

# STORIES FROM THE GROUND

CHILD MARRIAGE IN REFUGEE CAMPS



A compilation of stories received from our work in Lebanon with those fleeing the Syrian conflict.



## Background

The ongoing Syrian conflict has generated one of the largest refugee crises in recent history forcing over 5.5 million people to flee their homes and escape to neighbouring countries. Lebanon, one such neighbouring country now is home to approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees. The situation for children, especially for girls, is of great concern as instability and lack of a certain future has led to many ramifications including a significant rise in child marriage.

Prior to the conflict in Syria, child marriage was not unheard of with 13% of young Syrian women being married before the age of 18. However, the outbreak of the conflict has caused a massive increase in the rate of this practice. Current figures estimate that 41% of Syrian girls are married before the age of 18. This does not include the number of informal unions, which from our work on the ground is much more commonplace.



# Causes

FROM OUR OBSERVATIONS, THERE APPEARS TO BE THREE MAIN FACTORS LEADING TO CHILD MARRIAGE: POVERTY, SECURITY AND LACK OF ACCESS TO EDUCATION.

## 1. Poverty

With approximately 70% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon living below the poverty line, child marriage is viewed as a coping strategy. Parents are often left unable to provide for their children and meet their basic daily needs. This is due to either high unemployment rates, low-paid and often illegal jobs and high rents. Marriage is seen as a way to provide financial relief for the family as it is one less mouth to feed and in addition there is often a dowry paid.

## 2. Security

Given the instability caused by the conflict and unfamiliar living environment, marriage is seen as a way of protecting the girl. From reports on the ground the concept of 'al Sultra' which translates to protecting a women's honor or reputation, is a driving factor. Protecting the women's and also of the families' reputation is of importance, and unmarried girls may be subjected to unfavourable gossip. In addition, girls are vulnerable to sexual harassment and rape given the unfamiliar and sometimes dangerous environment and breakdown of social networks. The changing household dynamics, with women now being at the head of the household as their husbands are lost at war or still in Syria, has increased the rate of the practice as they view marriage as a way to ensure their daughters fall under the protection of their husbands thus ensuring their safety.

## 3. Lack of Access to Education

Access to education is a widely recognised factor in preventing child marriage. With over 40% of Syrian refugee children out of school in Lebanon, this is a catalyst to child marriage as it is seen as a way of securing a future when the girls future is often an unknown factor. However, lack of access to education means they cannot obtain qualifications and therefore they are prevented from entering the skilled labour market and being economically independent. In addition, from our observations, boys out of school work on construction sites or sell tissues on the street, a common practice in Lebanon, whereas girls are less likely to do so due to security concerns and stereotypes, with girls being expected to stay at home to look after the household. In addition, education is of vital importance in tackling this issue as when girls remain in school they are viewed more as a child and are therefore less likely to be married.

# Consequences

OUR TEAM ON THE GROUND HAS REPORTED THE FOLLOWING CONSEQUENCES FROM CHILD MARRIAGE.

## 1. Education

We have noticed that many of the girls who get married, stop attending classes as they are expected to stay at home and perform their duties as a wife and mother.

## 2. Domestic Violence

We have been informed of a number of cases of domestic violence occurring which has led to significant injuries and even death. Recently we published a story where the girl was beaten for asking for chocolate.

## 3. Physical Health

Once married, the girl is expected to engage in sexual intercourse at an age where their bodies are still developing. We have had reports from our field staff of instances where girls have died the day after marriage, as their bodies were not prepared for sexual activity. In addition, there is a higher rate of harmful side-effects including death in some circumstances given their young age.

## 4. Mental health

Our staff have noted instances of deteriorated mental health amongst the girls, with reports of feeling overwhelmed with their new life and this has led to in certain cases, suicide.

## 5. Divorce

This appears to be a frequent occurrence which leads to ostracisation of the girls by their family and the wider society. We have had cases of girls as young as sixteen being divorced.

## 6. Lack of legal recognition

Many of the marriages we have observed have been informal unions. This has a direct consequence on the future generations, as without legal recognition, the children will be born stateless.

# Actions

Given our understanding that this is something born out of a desire to not only alleviate poverty but also to protect the children and provide a certain future, we have tried to implement the following strategy: outreach, education and coping mechanisms.

## CONCRETELY WE DID THIS IN FOUR WAYS:

### 1. Community Outreach

We began by going into the community and talking to the families about the consequences of child marriage and the effect of it on young girls, as well as advocating for the continuation of education.

