

Leave no one behind: married girls in Jordan

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) commit to leaving no one behind and include a global target (SDG 5.3) to eliminate child marriage by 2030. To augment the evidence base on adolescents that are hardest to reach, our GAGE research sample explicitly includes not only girls at risk of child marriage, but those already married or divorced. Our findings in Jordan underscore the importance of outreach to ensure that policy, services and programmes engage with these highly vulnerable girls – especially those from marginalised refugee communities.



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GAGE research findings

Of the 997 older girls (age 15-17) who completed our survey, 18% – almost exclusively Syrian – had already been married. We found these girls to be disadvantaged across many domains. For example, only 44% could identify a form of contraception, when presented with a list of methods, and only 9% were enrolled in school (compared to 64% of their unmarried peers). Compared to their unmarried peers, married girls were also 54% less likely to leave home on a daily basis and 17% less likely to have a friend that they trust.

Our qualitative work highlighted not only married girls' social isolation, but also their susceptibility to gender-based violence and their lack of voice and agency. An 18-year-old Palestinian girl stated, *'When the girl gets married ... she does not have any more relationships with her friends'*. Many married girls reported being abused by their husbands, their in-laws and members of their own natal families. Some of the reasons cited were not becoming pregnant fast enough, or because their husbands were *'extremely paranoid'* (18-year-old Syrian girl, host community) that they might be communicating with non-family members. A 19-year-old Syrian (host community) explained that her husband *'used to pour water in my ears, because these things don't leave any marks on the outside'*. Some Syrian girls noted that violence, including sexual violence, often began on their wedding night. With their lives totally dominated after marriage by their husbands – who do not allow them to leave the house, use the phone, or make a single independent decision – some married girls reported feeling suicidal.

Our findings suggest that divorce is a not uncommon result of child marriage. One father from Azraq noted that *'Syrians now get married and then get divorced a month or two later. Why? Because they're not mature.'* But for girls, the consequences of child marriage do not end when the marriage is dissolved. Some are forced by their marital families to sign away their legal rights (including to children) before they are allowed to divorce. In addition, Jordanian law stipulates that if the wife initiates the divorce, she must repay her dowry, which exacerbates the financial strain on their natal families. Most divorced girls reported experiencing daily stigma, including *'dirty'* language (18-year-old Syrian girl), rejection by married women who assume that divorcees *'want to take away their husbands'* (19-year-old Syrian girl), and exclusion from services and programmes that seldom mix unmarried girls with those who have been married because the latter's greater knowledge of sexuality is perceived to threaten the *'purity'* of their unmarried peers.

Makani programme effects

Our research found that while UNICEF Jordan's integrated Makani programme raises awareness among adolescents and parents about the risks of child marriage, it is largely not reaching married girls with its programming – because few are allowed to participate. Girls reported that their husbands would jealously beat them if they even tried to attend Makani, noting also that they have *'responsibilities like having children'* that prevent them from attending. Makani staff noted that in-laws are also quite vested in keeping girls away from Makani. One staff member reported that a 12-year-old mother had been taken out of class by her mother-in-law who said:

'She has to stay home and raise her child, I don't want her to be educated. You can't force her.'

While many centres offer classes for mothers and their young children, conservative social norms tend to preclude the most vulnerable adolescent mothers from attending.

Programme recommendations

Strengthen efforts to keep girls in school through the secondary level and to prevent child marriage, including through provision of social protection programmes such as labelled cash transfers, linked to girls' continuation in school.



Expand investments to target married and divorced girls, including through Makani and other non-formal education and safe spaces, prioritising skills building and psychosocial support.

Consider investing in gender synchronised programming for young married couples to address discriminatory gender norms and improve communication between spouses.



Target caregivers not only as parents—but also as parents-in-laws—to raise awareness about the risks of child marriage and the support that adolescent girls need for good health and well-being.

Continue to use Makani centres to provide awareness-raising classes to adolescents and parents about the risks of child marriage – and monitor the effectiveness of these messages, especially given that other service providers (e.g. schools, religious institutions) are not active in this space.

