

# Early marriage among Syrian refugees in Jordan: exploring contested meanings through ethnography

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**Abstract:** *Early marriage remains a central concern among reproductive and sexual rights advocates worldwide. Mainstream researchers have often focused on the negative effects of early marriage on young women, presenting them as powerless victims of social and cultural traditions. Yet the voices and perceptions of young women remain strongly absent in many studies on early marriage. Our study addresses this knowledge gap by utilising participatory and ethnographic methodologies to better understand what early marriage means to those who have experienced it and how these emic perspectives may diverge from humanitarian paradigms. Since the war began in 2011, Syrians have become one of the largest groups of refugees worldwide, with over 5.5 million individuals seeking asylum abroad. Humanitarian organisations have called attention to high rates of early marriage within this population and its unique drivers in the specific context of displacement. We draw upon data collected between 2018 and 2020 during 90 individual interviews and 14 participatory action research meetings to explore how Syrian refugee women conceptualise the practice of early marriage and its drivers after displacement. Our findings reveal that early marriage is perceived as a practice that benefits young women and is justified in terms of its beneficial effects. Participants described early marriage as a rational solution to present-day problems, many of which they associate with the unique context of displacement. Our findings echo prior qualitative studies that illustrate the complexity of attitudes towards early marriage and the importance of understanding the specific contexts in which it is practised. DOI: 10.1080/26410397.2021.2004637*

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## Introduction

Early marriage remains a central concern among advocates for sexual and reproductive rights worldwide and has been associated with women's increased exposure to gender-based violence,<sup>1</sup> increased likelihood of leaving school early,<sup>2</sup> higher levels of unmet need for contraception,<sup>3</sup> and adverse reproductive health outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Several international organisations have adopted the term "child marriage" to refer to all marriages under the age of 18 and emphasise that such unions must be uniformly understood as instances of "forced marriage" since individuals under the age of 18 cannot legally consent to marriage according to international human rights conventions.<sup>2,5,6</sup>

At the same time, some scholars suggest these definitions are premised upon a normative, romanticised concept of "childhood" as a life stage "free from risk and responsibility" that is culturally specific to Western societies and not often afforded to low-income adolescents in the Global South.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, social scientists have questioned the assumption that girls necessarily lack any semblance of agency in the decision-making processes surrounding marriage,<sup>8</sup> pointing out that adolescents' "agency is accepted by external actors only when young people make the 'right' choice according to development agendas".<sup>7</sup>

Over the last decade, as worldwide rates of forced migration have reached all-time highs, the link between displacement and early marriage

has become an object of international scrutiny. The context of displacement produces unique dynamics that contribute to the prevalence of early marriage, including economic hardship, increased barriers to education, and women's heightened vulnerability in unfamiliar physical, social, and cultural environments.<sup>9–12</sup> Despite the enormous investment in interventions intended to solve the problem of early marriage among Syrian refugees, specifically, exceedingly few studies have employed longitudinal, ethnographic methods to develop a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon in the Middle Eastern context.

Since the civil war began in 2011, Syrians have become one of the largest groups of refugees worldwide, with over 5.5 million individuals seeking asylum abroad.<sup>13</sup> Humanitarian organisations responding to the needs of Syrian refugees in the neighbouring countries of Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon have called attention to high rates of early marriage within this population and have developed interventions to identify and address the factors driving this practice within the specific context of displacement. While national rates of early marriage between Jordan (8% of women aged 20–24 were married before age 18) and Syria (11.2% of girls aged 15–19 were married) do not differ dramatically, rates of early marriage *within* each country vary dramatically.<sup>14</sup> For example, rates of early marriage in the Syrian province of Dara'a (the region of origin for 41.2% of Syrian refugees registered in Jordan) were found to be as high as 26.2%.<sup>14</sup>

Scholarship on early marriage has focused on its negative consequences for young women, often presenting them as powerless victims of social and cultural traditions. Yet the voices and perceptions of these women are strikingly absent in the majority of these studies. Our research addresses this knowledge gap by utilising participatory and ethnographic methodologies to better understand what early marriage means to those who have experienced it and how these emic perspectives may diverge from humanitarian paradigms.

### The Jordanian context

More than eight years have passed since the eruption of civil war in Syria. Since that time, more than half of the country's original population of 22.5 million<sup>15</sup> has been displaced internally and externally. Neighbouring countries such as

Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan inherited the heavy burden of war and displacement as host nations for several million Syrians who are unable to return home. Over 80% of Syrians are dispersed throughout the country in informal settlements and urban areas while the remaining 20% reside in official refugee camps.<sup>16</sup>

Syrians' displacement in Jordan cannot be understood without taking into account the history of cross-border mobility between the two countries. Prior to 2011, well-established trans-border networks facilitated family visits, marriage, or commercial activities between Syria's southernmost province of Dara'a and the northern provinces of Jordan. There are historical links and tribal ties between these provinces. Half of the refugees in Jordan originated from Dara'a governorate in Syria.<sup>17</sup>

The first wave of Syrian refugees, who entered Jordan several months after the beginning of the war in 2011, were mostly welcomed and offered free places to stay. Locals' homes were packed and there was no extra space for more. In 2012, the Jordanian government set up Al Zaatari refugee camp, and in 2014 the number of residents exceeded 120,000. The largest migration took place in 2013, when over 51% of refugees (aged 6+) arrived in Jordan.<sup>18</sup> By July 2013, more than 420,000 Syrian refugees were registered with UNHCR and the total number had increased to more than 604,000 in 2014 and reached about 655,000 in 2016.<sup>19</sup>

The Jordanian government estimates the number of Syrians in the country to be as high as 1.5 million, however. As of May 2021, there were 665,834 Syrians in Jordan registered with UNHCR; 80% were living in urban and semi urban areas.<sup>20</sup> Around 78% of Syrians in Jordan live under the poverty line.<sup>21</sup> Syrian refugee women make up 49.4% of the total refugee population in Jordan and 30% of Syrian refugee households in Jordan are headed by females.<sup>22</sup>

