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A Closer Look into Child Marriage

(Focusing on refugees in ten informal settlements in Southern Lebanon)

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Acronyms, Abbreviations and Terminology:

PRL: Palestinian refugees in Lebanon

PRS: Palestinian Refugees from Syria living in Lebanon

S: Syrian

L: Lebanese

PPE: Personal protective equipment

FGDs: Focused group discussions

PC: Popular Committees consist of male members appointed by the Palestinian political parties to “serve their communities” and act as local governance in the informal settlements.

WC: Women Committees are made up of women who have undergone PARD’s comprehensive training program aimed at strengthening decision-making and problem-solving in which the participants acquire skills such as managing, planning and implementing activities that are relevant to their individual, familial and community needs, community mapping, conflict mediation, needs-assessment, and in advocating and lobbying for their rights as women and as refugees. These WCs also serve as a community alarm system, provide ideas, input and involvement in project implementation and serve as spokespeople to the male-dominated Popular Committees that govern the Palestinian gatherings. (PARD annual report, 2020)

GBV: Gender-Based violence

NGO: Non-governmental organization

Educational levels:

Illiterate: did not receive any formal education

Elementary: Grade 1 through grade 5

Primary: Grade 6 through grade 9

Secondary: Grade 10 through grade 12

Vocational: vocational education equivalent to secondary levels

I. Definition of child marriage:

Child, early, and forced marriages or unions are a global problem across many different countries, cultures, religions, and ethnicities.

Child Marriage is defined as a marriage of a girl or boy before the age of 18 and refers to both formal marriages and informal unions in which children under the age of 18 live with a partner as if married. Child marriage affects both girls and boys, but it affects girls disproportionately.

Child marriage violates children's rights and places them at high risk of violence, exploitation, and abuse.

South Asia has the highest rates of child marriage in the world. Almost half (45%) of all women aged 20-24 years reported being married before the age of 18. Almost one in five girls (17%) are married before the age of 15. (The economic impact of child marriage, Global synthesis report, June 2017).

India has the largest number of child brides in the world – one-third of the global total. Bangladesh has the highest rate of child marriage in Asia (the fourth-highest rate in the world). Nepal has also one of the highest rates of child marriage in Asia for both boys and girls.

Tragically, about 40 million girls worldwide are currently married or in a union. Each year, some 12 million more girls will marry before reaching age 18 – and of those, 4 million are under age 15. (Child Marriage: The Devastating End of Childhood, 2013)

By 2030, it's estimated that 150 million girls will lose their childhoods due to child marriage. (Save the Children International)

A recent UNICEF report was published in 2021 explored the findings of recent studies indicating almost 10 million additional girls are now at an increased risk of being married as a direct consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. (UNICEF, 2021)

II. Child marriage in Lebanon:

Early marriage exists in Lebanon among the local population (13%) and Syrian refugees (22 to 24%). It is mainly due to poverty and the decision of the father of the family. If it is in constant regression within the Lebanese population since 1935 and until 1992, nothing allows for the moment to know the situation these days; in other words, the marriages contracted in recent years by Lebanese women and men under 18. There is also nothing to know whether the phenomenon continues to decline, or whether it is making a strong comeback among the Lebanese population, since the Syrian crisis. (Institut des Sciences Politiques, 2017)

This is what an early marriage survey reveals carried out by the Institute of Political Sciences of Saint Joseph University, in collaboration with the Embassy of Canada. A survey the results of which were published in 2019, during a meeting-debate at the campus of social sciences on rue Huvelin, in the presence of the Ambassador of Canada, Michelle Cameron, the vice-rector of the USJ, Father Michel Scheuer, the former director of the ISP, Fadia Kiwan, and an audience of personalities academics and civil society. (Institut des Sciences Politiques in collaboration with Ambassade du Canada, 2019)

Marriage of women before the age of 18 is significantly higher in Lebanese Muslim communities. This is also what emerges from the survey entitled “Early marriage: illusion or reality”, carried out among the Lebanese and Syrian refugees. The Alawite community leads the way with a rate of 16%, followed by the Sunni (13%) and Shiite (12%) communities. Despite a low rate, the Christian communities are not left out, with a rate of 7% for Maronites and Greek Orthodox, and 6% for Greek Catholics. (USJ, 2019)

Another observation of the work that bears the signature of the director of the Institute of Political Sciences, Carole Alsharabati, and researcher Hala Soubra Itani: “The peripheral areas have the highest rates of early marriage. The closer you get to the center (cities or towns), the fewer early marriages there are. The tendency to marry young girls within the family is also very clear. “21% of women married before 18 have married husbands from the same family, against 16% of women in general, all generations combined. ” (USJ, 2019)

“The data concerning the Lebanese population were taken from the electoral rolls of 2014 appearing in the registers of the Ministry of the Interior. Women married before the age of 18 were identified based on the age of their first child. Among the 89,307 women identified, 11,598 had their first child before age 18, or 13%, notes the study. “This explains the limits of this source of information,” admits the workers. Women and men currently under the age of 21 are excluded, as are those not registered to vote, as well as married women who have not had children, to name but a few limitations. (UNFPA Lebanon, 2016)

According to UNHCR, a quarter of registered married women in Lebanon (22,984 women) got married before 18 years old. (UNHCR, 2017)

III. Special focus on child marriage in PRL, PRS and S communities:

A recent study (Monla-Hassan & Yacoubian, 2020) found that the rate of child marriage has quadrupled since the Syrian conflict started. This staggering increase among Syrian refugees in Lebanon may be attributed to a multitude of factors, including the covid-19 pandemic, on top of an already precarious refugee and economic crisis assailing Lebanon.

Even though it might seem like child marriage is not as prevalent in Lebanon as it is in other Middle Eastern countries, the numbers must be broken down to fully examine the issue.

In a survey conducted by UNICEF in 2015-16, it was found that only 6% of Lebanese women aged between 20 and 24 years were married prior to the age of 18. While the number may not seem as high as in neighboring countries, the prevalence was 12% among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, 25% among Palestinian refugees from Syria residing in Lebanon, and a staggering 40.5% among Syrian refugees in Lebanon. (UNICEF,2015)

The survey concluded that while there was a decrease in child marriage among all women, the prevalence was specifically increasing for Syrian women and Palestinian women from Syria living in Lebanon (LEBANON Country Brief: UNICEF Regional Study on Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa, 2017). Looking at the numbers, since both Palestinians and Syrians displaced from Syria have an increase in the prevalence of child marriage, one may hypothesize that the continuous conflict in Syria is a major driver of that increase.

After a decade of civil war, Syria remains the world's largest refugee crisis today with more than 6.6 million people who have been forced to flee their home country since 2011 (UNHCR, 2021). Lebanon is currently hosting 1.5 million Syrian refugees – the highest population-refugee ratio in the world (ECHO, 2021). At the same time, Lebanon has been hit by a series of crises: an economic and financial collapse which has been aggravated by a political crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic and finally the explosion in the port of Beirut on August 4, 2020 (The Worldbank, 2021).

This situation has led, in particular, to a deterioration in the quality of life of the population, especially amongst refugees, with spiral growth in levels of hunger, debt, and health problems subsequently leading to more violence and child labor (UNHCR, 2021). Another side-effect of the deterioration of quality of life is a drastic increase in the number of child marriages.

Early studies prior to the crisis in Syria have shown that only around 13% of Syrian child girls used to undergo child marriage. However, a more recent study conducted in Lebanon in 2016 has shown a staggering increase from 13% to 35% in the prevalence of child marriage among underage Syrian refugee girls (UNFPA; American University of Beirut; SAWA for Development and Aid, 2016).

While these numbers seem shocking, it is important to note that this study was conducted prior to the financial crisis. Hence, one can expect those numbers to be significantly higher due to the recent deterioration of living conditions. Another reason the numbers could be higher than those reported is that many refugees cannot register the weddings of their children, since they themselves lack a valid residency (Arab & Sagbakken, 2019).

A study undertaken by Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) in partnership with John Hopkins University, International Medical Corps (IMC), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Kachin Development group and the Arab Institute for Women (AIM) at the Lebanese America University (LAU), recently found that in the South of Lebanon roughly 1 in 7 Syrian refugee adolescent girls are married before 18 years of age, and 1 in 5 are married by 19 years of age. The same study found that 94.8% of married adolescent girls were not in school.

IV. Consequences of child marriage

Early pregnancy is one of the most dangerous causes and consequences of this harmful practice.

Early marriage has devastating consequences for a girl's life. Effectively, child marriage ends her childhood. Girls are forced into adulthood before they are physically and mentally ready. Child brides are frequently deprived of their rights to health, education, safety, and participation. What's more, an arranged marriage often means a girl is forced to wed an, at times significantly, older man. (Judith M. Stern, Joanne Weinberg, and Michael B. Hennessy, 2016)

Maintaining a marriage is not easy in a society where one out of every two marriages will end in divorce. Early marriage is followed by early divorce for many, so it is not surprising that teenage marriages are likely to fail. The probability of divorce early in the marriage was nearly four times as high for couples married while still under twenty years old than for couples who were twenty-five years or older at the time of marriage. (Judith M. Stern, Joanne Weinberg, and Michael B. Hennessy, 2016)

The logical consequence of these marriages is pregnancy, which is also often forced: a married woman must have as many children as her husband wishes, even if this entails risks due to her young age. Forced marriages are however prohibited by the country's constitution and by international law, but the authorities are struggling to implement this ban. Legal means, therefore, exist to put an end to these violations of a fundamental human right: the freedom to dispose of one's body and one's own life. (OCHCR, 2013)

Girls married young are far less likely to stay in school, with lifelong economic impacts. They are often isolated, with their freedom curtailed. They are at higher risk of physical and sexual violence. Child brides are also at greater risk of experiencing dangerous complications in pregnancy and childbirth, contracting HIV/AIDS, and suffering domestic violence. (OCHCR, 2013)

These effects can be sometimes deadly. Every year, around 17 million girls give birth. Forced pregnancy and childbearing at a young age, often a result of child marriage, when a girl's body is not physically mature enough to deliver without complications, can also lead to devastating consequences. (OCHCR, 2013)

Complications during pregnancy and childbirth represent the number one killer of girls ages 15-19 worldwide. And babies born to adolescent mothers face a substantially higher risk of dying, with a higher likelihood of low birth weight, malnutrition, and underdevelopment. Young mothers are far less likely to be in school, and therefore more likely to struggle economically. (OCHCR, 2013)

V. Education and child marriage:

"Education is not a way to escape poverty, it is a way to fight it" Julius Nyerere.

According to Save the Children, more than 1.2 million children have been out of school since the start of the pandemic in the country in February 2020. (Save the Children International, 2020) According to the World Bank's 2020 Education Report, Lebanese students are on average 4 years behind students in OECD countries.

This is the story of a descent into hell that began a decade ago, long before the collapse of the Lebanese pound against the dollar and the Covid-19 pandemic. It was from 2007 that the inexorable drop in the performance of students from Lebanon began in international math, science, and reading tests. So much so that today it is at the back of the pack. So inevitably, the current political, health, economic and financial crisis can only strike down, even more, an education sector at the end of its rope, without vision, without standards, without accountability, without concern for the student, plagued by corruption, clientelism, political interventions. It is currently a sector which many experts assure that it cannot be reformed or even rectified by the political power responsible for its collapse. Education in Lebanon is a reflection of the country, paralyzed by clans, corruption, and political patronage. (L'Orient-Le Jour, 2020)

And if there are still poles of excellence, represented by a handful of private schools, these cannot claim on their own, and what is more, in times of acute crisis, pull education upwards, nor regulate

the aberrations of an obsolete and inequitable system, which leaves behind the poorest, the slowest and those who need more attention. (L'Orient-Le Jour, 2020)

Today all the lights are red. Compared to the OECD average, Lebanon scores poorly in international student assessments, including TIMSS and PISA tests designed to estimate learning outcomes and help steer education systems. The first was carried out on students of CM1 and fourth, the second on students aged 15 years. In its 2020 report on education entitled “Political Economy of Education in Lebanon”, the World Bank has already noted the insufficient results of students in Lebanon during the tests conducted in 2015. A poor student in science, the country of the Cedar sees “his math scores drop below the international average”. It is also "caught up and even overtaken by the countries of the Arab world and North Africa". The results of the PISA 2015 test are so bad (in math, science, reading) that "Lebanese students are on average four years behind in education compared to students in OECD countries", reveals the World Bank. And in reading, Lebanon is quite simply "the least performing" out of 70 participants.

