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THE RASKOB FOUNDATION
FOR CATHOLIC ACTIVITIES

CHILD MARRIAGE IN JORDAN

Report on Project Findings and Recommendations

International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC)

Executive Summary

This advocacy report, produced by the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), addresses the issue of child marriage in Jordan, by focusing on the driving factors and the negative consequences of the practice on the lives of girls and young women and on the ability of the country to pursue sustainable growth and human development. The arrival of Syrian refugees to Jordan starting in 2011 has contributed to restructure the debate on child marriage in the Kingdom, since its alarming prevalence among highly vulnerable social groups emphasizes the persistent and multifactorial nature of this harmful traditional practice (HTP).

This report is informed by literature, available in English language, on child marriage in Jordan, produced by non-governmental organizations operating in the country, Jordanian government bodies, and findings derived from focus group discussions with 93 girls and young women at risk of, divorced or in child marriages, who have participated in the Life Skills group course funded by the Raskob Foundation, from September 2020 until May 2021, in the Jordanian governorate of Irbid. The course focused on promoting positive changes in mentality, at both individual and family levels, and equipping girls and young women with knowledge on human rights, personal hygiene and adolescent health, as well as interpersonal and transferable skills relevant to both their personal and professional lives. Additionally, the report includes findings from focus group discussions conducted separately with mothers and caregivers, as well as with husbands.

Testimonies shared during these discussions have confirmed the need for multisectoral, cross-cutting initiatives for the elimination of child marriage, which can offer effective remedies for the different driving factors of a practice that is still tolerated by society and validated by government and religious authorities in Jordan. Based on these assessments and the experience of ICMC Jordan in implementing gender-sensitive protection interventions targeting girls and boys, women and men, refugees and Jordanian nationals, this advocacy report includes recommendations for policy change, awareness raising and program activities.

Introduction

Jordan has ratified the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** and the **Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women**. The Kingdom has also put in place **efforts to eliminate child marriage** and other forms of child abuse by stepping up investments in education, shelter, and financial assistance to vulnerable children such as **Jordanian and Syrian refugee children living in poverty**. Girls are disproportionately affected by the practice, as the prevalence of child marriage among boys is just one sixth that among girls¹.

Most child marriages in Jordan involve **Syrian refugee girls, who are amongst the most vulnerable**. Affected by forced displacement and severe destitution resulting from war, lack of citizenship rights and of social safety nets. **80% of the Syrian refugee population in Jordan is living in extreme poverty, with 51% of such population being children**². While child marriages have been in steady decrease in the MENA region, in Jordan, the proportion of child marriages vis-à-vis all registered Syrian marriages has increased 10 percentage points between 2012 and 2014, from **12% to 32.3%**, respectively³.

Despite consistent efforts by NGOs and activists, in 2017, over **10,400 girls** were married before the age of 18 in Jordan alone. In 2018, the minimum marriage age was set at 18, however, with legal exceptions being made for those aged 16-18 years old; and thus, another **8,000 girl children** were wed in that same year. These numbers add to the **12 million girls** being married before the age of 18 every year around the world; or the 21 per cent of females worldwide who are married off as children every year. Around **700 million girls and women** alive today were married before their eighteenth birthday⁴.

In Jordan, some of these marriages are only **temporary or “pleasure” marriages**, where usually wealthy men, particularly those from Gulf countries, take a Syrian refugee child as his wife with the intent to sexually exploit her and later invalidate the marriage contract or simply divorce her. The family is commonly **encouraged to accept such marriage proposals** as it may help reduce the economic burden of the household through the collection of the dowry payment. After a few hours or days, the girls are returned their families by their ex-husbands.

