



insights on child marriage



discussions on
gender-based violence

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This brief has been developed by UNRWA's Gender Section in the Protection Division, and is dedicated to the protection of and support to all Palestine refugee gender-based violence (GBV) survivors.

About UNRWA

UNRWA is a United Nations Agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 and is mandated to provide assistance and protection to registered Palestine refugees. Its mission is to help Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and the Gaza Strip to achieve their full potential in human development, pending a just solution to their plight. UNRWA services encompasses education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance, and emergency assistance. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions.

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IN 2022, 650 MILLION WOMEN AND GIRLS WERE MARRIED BEFORE THEY REACHED AGE 18.¹



Introduction to Gender-Based Violence at UNRWA

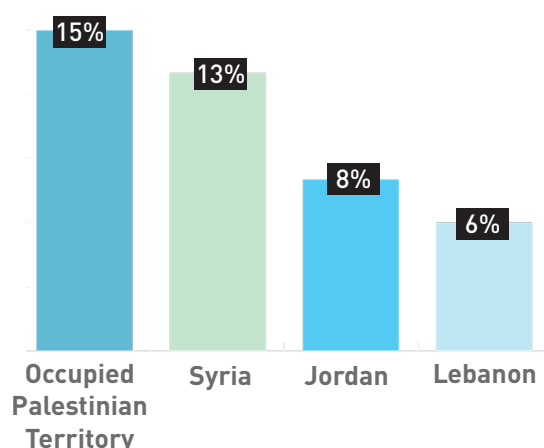
From July 2023 to March 2024, UNRWA conducted primary and secondary research on Palestine refugee community perceptions of Gender-Based Violence (GBV). This research, which included focus group discussions (FGD) and Key Informant Interviews (KII), sought to capture thematic priorities and key trends related to GBV to better inform evidence-based gender-responsive policies, programmes and survivor-centred services provided by the Agency. Reflections from over 600 community members of all ages across UNRWA's five fields of operation revealed four recurring thematic GBV priorities: domestic violence, child marriage, violence in schools and sexual violence.² This brief is part of a series which will present insights on the prevalence, causes and impact of these forms of GBV on the Palestine refugee community. These briefs accompany UNRWA's longer report encompassing findings, analysis and recommendations across all GBV themes emerging from the research across all five operational contexts. In Gaza, the research was conducted prior to 7 October 2023 and serves as a unique snapshot of community perceptions prior to this date.



The Phenomenon of Child Marriage

Child marriage, also known as 'early marriage', is a global human rights challenge with severe consequences for the child brides, their children, and their communities. It significantly increases the risk of domestic violence, health complications from early pregnancies, and perpetuates poverty.³ Child marriage is a form of GBV because it disproportionately affects girls. **Globally, 650 million women and girls worldwide were married before turning 18.**⁴ These girls are less likely to finish school and obtain employment and are at greater risk of exploitation and abuse – adverse outcomes that extend beyond the individual, affecting their families and communities.⁵

In 2022, reported rates of early marriage were higher in Occupied Palestinian Territory (15 per cent) and Syria (13 per cent) compared to Lebanon (6 per cent) and Jordan (8 per cent) (Bar Graph A). However, research indicates that **early marriage is likely to be underreported**, particularly in contexts where it is not recognised as a form of GBV.⁶ Across the region, child marriage rates decreased in the last two decades, but have increased slightly in the last few years, largely due to rising poverty levels and growing influence of conservative norms and traditions among some segments of society.⁷



Bar Graph A: Percentage of women who were married before the age of 18 (2022)⁸

¹ UNICEF, 'Child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa', February, 2022.

² Note that the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in Gaza were conducted prior to 7 October 2023 and serve as a unique snapshot of community perceptions prior to this date. FGDs in West Bank were conducted in early 2024.

³ Girls Not Brides, 'Where Child Marriage Happens', June, 2018.

⁴ UNICEF, 'Child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa', February, 2022.

⁵ UNICEF, 'Child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA): Executive summary', 2017.

⁶ Streatfield, P. K., Kamal, N., Ahsan, K. Z., & Nahar, Q., 'Early marriage in Bangladesh: Not as early as it appears', 2015.

⁷ UNICEF, 'National Study on Violence Against Children in Jordan', December, 2021.