The results of the TIMSS 2019 and PISA 2018 tests confirm this appalling report. Not satisfied with being relegated to the penultimate place in science at TIMSS 2019, Lebanon shows catastrophic results in PISA 2018. In mathematics, it is ranked 69th (out of 79 countries). In science, the Lebanese student is 73rd, and in reading, he is 75th out of 78 countries. And if a handful of students from Lebanon prance in the lead, they hardly represent more than 1% in reading and science, 2% in maths, the average of the OECD countries being respectively, for these subjects, of 10, 7 and 11%.

The quality of education that was once the pride of the Lebanese is well below the world average. It is also clearly below the perceptions that the Lebanese have of it. “When the public is asked to rate the Lebanese education system, 76% of people express their positive opinion. However, this perception of quality is far from reflecting reality,” observes the World Bank. It blamed, "political instability, un-consensual decision-making, lack of organizational efficiency, centralization of power", but also "the conflicting interests of (too) many actors in the sector, which prevent the achievement of results schools for all children”, inevitably leading to an “absence of responsibility”. (OLJ AFP , 2021)

In Lebanon, the laws barely protect young women that many adolescent girls still often face early marriage, whether willing or not. A bill was proposed in March 2017 to institute a minimum legal age for marriage, however, this law cannot be passed without the consent of religious leaders. Thus, until now, it is the religious courts that define the marriageable age of their followers.

Despite the many attempts by civil society to change the debate, the demonstrations, and the cries of women victims, the bill remains in the drawers of parliament. In the absence of a civil code in matters of divorce, marriage, birth, or inheritance in Lebanon, personal status is governed by the 18 religious communities.

The legal minimum age of marriage is thus set by the religious authorities of each community. In the various Muslim communities, it is 18 years for boys and 14 or 17 years for girls. In the different Christian communities, it varies from 16 to 18 years for boys, and from 14 to 18 years for girls.

By allowing these marriages, Lebanon is violating the International Convention on the Rights of the Child made in 1989, which it nevertheless ratified without reservation in 1993 - and more specifically the principle of non-discrimination enshrined in article 2: “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment based on the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members.”

These marriages also constitute a scandal which compromises the education of girls, it is a great obstacle to children's access to education, a human right as well as a moral commitment enshrined in article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

“Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.”

Primitive laws sacrifice the right to freely and fully consent to marriage are now recognized by Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 to the detriment of confessionalism. It should be noted, however, that the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, made in 1989 within the framework of the United Nations, does not specifically address marriage.

VI. PARD’s previous interventions in child marriage in the informal settlements:

In 2013, the women committees in Beirut and the South chose to work the topic of child marriage when they noted that very young women in their communities were interested in marriage due to the influence of social media and television (Turkish series and others). This media influence went along with other influences especially parents or parent encouragement or coercion, family member influence, ignorance, economic needs, leaving schools and others. The women committees launched a campaign aiming to decrease the frequency of early marriage in their communities through statistics, raising awareness (143 lectures benefitting 170 males 16-20 years old, and 1404 females 12-18 years old) as well as problem solving workshops.

The campaign continued throughout 2014, lasted for a duration of 6 months and included:

- Home visits to count youth (males 16-20 years old, females 12-18 years old)
- Filling a questionnaire on early marriage with 436 youth (males and females).

The analysis of the questionnaires showed the following:

61 cases of youth (males and females) were directly affected by the campaign, changed their lives towards seeking employment or seeking education (schools or vocational training), implying a change in behavior.

14 cases of youth (males and females) were not affected by the campaign (were engaged or married based on their own convictions or influenced/coerced by their parents).

The rest of the targeted youth (361 males and females) were not engaged or married, they benefitted from the information (awareness raising) given in the community.

- Raising awareness on hazards of early marriage through 143 sessions for the benefit of 1574 people (170 males and 1404 females).
- 75 of these sessions focused on 11 informal settlements in the South of Lebanon (81 males and 655 females) whereas the remaining 68 sessions were conducted in 4 of the Beirut settlements (89 males and 749 females)

The objective of the campaign was to convince a number of youth and parents that early marriage is unhealthy, socially and economically. After the awareness campaign was finished, a post questionnaire was filled to monitor opinions of targeted youth and estimate possible changes in behavior.

The campaign continued in 2015 whereby raising awareness on hazards of early marriage targeted young males and females (12-20 years of age) and their families. In 2015, the total beneficiaries from raising awareness reached 250 people in the gatherings of the South and Beirut as a follow up activity to the campaign.

In addition, PARD's community health worker/trainer in Beirut facilitated workshops conducted by researchers from the American University of Beirut (AUB) with men and women from the informal settlements of Said Ghawash, Daouk and Gaza Buildings in Beirut.

These included:

- 5 workshops with 15 men who have young women, 18 years old or younger, or who have married young women 18 years old or younger.
- 5 workshops with 20 women who have young women 18 years old or younger, or have married before the age of 18 years.

VII. Methodology:

1- Quantitative: child marriage census

Study design:

The quantitative portion of the study relied on child marriage census (Annex 1).

Study Setting:

The censuses were carried out in the ten targeted informal settlements in Southern Lebanon, hosting a population of refugees from different nationalities (PRL, PRS, and S).

Data collection:

The data for the quantitative portion of the study was collected the use of a census (Annex 1). The census was carried out in each informal settlement by female volunteers from the local community. This was designed as such because filling the census required door-to-door visits, in order to obtain the largest number of surveys. The female surveyors were recruited by the project's community health worker, and trained by the project workers, in order to ensure standardization of the data collection process, as much as possible.

Sampling:

The sample size was determined using the 10% rule since the population size averaged around 1000 families.

According to the PARD's 2020 annual report, the families in the ten targeted informal settlements were distributed as follows (based on data obtained from 2017):

	Informal Settlement	No. of Families	No. of PRL Families	No. of PRS families	No. of Lebanese	No. of Syrian Refugees	Others	10%	No. of families surveyed
1	Shabriha	1866	1519	263	45	10	29	187	188
2	Wasta	595	95	500	13	85	10	60	160
3	Burghlieh	390	304	16	68	2	0	39	36
4	Aitanieh	205	187	1	12	1	4	21	37
5	Kfarbadda	295	272	7	14	1	1	30	41
6	Jim Jeem	174	162	5	7	0	0	17	19
7	Maashouk	1235	1176	13	40	1	5	124	277
8	Jal Elbahr	1172	1045	79	30	13	5	117	248
9	Qasmiyyi	1492	1278	174	26	8	6	149	285
10	Sikki	1704	1246	370	30	58	0	170	222
	Total	9128	7284	1428	285	179	60	913	1513

Therefore, for the total sample of 9128 families, a sample size of 1513 represents 16.6% of the total population.

2- Qualitative: Focus Group Discussions FGDs

Study design:

The qualitative portion of the study utilized focus groups with married women over the age of 20 years, young women (married and single) between the ages of 14 to 20 years, and young single men between the ages of 12 to 20 years.

Study Setting:

The focus groups were carried out in the informal settlements in Southern Lebanon, hosting a population of refugees from different nationalities (PRL, PRS, and S). In each settlement, the focus group was held in a house with an open space (usually belonging to members of the women committees, or popular committees, or in our community centers). Social distancing measures were taken for Covid-19 concerns and appropriate PPE.

Data collection:

The data for the qualitative study was collected through Focused Group Discussions (FGDs), held by 2 female project workers familiar with the informal settlements and their cultures. To maintain consistency of data reported, the same workers conducted all the FGDs. The FGDs were organized by the project's community health worker, who is also well-familiarized with the settlements and the beneficiaries, but she did not attend the FGDs to maintain a comfortable environment for the attendees to share their thoughts and opinions freely.

Sampling:

Participants in FGDs were recruited purposively by the project's community health worker, with the help of the women and popular committees in the informal settlements. The method used was purposive sampling, which aimed to best represent the age group and the informal settlement covered. Women over the age of 20 years were grouped together as they share the experience of being married, with similar concerns and life situations. The FGDs in this age group automatically focused on relaying past experiences and beliefs. Young women below the age of 20 years were grouped separately (married or single) to attempt to cover both sides of the spectrum in the discussion of early/child marriage and the discussions focused on their previous perceptions of definition of child marriage, its causes, and consequences.

Lastly, young males below the age of 20 were grouped separately. All female participants were approached through a member of the Women Committees assigned by the project's community worker. On the other hand, the male participants were recruited with the aid of Popular Committee members and communicated to the project's community health worker. The study's aim, approach and methodology were explained briefly in the recruitment process, and further in detail at the beginning of each FGD. Verbal consent for

participation and permission to make an audio and photographic recording of the discussion was solicited from those who agreed to participate in the FGDs. Consent was later on confirmed through each participant's signature on the FGD questionnaires. For participants who were illiterate and required help filling out the questionnaire, the female project workers aided in documentation when needed or requested by participants. In groups 1 and 2, the FGD participants were more or less even distributed between PRL and S nationalities, in order to obtain the most accurate depiction of the community in the settlements they were recruited from.

Focused Group Discussions:

Thirteen focused group discussions were done covering seven of the ten targeted informal settlements in the South of Lebanon. The discussions comprised of 7- 13 participants each. In one instance only, specifically Wasta younger women group, 3 girls did not show up, hence the group was done with 4 girls only.

There are a number of reasons FGDs were chosen as the main method for qualitative data collection. FGDs are often recommended as a standalone method, for research relating to group norms, meanings and processes. The group interaction can help in generating a rich understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs (Gill P et al 2008). When comparing FGDs with individual interviews: "Group discussions provide direct evidence about similarities and differences in the participants' opinions and experiences as opposed to reaching such conclusions from post hoc analyses of separate statements from each interviewee" (Morgan DL 1996).

For that purpose, a questionnaire was used as a semi-structured interview tool to guide the discussion (Annex 2). As stated before, consent was obtained at the beginning of each meeting. The duration of each FGD was 1 hour on average, depending on the number of participants, the topics raised, and the interactive participation level of attendees.

Data Analysis:

The questionnaires used were filled during the FGDs by the participants themselves or with the help of the project workers when needed. In addition to answering the questions, tape recordings were taken during the discussions to document all subtopics and dialogs, and transcribed later on by the same project workers to maintain consistency.