### 2. Vocational and Educational Courses

Education is recognised as a factor in preventing child marriage, and through providing education with our three 'catch-up' schools, we aim to keep girls in school and encourage them to think about their other options rather than getting married. In addition to this, we run vocational courses where we provide the girls and women with skills to allow them to become somewhat economically independent.

### 3. Coping Mechanisms

We also run activities, such as life-skills, art and drama, which aim to empower the young women and enhance the awareness of their rights. We believe that through art, the young girls are provided an outlet to express emotions that are often left unexpressed. In addition, as part of our drama workshops, we allow our students to create plays based on their experiences and then invite the community to the production. This has the dual effect of providing a creative outlet for the girls as well as providing an often-unknown insight into their world to the parents and the community, and thereby change the perceptions of child marriage and curb the practice. In addition, we offer psychological support to the girls and refer more serious cases to specialised institutions.

### 4. Raise Awareness

From our HQ in Brussels, we aim to raise awareness of this practice by bringing the stories on the ground to the public. We do this through publishing them on our website and on other media outlets, as well as speaking at events. Below, we have four stories from the work we do on the ground. These stories all follow a similar pattern and show the detrimental effects of child marriage.



*Yes, I am a mother, I cook, I clean, I wash  
I care about my family  
I have a child and I am pregnant  
But...  
I no longer have time for myself  
and I forget that I am only 16 years old.*



## STORIES FROM LEBANON

# SHERINE'S STORY

Written by Raisa Elhadi,  
a volunteer with SB Overseas Lebanon

This is a story of a girl named Sherine, but her name could be Amina, or Amal, or Sara, or any one of hundreds, even thousands of names of girls with almost the same story. Girls whose futures have been wrested from their control over and over again in so many different ways and who, somehow, still manage to feel hope and passion and optimism for a different, better life than their own. Sherine is only one of those girls.

Sherine's family, like so many others, came to Lebanon seeking safety from violence. As a thirteen-year-old, Sherine had studied up until the fifth grade in Syria. Growing up she had aspirations of becoming a doctor, a dream only reinforced by the sight of all the violence she saw around her during the war. Sherine thought her family's stay in Lebanon would be brief, and she would soon return to Syria to complete her studies and fulfill her dream.

Shortly after their arrival in Lebanon, Sherine's mother asked her what she thought about getting married. There was a young man from the family's town back in Syria who was interested in taking Sherine as a wife.

"It's up to you," Sherine shrugged, ambivalent. Marriage didn't seem like a very big deal to her. How different could it be from the wedding games she played with her friends in her yard in Syria or in the streets of Shatila?

So Sherine's family decided to wed her to the man from their town, and Sherine went along with it, unaware of the gravity of the union she was about to undertake. Within a month of fleeing to Lebanon, Sherine, still just thirteen years old, married a twenty-five-year-old man she barely knew.

Her ambivalence didn't last long. From the very beginning, Sherine's marriage darkened her life like a cloud. Rather than spending time with her parents and siblings, playing in the streets with her friends, or studying, Sherine spent her days cleaning and cooking for her husband. The only times she left the house were to fetch groceries and household supplies from the market, or on rare visits to her family's house. Real marriage was nothing like a game. Instead, it was full of responsibilities and obligations that took up all her time and energy, crushing her youth and depleting the reading and academic skills she had built up in school.

Sherine's family had tried to explain, before her wedding, the physical expectations that would befall Sherine as a wife. But Sherine, a child, naive and unaware, and she hadn't understood. Her wedding night came as a nasty shock.

Things got worse over time. Sherine's housewife skills fell short, and that angered her husband. When he came home to an empty table or messy house, his temper swelled, and he began hitting her as punishment. Jealousy festered, and he forbade Sherine to put on makeup and forced her to wear long, loose abayas.

Before long, Sherine's husband was intervening in every part of her life. She spent her days trying to appease him, afraid of his anger and violence, fading to a quiet shadow of who she once was.

When her husband's anger was especially bad, she would flee to her family's house for comfort and safety. She asked her family to help her divorce her husband, but her mother tried to placate her instead.

"No marriage is ever perfect in the beginning," she said. "Just be patient, and you'll get used to him and begin to accept him."

One day during a particularly fiery bout of rage, Sherine's husband smashed the furnace in the kitchen. In his anger, he beat her and swore divorce upon her. Through her fear and pain, she felt a wash of relief and hope that maybe she could escape and go back to her life before. But as refugees, their marriage wasn't registered, and both their union and their divorce were bound only through words. Soon after the fight, her husband took her back, and the nightmare resumed.

