



# Caught in Contradiction

Making Sense of Child Marriage  
among Syrian Refugees in  
Lebanon



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This report can be found online at ABAAD resources page:  
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## Acknowledgements and Authorship

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### List of Acronyms:

SGBV	Sexual and Gender Based Violence
GBV	Gender Based Violence
CEFM	Child, Early or Forced Marriage
ITs	Informal Tented Settlement
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
DV	Domestic Violence

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Syrian conflict has resulted in one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history (UNHCR, 2016) with 5 million Syrians having fled the country and another 6 million people displaced within Syria, including in besieged areas without humanitarian access (Human Rights Watch, 2017). In particular, women and girls have been identified as being at risk of various forms of gender-based violence (GBV) in humanitarian crises (Anani, 2013); one of which is child marriage (UNICEF, 2016). Child marriage has several well-documented undesirable consequences (International Women's Health Program, 2009).

In this study, SenseMaker<sup>®</sup>, an innovative mixed quantitative/qualitative data collection tool, was used to better understand the experiences of Syrian refugee girls in Lebanon in order to provide new insights into the societal, economic, security, religious, and psychosocial factors contributing to child marriage within this large-scale humanitarian crisis.

Data collection was conducted over a period of 7 weeks across three Lebanese locations: Beirut, Beqaa, and Tripoli with close oversight by the team leaders in each location. Participants were asked to share a story about the life of a Syrian girl in Lebanon and to then self-interpret the narrative by answering follow-up questions in relation to the story provided.

A total of 1,422 self-interpreted stories were collected from 1,346 unique individuals representing a variety of different participant groups (married and unmarried Syrian girls, Syrian mothers and fathers, married and unmarried men and community leaders). Independently and without prompting by the survey or research assistant, 40% of the stories were about (n=332) or mentioned (n=245) child marriage.

Study results highlight the gendered differences in the views of respondents. For instance, male and female respondents interpret their narratives about child marriage differently and emphasize different underlying factors contributing to this practice. Additionally, it was found that some Syrian girls in Lebanon choose to marry early as a way out of unfavorable living conditions.

Although broad engagement at the community level is required for meaningful and sustained progress towards addressing child marriage, our analysis suggests that it may be more effective to frame strategies differently according to gender. As such, strategies need to take on a gendered approach and be more nuanced for men and women.

# INTRODUCTION

## The Syrian crisis and the influx of refugees into Lebanon

The Syrian conflict has resulted in one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history (UNHCR, 2016) with 5 million Syrians having fled the country as of March 2017 and another 6 million people displaced within Syria, including in besieged areas without humanitarian access (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Lebanon hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees per capita with more than one million displaced individuals, accounting for greater than a fifth of the country's population (UNHCR, 2017). In Lebanon, Syrian refugees are dispersed across the country, living in informal tented settlements (ITSs) or integrated into the community, either living with family or in rental accommodations. This is, in part, a consequence of the Lebanese government's refusal to establish formal refugee camps for displaced Syrians. The highest number of Syrian refugees are located in the governorate of Bekaa (357,303) followed by Beirut (270,608) and Mount Lebanon (253,332) (UNHCR, 2017). Nevertheless, many Syrian refugees in Lebanon are living in precarious circumstances in ITSs with few to no legal rights. About 70% of refugees registered with UNHCR in Lebanon were considered to be living in poverty in 2014 with increasing debt and growing reliance on food aid (World Bank, 2015).

### **Vulnerable groups among Refugees**

#### *1. Child refugees*

There are an estimated 500,000 school-aged Syrian children between the ages of 3 and 18 in Lebanon (UNHCR, WFP & UNICEF, 2015). About half of these children face challenges enrolling in educational institutions and are instead engaged in child labor to help support their families (Paolo et al., 2016). There are a myriad of ways children have been impacted by the crisis including physical injuries, psychological stress, being orphaned or separated from family, lack of basic health services, food shortages and insecurity (UNICEF, 2016; World Vision International, 2012). It is worth noting that girls are particularly vulnerable due to additional gendered risks, such as harassment and sexual violence. Recent reports have raised concern over increased rates of child marriage within Syrian refugee populations (UNICEF, 2014). Although child marriage did occur in Syria prior to the ongoing war, with 13% of girls under the age of 18 reportedly married in 2006, forced displacement has increased its prevalence (Save the Children, 2014). According to UNFPA, approximately 35% of Syrian refugee girls are now married before they reach the age of 18. These findings suggest that a variety of factors are likely to contribute to this increased prevalence of child marriage including: difficult socio-economic conditions, a desire to protect girls from harassment and sexual violence and experiences of trauma and loss due to armed conflict (UNFPA, 2017).

#### *2. Violence against female refugees*

Women and girls have been identified as being at risk of various forms of gender-based violence (GBV) in humanitarian crises (Usta, Masterson & Farver, 2016). GBV is any act that results in harm, suffering or humiliation of women and girls and includes rape and sexual abuse, forced pregnancy, dowry-related abuses, female infanticide, and domestic violence (Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016). Although sexual exploitation and abuse is a global phenomenon, the risks are heightened during humanitarian crises (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2002; Anani, 2013). Migrants are recognized to be at particular risk of sexual victimization with many women being forced into prostitution or subjected to sexual exploitation and/or torture to pay for their migration (Piscitelli et al., 2016). Moreover, in post-migration settings, women frequently experience social and cultural isolation as well as dire economic need, which then exacerbates the risk of GBV (Barbara et al., 2017). A 2012 study in Lebanon highlighted how some refugee women and girls relied on transactional sex to earn money to meet their families' survival needs (Bartels & Hamill, 2014). Intimate partner violence (IPV) has also been identified as a prevalent form of GBV for Syrian women and girls in Lebanon. The risk of IPV is thought to be aggravated by the frustration that some men experience when their lives are disrupted and their pre-existing roles within the family are altered (Anani, 2013). All forms of GBV can have substantial and long-lasting negative effects on the survivor's mental, physical, reproductive and sexual health. This can result in profound implications for the survivor's and her family.

## Definition, Prevalence and Factors contributing to Child Marriage

Child marriage is recognized as a form of GBV and is defined as any formal or informal union in which one or both parties is under the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2016). Early marriage, on the other hand, encompasses child marriage but also includes situations that do not qualify as child marriage, such as marriages in which one or both spouses are below the age of 18 but have attained majority under State laws. Furthermore, forced marriage refers to any union where one or both of the spouses did not give their free and full consent (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013). Child marriage is recognized as a human rights violation by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1948), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (OHCHR, 1990), the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (OHCHR, 1962) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (United Nations General Assembly, 1979). Since the research described here focuses on marriages occurring before the bride's 18th birthday, the term child marriage will be used throughout the remainder of the report.

