

WHEN CAGED BIRDS SING

STORIES OF SYRIAN
ADOLESCENT GIRLS



This publication is dedicated to Syrian adolescent girls throughout the region, many of whom are grappling with enormous challenges on a daily basis and yet continue to defy numerous odds to fight for their basic human rights. Special thanks go to the courageous girls who shared their stories with UNFPA in order to help the international community understand the many struggles they encounter on their journey to adulthood and help shine light on their resilience during the most difficult of circumstances.

UNFPA is also grateful to all the donors whose support has enabled the delivery of a wide array of programmes geared toward Syrian women and girls region-wide, thus providing these adolescent girls with the platforms and support they need to share their stories with the world. UNFPA's programmes are currently supported by Austria, Canada, Denmark, The European Commission, Finland, France, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.



Growing up, I felt as though my wings were slowly clipped against my will, and life became a cage from which there was no escape. An entire world waited outside, where women were becoming leaders, scientists, engineers, but I was trapped in a different world where being a woman meant having no voice.

Amal, a refugee from Qamishli, Syria

INTRODUCTION

You hear stories, all the time. Stories of girls being attacked and killed and kidnapped, and stories of their families forcing them to get married at such a young age. I heard these stories all the time growing up, but I never thought they would become my life.

Reem, an adolescent girl from Quneitra, Syria

As the war in Syria approaches its ninth year, the humanitarian situation is continually evolving, and the needs of the affected populations remain high. Even as some parts of Syria appear to be stabilizing, the crisis has long since passed a tipping point in terms of generational change, and its effects will undoubtedly continue for many years to come. This is particularly true in the case of women and girls due to the deep-rooted complexity of the issues they continue to face on a daily basis.

In humanitarian crises, the risks of gender-based violence against women and girls often multiply, and the situation in Syria and the region is no exception. In a society ingrained with patriarchal attitudes, women and girls often find themselves at a significant disadvantage, especially in light of disruptions in community networks, safety nets and rule of law. Since the onset of the crisis, humanitarian actors have been in a constant race against continuing reports that show that gender-based violence remains a serious protection risk both inside Syria and throughout the region. This will undoubtedly have lasting repercussions on the fabric of Syrian society, with ramifications palpable enough to compromise the efforts of the international community to secure a stable and resilient future for the people of Syria.

While women and girls alike bear the brunt of the crisis, girls — particularly adolescent girls — face increasingly complex challenges that stand to alter the course of their development for the rest of their lives. Violation of privacy, movement restrictions, forced and early marriage, and sexual and physical violence continue to be part of their

daily reality, creating a web of violence that can transcend generations. Many adolescent girls in 2018 were in the 5-to-11 year-old age category when the crisis began in 2011. The experiences they have gone through over the past eight years have defined and indelibly shaped a significant portion of their formative years.

This publication is an attempt to highlight the plight of adolescent girls who have survived what is arguably the worst humanitarian crisis of our time. The information, stories and quotations provided not only shed light on the challenges they face on a day-to-day basis, but also highlight their hopes, aspirations and their courageous efforts to find their place amid the chaos of conflict.

The narratives presented in this publication, including the stories and quotations, were acquired via direct interactions with Syrian adolescent girls and their families throughout the region, including inside Syria and within refugee camps and host communities in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. Given the sensitive nature of the subjects discussed and the protection issues associated with telling these stories, special care has been taken to adhere to the wishes of these girls with regards to the type of information disclosed, e.g., when it comes to the use of real names, hometowns and current locations. Because of this, no real names feature in these accounts. Moreover, details of hometowns and current whereabouts feature only intermittently in accordance with the wishes of those interviewed and/or quoted.

THE WEB OF VIOLENCE

It is so hard to talk about these things. As a girl, I always feel like I'm walking with a thousand eyes on my back and an invisible knife held against my throat. Every word, every glance, and every step is a potential affront to the honor of my family.

Nergis, an adolescent girl from Qamishli, Syria

UNFPA's programme data from 2018 reaffirmed that gender-based violence — including sexual violence and harassment, domestic violence (including family violence), and early and forced marriage — continues to pervade the lives of women and girls, particularly adolescent girls. These forms of gender-based violence are occurring everywhere — in homes, schools, universities, marketplaces, and in public streets, and have come to define many of the ways in which young girls perceive and interact with their communities.

Furthermore, due to the continuing after-effects of the crisis and their inherent vulnerability, adolescent girls are growing up in an environment of fear that is being reinforced consistently by their families and community members. As 16-year-old Mariam from Aleppo describes it: "For girls our age, life quickly became an open-air prison after the war. Suddenly, we were told not to leave our houses because we might get harassed, raped or kidnapped. I'm told that being married is my only path to true safety, but I don't want to get married. I'm simply not ready."

Mariam's words succinctly summarize the experience of countless adolescent girls inside Syria and in host communities throughout the region. Data collected through focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews shows that Syrian adolescent girls face a shared pattern of violence that manifests itself directly and indirectly, beginning during the early stages of adolescence and amplifying in terms of intensity and consequence as the girl approaches adulthood. These forms of violence include violations of privacy, sexual harassment, restriction of movement, domestic violence, and early and forced marriage. Within each category, there exists an underlying layer of negative attitudes and practices that have lasting negative

repercussions on the development of Syrian adolescent girls.

Moreover, the evidence shows that these forms of violence are interlinked — that the presence of one form significantly compounds the likelihood of others. A girl forced into child marriage five years ago may by now have become a widow or a divorcee — sometimes more than once — with children to protect and feed. She may have had to forgo her education as a result of her early marriage, resulting in significantly diminished prospects for livelihood and personal growth. This, in turn, substantially increases the likelihood of becoming vulnerable to exploitation and negative coping mechanisms such as polygamy, survival sex, and others.

The web of violence invariably impacts the trajectory of a girl's development, compromising her ability to experience her formative years to their fullest and preventing her from realizing her true potential. In an environment that has been destabilized by protracted conflict, this can have deleterious consequences that range anywhere between anxiety and depression, all the way to unwanted pregnancies and maternal death.