When the conflict began in 2011, humanitarian organisations partnered with the Jordanian government to meet the most immediate needs of acutely displaced Syrians by providing basic services. Over time, this approach has expanded to address issues arising in contexts of prolonged displacement and has sought to integrate Syrians into the Jordanian educational system and labour market in sustainable ways. Syrians have thus been incorporated into longer-term strategies to promote Jordan's economic and human

development, coordinated by multilateral organisations such as the UN and USAID.<sup>23</sup>

Issues of gender equity and women's empowerment have been increasingly emphasised in the overlapping fields of development and humanitarian response on a global scale. In Jordan, the early marriage of Syrian refugees has emerged as a central concern. Researchers have sought to determine the extent of early marriage among Syrians in Jordan, identify its drivers, and document its consequences. At the same time, policymakers have attempted to design programmes to prevent early marriage by promoting girls' access to education, providing "safe spaces" for adolescent women, and raising awareness about the consequences of early marriage.<sup>12,24,25</sup> However, despite the significant focus on early marriage among researchers and policymakers alike, relatively few studies<sup>26,27</sup> have engaged in long-term, ethnographic research with the Syrian community in Jordan to understand lived experiences and attitudes towards early marriage within local ontologies.

Most sources suggest rates of early marriage among Syrians have increased since displacement,<sup>2,11,28–30</sup> observing that early marriage among Syrians increased from 12% of all registered marriages in 2011 to 34.6% in 2015.<sup>28</sup> However, Sieverding et al.<sup>14</sup> have critiqued the quantitative models typically used in these calculations. For example, comparisons that incorporate data collected at the national level prior to the war, fail to account for the fact that the population of Syrians living in Jordan is not a representative sample of Syria's national population.<sup>14</sup> A majority of Syrians in Jordan migrated from southern provinces such as Dara'a (41% of Syrians in Jordan) or rural Damascus (12% of Syrians in Jordan).<sup>14</sup> The respective probabilities of marriage under the age of 18 in Dara'a (26.2%) and rural Damascus (24.9%) were both already higher than Syria's national average (17.7%) prior to the war.<sup>14</sup> Using sophisticated quantitative models, the authors conclude that rates of early marriage remain largely unchanged among the specific population of Syrians now residing in Jordan. Nevertheless, they suggest that the process of displacement has triggered a *qualitative* shift in the drivers contributing to early marriage such as "concerns over girls' honour and safety", the corresponding need for social protection, and economic hardship.<sup>14</sup>

### Early marriage after displacement

Drivers of early marriage after displacement include economic hardship, increased barriers to education, and women's heightened vulnerability in unfamiliar physical, social, and cultural environments. After displacement, refugees lose access to stable employment and financial assets left behind in their country of origin, rendering even middle-class families susceptible to economic insecurity such that many now struggle to provide for the family's most basic needs. In such circumstances, the marriage of a teenage daughter lightens her family's economic burden and simultaneously may provide the adolescent herself with increased access to resources and opportunities, especially if her husband and in-laws are better off financially.<sup>1,12</sup> Of course, a woman's ability to benefit from these resources is largely determined by her in-laws and the realities of everyday life after marriage may differ dramatically from her expectations.

Moreover, refugees are often excluded from formal systems of education or face indirect access barriers including a lack of transportation or the cost of school supplies.<sup>29</sup> While the Jordanian government subsidises school fees and supplies for registered Syrian refugees, many families struggle to afford the cost of local transportation to and from school. In addition, adolescent women often face verbal harassment during their daily commute, prompting some families to discourage or prohibit them from attending school out of concern for the girl's reputation.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the Jordanian educational system has accommodated the massive influx of refugees by creating separate "shifts" for Jordanian and Syrian pupils, with the latter beginning their school day at noon. Some families are reluctant to send their daughters to school during the later hours of the day, thus compounding existing barriers to girls' education.

A final factor is women's heightened vulnerability in unfamiliar physical, social, and cultural environments, which has been described through a variety of terms. For instance, numerous studies emphasise that early marriage serves as a means of safeguarding women's honour or reputation in contexts where sexual harassment is widespread and families fear that their daughters may be exposed to sexual violence.<sup>4</sup> Scholarship

on Syrian refugees, specifically, has referred to this factor using the Arabic term, *sutra*, which has been translated as “social protection”,<sup>29</sup> “the social protection and preservation of the honour of the family through the honour of the bride”<sup>9</sup> or “financial and physical protection from hardship”.<sup>14</sup> In the uncertain context of displacement, families may fear that instances of sexual harassment may spark gossip suggesting that the girl involved somehow encouraged the behaviour, damaging her reputation and thus her future prospects for marriage. In addition, fears of sexual violence remain pervasive – even in contexts where reported rates of violence are relatively low<sup>12</sup> – and may act as an additional driver for early marriage.

It is in relation to this final factor that social norms, tradition, and religious or cultural factors are most often discussed.<sup>1,12,28,29,31</sup> Efforts to transform the social norms surrounding early marriage have thus become a crucial component of humanitarian interventions.<sup>24</sup> Social scientists have argued that the focus on “correcting”<sup>32</sup> harmful social norms reflects and reinforces condescending, colonial logics that deny the value of local knowledge and dismiss practices like early marriage as remnants of obsolete “traditions” without “attempting to investigate... [the] crucial power relationships”<sup>33</sup> that shape these practices today.<sup>34</sup> This dynamic is especially evident in reports that juxtapose traditional customs and modern rationality,<sup>31</sup> suggesting that early marriage is an illogical practice that persists in communities characterised by “limited rationality”.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, our study is premised upon the inherent value of women’s knowledge and lived experiences and thus seeks to understand early marriage from the perspective of those who practise it. As such, we sought to take seriously participants’ assertions that early marriage offered benefits to girls, their families, and society at large by attempting to understand these advantages as they were described during focus groups. Rather than dismissing women’s support for the practice as a result of “brainwashing” or a form of false consciousness, we aim to contextualise this support in relation to the larger political economy that defines daily life for Syrian refugees in Jordan today. To do so, we explored the following research question: How do participants conceptualise the practice of early marriage and its drivers in the context of displacement?