Although certainly a global issue, historically sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia have had the highest rates of child marriage (UNPF, 2012; Girls not Brides, 2017) with poverty continuing to be a major contributor and many parents genuinely believing that child marriage will secure their daughters' future (Glinski, Sexton & Meyes, 2015; Bunting, 2005).

*"Child marriage is a pervasive problem: over the next decade, more than 100 million girls are expected to be married if present patterns persist (Erulkar, 2013)".*

Evidence suggests that vulnerability to child marriage can be exacerbated by armed conflict (Schlecht, 2016), natural disasters (UNPF, 2012) and displacement (UNHCR, 2011). During the Syrian crisis, for example, rates of child marriage have dramatically increased (Sahbani et al., 2016) as a negative coping strategy to address economic needs and ongoing concerns about girls' safety.

Earlier work in Lebanon identified economic desperation as an important factor underlying why child marriage had become more prevalent and why children were married at younger ages (Bartels & Hamill, 2014). As financial resources become depleted, some families find themselves unable to meet the basic needs of all family members and make the choice to marry adolescent girls earlier than they would have otherwise. Additionally, in conflict settings, the risk of sexual violence and harassment is often heightened, leading some families to feel that marriage and a good husband will offer their daughter protection over and above that which her father or other male guardians could provide (UNICEF, 2014; Amnesty International Canada, 2013). Furthermore, in some societies, girls who have experienced sexual violence are considered unsuitable for marriage, which more often than not brings dishonor to her and her family. By arranging early marriages, some families believe they are reducing or eliminating this risk.

## Legal Context on Child Marriage in Lebanon

A number of international legal instruments address the issue of child marriage, such as prohibiting child marriage, the standardization of marriage consent, setting a legal age of marriage, and marriage registration [Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age of Marriage, and Registration of Marriage (1962); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979); the Convention on the Rights of Child (1989); and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995)]. Most countries around the world have laws that view marriage before the age of 18 as a human rights violation. However, many countries provide exceptions to the

minimum age of marriage if, for example, parents' consent to the marriage or if the marriage has been authorized by a court of law. Other exceptions allow customary or religious laws that set lower minimum ages of marriage to take precedence over national law (Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2014). Based on the CEDAW report (United Nations General Assembly, 2006), there is no minimum age for marriage in Lebanon. Instead, religious communities have personal status laws governing marriage, divorce and inheritance and some of these personal status laws allow girls younger than 15 to marry (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Child marriage is associated with high fertility (Gebremedhin & Betre, 2009; Raj et al., 2009), early childbearing (Raj et al., 2009; Nasrullah et al., 2014), multiple unwanted pregnancies (Raj et al., 2009), pregnancy termination, and short spacing between births (Raj, 2010). Young girls' bodies are too physically immature for childbirth, thus increasing their risk of preterm labor and delivery, low birth weight infants (Nour, 2006), prolonged labor, obstructed labor, obstetrical fistula and stillbirth. Compared with women > 20 years of age, girls 10 – 14 years of age are 5 – 7 times more likely to die from childbirth and girls 15 – 19 years of age are twice as likely to die from childbirth (UNICEF, 2001). In developing countries, complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading causes of death for girls aged 15-19 years (UNFPA, 2012) and although births among adolescents account for 11% of all births worldwide, they constitute 23% of the overall burden of pregnancy and childbirth-related disease (Patton et al., 2009). Early marriage also in

creases girls' risk of sexually transmitted infections, cervical cancer and HIV (Nour, 2006).

*"The mortality rates are 73% higher for infants born to mothers less than age 20 compared with those born to mothers aged 20 and older with continued poorer overall survival for the first five years of life." (Adhikari, 2003)*

Child brides often marry with lower levels of education and marrying early usually limits future educational opportunities. This in turn limits girls' literacy skills and future earning potential as well as impedes their knowledge and skill to negotiate adult marital roles (UNICEF, 2011). Furthermore, child brides often have older husbands with a greater age difference than women who marry later in life (Glynn et al., 2001; Mensch et al., 1998). The result is a compromised power dynamics within the marriage. Child brides are generally more vulnerable to IPV and sexual abuse within their marriages and are at risk of social isolation (UN Women, 2013; Save the Children, 2016).

## RESEARCH AIM

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, child marriage is an urgent issue presumably exacerbated by the Syrian crisis. This practice jeopardizes the health and well-being of Syrian girls. Although poverty and a desire to protect girls are widely recognized as factors that contribute to early marriage worldwide, there is not enough empirical data pertaining to the factors that contribute to child marriage in humanitarian settings. Thus, there may be unrecognized cultural and social factors specific to the experiences of trauma and loss that have ensued during the Syrian crisis that contribute to the increased rates of early marriage among Syrian refugee families. To address this knowledge gap within the Syrian crisis, the ABAAD Resource Center for Gender Equality and Queen's University employed an innovative data collection tool, Cognitive Edge's SenseMaker®, to understand the experiences of Syrian girls in Lebanon.

## METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

### DATA COLLECTION TOOL (SENSEMAKER®)

<sup>1</sup>SenseMaker® is a cutting edge mixed quantitative/qualitative data collection tool that extracts meaning from a collection of stories that are accumulated about people's experiences. Data is collected via a smartphone/tablet application as brief narratives (short stories), collected from participants and documented in the form of text or audio recordings. Assisted by a prompting question to elicit stories on a topic of interest (in this case the experiences of Syrian girls in Lebanon), participants tell and then quantify their interpretation of the story using predefined questions on the smartphone/tablet. The SenseMaker® application then quantifies each of the plotted points, providing statistical data backed up by the explanatory narrative (SenseGuide, 2016).

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of the survey, Syrian girls were defined as females below the age of 18

In this study, SenseMaker® was used as an innovative approach to better understand the experiences of Syrian refugee girls in Lebanon. This was carried out with the aim to provide new insights into the societal, economic, security, religious, and psychosocial factors that contribute to child marriage within this large-scale humanitarian crisis.

