

Early Marriage in Jordan: A Case Study of Kitteh's Syrian Refugee Community

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Abstract

This article undertook a case study comprised of group interviews within Kitteh, Jordan's Syrian refugee community. Specifically, three groups of ten voluntary participants provided insights regarding the underlying causes, concerns and byproducts of early marriage in this community. Results from the group interviews shed anecdotal light on the reasons why this phenomenon is so prevalent in Kitteh in particular. In addition, participant insight illustrated broader issues concerning child marriage that local authorities are failing to properly address.

Keywords: early marriage, child marriage, Jordan, social problems, poverty

1. Introduction

Mary Kawar describes the traditional gender role for women as transitioning from dependent, to juvenile, and then to spouse and caregiver (Kawar, 2000, p.4). While this role is prevalent in many societies regardless of the age at which females marry, early marriage serves as an undeniable catalyst that exacerbates this role. Moreover, early marriage brings with it additional burdens upon those females involved, in addition to the question of legality of such cases according to local laws and the international law implications of such cases (Hikmat, 2017). For the purposes of this article, we are concerned with the Jordanian local laws concerning early marriage, in addition to the international law implications for these cases. In terms of Jordanian local law, 2011 legal amendments raised the legal age of marriage to eighteen for both males and females, from fifteen for females and sixteen for males; however, this legal amendment left open exceptions for those between the ages of fifteen and eighteen. These exceptions include that there be no age gap greater than fifteen years between the prospective groom and the bride, that the prospective groom not be married at the time to another wife, and that stipulations be put in place to ensure that the prospective bride will be allowed to continue her studies regardless of the marriage (Husseini, 2017).

In terms of international law stipulations for early marriage, we are concerned with the fact that early marriage violates the articles within the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Convention on Rights of the Child, Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery, and Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Plan International, n.d.; Samar, 2016). More importantly for our purpose, Jordan has – as a result of the Syria Crisis – witnessed recently an expanding phenomenon of child marriage as a negative coping mechanism for Syrian refugees – for example, as related to the need for housing and safety. This is especially problematic because it can exacerbate poor conditions due to unstable employment of the groom in typical situations, in addition to the fact that most Syrian females who marry young eventually leave school in cases in which they were previously enrolled (Girls Not Brides, n.d.; Laub, 2017; Terres Des Hommes, 2017). According to the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD), a tremendous spike in early marriages occurred from 2011 to 2014 in Jordan, from 12 in 2011 to 30 in 2014. Importantly, these statistics only convey formally documented marriages, and thereby do not convey the majority of child marriages, which are informally held by "sheikhs" (ARDD, n.d.; Stoter, 2015). These statistics, while significant, differ from those of Soguel, which claim that seven-hundred and thirty-seven marriages were formally documented in the shari'a courts in 2014, in comparison with forty-two in 2011 (Soguel, 2014).

In addition to early marriage being a negative coping mechanism, this practice also arguably finds roots in Syrian culture. According to the International Humanist and Ethical Union, poor conditions, the need to protect, concern regarding virginity and issues of honor and the need for stable conditions in times of unrest (eg, displacement) all contribute to early marriage. To further support these claims, early marriage is most prevalent amongst poor families (IHEU, 2007). Lastly, in northern Jordan, there is a particularly exemplary phenomenon of the issue of early marriage – particularly amongst Syrian refugees - in Kitteh, a rural town on the outskirts of Jerash – that is worth examining. Accordingly, this article will undertake a case study of a sample population within this community.

2. Methodology

This article undertakes a case study comprised of group interviews with individuals who volunteered to share information regarding the underlying causes and concerns surrounding early marriage. Particularly, three groups of ten volunteer participants were involved. The venue for these group interviews was Kitteh Charity Organization and Kitteh Women's Charity. To mitigate against obtrusive questioning, and to thereby allow for greater indirect insight into the underlying causes and concerns regarding early marriage, broader subjects were discussed with participants. A sample of the questionnaire used is as follows:

