

“Displaced Childhood”

Narratives of Women From Syria and Turkey Who Were Forced to Marry in Child Age: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Kadınlarla Dayanışma Vakfı (KADAV)
November, 2020

Supported by:
Sivil Toplum Destek Vakfı (STDV)



“Displaced Childhood”



Table of Contents

Introduction and Conceptual Background:	3
Methodology, Limitations and Ethics:	6
Data Collection:	6
Data Analysis:	6
Research Setting:	6
Limitations:	8
Ethics:	8
Objectives of the Research:	9
Research Questions	9
Characteristics of families and communities:	9
Social and cultural characteristics that promote child marriage:	9
Role of laws and civil society organizations in preventing child marriage:	9
Research Findings:	10
Contextual Understanding of Childhood and Adulthood:	10
Gender Segregation in Public Places:	10
Lack of Educational Opportunities:	11
Urban vs Rural Settings:.....	11
Poverty and Economic Class:	12
Culture, Biology and Generational Differences:	13
Decision Making and Patterns of Child Marriage:	14
Poverty and Economic Class:	14
Honor and Chastity:	15
Forced or Consented to? :	15
Motivations For Marriage:.....	17
Patterns of “Proper” Marriage:	17
Life After Marriage at Child-Age:	18
Factors That Delay Marriage at Child-Age:	19
Implications and Conclusions:	20

Introduction and Conceptual Background:

Internationally, a child marriage is defined as a legal or customary marriage before the age of 18. An internationally recognized human rights violation, child marriage directly impacts girls' education, health, psychologic well-being, and the health of their offspring. It is both a cause and a consequence of multiple types of violence, abuse and rights violations.¹ According to United Nations Population Fund, nearly one in three girls continues to marry as a teenager in many parts of the developing world and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) 5.3 mandates the elimination of child marriage as one of its targets by 2030.

Researchers occasionally use the terms child, early and forced marriages interchangeably. "The terms, in fact, are both distinct and overlapping. Child marriage and early marriage largely refer to the same phenomena: marriages in which one or both spouses are under 18 years old. However, early marriage is also sometimes used to describe marriages in which one or both spouses are 18 or older, but with a compromised ability to grant consent. For example, the marriage of a 19-year-old who is not physically or emotionally mature, or who does not have sufficient information about her choices, would be considered an early marriage. Forced marriage is a marriage in which one or both spouses do not give full and free consent, regardless of age. Forced marriage can also refer to a union in which one or both spouses are unable to end or leave the marriage. Because in most countries children are not considered able to give legal consent, all child marriages are sometimes considered forced marriages. However, there are many instances of two adolescents under the age of 18 marrying each other voluntarily"².

Although child marriage is an issue affecting women's and girls' lives all around the world in both developed and underdeveloped countries, "the rates vary dramatically, both within and between countries. In both proportions and numbers, most child marriages take place in rural sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. In South Asia, nearly half of young women and in sub-Saharan Africa more than one third of young women are married by their 18th birthday."³ According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 11% of women worldwide were married before reaching the age of 15.⁴ The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) gives more detailed statistical data about severity of this crime in global level. "41% of girls under 18 are married in East and Central Africa, 29% in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 15% in the Middle East and North

¹ Global Child Health, Anita Raj. When the Mother is a Child: The Impact of Child Marriage on the Health and Human Rights of Girls. 2000

² <https://www.unfpa.org/child-marriage-frequently-asked-questions#what%20is%20the%20difference%20between%20child%20marriage,%20early%20marriage%20and%20forced%20marriage?>

³ https://www.unicef.org/media/media_68114.html (accessed 08/31/2020)

⁴ UNICEF, "Child Marriages: 39,000 Every Day", 08/05/2016, http://www.unicef.org/media/media_68114.html

Africa.”⁵ In terms of absolute numbers, because of the size of its population, India has the most child marriages.⁶

Child marriage is a known phenomenon among boys as well. “While boys and girls who marry in childhood do not face the same risks and consequences due to biological and social differences, the practice is nonetheless a rights violation for children of both sexes. Similar to girls, boys are forced to take on adult responsibilities for which they may not be prepared. The union may bring early fatherhood and result in additional economic pressure in the form of providing for the household; it may also constrain the boy’s access to education and opportunities for career advancement.”⁷ However, girls remain disproportionately affected, with 1 in 5 young women aged 20 to 24 years old married before their 18th birthday, compared to 1 in 30 young men.⁸ Annually, 12 million girls are married before the age of 18, which means 23 girls every minute are married off.⁹ For this reason, this report will focus on girls’ child marriages.

According to Girls Not Brides, child marriage disempowers girls for life, depriving them of their agency, their freedom, fundamental rights to health, education and safety. The victims of early marriage have little or no say in if, when and whom they marry and are often pressured into motherhood, putting them at risk of death or injury during childbirth. Girls are neither physically nor emotionally ready to become wives and mothers. They face more risks of experiencing dangerous complications in pregnancy and childbirth, contracting HIV/AIDS and suffering domestic violence. With little access to education and economic opportunities, they and their families are more likely to live in poverty. Because child marriage is often illegal and/or stigmatized, children born from those unions end up not being registered and young mothers avoid hospitals, denying adequate maternal health to their infants.¹⁰ “Child marriage adds a layer of vulnerability to women that leads to poor fertility control and fertility-related outcomes, and low maternal health care use.”¹¹

The factors driving child marriage are multi-dimensional and often overlap with persistent conditions of poverty, social inequality and vulnerability to violence. Among them, deeply embedded cultural and religious beliefs and practices, gender inequality, socioeconomic

⁵ UNFPA, “Marrying too Young: End Child Marriage”, 2016, p. 27 in E-Journal of Law, YILDIZ Furkan “The Dark Side of Syrian Refugee Crisis: Child, Early and Forced Marriage in the Case of Turkey”.

