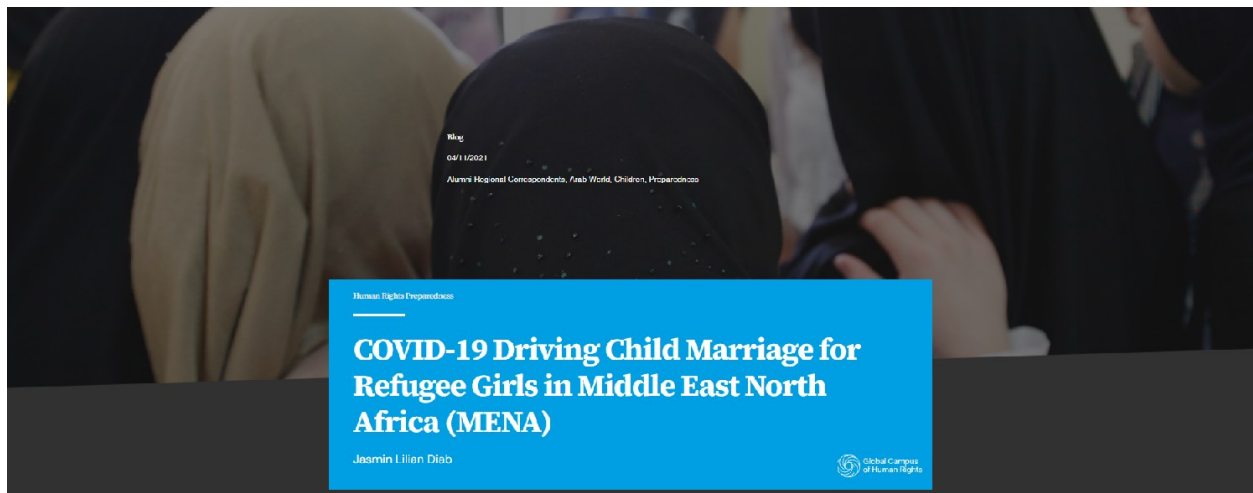




COVID-19 Driving Child Marriage for Refugee Girls in Middle East North Africa (MENA)

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Abstract: Children's rights activists and international aid agencies in Lebanon and throughout the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region claim school closures, rising poverty rates and lack of legal barriers mean more underage refugee girls being forced to marry during COVID-19.

Negative [coping mechanisms](#) to combat Lebanon's intersectional and layered political, economic and health crises have been witnessed across the country—particularly among some of the most vulnerable population groups. For example, several UN agencies, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and human rights groups on the ground report that [child marriage](#) among refugee populations has increased at an alarming rate since the COVID-19 outbreak and its dire economic implications.

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UNICEF's Child Protection Programme in Lebanon insists that child marriage is '[just one](#)' of the harmful strategies to which refugees and disadvantaged Lebanese citizens are resorting. In March 2021, UNICEF put out a [public statement](#) highlighting that the pandemic may result in as many as 10m more girls from at risk population groups being made to marry over the next decade worldwide. On rare occasions, young refugee boys are also forced into marriages, however, this issue [predominantly affects](#) young refugee girls.

Drivers of child marriage among refugees

Save the Children International, an INGO aimed at improving the lives of children through better education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, states that Syrian refugee girls remain at a heightened risk of child marriage in both Lebanon and throughout the MENA region. This is [because of](#) a surge in pandemic-linked poverty, inconsistencies in legal frameworks, inadequate protection mechanisms and protracted forced displacement in countries across the MENA region, but Lebanon more specifically.

More than [5.5m Syrians](#) are registered as asylum seekers in the MENA region since conflict broke out in Syria over a decade ago. Lebanon, which alone is home to an [estimated](#) total 1m (registered and unregistered) Syrian refugees, [has not enacted](#) a law against child marriage. This is despite activists and human rights groups campaigning against its nationwide spread [for decades](#). As refugee communities in Lebanon continue to battle prolonged displacement, inadequate protection, severe poverty and the impacts of mismanagement of the pandemic, following the [Beirut blast](#) on August 4, 2020, drivers of child marriage remain persistent and inescapable. Refugee girls continue to be married off at much higher rates than girls from host communities in the MENA region, as their financially struggling families see this as a way [to save on expenses](#). In the past, certain parts of the population in Lebanon had more underage or forced marriage than others. Estimates collected by UNICEF between 2015 and 2016 (before the current crises) indicated that percentages of child marriages were [much higher](#) among the country's refugee populations. Approximately [12 per cent](#) of female Palestinian refugees from Lebanon, [25 per cent](#) of female Palestinian refugees from Syria and at least [a quarter](#) of female Syrian refugees were married off as children (before the age of 18 years old).