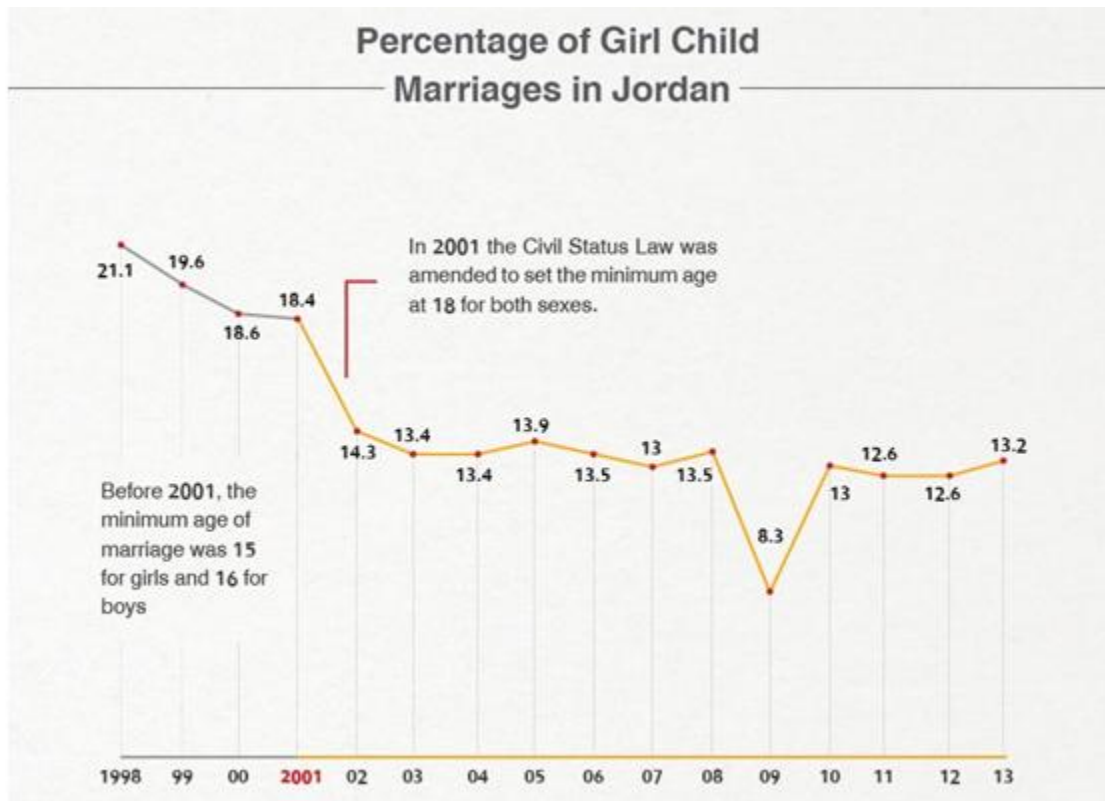
1. In your opinion, are child marriages sustainable in the long run?
2. Have you or someone you know personally been involved in or witnessed a marriage in which they were wedded early, and ended up feeling positive about the result?
3. In your opinion, what is the best age for someone (especially a female in a refugee / displacement situation) to marry?
4. What concerns do you have about the possible negative effects of child marriage?
 - a) Great responsibility
 - b) Losing the opportunity to experience youth
 - c) Health concerns
 - d) Lack of sustainability in the long run
 - e) Missing out on school opportunities
 - f) Difficulty in child-rearing
- 5) In your opinion, is education crucial to one's success?
- 6) What are your opinions regarding the legality of early marriage?
- 7) Do you suspect that physical abuse is prevalent in early marriages?
- 8) Do you sense that early marriages are on a rise, or in decline, at present day?
- 9) What are the most important problems Syrian refugees of Kitteh face?

3. Results

As expected, the main underlying causes regarding the amount of early marriages was resultant from inability to attend school, poor conditions, limited access to health – especially for females, and poor enforcement of local laws regarding child marriages. More specifically regarding poor law enforcement in local governments, participants added that there was a lack of legal assistance available – especially to refugees – across the whole arena of criminal, civil / family legal issues, particularly in terms of child marriage / abuse / labor / custody. This result thereby not only shed insight on the underlying causes of child marriage but also on the vicious cycle of social problems that child marriage can lead to. According to one young female refugee, a family's honor will be threatened if she is not married young, as people will suspect as to why she has not married, and her being single will lead to the risk of pre-marital affairs. According to participants, approximately three quarters of young females are typically married before they reach the legal age, some even at the age of fourteen. Moreover, participants noted – in comparing early marriage rates with surrounding rural towns – that Kitteh indeed had a significantly higher percentage of child marriage. Suspected reasons for this is because most of the refugees inhabiting Kitteh are from the same areas in Syria – namely Dera'a, and thereby kinship ties, in addition to poor conditions to begin with, could be the underlying causes of such issues. In fact, in keeping the questions broad, participants noted that while child marriage is most common in Kitteh, child labor was more common in surrounding areas. In fact, when asked what the most important problems are regarding Syrian refugees of Kitteh, seven out of nine participants stated early marriage. These participants confirmed that child marriage is used as a tool to ensure safety and security in times of instability.

4. Conclusion

This article examined an important phenomenon that inarguably leads to a vicious cycle of social problems, exacerbating poor conditions, increasing social instability, and preventing young females from being able to attain their education. Thus, child marriage lends itself as a catalyst for what is already a significantly prevalent traditional gender role – that is, as transitioning from dependent, to juvenile, and then to spouse and caregiver (Kawar, 2000, p.4). Importantly, the information attained through the group interviews at Kitteh Charity Organization and Kitteh Women's Charity, shed light not only on underlying causes and concerns regarding child marriage, but also illustrated broader issues that often come about as a result of child marriage, including but not limited to criminal, civil / family legal issues, particularly in terms of child marriage / abuse / labor / custody. As a result, this article recommends that agencies – whether local or international – seeking to target child marriage in Jordan work to provide pro bono legal assistance to help mitigate against these challenges. Additionally, participant information illustrated – albeit anecdotally – that perhaps the reasons why child marriage is prevalent amongst Kitteh's community of refugees is that many of its residents hail from the same town and background in Syria – that is, in Dera'a. Accordingly, child marriages are thus potentially viewed as a safety net, or coping mechanism, so that young females can find stability and safety, and also lessen the financial burden of families in crisis.



*UNICEF, "A Study on Early Marriage in Jordan" (2014)

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