VIII. Findings:

1- Quantitative data statistics and analysis:

In regard to the child marriage census conducted in the ten targeted informal settlements, the results were distributed as follows:

(Note that any missing data refers to a deceased individual, or when only nationality or educational level or employment are missing, data is still counted; however, when date of birth is not available, entry is deleted)

▪ **Results:**

	Informal Settlement	No. of families surveyed	No. female child marriages	% from surveyed families	No. male child marriages	% from surveyed families
1	Shabriha	188	26	13.83	3	1.60
2	Wasta	160	33	20.63	4	2.50
3	Burghlieh	36	6	16.67	0	0.00
4	Aitanieh	37	15	40.54	3	8.11
5	Kfarbadda	41	5	12.20	2	4.88
6	Jim Jeem	19	1	5.26	1	5.26
7	Maashouk	277	66	23.83	6	2.17
8	Jal Elbahr	248	65	26.21	7	2.82
9	Qasmiyyi	285	57	20.00	6	2.11
10	Sikki	222	40	18.02	7	3.15
	Total	1513	254	19.72%	39	3.26%
				Average		Average

By nationality, the following distributions were obtained:

	Informal Settlement	No. female child marriages	No. male child marriages	Total No. of child marriages	No. PRL	% PRL	PRS	%PRS	S	% S	L	% L
1	Shabriha	26	3	29	27	93.10	2	6.90	0	0.00	0	0.00
2	Wasta	33	4	37	18	48.65	1	2.70	13	35.14	5	13.51
3	Burghlieh	6	0	6	4	66.67	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	33.33
4	Aitanieh	15	3	18	16	88.89	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
5	Kfarbadda	5	2	7	6	85.71	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	14.29
6	Jim Jeem	1	1	2	1	50.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
7	Maashouk	66	6	72	43	59.72	2	2.78	17	23.61	6	8.33
8	Jal Elbahr	65	7	72	46	63.89	3	4.17	17	23.61	5	6.94
9	Qasmiyyi	57	6	63	44	69.84	1	1.59	11	17.46	4	6.35
10	Sikki	40	7	47	33	70.21	1	2.13	10	21.28	3	6.38
	Total	314	39	353	238	69.67%	10	2.03%	68	12.11%	26	8.91%
						Average		Average		Average		Average

As for educational level, distribution was summarized in the following table:

	Informal Settlement	Total No. of child marriages	University	% university	Secondary	% Secondary	Primary	% Primary	Elementary	% Elementary	Illiterate	% Illiterate
1	Shabriha	29	0	0.00	1	3.45	9	31.03	18	62.07	1	3.45
2	Wasta	37	0	0.00	1	2.70	23	62.16	7	18.92	5	13.51
3	Burghlieh	6	1	16.67	0	0.00	3	50.00	2	33.33	0	0.00
4	Aitanieh	18	1	5.56	1	5.56	8	44.44	3	16.67	2	11.11
5	Kfarbadda	7	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	28.57	3	42.86	0	0.00
6	Jim Jeem	2	0	0.00	1	50.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
7	Maashouk	72	5	6.94	2	2.78	37	51.39	25	34.72	3	4.17
8	Jal Elbahr	72	0	0.00	3	4.17	30	41.67	26	36.11	12	16.67
9	Qasmiyyi	63	1	1.59	2	3.17	23	36.51	13	20.63	24	38.10
10	Sikki	47	0	0.00	1	2.13	15	31.91	10	21.28	21	44.68
	Total	353	8	3.08%	12	7.40%	150	37.77%	107	28.66%	68	13.17%
				Average		Average		Average		Average		Average

Lastly, findings depicting profession of the child marriage cases found in the child marriage census are displayed as below:

	Informal Settlement	No. female child marriages	No. male child marriages	Total No. of child marriages	worker	% worker	housewife	% house wife	unemployed	% unemployed
1	Shabriha	26	3	29	1	3.45	26	89.66	2	6.90
2	Wasta	33	4	37	3	8.11	30	81.08	1	2.70
3	Burghlieh	6	0	6	1	16.67	5	83.33	0	0.00
4	Aitanieh	15	3	18	0	0.00	15	83.33	1	5.56
5	Kfarbadda	5	2	7	0	0.00	4	57.14	1	14.29
6	Jim Jeem	1	1	2	0	0.00	1	50.00	0	0.00
7	Maashouk	66	6	72	5	6.94	38	52.78	1	1.39
8	Jal Elbahr	65	7	72	7	9.72	62	86.11	1	1.39
9	Qasmiyyi	57	6	63	5	7.94	57	90.48	1	1.59
10	Sikki	40	7	47	2	4.26	40	85.11	2	4.26
	Total	314	39	353	24	5.71%	278	75.90%	10	3.81%
						Average		Average		Average

▪ **Analysis:**

The child marriage census carried out in the ten targeted informal settlements in Southern Lebanon reflect international current data on the increased prevalence of child marriage, and the

disproportionality of prevalence between boys and girls. It was found that while 19.72 % girls were child brides, 3.26% of boys had married before the age of 18 years.

The distribution of prevalence of child marriage in our findings differ from those reported by UNICEF in their 2015-2016 survey, referenced earlier:

Prevalence of child marriage among difference nationalities				
	Lebanese	PRL	PRS	S
UNICEF 2015-16	6%	12%	25%	40.5%
Current study	9%	70%	2%	12%

Taking into consideration of course the difference in target areas where both surveys were conducted, it is also worthy to note the observed increased prevalence of child marriage among PRL. This can be attributed to many factors, mainly the census itself being focused on informal settlements in the South with a higher percentage of PRL residents and possible increase in the child marriage phenomenon due to economic and other factors which will be addressed and discussed later on. Another remark to be made is the decreased reported prevalence of child marriage among PRS and S categories, which can allude to possible return of these refugees to Syria in the past few years since 20115-2016. This data requires further in depth exploration.

In addition, when asked what the respondents' cause of marriage was during the child marriage census, they all had two main reasons: Traditions and love; both of which will be further explored later on the qualitative portion of the study.

With respect to educational level, as expected from international data as well as this study's qualitative FGD results, child marriage was a hindrance or an obstacle for pursuing education. This is evidenced by the high percentage of child brides who did not go beyond primary level of education (usually ending in 9th grade at an average age of 14 years). Around 80% of child marriage respondents received only elementary and/or primary education, or none. On the other hand, only 8 respondents out of 353 pursued university education (not necessarily obtaining a degree). This reflected in the professions of the respondents, with almost all women being housewives or unemployed (many factors are at play here: cultural, educational, religious; discussed below). As for the males, almost all were labor workers, or unemployed at the moment.

2- Qualitative data statistics and analysis, with special focus on the following issues:

▪ Demographic Distribution:

The FGD participants were distributed demographically as shown in the below tables:

Women over the age of 20 years (Group 1)					
Settlement	Number of participants	PRL	PRS	S	L
<i>Kfarbadda</i>	13	9	0	0	3
<i>Qasmiyyi</i>	10	10	0	0	0
<i>Shabriha</i>	9	0	0	9	0
<i>Wasta</i>	12	11	0	0	1
<i>Maashouk</i>	11	0	0	11	0
<i>Jal Elbahr</i>	9	0	0	9	0
Total	64	30	0	29	4
Percentage	100	48.44%	0	45.31%	6.25%

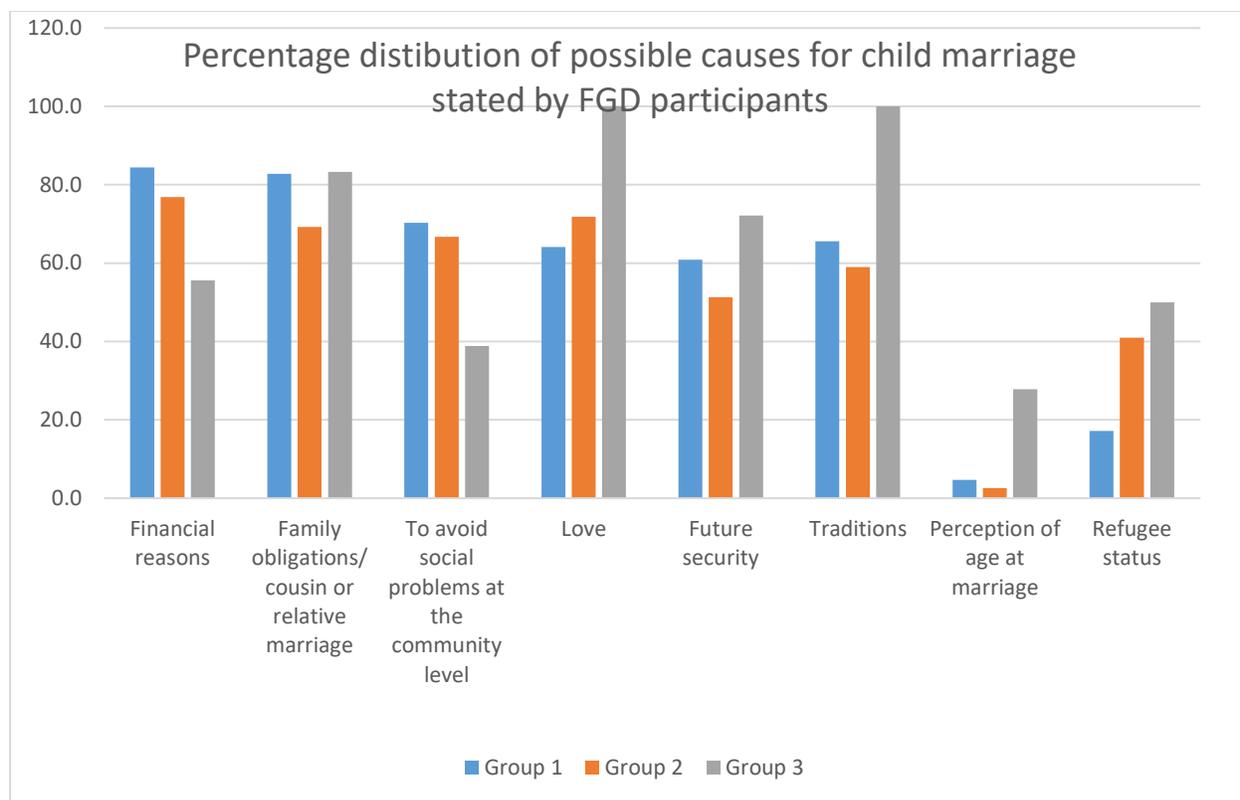
Women below the age of 20 years (Group 2)					
Settlement	Number of participants	PRL	PRS	S	L
<i>Sikki</i>	10	10	0	0	0
<i>Shabriha</i>	7	0	0	7	0
<i>Wasta</i>	4	3	0	1	0
<i>Maashouk</i>	9	0	0	9	0
<i>Jal Elbahr</i>	9	6	0	3	0
Total	39	19	0	20	0
Percentage	100	48.72%	0	51.29%	0

Young Males below the age of 20 years (Group 3)					
Settlement	Number of participants	PRL	PRS	S	L
<i>Sikki</i>	10	8	1	0	1
<i>Maashouk</i>	8	6	0	1	1
Total	18	14	1	1	2
Percentage	100	77.78%	5.56%	5.56%	11.1%

Settlement	Average Age		
	Women Above 20 (Group 1)	Women below 20 (Group 2)	Males below 20 (Group 3)
<i>Kfarbadda</i>	42	-	-
<i>Qasmiyyi</i>	38.8	-	-
<i>Shabriha</i>	40.2	15.1	-
<i>Wasta</i>	46.9	14.3	-
<i>Maashouk</i>	37.7	18.9	15.8
<i>Jal Elbahr</i>	55.1	17.2	-
<i>Sikki</i>	-	15.5	14.8
	43.45 years	16.2 years	15.3 years

- **Possible causes of Child Marriage:**

When asked to identify the possible cause(s) of child marriage in their respective communities, the participants chose one or more of the options provided in the list as seen in the questionnaire (Annex 2).



1- Financial reasons:

One of those main causes has been found to be financial in nature. On one hand, young girls who are displaced to other countries lack access to education and are thus expected to have more difficulties in finding a job in the future. On the other hand, the impoverished families may believe that an early marriage would decrease the financial burden by eliminating the cost of raising the young girl (Arab & Sagbakken, 2019). In a UN Survey conducted, 28.4% of females in refugee camps believed that the marriage of underage girls could solve the family’s financial problems compared to 18.3% of males in refugee camps (UN Women, 2013).

As reported in an article written by Ali Karaki, in Muslim marriages, it is customary to have a Mahr, which is similar to a dowry, that the husband gives his newlywed wife as a sign of respect.

Syrian women from Shabriha FGD 1 shared this conversation:

WOMAN 1: “Parents currently prefer and even seek grooms who live abroad for financial reasons and stability; even if their daughter is very young and the groom is over 30 years old”.

WOMAN 2: “If a mother refuses to let her daughter marry a groom who lives abroad, then she has ruined her daughter’s future”.

Child marriage thereby becomes a source of income for many families (1). However, in the FGDs conducted for the purpose of this study, the topic of Dowry (Mahr) was never raised.

Whereas, the topic of financial need, either justified by poverty on a baseline level, or worsened due to the current economic crisis currently afflicting Lebanon, was considered as one of the top potential causes for child marriages in the participants' communities (84.4% and 76.9% in Groups 1 and 2 respectively). An older married woman from Jal Elbahr FGD 1 proclaimed that fathers would marry off their daughters young if they are poor. However, another woman in the same discussion presented a rebuttal that the marriage would most likely not last if it is based on merely financial motives. Also, the notion of financial status being the driving force behind the dissolution of an early marriage was enforced in another discussion (Maashouk FGD 1), when a woman with the Syrian nationality stated that "financial problems are the main causes of divorce, because poorer couples [in our community] usually live with their in-laws which causes a lot of problems".

