed the many shapes early marriage can take in their understanding and experience. Early marriage includes cousin marriage, arranged marriage (both forms are also referred to as ‘traditional marriage’), large age-difference marriages and small age-difference marriages, marriages between spouses of the same nationality and marriages with male spouses with other nationalities, and any combinations of the above. There can be varying degrees of social pressure or space for personal negotiation by women with their parents or other family members concerning the marriage partner, marriage decision or timing. Additionally, parents may accept romantic love to play a role in choosing a suitable spouse, or not. Some girls and women attached great value to romantic love while others did not. Similarly, young women who are living isolated from their own (extended) families have different experiences from those who live in relative proximity of family members. In an effort to prevent girls under the age of 18 of marrying, however, this great variety of practices with very different concrete outcomes is often glossed over while cases of early marriage differ greatly based on a host of personal conditions.

The diverse types of early marriage:

- cousin marriage
- arranged marriage
- large and small age gap differences between spouses
- spouses with same or different nationalities
- future spouses residing in the neighbourhood or abroad
- varying degrees of social pressure and space for personal negotiation
- varying degrees of the role of romantic love
- girls living isolated from their own relatives or living close to their (extended) family

4. Contextualizing the reasons for early marriage

Findings point at the different contexts that influence decisions of early marriage. These reasons are a combination of pre-war existing cultural understandings and post-flight new conditions. Important themes among dominant *cultural understandings* are:

- 1) body shape and the body reaching a mature stage
- 2) the girl's expressions of her own willingness to marry and have sexual relations,
- 3) when close peers and family marry, this increases girls' desire to marry,
- 4) the cultural/religious idea of *sutra*, i.e. the protection of girls from entering premarital sexual premarital relations.

Other important reasons arose from living conditions in forced displacement and the differences between life in Syria and Jordan. Literature often mentions that poverty and dire economic conditions are a main driver of the rise in early marriages among Syrians in Jordan. This project does not find this, on the contrary, dire economic conditions seem to rather delay marriage than hasten it. Access to internet, social media and smartphone apps increases the ability to connect socially. The increased social access affects the selection of potential spouses and the timing of marriage. Finally, different marriage legislation (Jordanian law changes on minimum marriage age and maximum age gap between the spouses) also affects early marriage choices.

Lubna (aged 24) was a participant in the recurrent talk group in Zarqa. She arrived in Jordan at the age of 18. While she initially did not want to marry early, she married within a year, which she herself still considered early. For her, marriage was a conscious decision "to bring back purpose to her life". The flight and life as a refugee in Jordan had left her feeling "empty", alone and depressed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The main recommendation of the study calls for a *diversification in the design of responses* to the rise of early marriage among Syrians in Jordan may lead to higher efficiency and adequacy in meeting refugees' needs.

- Short-term or long-term recurring *interactive group meetings* that focus on dialogue and foreground women's own experience, knowledge and strategies, may offer more adequate support in concrete circumstances. Dominant formats today are built on imparting information in order to instigate behavioural change. These formats can be refined by incorporating more interaction between care givers and care receivers who all participate in the meeting as equals.
- The research calls for incorporating an *ethics of dialogue* in the design of initiatives that aim to address needs of early married women or aim to prevent early marriages. A larger focus on listening may be more rewarding than activities that focus on the transmission of information.
- The research advocates a greater investment in understanding the *individual level of concrete experience* when formulating responses to women in need of help due to early marriage or when aiming to prevent it. Cases of early marriage differ greatly based on a host of personal conditions. Displaced girls who live isolated from their family and married at age 14 require different support than girls who marry at age 16 and live in close proximity of (extended) family members.
- It may be equally relevant to invest in understanding *different levels of problematisation* of early marriage by individual refugees themselves when designing responses. Some girls may express a strong rejection of early marriage while other do not. The project shows that there are substantial differences between girls who reach out for support in their decision of not wanting to marry (early) and girls who express willingness to marry.
- In initiatives that rely on collective awareness-raising, it is pivotal to downplay the relation that is often mentioned between early marriage and *negative (reproductive) health problems*. International development planning agencies (UNFPA SRHR & early marriage program managers and partners in the Jordan Strategic Plan) have been debating the role warning for negative reproductive health concerns should play in awareness-raising. Given the limited medical support, prevention campaigns could be more efficient without strengthening this claim.