⁶ UNICEF & UNFPA, “Child Marriages: 39,000 Every Day”, 03/07/2013
https://www.unicef.org/media/media_68114.html (accessed 08/31/2020)

⁷ UNICEF, child marriage information sheet, April 2020, <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/> (accessed 09/01/2020)

⁸ UNICEF, “115 million boys and men around the world married as children”, 06/06/2019,
<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/115-million-boys-and-men-around-world-married-children-unicef>
(accessed 09/01/2020)

⁹ Girls Not Brides, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/what-is-the-impact/> (accessed 09/01/2020)

¹⁰ Global Child Health, Anita Raj When the mother is a child: the impact of child marriage on the health and human rights of girls, 2010, p. 931.

¹¹ Deepali Godha, Journal of Adolescent Health, Vol. 52 Issue 25, “Association Between Child Marriage and Reproductive Health Outcomes and Service Utilization: A Multi-Country Study From South Asia”, p. 511-660,
[https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(13\)00077-3/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(13)00077-3/fulltext) (accessed 09/01/2020)

circumstances such as poverty, the lack of resources to dedicate to the girl child, and the parents' desire to secure economic and social security for their daughters and for the family; the perceived need to protect girls from harm, including sexual violence; the child's will to escape from the family home and potential ill-treatments.¹² However, the available literature details the consequences of child marriage more in-depth than its drivers. This research aims at investigating this gap as thoroughly as possible.

The body of literature shows that, overall, child marriage rates are slowly falling. Around 2000, one in three women between the ages of 20 and 24 reported they had been married as children. In 2017, this number was just over one in five. Rates of child marriage before age 15 also fell, from 11% in 2000 to 5% in 2017.¹³ Globally, "the proportion of young women who were married as children decreased by 15%, from 1 in 4 (25%) to approximately 1 in 5 (21%), that's around 25 million child marriages that have been prevented. Increasing rates of girls' education, proactive government investments in adolescent girls, and strong public messaging around the illegality of child marriage and the harm it causes are among the reasons for the shift."¹⁴ However, despite the decline in child marriages globally, "progress has been uneven and child marriage is not declining fast enough. Because of population growth in regions where child marriage is more prevalent, such as West and Central Africa, the rate of decline is slow and the total number of child marriages is actually projected to increase by 2030. While South Asia has seen dramatic declines in child marriage over the last decade, the global burden of child marriage is now shifting to sub-Saharan Africa. Of the most recently married child brides, close to 1 in 3 are now in sub-Saharan Africa, compared to 1 in 7 25 years ago. While sub-Saharan Africa still has some of the highest rates of child marriage, South Asia is home to the largest numbers of child brides."¹⁵

Eventually, while the topic of child marriage has gained increased attention and been widely studied over the years, there are still a few blind spots. As mentioned above, the driving factors of EFM have not been explored as in-depth as the consequences. In particular, the literature looking at the correlations between migration/displacement and EFM is scarce. Similarly, the literature studying EFM through the length of heteronormativity, where child marriage is used as a form of violence/punishment and control mechanism including gender and sexual orientation assignment, against LGBTI+ children, is virtually inexistent.

¹² Global Child Health, Anita Raj When the mother is a child: the impact of child marriage on the health and human rights of girls, 2010, p. 931 and Girls Not Brides.

¹³ UNFPA, Child Marriage, <https://www.unfpa.org/child-marriage-frequently-asked-questions#how%20common%20is%20child%20marriage> (accessed 09/01/2020)

¹⁴ UNICEF, "Fast Facts: 10 facts illustrating why we must #EndChildMarriage", 02/11/2019, <https://www.unicef.org/eca/press-releases/fast-facts-10-facts-illustrating-why-we-must-endchildmarriage> (accessed 09/02/2020)

¹⁵ UNFPA, Child Marriage, <https://www.unfpa.org/child-marriage-frequently-asked-questions#how%20common%20is%20child%20marriage> (accessed 09/01/2020)

There are various factors contributing to the existence of early marriage and this report explores how women from Turkey and Syrian refugee women living in Turkey who married as children 1) perceive their childhood, 2) the social, political and economic drives behind their child marriages and how they view 3) their lives after marriage and their own children's future.

Methodology, Limitations and Ethics:

Data Collection:

The research utilized desktop research and qualitative methods to explore child marriages among women from Turkey and Syria. Desktop research mostly targeted legal situation of child marriages in Syria and Turkey, as well as previous research on the topic. In terms of qualitative research methods, this study reached a sample of 50 women who married before the age of 18 and in depth interviews were conducted with them. Of these 50 interviewees, 26 of them are Syrian refugee women in Istanbul and 24 of them are women from Turkey. Each in depth interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted between 22.07.2019 and 18.08.2020. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated.

Data Analysis:

Content analysis approach was utilized to analyze the data. All interview transcriptions were read several times to gain a sense of the whole. Afterwards, transcripts were divided into meaning units and coded. Codes were compared according to similarities and differences and sorted into categories and subcategories.