¹ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Child marriage threatens the lives, well-being and futures of girls around the world. Available at [Child marriage | UNICEF](#)

² United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). A Qualitative Study on the Underlying Social Norms and Economic Causes that Lead to Child Marriage in Jordan. Available at <https://www.unicef.org/jordan/media/1796/file/Jordan-Reports.pdf>

³ Terre des Hommes (TdH). Mapping Responses to Child Marriage in Jordan. Available at [Research: Understanding child marriage amongst Syrian Refugee Communities in Jordan and Lebanon | Terre des hommes \(tdh.ch\)](#)

⁴ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects. Available at [Child Marriage Report 7 17 LR..pdf \(unicef.org\)](#)

In a way that is similar to child labour, child marriages may also represent a **coping strategy to survive poverty**, especially in large households with six or more family members, where the poorest tend to marry off their underage daughters, whose informed consent cannot be given, with views to transfer the guardianship of the girl child to the husband.

Among other factors contributing to child marriage as a **harmful traditional practice (HTP)** are **gender discrimination and inequality** derived from some conservative socio-cultural and religious norms, **honor-related traditions, social vulnerability, intra-family violence and discriminatory or inefficient legal frameworks and law enforcement**. The age difference between child brides and their husbands can contribute to increased gender power imbalances and incidents of domestic violence. In fact, **21%** of ever-married females aged 15-49 have experienced physical violence since age 15⁵.

To date, at-risk children in Jordan cannot rely on **effective protection response systems** and adult relatives wishing to help sometimes **lack governmental and legal support** to do so. **Domestic violence** and the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of children are frequently seen as a **family matter**, to be dealt with by the head of the family, who is often also the perpetrator of these different forms of violence. Additionally, the government lacks **sufficient technical capacity** to effectively respond to incidents of child abuse and domestic violence, that is further aggravated by the lack of **comprehensive child protection, health, and education policies**, which offers a conducive environment for the continued violation of child rights.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that there is a clear trend distinguishing Jordanians from Syrian refugees living in Jordan: while child marriage among the former made up **12% of all marriages** in 2017, the percentage was as high as **19.7%** among the latter. Although common in many parts of Syria before the war, today, child marriage is mainly a negative response to the current social and economic challenges imposed on vulnerable refugee families in Jordan.

Child marriage has significant negative consequences for girls. Those who marry young tend to have **more children** and are more likely to experience **intimate partner violence, drop out of school** and suffer from **limited professional and educational opportunities**. With the exception of temporary marriages, men who marry girls usually do not have educational qualifications and depend on unstable jobs. Research shows that low levels of educational attainment of girls are a risk factor for child marriage: girls with only elementary-level education make up for almost **70% of children married before the age of 18**⁶.

⁵ The 2017-18 Jordan Population and Family Health Survey (JPFHS) was implemented by the Department of Statistics (DOS) from early October 2017 to January 2018. The survey is available at http://www.dos.gov.jo/dos_home_e/main/linked-html/DHS2017_en.pdf

⁶ Ibid., ref. 4.

Child marriage also has **economic costs to the country**, once it delays the **demographic dividend** that come from reduced fertility, investments in education and a proportional active workforce vis-à-vis population growth⁷. Furthermore, the continuance of the practice leads to entrenched poverty and **close to non-existent intergenerational mobility**, since the educational levels of child brides have a negative impact on the chances of their children completing education themselves.

The outbreak of the pandemic, and the subsequent **protective measures** imposed by the Government of Jordan to contain the **spread of the coronavirus**, have caused already vulnerable families to lose the income from daily-wage work and similar informal contracts. Limited mobility has **further restrained freedoms** enjoyed by females and remote learning has become a barrier to many who lack the necessary means to access online classes (i.e., access to stable internet and computers and/or basic computer skills). As a result, tensions within the household have led to increased incidents of domestic violence and, while before the pandemic, some **100 million** girls were expected to marry before the age of 18 in the next decade, now this number is predicted to be **10%** higher⁸.

With views to provide a response to child marriage in Jordan, ICMC conducted **4,938** outreach assessments with refugee and Jordanian households in Northern Jordan, **2,539** of which were in Irbid. The teams are trained to **identify children at risk of forced marriage**, as well as on tried-and-true approaches to obtain the **informed consent and support of families** for the participation of girls in **life-saving protection activities and services** provided by the organization.