## DEVELOPMENT OF SURVEY

Team members with collective expertise on humanitarian crises, GBV, child, early or forced marriage (CEFM), and survey design, drafted the SenseMaker® survey. The questionnaire was reviewed and finalized by an experienced SenseMaker® consultant as well as by team members from ABAAD. First, participants were asked to share an anonymous story about the experiences of Syrian girls in Lebanon in response to one of three open-ended prompting questions [example in Figure 1]. The SenseMaker® survey was intentionally structured to refrain from asking direct questions about CEFM. This was to avoid introducing reporting biases that are inherent if the field of enquiry is narrowed to a research hypothesis (Cognitive Edge, 2017). It also allowed stories about child marriage to emerge on their own from the broader landscape of experiences, situating them in the everyday lives of Syrian girls.

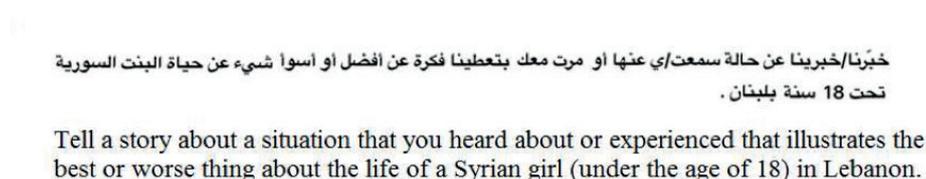
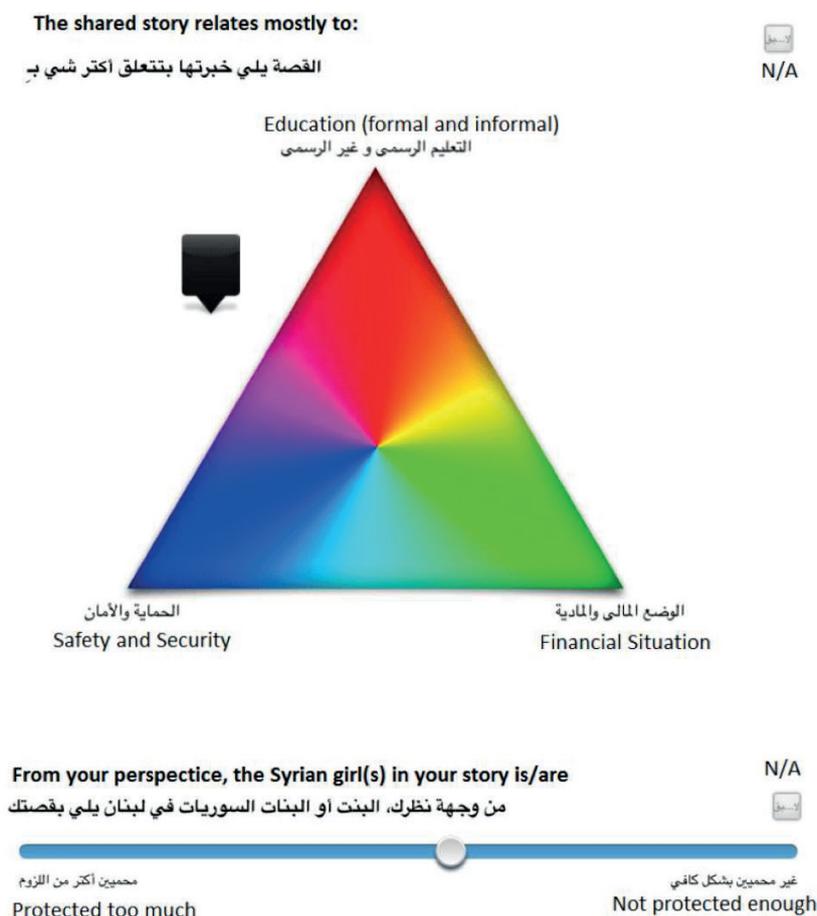


Figure 1. Example of a story prompt used to elicit a story about the experiences of Syrian girls in Lebanon.

The anonymous stories were audio-recorded on a smart tablet. Participants were then asked to self-interpret their shared narrative by responding to three different categories of SenseMaker® questions: triads (Figure 2a), dyads (Figure 2b), and stones (Figure 2c).



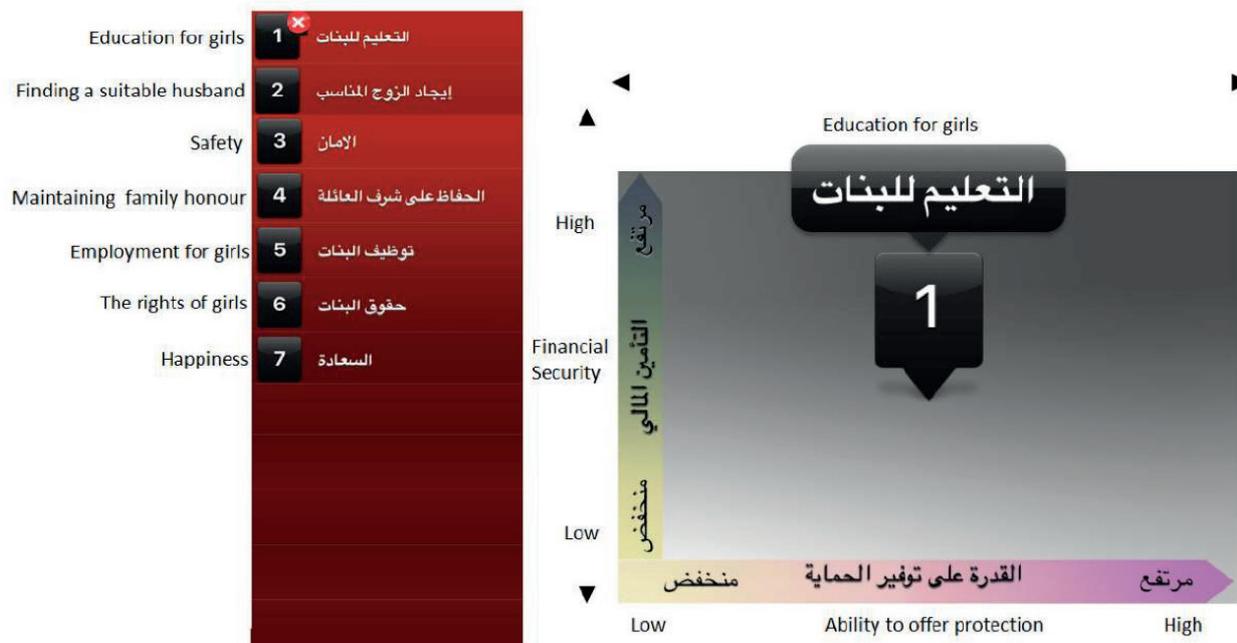


Figure 2. Categories of SenseMaker® questions. (a) Triads: Participants move a marker between the three

options in each triad to provide a more nuanced answer. (b) Dyads: Participants move a marker between two options using a slider. (c) Stones: Participants choose stones relevant to their shared story and plot them on the grid. A non-applicable option is available for each question.