## Methods

The results presented here draw upon collaborative analyses of multiple qualitative datasets collected by the two authors, both of whom conducted long-term ethnographic research with Syrian refugees living outside of camps in Jordan. Both authors conducted extensive participant observation with Syrian refugee families in Irbid, Ramtha, and Amman over an 18-month period. Participant observation took place in women’s homes and at important events such as weddings, circumcisions, engagements, weekend outings, and other family celebrations. Although each author collected her own data independently, participants in both studies were demographically similar in that the vast majority were born and raised in the Syrian province of Dara’a, lived outside of camps, and had migrated to Jordan during the earliest years of the conflict (2011–2013).

From March 2018 to February 2019, RA conducted 75 interviews with Syrian refugees: 30 married women; 30 unmarried women; 10 divorced women; and five parents of young women. In addition, she facilitated 14 participatory action research (PAR) meetings as part of a larger qualitative study (the methods of this project have been described in detail by Van Raemdonck and Regt<sup>26</sup>). She selected eight Syrian women to take part in the monthly PAR meetings based on the criteria of age (18–25) and marital status (either married or divorced). The PAR meetings lasted for two hours. Three out of the eight women got married in Syria, the rest got married in Jordan. All of them were married before the age of 18. Participants came from low-income backgrounds and the majority originated from Dara’a province. The PAR meetings were constructed to enable women to flexibly tell their own stories of marriage using a life events-narrative approach.<sup>35</sup> MC interviewed 15 refugee women and 15 stakeholders in the field of refugee women’s sexual and reproductive health, including physicians, humanitarian workers, and researchers. She employed a person-centred<sup>36</sup> approach and conducted multiple (3–5) interviews with a select group of four refugee women from September 2019 to March 2020. Both authors sought participants’ feedback on their initial findings to identify any possible misinterpretations or misunderstandings.

Our methodological framework was informed by the principles of feminist ethnography<sup>37</sup> and

its emphasis on reflexivity. Throughout our analysis, we reflected on how the data collected were influenced by the presence of each respective interviewer. Participants' responses were undoubtedly shaped by, for example, Author 1's positionality as a Jordanian woman, professor, and mother or, conversely, Author 2's positionality as an unmarried, American graduate student.

Chain-referral sampling<sup>38</sup> was used by both authors to recruit participants living in the areas of Amman, Irbid, Ramtha, and Attura. Ethics approval was obtained from each researcher's respective institution (Yarmouk University and University of California San Diego). MC obtained a waiver of parental consent from her institutional review board to interview participants under the age of 18 who had been married, as their marriage acted to legally emancipate them from parental legal authority. Informed consent was obtained verbally by both authors from all interview and PAR group participants.

Interviews were conducted in Arabic by the authors and transcribed in Arabic by research assistants. An inductive, iterative approach was used to thematically code transcripts in Atlas.ti. MC developed the initial codes, based on emic concepts arising from the words of participants themselves. Additional second-order categorical codes were then developed to identify larger themes connecting the microlevel concepts. RA reviewed the coding scheme to ensure validity and accurate representation of the perspectives represented in the data.

## Results

Though respondents shared similar economic and geographic backgrounds in that most were from Dara'a and entered Jordan between 2010 and 2013, they expressed a wide variety of attitudes towards early marriage. Although several women had been pressured or forced to marry early, the majority reported that marriage before age 18 had been their decision and some described their own efforts to convince their family members to support their choice. Nevertheless, many who had chosen early marriage expressed regret and stated that, in retrospect, they would have chosen to delay marriage. Through a process of inductive, iterative coding we identified common themes and organised them within three sections: (1) what is marriage? (2) who marries early? (3) why marry early?

## What is marriage?

As Giddens<sup>39</sup> has noted, the contemporary, Western understanding of marriage as an intimate, romantic partnership entered into by two autonomous individuals, is historically anomalous and developed relatively recently in European and American societies. Social scientists have shown that the meaning and social function of marriage vary across cultures and economic classes.<sup>33,40</sup> Participants' narratives emphasised that marriage in the context of displacement serves distinct social functions that have not been adequately captured in the scholarly literature.

### *Marriage strengthens, rebuilds, and expands social networks*

In the Middle Eastern context, marriage has historically served as a means of strengthening existing kinship networks (e.g. via consanguineous marriages) and cementing relational ties between families.<sup>41</sup> This ideal was reflected in our findings. For example, one Syrian father emphasised that:

*"From the day that I become an in-law, I become an in-law of his mother and father, an in-law of his family and of his relatives. It's not just the guy. It becomes a social relationship and a strong tie ... [After a girl gets married] her father comes with her brothers to visit her [in her in-laws' home]. We all sit together with his family and the connection of intimacy and love between us increases".*

During the same interview, he described the lack of social cohesion he experienced in Jordan in contrast to his hometown of Dara'a, where daily life was characterised by frequent visits between neighbours and relatives. He sought to rebuild these connections in Jordan where, as he proudly recounted, he had recently invited neighbours to join him for a meal of *mansaf* – the national dish of Jordan and a local symbol of hospitality. While marriage has long represented a means of strengthening social ties, this function has gained additional significance after displacement for families who have lost access to the reciprocal support networks that served as the foundation of social life.<sup>42</sup> Zbeidy's prior ethnographic work with Syrian refugees in Jordan has suggested that "with the loss of social networks and relatives during the war ... creating new social connections and intimacies [through marriage] is one way to ... regain a sense of home and familiarity".<sup>27</sup>



### *Marriage restores and represents hope for the future*

Anthropologists have illustrated that marriage represents arguably the most central aspiration for diverse groups of people across the Middle East.<sup>43–49</sup> This significance largely transcends differences in women's plans to seek future employment, class background, and level of education.<sup>47</sup> Marriage thus symbolises a crucial step towards one's future as an individual while also serving as the (socially sanctioned) vehicle through which future generations come into being. For example, one Syrian woman described her early marriage as a positive development in her life, one that had allowed her *"to achieve my dream of getting married and having a family."* Marriage represents a step towards a future because of its social role in legitimising sex and reproduction – all the more so in a context where alternative futures are scarce.