The following pages will provide a closer look at these various forms of violence in an effort to chart the trajectories that many Syrian girls have been forced to follow throughout their development. The narratives provided will shed light on the impact these forms of violence have had on survivors, in addition to demonstrating the remarkable resilience of adolescent girls to the hardships they continue to face on a daily basis. Lastly, the stories contained in these pages will underscore the crucial role played by specialized humanitarian services geared toward addressing the needs of adolescent girls.



THE WEB OF VIOLENCE, ILLUSTRATED

VIOLATION OF PRIVACY

Adolescent girl begins to lose her sense of personal space, autonomy and individuality. Family and extended community begin to exercise greater control on her personal decisions.

FAMILY VIOLENCE

As family begins to exercise greater control, this may be accompanied by an increase in various forms of family violence, particularly if a girl attempts to resist control.

SEXUAL HARRASMENT

Adolescent girl begins to experience various forms of sexual harrasment by adolescent boys and men in her wider community, which begins to define her perception of self and the opposite sex.

DEPRESSION / ANXIETY

Adolescent girl becomes at risk of depression and anxiety due to fear, isolation and recurrent physical and emotional trauma.

MOVEMENT RESTRICTION

Adolescent girl is confined to the home for so-called protection, often foresaking education, self development and social interaction. Future prospects are severely compromised.

SO-CALLED HONOUR KILLINGS

In many cases, family violence escalates to reach the height of so-called honour crimes, which have reportedly increased in Syria since the onset of the crisis.

FORCED / EARLY MARRIAGE

Adolescent girl is either forced into early marriage or willingly enters into it believing that it is the only way out of her social isolation.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The same factors that lead to family violence are also key drivers of domestic violence at the hands of the husband, heightened by predominant patriarchal notions of male dominance.

EARLY PREGNANCY

Adolescent girl assumes the responsibilities of motherhood and household management long before she is physically and mentally prepared.

UNSAFE ABORTION / SUICIDE

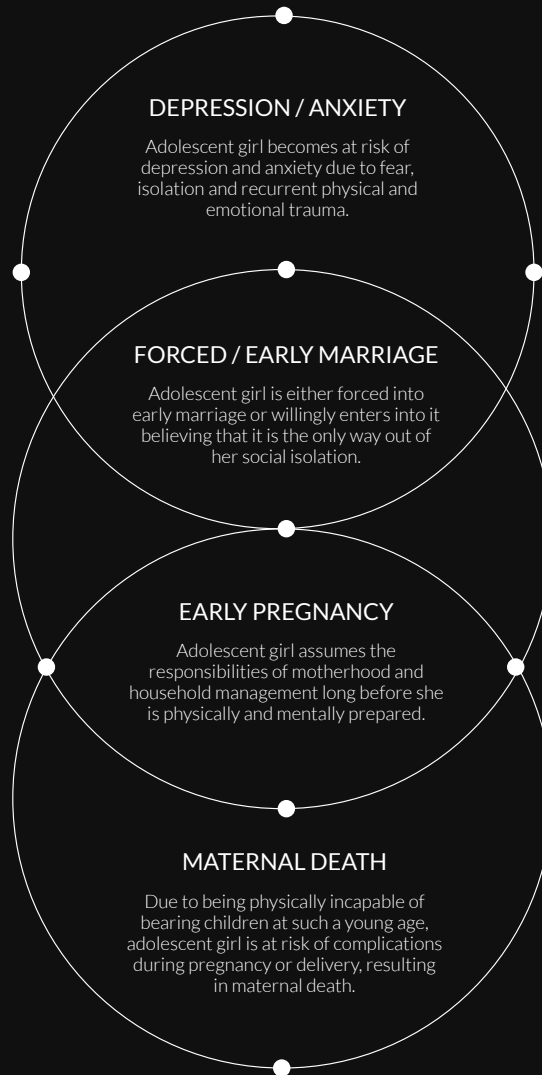
Given the lack of access to family planning services, the adolescent girl may resort to unsafe abortion to terminate unwanted pregnancies, resulting in potentially fatal consequences to her health. Some girls may resort to suicide as a result of depression and abuse.

MATERNAL DEATH

Due to being physically incapable of bearing children at such a young age, adolescent girl is at risk of complications during pregnancy or delivery, resulting in maternal death.

DIVORCE

For an adolescent girl who ends up in forced / early marriages, divorce carries significant social stigma and inherent risk factors, including serial marriages, child custody issues and additional emotional trauma.



THE WATCHFUL, PRYING EYES

We hear stories all the time about honour killings. They frighten me, because I cannot imagine a father killing his own daughter or a brother his own sister, no matter what she has done. When I hear men talk about honour, I worry what might happen.

Rania, an adolescent girl from Qamishli, Syria

FEAR, SHAME AND TRADITIONS

For many Syrian adolescent girls, personal privacy is limited. Its absence is often a precursor to other, more serious forms of violence and the overall deprivation of freedom. Prevalent patriarchal beliefs, such as the association of female sexuality with family honour, inevitably result in families and communities feeling the need to exercise greater control over their behaviour.

Typically, this begins at a fairly early age in their development. It seems to vary from one community to another. Nada, a 14-year-old Syrian refugee in Jordan, says that she began to feel the prying eyes of her family members shortly after she turned ten years old. “It began with the women in my family asking me where I go and who I talk to, telling me not to play with my friends outside. Then I started feeling strangers watching me when I walked to school or sat outside with my friends. If a boy talks to me, I see people looking at me with aggression, as if I am somehow doing something wrong.”

These behavioural patterns — also observed in other parts of the globe — usually begin inside the home and extend to a girl’s larger community, resulting in a heightened sense of anxiety and unwarranted guilt among adolescent girls. Many report being invasively and frequently questioned by strangers about their day-to-day interactions, their choice of clothing, and even about increasingly personal matters such as their menstrual cycles and sexuality.

“I remember an incident that happened when I was about twelve years old,” says Aya, a 17-year-old refugee from Aleppo. “I was returning to my house from the market, and our neighbour saw me and called to me to approach her. She asked my age and whether or not I have reached puberty, and then told me how inappropriate it is that I am not covering my hair. I felt so ashamed that I ran home crying.”