The survey ended with a series of questions to contextualize the events shared in the story as well as questions regarding demographic information. The survey was drafted in English and then translated to the Arabic Syrian dialect. Using the Syrian dialect made it easier for the participants to read and understand, as it accounted for varying levels of familiarity with formal Arabic. The SenseMaker triads, dyads, and stones as well as multiple choice questions allowed participants to digitally interpret their own narratives. The data was then uploaded to the secure Cognitive Edge server. See Bakhache et al (2017) for detailed information about this study design. From this information, SenseMaker® was employed to generate readily available quantitative data.

## TARGET POPULATIONS

To capture varied perceptions of the lives of Syrian girls, a wide range of participants were targeted including: married and unmarried Syrian girls, Syrian mothers and fathers, married and unmarried men, and community leaders such as teachers, health care providers, religious leaders, and members of the NGO community.

## DATA COLLECTION

The interview team consisted of 12 trained research assistants recruited by ABAAD based on their place of residence, gender, nationality and prior relevant work experience. Six of the interviewers were Syrian females, purposively selected to interview Syrian girls (aged 13 and older) and mothers, three of the interviewers were Syrian men to interview male Syrian participants, and three were Lebanese men to interview male Lebanese participants. Data collection occurred across three locations, the greater Beirut area, Tripoli and Beqaa Valley. The percentage of Syrian refugees in each site was used to calculate a purposeful weighted sample size for each geographic area of focus. A minimum of 300 stories per location was recommended to provide enough data points to allow patterns to emerge on visual scanning of the triads, dyads and

stones. In addition, this research aimed to interview 45 community leaders across the three regions to take into account their perceptions of the reality of child marriage within their community. Table 1 shows the number of participants interviewed in each area.

Geographical coverage:

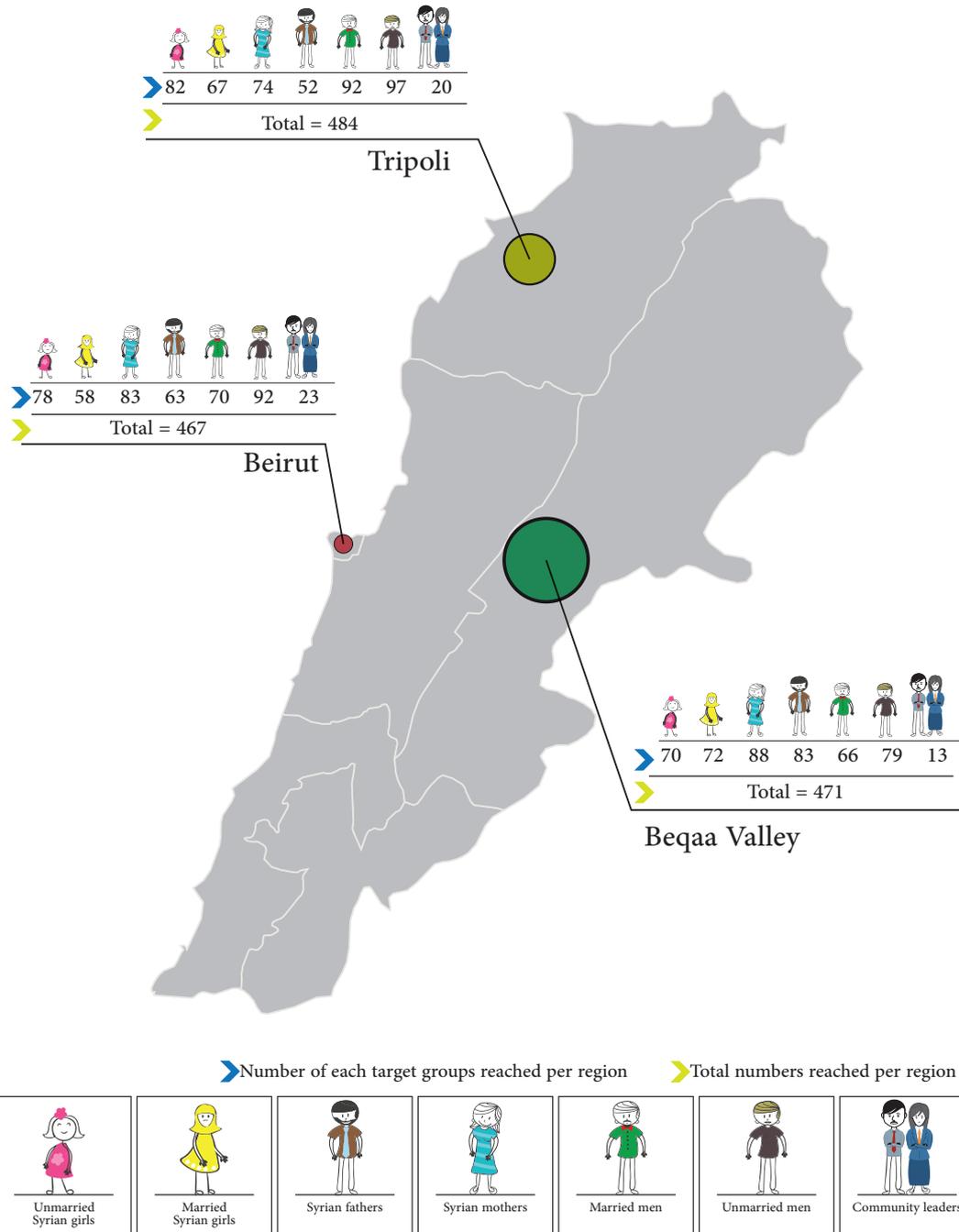


Figure 3. Geographical coverage per region by target population

# FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

## Overview

A total of 1,422 self-interpreted stories about the experiences of Syrian girls in Lebanon were collected over a seven-week period from 1,346 unique individuals representing a variety of different participant groups. Independently and without prompting by the survey or research assistant, 40% of the stories were about (n=332) or mentioned (n=245) child marriage. Across all participant groups, child marriage was independently identified by respondents as an important issue in their communities. Despite the fact that neither the research team nor the survey itself indicated that the research addressed child marriage, 40% of the stories collected were either about child marriage or mentioned child marriage. The analysis presented here considers only those stories that were about or mentioned child marriage. For additional details of the use of SenseMaker® in this context, please refer to Bartels et al., 2018.