2- Family Obligations (cousin or relative marriage):

With regards to family obligations, it was brought up on two levels: siblings from one family marrying siblings from another family, and cousin or relative marriages.

The first instance, an old custom called "badayel" (translated literally into switching or trading), is usually done when two families choose this union, whereby the brother offers his sister for marriage to the brother of the girl he wishes to marry. This tribal and ancient custom, passed on along generations in the Arab culture, used to be done in order to avoid paying the dowry, among other reasons. However, when one of the couples chooses or ends with a divorce, the other marriage will most surely follow suit.

A woman of Syrian nationality in Maashouk FGD 1 told her story:

"My aunt liked me because I am clean and good. She forced her 30-year-old son to marry me when I was 16 years old, even though he was in love with another girl. I was lucky my husband accepted me as a wife. I did not go to school a single day in my life, whereas he was educated. He always acts like he is better than me."

In the FGDs, most participants stated that this kind of marriage is no longer frequent, only in rural areas with tribal traditions, such as rural Syria or Egypt (according to participants' reporting).

On the other hand, cousin or relative marriage, which is legal in the Arab countries and in Islam, is quite common and very frequent to this day. That is why most of the participants in FGDs stated it as a possible cause for child marriage (82.8% of Group 1, 69.2% of Group 2 and 83.3 of Group 3). In this regard, a participant in FGD 1 stated that when people support relative marriage, they often use the phrase: "Relatives are more worthy of your favor", but in fact such unions are not healthy and "might lead to blood diseases and deformities". A young woman from Maashouk FGD 2 shared her story: "I married a "double cousin" (cousin related maternally and paternally). My mom asked a doctor in Syria who allowed it, even though my grandfather was against this marriage of relatives."

3- Prevention of social problems at community level:

In reading out the questionnaires in the FGDs, this cause was explained as follows: do you think prevention of social problems at the community level is a cause for child marriage? As in do you think, people would use child/early marriage in order to resolve issues between families, or in a community?

The results were varied as evidenced by the varying percentage distribution of participants. 70.3% of Group 1 identified it as a possible cause as compared to 66.7% of Group 2, and an even wider discrepancy in Group 3, with only 38.9%.

A participant from Kfarbadda FGD 1 shared that in her community, they do not use marriage as a way to solve problems amongst families, because usually if there are any problems, “they prefer death over giving the “rival family” their daughter for marriage.”

4- Love:

In Group 1, 64% of the participants stated that love can be a cause for child marriage. As expected, the percentage increased in Group 2 to around 72% and 100% in Group 3, since teenagers in that age group (14-20 years) romanticize the idea of marriage. In these cultures, due to religiousness and conservatism, teenagers’ experience with love is very limited, and highly influenced by media. Pre-marital relationships are not allowed, even platonic ones. So marriage, even at a young age, is the only solution to the “problem” of love.

In addition, by stating that love is the cause of child marriage, these teenagers are subconsciously taking ownership of a decision that was forced upon them, and justifying it as their own.

A young man from Maashouk FGD 3 said:

“If the girl is younger than 18 and is in love, it is ok to get married. It is considered better than having a relationship where she talks on the phone with the boy. This reflects the family’s honor. If it were my sister, I would kill her and the boy she is talking to”.

Older women in the FGDs 1 came off as more jaded and cynical. They made statements such as “love is rarely a cause for early marriage” and “the girl is still a child, she has no awareness of the future, she only thinks about what to wear and what to play. In our community, girls were married off young at the age of 14, then they got divorced and came back to her parents’ house. These girls had married for love”.

On the other hand, the younger participants in FGDs 2 and 3 placed more emphasis on love as a possible cause for child marriage. For instance, when asked if early/child marriage was legal or accepted, a young boy from Sikki informal settlement FGD 3 stated that “if the couple are in love, then it’s ok”. Same sentiment was echoed in the Maashouk FGD 3.

5- Future security:

Several reports have argued that families, in patriarchal societies, believe that marriage provides young girls with a husband who will protect them. This perceived need for protection is compounded with the lack of security brought on to conflict-affected areas, such as refugee camps and informal settlements (Bartels, et al., 2017), (Arab & Sagbakken, 2019). A UN report stated that as many as many as 28.7% of Syrian and 22.2% of Syrian males believed that marriage provides necessary protection to young girls (UN Women, 2013).

A Syrian woman from Maashouk FGD 1 used a famous Arabic saying to support her case: “worrying about girls is a never ending concern”. The girl should get married so “she is safeguarded in her home”.

Aside from the perceived need for physical security, the women participants of the FGDs also needed emotional and non-tangible security to be provided in the figure of a husband. A PRL woman from Kfarbadda FGD 1 stated that “The man has his function, to stand by his wife when she is facing problems since she cannot defend herself”. “If the man does not stand by his wife and protect her, why did she marry him?”

A Syrian woman from Qasmiyyi FGD 1

“I was very happy at my parents’ house, and was waiting for the right man. However, when my father got sick, he told me “Who will take care of you when I am dead?” so I got married at the age of 26. But they told me that because of my age, I will not be able to marry a single man (only divorced, widowed, or with another wife)”.

6- Traditions:

In the UN survey of 2013, as many as 33.4% of males and 44.2% of females believed that marriage under 18 is part of their traditions and customs. In our FGDs, 65.6% of older women (FGDs 1) and 100% of younger men (FGDs 3) stated that the it was considered the norm, following societal expectations, as a cause for child marriage in their communities.

One of the Syrian women of Shabriha FGDs 1 believed that “tradition is engrained in the brains of children”, while a PRL woman from Qasmiyyi FGD 1 exclaimed that “we are slaves to our culture.” Their statements proved true, especially in the case of young boys, as evidenced by the answers of the participants in FGDs 3.

While many families claim to be unsupportive of child marriage, they were still forced by societal trends and pressures. “Tradition and customs dictate everything. People fear scandal; they want to protect the family’s honor represented by the girl’s honor”, said a woman from Qasmiyyi FGD 1. A Syrian woman from Shabriha FGDs1 recalled that “because of tradition, this is what men and their moms think [accepting child marriage; wanting young brides], so we ended up accepting our brother to marry a 16-year-old girl”.

In Shabriha FGDs 2, a Syrian girl stated that “the parents acknowledge than it is the custom and tradition to marry young, but they tell their girls not to get married”. However, this sentiment is

not reflected in reality, where studies show that child marriages among Syrian refugees in Lebanon are on the rise.

Also, it was noted that in FGDs 1 and FGDs 2, there was a similar prevalence of reporting of relatives who experienced child marriage (70.3% and 71.8% respectively).

7- Perception of age at marriage:

When asked directly if the participants identified the perception of age at marriage as a possible cause for child marriage, the answer was overwhelmingly no (4.7% of FGDs 1, 2.6% of FGDs 2 and 27.8% of FGDs 3). However, the discussions tell a contradicting story. Almost all FGDs' participants coined the term "spinster" for a girl who was not married. The cut-off age for this label ranged between 17-18 years among Syrian participants, and 20-22 years among PRL participants. Many women used the phrase "in her prime" when referring to a girl in her late teens as an appropriate age for marriage.

Also, age was linked to the status of the groom the girl will get. According to the women participants, the older the girl is, the less likely she is to get a proposal from an "eligible" groom (i.e. someone who is not widowed, or divorced or with another wife).

In addition, another link to perception of "acceptable" age at marriage was a reference to a desired age gap between the woman and the man in a couple, since the woman "will show signs of aging physically" earlier than the man.

A Syrian woman from Shabriha FGD 1

"When the girl is 18 years old, she will not get a single husband, only one who is divorced, or widowed, or has another wife. All girls get engaged at 16, because the man up to the age of 27-28 "has the right" to marry a 16-year-old girl and wouldn't choose an older girl".

8- Refugee status:

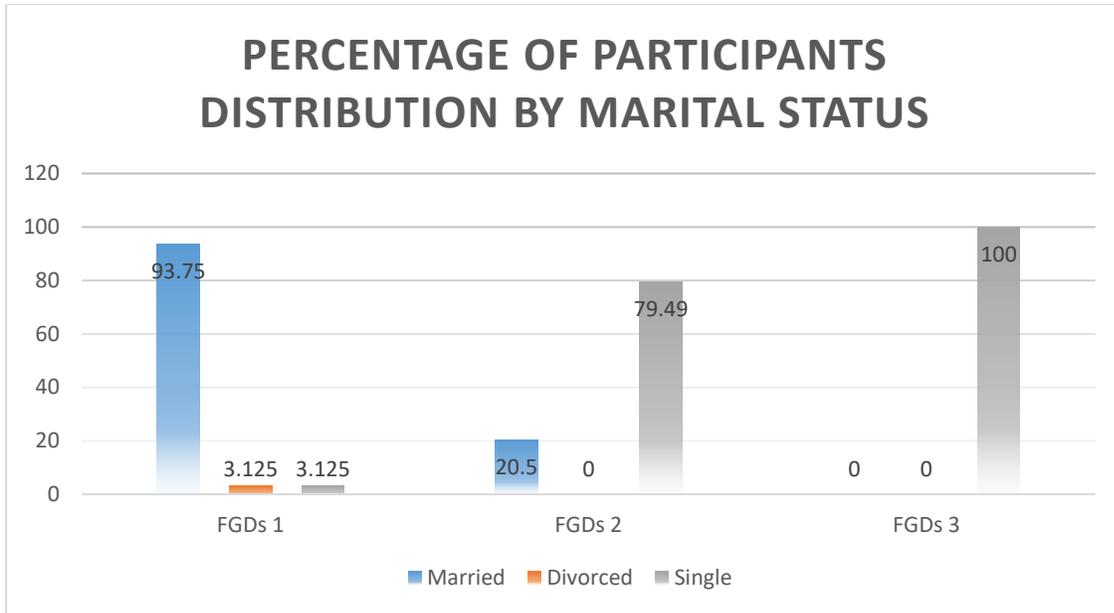
Worthy of note at this point is that in general, the participants of FGDs 1 did not agree that a person's refugee status might be a cause for child marriage (only 17.2 % of the participants identified it as a cause). However, interestingly, these groups, especially the Syrian nationals living in informal settlements in Lebanon, were the most to blame their refugee status for many of the problems they are currently facing. They claimed that if they were not refugees, they would have better education, better work opportunities, etc...

Yet, very few said that it was a cause of child marriage; on the contrary, one Syrian woman stated that had she been back in Syria, she would've gotten her daughter married at 16-17 years, as is the

custom there. But being in Lebanon, she can afford to wait a little longer “but not much, because we are also afraid for her honor and safety”.