Sherine tried to be patient, but her marriage wore her down. Her husband's anger carried into the bedroom, where he was rough and brutish with her. Evenings soon became a nightmare that was nearly too horrible for Sherine to bear. When she escaped to her family's house, she begged them for a divorce.

Finally, her family agreed and they managed to register her marriage with the court so that her divorce could be officially recognised. Sherine's nightmare was over, and she returned to live with her family. But she didn't want any other girls to be put through what she had experienced. She began to spread the word among her friends and peers about the true meaning of marriage. As a young teenager, Sherine had agreed to marriage blindly, without any understanding the responsibilities and realities of married life. She advised other girls never to accept early marriage and revealed the details of what marriage could be like. She hoped that with the necessary knowledge and insight, other girls would be more aware than she was and would be able to protect themselves and, ultimately, their futures. ■



## STORIES FROM LEBANON

# A LOST CHILDHOOD

Written by Jade-Leigh Tenwick,  
Communications and Development Officer at SB OverSeas Brussels

Ream left Syria at the age of twelve shortly after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. A conflict which led her not only to lose her home, but also her childhood and education.

Ream, along with her family, followed the same path as many other Syrians escaping the conflict to Lebanon. She was enthusiastic to start her life in Lebanon and continue her education. She dreamed of being a human rights lawyer, giving a voice to those who had none.

This dream did not last long. Registration requirements and safety concerns of her family thwarted her educational opportunities.

Left at home. Without routine. The monotony and the hopelessness of the situation began to erode at the once happy and ambitious child. Her mental health deteriorated. Her mother charged her with more responsibility in the household in a bid to lift her out of her depression. This was her existence for two years.

At the age of fourteen, Ream was told about her impending marriage to a family friend. This was her chance to start a new life. Excited for the wedding day, she dreamed about wearing her white dress. After an idyllic day, she was filled of hope for a new life with her husband. A husband nearly double her age.

This story follows the same narrative as the other stories we have heard. Cracks began to appear and her feelings of hope dissipated. They were unable to register the marriage as Ream was too young. This legal status had consequences for the child she was bearing. Without legal status, the child would be born statelessness – a life without clear rights or legal status.

Their problems also extended to the husband's family. Living in a small space caused tensions to heighten. She tried to ease this by shouldering more household responsibilities. This included not only household chores, but walking to retrieve water. Overwhelmed by the responsibilities and pregnancy, she would often find herself in tears.

With problems escalating, she felt more and more overwhelmed and asked for a divorce so she could return to her family. Her husband refused. He threatened her stating he would not register the marriage, renounce their child and marry another woman. The ramifications of these actions were sufficient enough to convince her to stay.

Things did not get better. Her husband began to beat her, sometimes daily, and she worried about the physical affect of the trauma on her unborn child. She fled her family to seek their support. Yet, they were not as supportive as she had hoped. With over 70% of Syrian refugees living below the poverty line in Lebanon, food is scarce and hunger is

rife. They told her to forget about her old family and to return to her new one.

Ream had to choose either to be vulnerable and alone on the streets or to return to her husband. She chose the latter. With her baby born, she had not only herself to worry about, but another human. With another mouth to feed, she was often hungry, barely able to provide for her child, never mind herself.

Her health deteriorated and her husband decided to take her back to her family visiting her sporadically. After three months, her family decided it was time for her to fend for herself. Left out on the street, she begged her husband to look after her and her son. He rented a small room for her. This came at a cost. He appeared to only visit her when he wanted to have a target for his anger and frustration. Her family realising the extent of the situation, took her back in.

After three years of limbo, Ream is now trying to rebuild her life and find the girl who once dreamed of being a human rights lawyer. She comes to SB OverSeas centre four times a week and attends our courses. At our centre, she speaks of her story with the other girls to raise awareness of hers and many other girls' experiences with child marriage. ■



## STORIES FROM LEBANON

# LEFT WITHOUT A CHOICE

Written by Kevin Charbel, Project Manager in Lebanon

No one escapes war unchanged. Who can lose the past and the future at once without bearing a scar? The young and old are marked, though for most, these marks take invisible forms.

Nadine wishes hers were less apparent. The burns on her hands, neck, and face tell of her loss before she can say a word. She never meant to carry her village's story this way, to become to her community an unmistakable reminder of their suffering, but she did not get to choose.

When war came to Syria, it did not take long for the bombing to reach even her quiet village. If she ever manages someday to forget what the explosions sounded like, she will not forget what they felt like on her skin.