⁸ UNICEF, 'Child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa', February, 2022.



National Legal Frameworks

In Syria, the legal minimum age for marriage is 18 years for boys and 17 years for girls.⁹ The legal marriage age is set at 18 years for both men and women in Jordan. This is the same for the West Bank including East Jerusalem.¹⁰

In the Gaza Strip, marriage regulations are governed by Article 5 of the Egyptian Family Rights Law No. 303/1954,¹¹ but its application is inconsistent, particularly in relation to personal status rights.¹² The Sharia Judicial Council in Palestine sets the minimum marriage age at 15 lunar years for females and 16 lunar years for males,¹³ and religious Sharia courts approve marriages for minors if they deem it in the “best interests of the child”.¹⁴

Lebanon does not have a unified Personal Status Law or civil code governing the legal age for marriage, divorce or child custody.¹⁵ Instead, each of the 18 officially recognized religious communities in Lebanon sets its own regulations regarding the legal age for marriage.¹⁶ For example, among Catholics, the minimum age is 16 for boys and 14 for girls. Sunni Muslims have set the minimum age at 18 for boys and 17 for girls. For members of the Jewish faith, it is minimum 18 for boys and 12.5 for girls with granting authority from the father.¹⁷



Perceived Dynamics of Child Marriage

During discussions across all UNRWA fields of operation, child marriage is attributed to the intersecting and varying influences of socio-economic conditions, traditional norms and values, and access to education. Among participants from the West Bank, it was seen as prevalent in economically disadvantaged areas, while both male and female adolescents in Jordan attributed the practice to cultural and economic factors. In Lebanon, younger people saw child marriage as an expression of traditional and outdated norms. Older adult participants in Syria characterized the phenomenon as more persistent, while younger people remarked on changing attitudes. Varying perceptions of the complex reasons behind the continued prevalence of child marriage across age and context reflect the need for a multi-faceted approach when addressing it.

Participants reported the widespread occurrence of child marriages notwithstanding low rates of formal reporting, although perceptions of its frequency are mixed. For example, while a young man in Syria remarked, *“Early marriage is still happening, but not as much as before. People are becoming more aware of its negative effects”* (FGD, young male, 18-29), young women in both Gaza and the West Bank believe that child marriage is still common. One young woman in Gaza attributes this to the fact that males prefer to marry young girls in order to raise them as they want: *“Men want young brides so they can mould them into the kind of wives they prefer, which perpetuates the practice of early marriage”* (FGD, young female, 18-29).

Socio-Cultural Norms



I was married at 14 by force by my aunt because he was her son, and I carried a big responsibility at a young age. I learned that I would never marry off my daughter at this age - (FGD, young female, 18-29)



To varying degrees, participants across contexts identified socio-cultural norms, traditions and practices as key causal factors. One participant from Syria noted *“Cultural customs and traditions in some communities encourage early marriage and accept it”* (FGD, elderly male, 55+), while in Lebanon, another participant observed: *“Customs and traditions are still strong, so they marry their daughters young”* (FGD, elderly female, 55+). This suggests that while their power has diminished over time, traditional norms that are accepting of child marriage still influence marriage practices in some parts of the community. For example, one participant from Gaza noted that *“Traditions are strong, and many people want to make a large family early”* (FGD, adult male, 30-54).

⁹ Girls Not Brides, *‘Child Marriage Atlas, Syria’*, 2024.

¹⁰ Swana, G., *‘Child marriage in Jordan: Breaking the cycle’*, 2024.

¹¹ Norwegian Refugee Council, *‘The Shari’a Courts and Personal Status Law in the Gaza Strip’*, January, 2011.

¹² Aisha Association for Woman and Child Protection, *‘Fact-sheet regarding early marriage in the Gaza Strip’*, 2020.

¹³ Swana, G., *‘Child marriage in Jordan: Breaking the cycle’*, 2024.

¹⁴ Girls Not Brides, *‘Child marriage Atlas, Lebanon’*, 2024.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ United Nations, *‘Committee on the Rights of the Child – Initial Report Submitted by the State of Palestine’*, 2019.