Day-to-day interactions with men and adolescent boys invariably become a cause of frequent distress for adolescent girls, many of whom report feeling unjustifiable guilt and shame even as a result of casual interactions. As one volunteer at a youth centre operating within the Domiz 1 Camp in Iraq notes, “many of the teenage girls we receive in our programmes struggle to interact with their male counterparts simply because of the fear and guilt ingrained into them by their families and communities. Breaking through this barrier is one of the most difficult challenges we face.”

The collective sense of entitlement harboured by families and members of the wider community eventually places girls at increased risk of other forms of violence. Violation of privacy is often a precursor to family violence, particularly on the part of male members of the family who feel a need to exercise full control over the lives of adolescent girls. It also inevitably leads to considerable restrictions in their movement, which in turn severely inhibits a girl’s development and compromises her future prospects.



THE SAVAGE WORDS OF STRANGERS

“When a girl leaves the house, she is often bombarded with lewd comments and advances by strange men,” explains Roya, a Syrian adolescent girl living in Raqqa. “We hear overtly sexual comments about our bodies and ourselves, and these comments often have violent undertones. Many girls are also touched and groped inappropriately by strangers. This makes us think a hundred times before going out, even to do essential things like fetching food or water.”

For girls like Roya, sexual harassment is a daily struggle and a key factor when it comes to restriction of movement. UNFPA programme data shows that sexual harassment runs rampant in many Syrian communities and that the risks have multiplied in the wake of the crisis for reasons ranging from increased population densities in host communities and camps to the disruption of social networks and protection mechanisms.

“Adolescent girls are at particular risk of harassment because of their perceived vulnerability,” explains Amer Yasser, a youth volunteer in Jordan’s Zaatari Camp who has organized several awareness workshops on harassment. “It is very much like a disease. Girls are taught to ignore it and remain silent, and this makes men more likely to take advantage of their silence. If a girl speaks out, she risks getting blamed for putting herself in that situation.”

What Yasser describes has been extensively corroborated by Syrian girls throughout the region. Predominant patriarchal beliefs often shift the blame to the girls themselves in cases of harassment, which results in girls increasingly feeling powerless. As is often the case elsewhere, a girl who has been subjected to harassment or sexual assault might find herself blamed for her choice of clothing at the time of the incident, or for being in public without a male escort.

“Sometimes you feel hated by men and boys just for being a girl,” explains one adolescent girl from Qamishli. “The things I frequently hear on the street are so vile, so disrespectful that I often wonder how men can talk about the importance of honour and decency and then violate the dignity of girls so brazenly.”

Reports by humanitarian actors and news organizations have shown that Syrians throughout the region consider sexual harassment a serious protection issue, with numerous reports indicating that young and adolescent girls are at particular risk. According to Sama, a refugee living in the Zaatari Camp in Jordan, “men come and harass Syrian girls, even girls as young as six or seven. They want to kidnap them and take them outside the camp.” Pointing towards a girl of about ten years of age, she remarks, “even a girl as young as this one would not be safe from their harassment.”

The threat of kidnapping cited by Sama is one that has been raised repeatedly throughout the region. As a result, sexual harassment is often seen by Syrian girls as a precursor to more serious forms of sexual violence, including sexual assault and rape. “They kidnapped many girls and made them work as prostitutes,” explains Um Ahmad, also a resident of Zaatari. “Three girls in our camp were kidnapped. They raped them and brought them back to the camp.”

Majida, who moved to the camp with her family shortly after the war broke out in Syria, explains that fear of harassment and sexual violence has become a daily reality for Syrian girls, so much so that routine day-to-day activities have become increasingly difficult. “My daughter refuses to go to the bathroom at night because she is afraid. Even I, a married woman, refuse to go the bathroom at night. We all choose to hold it in and wait until the morning when it is safer.”



THE JAGGED KNIFE OF HONOUR

In October 2018, a video was widely shared on social media depicting the gruesome murder of Rasha Bseis – a Syrian girl from Jarabulus, Aleppo. Rasha, pleading for her life, was gunned down by her brother, Bashar – a member of the Free Syrian Army who claimed that she had “committed adultery” and was therefore sentenced to die in order for him to “cleanse” his honour.

For Syrian adolescent girls – and indeed adolescent girls throughout the region – the word “honour” carries ominous undertones that haunt them throughout their formative years and well into adulthood.

In many Syrian communities, honour is a pivotal socio-cultural concept that is fundamentally connected to identity and social status. As Dr. Peter C. Dodd writes in *Family Honour and the Forces of Change in the Arab World*, “honour

is characterized as preoccupation with sexual purity and chastity, or as a cause of suspicion and jealousy between men and women.”

In patriarchal structures, this preoccupation with sexual purity inevitably devolves into a preoccupation with controlling female sexuality and behaviour, resulting in oppressive socio-cultural practices that substantially disenfranchise women and girls and put their physical and mental wellbeing at risk.

For adolescent girls, this can have a detrimental effect on their development, ultimately shaping their perception of the opposite sex and their understanding of fundamental concepts such as sexuality, marriage, and the role of women in society. UNFPA programme data has shown that the word “honour” itself has become a potent driver of fear and shame for Syrian adolescent girls throughout the region.

“We hear stories all the time about honour killings,” explains Maya, a Syrian refugee from Qamishli. “They frighten me, because I cannot imagine a father killing his own daughter or a brother his own sister, no matter what she has done. When I hear men talk about honour, I worry what might happen.”

This preoccupation with honour can drive men, families and the community at large to violate the privacy and autonomy of adolescent girls, sometimes long before the girls themselves have reached sexual maturity. Meanwhile, the fear of retribution — including the fear of so-called honour-killings — is also a cause of anxiety for many adolescent girls, many of whom opt to restrict their own movements as a coping mechanism. This fear is heightened by the conspiracy of silence that so often goes hand in hand with such killings, given the propensity to justify the murderous crime based on the perceived “guilt” of the victim.

Where the murder of Rasha Bseis was concerned, some news reports suggested she had in fact been raped by a man who took photographs of the assault and then posted them on the internet and that this was what led to her death. Adolescent girls interviewed by UNFPA noted that narratives surrounding so-called honour crimes are usually blurred, with families often preferring to protect the perpetrator — usually an immediate male family member — from prosecution.