Research Setting:

The legal age of marriage in Turkey is 18 and children can marry at the age of 17 with the consent of their parents or legal guardians. Children at the age of 16 can also marry, with special permission from the courts 'under exceptional circumstances and on vital grounds'¹⁶. "Turkey has one of the highest rates of child marriage in Europe, with an estimated 15% of girls married before the age of 18 and 1% married before the age of 15. Available data may not be representative of the scale of the issue since many child marriages are unregistered and take place as unofficial religious ceremonies"¹⁷. According to statistics announced by the

¹⁶ <https://www.unicef.org/turkey/en/child-marriage>

¹⁷ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/turkey/>

General Directorate, the Family Court judges allowed 11,446 16-year-old children to get married in 2019. According to the Civil Code, a 16-year-old child must have an extraordinary and very important reason to marry.¹⁸

The number of girls getting married in the 16-17 age group is 20 times the number of boys. Accordingly, 1,483 boys were married off in 2015, 1,319 in 2016, 1,081 in 2017, 1,029 in 2018 and 940 in 2019. Conversely, the number of girls who were married off was 31,337 in 2015, 27,637 in 2016, 23,906 in 2017, 20,809 in 2018 and 17,047 in 2019.¹⁹

In 2018, 2% of Turkish women aged between 20-24 were married by 15 years old, and 1.1% of girls aged between 15-19 reported they were also married by the age of 15.²⁰ In 2019, the rate of marriage among girls aged 16-17 was 3.1 %, and the adolescent fertility rate between the ages of 15-19 was 1.7 %. According to TURKSTAT, both the adolescent fertility rate and 'official' female child marriage have decreased.²¹

In pre-war Syria, 13 % of Syrian women aged 20-25 were married before 18; today child marriages have increased among all Syrian populations, including those not displaced.²² Estimates vary, but some show child marriage rates to be four times higher among Syrian refugees today than among Syrians before the crisis.²³ In Lebanon a survey in 2016 shows that 41 % of young displaced Syrian women between 20 and 24 years were married before they turned 18. Given that many marriages are unregistered, these figures may be understating the actual rates.²⁴

Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees. Among the 3,632,442 Syrian refugees currently residing in Turkey. A 2014 UNHCR survey revealed that the age of marriage for Syrian refugee girls in Turkey can be as young as 13.²⁵ According to the 2018 Demographic and Health Survey conducted among Syrian people in Turkey, 45% of Syrian girls in Turkey were married

¹⁸ <https://www.dw.com/tr/t%C3%BCrkiyede-%C3%A7ocuk-ya%C5%9Fta-evlilik-ve-gebelikler-azal%C4%B1yormu/a-54070465>

¹⁹ <https://www.dw.com/tr/t%C3%BCrkiyede-%C3%A7ocuk-ya%C5%9Fta-evlilik-ve-gebelikler-azal%C4%B1yormu/a-54070465> & <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Dunya-Nufus-Gunu-2020-33707>

²⁰ <https://www.ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ECPAT-Briefing-Paper-on-the-Sexual-Exploitation-of-Children-in-Turkey-2020-ENGLISH.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.dw.com/tr/t%C3%BCrkiyede-%C3%A7ocuk-ya%C5%9Fta-evlilik-ve-gebelikler-azal%C4%B1yormu/a-54070465> & <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Dunya-Nufus-Gunu-2020-33707>

²² <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2019/06/19/forced-displacement-and-child-marriage-a-growing-challenge-in-mena/>

²³ <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2017/02/new-study-finds-child-marriage-rising-among-vulnerable-syrian-refugees/>

²⁴ <https://www.nrc.no/perspectives/2019/what-you-need-to-know-about-syrian-child-marriage/>

²⁵ https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_Child-marriage-in-emergencies_2015.pdf

before the age of 18, and 9% before the age of 15. 9.2% of Syrian women aged 20-24 were married by 15, and 13.4% of Syrian women aged 15-19 were married by the age of 15.²⁶

Though there has been anecdotal evidence over the past few years that child marriage rates have dropped among Syrian refugee girls due to increasing awareness within the Syrian community concerning the legal system in Turkey, it is difficult to reach statistical evidence whether there are less child marriages or not. In the initial years Syrian refugees arrived Turkey, due to lack of provision of information, Syrian refugees were not aware of the fact that civil law dictates marriages in Turkey and that sharia law is not legally binding. Therefore, many families indeed assumed that marrying their child girls to men as second wives was legal. However, especially since civil society organizations' took information sessions as part of their main mandate, refugee families became better knowledgeable about the legal system in Turkey. As a result, research findings prove that at least narrative wise rate of approval of child marriages among the Syrian community in Turkey have dropped. However, that being said there is also conviction that as long as the main economic reasons behind child marriages are eradicated, it will not be possible to prevent it. Due to lack of financial resources, families are being forced to marry off their daughters at an early age either to generate extra income for the family or in order to relieve the financial burden of one family member.

Limitations:

The limitation of the report is that it is not representative of early marriages in Turkey and in Syria. This is mainly due to the number of women interviewed which do not necessarily reflect the heterogeneity of their background, level of education, ethnicity, religion or other aspects of their identity. In addition, it does not reflect generational differences, either. Furthermore, it was conducted only in Istanbul and in specific neighborhoods of the city. However, this research was not designed to acquire statistically significant data, but rather focused on obtaining in-depth qualitative information on the underlying social, cultural and economic factors that both motivate and sustain the practice of child marriage.