These same traditions can lead to controlling behaviours, restrictions on women's mobility and autonomy, and acts of violence, dynamics that further hinder women from speaking out or escaping abusive relationships, further entrenching GBV.¹⁸ For example, a young woman in Jordan shared, *"I was married at 14 by force by my aunt because he was her son, and I carried a big responsibility at a young age. I learned that I would never marry off my daughter at this age"* (FGD, young female, 18-29). Her story highlights the imposition of familial will over personal autonomy, a common theme that underscores the gender dynamics of child marriage.

Similarly, participants from Lebanon highlighted that sometimes it is the father or male guardian who decides whether and/or whom a girl marries, reflecting the influence of patriarchal norms. As one male participant stated, *"the father decides, for sure"* (FGD, young male, 18-29). For some girls, the pressure to marry before they reach adulthood is seen as inevitable, rooted in societal expectations that their future lies in domestic life: *"because her fate is to be in her husband's house, raising children"* (FGD, young female, 18-29). In Syria, one older man commented, *"Some families still believe that marrying their daughters early will protect their honour and reduce financial burden"* (FGD, adult male, 55+).

These reflections are consistent with the research that demonstrates marriage is often seen as a way to protect a girl's honour, and ensuring adherence to social norms.¹⁹ Driven by concerns for the young girls' safety and familial honour, families consider early marriage as a shield from potential harm in environments where girls may be susceptible to exploitation.²⁰ This belief is prevalent across all contexts. Younger female participants in Gaza and Lebanon expressed frustration with the lack of agency in these decisions, while older participants may accept it as a necessary practice. Whether consciously or not, framing early marriage as an issue of protecting a girl's 'honour' serves to perpetuate traditional social norms.

In West Bank, where early marriage rates are perceived to have declined, participants attributed this trend to different reasons. One male participant from the West Bank observed: *"In the camp, this phenomenon is non-existent and is generally rejected by both young people and girls"* (FGD, adult male, 30-54). Another participant noted: *"In the past, laws permitted this, but currently, after the law was passed to set the minimum age at 18, the phenomenon has definitely diminished"* (FGD, adult male, 30-54).

Poverty

Among participants from Syria and Jordan, economic hardship is perceived across all age groups as a key contributing factor towards early marriage, although younger participants were more likely to identify education as an alternative. In Syria, poverty and the hope of alleviating financial burdens was frequently cited as a primary driver of early marriage: *"Financial reasons like poverty and necessity mean that parents marry off their daughters to someone who has money"* (FGD, adult male, 55+). Similar views were noted in Jordan where one participant observed that early marriage *"outside refugee camps (e.g., in cities) is less common because families outside the camp are economically better off and they do not need to marry off their girls due to economic considerations"* (FGD, adult male, 30-54).

Research supports the conclusion that families with limited economic resources or prospects are more likely to resort to marrying off their daughters at a young age, especially in the event of loss of jobs and livelihoods during crises.²¹ A UNICEF report indicates that girls from the poorest households are twice as likely to be coerced into child marriage compared to those from wealthier households.²² This disparity highlights the direct link between economic hardship and the increased risk of child marriage as a coping mechanism.²³ Additionally, a study exploring disability as a determinant of child marriage found that women with disabilities were 1.62 times more likely to report child marriage than those without disabilities.²⁴ Moreover, women with disabilities who had been married as children were 1.78 times more likely to report experiencing intimate partner violence in the past year compared to women without disabilities with no history of child marriage.²⁵

Older community members recounted economic hardships as a driving force behind child marriage. One participant in Lebanon explained, *"Poverty is the main factor in marrying girls underage; some families marry their daughters to wealthy older men for a better life"* (FGD, adult female, 30-54).

¹⁸ Mahamid, F., 'Gender-based violence experiences among Palestinian women during the COVID-19 pandemic: Mental health professionals' perceptions and concerns', *Journal of Conflict and Health* 16, 2022.

¹⁹ Protection Cluster, 'Child marriage in the occupied Palestinian territory', November, 2016.

²⁰ Bartels, S. A., Michael, S., & Bunting, A., 'Child marriage among Syrian refugees in Lebanon: At the gendered intersection of poverty, immigration, and safety', *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 19(4), 472-487, 2021.

²¹ Girls Not Brides, 'Child marriage and conflict & crisis', 2024.

²² UNICEF, 'Child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa', 2018.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Kanselaar, S., Zhang, C., Grace, K. T., Lindley, L. L., Zaidi, J., & Gupta, J., 'Exploring disability as a determinant of girl child marriage in fragile states: A multicountry analysis', *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 73(6), 1101-1109, 2023.