As is the case around the world, what the internet has done in Syrian communities is serve as yet another medium through which adolescent girls can be subjected to emotional abuse, harassment and sexual exploitation.

Bseis’s tragic story sheds light on the fact that the growth of internet access in Syrian communities has opened new conduits that have arguably increased the risk of gender-based violence, including exposure to violence and killings motivated by honour. As one Syrian adolescent girl living in Sweida notes, “honour killings are very frequent and are increasing because of the internet and a lack of morality on behalf of many.”

For girls like Haya — an adolescent from southern Syria — the consequences were beyond dire. Haya had taken the decision to end a romantic relationship in which she was subject to physical and mental abuse. In her words, the relationship was “destructive.” Leaving, however, proved much more difficult than she had anticipated. Knowing full well what the consequences to her safety and life might be, the man she sought to leave blackmailed her into staying by threatening to post compromising photos he had taken of her on the internet. “I might be living in a war-torn country where fear is part of our daily lives, but that moment when he threatened to release those pictures was the most frightening moment of my entire life,” she explains. “I was devastated. I felt completely trapped and hopeless.”

Haya’s primary fear was what the men in her family would do to her, especially at a time when the rising threat of honour crimes had become part of the nation-wide zeitgeist. Compounding her terror was the fact that the man in question resorted to using this leverage to extort sexual acts from her.

Such was her fear and state of utter despair that she began to seriously contemplate suicide. “I felt as though I had two choices: I could either kill him or kill myself. There were simply no other alternatives.” However, having never been a person capable of violence, Haya admits that “thoughts of suicide quickly took over — so vivid and dominant that I even visualized how I would do it.”

Fortunately for Haya, she found her way to a UNFPA-supported safe space for women and girls. It was there that she found the intensive psychological counselling and guidance that helped her address her situation without compromising her safety and security.

Haya’s story is but one example of the potential dilemmas facing numerous adolescent girls in Syria, many of whom are finding themselves trapped in similar situations yet, unlike Haya, are unable to reach out for help.

THE OPEN AIR PRISON

For girls our age, life quickly became an open-air prison after the war. Suddenly, we were told not to leave our houses because we might get harassed, raped or kidnapped. I'm told that being married is my only path to true safety, but I don't want to get married. I'm simply not ready.

Mariam, an adolescent girl from Aleppo, Syria

Restriction of movement, a dominant theme in the lives of Syrian women and girls, has been reported consistently in various Syrian communities throughout the region since the onset of the war. Yet the practice traces its roots to beliefs and traditions that existed long before the crisis. Prevailing patriarchal notions that equate female behaviour with family honour inevitably result in families increasingly regarding adolescent girls as liabilities and exercising control over their movements.

“Aleppo is a generally conservative community,” explains Rana, a Syrian adolescent girl who has taken refuge in Turkey. “While I was lucky to have parents who trusted me to make the right decisions, many girls I know were never allowed to move freely. They remained prisoners of their own homes until they got married, and then they continued to be prisoners within their husbands’ homes.”

After the violence in Syria erupted, the causal factors for such restrictive behaviour grew exponentially. With disruptions to the social order and rule of law, adolescent girls were disproportionately at greater risk of various types of violence, including sexual harassment, sexual violence, abductions and rape. As a consequence, Syrian communities in general became more fearful and took measures to deal with the growing threat, with many families resorting to movement restriction as the means of protection for adolescent girls. Roya, an adolescent girl from Idlib, recalls how “when a girl in Darkush [a town in northern Syria] was abducted and raped, many parents became terrified and stopped sending their daughters to school. Those who did made sure to escort their daughters back and forth.”

As a result, many adolescent girls report feeling constantly threatened, either due to direct experiences or due to fears instilled by their families and communities. “I no longer leave the house, even when I really need to,” says Dima, a 16-year-old Syrian refugee from rural Damascus. “Every time I leave, I am made to feel guilty by those around me, especially when I see the fear in their eyes.”

Discussions with Syrian adolescent girls show that these movement restrictions have destructive consequences that extend far beyond the immediate constraints. They impact and impede adolescent girls’ access to education, recreational activities, and vocational and employment opportunities, thereby severely inhibiting their development. The long-term psychological impact, while difficult to ascertain and quantify, can manifest in a many ways ranging from apathy, anxiety and depression to social isolation.

Areeje Semreen, a psychologist who has overseen a range of cases involving Syrian adolescent girls in Jordan, notes that restriction of movement is often a precursor to severe psychological disorders observed among refugee communities, including paranoia, clinical depression, suicidal tendencies and substance abuse. “Besides these chronic mental conditions, a destructive consequence of movement restriction is a tendency among girls to regard early marriage as a potential way out of imprisonment, not fully grasping the ramifications of such a decision.”

“When I first arrived at the camp, school was my only real social outlet, and it helped me feel like life was not completely turned upside down,” says Simar, a 14-year-old Syrian refugee from Idlib. “But after stories started coming out of girls of being attacked and raped, I was forbidden by my family from leaving the house. They are now encouraging me to get married, as several men have expressed interest, but I really don’t want to.”

Meanwhile, restriction of movement has the indirect effect of severely degrading the role played by adolescent girls in their communities, reinforcing the perception that they are a “burden” or “liability.” In the short-term, this significantly damages their fragile self-esteem and self-perception, stifling their drive to pursue opportunities for self-development or actualization. On a grander scale, it perpetuates the relegation of women to the status of second-class citizens and is conducive to the development of a hostile environment where gender-based violence can thrive.

BROKEN CHILDHOODS

You see them all the time in the camp - these young girls being married off to older men. They would be thirteen, fourteen, even twelve in one case. Most are too young to know what they are being forced into, and many end up divorced several times by the time they reach adulthood. It is simply criminal because it destroys them.

