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FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CHILD MARRIAGE AMONG SYRIAN REFUGEES IN DOMIZ CAMP-KURDISTAN-IRAQ

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ABSTRACT

Child marriage is an internationally recognised human rights issue that has been extensively studied by various Non-Governmental Organisations and the United Nations. In response to this problem, many countries have implemented social policies aimed at addressing child marriage and several international treaties are dedicated to combatting it. This study focuses on examining the factors contributing to child marriage within refugee populations. The research methodology involved conducting in-depth interviews with ten young wives aged between 16 and 22, facilitating focus group discussions with their husbands and parents residing in Domiz Camps 1 and 2 in Kurdistan, as well as interviewing key informants who work in child protection services and social policy development. Thematic analysis was employed to identify prominent themes and

subthemes based on the perspectives of participants. The research revealed that child marriage is driven by factors such as the need for safety, preservation of family honour, and economic challenges. Similar safety concerns were observed among Syrian refugees in this study, as well as in previous studies conducted on Jordanian refugees and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. This study takes a comprehensive approach by considering perspectives from young wives, their parents, husbands, and key informants when examining factors related to child marriage. Ultimately, the findings of this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of refugee issues and efforts towards protecting children's rights within the refugee context.

Keywords: Child marriage, safety, Kurdish-Syrian refugees, qualitative inquiries.

JEL: Z1, J13, J 12, J 28

INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is defined as “any legal or customary union involving a girl or boy below the age of 18, is a practice that disproportionately affects girls, with negative impacts on their health, education, economic and social status” (Parsons et al., 2015). The United Nations Fund for Population Analysis (UNFPA) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have defined child marriage as a marriage that includes individuals who are under 18 (Gaffney-Rhys, 2011). In recent years, there has been a growing focus on eradicating child marriage, which is now recognised as a global concern as has been underscored in Sustainable Development Goal No (5) (World Health Organisation, 2015).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, established in 1989, includes several provisions that address child marriage. For example, Article 34 ensures protection against sexual exploitation and abuse, while Article 24 guarantees access to healthcare and protection from harmful traditional practices. Additionally, Article 19 prohibits any form of physical or psychological violence, injury, abuse, mistreatment or exploitation. The right to education is outlined in Article 28 of the Convention, aiming to discourage early marriage. Variations in cultural norms between Western and non-Western legal systems are commonly cited as obstacles for adopting global

agreements. However, it is essential to acknowledge that international treaties recognising child marriage as a violation of human rights play a crucial role in ensuring the effectiveness of these agreements. Without a clear consensus at the international level regarding this issue, it may hinder the initiation and funding of various programmes targeted towards addressing child marriage (Gaffney-Rhys, 2011).

In 1924, the League of Nations recognised children as a distinct and significant group within society (Efevbera & Bhabha, 2020). This recognition continued with subsequent international declarations such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, where article 16 (1) declares that “men and women of full age” possess the right to enter into marriage. Similarly, article 23 (2) of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights in 1966, Article 17 (2) of the American Convention on Human Rights in 1969, and Article 12 of the European Convention on Human Rights in 1953 grant the right to marry to “men and women of marriageable age” (Gaffney-Rhys, 2011).

Despite a global decrease in child marriage, it is still estimated that 40 percent of girls in the least-developed countries become brides before the age of 18 (Gaston et al., 2019). Furthermore, there has been an increase in child marriage rates among Syrian refugees, rising from 13 percent before the crisis to 35 percent. This can be attributed to socioeconomic circumstances and the aspiration to safeguard young females from sexual abuse and harassment (Michal et al., 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The situation for individuals in Myanmar varied between that in their community and the refugee camp. While child marriage was not as common among Rohingya refugees in Myanmar due to the strict enforcement of age restrictions by the military, rates increased among Rohingya refugees residing in camps in Bangladesh. The absence of regulations and lower costs associated with such marriages contributed to this rise. Additionally, tensions arose within the host community as they perceived the presence of the Rohingya community as promoting polygamy and child marriage (Melnikas et al., 2020).