- **Women status and lifestyle:**

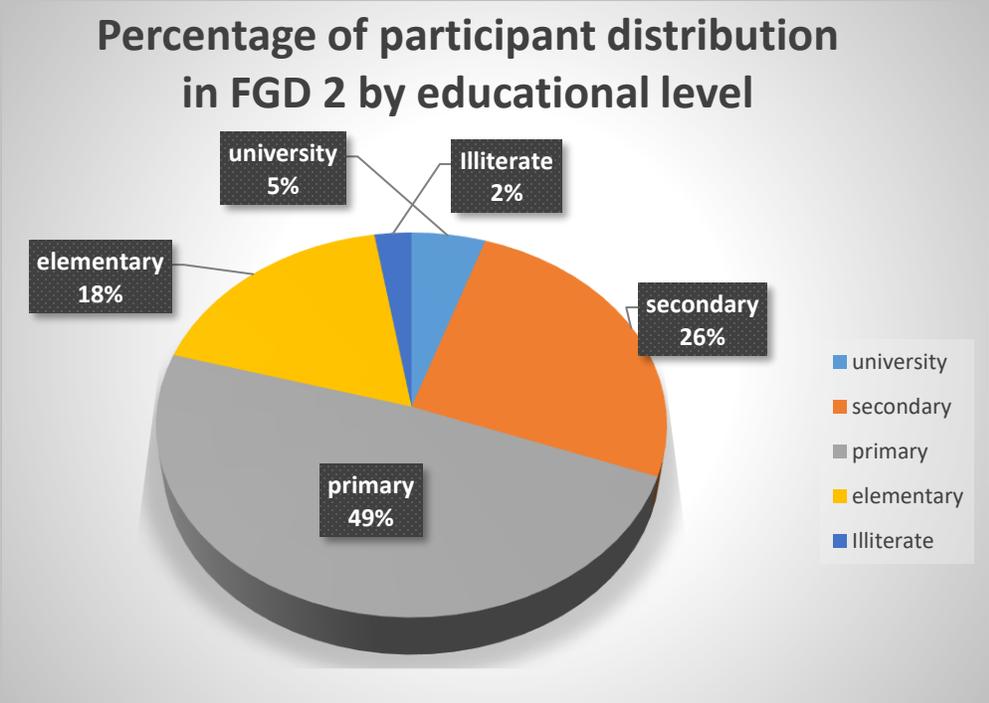
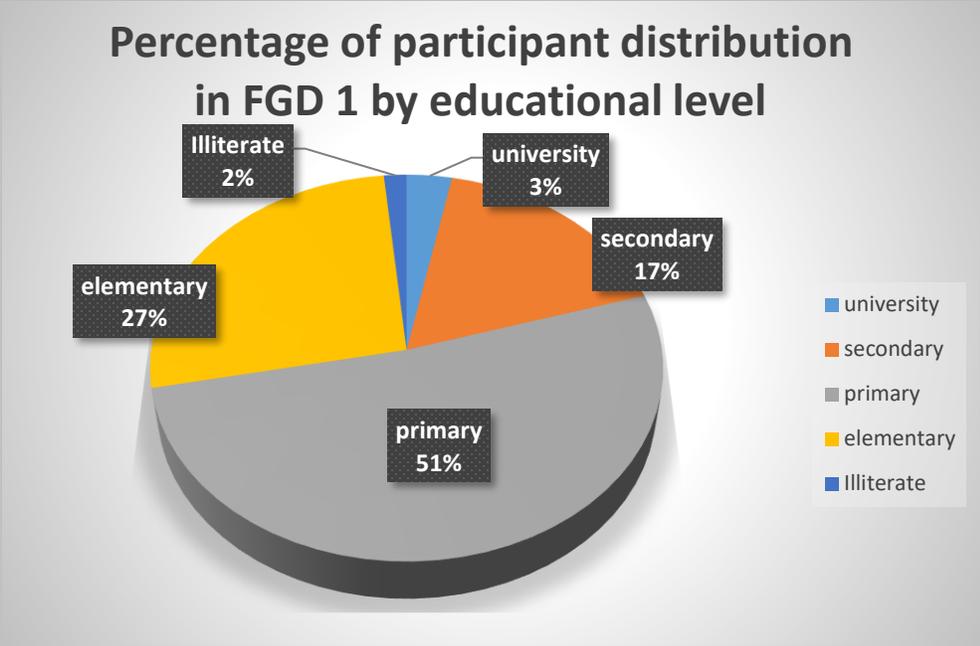
- a- Marital Status:



As seen in the table above, around 94% of the women in the FGDs 1 are married with a median age at marriage of 20.23 years. 31.3 % of those are considered as child marriages since the woman was below the age of 18 years. By comparison, only 1% of the husbands of the women in this age group FGD were married before the age of 18, with a median age at marriage corresponding to 26 years in men. Whereas in FGDs 2, 20.5% of the participants were married; 62.5% of which were married before the age of 18 years. The median age at marriage for women in Group 2 is 16.7 years for women and 25 years for men.

Correlating nationality to marital status, in FGDs 2, 7 out of 8 of the FGD participants who were married were of Syrian nationality.

- b- Education:



In regards to educational level, similar percentage distributions among the different educational levels is shown as per the graphs above.

In some of the FGDs, the topic of education was brought up, whereas in others, it was clearly absent. Mainly, the general consensus was that it possible for a girl to pursue her education while married, if: a) the husband is understanding b) it is agreed on beforehand c) the girl shows time management skills in the sense of taking care of the house and her husband.

In some instances, especially PRL FGDs, pursuit of education provided some sort of “leeway” for the girl, especially in putting off the use of the label “spinster”.

On the other hand, some women saw it as a hindrance. “A girl who is educated has too much pride and is more likely to get divorced”, said a Syrian woman from Maashouk FGDs 1.

In the FGDs 3, especially in Maashouk, there was great apprehension to the idea of women pursuing her education and even more so to their joining the workforce.

c- Employment:

In a generalized sense, participants of FGDs 1 and 3 were both apprehensive of the idea of females in the work field. One Syrian woman from Shabriha FGDs1 said, “If a woman has a difficult or demanding job, I would not let her marry my son. How can she have time to work then come home, cook, clean, do the laundry, and the dishes, and then put on makeup and look nice for her husband? If a woman is working and her husband asked her to quit work, she must quit and stay at home. Her children are “more worthy” of her and her time”.

A few women in the FGDs 1 were pro-education and women employment prior or in conjunction with marriage. A PRL woman from Wasta FGDs 1 expressed that “If the couple is in financial need, the man and woman should both work. If the man is well off, she doesn’t have to work. She might be convinced of his idea to stay at home, which is wrong because she must work to achieve her goals and dreams. Education is important for the woman to participate and be an active member of the society. Men and women are equal, especially these days. However, some men do not accept their wives to work, because she might become too proud.”

As for the FGDs 3, the young male participants recruited in this group were completely against the idea of women education and employment. Some expressed ludicrous concepts such as women are only allowed to work as “teachers or doctors”. When asked by the project workers how can she become a teacher or a doctor if she is not allowed to leave the house to pursue her education, no answer was given.

Young males from Maashouk FGD 1 said:

“I would rather sell a kidney if I needed money than let my wife work”.

“If my wife is a doctor and she gets called to a surgery at 10 pm, I would tell her to let the patient die”.

The participants of FGDs 2 were more lenient and open to the ideas of girl education and employment. Syrian girls from Jal Elbahr FGD 2 (who were married before the age of 18 years) said that it is rare for girl to pursue her education while married. And in all cases, the salary she would earn as a working member of society would not be hers, since according to their tradition, “the girl usually gives her parents her whole salary and only gets an allowance, while the parents keep the rest”. However, according to Islamic shari’a law, a working woman’s salary is hers alone to do with as she pleases, and she is not obliged to share it with her husband unless she chooses to.

Despite the well-known Islamic law on this issue, some men use the culture of male dominance and female subordination to “illegally” overpower the women and her full right to decide what to do with her earned income, property or inheritance, without interference from any male figure, be it a father, brother, husband or guardian, as long as she is an adult of sound mind. Therefore, what the Syrian girl from Jal Elbahr FGD 2 stated is a tradition that is not endorsed by Islam, and is direct contradiction to it. However, it may well justify why some women governed by such customs and cultural norms would rather not work.

On the other hand, some PRL girls had differing opinions. One such participant, for instance, from Jal Elbahr FGD 2, said that “marriage is the least of her concerns; she is instead of focused on her education and starting work afterwards.” It must be noted that this specific girl’s mother was a child bride (married at the age of 17 years) and completely against the idea now, so when approached about the study, she offered her home as a FGD setting, knowing her daughters would be members of the FGD for their age range.

- **Gender-Based Violence:**

The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women defines "violence against women" as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life."

According to UNICEF, child marriage is recognized as a form of gender-based violence, and as a violation of human rights. In addition, the same UNICEF report stated that statistically, girls who marry before the age of 18 years are more likely to experience physical, sexual, and emotional abuse than those who marry later.

Unsurprisingly, however, this link between GBV or domestic abuse and child marriage was not brought up or discussed in our FGDs. It can be attributed to two possible factors. Either the topic is seen as taboo, or simply, in their minds, the link does not exist.

Even the topic of GBV alone was hardly raised, only in passing comments. A young boy in Sikki FGD 3 said that “married life has its problems, such as infidelity and physical abuse”. No reaction from other participants to that phrase was noted.

- **Religious and legal resources or assistance:**

According to Sunni Islamic law, the legal age of marriage was raised to 15 years old recently (April 2021) for both boys and girls, after it had been set at 12 years for boys and 9 years for girls. This legal age requires specific conditions and must be approved by the religious judge. The legal age of marriage without the need for parental consent was set at 18 years.

This legal and religious background for child marriage will be discussed further in detail in the section entitled “Discussion and Recommendation”. However, it was introduced at this point to illustrate that the participants of FGDs did not discuss the topic at all; they did not view it as hindrance.

The topic of divorce was discussed greatly though. Many saw that “early marriage leads to early divorce”. Many women were fearful of the label of divorcee and instead thought it best to “work out the issues within the marriage”. Many even considered the financial burden of divorce, if the divorced woman returns to her parents’ house. One Syrian woman from Maashouk FGD 1 said, “we married off our girl to get a break; then she got divorced and came back to our house with 4 kids”. A PRL woman from Wasta FGD 1 even went on to say that “divorce would be a total disaster” and The term “divorcee” is considered a bad word, as she is often banned from going out and is controlled by her father or her brother. Another woman in the same group reassured that “now it is different, some divorced women are free to come and go as they please. However, the woman must respect her boundaries. She should be respectable, pure and pious. A divorced woman might follow the “wrong” path. Also it is important for the divorced woman to follow the religious rule of celibacy and not going out for 3 months and 10 days”.

- **Child marriage and males:**

Group 3 of the FGDs, in which young males below the age of 20 years were recruited, showed a different scenario in regards to many of the demographical and social distributions discussed above. Despite the fact that 2 small focus groups are not statistically representative, the project workers who are familiar with community stated that the ideas, data and quotes presented were somewhat illustrative of the young male population in the informal settlements.

100% of the participants in Group 3 were single. 67% of them were in primary education, whereas the rest were evenly distributed between secondary and elementary levels. The average age of the recruited participants was 15.3 years, hence explaining no university level participants. Also, 61% of them stated that they have relatives who were in child marriages.

- **Impacts & Consequences:**

- *Physiological:*

Girls who marry before the age of 18 years have worse health outcomes and lower life expectancies when compared to unmarried children their age. For instance, married girls are more likely to become pregnant during their teenage years, which leads to an increased risk of complications during pregnancy or childbirth (UNFPA, 2020).

In the FGDs 1 and 2, the participants provided a plentitude of examples of the physiological and health consequences endured directly or indirectly due to child marriage.

Various stories from FGDs 1 and 2:

“I married at the age of 17. I experienced health problems, such as inguinal hernias and herniated discs.”

“I married under the age of 18, and delivered my baby prematurely. So the baby ended up spending 15 days in the incubator and the doctor said I was lucky that my uterus did not rupture.”

“I know a 14-year-old who got married and pregnant. She had a problem with her uterus during delivery and had to undergo an emergency hysterectomy. Therefore, she can no longer have children.”

- Economic:

As a result of those negative consequences on the girls' health, education, and development, among many others, child marriages have a significant toll on national economies. (UNICEF, 2021). A report by The World Bank stated that child marriage is likely to cost developing countries trillions of dollars by 2030 (Wodon, et al., 2017).

Though many participants expressed frustration with the worsening economic situation, and the financial burdens on marriage, they did not correlate these as consequence of child marriage. They considered it the duty of the man, no matter what his age was, to work and financially support his family. Very few, if any, were insightful into the bigger picture of the economic impacts of child marriages on their communities.

- Psychological:

Child marriage has a significant impact on women's psychological well-being, even after accounting for other factors that might affect mental health such as household wealth and experiences of intimate partner violence.

The psychological impacts of child marriage on children's mental health is detrimental. Social isolation from their peers, in addition to an increased likelihood of GBV and abuse more often than not add to the instability of these young people's mental health status.

A study "The Traumatic Psychological Impacts of Child Marriage" has concluded that child marriage is associated with higher rates of lifetime and current psychiatric disorders including depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorders. This study also revealed that girls under the age of 18 who marry are more likely to become dependent on alcohol, drugs, and nicotine. Dr. Yann Le Strat, the study's lead author, explained "With a 41 percent increased risk of mental disorder, child marriage should be considered a major psychological trauma," he said. (The Traumatic Psychological Impacts of Child Marriage, 2020).