²⁵ Ibid

“*Early marriage eliminates the opportunity for education. I have seen few cases where the husband allows the girl to complete her education* - (FGD, adult female, 30-54)

Lack of access to education for girls was another perceived causal factor in parental decisions that their daughters should marry before adulthood. Many female participants noted that families often prioritise educating boys over girls. This is particularly the case when poverty is relevant as one young woman in Lebanon commented, *“Because of poverty, families prefer that boys continue their education because boys can travel and work, while girls are destined to stay in the camp”* (FGD, young female, 18-29). In environments where Palestine refugees face limited opportunities, there is a tendency for men to prioritise their employment over women’s, underscoring the perceived greater importance of male work.²⁶ This outlook remains prevalent despite women pursuing higher education. It positions them primarily as wives, mothers, and caregivers, reinforcing the notion that their main societal role is within the confines of marriage.²⁷

Consequently, child marriage is also fueled by the perception that girls have a lower status compared to boys.²⁸ When girls do not have access to education, marriage is often seen as the only viable option for their future. Participants from the West Bank and Lebanon perceived limited educational opportunities as a driver of child marriage, particularly among girls from poorer families, where continuing education is seen as less viable. However, younger people described education as a potential escape from child marriage. One teenage girl in the West Bank mentioned, *“In many cases, girls are married off early because they do not have access to education, and their families see no other future for them”* (FGD, adolescent female, 12-17).

The declining prevalence of child marriage in Gaza was attributed to increased access to education and greater awareness of its negative impacts: *“Many families now prioritise their daughter’s education over early marriage because they understand the long-term benefits”*, explained one woman (FGD, adult female, 30-54). Another woman echoed, *“Nowadays, people are looking for employed and educated women for marriage. This means that the rate of early marriage has decreased”* (FGD, adult female, 30-54).

Perceived Consequences of Child Marriage

“*A girl who marries before 18, is raised by her husband in a dominant way, and if she makes a mistake, he might abuse her* - (FGD, young female, 18-29)

The consequences of child marriage are profound and multi-faceted. **Health consequences** are a major concern with early pregnancies posing significant risk especially where access to specialized healthcare is limited. One woman in Syria observed: *“If the girl is not physically mature, marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth can affect her health and she could even die”* (FGD, adult female, 55+). Similarly, in Gaza a young girl emphasized, *“Young girls are not physically or emotionally ready for the demands of pregnancy and childbirth, which puts them at great risk”* (FGD, adolescent female, 12-17).

Marital conflict and domestic violence were also frequently mentioned as potential consequences of child marriage. Domestic violence was also perceived as more likely in cases of child marriage among participants in the West Bank and Lebanon. Women across different age groups also noted the increased risk of divorce and subsequent social and psychological concerns. One woman in Lebanon emphasized that child marriage often results in power imbalances within the relationship, leading to abusive dynamics. She explained, *“A girl who marries before 18 is raised by her husband in a dominant way, and if she makes a mistake, he might abuse her”* (FGD, young female, 18-29). One community leader in Gaza noted, *“Early marriage subjects girls to various forms of violence, including from their husbands and in-laws, especially in extended family settings”* (FGD, community leaders).

Psychological stress is another major consequence, with young brides often unprepared for the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood, a sentiment shared across Syria, West Bank and Lebanon. *“Psychologically, a young girl is not ready to raise children”* (FGD, adult female, 55+). This statement from an older Syrian woman reflects the view that young brides are often unprepared for the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood, leading to significant emotional stress. Participants in Lebanon expressed similar views, including by one woman who shared, *“Girls who marry early lose their childhood and adolescence, and this causes psychological distress”* (FGD, adult female, 30-54). Further, in the West Bank, it was noted that *“Girls who are married off early often suffer from severe trauma*

²⁶ UN Women, *‘Understanding Masculinities: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) – Middle East and North Africa’*, 2017.

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ Protection Cluster, *‘Child marriage in the occupied Palestinian territory’*, November, 2016.

and depression, as they are forced to abandon their dreams and aspirations" (FGD, adult female, 30- 54). Older participants tended to focus on practical challenges, while younger community members highlighted the emotional impact.