Moreover, it has been documented that residing within the camp poses security risks for girls and women, making them susceptible to sexual

abuse and harassment (Almadani, 2018). Consequently, as a result of the standardised conditions in the camps, women frequently depend on men or aid workers for basic necessities such as food, water, and other essential provisions without thorough screening procedures (Solomon, 2019).

Mourtade et al. (2017) revealed that the practice of child marriage has undergone significant transformations in response to crises and displacement. Specifically, the prevalence of child marriage among Syrian refugees increased due to the impact of conflicts. The current situation is particularly concerning, considering that approximately 500,000 Syrian refugee children aged 3-18 face barriers in accessing education, making them more susceptible to early marriages or being coerced into engaging in child labour.

Various factors contribute to the occurrence of child marriage among Syrian refugees in Lebanon. These include economic challenges, instances of sexual abuse, and peer influences (Mahzooni, 2018; Yidana, 2018; Sieverding et al., 2020; United Nations Population Fund, 2016). Moreover, limited educational opportunities often result in school dropouts (Kelsey & Zimmerman, 2017). The participants commonly rationalised restricting women's physical movement as a means of ensuring their safety.

This has significant implications for the physical, psychological, and social growth of both girls and boys. It also poses challenges in terms of accessing education, economic advancement, and overall welfare (Fatima, 2023). However, Syrian cultural norms often limit women's freedom of movement and social interactions due to concerns about jealousy and safety (Al-Naqib et al., 2021). Additionally, researchers like Sophie have emphasised that such restrictions on mobility help protect young females from experiencing sexual abuse or exploitation (Sophie, 2017; Michel et al., 2018).

In addition, there is a disparity in prioritising the education of female children compared to their male counterparts. This discrepancy stems from the growing concern among parents about their daughters' interactions with the host community and potential changes to social values experienced by Syrian refugee girls. Consequently, parents are inclined to marry off their daughters at an early age as a means of safeguarding them (Mahzooni, 2018). Addressing this issue, another

study (Kok et al., 2023) recommends implementing a curriculum that promotes economic opportunities for young girls in order to deter child marriage practices.

In addition to Syria and Lebanon, it has been noted that Bangladesh also faces significant challenges related to early marriage (Streatfield et al., 2015). Efforts are being made by authorities to address this issue through locally-based awareness programmes. Taking inspiration from the experiences of Nepalese women who marry before the age of 18 and consequently face obstacles such as dropping out of school due to societal norms, safety concerns, and fear of sexual harassment including rape, measures are being taken in order to improve the conditions for girls in Bangladesh (Sekine & Hodgkin, 2017).

Moreover, within classical Muslim society, the preservation of female virginity is deemed crucial for maintaining family reputation (Asemah & State, 2023; Punam & Kumar, 2023). In traditional societies, girls have limited agency in determining their marital fate (Asrari, 2015). Scholars have documented various social factors that contribute to child marriage, such as social interaction dynamics, adherence to cultural norms, and concerns related to security (Moses, 2015; Schlecht 2016; Walker 2016, and Bride 2018). Additionally, cultural factors identified by Melniskas et al. (2020) include religious justifications, financial considerations, and concerns about the safety of girls; pointing out that these factors serve as significant drivers behind child marriages. Interventions implemented by service providers can play a vital role in ensuring the well-being of girls affected by these practices and hold implications for addressing this issue.

Islam et al. (2021) found that child marriage is influenced by various factors such as societal norms, pressures, concerns about insecurity, and lenient legal frameworks. Additionally, considerations related to family honour and a preference for younger brides play significant roles in driving this practice. A study on Syrian refugees in Jordan and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh revealed that safety concerns were among the motivating factors for parents consenting to their daughters' marriage (Gausman et al., 2022)."