One such woman from Jal Elbahr FGD 1 recalled her story: "I married young. When my husband fell asleep at night, I would sneak out into the neighborhood, and play "Hide and Seek" with my friends."

A young girl from Sikki FGD 2 worried that early or forced marriage would lead to suicide, "just like the movies".

Many girls are also still dealing with their own personal psychological traumas, mostly related to their parents' marriages. With the absence of proper mental health programs, access to medical or psychological care, these girls, should they become child brides, or even as adults, are bound to bring their latent traumas to their married lives and children's lives as well. This was evident when one girl from Sikki FGD 2 preferred to "stay single", reflecting an abhorrence to the concept of marriage, not clear if at her current age or in general.

Another issue to discuss at this stage is pedophilia.

Pedophilia is listed among the paraphilia. Adolescents or adults who feel sexually attracted to children who have not reached puberty are considered pedophiles. Pedophilia exists in all socio-cultural backgrounds.

Not all people with pedophilia have a sexual relation with children, and not every act on children is pedophilia. Whereas a sexual assault or rape committed on a minor under the age of 18 can be underpinned by mechanisms other than a pedophile fantasy.

According to the WHO International Classification of Diseases, pedophilia is defined in code F65.4 as "sexual preference for children, usually of pre-pubic age or at the beginning of puberty."

Socially, pedophilia is manifested by a desire or a transgressive act, which does not respect the norm. This is why pedophiles are considered delinquents. So when we talk about pedophilia, we are talking about delinquency.

We can distinguish three types of pedophiles:

- 1- Those who have an exclusive attraction for children;
- 2- Those who have a preferential attraction for them but who can be aroused by adults;
- 3- Those who have a secondary attraction for children. In the latter, sexuality is generally organized around fantasies and adult partners. But, in an exceptional context of promiscuity, they can feel an attraction for a child.

After this brief introduction about pedophilia, can we relate the marriage of those girls to an older man as an act of pedophilia? (Child Brides- A Cover for Cultural Pedophilia? 2017) This remains an open-ended discussion to be further explored, keeping in mind that in the FGD, the age gap between child brides and their spouses averaged at 7 years, but with a very wide bell-curve; the biggest age gap being 20 years, between the youngest girl to get married in our FGDs (13 years old) and the oldest husband at 33 years.

	Nationality	Date of Birth	Age of Woman at Marriage	Age of Man at Marriage	Age Gap
Kfarbadda	PRL	1975	17	18	1
Qasmiyyi	PRL	1986	17	19	2
Qasmiyyi	PRL	1995	15	19	4
Shabriha	S	1981	16	21	5
Shabriha	S	1979	17	27	10
Shabriha	S	1963	17	29	12
Shabriha	S	1987	17	27	10
Wasta	PRL	1980	17	18	1
Wasta	PRL	1958	16	28	12
Wasta	PRL	1964	14	21	7

Wasta	PRL	1970	17	24	7
Wasta	PRL	1958	18	17	-1
Wasta	L	1992	17	33	16
Maashouk	S	1989	16	28	12
Maashouk	S	1978	15	20	5
Maashouk	S	1988	17	23	6
Maashouk	S	1976	17	18	1
Maashouk	S	1976	14	32	18
Maashouk	S	2003	16	28	12
Maashouk	S	1999	15	20	5
Maashouk	S	1999	17	23	6
Maashouk	S	1999	17	18	1
Jal Elbahr	S	1971	16	21	5
Jal Elbahr	S	1962	16	19	3
Jal Elbahr	S	1983	16	23	7
Jal Elbahr	S	2005	13	33	20
<i>Average</i>			16 years	23 years	7 years

▪ **Challenges:**

While conducting the FGDs, the project workers were faced with a few challenges that they were able to overcome for the benefit of proceeding with the discussion in an appropriate and productive manner.

A challenge faced in all FGDs, mainly 1 and 2, is that the participants have attended trainings and awareness sessions prior to the discussions on various occasions., either with PARD, other NGOs or at school. Therefore, they had preset answers to some questions. This hurdle was overcome with further inquisitions conducted by the project workers in order to obtain true reflections and thoughts.

For instance, in the FGDs 1, many women presented with dominant talkative characters, which did not open the floor for participation from other timid or shy attendees. The project workers in such cases controlled the discussion in a manner to maneuver this situation safely. Also, in one of the FGDs, the women had opposing views on divorce with judgmental behavior that was also effectively veered off towards a productive nonjudgmental conversation.

In FGDs 2, the difference between married and non-married participants caused a drift in the discussion, but the project workers used the afore-mentioned variance to open the dialog amongst the young participants, especially since most were shy about the topic at hand.

The greatest challenges were faced in the FGDs 3, expectedly. In the Sikki FGD, the young males were apprehensive and mocking of the discussion, in which case the project workers divided the group into 2 subgroups in order to better obtain results and ensure effective communication. In the Maashouk FGD, young males were very resistant in the discussion, expressed their opinions aggressively, and exhibited a high yet illogical adherence to traditions

and customs. A few of them refused to answer the question related to consequences of early or child marriage in the questionnaire, and left immediately.

IX. Discussions and Recommendations:

In the absence of a unified civil code on personal status in Lebanon, marriage is currently governed by 15 separate personal religious-based status laws. Each religious sect enacts a minimum age of marriage according to its religious laws, which in some will fall to nine years old. Minors are thus subject to the domination of religious sects that control all decisions determining their personal and legal status. (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018)

A draft law was introduced in Lebanon in 2014 aiming to regulate early marriages in Lebanon, but failed to reach its way as it did not include a comprehensive ban on early marriages. Instead, it required the consent of a juvenile judge and not only the guardian, before the marriage is conducted. The project was confronted with a strong opposition campaign as it was considered lined legislation allowing underage marriages (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018).

According to a report from advocacy organization Girls Not Brides, countries with high rates of child marriage tend to be poor and unstable, or those that are currently affected by major humanitarian crises (Danish Refugee Council, 2020). Worthy of note at this point is the economic crisis Lebanon has been affected with since the fall of 2019. According to the latest World Bank Lebanon Economic monitor, this economic and financial collapse has been described as one of the worst in the world in over 150 years, and likely to rank in the top 10, or possibly even top 3. Hyperinflation, coupled with the gradual but worsening demise of the Lebanese currency, have both led to prices of basic goods skyrocketing in Lebanon, which imports more than 80% of its basic goods. As predicted, poverty has exponentially increased.

This crisis has expounded the need for “fresh dollars”, i.e. dollars coming from abroad, not restricted by the banking sector. Hence, a new trend has emerged to seek grooms who live outside of Lebanon, in order to seek financial support for the family.

However, interruption of education was reported by all mothers and service providers as one of the major challenges faced by adolescent girls resulting from the conflict. Whereas, young women, especially those who were unmarried, were particularly distressed, expressing that the economic situation had disrupted their education and compromised their future. Many had prior hopes of a college degree and a career. The inaccessibility of education may have encouraged many women to marry before turning 18, and may have pushed many parents to marry off their daughters at an earlier age; especially with Covid-19 and the lockdown which led to the closure of many schools with the absence of the online classes due to many reasons (financial for example parents cannot afford to buy a tablet, or logistic reasons; there’s no electricity nor internet...). On the other hand, married women appeared less concerned about education, possibly because they stopped school once they married or became pregnant, and they were expected to take care of their husbands and children. Some refugees were more concerned with the prospects of their daughters in such a way as to push them into child marriage. These refugees came from more urban and wealthier communities in Syria, where most of the young girls and many of these families expected the girls to pursue a full education and even a career. Most of these young women and their parents were aware of the negative consequences of child marriage. They might have perceived that the risks of

having an uneducated single wife or being single with no access to education under these circumstances outweighed the risks of getting married early.

Despite all the justified reasons we discussed some parents had shown high awareness of the negative consequences of child marriage, especially those who did not accept to marry their daughters.

Many awareness sessions are given to women and girls, whereas the main decision maker is typically the male head of the household, many of the awareness sessions do not achieve desirable results as for the FGDs 3.

The solution to early marriages is, first, to tackle their causes because the same causes produce the same effects. The main causes of early marriage are gender inequality, poverty, customs, and teenage pregnancies.

Gender inequality must be approached, first and foremost by encouraging the education of all children regardless of gender, and this can only be possible through free basic education because the cost of education explains that many girls do not go to school and marry too young. In our FGDs 2 or 3, very few reported dropping out of school. Most said that they are still enrolled; however, due to the pandemic Covid-19 and the very turbulent period Lebanon has been passing through, they instead reported a very lax attendance rate due to all the afore-mentioned difficulties.

Next, girls must be made aware of the consequences of teenage pregnancies on their schooling and their health. They must also be helped to develop their skills and knowledge to enable them to claim their rights, of course by developing projects that focus on the empowerment of girls and the strengthening of their capacities, girls must have the courage to denounce all kinds of violence of which they are victims.

Finally, stricter laws are needed to discourage this practice; follow-up commissions are also needed because early marriages are done clandestinely. In addition, in informal settlements, refugee camps and other crisis-afflicted areas, decrees are not followed as much as religious Islamic law, since a religious judge can conduct a marriage and not legally register the marriage in the government until later. Therefore, popularization of strict laws against child marriage must be properly enforced since it is not enough to establish only laws but to ensure their practice equally among all. To end child marriage, a strong legal framework is needed. The legal age of marriage needs to be raised to 18 without exception. Meanwhile, existing laws against child marriage also need to be enforced and offer those girls at risk, the possibility to seek protection by authorities and courts (UNFPA, 2020).

However, as child marriage is deeply enrooted in some cultures and norms, legislation alone is not enough. Civil society and governments must cooperate to foster children's access to high-quality education (including sexuality education), health services, and justice. Girls who are able to stay in school become empowered through information, skills and a support network, and are more likely to avoid child marriage (UNFPA, 2020).

As part of the project done as a partnership between Popular Aid for Relief and Development and Solidaridad International entitled "Medical and Psychosocial Assistance to the Palestinian Refugee Population in Southern Lebanon", awareness sessions were done in Phase 2 (2021) to tackle the

topic of child/early marriage for the benefit of 1221 women from the targeted informal settlements. The sessions were done by members of the community, recruited and trained by the project, in an extensive TOT training. They relied on audio/visual aids, brainstorming and open discussion, brochures, and post-questionnaires were conducted to evaluate training effectiveness in addressing knowledge of the beneficiaries/attendees.

X. Limitations:

For the quantitative study, the limitations were due to the nature of the data collection process; mainly door-to-door. Hence, data might be inaccurately reported, missing data was also noticed, and some did not wish to participate all together. Furthermore, in such cases, the study aimed to obtain the woman's point of view; yet in some entries, the men were the respondents, and were either not interested to participate at all or participated very passively and reported some inaccuracies.

For the qualitative portion of the study, it must be acknowledged that there are opposing views in the literature regarding the suitability of FGDs to discuss sensitive topics, but one of the downsides of FGDs is that the presence of other participants may compromise confidentiality and discourage some participants from discussing private or sensitive topics. For instance, in the FGDs, almost all the participants were well-acquainted; some of them neighbors, relatives or even in-laws. This could not be avoided during the sampling process. Despite this limitation, FGDs were utilized in this study to collect data because they provide a good platform for addressing social norms and changes affecting entire communities, such as the impact of the conflict and forced migration (Mourtada, R. et al 2017)

Also worthy of note is that the qualitative findings are only officially representative of the participants' views, even though the project workers who are familiar with the informal settlements and project beneficiaries find them also representative of the community as well.

Lastly, due to the current situation in Lebanon (related to Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on educational system), very few cases reported dropping out of school. Almost all FGD participants were enrolled in school, with schooling being online, and all enrolled students considered passing in the last 2 years.