Ethics:

Informed consent was taken from interviewees where they agreed to their interviews being used for the purpose of preparing this report. Interviews were recorded within the knowledge of the interviewees and there was a translator present in cases where the interviewee and the interviewer did not speak the same language. The interviewee used whatever name she preferred to introduce herself in.

²⁶ <https://www.ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ECPAT-Briefing-Paper-on-the-Sexual-Exploitation-of-Children-in-Turkey-2020-ENGLISH.pdf>

Objectives of the Research:

The objectives of this research are three-fold:

1. Exploring the social and economic circumstances under which child marriage decisions are made.
2. Exploring the influencers and the decision-makers about child marriages within families and communities.
3. Exploring how social and political institutions encourage or discourage the practice of child marriage.

Research Questions:

In line with the above stated research objectives, the research questions addressed in this report are classified under three main headings:

Characteristics of families and communities:

1. What types of household are most affected by child marriage?
2. What are the benefits and risks associated with child marriage according to both the families and children?

Social and cultural characteristics that promote child marriage:

1. What are the understandings that communities have of who is a child and who is an adult?
2. What social and cultural characteristics motivate family or community members to encourage child marriage?
3. What are the rites of passage that girls undergo as a child and during marriage? How is a girl prepared to marriage?

Role of laws and civil society organizations in preventing child marriage:

1. Are women, families, communities influenced by legal frameworks related to child marriage? How do presence or lack thereof legal frameworks prevent or encourage child marriages?
2. Do women know of organizations that struggle against child marriage? Do they have an influence?

Research Findings:

Contextual Understanding of Childhood and Adulthood:

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), a child is defined as anyone from birth to the age of 18. However, what it means to be a child or an adult in a given society is influenced by the state laws as well as economic, social and cultural characteristics of the context. Child marriage practices among Syrian refugees are reported to be high as a result of displacement and conflict. However, child marriage was a significant practice in Syria before the conflict, as well. “The percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before the age of 18 years was estimated at 13% over the period 2002–2011 by UNICEF [18], and at 17.3% in 2009 in the nationally representative Syria Family Health Survey [19]. Marriage is registered by religious courts in Syria and most religious groups in Syria allow girls under the age of 18 to marry with the permission of a legal guardian [14]- and the minimum age for marriage is 13 years of age [20].”²⁷

Some of the more current common place explanations as to why child marriages were high in Syria are culturalist in the sense that it is attributed to “Syrian culture” which is defined to be religious, conservative and patriarchal. Such culturalist explanations assume culture to be static and unchanging, thus paving the way for stereotypes and racist stances against Syrian refugees. In other words, culturalist explanations ignore the legal, political and economic context which lead to structural inequalities as well as having a role in curbing resistance to such structural inequalities. Therefore, the purpose of this research has been to stay away from culturalist explanations and approach the issue from a comparative and gendered perspective on the social, economic, legal and political context in which girls of Syria and Turkey are being forced to marry and in which these child marriages are being rationalized and assumed to be “natural.”

Gender Segregation in Public Places:

According to the interviews conducted among Syrian refugee women in Istanbul, in most cases, the age demarcations of international treaties did not have much meaning among the communities during the families’ decision making process of their girls’ marriage. Communities, families and the girl herself tend to define child and adulthood in terms of other developmental stages: Puberty, withdrawal from school, development of the capacity to care for others and for the household are the markers of maturity. According to the statements of an overwhelming majority of the interviewees among Syrian women, this process of change occurs approximately around the age of 12-13 which also indicates the starting age of gender segregation in public places. According to almost all of the interviews with Syrian women, one of the first and major

²⁷ <https://conflictandhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13031-017-0131-z#:~:text=The%20percentage%20of%20women%20aged,Family%20Health%20Survey%20%5B19%5D>.

results of entering adulthood is not being allowed to play outside the home or with children of the neighbors, with schoolmates or relatives:

“When we were children, we used to play only at home or at school, not on the streets. In Syria, they do not want girls to go out on the street. Girls and boys used to play together until 3rd grade and then it is only girls. “

The proportion of women from Turkey who stated that being banned from being outside home as a marker of entering adulthood is less than Syrian women even though in general among women of Turkey who married at child age, marriage indicates being restricted from public spaces without the presence of the husband or the mother in-law. Both interviewees from Syria and Turkey indicated that they needed the permission of their husbands in order to visit their own parents. Restrictions from public spaces and gender segregation both indicate that issues of honor and reputation of the family are central to what opportunities are being taken away from girls and are replaced with marriage at child age.

Lack of Educational Opportunities:

Such segregation and being banned from the street were usually followed by girls losing the opportunity to continue their education. In other words, girls ended up being banned from the street and school around the same age which marked entering adulthood around the ages of 12 or 13 as stated by most of the Syrian interviewees. In rural areas, girls' education opportunity usually ended at 6th grade, since there were no schools in the village beyond that and continuing education meant that the family would have to move to or send the daughter to the city. While talking about their school years, most interviewees told stories of socialization with their friends rather than the education they were receiving. In other words, it is clear how school provided one of the most important opportunities of socialization outside the family and how women regret not continuing their education mainly because not going to school meant losing an important sphere of establishing relations outside the family. It is important to note that not having access to education and early marriage accompanied each other rather than one being the cause or result of the other. Among most of the interviewees from Turkey, losing the opportunity to continue their education also accompanied child marriages even though this correlation appeared at a later age, around 14-15. Almost of the women interviewed from Turkey and Syria indicated that they regret having stopped going to school and that they want their daughters to continue their education.