One of the most frequently mentioned consequences in all contexts was the **disruption of education**. Many participants observed that child marriage forces girls to leave school, with one male participant in Lebanon stating, "*Many girls stop their education when they marry, and this is a negative thing*" (FGD, young male, 18-29). Similarly, one participant in Gaza explained: "*Marriage affects education as it reduces the chance of girls continuing their studies*" (FGD, adult male, 30-54). Such disruption is perceived to perpetuate poverty, limits social mobility, and reinforces traditional gender roles that undervalue women's capabilities and aspirations. One woman in Syria stated: "*Early marriage eliminates the opportunity for education and there were few cases where the husband allows the girl to complete her studies*" (FGD, adult female, 30-54).

Child marriage is also perceived to prematurely **halt personal growth** and development and create social isolation. A teenager in Jordan highlighted the necessity for individual growth before marriage, stating, "*This is wrong because [the husband] has not built himself yet*" (FGD, adolescent male, 12-17). Similarly, one young woman in Lebanon spoke of a sense of social isolation: "*The girl who marries before 18 is marginalized by her peers, and they don't play with her because she's seen as mature and responsible for a family*" (FGD, young female, 18-29). As a community leader in Gaza observed, "*The community expects a married woman to focus on her husband and children, which limits her opportunities for personal growth and employment*" (FGD, community leaders). This view reflects the concern that married girls can often be overwhelmed, and with no access to resources and support to navigate familial, health and parental challenges.

Community members across all contexts perceived the loss of educational opportunities both as a cause and consequence of child marriage. Participants in Lebanon, Gaza and Jordan particularly viewed social isolation and restricted personal development as significant repercussions. Young brides are often confined to domestic roles with little opportunity for self-growth. Perceptions differ slightly by age, with younger women more likely to lament the loss of potential, while older women focus on the practical challenges of early motherhood and household responsibilities.

Responses to Child Marriage & Proposed Solutions

Family and community responses to early marriage are varied. In some cases, communities are taking steps to reduce child marriage through awareness programmes and educational initiatives. One example is from a community leader in Syria, who "*conducted numerous awareness sessions to educate families about the risks of early marriage and the importance of education*" (KII, female community leader). Yet, also in Syria, "*many still believe that early marriage is a way to ensure the girl's security and to alleviate financial burdens on the family*" (FGD, adult female, 30-54). In contrast, others highlighted ongoing support for the practice due to deep-seated cultural beliefs and economic necessity. Community members identified several measures that could reduce the prevalence of child marriage:

- Providing better access to education for girls and raising awareness about its importance can help delay marriage. "*Education is crucial for girls to realise their potential and avoid early marriage*" (FGD, adult female, 30-54).
- Increasing economic opportunities to reduce financial burdens that lead to child marriage: "*Economic stability is essential for families to resist the pressure to marry off their daughters early*" (FGD, adult male, 55+).
- Strengthening legal frameworks that prohibit child marriage and ensuring that they are effectively communicated to communities: "*Strict enforcement of marriage laws and penalties for violations can help reduce early marriage*" (FGD, female community leader).
- Engaging local communities, including community leaders in dialogue to discuss norms and attitudes towards child marriage: "*Community leaders play a vital role in shaping attitudes and practices; their involvement is crucial*" (FGD, male community leader).



Conclusion

Child marriage remains a complex challenge across Palestine refugee communities in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Gaza, and the West Bank including East Jerusalem, with profound implications for the health, education, and overall well-being of young girls. Economic hardship, limited opportunities in education and cultural norms and perceptions are key contributing factors to the prevalence of child marriage. The experiences shared by community members highlight the consequences of child marriage, which are perceived to limit girls' autonomy and potential. Moreover, the research shows that the repercussions of child marriage are multi-faceted, encompassing severe health risks, disruption of education, psychological distress, and increased vulnerability to domestic violence. It also reveals that child marriage not only affects individual girls, but also has broader implications for families and communities, through exacerbated poverty, poor health outcomes for children and overall limited socio-economic mobility.

As highlighted by the communities, responding to child marriage requires a coordinated strategy that prioritises economic stability, educational opportunities, and conversations around cultural norms. Such efforts must be grounded in an understanding of the local context and informed by ongoing engagement with the communities involved, ensuring that interventions are community-driven and culturally sensitive.



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