The material hardships of displacement constrain the possible futures available to many Syrian refugees, who cannot return to their home country and struggle to recreate their lives in Jordan where they face barriers to employment and higher education.<sup>50</sup> Everyday life for most Syrians in Jordan is characterised by extreme economic precarity, given that many are employed in the informal economy and/or are working without a permit, rendering them vulnerable to employers' abuse and rights violations. In this context, marriage takes on an even greater significance as both an "important and desirable step for a better future"<sup>27</sup> and also "a way to resume life, to continue living and to compensate for the losses they had endured" during conflict and displacement, precisely because "other futures are limited."<sup>27</sup> As one participant suggested, *"You feel as if the mothers just want to marry their daughters and see them in a wedding dress – more than the girls themselves [want it]. The dress is a dream"*. Her remark points to the symbolic significance of marriage, particularly among mothers, for whom a daughter's marriage not only attests to the quality of her upbringing but also brings with it the happy prospect of grandchildren.

### *Marriage makes a woman part of her in-laws' family*

In explaining the widespread preference for younger brides, participants uniformly emphasised the impact of age on a new wife's successful integration into her husband's family. In Syria, it

was not uncommon for a newly married woman to move into her husband's family home and live with her in-laws for a number of years. This practice has become even more widespread for displaced Syrians in Jordan, many of whom struggle to afford the high cost of living and monthly rent. In these conditions, newly married women are expected to contribute (often disproportionately) to the household responsibilities. For instance, one woman expressed her desire to find a wife for her son so that she would have someone to help her with housework, since her daughter had recently married and moved in with her in-laws.

Several participants emphasised that a younger bride would be more malleable and would more easily learn, for example, to cook the foods her husband was accustomed to in the same way as her mother-in-law. As one woman put it, *"families will pick a young girl [as a wife for their son] and teach her their ways."*

Participants often described the role of the mother-in-law in raising, shaping, and teaching her son's wife. Some older women took particular pride in this role. For instance, one Syrian mother, who had travelled to Zaatari, Jordan's largest refugee camp, to find a bride for her son, emphasised how much she had taught her daughter-in-law after marriage:

*"I mean – she didn't know to greet people – she would use this hand [the left instead of the right] – that's how young she was. Poor thing – she didn't know anything. I taught her everything myself. I taught her about cooking, the kitchen, and married life"*.

The role of husbands and in-laws in teaching young wives was a recurring theme throughout interviews. This emphasis revealed an understanding of marriage that differed markedly from the model of marriage described by Giddens,<sup>39</sup> in which two autonomous individuals choose to maintain a relationship for reasons of romantic compatibility and mutual self-interest. Equality between spouses is the most central, defining feature of such a partnership. Yet not all participants necessarily aspired to this ideal of equality within marriage.<sup>51</sup>

For instance, as a young woman who married at the age of 19 explained, *"my husband taught me everything in life. He taught me what life is like and people's customs and behaviour"*. She went on to describe how displacement had

brought them closer, explaining that “*here [in Jordan], he has become my mother, my father – everyone. Here I don’t have anyone but him*”. She emphasises her husband’s role as her teacher and likens him to a parental figure. A second woman similarly endorsed her husband’s “*right to lead and guide*” her, while another expressed the view that “*our religion ordered us to respect and serve our husbands*”.

For some women, teaching represented a form of care and intimacy. The notion that a young bride would continue to be raised by both her husband and in-laws was not viewed as objectionable by participants in and of itself. However, they did not uncritically idealise such relationships as inherently supportive or beneficial and identified mistreatment by in-laws as a common problem among married women, regardless of age. As one woman put it, “*for us, the mother-in-law is something important – she can be the one that helps you or the one that destroys you*”. Similarly, while one participant emphasised the positive effects of displacement on her marital relationship, it is evident how the isolation she describes (“*here I don’t have anyone but him*”) could just as easily increase refugee women’s vulnerability to gender-based violence in contexts where they lack access to prior social networks and supports.

### Who marries early?

The structural factors that contribute to early marriage after displacement were described to varying degrees by participants. Nevertheless, their narratives generally portrayed early marriage as a solution to these problems that families actively chose and pursued, rather than as a last resort or a tradition that persisted out of habit. Economic hardship was occasionally emphasised explicitly as a driver of early marriage; however, participants more frequently referred to crowded residences and tension in the maternal home as factors that made early marriage an attractive option for both girls and their families. Participants also described barriers to women’s education in Jordan but emphasised girls’ agency in the decision to leave school, suggesting that those who did not like to study dropped out of school and subsequently pursued marriage as the next logical step. In addition, one woman’s observation that “*beautiful girls marry early*” led to a lively discussion among participants, who concluded that physical signs of puberty and sexual development indicate a girl’s readiness for

marriage while simultaneously increasing her risk of male harassment. In such scenarios, marriage was seen as a way to provide her with physical protection and also safeguard the girl’s reputation.