⁷ Higher Population Council: Under-age Marriages are Considered One of the Primary Population Issues that Threaten the Standard of Society's Demographic Characteristics. Available at [Higher Population Council: Under-age Marriages are Considered One of the Primary Population Issues that Threaten the Standard of Society's Demographic Characteristics | HPC](#)

⁸ Ibid., ref. 1.

Objectives & Methodology

1. To inform future initiatives promoted by the Raskob Foundation in Jordan in the domains of child marriage and women's empowerment.
2. To provide practical recommendations for stakeholders committed or obliged to respond to the persisting practice of child marriage in Jordan vis-à-vis existing gaps.
3. To identify potential strategies that shall allow ICMC to build on the improvements made by girls and young women participating in this Raskob-funded Life Skills course.
4. To share knowledge on best practices that can improve the quality and levels of engagement in awareness raising, empowerment, protection and capacity-building initiatives.

This advocacy report is based on a review of English language literature on child marriage in Jordan and the collection of qualitative data from a total of 80 focus group discussions (FGDs) with girls and young women participants; one FGD only with mothers and caregivers; three FGDs only with husbands; and 15 FGDs that brought together mothers/caregivers with girls and young women participants. Primary data collection was guided by a set of pre-structured questions aimed to assess changes in mentality, behaviors and attitudes in relation to the newly acquired knowledge and skills on problem-solving, decision-making, human rights, self-care, adolescent health, communication, and computer and financial literacy.

Due to the small size nature of groups, a sample of 100% of beneficiaries have participated in these discussions, which have taken place in person, at community-based organizations and the ICMC Irbid Field Office, as well as remotely through the multi-platform messaging application *Whatsapp*. Focus group discussions were conducted at the end of the course; however, during sessions, participants could reach out to facilitators with suggestions, complaints, and recommendations, which served the purpose of adjusting the course on the go, without delay, to provide effective responses to the arising needs of participants. Such feedback also has informed the development of findings and recommendations found in this document.

Findings

On the drivers and consequences of child marriage

Sexual harassment within the family

Some child marriages are an unspoken solution to sexual harassment taking place within the family, which is oftentimes perpetrated by an uncle or male cousin of the girl child. In such scenarios, parents understand that by marrying off underage daughters, they are protecting them from abuse and, at the same time, complying with customs and religious rules, and safeguarding the reputation of the family, which, especially in the case of conservative communities, is closely associated with a biased notion of female honor.

Unequal educational and professional opportunities

Biased sociocultural beliefs about the ability of females vis-à-vis that of males, combined with deep-rooted conservative notions of gender division of labor and female-honor, contribute to the confinement of females to the household domain, where school and universities degrees essentially are not considered to be necessary. It is gender discrimination and attitudinal barriers to education and professional development, within and outside of the household, that coincide to make it difficult or virtually impossible for females to really decide if they want to perform unpaid care and domestic work instead of fulfilling career goals, and which will oftentimes discourage females from seeking a career altogether. Additionally, in Jordan, many jobs are seen as unsuitable for females, who are perceived as not as capable or knowledgeable as their male counterparts. Women are still prohibited by law from working in certain sectors and during the evening after 10 pm, which further limits the competition between women and men in the labor market. Gender discrimination is then translated into occupational segregation as females mostly performing low paid jobs, in comparison to their male counterparts, and a persisting gender pay gap, that is also fuelled by the argument that men are supposed to be the breadwinner of the family and that women are not in need of, neither entitled to, the same salaries.