Urban vs Rural Settings:

Even though many studies emphasize the rural vs urban difference in child marriages and indicate that child marriages are more common in rural areas, it is observed within this study that it was more the financial situation and level of education of the family rather than living in the city or rural areas that defined when the girl enters adulthood, thus her marriage considered to be

justified. Many of the women interviewed within the scope of this study came from urban areas, yet most of them indicated either living in poverty during their childhood or just above the line of poverty. In other words, what was common among women coming from rural and urban regions was the level of their families' financial situation. Therefore, it is possible to state that level of poverty was more indicative of child marriages more than the urban-rural divide.

However, it is important to note that the rural vs urban distinction played a more important role among interviewees from Turkey than from Syria. Interviewees from Turkey who used to live in rural areas lost their educational opportunities and their right to exist in public spaces at an earlier age compared to interviewees who grew up in urban contexts. Among interviewees from Syria, this distinction was less relevant. Whether the girl's family is living in a rural or an urban setting does not seem to be a determining factor when it comes to age difference between the groom and the bride.

Poverty and Economic Class:

Especially in family contexts marked by high levels of poverty and lower levels of formal education, this transition from childhood to adulthood is very swift. Some interviewees, both among interviewees from Syria and Turkey, mention their mothers' attempts to alleviate poverty through working outside the home marked the child's transition to adulthood. As the mother starts working outside the home, responsibility of taking care of the household falls on the shoulders of the daughters, thus making their transition into adulthood faster. It is important to note however, the difference between how interviewees from Turkey and Syria narrate poverty. Many of the Syrian interviewees mentioned poverty not as a social problem or as a determinant factor in their childhood, but rather as a social reality taken for granted. In other words, with Syrian interviewees, there was not a critical narrative on poverty during their childhood. Their narratives centered around "the father doing his best" to provide for their families and they simply had to be content with what they had. This narrative could be attributed to the more oppressive nature of Syrian regime and lack of space for criticism of life conditions of inhabitants. Poverty and its implications emerge more clearly though in interviews with women from Turkey. As an interviewee stated: " We used to live in a luxurious neighborhood. My dad used to be the doorman there. It might be that we were being excluded there since we did not have any friends there." In other words, interviewees from Turkey had a clearer analysis of their childhood living conditions through the lens of class and their economic positioning within the society.

Interviews with women from Turkey and Syria indicate that girls' transition to adulthood involved watching their mothers do housework and learning from them how to cook and clean, and taking care of their younger siblings. Indeed, taking care of the house and of the younger siblings indicates the end of childhood and transition to adulthood. Usually the transition to adulthood happens as the elder sisters get married. In other words, the duty to take care of younger siblings and do housework is passed onto the younger sisters with the elder sisters getting married and moving outside of the home. Thus, child marriage of one of the daughters has a direct influence

on the future of the younger sisters. As mentioned above, usually this transition happens at an earlier age in families where the mother needs to contribute to family income, as well, thus has to be outside of the home and leaves the younger siblings under the care of the elder girls.

It is important to note that poverty and economic class was mentioned more by interviewees who grew up in urban settings rather than in rural settings both in Turkey and Syria. Also, for those interviewees whose families lived in conspicuous poverty, age difference between the groom and the girl was higher whereas those families who were able to get by and did not necessarily consider marrying off their daughter at child age only as an economic opportunity, cared more about the age of the groom being closer to the age of the girl both in Syria and Turkey.

Culture, Biology and Generational Differences:

Girls were socialized and eased into gender segregation at an early age through naturalization through either religious belief or an assumed culture of what indeed is a social and political phenomenon. Many interviewees stated sentences similar to: “That is how girls and boys are created by Allah: Girls for cooking and for the home, boys taking care of the household and to work outside.” In other words, gender role differences are legitimized through religion and culture. However, it is clear through the interviews that women were not necessarily critical of such legitimization of gender role differences while they were growing up; and their experience of child marriage is the main reason and process through which they became critical of such legitimization. This is also clear from the way they state how they treat their daughters and sons. Most interviewees, both from Turkey and Syria, state that there should not be a difference between sons and daughters. In other words, personal experience of child marriage has resulted in a very stark generational difference in approach to gender roles.

Furthermore, it is important to note that refugee experience among Syrian women has also played a role in this generational difference. Many Syrian interviewees indicate this to be one of the main differences between Turkey and Syria and that “there is no difference between girls and boys here. The rights are the same for women and men.” They also indicate that this is based on both the legal system in Turkey, as well as the societal approach in general.

Some interviewees mentioned biological development to accompany being banned from public spaces. However, biological development was usually portrayed to be taking place at an age earlier than normal. Many Syrian interviewees stated that their families did not allow them to play outside anymore because she was “looking older than she actually is.” Interviewees also mentioned their bodies developed at an earlier age and therefore they started covering their hair. It is possible to argue that such an explanation became common place in order to legitimize the discrepancy between biological and social transition from childhood to adulthood. Other than such references to early puberty, physiological stages of development were not referred to much among interviewees. This also indicates that among communities, adulthood is defined more socially rather than biologically and according to age demarcations.

Even though most of the interviewees from Syria mention they did not feel oppressed while growing up, they now consider “women to be vulnerable and afraid whereas men can overcome all difficulties in life” due to how they had been socialized during their childhood. As already mentioned above, even though they do not feel being oppressed, most interviewees mention that girls and boys were not treated in the same manner as children. Many stated how boys could play outside, come and go as they please while girls were not allowed to be outside or play with their friends. In such cases, issues of honor and family reputation being central to marriage at child age accompany lack of consent by the girl to marriage.