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XIII. Annexes:

Annex 1: Child Marriage Census Form

1	Husband's Name	
2	Year of Birth	
3	Nationality	
4	Profession	
5	Educational Level	
6	Wife's Name	
7	Year of Birth	
8	Nationality	
9	Profession	
10	Educational Level	
11	Address	
12	Wife's Phone Number	
13	Year of Marriage	
14	Reason for Marriage	
	Sons + YOB	
15	1	
16	2	
17	3	
18	4	
19	5	
20	Any of sons engaged?	
	Daughters + YOB	
21	1	
22	2	
23	3	
24	4	
25	5	
26	Any of daughters engaged?	
27	Appropriate age for sons' marriage	
28	Appropriate age for daughters' marriage	

Annex 2: Focus Group Questionnaire Form

Questionnaire of perception of Early Marriage

إستمارة حول الزواج المبكر

This form should be read to the client or guardian in his/her first language. It should be clearly explained to the beneficiary that he/she can choose any or none of the options listed.

Thank you very much for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire. This questionnaire is designed to provide information on our project on early marriage. The following questionnaire will require approximately 7 minutes to complete all the questions. Your honest and detailed responses will help us gain a clear picture of that perception. The results of this survey are confidential. You have the option to not respond to any questions that you choose. Participation or nonparticipation will not impact your relationship with the organization.

شكرًا جزيلاً على الوقت الذي قضيته في ملء هذا الاستبيان. تم تصميم هذا الاستبيان لتوفير معلومات عن مشروعنا حول الزواج المبكر. سيتطلب الاستبيان التالي حوالي سبع دقائق لإكمال جميع الأسئلة. ستساعدنا ردودك الصادقة والمفصلة في الحصول على صورة واضحة لهذا التصور. نتائج هذا الاستبيان سرية. لديك خيار عدم الرد على أي أسئلة تختارها. لن تؤثر المشاركة أو عدم المشاركة على علاقتك بالجمعية.

Date of the interview: تاريخ المقابلة:		Date of Birth: تاريخ الميلاد	
Community: التجمع:		Nationality: الجنسية	
Sex: الجنس			

1. Level of education

المستوى التعليمي

- Illiterate, أمية
 - Elementary, ابتدائي
 - University degree, Please Specify the major
شهادة جامعية ، يرجى تحديد الاختصاص
- Primary, أساسي
 Secondary, ثانوي

2. Status

الوضع الاجتماعي

- Single, عزباء
- Formally Engaged,
- Informally engaged
- Divorce/ Separated , مطلقة / منفصلة
- Marriage, متزوجة

If married please specify the age in which you and your spouse got married, and how many children you have:

إذا كنت متزوجًا ، فيرجى تحديد عمرك وعمر الشريك الذي تزوجت فيهما ، وعدد الأطفال لديكما:

.....
.....

3. Define early marriage:

عَرّف الزواج المبكر:

Does this definition apply to males and females?

هل ينطبق هذا التعريف على الذكور والاناث:

○ Yes, نعم

○ No, كلا

Explain if needed, اشرح:

4. Do you have any relatives that are married early?

هل لديك أقارب تزوجوا مبكراً؟

○ Yes, نعم

○ No, كلا

If yes, please specify the relativity degree and at what age, يرجى تحديد، إذا كانت الإجابة نعم، نسبة القرابة وعمر الزواج

5. Which of the following do you think are the reasons that led to early marriage?

أي مما يلي تعتقد أنه سبب (أسباب) تؤدي إلى الزواج المبكر

○Poverty, الفقر

○Family obligations, الدعم الأسري

○To avoid social problem at the community level, لتجنب مشاكل إجتماعية

○Love, الحب

○Future security, الأمان للمستقبل

○Traditions, العادات والتقاليد (cousin/relative marriage)

○Perception of age at marriage, نظرة المجتمع للعمر المناسب للزواج،

○Refugee status, الوضع كلاجئ،

○ Other reasons, أسباب أخرى:

6. At which age in your opinion, do you think a boy and a girl can get married; and why do you think that?

أي سن برأيك ، هل تعتقد أنه يمكن للفتى والفتاة أن يتزوجا ، ولماذا تعتقد ذلك؟

7. What are the impacts/consequences of early marriage for males and females? ما هي

نتائج الزواج المبكر عند الذكور والاناث؟

Annex 3: Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) Transcriptions

1- FGD 1 : Shabriha (older women)

Syrian nationality

- When the girl is 18 years old, she will not get a single husband, only one who is divorced, or widowed, or has another wife. All girls get engaged at 16, because the man up to the age of 27-28 “has the right” to marry a 16-year-old girl and wouldn’t choose an older girl.
- Men in this community are “stupid”. They want a blond wife to get blond kids even if they are of darker skin.
- On the other hand, also some girls do not accept any man, they want specific physical characteristics, like tall, etc...
- After the age of 18, the girl is considered a spinster.
- Under the age of 18, the girl is not mature yet, but if the couple get along and love each other, the man will be mature enough to make it work.
- There are no financial reasons to early marriage, even if the father is very poor.
- My sister was under the age of 18, and married a 27 year old man who loved her.
- They are preferring grooms who are abroad for financial reasons and stability, even if the girl is very young and the man is over 30.
- Because of tradition, this is what men and their moms think, so we ended up accepting our brother to marry a 16 year old girl.
- Tradition is engrained in the brains of children.
- If I had a girl and we were back in Syria, I would have her married off by 16 or 17 because of tradition and fear from relatives’ judgements. However, in Lebanon, we can wait a little longer, but not much, because we are also afraid for her honor and safety.
- Females can be married at the age of 18 while males at 22, because the girl has no responsibility at all whereas the male carries all the responsibility.
- If a woman has a difficult or demanding job, I would not let her marry my son. How can she have time to work then come home, cook, clean, do the laundry, and the dishes, and then “put on makeup and look nice for her husband”?
- If a woman is working and her husband asked her to quit work, she must quit and stay at home. Her children are “more worthy” of her and her time.
- If a mother refuses her daughter to marry a groom who lives abroad, it means she has ruined her daughter’s future.
- The age difference between men and women should be between 5 and 10 years, because the woman will show physical signs of aging whereas the man can still go out and enjoy life.
- If a girls gets married early, how can she have children? Her body is ready but she is still mentally immature to raise a child. “a child raising a child”
- If someone tries to interfere and speak against early marriage, the family will ask them not to interfere and that it is none of their business.

Note: In this group, it was noted that there was a lot of denial and contradictions. They tend to blame everything on their status as refugees from Syria. Also, in this group, education was rarely discussed compared to other groups.

2- FGD 1: Jal Elbahr (older women)

- The boy younger than 25 is not mature and doesn't have his what is needed to start a family. He is considered an adult when he can financially support a household.
- Even if he doesn't know what to do, the days will teach him.
- For financial reasons, if the girl is poor, her father will marry her off.
- If it is a marriage of convenience (financial causes), it will not last.
- Marriage between relatives: "Relatives are more worthy of your favor". But it is not healthy because it might lead to deformities and blood diseases.
- Siblings marrying siblings is an old tradition, from our grandparents' time.
- Young love is immature. To love maturely one must be above the age of 28.
- I married at the age of 17. I experienced health problems, such as inguinal hernias and herniated discs.
- I married under the age of 18, and delivered my baby prematurely. So the baby ended up spending 15 days in the incubator and the doctor said I was lucky that my uterus did not rupture.
- "let your kid marry so that he can get a kid": if the family are well-off and can afford it, the parents will let the boy marry at the age of 18, so that he can raise his own children while he is young.
- If he is considered a "bad" kid or is part of a bad group, marriage will cause the boy to stay at home more.
- If the girl doesn't marry while she is still young, the society will label her as a spinster.
- Economic situation is a main cause for early marriage, especially if the groom lives abroad.
- Due to unemployment rates increase, kids finish their university education but get no work opportunities. My nephew is a college graduate, but he is selling fish in the fish market.
- Girls get jealous of each other.
- Training and raising awareness are very important, because teenagers listen to strangers rather than their own parents.
- My daughter was considering marriage at a young age. However, we convinced her to wait because there was no appropriate groom at the time. When she finished school, it became her decision to wait longer, study, work before considering marriage.
- I married young. When my husband fell asleep at night, I would sneak out into the neighborhood, and play "hide and seek" with my friends.
- S: my Syrian neighbor married at the age of 16. She got divorced after 1 year of marriage and a baby. Then they forced her to go back to her husband for the baby, but the husband and his family are not allowing her get pregnant again.

3- FGD 1: Qasmiyyi (older women)

Both Syrian (S) and (PRL)

- S: in our Syrian community, the girl gets married off to her cousin at the age of 12 or 13. For example, this girl got married at 13, got pregnant at 14, had a miscarriage, then got pregnant again and delivered her baby. So now, “a child is raising a child”, the girl needs someone to “raise her” (i.e. be a parent to her).
- PRL: we do not have this tradition
- S: in a family of many girls, they make them marry young
- S: a 17 year old girl was married off to a 50 year old man for financial reasons
- S: siblings marrying siblings is an old custom, but is now less frequent.
- S: love is rarely a cause for early marriage.
- PRL: the girl is still a child, she has no awareness of the future, she only thinks about what to wear and what to play. In our community, girls were married off young at the age of 14, then they got divorced and came back to her parents’ house. These girls had married for love.
- PRL: 23-25 year old girls, now is the time to get married.
- S: if she 20 and not married yet, she has missed the train.
- S: I got married at the age of 26. I was very happy in my parents’ house, and was waiting for the right man. However, when my father got sick, he told me “Who will take care of you when I am dead?” so I got married at the age of 26. But they told me that because of my age, I will not be able to marry a single man (only divorced, widowed, or with another wife)
- PRL: even if the girl goes to school, she is inevitably for the house and must stay in her house, how can she work while she has kids?
- PRL: depending on her body, she will see if she can manage a house and work. The girl should get married by the age of 22, so she can have kids before she is 30. How can she have children in her 30s?
- PRL: the mother wants her son to marry a young girl. The girl will then mature and if she has married early, she will wonder what she has done to herself.
- S: girls should marry in their 20s, depending on the girls’ education. If she is not going to school and just sitting at home, she should marry.
- PRL: we are slaves to our culture. But education does not stop for anyone, my sister has 2 kids and is still in school. Every rule has its exceptions.
- PRL: society does not accept a 13 year old girl getting married, they will judge her family and accuse them that they are too poor to feed her and that’s why they married her off.
- PRL: even if the brain is developed by the age of 10, the uterus and body are not fully developed yet.
- PRL: if she is 20, she is in her “prime time” for marriage, if she is not attending school. If she is pursuing her education, the situation is different.
- PRL: if the girl is 25 years old and staying at home (not pursuing her education) and didn’t marry, she is considered a spinster.

- PRL: when our son or brother wants to get married, we as women ask around for brides. If the girl is 25 years and older, we disregard her as an option, because we know the man wants a younger girl to control and “raise” according to his preferences. Even if he is older and educated, he still wants a young girl as a wife in order to better control her.
- S: I got pregnant at 15. I had a miscarriage and was not aware of it, thought it was a menstrual period a little later than usual.

4- FGD 1: Maashouk: (older women)

Syrian nationality

- S: I was lucky my husband accepted me as a wife. I did not go to school a single day in my life, whereas he is educated. He always acts like he is better than me.
- S: the saying goes “sit with people who talk well, not with people who are well educated”.
My aunt liked me because I am clean and good and forced her 30 year old son to marry me when I was 16 years old, even though he was in love with another girl.
S: some tribes force the young man to marry his relative when they/she are younger than 18 years of age. Siblings marrying siblings, or relatives’ marriage are common in the Arab culture. There was a story of a young girl in Syria who was murdered by her family for refusing to marry her cousin.
- The man does not care. He is free to come and go as he pleases. Raising a boy is different than raising a girl. The boy will listen to his parents’ advice about marriage. He also enjoys freedom, and is allowed to do anything he wants. However, for the girl, she is not allowed to have a phone, go to school or go out in general.
- The girl should not go to school so she doesn’t escape her family’s supervision, doesn’t become open minded or fall in love. We are committed to the Islamic religion.
- I got married at the age of 14, didn’t know what to expect, just the white dress. I had two kids, and then could not take it anymore. So I finally got divorced at the age of 18. That was when I matured. Afterwards, I met my current husband, fell in love with him when I was 19 years old, and we got married. Now I have 2 kids with my second husband. In my first marriage, while I was pregnant, I was in pain, the husband and his family did not believe me and accused me of being too soft and spoiled and forbade me from seeing my parents or talking to them. When my first husband proposed to me, my mother told him we didn’t want you, but he would not take no for an answer and kept returning with other people as mediators so we had to finally accept for tradition and customs.
- Siblings marrying siblings or relatives’ marriage was more frequent before but has now decreased in frequency.
- Above the age of 18-20, she is considered old and a spinster. At 18, the girl is considered in her prime. They want her young to raise her according to their preferences.
- PRL: in our community, the men want the girls to be educated.
- S: they want them for their money in that case.
- S: the man must work while the girl doesn’t have to. Some men do not accept their wives to work, for fear of the judgement of their families.