Jiyan, a survivor of child marriage from Al-Hasakah, Syria

The same issues underlying violations of privacy and restriction of movement contribute to the growth of Syrian adolescent girls being led into early and forced marriages, identifiably an all too common coping mechanism within Syrian communities throughout the region. According to a 2014 Unicef study, approximately 12% of registered marriages among Syrians involved girls under age 18 when the Syria crisis erupted in 2011. This figure rose to 18% in 2012, and to 25% in 2013. In early 2014, the figure had reached 32% and has remained relatively constant since.

Assessments conducted by UNFPA show that early and forced marriage is not a new phenomenon in Syrian communities but rather a practice linked to custom and traditions rooted in the belief that women need protection by men. However, the protracted nature of the crisis has influenced the nature of early and forced marriage in a way that has placed additional pressure on adolescent girls.

Fears of sexual violence or exploitation play a major role when it comes to child marriages. Families may arrange marriages for their girls because they perceive it as a means of preventing sexual violence. Indeed, girls who have experienced sexual violence are considered unsuitable for marriage in many Syrian communities and more often than not are deemed to have brought dishonour to themselves and their families. As a result, some families harbour the notion that they can reduce or eliminate this risk by pushing girls into marriage as early as possible.

The impact of child marriage on girls has been widely documented in a variety of assessments conducted by UNFPA and other humanitarian

organizations such as Unicef, Save the Children, and Human Rights Watch. In the case of Syrian adolescent girls, the consequences are no different, with similar patterns of potentially fatal complications during pregnancy and childbirth, domestic violence, inadequate education and economic opportunities, as well as significantly reduced freedom to socialize with children their own age.

However, further compounding the struggles Syrian child brides face is the fact that many marriages are unregistered, often leaving adolescent girls with little protection for themselves or their children, and making them all the more vulnerable to longstanding practices that often favour men in cases of divorce, alimony and child custody. Moreover, divorced girls are often stigmatized in their communities, rendering them more susceptible to exploitation and subject to serious psychosocial consequences that can follow them for the rest of their lives.

“Do not look for fairness or humanity in cases like mine,” warns Dania, a Syrian refugee from Aleppo who was forced into early marriage shortly after the war broke out in 2011. “I was forced by my father and brothers to marry when I was fourteen, to a man a decade older than I was. It was a toxic and violent relationship that lasted less than two years, by which time I had given birth to my first child.

The marriage was officiated by a sheikh because I did not have my official documents, so when I finally managed to free myself, there was no legal proof that I was married. His family took my son from me and I have only been able to see him twice in the past four years.”



“WITH A THOUSAND EYES ON MY BACK”

As told by Zain, an adolescent girl from Aleppo, Syria

“When you ask girls my age about life in the camp, more often than not they would struggle to answer. Many of them can barely remember what life was like before the war, but — at least for most of them — life has not changed much. The restrictions that rule their lives today have always been there, regardless of what was happening around them. To be a girl in my community is to feel like a lifelong refugee; restricted, ashamed and constantly feeling threatened.

“It is so hard to talk about these things. As a girl, I always feel like I’m walking with a thousand eyes on my back and an invisible knife held against my throat.

“Every word, every glance, and every step is a potential affront to the honour of my family. They tell us that we are constantly at risk, that the world is filled by those who want to kidnap us, sell us or take advantage of our bodies. We are made to feel like liabilities, and the threat levelled against us from outside our homes eventually breeds even worse threats within our homes. We are constantly imprisoned, restricted and controlled.

“I was taken out of school at the age of fourteen and forced to marry a man twice my age. I hated him with every fibre of my being, but I hated my father and brothers more for making me marry him. Four years have passed since then, during which time I have been married twice.

“My first husband left me less than a year into our marriage because he said I was infertile. That turned out to be untrue, as I fell pregnant shortly after my second marriage to a man several years older than the first. He treats me well enough, especially if I don’t protest much, but we come from different worlds.

“Today, I am about to turn eighteen, and I am the mother of a six-month-old boy. I love him with all my heart. He is my world, because he is just as helpless as I am, but he is also my invisible chain. Because of him, I will forever be tied to a man for whom I feel absolutely nothing, and to a life I simply did not choose.”



THE ILLUSION OF FREEDOM

“Growing up, I never felt like I had a life,” explains Shatha, a Syrian refugee from Raqqa. “I was confined to my house, unable to go to school or see my friends. Every time I tried to leave, I was beaten by my brother and told that I would eventually bring scandal to the family. In the end, marriage felt like the only way out. I had this fantasy that a man slightly older than me might finally give me the life I wanted; that he would help me finish my education and we would share a happy life. Little did I know that I was simply leaving one prison and going to another.”

Shatha’s story is one shared by countless adolescent girls in her community. Having moved to Lebanon in 2012 when she was about twelve years old, she grew up into a world in which girls felt increasingly unsafe, often forced by families and communities to limit their movements and interactions with the outside world. According to focus group discussions held by UNFPA, many adolescent girls feel motivated to marry under the illusion that doing so will allow them greater freedom of movement and an escape from restrictions imposed by their communities.

As an adolescent girl living in Raqqa explains: “We girls cannot move freely. When they see us moving freely, people start talking about us as being disrespectful. But when [girls] get married,

they can go out to their relatives or their friends or wherever they want, and that’s what motivates them to get married.”

Unfortunately, for girls like Shatha, this illusion of freedom is short-lived. The consequences of early marriage are almost immediate, usually beginning with restriction of movement that can progress to domestic violence. Meanwhile, the course of their natural development is affected as they take on the responsibilities of a household long before they are physically or mentally prepared for them.

“I feel trapped and alone,” explains Jana, a 16-year-old Syrian refugee from rural Damascus. “I will be giving birth in less than six months, and I did not believe it would happen so quickly. I had so much I wanted to do.”

Jana, a star pupil at her school before she was made withdraw by her family, always dreamed of being a writer. “I grew up writing stories, and eventually I started writing articles for school. My teachers told me that I should study to be a journalist, but that feels impossible now.”



A BAD BARGAIN

Poverty plays a central role in perpetuating child marriage among Syrian communities in the region. With livelihood opportunities dwindling following the crisis, some parents have sought to minimize expenses by passing on the financial burden of daughters to other families through marriage. This comes back to the age-old distorted perception that daughters are an economic burden — that feeding, clothing, and educating them is costly and ultimately a poor investment given that they will eventually leave the household.