Lack of knowledge about rights and discriminatory laws

The Jordanian public school system and media constitute main institutions through which girls and young women should be able to access relevant information on the human rights of children and women as foreseen in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Jordanian civil law, although the latter is still to catch up with international standards of justice and equality. It is such knowledge that inspires activism as well. However, on one hand, neither of these institutions play such a role in Jordan, where most females live by informal gender biased social norms that commonly deny them equal rights to men and restrain any behavior or call for help that diverges from what is traditionally authorized in patriarchal communities. This is especially relevant to note as many husbands have explained during FGDs that the possibility to exert control over the opinions and lives of child brides is something that they consciously seek in a child marriage. Moreover, women are indeed treated unequally in several statutes. Representative examples can be found in articles 340 and 98 of the Jordanian Penal Code, which can be invoked to minimize punishment for honor crimes; and in the Crime Prevention Act 121, which allows authorities to hold women under protective custody for an illimited time on the basis of preventing a crime against her, thus turning the expectation of relief into a reality of punishment for the victim. Many girls are forced into marriage, submitted to different forms of violence, made to drop out of school and/or are prohibited from exercising certain freedoms, such as freedom of movement, expression and to seek educational and professional advancement, without ever realizing that these prohibitions constitute a violation of their human rights. Such lack of awareness and knowledge also contributes to lack of knowledge among girls and young women about how to reach out to authorities to demand the protection of their rights, albeit limited, and denounce violations; or how to respond in case they are denied assistance – both of which cause incidents of violence against children and women to go unreported or unsolved.

Temporary poverty relief and financial stability

Some vulnerable families tend to see child marriage as a temporary solution to poverty, a pathway to social and financial stability for the family (sutra), and/or citizenship rights for refugee girls. In turn, these daughters are faced with the obligation to follow the decisions of her parents, the highest authority within the household, often against their will. The belief in the predetermined nature and inevitability of such fate, once others in her family and immediate circles have gone through the same experience, and fear of reprisal from

the family and community and a culture of shame may also influence girls to enter a forced marriage. Finally, girls may also feel obliged to guarantee the wellbeing of the family by freeing them from the burden of having to provide for her and/or by giving them access to the dowry payment. However, it is important to highlight that such a strategy, specifically when adopted by the poor, rarely translates into long-term financial stability for the original family of the child bride; and that children born from child marriages are usually denied the necessary conditions to achieve intergenerational mobility.

Lack of citizenship rights and destitution resulting from war

In addition to destitution resulting from war, the limited social and economic rights enjoyed by Syrian refugees in Jordan cause the great majority of them to live in extreme poverty. Most Syrian refugees in Jordan suffer from limited and exploitative job opportunities and the lack of a social safety net. The situation of Syrian refugee families has been made worse by the coronavirus pandemic, which caused a 40% drop in their income, as many have lost their jobs or were unable to attend work as a daily wagger for several weeks in a row due to movement restrictions. Due to the informal nature of their work and refugee status, the majority does not have access to social security or assistance provided by the Government of Jordan⁹. Syrian refugees are also barred from working in several sectors, including engineering, health, and teaching. Poverty and unequal citizenship rights are self-enforcing factors inextricably linked to the high rates of child marriage among Syrian refugees. One third of all Syrian marriages in Jordan, including those celebrated inside Zaatari and Azraq camps and in Jordanian host communities, involve a child under 18.

Higher prevalence of intimate partner violence, neglect, and divorce¹⁰

Girls married before the age of 18 are more likely to experience intimate partner violence (IPV), as well as suffer injuries perpetrated by their adult husbands than those in marriages initiated in adulthood. Approximately 30% of married children report experiencing injury perpetrated by a spouse, almost 6% of them have left a child marriage due to emotional violence and another 10% for fear of their husbands. The consequences of IPV can last for a lifetime; however, married and divorced girls are rarely given the opportunity to undertake mental health treatment in government clinics and still face challenges from the

⁹ Amnesty International. Jordan 2020. Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/jordan/report-jordan/>

¹⁰ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). A Qualitative Study on the Underlying Social Norms and Economic Causes that Lead to Child Marriage in Jordan. Available at <https://www.unicef.org/jordan/media/1796/file/Jordan-Reports.pdf>

social stigma associated with both divorce and mental health assistance in general. The children of child brides are also affected by the violence that they witness their mother suffer, as well as that which they might experience firsthand. These experiences may contribute to the unhealthy normalization of intra-family violence and can bring about negative consequences for behavior, cognitive development, and worldviews of children. Moreover, both child brides and their children may suffer from the neglect of their basic needs, particularly of emotional and medical care, and recreation.