### *Girls marry early to escape financial, material, and psychological hardship*

Participants often identified pressure or stress (*dhagt* in Arabic) in the home as one of the most important drivers of early marriage. In this context, the term referred both to economic stress as well as tension between family members due to crowded living conditions or a step-parent’s abuse. One woman suggested that “*a girl who isn’t able to stand the situation in her own home will get married early*”. Other participants similarly emphasised the potential for early marriage to improve young women’s living conditions and explained that

*“sometimes a family wants to relieve themselves from her expenses, from [the responsibility] of having a daughter and the worries that come with it ... on a basic level, her husband’s house provides the greatest salvation and security for a girl, even though it’s not right”.*

The “worries” described include financial concerns as well as anxieties about a young woman’s reputation in contexts where girls are frequently exposed to (and blamed for) sexual harassment.

Most participants felt that, in some scenarios, marriage was the best option for a girl who is “*oppressed in her family’s home*”. Furthermore, though Jordanian law prohibits marriage under the age of 18, a judge can grant exceptions for individuals aged 15 and above. Participants observed that, in conditions of financial or psychosocial hardship or the case of abuse by a parent’s new spouse after a remarriage,

*“the judge prefers a girl to marry – it’s better for her than staying in her home. That way she escapes the oppression of her stepmother or stepfather or, for example, in the camps, getting married is better for her than staying in the camp”.*

### *Bad students marry early*

While access barriers to education were often cited as a driver of early marriage, women concurrently emphasised the agency of girls who disliked school and chose to marry rather than continue their studies. This emphasis was present in

general descriptions of early marriage and women's own autobiographical accounts. However, though most women stressed that they had been bad students who disliked school and that the decision to leave school had been their own, many wished, retrospectively, that they had completed their studies and regretted dropping out. As one participant recalled:

*"I got married at 18 and I didn't finish high school. My father likes girls to study. It was my decision to get married. My father wanted me to keep studying and told me, 'study whatever you want and it will take you wherever you want to go – just keep studying'".*

Another woman described her sister's early marriage as a result of her refusal to continue her studies, explaining that *"she wouldn't go to school – my father didn't want to marry her early, she was 15 years old – but she refused to go back to school"*. Conversely, for several women, continuing their education was described as *"a way to escape marriage"*.

In contrast to these narratives emphasising individual choice, one participant explicitly connected early marriage with a lack of choice, stating that *"now we're living far away from home in a foreign environment ... there's no education and there's no choice and people started marrying their daughters more and at an early age"*. One of the few participants who explicitly stated that she had been married against her will described a similar situation:

*"I got married when I turned 17. I didn't want to, but my family told me that he was a good guy from a good family. There wasn't any way to study—it was forbidden to finish studying in Jordan"*.

While she did not elaborate on the reasons that she was unable to study in Jordan, she likely faced many of the commonly cited barriers including transportation costs and harassment while in transit.

#### *Beautiful girls marry early*

Women emphasised that physical maturity was more important than age in assessing a girl's readiness for marriage. Participants considered signs of sexual maturity, such as breast development, as well as a girl's overall size, to be indicators of her ability *"to bear the responsibilities of marriage"*. As one woman explained, *"a girl*

*whose body is older than her age [will marry early] – if her body is big, suitors will start coming to ask for her hand. That's why her parents will marry her early"*. In addition, girls who develop early are often at increased risk of sexual harassment, leading to a synergistic effect in which the overlapping drivers of physical maturity and vulnerability to harassment increase the likelihood of early marriage.

#### **Why marry early?**

##### *Marriage protects women*

Parents' fears for their children, especially girls, were often cited by participants as an important reason for early marriage. Though *"fearing for girls"* was an overwhelmingly common theme, participants did not always explicitly state *what*, specifically, parents feared might happen to unmarried daughters. For instance, one participant explained that *"a father fears for his daughter – as soon as she grows up, he will want to get her married"*.

Parental fears were temporally specific and explicitly connected to the current state of society. As one mother explained, *"we've arrived at a frightening time ... my [six-year-old] daughter goes to school but doesn't use the bathroom until she comes home"*. Another woman remarked, *"God, I get scared just from seeing the news"*. Similarly, a young woman remarked that Syrian parents in Jordan *"are afraid of everything ... Before, they knew everyone – now they've become afraid for us, afraid that we'll have problems, [because] they don't know this country"*. While several participants openly shared that the risk of sexual violence contributed to their decision to leave Syria, fears of sexual violence in Jordan were not mentioned explicitly.

##### *Marriage relieves girls from the pressure of maintaining their reputation*

Participants described differences in parents' fears for daughters compared to sons. Girls were seen as much more vulnerable to rumours and gossip that would damage their reputations, especially in comparison to young men. One participant described these dynamics in detail:

*"Our society always blames girls ... Boys, no one talks about them, even if they are the ones who are doing something wrong. [They say] it's normal, he's reckless, he'll learn later. A girl, whether she*



*goes out or not, they'll shame her, even if she's not guilty of anything, the blame will be on her".*

Marriage was seen as a way to relieve daughters from the pressure of protecting and maintaining the family's reputation. One participant emphasised the ways in which marriage could potentially increase a girl's freedom of movement, remarking that *"people will start talking about her if she goes out a lot – but put her at her husband's house – and she can go out wherever she wants"*.

Of course, women who hoped marriage would increase their mobility often found that the reality of marriage differed from what they had expected. One participant explained that she had agreed to marry at the age of 16 in order to escape the surveillance of her older brother, who prohibited her from leaving the home. She was disappointed to find that her brother still forbade her from going out, even with her husband's permission, and noted that life had become even harder for her now that she had household obligations and children to care for.

#### *Marriage offers a socially sanctioned outlet for adolescent sexuality*

While participants suggested that parents *"marry their children at an early age so that they don't do anything wrong"*, this fear was more often mentioned in relation to sons. Young men were described as naturally endowed with a higher sex drive and thus more likely to "deviate" or "do something wrong", i.e. engage in premarital sexual activity. Marriage was seen as a solution to prevent one's children from engaging in premarital sex, as one woman explained:

*"Me, if I saw that my child was deviating [at risk of engaging in sexual activity], I would get him married without him doing something haram [religiously prohibited] and outside the institution of marriage. It's better to get him married. Yes, marry him properly, bil halal [in a way that is religiously approved], in order to avoid him doing anything that's not good and deviating and having relations outside of marriage. Marry him, so that he settles down and takes responsibility".*

While premarital sex for men was certainly not condoned, it was a much less concerning issue than gossip about daughters engaging in any kind of inappropriate behaviour such as flirting.