After the outbreak of wars and internal and external conflicts in different regions, application for asylum, and the influx of refugees have become a global issue. According to the UNHCR, there were

around 21.3 million refugees worldwide due to conflict, war, and insecurity in 2015. According to Huber (2017), Syria (4.9 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million), the Lake Chad Basin (Nigeria, Chad, and Cameroon) (2.2 million), South Sudan (1.1 million), and Somalia (1 million) were the five nations with the most significant numbers of refugees worldwide. The researcher found studies on refugee and human rights violations. For example, the Rohingya crisis has dragged on for decades, and there is no solution to this dilemma affecting neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh and Malaysia and international agencies have focused on helping and repatriating the Rohingya refugees, resolving regional conflicts, and protecting the welfare of human rights. (Shukri, 2021). The Rohingya population has experienced numerous human rights infringements, which have been documented and shared by international organisations and UN agencies. These violations occurred against the backdrop of tensions between Muslim minorities and Buddhists in Myanmar.

The Rohingya refugees have faced persecution due to the low education level and high illiteracy rate among them (Sidhu & Parnini, 2020). Afghanistan has been plagued by ongoing internal and external conflicts for many decades, causing instability that prompts the Afghan people to seek safety elsewhere. Religious factors play a role in the conflicts between the Afghan people and local governments, as well as with the Soviet Union. Afghanistan's request for financial loans from major countries like the Soviet Union exposes it to additional problems and foreign interference, providing an opportunity for outsiders to meddle in its internal affairs. Islamic groups have found that in Afghanistan the ideology of Marxism poses a threat to the Islamic religion. Alongside cultural and ethnic differences, other factors contributing to division and conflicts within the country include external influences and people fleeing from Afghanistan (Ahmad Zakuan, 2020). The prevalence of violence, insecurity, and racial discrimination in Nigeria has resulted in millions of individuals being displaced from their homes as they seek safety in neighbouring areas. By May 2017, over two million Nigerians had experienced displacement, with more than 90 percent remaining internally displaced while others sought refuge in Cameroon, Chad, and the Republic of Niger due to the insurgency conducted by Boko Haram insurgents (Mukhtar et al., 2018).

The purpose of present study is to examine the phenomenon of child marriage among Syrian refugees residing in Domiz Camp 1-2. Furthermore, the research aims to shed light on the underlying factors that contribute to child marriage in this particular context, with a specific focus on safety and security conditions within the camp.

In various conflict-ridden countries such as Syria, Nigeria, Afghanistan, and Myanmar, the primary concern for individuals leaving their home countries is related to safety. Both ISIS in Syria and Iraq and Boko Haram in Nigeria employ similar tactics of instilling fear among the population through acts of violence including killings, rapes, and kidnappings.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research employed a qualitative methodology to examine the social dynamics in Domiz Camps 1 and 2, located in Duhok City, Kurdistan, Iraq. This approach would allow for a comprehensive exploration of the experiences of Syrian refugees and enhance our understanding of the population under study (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

To facilitate this study, the first author received support from two members of the Child Protection Unit (CPU) in recruiting participants who have experienced child marriage. The research team conducted in-depth interviews with the participants at their homes and held focus group discussions at the CPU premises. Prior to conducting the interviews, informed consent and permission were obtained from both the young wives themselves, as well as their parents and husbands. In addition, some cases were also identified for the research by the camp director. This was done through individuals responsible for each neighbourhood within the camp setting. The semi-structured interviews focused on gathering demographic information and exploring various factors that contribute to child marriage.

Participants

This study delved into the issue of child marriage within the Syrian refugee community living in Domiz Camp 1. The camp was situated in the Summel district of Duhok province, and it was home to a total of 8,572 families and 33,932 individuals. The research involved

conducting interviews with ten young women who had been married before turning 18 and had been married for at least six months while living in the camp. The interviews were conducted in the participants' homes to gather comprehensive information. The participants' ages ranged from 16 to 22 years old at the time of the interviews.

Table 1 displays the demographic information of the young wives who had participated in this study. It provides a comprehensive breakdown of relevant data for future reference and analysis. Out of the ten cases, only two were divorced - case number 5 and 7.