Furthermore, some interviewees, both from Syria and Turkey, indicate that it was the older brother rather than the father, who had power over them. This could be due to the fact that the fathers were outside the home most of the time working, thus delegating the authority to their sons among the household. In other words, whereas fathers were responsible for the economic order of the family, the elder sons were responsible for maintaining the gender segregated order inside the home. Some interviewees mentioned how they violated such an order dictated by social norms, however, their narratives indicate that they were indeed social anomalies in challenging the societal rules.

Despite the difference of treatment between girls and boys, most interviewees from Syria mention their fathers in a positive manner. They indicate that their fathers were hard working and trying to provide for the family. Some stated that their fathers would get angry easily and they mentioned it as a personal characteristic rather than a societal gender norm. In other words, the patriarchal norms and roles were not recognized, but rather attributed as personal traits of the father.

It is striking how most interviewees mentioned that what really marked their transition from childhood to adulthood was marriage. Interviewees, from Turkey and Syria, uttered variants of the following definitive sentence: “My childhood ended when I got married.” What marks transition from childhood to adulthood according to the interview narratives are: 1) access to public spaces being limited 2) discontinuing education 3) housework and taking care of younger siblings, yet the ultimate and conclusive final step being 4) marriage. In other words, according to the societal rules, the term child marriage is an oxymoron since the child is considered to be transitioned to an adult as soon as she gets married despite the age.

Decision Making and Patterns of Child Marriage:

Poverty and Economic Class:

There are various factors that contribute to the existence of child marriages such as coming from families who are working class or with low education level. Literature on child marriages make it clear that many of child marriages are driven by the aim to escape bad living conditions, to meet basic needs and to secure and economic benefit for the family as well as the girl. Such analysis is

especially prevalent to explain child marriages among the Syrian refugee communities given the fact that they are economically disadvantaged due to both legal and social conditions under which they live. However, even though poverty emerges as an aspect of the social context in which Syrian interviewees grew up and were married off, it was not narrated as a cause of their early marriage by most of the interviewees. In other words, there is not a causal link between poverty and early marriage in the narratives of the Syrian interviewees. This is not to mean class position of the interviewees was not a decision-making factor in their child marriage, but rather to state that it was not part of their narrative of the causes of their marriage in most of the cases.

Among interviewees from Turkey, however, poverty emerges as a more important factor in the decision-making process of marrying off a girl. However, both interviewees from Turkey and Syria indicate that they want their daughters to be economically independent in the future so that they can avoid being forced to marry. In other words, even in cases where economic poverty might not appear to be the cause of being married off at child-age, having economic opportunities and economic independence is considered to be a tool to escape an unwanted marriage both for women from Syria and Turkey.

Honor and Chastity:

Contrary to expectations, majority of the interviewees from Turkey and Syria did not directly express matters of honor and chastity as a reason for marriage at child age within their communities. However, gender segregation in public places, prevention of socialization with males even among relatives, discontinuance of education for reasons other than poverty, all refer to issues of honor, chastity and family reputation. In other words, interviewees indicate that marrying girls off at child age, meaning while she is still a virgin, is a way of guaranteeing the family reputation even though interviewees do not refer to it directly in their narratives. Despite the fact that, most of the interviewees mentioned first sexual intercourse after marriage to be a devastating experience, they did not refer to virginity in their discussion of causes of marriage at child age.

Issues of honor come up directly and regularly while talking about their lives after marriage. For both interviewees from Turkey and Syria, it is clear from the narratives that with marriage now the girl represents the honor of the husband's family. However, it is important to indicate that issues of honor and reputation of the husband emerge more evidently when the groom is much older than the girl.

Forced or Consented to? :

When it comes to decision making, most interviewees from Syria state that they were not forced to get married whereas the proportion of interviewees from Turkey who state that they got married without their consent taken is higher. This requires a revisiting of the term "forced" and

“consent” and how interviewees view whether they consented to getting married and whether they had choice and agency in their marriages or not. When asked who made the decision of marriage, an overwhelming majority of interviewees both from Turkey and Syria, indicated that it was their parents. However, in most cases it was usually the father who had the final word. Usually the father does not appear as a brutal “dictator” who forces the daughter to get married, but as someone who does not “know any better” and takes the decision since “it was the way things were done” in their communities. Especially in cases where the mother was against the marriage, the father always argued this is “how things are done”.

Interviewees from Syria usually indicate the main decision maker is the society itself: “It was not about my family. This is the case with Syrian society. My elder sisters also got married in this way. It was not my family’s decision. It is the customs.” In other words, interviewees indicate that decisions were not coerced upon them: “No one made the sentence ‘you will get married.’” “It is normal when they come to ask for your hand. I was not afraid.” In other words, according to most interviewees from Syria “giving consent” as a girl meant not opposing what is generally practiced by society rather than being provided with opportunities, such as education or work, and making informed choices among opportunities. For many interviewees from Turkey, the same definition of consent applied even though some expressed that marriage at child age means it is marriage without consent since it is against the law.

Many interviewees both from Turkey and Syria mentioned that when the groom’s family asked for the bride’s hand, initially the girl’s family, and mostly the mother rather than the father, but in some cases also the father, first opposed the proposal on the grounds that their daughter is still very young. However, such initial refusal appears to be part of a culturally accepted legitimate negotiation stage which is usually followed by acceptance or “giving in” as some interviewees put it. In other words, even the initial refusal did not necessarily indicate the parents felt the need to take the girl’s consent.