Participants also alluded to the possibility that a young girl might willingly engage in flirting or

sexual activity and attributed this risk to two specific aspects of contemporary life: young women's increased knowledge of sex through television and the Internet as well as exposure to new, more liberal cultural norms in novel environments. For instance, as one participant explained:

*"Today girls have cell phones and can receive calls – a guy could seduce her. Once one or two suitors come [to ask for her hand], [her parents should] pick one and get them married. That way, [the couple can] talk bil halal and not bil haram [in a way that is religiously acceptable and not religiously prohibited]. I mean, if – we aren't for early marriage – but if they want to deviate or become delinquent, no, [it's better if] they get married and it keeps them under control and protects the guy and the girl".*

Another participant elaborated further on the differences between young girls nowadays and women of her generation. She explained that:

*"Me, when I got married, I'm talking about 20 years ago, there wasn't openness like now. People now – girls weren't open like they are now. Now girls know everything, everything about married life. Us, back then, we didn't know. Imagine I got married and didn't know anything. I didn't know anything because it wasn't allowed to sit with the [married] women. It was forbidden to sit with them. That was a simpler life than now. Maybe back then there wasn't the idea of early marriage to the same degree as today. Now early marriage has become widespread, something basic and foundational, you know?"*

She felt that children whose families had been resettled as refugees in Western countries were at an especially heightened risk of engaging in deviant behaviour. She described her sister's experience after resettlement in the United States, noting that:

*"They encourage early marriage [after resettlement] because of the degree to which they see problems there. Girls have started to want to go out on their own. Girls have become – for example, she wants to have a boyfriend and go out with guys. You [Americans], you don't interfere in such cases. [American] girls feel that 'me, this is my personal life and I'm free in it,' so Syrians in Western countries have started to marry their daughters at fourteen. At fourteen, girls will be married. They've started to encourage early marriage more".*

Marriage was viewed as an institution that provided opportunities for sexual expression without violating social, cultural, or religious norms. As one woman put it, *“our religious beliefs prohibit us from having sex out of marriage, so why we don’t follow our religious orders and have legitimate sex?”*

#### *Every girl’s dream? Opposition to early marriage*

Marriage was often described as “every girl’s dream” by participants as they explained why women might prefer early marriage. Such language was most commonly employed by women who opposed early marriage or by those who stated that they had chosen to marry early but now regretted the decision. Descriptions of girls dreaming of beautiful bridal gowns and lavish wedding parties were typically used to emphasise the young women’s naivety, implying that desires to marry early were largely based in idealistic fantasies and a lack of understanding surrounding the realities of married life. It was these realities that participants most often highlighted in explaining the risks and disadvantages of early marriage: the physical and emotional labour associated with maintaining a household and raising a family, the potential for abuse or exploitation by in-laws, the possibility of marital discord, and isolation from one’s natal family. In addition, several participants felt that marrying early not only limited a woman’s opportunities for education but also denied her the more existential opportunity of self-actualisation – what one participant described to as *“the chance to know herself and to know the world”*.

Opposition to early marriage was also frequently articulated in the form of criticism directed towards young women’s lack of knowledge and expertise in cooking, cleaning, and childrearing. These narratives similarly emphasised girls’ naivety and inexperience, lamenting the negative effects early marriage has on a young bride’s husband and offspring rather than its consequences for the woman herself. This framing departs significantly from humanitarian discourses, which denounce traditional gender norms as justification for practices like early marriage, practices that are seen as violating young women’s rights as *individuals*. Conversely, objections to early marriage suggesting that young brides will be inadequate – even incompetent – wives and mothers do not challenge traditional gender norms or the gendered division of

household labour. In fact, these objections in some ways directly harness the value traditionally afforded to women’s gendered labour as wives and mothers in order to argue against early marriage. Such narratives simultaneously reinscribe the significance of this labour as work that demands unique, specific skills that must be honed as one matures over time.

These examples illustrate the diverse ways in which women may engage with gender norms to articulate particular critiques and achieve a variety of aims. Simplistic representations of early marriage as a conflict between patriarchal authority and women’s agency or between the rights of the individual and the enduring power of “culture/tradition” fail to capture the nuanced ways in which gendered norms are constantly renegotiated and redefined. As such, gendered norms cannot be understood as anachronistic relics of a traditional, patriarchal past but rather as dynamic, fluid structures that are perpetually dismantled, reinforced, and reconstructed through the everyday actions of individuals.

## **Discussion**

This study illustrates how ethnographic, participatory, and qualitative methods were harnessed to enhance our understanding of the contextual specificities that shape marriage practices among a particular population of Syrian refugees in Jordan. While our results describe structural dynamics and sociocultural norms that are uniquely relevant to this population, our conclusions are largely generalisable. Namely, we found that longitudinal, ethnographic methods afforded unique insights into perceptions of early marriage as a practice that offered both risks *and* opportunities for young women, as suggested by Schaffnit et al.<sup>7</sup> Thus, though our findings relating to the social norms surrounding pre-marital sex or post-marital residence are not necessarily generalisable to other populations, we have sought to demonstrate *why* it is critical to understand early marriage as a temporally and contextually specific practice rather than an anachronistic tradition that persists out of habit.