Table 1

Demographic Information on the Young Wives

Code	Age At Marriage		Length of Marriage (Years)	Living Arrangement	Date of Interview	Number of Children
	Wife	Husband				
R 1	15	22	1.5	With Parent-in-law	7 th February 2021	1
R 2	15	20	2	With Parent-in-law	17 th March 2021	1
R 3	16	24	6	With Husband	17 th March 2021	3
R 4	14	24	1	With Husband	22 th March 2021	1
R 5	16	23	2	With parent	9 th June 2021	0
R 6	14	19	3	On her own	14 th June 2021	1
R 7	14	24	1	With parent	17 th June 2021	0
R 8	16	21	2	With Parent-in-law	24 th June 2021	1
R 9	15	22	2	With Parent-in-law	28 th June	2
R 10	14	21	7	With Parent-in-law	4 th July 2021	2

During the research, separate Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were organised for fathers, mothers, and husbands. Each group had four participants. The aim was to understand the parents' views on the factors that led to child marriage. The FGDs for mothers and husbands were held in the CPU, while the one for fathers was conducted in a participant's house. This approach helped to identify the factors that motivate girls and parents to practice child marriage. The primary focus of the FGDs was on the parents of young brides. The list of FGD participants is as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Information on Participants of the FGDS

Methods	Participants	Date of interview	Camp 1	Camp 2	Total
FGDs	Fathers	29 th July 2021	3	1	4
	Mothers	7 th July 2021	4	0	4
	Husbands	12 th July 2021	4	0	4

The researcher also conducted interviews with 10 key informants in the fields of human rights, child protection, and social policy related to refugee camps. Information from these interviews is as presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Demographic Information on the KIIs

Occupation	Gender	Location	Date of Interview	Nationality	Interview Conducted
1- Judge	Male	Summel	14 th March	Iraqi	Office
2- Lawyer	Female	Harikar NGOs	18 th March	Iraqi	Office
3- Child Protection Officer	Male	Duhok	13 th June	Iraqi	Office
4- Teacher KK	Male	Camp 2	20 th May	Iraqi	School
5- Teacher AR	Male	Camp 1	23 th May	Iraqi	School
6- Teacher IM	Female	Camp 1	23 th May	Syria	School

(continued)

Occupation	Gender	Location	Date of Interview	Nationality	Interview Conducted
7- Psychologist	Female	Camp 2	22 th May	Iraqi	School
8- Social worker	Female	Camp 1	7 th June	Syria	CPU
9- Camp manager1	Male	Camp 1	23 th May	Iraqi	Office
10-Camp manager2	Male	Camp 2	20 th May	Iraqi	Office

Note. KLLs stands for Key Informants Interview

Data Collection

The researcher gathered information from Kurdish-Syrian refugees in two out of the four camps located in the Duhok governorate. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to ensure a fair representation of available and willing participants. The study focused on the Domiz Camp, which was the largest refugee centre located nearest to the Syrian border. The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with young wives, their husbands, parents, and Key Informants Interview that lasted an average of 30 minutes and were recorded using an audio device. Additionally, FGDs were conducted that ranged from 27 to 50 minutes, with an average duration of 40 minutes. The interviews were conducted between February and August 2021, and verbatim transcription was used to ensure accuracy and completeness. The transcripts were then reviewed and translated into English, and revised for accuracy and completeness.

Data Analysis

For this study, Clarke and Braun's (2017) thematic analysis approach was utilised to analyse the data gathered. This involved identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns and themes within the data in a systematic manner. All interviews were conducted and recorded in the Kurdish language. An inductive approach was used for analysis, with word-by-word coding derived from participants' stories. The researchers identified and named emerging themes from the data, reviewed and assigned codes, and created a compelling story from the relationships recounted by the participants themselves. It was recommended to incorporate writing as an integral component of the analytical method to present a coherent and persuasive story (Terry et al. 2018).

Ethical Consideration

Prior to beginning work with participants at their homes, the researchers provided an explanation of the purpose of their visit and obtained verbal consent from both the participants and their families. After agreeing to participate in the study, each participant was asked to sign two official consent forms: one to permit the researcher to be contacted if needed and one to be kept for research ethics purposes. As part of the consent process, preliminary information regarding the task and working methods was disclosed. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

In the course of conducting research, it is crucial to uphold ethical standards to safeguard the faithful portrayal of people's experiences, emotions, and convictions. To this end, this particular study has taken measures to preserve the anonymity of young women, thereby securing their confidentiality and privacy throughout the entire process of data gathering, examination, and dissemination (Surmiak, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study discusses safety issues, economic situations, and maintaining family honour as factors that motivate child marriage. The first factor is described below.