- S: Saying goes: “worrying about girls is a never ending concern”. The girl should get married so she is safeguarded in her home.
- PRL: boys and girls are the same
- S: the boys did not finish their education because our refugee status from our country. The girl can use her education as a weapon, while education does not really matter for men, as long as they have money.
- S: we married off our girl to get a break, she got divorced and came back to our house with 4 kids.
- Financial problems are the main causes of divorce, because poorer couples usually live with their inlaws which causes a lot of problems.
- A girl who is educated has too much pride and is more likely to get divorced.
- PRL: happiness is not linked to marriage, it is linked to peace of mind and self awareness.
- S: I got divorced one time already. If my second husband is not good to me, I am willing to get divorced again.
- S: I know a 14 year old who got married and pregnant. She had a problem with her uterus during delivery and had to undergo an emergency hysterectomy. Therefore, she can no longer have children.

Note: Syrian community tends to blame a lot of issues on their refugee status.

5- FGD 1: Wasta (older women)

All PRL with one L

- “if I could go back in time”, said a woman who got married at the age of 14.
- My aunt got married at the age of 16, and got her first period at her husband’s house.
- Now relatives’ marriage is less common.
- Over the age of 20, the girl is considered a spinster according to society.
- However, in other situations, depending on the girl, she cannot be considered a spinster till she is over the age of 30 years.
- Marriage for girls should take place between the age of 20 and 25 years at the latest.
- The couple must agree about the girl pursuing her education, because it involves postponing pregnancies and time management.
- It is not right for a pregnant woman to go to university.
- Siblings who marry siblings is a situation that often ends in divorce.
- In these days, there is no love, only thinking logically. The men are looking for a girl who works or who lives abroad.
- There should be an age gap between men and women at marriage because the man is “everything”. He has to financially provide for the family. She can only get an education. She can use that education to work and help her husband financially if he is in need. Or for her kids. Also the age gap helps because women show signs of aging sooner than men.
- If the couple is in financial need, the man and woman should both work. If the man is well off, she doesn’t have to work. She might be convinced of his idea to stay at home, which is wrong because she must work to achieve her goals and dreams.

- Education is important for the woman to participate and be an active member of the society. Men and women are equal, especially these days. However, some men do not accept their wives to work, because she might become too proud.
- Getting a divorce is total disaster. It is better to resolve issues than to get a divorce so as not to affect the children, and since it is difficult to return to her parents' home. The term "divorcee" is considered a bad word, she is often banned from going out and is controlled by her father or her brother.
- Now it is different, some divorced women are free to come and go as they please.
- The woman must respect her boundaries. She should be respectable, pure and pious. A divorced woman might follow the "wrong" path. Also it is important for the divorced woman to follow the religious rule of celibacy and not going out for 3 months and 10 days.

6- FGD 1: Kfarbadda (older women)

10 PRL, 3 L

- The girl gets married as an only solution to escape her parents.
- Siblings marrying siblings is not a custom in our culture, only in Egypt.
- In our community, they do not use marriage as a way to solve problems amongst families, because usually if there are any problems, they prefer death over giving the "rival family" their daughter for marriage.
- If a couple gets married early or young (before the age of 18 years) for love, it will not last. When they get older, they will mature, he will get a second wife.
- The girl should remain in her parents' house till the age of 20, "waiting for the groom".
- The society is patriarchal; they will always insist that the woman has a man for reference/leadership.
- If a girl was married early, how can she get an education?
- The woman carries all the load in a marriage, for better or worse. The woman establishes the house.
- The man has his function, to stand by his wife when she is facing problems since she cannot defend herself.
- A separated/divorced wife: the man might be good or bad, it could be the fault of the woman.
- If the man does not stand by his wife and protects her, why did she marry him?
- Tradition and customs dictate everything. People fear scandal; they want to protect the family's honor represented by the girl's honor.
- My sister refused every proposal and groom she received. When she turned 22 years old, my dad told her that she has become a spinster, hit her and forced to marry the next groom who proposed. She was crying at her religious ceremony "Kateb Ktab".
- This generation is more mature than ours; they have more information they obtained from media and internet.

Note: some women in this community requested the project workers conducting the FGD meet with their daughters, as they would act as role models for them to continue pursuing

their education, and to provide counter-argument against the norm of child marriage in their community.

7- FGD 2: Maashouk (young females)

- For the guy, marriage before the age of 25 is considered early.
- If the girl is over the age of 20 years, she is considered a spinster and not an eligible bride anymore. Unless she is studying, in that case, the parents can wait for her to get married later on.
- No girl considers her life without marriage; she is ultimately dedicated to her husband's house.
- If the girl is in her 20s (24-25 years old) and did not get married yet, she will see other girls who are already married and had children and would be jealous of them. "I'm attending weddings for the girls I used to babysit or send to the market to run errands".
- Marriage is related to God; but education is each person's hand.
- Relative/cousin marriage is common.
- A girl and a boy could get married young (before the age of 18) but it will be teenage love, or to avoid problems.
- The girl should listen to her mom's advice.
- In our community, the girl has no freedom of choice; she must always listen to her mother or father or grandparent.
- I married a "double cousin" (cousin related maternally and paternally). My mom asked a doctor in Syria who allowed it, even though my grandfather was against this marriage of relatives.
- When a man marries a young girl to raise her as he wishes, it's as if he is training a pet or an animal.
- For a young married girl, she has the responsibility of a full household with a husband and children while other girls her age are playing. So she was robbed of her childhood.

8- FGD 2: Wasta (younger females)

- We are too young to get married.
- I would never consider getting married till I achieve my goals.
- If a girl and a boy are in love and they are younger than 18 years, and her parents accepted, why not?
- No, a girl should live and enjoy her childhood. She should get an education. It is her right.
- Education allows her to become independent, more confident, and play a role in her community and society.
- When a married girl faces a huge and difficult load, she might separate from her husband.
- However, the man should stand beside his wife during her problems, and not consider getting a divorce.
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9- FGD 2: Jal Elbahr (young females)

Group included 2 Syrian married girls who dropped out of school and have 1 child each while the rest were PRL.

- PRL: we have heard the term early marriage
- PRL: definition of early marriage doesn't apply to boys; it is considered early for them to marry if they are younger than 25 years.
- S: my cousin is one of 9 girls; their mother married them off one by one to decrease the financial load on the family.
- S: they tell the girl to marry her relative, or her cousin; he would take better care of her as family.
- S; relatives are evil like scorpions.
- S: I know a 12 year Syrian girl whose parents forced to marry someone in Sweden. She got divorced after 1 month.
- S: in our culture, a girl is considered a spinster at the age of 18 years.
- PRL (university student): marriage is the least of my priorities.
- PRL: if she marries young and her husband turns out to be not nice, she will have destroyed her future.
- PRL: the engagement period must be long. It is better to break off an engagement than a marriage.
- PRL: I am the youngest of 6 girls. Our oldest sister got married at 21 years. After my sisters got married very young (13-15 years old), my mother won't allow to get married before the age of 20 years as she considers she doesn't want to repeat her previous mistakes.
- PRL: there is time for the stressors of marriage later on; we can get married after we get an education.
- S: "the girl is weak". The girl is different than the boy in many things.
- S: the woman will be devastated if she gets a divorce.
- S: In rare exceptions, the girl can pursue her education while married.
- PRL: If the woman pursues her education, she can be of great benefit to her society.
- S: The working woman's salary is for her family. In Syrian tradition, the girl usually gives her parents her whole salary and only gets an allowance, while the parents keep the rest.

10- FGD 2: Shabriha (young females)

All S.

- I had a groom proposing to me at a very young age but my mother refused him as I was too young. I was 13 years old, my parents never discussed the issue with me and refused immediately.
- Early marriage is defined by marriage before puberty (10-14 years).
- The parents acknowledge that it is the custom and tradition to marry young, but they tell their girls not to get married.

- The girl should not marry young because she might die after marriage. It is a big responsibility.
(here is a direct contradiction to older women in Shabriha who said that the wife has no responsibilities).
- Education is more important (stated by a 16 year old girl who is in 5th grade).
- The husband will not accept that I continue my education while married or with children; it is considered increased responsibility.
- There is no perception of age at marriage (also contradiction to older women group).
- My aunt is a widow living in Turkey. She let her daughters marry young. They have many children and then got divorced. The oldest daughter is 22 years old with 5 children and back to living with her mom.
- If the couple have a lot of children, the mother would love one child more than the others.
- The girl marries young to escape her parent's authority.
- The girl who married young will always wonder about her life had she not married.

11- FGD 2: Sikki (younger females)

All PRL.

- When the participants were asked to fill their marital status, one of the girls said "It's better to stay single".
- If she stays single, she can enjoy her childhood, play with toys.
- Childhood ends when the girl gets engaged. So she shouldn't get engaged till she is above 20 years.
- Early marriage leads to early divorce.
- There is no right or wrong age to get married; it depends on when the groom proposes and when he is financially capable.
- The girl should wait for mental and physical maturity. At puberty, she is still too weak to get pregnant.
- She won't know how to cook until she is older than 20 years.
- The girl must have patience and endurance.
- Education is not an obstacle for marriage.
- An understanding man will let the girl pursue her education if she knows how to manage her time well, in order to take care of the house and her husband.
- But if she is not educated, how can she teach her kids later on?
- Since polygamy is allowed in Islamic religion, one of the participants stated that she doesn't mind the idea of her husband having a second wife, they could become friends.
- Another participant said that she would not accept and would kill her husband if he wanted a second wife.
- The husband must financially support the wife. If the wife is working, she can help her husband but it is not mandatory.
- We have friends who married young, not just relatives.
- Forced marriages can lead to suicide, just like we see in TV series.

12- FGD 3: Sikki (young males)

- My uncle who is 46 married a 16-year-old girl. It's ok, she will be a young widow.
- If they are in love, it's ok.
- However, if the age gap is too much, they will not understand each other.
- It is normal for the man to be older than the woman, it's traditional this way.
- Love is a main reason for early marriage; better than eloping or doing something "wrong".
- They tell the girl that she has gotten old and must get married at the age of 17.
- For the boy, they tell him at 15 years of age that he can get married but they don't go actually do it.
- I am not 15 years old. In 3 years, I will be ready for marriage.
- Married life has problems, such as infidelity and physical abuse.
- If the girl is going to school and getting married, she must quit school or else she will follow the "wrong" road, so will the kids. The couple could get divorced because of that.
- If the wife doesn't know how to cook, send her back to her parents' house.

13- FGD 3: Maashouk (young males)

- Younger than 18 years, the girl is too young. 18 years and older, she is now legal to marry (in a religious sense).
- Relative/cousin marriage is an old tribal custom, not in our community.
- If the girl is younger than 18 and is in love, it is ok to get married. It is considered better than having a relationship where she talks on the phone with the boy. This reflects the family's honor. If it were my sister, I would kill her and the boy she is talking to.
- For the girl, it is better to get married. She is not allowed to work in our community. She is not allowed to leave the house freely or there will be a lot of trouble.
- Now most guys are looking for brides from abroad, for financial and future stability.
- I would rather sell a kidney if I needed money than let my wife work.
- When the girl is 30 years old, she is considered a spinster. Between the ages of 18 and 30, she should help in the house and wait for marriage.
- It is ok for the girl to work as a teacher or a doctor.
- If my wife is a doctor and she gets called to a surgery at 10 pm, I would tell her to let the patient die.
- The parents should make the decisions for the issue of marriage. They know their kids' benefit and welfare better.