As such, marrying a daughter off in exchange for a dowry can be seen as a way for a family to recoup its investment. Interviews with a number of survivors of child marriages show that, in many Syrian communities, the dowry is inversely proportional to a girl's age. This can persuade parents to marry off their daughters at younger ages. Even worse, some survivors report that there are families pushing adolescent girls into prostitution or serial/temporary marriages as a means of generating family income.

Ghaida, a volunteer at a women and girls centre in Iraq, notes that a significant number of adolescent girls who attend activities at the camp are survivors of sexual exploitation. "These are perhaps the hardest cases to track and address, as such practices are done discreetly. Nonetheless, it has become a recurring phenomenon for many girls in poorer communities. They are either forcibly entered into a series of short-term marriages, or worse, become unwilling participants in family-endorsed survival sex."

Credible news reports have highlighted the phenomenon of serial and temporary marriages, which frequently involve wealthier patrons

who seek younger wives in return for financial compensation. These are usually marriages of convenience that last anywhere from several days to several weeks.

Abu Sanad, a Syrian refugee and concerned father of two girls living in the Zaatari camp in Jordan, explains: "They come and ask: 'do you want to give your daughters away for marriage?' They see that we don't have money and they want to exploit us." He claims families have been offered anywhere between 100 and 300 Jordanian dinars (\$140 to \$420) as a price for their daughters.

Rama, a refugee who had to flee the camp after facing mounting pressure to get married to a wealthy donor noted that her tent was burned down as a result of her consistent refusal of such propositions. "There are many girls who might accept these propositions," she says. "They might have suffered during the war and feel a need to be protected. They may feel vulnerable and may need money, clothes, and other essentials."

Um Majed, a 28-year-old Syrian housewife from Homs, is a self-described "marriage broker" who facilitates marriages of Syrian girls to such donors, even those seeking temporary arrangements. "It can go anywhere from 50 dinars all the way to 1,000 if he wants an official marriage. It's his business if he wants to divorce her after an hour." As if to emphasise the point that it's a business, albeit one dictated by men on their terms, she dispassionately recalls an instance where a sixty-year old man "wanted a thirteen-year-old girl."



OF WARS WAGED ON INNOCENCE

As told by Suha, an adolescent girl from Aleppo, Syria

“I was born in Raqqa in 1993. I attended school until 9th grade, but my father took me out of school when I was 14, and I was forced to marry a man who was 12 years my senior. I felt as though my life had ended, but little did I know that my nightmare was just beginning.

“I could never understand my husband’s behaviour. He was extremely violent towards me, even sexually, which at the time I was too young and inexperienced to realize. Three days into our marriage, he came to me and demanded that I give him all my jewellery. As a 14-year-old girl from a poor family, I had never owned jewellery — not the valuable kind, anyway — an idea that he did not seem to grasp. It was then that I received my first beating. I sought refuge at the feet of mother-in-law, hoping she would have the compassion to make him stop, but she encouraged him to hit me again. “By the time he was done, I was wiping blood from my face and looking at them both in

amazement. How can people be so cruel?”

“Two weeks into my marriage, the violence only became worse. My husband locked me in a room, only letting me out when it was absolutely necessary. I demanded to see my mother, which afforded me another beating, but by then my family had begun asking to see me, and so I was allowed to visit them. On my way out, he promised to kill me if I told any ‘lies’ about him.

“When I saw my family, I broke down in tears. I told them what had been happening to me, but they did not believe me; they thought it was the imagination of a newly-wed girl. Still, my sister — who suspected I was telling the truth — decided to accompany me as I was forced to return to my husband’s house, and she saw first-hand the uncontrollable monster with whom I shared my bed. A brief argument ensued, and both my sister and I ended up being locked in the room. We

screamed, we cried, and then we threatened to go to the police, at which point he let her go. As soon as she left, he beat me, leaving me bloodied and half-conscious.

“My husband would accuse me of stealing his money and having an affair with another man, and — much to my surprise — everyone believed him, including my own family. Upon hearing his tale, my father and brothers beat me until I felt my bones breaking. My mother stopped them eventually, taking me to another room and attempting to calm me down. She left me to rest and sleep.

“As soon as she left, I walked to the bathroom, opened the medicine cabinet, took out a pack of painkillers and swallowed every pill inside. I was in dire pain and wanted it to stop.

“I came to in what seemed like a clinic, with a doctor looking down on me with kind, sorrowful eyes. He told me that I had attempted suicide and that several bones in my body were broken.

“The word ‘suicide’ struck me as odd; I was not trying to kill myself. I just wanted the pain to go away. Nonetheless, he decided to refer me to a psychiatrist. My so-called suicide attempt was somehow considered an affront to my family and their honour, and I was treated like a criminal. But there was one silver lining in this entire ordeal: my accidental suicide freed me from my abusive husband.

“Alas, my freedom was short-lived, as shortly after that the war in Syria broke out, and it felt as though the world itself was breaking apart.

“My family and I first took refuge in Iraq. It was there that my mother and I sought the help of a doctor to continue my treatment, as my body had still not fully healed from my supposed suicide attempt. At the clinic, I was taken into a private room so that the doctor would examine my injuries. In the room, after he looked at the injuries, he began touching parts of my body affectionately and telling me how beautiful I am. Both my mind and my body froze; I simply didn’t

know how to respond.

“When he saw my discomfort, he stopped and asked if I was interested in marriage. He told me that he would give me a good life. I could not respond and asked to leave, but he urged me to think about it and come back if I decide to accept. A part of me wanted to accept. I was so desperate for an escape — to be free of my family and the madness they have inflicted upon me — and this felt like a good enough opportunity. After all, he was kind and gentle with me.

“Eventually, my family and I moved from Iraq to Turkey, where we heard that many Syrians had sought refuge in the hope of leading a better life. As soon as we had arrived, the family placed me under house arrest and forbade me from speaking to anyone. I was treated like a curse that had been forced upon them, and my father spared no effort to try and sell me to other potential suitors. He was determined to get rid of me at all costs.