Safety and Camp Situation

During times of war, citizens of affected countries may experience a sense of the loss of safety in their homes and workplaces. Refugees who have fled their countries have often encountered various forms of violence and adversity in their search for safe havens. Unfortunately, violence can also occur within families, perpetuating a cycle of abuse. Adolescent girls may opt for early marriage as a means of finding security, as their parents may struggle to provide basic necessities. Those living in refugee camps may face ongoing insecurity and fear when integrating into new communities. Sadly, refugees can be vulnerable to the following set of problems: Violence, Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation (VANE). The current situation in Syria is causing parents to consider marrying off their daughters at a young age in

order to keep them safe during the conflict. Seven people, including a young wife, a husband, four mothers, and a teacher, reported that the safety and living conditions in refugee camps have led to child marriage.

“First, it is my fate due to the alarming situation in Syria. If someone marries, they usually feel better. The parents think about their children’s safety”. (R-6, date 14th June, 2021).

According to one husband, the situation in Syria was so frightening that he decided to get married. Both families of the young couple were worried about possible difficulties their adolescent children might face. They believed that marriage would provide protection for the girls from any type of abuse, as R 9 Husband stated,

Because of the dire political conditions in Syria, my wife’s family wanted to emigrate to Germany, and I was in a loving relationship with her. Then I decided to marry her and brought her to Kurdistan, and we did the marriage procedures inside the camp. (R-9’s Husband, date 12th July, 2021).

Four mothers confirmed that the conditions in the camp were the main reason for the increase in child marriages. The girls were particularly susceptible to physical harassment, including attacks and assaults, as well as psychological harassment, bullying, and verbal abuse. Harassment occurred when young girls went to school and the market. Three mothers agreed to their daughters’ marriages because it was difficult for them to protect their daughters from abuse. Syrian refugees allow their daughters to get married for their safety, as mentioned by R-7’s mother.

“We face more challenges and psychological stress inside the camp. Particularly, when girls go to school, they usually expose to harassment; hence, we cannot keep them safe inside the camp” I must protect my daughter; that’s why I agreed to marry her off because of real fears about her safety “(R-7’s mother, date 7th July, 2021)”.

The young girls in the camp are influenced by each other, which leads to early marriages. However, one mother did not approve of

her daughter's marriage as she wanted her to complete her studies and marry after the age of 20. The other girls in the camp urged and even threatened their parents to allow her to marry. Life inside the camp was difficult, with men going out for work, and living in tents with no doors or locks. The people in the camp came from diverse backgrounds, causing potential problems for families who disagreed with one another, as mentioned by R-3's mother.

“She follows her peers who have boyfriends and made tattoos on her body. I have a problem with my daughter concerning her clothes. Hence, both, economic issues and camp situations are the reasons for child marriage. I agreed because of my daughter's insistence and threatening, I disagreed with her. I would approve it if she were twenty “. (R-3's mother, date 7th July, 2023).

Upon their arrival in Kurdistan, Syrian refugees initially resided in tents. However, over the course of three to four years, they were able to transition from tents to houses. This shift was motivated by concerns for the security and safety of girls and women who faced risks while living in camps under temporary shelter. In order to safeguard their daughters from potential sexual abuse and uphold family honour amidst the insecurity caused by the Syria crisis, parents made efforts to arrange early marriages for them. The prevailing situation within Syria compelled parents to send their daughters with relatives to camps where they believed there would be better protection against early marriage as well as challenging conditions that could leave adolescent girls vulnerable to abuse and harassment. In Kurdish culture, there is a belief that mothers have the responsibility of safeguarding their daughters from sexual abuse. This expectation is particularly strong since many mothers in this society are primarily homemakers. As a result, some mothers may feel compelled to arrange early marriages for their daughters as a means of relieving themselves from the significant burden and potential blame they might face if any incidents were to occur. Additionally, when these mothers become aware of their daughters' romantic relationships, they may hastily marry them off in order to prevent social complications. Ultimately, both young wives and husbands along with parents and teachers acknowledge that child marriage practices can be influenced by factors such as living conditions within camps and concerns regarding safety issues.