Some interviewees mentioned that their opinions were asked about marriage when the proposal came. It was usually the mother asking the opinion of their daughters. Some interviewees indicated that they were neither with or against the proposition since this was the culture into which they grew up and “this is what they saw” around them. They said that they were not threatened by their families or forced to marry, yet they also were not provided with alternatives, especially with no access to education or work opportunities. In some cases, though, especially with interviewees from Turkey, girls got married even though they were working due to the insufficient economic resources of their families.

Majority of the interviewees from Turkey and Syria define consent, not as having an active role and the final say in the decision making process, but rather as not being subjected to violence, such as being beaten and locked up, while the decision is being taken by the family. Furthermore, in general individual’s consent is not considered to be independent from and above the socially expected gender roles. In other words, the girl does not have a mature judgement of getting

married as a socially accepted practice in comparison to other life opportunities such as continuing with her education. This becomes clearer as the women, both from Syria and Turkey, state that they would not have married at child age if they were to make the decision within their current state of mind and experience.

Motivations For Marriage:

Interviewees, both from Turkey and Syria, mentioned they did not have much information or knowledge on sexuality or what married life constitutes. They stated that their perspective on marriage mostly revolved around the dress: bridal gown. They said, as a girl, the idea of having a beautiful bridal gown was what motivated them most to get married. They said they thought “marriage was all about the dress.”

For some interviewees, the main motivation behind accepting to get married was to escape from the adult life they had transitioned to at an early age. Some interviewees said: “I thought I will get away from pressure and will be able to play games when I get married with my sisters in law.” In other words, they assumed that moving away from their parents’ household and into their husband’s parents’ household would bring back their childhood. They were consenting to getting back their childhood, as an indicator of not being consented to the child adulthood they were living: Accepting child marriages was a strategy to escape their child adulthood since they were left with no other options such as continuing their education. For some of the interviewees from Syria, accepting to get married to their relatives who are Turkish citizens and who reside in Turkey, child marriage was a strategy to escape war and to come to live in Istanbul.

Patterns of “Proper” Marriage:

Almost all cases interviewed were traditional child marriages, one that followed accepted social practices involving consent from families, rather than abduction or marriage as a result of rape. Through the interviews, there is a clear view of what constituted a proper marriage, how it was arranged and what steps were followed within the societal context of girls who are married off. One of the main patterns that emerge in the narratives of both the interviewees from Turkey and Syria is getting married to the son of a close relative, in most cases a cousin. Some interviewees mention even though their fathers were against marrying their daughters off at such an early age, they eventually could not say no to the elderly members of the family, usually the father of the groom. In other words, in such cases it was the extended family which had the decision-making power on the child-marriage rather than the nuclear family of the bride. In such cases, most of the time the age gap between the groom and the bride was not big.

In most cases, the girl meets the future groom for the first time when he and his family come to the girl’s family home to ask for her hand. It is usually the groom’s mother who has seen the girl beforehand and decides that she is an appropriate bride for her son. Then she sends a word to

the girl's family and then come as a family to ask for her hand. Interviewees usually mentioned how embarrassed they were when the groom and his family came to ask for her hand. When asked what she felt towards the groom or whether she found him attractive or not, there is usually not a clear answer in the sense that the girl's personal attraction to the groom was neither a decisive factor nor her priority that day. However, it appears that in cases where the age gap between the groom and the bride is small, the interviewees feel more comfortable in talking about how they felt about the groom, mostly their physical appearance since they did not have an opportunity to get to know him properly to judge character.

Interviewees further mentioned that during the engagement period, the girl and the groom do not have the opportunity to get to know each other. Usually they are not left alone in each other's company only, but are accompanied by other family members. Interviewees from Turkey indicate they started covering their hair once they got engaged whereas interviewees from Syria started covering their hair at either an earlier age or when they quit school.

The day of legal marriage at the court is also the day of fiscal exchange between the two families. In the Syrian context, the two families agree upon a dowry which is the amount to be paid to the bride upon divorce. It is the bride's father who has the authority to decide how much the dowry is going to be and it is to be paid to the bride in gold. However, many interviewees indicated that it was not them who received it to keep it in case of a divorce, but it was the groom who had control over it.

Life After Marriage at Child-Age:

Even though they had agreed to child-marriage thinking they would be able to get their childhood back, most interviewees indicated that they did not have enough information regarding married life and what it entails. They also stated that they did not have any relative or anyone they could confide into for advice. Interviewees stated that especially the sexual intercourse experience was scary and painful for them as most did not have any knowledge about sexual intercourse before marriage and therefore did not know what was expecting them. Many of the interviewees pronounced sentences such as: "I wouldn't have married if I knew this." "I changed my clothes and wore long pants and cried and went to sleep." "That experience left me with pain and fear." "Love during engagement period was different from the love during sexual intercourse." In cases where the groom was around the same age as the girl, first sexual intercourse was held off longer whereas elder grooms were forcing for first sexual intercourse more.

The participants believed that they could achieve their personal independence through marriage and acquiring the spouse identity. However, many mentioned their disappointment mainly because they had moved in with their in-laws, which brought more bondage than freedom. They were now responsible for taking care of the household of their in-laws, such as cleaning and cooking and taking care of their brothers and sisters in law who are younger than themselves.