“One day, I learned from one of my relatives about a women’s health centre nearby, where she had been receiving emotional support for some time. I had confided in her about my current mental state and my desire to speak to a psychiatrist to help me find a way out before it was too late. Her experience with the centre was incredibly successful, and after considering my options I decided to go.

“At the centre, I found the outlet I had been searching for. I was immediately enrolled in extensive counselling to process the years of unending abuse I had endured, and my therapist encouraged me to join the many empowerment activities on offer. I finally felt as though I had a social circle of my own, filled with people who had survived similar experiences. I gradually began letting go of the past. I learned to stand by myself, to guide myself and trust myself. I began to see a life where I am free of the many ghosts that haunt me every day.”



UNTIMELY BIRTHS, UNTIMELY DEATHS

“I have delivered hundreds of babies in my lifetime,” says Um Raad, a Syrian refugee from Kafr Nabl, a town in north-western rural Idlib. “Some of the things I have seen in this war have often made me regret my choices in life.”

Um Raad has been a midwife for the better part of three decades, a job that became ever more essential during the conflict in Syria as access to reproductive healthcare became increasingly difficult. For Um Raad, the crisis redefined many of the perceptions she had about some of the cultural practices common in her community. “The rise of the so-called Islamic State really turned our world upside down. Everything we thought we knew suddenly became distant and blurry.”

Child marriage was not uncommon in Um Raad’s hometown of Kafr Nabl before the war, but

following the violence there was a dramatic rise as underprivileged families increasingly resorted to the practice as a way of coping.

“I’ve seen girls as young as fourteen years become mothers,” says Um Raad. “I’ve seen them forced to marry, sometimes beaten into it, and I have also seen some of them die giving birth, their fragile bodies giving out after much pain and suffering. We also hear stories of many girls taking their own lives after being forced to marry much older men and becoming pregnant.”

What Um Raad is describing has been extensively documented throughout the region, with countless studies showing maternal deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth have become a serious issue facing Syrian adolescent girls. Meanwhile, focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews show that some Syrian girls

have turned to suicide as a consequence of child marriage and its associated forms of gender-based violence.

“There was one girl in my town — Rama — whom I will never forget. I think about her every day,” Um Raad recalls. “Her family married her at thirteen to a much older man who had a tendency for religious extremism. Both families had disagreements from the very beginning, and she was caught in the middle. She was full of life and innocence, but she was locked up in that house day and night, unable to see her family for more than two years. Her life was shattered after that marriage. A few years later she died after taking too many painkillers. I had heard that the husband later joined the IS militants.”

Um Raad has come across countless cases where child marriage has destroyed the physical and mental wellbeing of an adolescent girl. “For my generation, a girl marrying young was considered somewhat normal, but times have changed. Forcing these girls to become wives and mothers before they are ready is simply wrong. It is killing them and their babies.”

A concomitant risk facing Syrian adolescent girls is that of unsafe abortion. With increasing numbers of adolescent girls married and with limited access to family planning services, many end up with unwanted pregnancies that may lead them to resort to unsafe abortion as the only available avenue. This poses a wide array of health risks, some lethal. Unsafe abortion may also be seen as a last resort for girls who become pregnant after experiencing sexual assault.

“My cousin, Zina was forced by her father to marry when she was thirteen years old,” says Jude, a 17-year-old Syrian refugee from rural Damascus. “The husband, almost twice her age, was very violent to her, and he forced her to be intimate with him long before she was even physically ready.”

Jude, a survivor of gender-based violence herself, breaks down into tears at the memory of Zina. “She was very intelligent and mature, but she was

also a child. You don’t expect much from a man who chooses to marry a thirteen-year-old girl, but at least you hope he doesn’t abuse her.”

Zina became pregnant but kept it a secret from her family for more than a month, only confiding in her cousin and a mutual friend. “I’ll never forget her face when she told us. It was as if she had aged several years since she found out,” says a visibly upset Jude as she tells how Zina’s early pregnancy eventually led to her death.

Zina had managed to obtain under-the-counter drugs, told they would induce abortion. According to Jude, the side effects were to prove fatal, inducing severe heart problems resulting in Zina’s death two days later.

“What horrified me most was the way everyone rushed to cover up her story,” explains Jude. “What mattered to them was preserving the family’s reputation. None of them even cared that they all participated in her murder.”

BUILDING LIFELINES

“For me, the safe space became more than a lifeline. It became my life, my one outlet from the madness, hatred, discrimination and cruelty I was encountering on a daily basis. Sometimes, life feels like one of those strange nightmares in which you are trying to call for help but your voice is caught in your throat. Coming to this centre felt like I finally got my voice back..”

Rama, a survivor of gender-based violence from Qamishli, Syria. Rama has been receiving psychological support services from a Women and Girls Safe Space that is supported by UNFPA.



“I want to live in a world where I feel like I matter as much as my brothers,” explains Dalia, a Syrian refugee from Raqqa. “I want to live in a world where every girl has choices and the power to create the life she wants to live.”

Dalia, a survivor of family violence, says that she wants to be an architect so that she can help rebuild Syria when she finally returns to the country. Years of war, displacement and abuse have not managed to stifle the passion she has for life and for her country, nor have they quelled her hope in a future where girls like her can experience a greater sense of autonomy and empowerment.

When issues impacting Syrian adolescent girls are seen from a holistic perspective, it becomes painfully clear that addressing these issues is a key requirement for the future resilience and prosperity of the country. Allowing gender inequality and gender-based violence to thrive corrodes the social structures of any community, particularly when these forms of violence are directed against an entire segment of that community.

Breaking down the web of violence that has its grips on the wellbeing of Syrian adolescent girls — and indeed most adolescent girls in patriarchal

communities and those caught up in humanitarian crises — requires a concerted effort by the international humanitarian community to deal directly with root causes and the institutional structures sustaining the web. This includes delivering better programming that is informed by hard evidence and verifiable data about the diverse and differing needs of adolescent girls; ensuring that services and programmes are more adaptable to those needs; creating programmes that are specifically adolescent girl-friendly, e.g. helping them with mentoring aimed to build and strengthen their life skills; galvanising and bringing on board as many actors and agencies as possible to address and raise awareness of the needs of adolescent girls; and ensuring that the policy environment is favourable to adolescent girls.