### Demographic Information Graphic

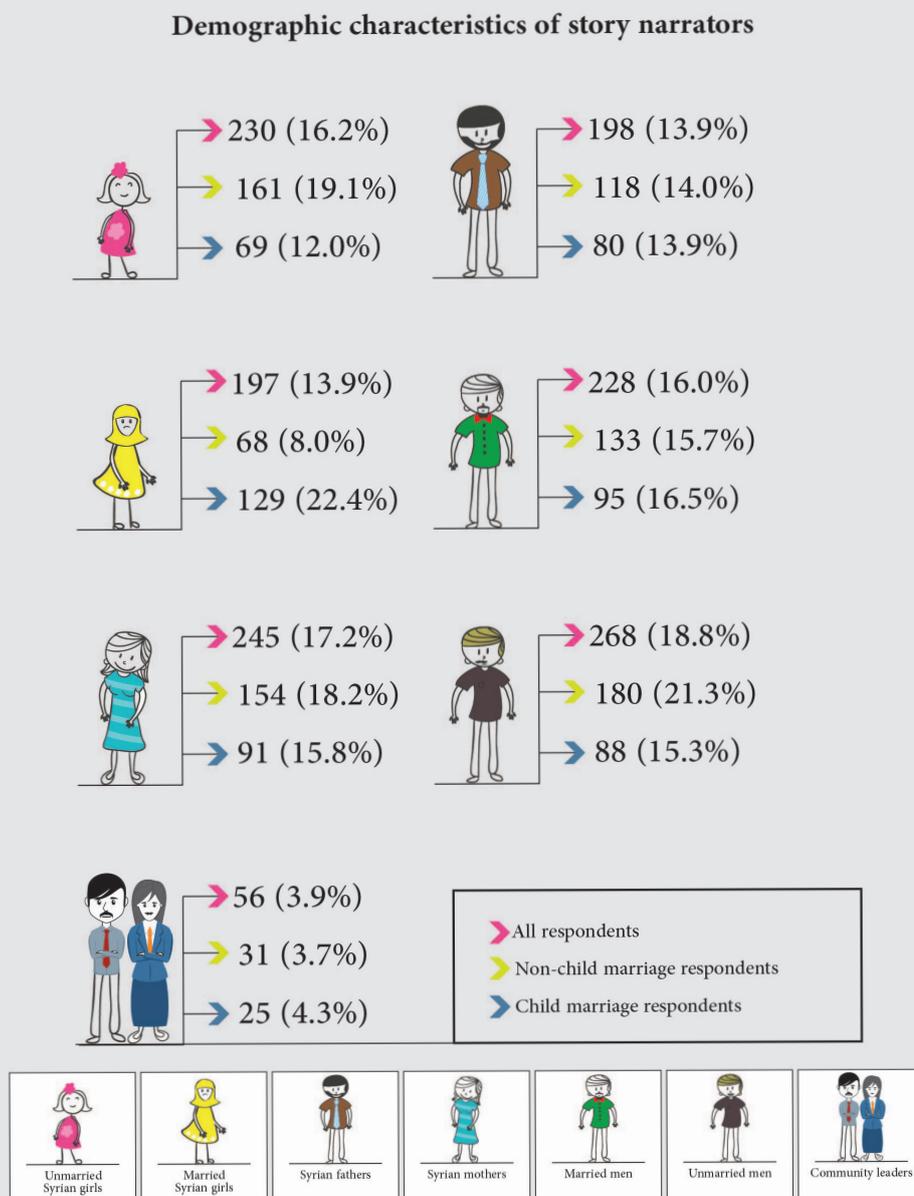


Figure 4. Types of shared stories (child marriage vs. non-child marriage) by target population.

## GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Our findings show that both male and female respondents viewed child marriage unfavorably. They also acknowledged the negative impact child marriage has on the lives of young girls. Indeed, the narratives offered by participants across the sampled groups were in many ways very similar. They indicated that child marriage is a largely negative reality, and an increasing phenomenon, for Syrian girls in Lebanon. Despite similar unfavorable views regarding child marriage among different target populations, the analysis revealed significant gendered differences in how participants perceived the factors contributing to this phenomenon.

### Dyads

The dyad questions asked participants to interpret the experiences of the girls in their stories between two extremes on a variety of perspectives, including protection. The results presented in Figure 5 show that the response pattern for female participants (married and unmarried girls, and Syrian mothers) differed from that of male participants (married and unmarried men, and Syrian fathers).