Recommendations

Recommendations are based on project findings, UNICEF's INPIRE Framework, the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030 and the National Action Plan for Implementing the Recommendations of the "Child Marriage in Jordan".

For ICMC and Humanitarian Partners:

- 1. Continue to implement and perfect gender-sensitive multisectoral responses to child marriage in Jordan,** particularly Life Skills and Positive Parenting courses; Intergenerational group discussions, especially including the elderly authority in the family and known community leaders; medical and mental health assistance; educational support and livelihoods-related training and opportunities.
- 2. Strengthen coordination among humanitarian and development organizations with aims to consolidate referrals and case management systems and provide complementary services** that have the potential to mitigate and/or eliminate concurrent key drivers of child marriage.
- 3. Continue to engage men and boys, as allies for positive social change,** in awareness raising initiatives that address issues of gender equality, human rights and justice in local communities in Jordan.
- 4. Intensify advocacy efforts for the elimination of legal exceptions for child marriage,** which have ensured the prevalence of such a harmful traditional practice in Jordan, and the strengthening of governmental protection response systems and law enforcement services to combat violations of the human rights of children and women.
- 5. Provide capacity building and technical assistance to local stakeholders and Government institutions** to lead the provision of free-of-charge, simplified access to legal assistance, medical assistance and psychosocial counselling for girls and young women survivors, at risk of or in a child marriage.

For the Government of Jordan:

- 6. Include effective accountability mechanisms** to the law to ensure that duty-bearers provide appropriate, much needed responses to cases of gender-based violence and child abuse in the contexts of both family and criminal law.
- 7. Increase investments in gender-sensitive, child-friendly training and technology** to equip government actors and agencies with the necessary knowledge and tools to provide effective responses to cases of gender-based violence and child abuse.

8. **Consider amendments to the personal status law** to ensure full equality for females in marriage, child custody, divorce, and inheritance.
9. **Include human rights learning to the compulsory curricula of both public and private schools across Jordan**, with aims to educate school-aged children on their rights and contribute to fear-free generations of girls and boys who are able to choose and enjoy the benefits of gender equality.
10. **Invest in government-sponsored communication and awareness raising campaigns** through traditional and new media to educate the population on the negative consequences of child marriage for individuals and society; showcase the advantages of gender equality and education; and promote the protection of human rights, particularly those of children and women, through the provision of comprehensive, accurate information on rights, as well as on protection services available for those in need of assistance.
11. *With aims to eliminate poverty as a main driver of child marriage:* amend labor legislation and increase surveillance to effectively safeguard the rights of vulnerable Jordanians and Syrian refugees, as well as refugees of other nationalities, including guarantees of **non-exploitative work contracts, the right to minimum wage, equal pay and rights between genders and nationalities, stronger labor rights and access to social security.**
12. **Provision of free-of-charge, simplified access to legal assistance, medical assistance and psychological counselling** to vulnerable Jordanian and refugee children alike, in partnership with highly qualified, reputable non-governmental stakeholders.

For the Raskob Foundation and other International Donors:

13. **Increase funding for humanitarian and development initiatives focused on the provision of educational services**, including after-school learning and educational support programs, university scholarships, technical and vocational training, and grants for start-ups and home-based businesses, that can increase the chances of girls and young women to build successful academic and professional careers and become financially self-sufficient.
14. Lead advocacy and lobbying efforts in partnership with non-governmental stakeholders **to influence positive policy change at the national level, with views on the elimination of legal exceptions for child marriage in Jordan.**
15. Fund accessible **awareness raising initiatives to reach broad audiences**, including the uneducated and persons with disabilities, who may have limited access to information.
16. Support the Government of Jordan to invest in training and equipment that allow for effective responses to cases of gender-based violence and child abuse.

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