Programmes driven by the above guidelines have demonstrated their capacity to serve as lifelines for adolescent girls facing gender-based violence, offering them the necessary physical and mental therapies, treatments and counselling to address the consequences of violence, and providing a safe and secure environment in which they can begin to form constructive and supportive social circles that are conducive to their recovery and realisation of their full potential.



AMPLIFYING THE VOICES OF ADOLESCENTS

As outlined in the Convention of the Rights of the Child, a guiding principle of working with adolescents is to ensure the participation of adolescents themselves, reflecting and respecting the right of adolescents to express their views in all matters affecting them. The right to participation is relevant to the exercise of all other rights, within the family, the school, and in the context of the larger community. Participation is the catalyst and the key to ensuring each individual right is protected and respected. It is a criterion by which to measure and assess progress when implementing adolescents' rights; and, as an additional dimension of the universally-recognised right to freedom of expression, it feeds into the right of the adolescent to be heard and to have her views or opinions taken into account.

Adolescents have the right to participate in the design, development and evaluation of the programmes that target them. This has been demonstrated by many programmes in development settings, which show that adolescents' involvement in the design and implementation of programmes as well as in programme monitoring are vital to ensuring that programmes are acceptable and accessible in meeting the needs of their adolescent beneficiaries.

In addition, involving adolescents in programme evaluation can guide the development of future programming. Adolescent participation at all stages of the programme cycle can lead to more relevant programming, strengthen programme outcomes and contribute to meaningful partnerships between adolescents and adults.

This is crucial to any strategy geared toward rebuilding Syrian society as the effects of war begin to settle. Given that many of the issues

impacting Syrian adolescent girls are now fundamentally ingrained in the fabric of their communities, encouraging and enabling their active participation in the development process is of paramount importance. Too often, adolescent girls are engaged by humanitarian actors in an ad-hoc fashion, after realising the subpopulation was not accessing services or directly engaged in activities identified and publicised as being for children or adults. By ensuring that the struggles, restrictions, and individual needs of adolescent girls are taken into consideration, humanitarian actors can deliver much more focused and realistic programming that will have a much stronger and lasting impact on their lives.

Globally, most humanitarian funds, programming, and policy strategies do not target adolescent girls specifically but group them in with women or children, and the Syria response has been no different. While there is a growing body of information on how to reach and target adolescent girls in humanitarian settings and design programmes to best serve their needs, a concerted effort is required to continue broadening the quality and specificity of information available. We must increase our understanding of the variable needs of the different sub-groups of adolescents, taking into account crucial factors such as their age, their marital status, their education, the environment they live in and their living conditions. Adolescent participation and engagement will help build appropriate programmes that are relevant, adapted and acceptable, and which will build up and empower their confidence at the same time.



AWARENESS COMES FIRST

“The awareness sessions I’ve attended on child marriage really shifted my perspective on the subject,” explains Ranwa, a Syrian adolescent girl who had faced mounting familial pressure to marry at the age of fifteen. “Having the right information allowed me to stand up for myself and say no, which is a privilege not many of us have in our given circumstances.”

Helping adolescent girls traverse gender-based violence necessitates supporting all efforts to promote gender equality in different Syrian communities throughout the region. As long as women and girls are perceived as inferior in status and potential to men, they will continue to be targets for various forms of gender-based violence.

UNFPA Deputy Regional Director for the Arab States and adolescent girl expert, Frederika

Meijer, explains: “In order to achieve gender equality, we must work towards changing attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of and about women and girls, and the roles they play within families and communities. We do this by creating safe spaces where we build awareness at the family and community levels, and provide education to individuals on life skills and human rights. In addition, we work with policy makers and institutions to promote laws and policies that are conducive for women and girls. Our efforts are geared towards dismantling laws, policies, and institutions that disempower women and girls and perpetuate a system that not only reinforces gender inequality but also further entrenches negative attitudes rooted in society.”

Dismantling these policies, laws, and institutions applies across the board and at all levels, from national government agencies to the most local

government administrative body. Women and girls must be able to assert their right to make autonomous decisions impacting their lives and futures — whether it is to safely access family planning services or to prosecute a rapist rather than be forced to marry him.

“As women and girls, we deserve to live the lives we choose for ourselves and not be relegated as subordinate beings at the mercy of the beliefs and desires of men. Such beliefs and desires are often at the very foundation of patriarchal laws and institutions that profoundly impact our lives on a daily basis,” Meijer adds.

For girls like Yanal, a 16-year-old Syrian refugee living in Jordan, awareness can mean the difference between a broken childhood and a life of social activism. She explains: “When I attended the trainings on the subject, they gave us a comprehensive overview of the issue of child marriage, its dangers and its adverse effects on girls. They told us how girls are often taken out of school and thrust into a life of hardship and responsibility long before they are ready. Sometimes, they are forced to do it, often ending up with much older men. This inspired me to become an advocate against child marriage.”

Yara and Luma, best friends since primary school, tapped into their creative potential as artists on joining a women’s empowerment programme offered in their community. Both girls had grappled with family violence for years, with Yara facing mounting physical abuse by her brother and Luma surviving the consequences of an early marriage she had been forced into at the age of fifteen. Today, they are both leveraging on their past experiences to write and produce theatrical performances that address many of the issues facing women and girls in their community.

Working directly with the Syrian youth is also of paramount importance, as youth programmes have the effect of integrating adolescent boys and girls in a constructive and safe environment where many preconceptions about gender are quickly dismantled. For UNFPA, such programmes have consistently demonstrated

their effectiveness, helping adolescent girls find their individuality in a world that consistently tries to stifle it. This approach also helps young men overcome some of the deeply-entrenched and discriminatory patriarchal ideas that may have been prevalent in their communities.

Last but not least, the humanitarian community must continue to be vigilant when addressing the issues impacting adolescent girls, even in the face of the numerous constraints that may stand in the way of such efforts, such as cultural differences, conservative ideologies, or geopolitical barriers. Given the destructive long-term consequences observed, preventing and responding to these forms of violence must become a key global priority.



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