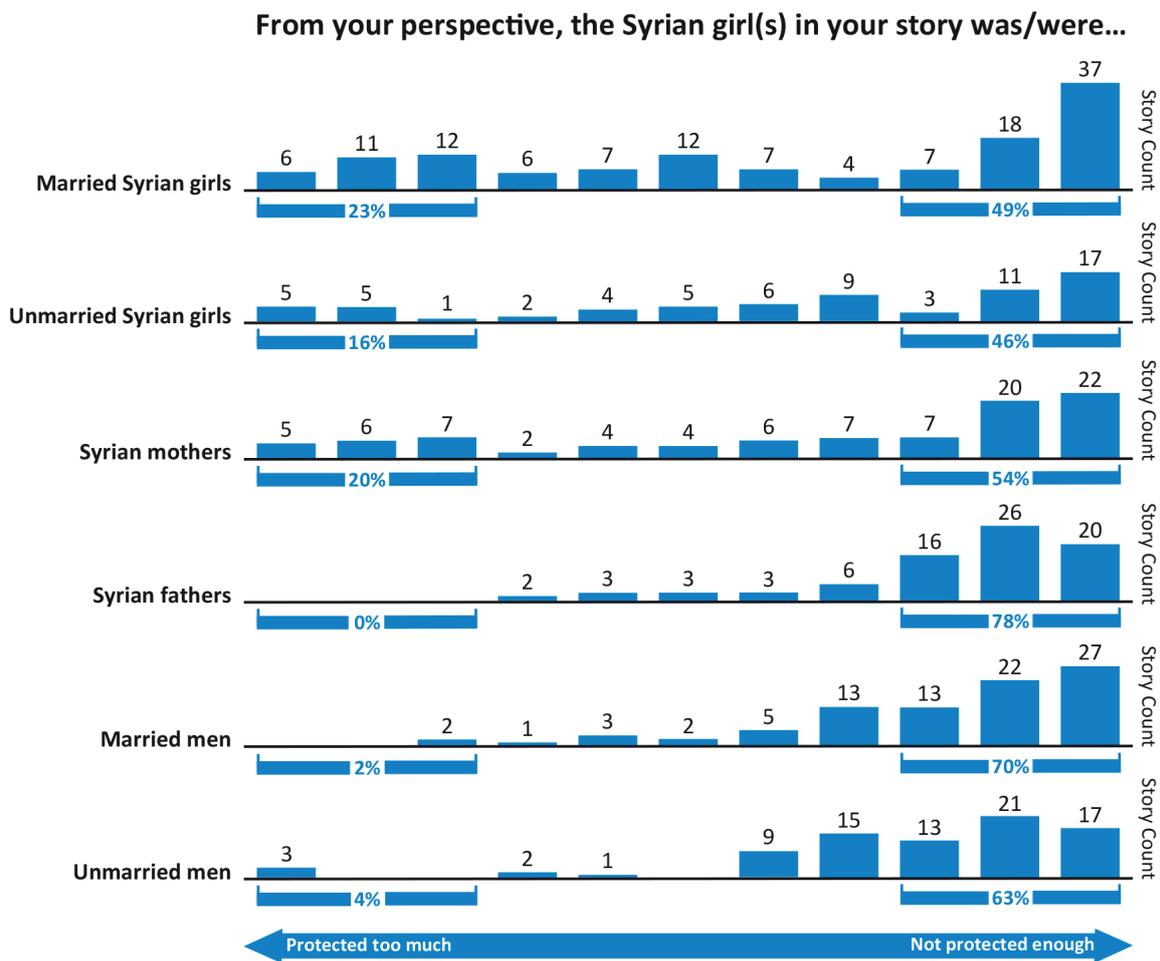


Figure 5. Dyad regarding protection of the Syrian girl(s) in the shared story (n = 533).

**Female participants were more likely to view young girls as being “protected too much,”** as seen in cases where young girls were married to protect them from abuse and exploitation. **Men, on the other hand, more often perceived that girls were “not protected enough”** and shared narratives describing exploitation and GBV both within and outside of marriage, and reported stories about girls being engaged in survival sex and being exploited to help with their families’ extreme poverty.

*“I know a Syrian family that was displaced to Lebanon. They have three daughters. When one of their daughters was 16 years old, she was compelled to work in sinful routes due to the family’s circumstances. She got raped, and she worked in prostitution. Now, she is a drug addict, and she is 18 years old.”*

## Triads

The triad questions asked participants to interpret the experiences of girls in their stories in relation to three labels on a triangle. As shown in Figure 6, participants from both genders were likely to interpret their stories as being about a **combination of protection/security and financial resources**. However, female participants were more likely to indicate that their shared stories were about education, which was not the case for male respondents.

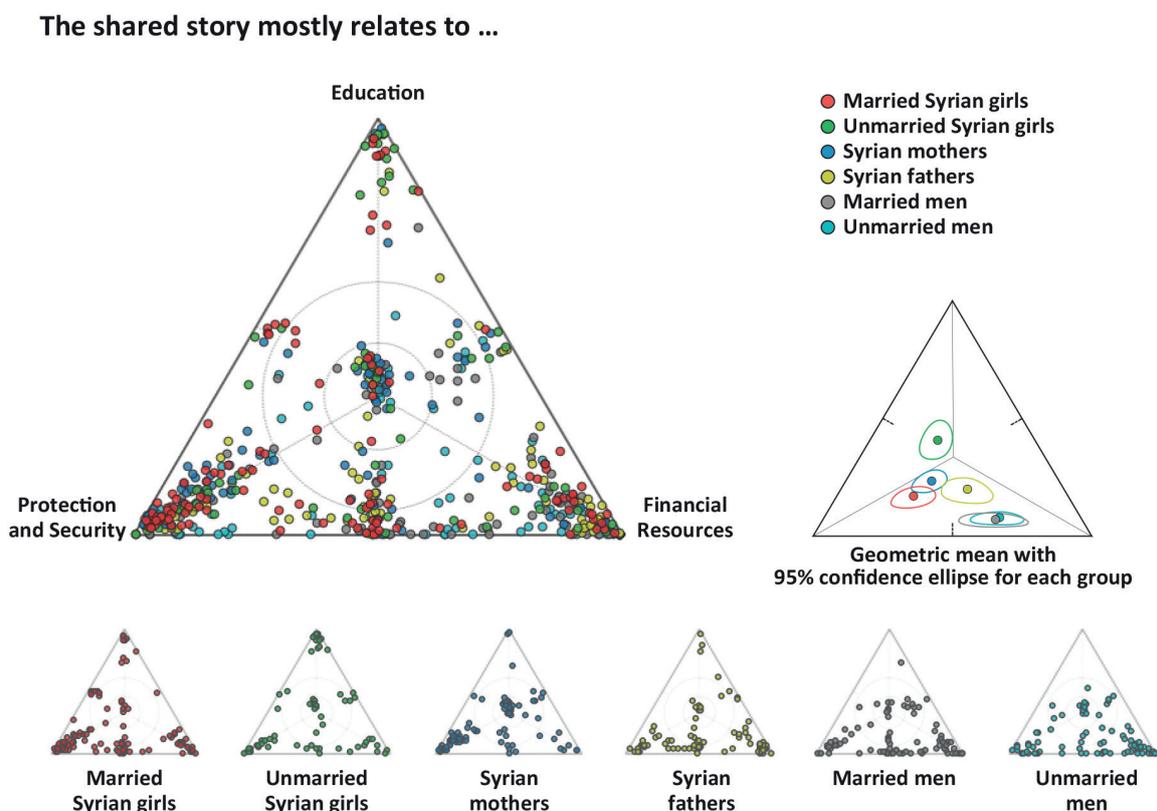


Figure 6. Triad regarding main topic of the shared story (n = 523) with geometric means and 95% confidence ellipses for each group.

When reflecting on their shared stories, **male participants were more likely to stress financial resources** and commonly discussed child marriage as a coping strategy due to financial burdens. **Female participants, on the other hand, were more likely to relate their stories to protection/security concerns as well as education**, and more often saw child marriage as a means to protect girls from sexual violence and/or harassment.

“The story is about two sisters who came with their family from Syria. They were 15-16 years old when they came. They couldn’t continue their education due to their financial status. The family consists of 7 siblings in addition to the mother and father. The father is the only support, and he can’t afford everything they need. In addition to that, he is diabetic. They had to work in order to help their father. One of them will get married soon, because she couldn’t continue her education.”

## CHILD MARRIAGE AND EDUCATION

As a factor contributing to child marriage, education was perceived differently by different target populations. As previously mentioned, female respondents in figure 5 (including mothers, married and unmarried girls) were more likely to self-interpret their shared stories as relating to education in contrast to men (from both refugee and host communities) who rarely interpreted their narratives as such.