Furthermore, many interviewees, both from Syria and Turkey, also mentioned how they husbands' behavior changed after marriage and they were less compassionate towards their wives, especially those who were much older than themselves. Some also mentioned they were subjected to physical and emotional violence from their husbands. Some marriages, especially among the interviewees from Turkey, ended up with divorce. While many girls and their parents considered marriages would provide them with economic gain, in many instances economic hardships for the girl were the main experience during marriage. In such cases, not only the relation between the bride and the groom was strained, but also the married couple were considered as a burden to their families and thus resentment occurred between them and their families as well as between the two families of the married couple. This was also mainly the case where there was not much age difference between the groom and the bride.

Many interviewees, from Turkey and Syria, also mentioned that they did not have much knowledge about pregnancy and raising a child. The extended family played an important role in raising the children of child-marriages in both countries, but more so in Syria. Most interviewees, from Turkey and Syria, stated that they are against their daughters getting married as a child and that they prefer their daughters continuing their education in order to gain their independence. In that context, they mentioned their regret for not being unable to complete their education. In general, interviewee narratives center around regret of their child-marriages when talking about the future of their own daughters rather than while talking about their own experience of marriage. For many, their mothers play an important role in dealing with difficulties of married life, including raising children.

Furthermore, many mention how they have been subjected to domestic violence after marriage. Divorce appears as an important option especially once domestic violence starts. Whereas not many complained about their relations with their fathers before marriage, for many they expressed the importance of their mothers after they got married.

Factors That Delay Marriage at Child-Age:

According to the interviews, below are the major factors that play an important role in delaying child marriages:

1. Educational level of parents: The higher the level of education of the parents, the less they are willing to marry off their daughters at child age. Furthermore, the higher the level of education of the parents, the more space there is for the girls to negotiate with their parents about delaying marriage.
2. Educational opportunities for the girls: If the girl has educational opportunities, it is more probable that child marriage will be postponed. Educational opportunities mostly depend on: a) whether the family lives in a rural or an urban setting, b) whether the family can

afford to send the girl to school, c) whether the laws of the country enforce compulsory education.

3. Opportunities in income generating activities: If the girl has access to income generating activities, it becomes easier to ward off financial excuses behind child-marriage. Financial contribution to family income makes the girl's negotiation capabilities stronger. However, this might also imply a choice between child marriage and child labor.
4. Legal structure of the country in which the girl is residing: Interviewees indicate that not only should the state have laws for compulsory education and preventing marriage before 18, but also the state should have enforcement mechanisms for the law to be applied at all conditions. Especially for refugees, it is vital that they are not left outside the legal mechanism and the law enforcement procedures.
5. Outside the family support: Usually it is difficult for the girl herself to seek support in order to prevent child marriage since she most of the time lacks both the skills as well as the information on where to seek help from. Therefore, it is important for the elder female members of the family, such as elder sisters or the mother who oppose child marriages, to have access to civil society organizations or legal aid, in order to take steps to halt child marriages. In the case of refugees, civil society organizations especially play an important role in providing channels of access to legal information and legal support for refugee women.

Implications and Conclusions:

1. Most interviewees, both from Syria and Turkey, grew in low income families with socioeconomic difficulties and low levels of education.
2. In a vast majority of the cases interviewed, child marriage is perceived to be a cultural practice rather than a reflection of economic and social conditions into which they were socialized.
3. Extended family plays an important role in the early-marriage decision making process both in Turkey and Syria. If the groom is a close relative, the authority of the extended family exceeds the authority of the nuclear family.
4. However, if the groom candidate's social conditions are not fit to marry the daughter, the nuclear family was able to oppose the marriage both in Syria and Turkey.
5. Honor, chastity and family reputation appear as important factors in the family's decision to marry off the girl even though the interviewees do not refer to these concepts directly in their narratives.

6. Girls do not have much power in the decision-making process due to lack of skills and alternatives such as education that would make them stronger in negotiation.
7. Even though most interviewees state that they were not forced to marry at child-age, their definition of consent does not indicate an active capacity to oppose the generally accepted gender roles within the community when it comes to the decision-making process of marriages.
8. Girls' own agency and why they agree needs to be taken into consideration to understand the reasons of child marriages. Some were pushed towards marriage in order to escape the adult life into which they were pushed into in the first place.
9. Most who were subjected to child-marriages indicate that they were not able to make the appropriate decision concerning child-marriages because they could not foresee the implications of child-marriages.
10. Sexual intercourse is usually the first shocking experience that results in regret of marriage for the girls even though there is not a reference to virginity in their narratives.
11. Whereas parents might see child marriage as a potential opportunity to benefit financially and an opportunity to ease the strain on household resources, in many cases the groom ends up not being able to provide for his household. In such cases, relations between the bride and the groom as well as the extended families are strained. This is mostly the situation when the age difference between the groom and the bride is not high.
12. Most interviewees narrate their marriage as a story of regrets even though they do not think they were forced into marriage. All interviewees are against their daughters getting married before the age of 18.

Supported by: STDV-Sivil Toplum Destek Vakfı & KADAV-Kadınlarla Dayanışma Vakfı

Written by: Şenay Özden

In Depth Interviews by: Nurten Demirbaş

Contributions by: Coralie Forget, Havin Kharahalil

and Aybeniz Karataş, Beyza Bilal, Bihter Somersan, Özgül Kapdan, Özgür Sunata, Sanem Öztürk.