However, researchers currently estimate that children are also increasingly being married off outside of Lebanon's refugee populations. Despite the fact that there is no dowry tradition in Lebanon—no money or property is exchanged or received when a young girl marries—she becomes her husband's 'economic responsibility' under both Lebanese and regional [legal frameworks](#). Furthermore, from a financial perspective, families living below poverty lines often believe they are doing what is

in the best interest of their child and ultimately what is most affordable for them amid the awful economic conditions they continue to endure.

Legal loopholes facilitating child marriage in Lebanon

Like many countries in the MENA region, Lebanon [does not outline or enforce](#) any clear and consistent legal penalties for child marriage. Moreover, resources and protection mechanisms to combat child marriage among at risk population groups [remain low](#), particularly in refugee camps. This is compounded by the fact that some of the most vulnerable [often reside](#) in remote and neglected areas.

An additional reason why child marriage is enabled in Lebanon is that, unlike many of its regional neighbours, including Iraq, Egypt and Jordan, the country does not have a '[Personal Status Law](#)', independent from religious and sectarian bodies.

[Traditionally](#), Personal Status Laws throughout the region regulate matters such as an individual's inheritance, divorce and custody of children after divorce, as well as the legal age of marriage.

In Lebanon, each one of the 18 officially recognised religious authorities/sects sets its own laws on the legal age to wed and also conducts all public and private ceremonies for that religion/sect, as Lebanon does not have separate [civil marriage](#) ceremonies. Legal [ages to wed](#) range from 14 years old for Catholics, 15 for Shiite Muslims, to 18 for members of the Greek Orthodox Church and Sunni Muslims.

Among more conservative religious groups and in vulnerable and hard-to-reach communities, parental consent to marry off daughters at younger ages often trumps legalities. For refugees, who essentially live 'outside' many national legal frameworks, minimum ages outlined by religious authorities are merely suggestive at best. Refugee families throughout the region have reportedly even resorted to ['promising'](#) their young daughters (and, in rare cases, sons) to their eventual spouses as soon as they are born or before their third birthday

Insights from the MENA region

A prevalent phenomenon in pre-war Syria, child marriage has been sustained after the influx of Syrian refugees into many countries such as Egypt and Jordan. [In Egypt](#), displacement subsequently engendered different responses and re-established many conservative societal and culture norms in the process. For a large proportion of refugee families, displacement-specific challenges such as disruptions to girls' education, financial struggles, protection concerns and insecurity exacerbate girls' susceptibility to child marriage within the refugee community.

[In Jordan](#), the majority of child marriages also involve Syrian refugee girls, who remain one of the country's most vulnerable groups. Having endured forced displacement, and lacking citizenship rights and social safety nets, [80 per cent](#) of

the Syrian refugee population in Jordan lives in extreme poverty. More than [half](#) of this population (51 per cent) are children. Since the Syrian conflict and the influx of refugees into the country, the proportion of child marriages reportedly [almost trebled](#) from 12 per cent to 32.3 per cent between 2012 and 2014.

Targeted holistic solutions required

Lebanon's civil society and human rights activists have attempted to pressure government to pass a Personal Status Law for decades. In 2017, [a bill](#) which would have criminalised child marriage at the national level was introduced in parliament but was defeated due to pressure, predominantly from religious authorities. Efforts to prevent child marriage among Syrian refugees in both Lebanon and the MENA region more generally need to acknowledge the wide range of implications that forced displacement may have on the prevalence of child marriage attitudes and practices. It is pivotal that these efforts are targeted, focused and contextualised interventions which take a more holistic approach, not just toward preventing child marriage but also as regards mitigating its drivers, direct and indirect.