Further analysis of the shared experiences from married girls revealed that limited access to education was perceived as both a contributor to child marriage as well as a consequence of marrying early:

## 1. Dropping out of school due to child marriage

"I was 8 years old when I displaced to Lebanon. I went to school for 2 years, and then my parents decided to wed me. I accepted to get married. My husband prohibits me from going to school and from going out. I cannot go out without my mother. We go out three days per week as a couple."

## 2. Getting married due to lack of access to education

"I know a girl who displaced from Sham to Lebanon. She wanted to continue her education, but she was surprised with the situation here. The public schools are not good, and the other schools are very expensive. She wasn't able to go back to school. So, her parents wed her to get some money. This is the situation of most Syrian families. They are selling their daughters."

Our findings are in line with other studies that similarly demonstrate that girls who have no education are reportedly more likely to marry by age 18 compared to girls with secondary or higher education (Girls Not Brides, 2017). These findings thus suggest that continuing girls' education may be one of the most valuable approaches to delaying the age of first marriage.

## CHILD MARRIAGE AND PROTECTION & SECURITY

Among respondents who shared stories about child marriage, varied views were presented on protection and security. For instance, the female participants who interpreted their stories as being about protection and security often presented child marriage as a means of protecting girls from sexual harassment and violence. This rhetoric is often linked to the honor culture, whereby the honor of girls is directly linked to their knowledge of and exposure to sexual experiences including the preserving of their virginity. Based on this cultural perception, girls who are at increased risk of such exposure are perceived as being at increased risk of jeopardizing their honor and that of their families. As such, child marriage is sometimes used as a strategy to mitigate this risk.

For example, one child bride shared her personal story about being married quickly after she was sexually harassed and reported that she was overprotected in this context:

"I was 12 years old when we were displaced to Lebanon. After we arrived, I was sexually harassed by an older man. When my parents found out about this, they forced me to get married. Now, I have a child, and I am pregnant. I am so unhappy."

Male participants also shared stories illustrating the risks faced by Syrian girls in Lebanon. However, in contrast to female respondents, men were more likely to report that Syrian girls were not protected enough. As such, some men may marry off their daughters in an effort to protect them. These discrepant views between men and women may relate to social norms around gendered roles and expectations for men and women. Recent research in Lebanon showed that after displacement, men often express their feelings of not being adequate, of not being able to fulfill their expected gendered role in society, and of not being able to protect their families (IMAGES, 2017). These feelings of emasculation, particularly among refugee men, may be one of the factors contributing to men choosing to marry off their daughters at a young age: an area that warrants further study.

## CHILD MARRIAGE AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

When asked why the events in the story occurred, married and unmarried men were more likely than other subgroups to report that the events occurred as a result of depleted financial resources. Existing literature suggests that parents may perceive child marriage either as a way of securing their daughter's economic future or alternatively as a way of easing the family's financial burden (Girls Not Brides, 2017). Results from this study more often aligned with the latter. Participants (particularly married and unmarried men) shared

stories about girls being married early as a means of alleviating their families' financial burdens. For instance, one married male participant talked about a Syrian girl marrying outside her sect due to financial need and reported that the girl in the story was not protected enough:

"In Lebanon, they were vulnerable, so the girls had to stop school and work...The girl had a marriage proposal but from a guy of another sect. Due to their financial status and poverty she had to marry him, because he had a good financial status. After a while, she delivered a baby girl, her husband left her and the baby.... and he never recognized his wife nor his daughter. The girl had to return back to working and return to the humiliation and poverty she faced before."

## IMPACT OF CHILD MARRIAGE (INTIMATE-PARTNER VIOLENCE, EARLY PREGNANCY, DIVORCE)

Several participants from different target populations described child marriage as being embedded in cultural and social practices, and some Syrian girls referred to marriage to the need to act upon the family's honor, customary or religious laws, whereby this practice was linked to their responsibilities towards their parents.

"In Syria, we were children. We liked adventures and playing. Here, we grew up. In Lebanon, we are working to support our families financially. This is what we are suffering from due to the war. We should be in schools, but we are obliged to work. We got married, and we have responsibilities. When we got married, we relieved our parents from our responsibility."

Yet, many stories included in the analysis demonstrated a myriad of consequences linked to child marriage, such as giving birth at a young age, being unprepared for the responsibilities of marriage, and not being able to continue formal education after marrying. Additionally, experiences of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and other forms of GBV were common among the child marriage stories. One Syrian girl shared her story of being married at the age of 14 and miscarrying the child after experiencing IPV.

"I was married when I was 14 years old. We got married after only a week from when we met. I suffered in this marriage. I was pregnant, and in my 7th month I bled because he hit me, and I miscarried the child. I wanted to get a divorce, but I couldn't. After my second pregnancy, I gave birth to a girl that died after 2 months only. I got divorced, and I still have problems with my husband. I am very sick (...). I hated pregnancy and marriage. I wish I never

got married. I wish I could go back to school (...)."

The narratives also revealed that marriages were often being arranged quicker than usual and to unknown men without some of the usual vetting that would typically take place. This may put girls at additional risk of maltreatment and violence.

"I was 15 years old when I got married. I didn't get engaged, and I didn't do a wedding. We were married in four days only. Problems started immediately. I lived with him for 20 days only. He used to beat me, he wanted to send me to Turkey, he wanted me to work as a dancer, and he wanted to take me away from my parents. One day, at 11 pm, I ran away from him. People I know helped me to get from where he lived to my parent's village. Then, my parents helped me to get a divorce."

Another concerning issue addressed by some participants is the sexual exploitation of girls under the mask of marriage. Short-term contractual marriages were often mentioned as a reality and in many cases respondents expressed that such marriage arrangements do not provide any long-term protection for girls and their families. For instance, an unmarried Syrian man reported:

"I know a family who has three children; two daughters and a son. He couldn't enroll them into any school, so he forced one daughter to work. But he forced his other daughter to get married more than one time and to get a divorce after every marriage in order to collect her dowry. She'll be married for seven days maximum, and then she'll get divorced. I know her brother, and he told me that his sister is 17 years old. Since their financial situation is terrible, the father forces his daughter to do so. It is a way to get money."

