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Tackling the Challenges of Child Marriage Among Syrian Refugees

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Brief Analysis

During a trip to the Kawergosk Syrian refugee camp in the Erbil governorate of the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI) to interview refugees on their employability skills, I came across a list of over a dozen registered, underaged divorcees. In some of these cases, adolescents as young as sixteen had already been divorced several times. With the destitute situations of the camps, underage marriage is, at first glance, a surprising outcome. Yet child marriage has become a growing phenomenon among Syrian refugees in Iraq, with a devastating impact on the lives of those involved. These often spontaneous relationships have a high potential for causing those involved to suffer for the remainder of their lives.

A study conducted by the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) shows that this phenomenon is common among Syrian refugees in countries neighboring Syria as well, namely Lebanon and Jordan. Ongoing conflicts and subsequent humanitarian crises have led to a dramatic increase in child marriages within Syrian refugee communities.

One of the other driving forces of this social trend is the lack of barriers preventing this practice. Local law has limitations: although the legal age for marriage in Iraq is eighteen, Iraqi civil law allows for adolescents to marry in the presence of one's parent or with written parental consent. In Syria, the legal age for Syrian girls to marry is seventeen, and religious clerics can make exemptions for younger ages. In the refugee camps, however, no one is sure which laws should apply—the rule of the hosting country or the rule of the country of origin.

The increase in this phenomenon can also be attributed to several factors within the camps, which, when pinpointed, may allow for aid to effectively counter this growing problem. Aside from the most serious challenges, including a lack of parenting education, contraception resources, an increase in social pressures, and rampant poverty, there are several challenges in the lives of youth living in refugee camps that may drive underage marriages.

A lack of entertainment and available social activities within the camp for adolescents, children, and adults alike is an issue that cannot be understated in terms of its effects on the mental health of refugees. In some cases, refugees are secluded in fenced-in communities and have limited access to the city center, theme parks, community centers, or even accessible internet services. Most Syrian refugees cannot afford to pay for transportation to the city or purchase internet services.

Social stigma is also a major driver; extramarital intercourse is prohibited and relationships between men and women outside of a marital relationship or an extended family circle are stigmatized. Since dating is not an option, teenagers get married to fulfill their curiosity and socialize with the opposite gender.

Marriage can also offer practical benefits to the issue of widespread shortages. In refugee camps, marriage contracts can provide many benefits, including extra food rations and better access to shelter for the household. In addition, marrying off a child helps ease the financial burden of the parents, shifting this burden to the adolescents themselves.

However, while there may be temporary benefits to entering into a marriage at an early age in the refugee camps, in the long run these marriages have a devastating impact. Just as contraceptives hold social stigma outside marriage, this is the case within marriages as well. Underaged newlyweds are especially prone to unintended pregnancies, and these pregnancies can put the life of the teenage mother and the child at risk, with an increased likelihood of maternal and infant mortality. Children of these adolescent parents tend to be unvaccinated, malnourished, and are at a greater risk of having a fatal accident before the age of one. Domestic violence against women is also more likely in underage marriages, making these arrangements particularly dangerous for adolescent girls. It will be especially hard for the young women involved to raise children and get out of poverty.□

Aside from the physical dangers of underage marriages, these arrangements have negative long-term educational and fiscal impacts as well. Young couples often drop out of school due to their new, increased responsibilities and the inability to pay for their own educational services. The result is a number of poorly educated individuals who will have fewer job opportunities. They are more likely to end up like their parents: poorly educated and without an opportunity for upward social mobility. Moreover, children of these adolescent parents will be less competent in their skill set compared to their counterparts raised by adult parents. Over decades, this process will eventually widen the gap between poor and rich, introducing more social problems into Syrian society writ large. High unemployment rates and low education rates also create a fertile environment for extremist recruitment, cycling conflict into future generations.

Preventing child marriage among refugees has failed to become a priority for humanitarian organizations and NGOs, which tend to focus on other aspects of the Syrian refugee crisis. The United Nations Refugee Agency—in conjunction with other local and international NGOs—has allocated the lion's share of the total estimate of 139 million dollars of 2019 contributions from donor countries to providing shelter and non-food items, livelihood supports, primary healthcare, mental health, and psychological support. In comparison, little attention has been given to raising awareness of the drawbacks of child marriage or to education programs, child protection, or parenting programs to help prevent the issue. However, child marriages have a real impact on many of the issues to which the UNHCR has provided funding, and the issue should therefore be seen as part and parcel of the UN's efforts to support refugees' health and livelihoods.

For its part, the United States can make its contributions to the UNHCR conditional to providing these services in order to amplify parenting and child protection programs in the region, especially for Syrian refugees. Alternatively, the UNHCR can increase its psychological and consulting support for child parents, providing them some measure of structure to insulate against the more harmful potential effects of child marriage. Community-led initiatives should also be implemented to address and combat the acceptability of this negative social norm. Parallel to community

efforts, religious clergies and community leaders should also use their social standing to discourage this practice. Enforcing host communities' civil law may also help.

However, if left unchecked, the phenomenon of child marriage will have a dire impact on society and will initiate health, economic, and security crises years down the road. ❖



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