In line with the findings in Emuria's (2009) research, the present research has found that residing within the camp posed a safety risk for women

and girls as they were susceptible to sexual abuse and harassment. Nevertheless, as camp life was regulated, women frequently depended on men, other refugees, and aid workers for essential resources such as food, water, and other supplies. Unfortunately, these individuals were often not thoroughly screened (Solomon, 2019). Syrian refugees who settled inside the camp faced more problems than those who lived in a city, but the refugees who lived inside the camp benefitted from the assistance provided by NGOs and the UN agency (Mourtada, 2017). Participants frequently highlighted the restrictions on women's physical mobility to safeguard them, using the pretext of "ensuring women's safety." However, Syrians limited women's movements and social networks due to concerns over jealousy and safety (Elnakib et al., 2021).

Many women are afraid of being raped inside the camp. If a married woman is raped, her spouse would probably forgive her eventually, but if an unmarried woman is raped, this may shatter her life (Kohnno et al., 2020). Life in a refugee camp is undeniably challenging, especially for those who have lost their families. Living with unfamiliar families or distant relatives presents difficulties. Even if it was feasible for adolescents to live independently, the increasing rate of rape in the camps and ethnic conflicts make their life too risky. Here, the marriage of girls inside the camp will provide an atmosphere of security for the husband and enable them to face challenges together (Smedt, 1998).

Upholding Family Honour

According to the findings of this study, in addition to safety concerns, upholding family honour or reputation was another factor that could lead to early marriage. Three fathers reported that living in a refugee camp made them feel the need to protect their daughters by marrying them off at a young age. The challenging circumstances in the camp also made them reflect on social values and the importance of upholding their family's dignity. These fathers agreed to the early marriages due to pressure from both their families and society. However, they stated that if they were still in Syria, they would not have made the same decision. Finally, one father (R-7) shared his emotions after his daughter returned home from an early marriage and subsequent divorce:

"The people in the camp come from different areas and have diverse backgrounds. If I were in Syria, I would

never allow my daughters to marry early. While I was speaking, my heart was filled with anguish. I pressed my daughter and myself as well, and then pressed my family. We try to protect ourselves and reputation within the refugee camp because life in the camp is a complicated one.” (R-7’s father, date, 29th July,2021).

The camp situation was challenging for parents who needed to work and attend other activities. If something happened to their daughters, it could negatively impact the family’s reputation, as noted by R-5’s father,

“The camp situation led to early marriage because Syria’s situation was different. Whenever I am not home, people talk about my daughter, and this is something affect my family’s reputation”. (R-5’s father, date 29th July,2021).

Both parents usually discussed their daughter’s marriage and were concerned about their safety. Although parents might disagree on child marriage, they were more worried about their daughter’s safety due to the camp situation, as mentioned by R-3’s father,

“I discussed her marriage with my wife and my daughters. Many people asked for my girl’s hand, but I refused. A person proposed to my daughter and we know each other since childhood, he was a good person and prayed. He is older than her, an educated man. Therefore, I agreed for my daughter to marry him”. (R-3’s father, date 29th July,2021).

In an effort to protect their family’s honour, parents often resorted to manipulating the system and employing religious figures from Syria as a means of conducting child marriages. Syrian refugees have shown a preference for early marriage for their daughters and engaged in altering documents, particularly age records, in order to evade legal consequences.

“Raising awareness among parents can help alleviate child marriage. The organisations and security forces intervene in the case of a clear circumvention of the law and changing the girl’s age through official documents,” (KIIs.No.6 Teacher IM, date 23th May,2021).

There were limitations to getting a marriage certificate in certain areas of Iraq. In some cases, individuals might need to travel to a different area under Iraqi control to obtain their certificate. Afterwards, the certificate had be validated in Duhok City.