# CONCLUSIONS

The results illustrate a complex myriad of factors that contribute to child marriage for Syrian refugee girls in Lebanon including poverty, lack of educational opportunities, safety concerns (particularly around sexual violence) and vulnerability to harassment. In addition, the data suggested that some girls were choosing or agreeing to marry in the context of their precarious refugee status, extreme financial hardship, and increased risk of GBV. Their agreement to marry provided them with a means to support their families; however, in doing so, it left them with little freedom to make choices about their own lives.

Our findings concerning potential root causes of child marriage among Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon are consistent with the existing research from other contexts insofar as poverty, lack of access to education, cultural taboos against sex outside marriage, and unstable political situations are causal factors in increased prevalence of early age at marriage (Schlecht, 2016). As such, despite the overall negative view of child marriage across different target groups, our data confirms that mothers and fathers continue to revert to this practice as a coping mechanism.

What this study offers as new knowledge is the disaggregated opinions on child marriage between different groups and insight into the disaggregated views regarding the underlying factors leading to child marriage. Male participants were more likely to identify child marriage as a response to unfavorable economic conditions, whereas women were more likely to identify it as a means of protection from sexual harassment or as a consequence of inaccessible education. These gendered differences are reflective of gendered social norms which dictate acceptable roles for men and women whereby men are socialized to be the economic provider for the family, while women are socialized to assume the reproductive role that includes their children's education and safety.

These identified gendered differences in perceptions about child marriage have important implications for future programming and policies. For instance, strategies to address child marriage targeted towards mothers might focus on providing

safe and suitable schooling as well as improved security for girls within the community (for exam

ple, ensuring that girls can commute to and from school safely) while programming targeting fathers could focus on income generating activities. These income generating activities could target both men and women. Additionally, work with men on redefining their gendered identity to one that is not solely linked to their role as financial providers might alleviate them from carrying solely the burden of providing, and as a result benefit them and their daughters. Men could also benefit from awareness sessions regarding the consequences of child marriage as means to prevent the practice.

## Limitations and Strengths

This study has several limitations. First, despite considerable effort to collect narratives from as wide a range of participants as possible, the sample cannot be considered as representative and thus the results are not generalizable. More marginalized or mobile families may have been underrepresented and girls under the age of 13 were not included. Second, SenseMaker® narratives are relatively short in comparison to more traditional qualitative interviews. As such, shared stories may lack the detail and richness that are afforded during in-depth interviews. Finally, participants' interpretation of their shared stories may have been constrained by the pre-determined labels of the dyads, triads, and stones, although review of the narratives shows that the chosen labels were highly relevant to many of the shared experiences.

There are also a number of notable strengths including a relatively large sample size with 1,422 self-interpreted narratives providing a wide range of perspectives from Syrian girls and their parents as well as married and unmarried men in the community. Using a mixed-methods approach allowed for new insight into child marriage in this context and the self-interpretation by participants minimized inherent researcher biases. Additionally, the lack of direct questioning about child marriage allowed the child marriage narrative to emerge from the broader landscape of experiences and contextualized it within the everyday lives of Syrian girls and their families.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Although comprehensive engagement at the community level is required for meaningful and sustained progress towards addressing child marriage, our analysis suggests that it may be more effective to tailor strategies in a more nuanced and gendered approach.

## **Child Marriage and Education**

It is critical to highlight the importance of education as a means to prevent child marriage, especially in humanitarian contexts. Programming after displacement should focus on educational/awareness campaigns targeting girls and their families from the onset of the response as means to prevent child marriage. For example, campaigns could provide information about different portals that allow refugees to register their children in formal education programs. It is also important that education for girls be framed as a way of increasing future financial stability not only for the girls themselves, but also for their families since our findings suggest that this might resonate more with fathers.

In cases where access and retention in formal education is not possible, programming should also consider non-formal educational options that are context specific and relevant to the specific needs of girls. These can be mainstreamed within or linked to activities provided in women and girls safe space centers as presented in the below section.

## **Child Marriage and Protection & Security**

Protection and security concerns were a key issue across all participant groups. Increased security for women and girls could include the development of sustainable safe space centers, particularly in targeted areas with high rates of child marriage. The centers should provide a safe space for girls to attend a varied range of activities including awareness-raising sessions on topics related to child marriage, psychosocial support, and life skills building. These types of sessions address issues that are key building blocks to girls' empowerment.

Protection and security were also discussed in relation to other factors such as safe access to education and girls' freedom of movement. Intersectoral efforts to develop joint strategies addressing the unique safety/security concerns in respective communities is urgently required.

## **Child Marriage and Financial Resources**

Aside from education, creating opportunities for Syrian community members (both women and men) to engage in vocational training and technical skills programs is needed. Such programs are important for building capacity, peer engagement, and creating a sense of belonging, while also providing an opportunity to generate income. As a means to prevent child marriage, such activities should be tailored for both fathers and mothers of underage girls. In addressing gender inequalities, it is vital that economic empowerment not be limited to just men despite the social pressure for men to financially provide for the family. Ideally, age-appropriate economic empowerment activities would also target young girls, thus contributing towards financial independence.

## **Comprehensive Interventions with Married Girls**

Additional holistic interventions should be tailored to support girls who are already married, noting that such programming is often limited by an inadequate understanding of their needs. Programs should be based on evidence that is derived from regular consultations with the girls, thereby increasing their willingness and commitment to access activities and services. Suggested interventions may include: age-appropriate family planning education and services, age-appropriate legal services, accessible consultation for marriage registration, and registration of new births and divorce. Holistic GBV services should also be provided, including case management, sheltering, and psychosocial support.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Targeted Programming (short to mid-term)**
  - o Prevention and empowerment activities with unmarried girls
  - o Prevention activities with families of unmarried girls (awareness raising, cash for rent, cash for education, vocational training for parents, income generating activities, etc.)
  - o Holistic response for married girls:
    - ◇ Family planning education and services, including positive parenting
    - ◇ Legal consultation and services for marriage/birth registration and divorce
    - ◇ Case management services for GBV
    - ◇ Sheltering services for GBV including IPV
- **National structures and frameworks (long term)**
  - o Legal Framework:
    - ◇ Advocacy for policy change to set the minimum civil legal age of marriage to 18
  - o Educational System:
    - ◇ Partnering with educational institutions and ministries to implement strategies that encourage retention of girls in schools
    - ◇ Development and mainstreaming of a sexual and reproductive health and rights curriculum for adolescent girls and boys that highlights the consequences of early marriage and risks associated with adolescent pregnancies.
  - o Research and Monitoring:
    - ◇ Development of a national system to monitor and collect disaggregated data to track marriage trends and inform programming
    - ◇ Applied research to identify which child marriage prevention strategies are most effective in humanitarian settings such as Lebanon

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