Much scholarship on early marriage presents the practice as a fundamental violation of women’s human rights that persists within patriarchal societies and contexts of gender inequity. Such studies implicitly construct the issue as one of competing interests: women’s rights are

positioned in opposition to the repressive force of social norms, tradition, culture, or religion.<sup>52</sup> Fathers and other decision-makers are seen as acting against the best interests of adolescent daughters. Yet this framing fails to capture a crucial element of community attitudes towards early marriage that we observed in our research: individuals involved in the decision-making process, including adolescent women who married early, viewed early marriage as a practice that potentially offered opportunities for upward social mobility, increased financial stability, and protection from the risks facing unmarried young women, particularly in the context of displacement. This finding challenges studies that present early marriage as a site at which the force of tradition resists the logic of modern reason and rationality. In fact, participants described early marriage as a logical solution to present-day problems, many of which were associated with the unique context of displacement.

### Implications for policy and practice

Our recommendations build upon previous scholarship<sup>7,53–56</sup> illustrating the complexity of early marriage and the importance of understanding the specific contexts in which it is practiced. To do so, we recommend that researchers and stakeholders working on early marriage adopt the following strategies:

#### *(1) Explore the contextually specific meanings of early marriage as it is practised in particular times and places*

Research in humanitarian settings frequently prioritises “actionable knowledge”, seeking to understand a phenomenon in order to design interventions that target it more effectively. Furthermore, the donor agencies who fund such interventions value programmes that are “scalable” and travel easily from one context to another. These funding structures strive to maximise efficiency and are thus rarely conducive to in-depth, “slow research”<sup>57</sup> that explores the contextually specific meaning of early marriage in particular times and places.

Despite these constraints, several mainstream global health initiatives (such as the Gender & Adolescence: Global Evidence study on early marriage) have prioritised efforts to understand the contextually specific drivers of early marriage. Social scientists have argued that such contextually specific understandings are critical for

developing more culturally sensitive global health policy and more effective interventions to improve the lives of young women.<sup>7,54,55,58</sup> Prioritising contextual specificity may require us to abandon the “unified global health concept of child marriage”<sup>54</sup> and its essentialising terminology, which refers to all women married under the age of 18 as children, a classification that fails to accurately reflect the distinctions that are made between various life stages in nearly every culture.

#### *(2) Recognise that social and cultural norms are continually reshaped and renegotiated*

Post-structuralist scholarship in anthropology has critiqued definitions that conceptualise culture as a static, immutable set of traits, values, or beliefs and adopt an overly deterministic understanding of how culture shapes behaviour. Social scientists have instead emphasised the ways in which the “structure” of culture is continually maintained, dismantled, and rebuilt through individuals’ daily actions. These insights have been increasingly incorporated into global health models of behaviour change that investigate the processes through which social norms are challenged and transformed. Nevertheless, one can still find reductive scholarship on early marriage that represents the practice as an archaic manifestation of traditional patriarchy, while failing to recognise how contemporary structural factors produce an environment in which early marriage is perceived as one of the *less risky* paths to ensure stability, security, and protection from other threats to young women’s health and well-being.<sup>7,55</sup>

Furthermore, while cultural values and social norms certainly impact marriage practices in any society, such factors cannot be divorced from the settings in which they operate (as we saw, for example, in one participant’s account of how she believes resettlement in the United States has increased early marriage). Research on early marriage must seek to understand how social norms interact with the novel environments encountered, for example, during displacement. Finally, in addition to exploring how social norms vary *across diverse contexts*, we must also consider how their application may vary *within one context* by examining the strategies employed by some to subvert, transform, or resist these hegemonic norms. Indeed, it is striking how often researchers will describe a social phenomenon as a result of the *culture* of the population

studied, when they would never dream of explaining an equally complex practice in their country of origin as merely a reflection of their own culture.

*(3) Partner and dialogue with communities, parents, and other decision-makers in research, intervention design, and programme implementation*

Even when qualitative interviews are used to identify factors associated with early marriage, these exchanges are seldom treated as opportunities to genuinely engage with community members in order to better understand their experiences and perspectives. Such opportunities are missed, in part, because we assume that we, as researchers, are already experts in the phenomena we study and are often unwilling to seriously consider value systems that conflict with our own. Our assumption that all early marriages are forced marriages and inherently harmful can prevent us from fully hearing women's stories in all their complexity and nuance.

Within simplistic representations of early marriage as a site of conflict between patriarchal oppression and women's empowerment, parents are implicitly constructed as ignorant – unknowingly perpetuating harmful practices – or uncaring, placing their own interests above their daughter's, despite being aware of the consequences. Stakeholders and policy-makers who adopt these dominant understandings are likely to dismiss the value of parents' insights into the practice of early marriage within their own communities. Studies that elicit parental perspectives typically present these as examples of "cultural norms" and rarely seek out meaningful, equal exchanges with parents that do not dismiss their knowledge as a mere remnant of tradition. As such, crucial opportunities to partner with communities are missed.

Engaging in dialogue with parents and seeking to understand their perspectives without dismissing them would offer a novel means to increase our knowledge about the practice of early marriage in particular contexts. This knowledge, in turn, can inform the development of interventions that improve the opportunities available to girls and their families, such that early marriage becomes only one of many possible paths to secure a young woman's stable and safe future.

## Conclusions

Implementing these recommendations requires that we must abandon the paternalistic notion that we know better than the young women involved what their choices should be. Indeed, much scholarship on early marriage is premised upon the assumption that if young women "had a chance; they would keep studying and playing as our own children do".<sup>52</sup> According to this logic, if women had the freedom to choose, they would make the "right" choices. Women who appear to be making the "wrong" choice are assumed to inherently lack agency and freedom to choose their own life path. Our findings reveal the diverse ways in which women may exercise agency, some choosing to stay in school to avoid marriage and others embracing marriage as an opportunity to have "legitimate sex" in congruence with their own values.