“The judge doesn’t give that permission for the marriage unless two couples complete 18 years of age. If the marriage contract is through the chief of religion, he will be in trouble, and they will put him in jail. So that also is control over it, but there was the case because it was an open camp, they will go to another location like Shikhan district and do this marriage even if they were under 18 years old”. (KIIs No.3 Family Protection Officer, date 13th June, 2021).

According to both mothers and teachers, proximity of houses facilitated love relationships by making communication easier. Living in tents or unfenced houses enabled easier communication and made it difficult to monitor daughters. The mothers consented to their daughters’ marriages out of love, wanting to protect them from social problems, and preserve the family’s reputation. They were reluctant to reject marriage proposals due to the potential difficulties it might pose for them, as reflected in the view expressed by R-1’s mother below,

“ I agreed on my daughter marriage because she is in love with someone, and we know each other better. We agreed because we don’t like to put ourselves into troubles”. (R-1’s mother, date 7th July 2021).

And that by KIIs. No.6, who pointed out that:

“In the beginning, the camps consist of a number of limited tents, very close to each other in general, families were afraid of their daughters simply because the tents were open. In fact, early marriage was the best solution to these fears in order to protected them from getting into any trouble”. (KIIs.No.6 Teacher IM, date 23th May,2021).

During the FGDs, fathers emphasised that the conditions in the refugee camp contributed significantly to child marriage due to concerns about safety and romantic relationships. Additionally, advancements

in technology made it difficult for fathers to monitor their daughters effectively. In traditional communities, there is a strong social value placed on female virginity, and girls may encounter increased difficulties and disapproval from their family, particularly their father if they lose their virginity before marriage.

Although the government is making significant efforts to prevent child marriage, some parents and young girls are resorting to smuggling to perform such marriages. For example, in refugee camps, some individuals manipulated the system by altering the girls' age, or by travelling from Kurdistan to an Iraqi-controlled district to obtain marriage certificates, and then returning to KRG for validation. However, this practice might eventually lead to problems for the young wives who might lose their rights in case of divorce as they would not have proof of marriage. Additionally, some parents, out of concern, might change their daughters' age to marry them off, which child protection officers agreed was a cause for concern.

Economic Issues

The challenges of living as refugees in camps led some parents to make the difficult decision of marrying off their daughters in order to improve their family's economic situation. Unfortunately, this practice resulted in a number of negative consequences for the girls, including child marriage, child labour, and school dropout rates which further impacted their social and economic well-being. It became particularly challenging to meet the needs of adolescent girls when families had only daughters. In such unstable circumstances, it was not easy for parents to ensure the protection and welfare of their teenage girls, as was highlighted by one mother interviewed.

“We live in poor economic conditions, and our children have a lot of needs. I have four daughters, and they have a lot of requests; I'm unable to fulfil their needs because living conditions here are mounting up day by day”.
(R-5's mother, date 7th July, 2021).

In the camp, families engaged in child marriage for two primary reasons. Firstly, it was a cost-effective option as it required minimal resources. Secondly, some families opted for this practice as children had significant needs, which parents might find challenging to meet, leading to financial strain.

“We give way to our girls to marry because of tough financial situations; if I were in Syria, I would let my daughter marry later (when she is older). The life inside the camp is very complicated we can’t keep an eye on them all the time”. R-3’s father, date 29th July,2021).

Two educators (KIIs.No.6 and KIIs.No.4, see transcript below) highlighted the inadequacy of small tents for accommodating large families, particularly when each married son required a separate living space. This cramped living arrangement posed challenges to parents and contributed to various social problems. Consequently, they agreed that marrying off their daughters would alleviate these difficulties and improve their economic situation by freeing up more space in the households. Furthermore, due to impoverishment and the prevalence of orphanhood among refugees, students often discontinued their education.

“These tents were small and not enough for the whole family. In addition to the bad economic conditions, they would marry their girls to eliminate these problems, and they thought that early marriage was to protect the girls”. (KIIs.No.6 Teacher IM, date 23th May,2021).”

“The first reason for child marriage is tough economic situations. Ten days ago, one of my students was in fifth grade. She called me to say she would like to leave school because her parent decided to marry off her. She belonged to a low economic class, and in other cases, she wanted to leave school because of her father’s death.”. (KIIs.No.4 Teacher KK, date 20th May,2021).