Her family fled to Lebanon four years ago, settling reluctantly in the skeleton of an unfinished and abandoned building where they live again amongst their neighbours from their hometown in Syria—now amid garbage and dust instead of sweet air and green fields. Their small rooms are stifling in the summer and bitterly cold in the winter, but they rarely leave the shelter, feeling out of place in the rest of the city.

Nadine began attending school, where she was confident and talkative in class. This education allowed her to make progress in Arabic, English, math, and science and to quickly make up for years of school she had missed since leaving her village, where her school had been bombed. She excelled in her schoolwork and was placed in the most advanced classes. Besides academics, Nadine and other girls her age took art lessons at school with a Syrian artist who encouraged them to express themselves: their experience as young girls, their ambitions, and their country, thus building on their self-worth.

She told her friends and teachers that she did not want to be married at an early age, as some of her peers were doing. School was important to her, and she planned to finish her education before getting married. She would marry after completing university, she said.

But there was a boy who lived in the same shelter whom Nadine liked, and this worried her parents. They were afraid that he would propose marriage and that she would find herself trapped in conditions like these for the rest of her life: between the dirty walls of a dark building in a city that was not hers, a country that did not want her.

When Nadine's parents remembered her grandfather's hope from her childhood that she would marry a certain man from her village, they acted quickly. He was still living in Syria. Within days, they sent Nadine away to marry him. She was fourteen.

Nadine returned to an area that was still unsafe, plagued by the same war that she had fled, the same bombs that once had almost taken her life.

And piece by piece, her own life and childhood continued to be stolen from her.

When her husband saw her burns, he refused to marry her. He had been told that they were less noticeable. Eventually, his mother forced him to marry Nadine because she had already moved back to Syria to accept his offer. They had no wedding.

Nadine's friends feel sorry for her because they have heard of the couple's problems. They wonder if her husband will marry another woman, or if she will soon be divorced, but her grandfather lives nearby in Syria and would not want to allow her to give up on a marriage he requested. Everyone who lives in her family's shelter knows that Nadine and her husband do not love each other, and that she will soon be expected to have children. But she is only a girl herself.

And so, again, without a choice, and this time in a way that is not so outwardly evident, Nadine has become a keeper of her country's sorrow. ■



STORIES FROM LEBANON

# THE CHIEF'S DAUGHTER

Written by Kevin Charbel, Project Manager in Saida, Lebanon

I still see her sometimes, walking through the maze of corridors in the shelter she lives in. Our eyes will meet for the briefest of moments as she smiles nervously before dropping her gaze and passing me by silently. In that instant I feel the urge to reach out to her, to ask her how she's been and what she's up to, but I always hold back, because I know that any interaction between us carries a risk to her safety.

Sarah was married under duress three months ago, at the age of 14. For some time, she openly defied her father, the community's chief, resisting his attempts to marry her to another teenager. She wanted to stay in school, to keep learning and to be with her friends. Eventually though, her father grew tired of her refusals, resorting instead to beating her into submission. It didn't take long after that for Sarah to be engaged. When I found out what had happened I made sure she knew we could protect her and that we would defend her right to choose, but by then, in her mind, the only thing worse than getting married to a stranger was to stay living with her father.

The once vibrant, cheeky student who would knock on my office door just to say hello disappeared from one day to another. Her marriage precludes her from continuing her education as she is now expected to prioritise domestic duties. This 14-year-old girl is under pressure to learn to be a "good wife", meaning she must quickly master the skills to keep a clean home and satisfy her husband's appetite, as well as learn not to flinch when he makes sexual advances. Sarah's own desires and thoughts no longer matter; her position in society limited by the four walls of her modest home, where she is expected to remain while her husband is at work.

Child brides are often told that the more compliant and submissive they are, the easier the transition will be. They are the ones who must adapt, not their husband. They are the ones who must sacrifice, who must accept hardships and who must, all of a sudden, become women. Sarah's imagination and

fiery stubbornness were once assets in the classroom, where they could be put to good use. Now these traits are a risk to her; she must lose this part of herself if she is to fit into the mould her father has set for her. She has no real choice in the matter, as if she were to end up discarded by her husband, she would not have the option to start again, she would be tainted.

Her friends, who are still in school, tell me that Sarah's father threatens her with more violence should she seek to continue contact with any of our staff members. If she is isolated there is much less risk of her rejecting her conditions and, as time goes on, the combination of aloneness and intimidation will numb Sarah into accepting a reality she would otherwise never have chosen for herself. ■



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