It is perhaps ironic that dominant representations of early marriage condemn the practice as a violation of women's rights while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge the possibility that young women could ever exercise agency in choosing to marry. Advocates for sexual and reproductive rights may find themselves in the paradoxical position of defending adolescents' rights to express their sexuality and access contraception before age 18 yet concurrently supporting policies that uniformly foreclose any opportunity for other adolescents to engage in sexual activity in a manner consistent with their own values: within the institution of marriage.<sup>59</sup> As McDougal et al emphasise, "early marriage interventions ... can help to create an enabling environment for informed decision-making, but cannot proscriptively make those decisions for the girls in question".<sup>8</sup>

By considering the possibility that early marriage may represent one way in which some young women exercise agency, we certainly do not intend to dismiss the harmful effects early marriage can often have on young women's physical and mental health. Similarly, we do not seek to romanticise the decision to marry early as one that takes place in an ideal environment free from structural and social constraints. We echo our participants' characterisations of early marriage as a potentially rational or logical choice in contexts where *the other options available are severely limited*. Considering the ways in which early marriage may be the most rational option

available for a young woman is certainly not an attempt to highlight any “positive aspects” of early marriage but rather is meant to emphasise how precarious and scarce the alternatives may be, especially in the context of displacement. Furthermore, research that takes seriously women’s own assertions that they *chose* to marry early enhances our understandings of what the practice means to those involved and often reveals profound “discrepancies between the narratives of global health” practitioners and those of local communities<sup>54</sup> surrounding the risks and benefits of early marriage.

At the same time, calling on researchers to detach themselves from their own ideological commitments in order to seriously consider the complicated reasons why young women might not make the “right” choices is not a call for moral relativism. Nor is it a denial of the fact that early marriage, in many cases, has negative consequences for young women and can often be detrimental to their overall well-being. Rather, it is a call to explore the specific contexts, structural constraints, and moral frameworks in which women pursue and *define* meaningful lives for themselves. More nuanced explorations

of early marriage will allow researchers to more concretely map how structural and social factors interact to create an environment in which early marriage is perceived as one of the only options to secure the economic and physical well-being of young women and their families. In addition, scholarship that foregrounds local perspectives and experiences often provides new, unexpected insights and thus has the potential to direct stakeholders towards novel approaches to expand the opportunities available to young women and their families.

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## Résumé

Les mariages précoces demeurent une préoccupation centrale des défenseurs des droits sexuels et reproductifs dans le monde. Les chercheurs se sont en général concentrés sur les conséquences négatives du mariage précoce sur les jeunes femmes, en les présentant comme des victimes impuissantes des traditions culturelles et sociales. Pourtant, les voix et les opinions des jeunes femmes restent largement absentes de beaucoup d'études sur le mariage précoce. Notre étude s'attaque à cette lacune en utilisant des méthodologies participatives et ethnographiques afin de mieux comprendre ce que le mariage précoce signifie pour celles qui l'ont expérimenté et comment ces perspectives émiques peuvent différer des paradigmes humanitaires. Depuis que la guerre a commencé en 2011, les Syriens sont devenus l'un des plus vastes groupes de réfugiés au monde, avec plus de 5,5 millions d'individus qui ont cherché asile à l'étranger. Les organisations humanitaires ont attiré l'attention sur les taux élevés de mariage précoce dans cette population et ses facteurs singuliers dans le contexte spécifique du déplacement. Nous nous sommes fondés sur des données recueillies entre 2018 et

## Resumen

El matrimonio precoz continúa siendo una preocupación central entre promotores de los derechos reproductivos y sexuales a nivel mundial. Investigadores convencionales se han enfocado con frecuencia en los efectos negativos del matrimonio precoz en las mujeres jóvenes y las presentan como víctimas impotentes de tradiciones sociales y culturales. Sin embargo, las voces y percepciones de las jóvenes continúan principalmente ausentes en muchos estudios del matrimonio precoz. Nuestro estudio aborda esta brecha de conocimiento al utilizar metodologías participativas y etnográficas para entender mejor qué significa el matrimonio precoz para aquellas que lo han vivido y cómo estas perspectivas émic pueden divergir de los patrones humanitarios. Desde el inicio de la guerra en 2011, los sirios han pasado a ser uno de los grupos más grandes de refugiados del mundo: más de 5.5 millones de personas sirias buscan asilo en el extranjero. Organizaciones humanitarias han puesto de relieve las altas tasas de matrimonio precoz dentro de esta población y sus impulsores únicos dentro del contexto específico de desplazamiento. Nos basamos en datos recolectados entre los

2020 au cours de 90 entretiens individuels et 14 réunions de recherche-action participative pour étudier comment les réfugiées syriennes conceptualisent la pratique du mariage précoce et ses facteurs après le déplacement. Nos résultats révèlent que le mariage précoce est jugé comme une pratique qui bénéficie aux jeunes femmes et est justifiée du point de vue de ses effets positifs. Les participantes ont décrit le mariage précoce comme une solution rationnelle aux problèmes présents, dont beaucoup étaient associés de leur point de vue au contexte particulier du déplacement. Nos conclusions font écho à de précédentes études qualitatives qui illustrent la complexité des attitudes à l'égard des mariages précoces et montrent combien il est important de comprendre les contextes précis dans lesquels ils sont pratiqués.

años 2018 y 2020 durante 90 entrevistas individuales y 14 reuniones de investigación-acción participativa para examinar cómo las mujeres sirias refugiadas conceptualizan la práctica del matrimonio precoz y sus impulsores después del desplazamiento. Nuestros hallazgos revelan que el matrimonio precoz es percibido como una práctica que beneficia a las jóvenes y se justifica en términos de sus efectos benéficos. Las participantes describieron el matrimonio precoz como una solución lógica a los problemas actuales, muchos de los cuales asocian con el contexto único del desplazamiento. Nuestros hallazgos hacen eco de estudios cualitativos anteriores que ilustran la complejidad de las actitudes hacia el matrimonio precoz y la importancia de entender los contextos específicos en los que se practica.