According to the perspective of the camp manager, there were several factors that had contributed to child marriage, including economic circumstances, the size of a family, and the level of parental interest. These factors could play a significant role in determining whether a child was married off at a young age, and could have long-lasting effects on the child’s physical, social, and emotional well-being. It is important to address these underlying factors if we hope to reduce the prevalence of child marriage and promote a healthier, more equitable society.

“the percentage of those who did not attend school was behind several reasons: economic, such as the increase in

the number of family members; social, such as the extent of parental interest”. (KIIs. No. 9 Camp manager 1, date, 23th May,2021).

The previous findings have highlighted the correlation between cramped living conditions, economic difficulties, and the increase in child marriage rates. It was observed that due to the limited space in small tents, families resorted to marrying off their daughters as a means of alleviating overcrowding issues. Poverty also played a significant role as girls dropped out of school and married at a young age due to financial constraints. Both teachers and camp managers acknowledged the impact of the economic crisis on early marriages among refugees. Furthermore, mothers’ consent for early marriages was influenced by poverty since they struggled to fulfil the basic needs of their children. In the context of war and conflicts, families affected by displacement often experienced a loss of resources and became reliant on external aid. This situation could lead to gender differences in how mothers perceived their children, viewing boys as potential providers while seeing girls as economic burdens. Families with only daughters might seek to alleviate financial strain by arranging marriages for their daughters, believing that this would improve both the girl’s life and the family’s circumstances. In some cases, both parents and daughters shared this view when facing challenging economic conditions. Fathers, feeling unable to meet their daughter’s needs individually, had considered child marriage as a means to lighten the family’s burden.

Glinski et. al. (2015), Mourtada et al. (2017), Tasker (2018), and Lives (2018) found that the practice of child brides has a significant economic impact. According to research by the World Bank in 2017, early marriage is projected to cost the world billions by 2030 due to increased population growth and health issues for children under five years old (Wodon et al., 2017). When women are prevented from participating in the labour force, it hinders both the economy and social development. Lack of education also acts as a barrier to formal employment, which is why women with low education levels often require more opportunities for formal earning. Glinski et al. (2015) reported that a one percent increase in the number of girls with secondary education can help raise a country’s annual per capita income development by 0.3 percent. Early marriage is more prevalent in rural areas, and it is essential to educate families and heads of households with low incomes.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The results of this study have profound implications for all concerned, including the general public and stakeholders. It is critical that those responsible for the well-being of refugees develop a prioritised strategy to address the issue of child marriage among Syrian refugees. According to the study participants, child marriage is prevalent due to safety concerns, the conditions of living in camps, financial constraints, and family honour. Although parents mentioned safety and financial reasons for child marriage, their primary motivation was to safeguard their daughters from harm and preserve their family's reputation.

Therefore, the Directorate of Labour and Social Affairs (DOLSA) is vital in coordinating with various United Nations and (NGO) agencies to enhance their plans, and programmes to reduce child marriage among refugees. It has been observed that the number of girls dropping out of school has decreased due to financial assistance provided by the Kurdistan Region Government and NGOs. This aid also helps low-income families. To promote a better understanding of their roles and responsibilities, courses should be developed for couples before they get married. Social workers and case workers need to be better trained to participate in a child protection system and handle complex cases with adequate knowledge of human rights and government policies. This will help them to better understand the plight of refugees and provide proper case management and family interventions. Additionally, psychological support should be provided to girls to empower them. The implementation of procedures in camps can help identify hot spots for violence and harassment. It is crucial for all stakeholders to work together to mitigate the impact of child marriage on young women.

LIMITATION AND FURTHER STUDY

This study's scope is focused on child marriage within two specific refugee camps situated in Duhok City, due to various resource constraints such as cost, location, and time. Regrettably, two other refugee camps and refugees residing in urban areas outside of these camps were not included in the study. As a result, there is a need for further research to examine child marriage among refugee populations

in both rural and urban areas to obtain a more all-encompassing insight into this matter.

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