The British Academy

Journal of the British Academy, **9**, 179–212
DOI https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009.179
Posted 15 July 2021

Early marriage and displacement—a conversation: how Syrian daughters, mothers and mothers-in-law in Jordan understand marital decision-making

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Abstract: Conflict and forced migration threaten to reverse the decline of early marriage in the Middle East. In some Syrian refugee communities, protracted displacement and precarious livelihoods, together with pre-war traditions of early marriage, push families to arrange matches for their adolescent daughters, and sometimes sons. Drawing on thirteen ethnographic interviews with young Syrian women, mothers, mothers-in-law and grandmothers in Jordan, we develop a multi-perspective approach to the study of early marriage. A feminist outlook has informed our fieldwork and the way its results are presented: around a conversation with Syrian women of different ages and from different generational groups. While humanitarian reports often use women's voices in a tokenistic way, we stay attentive to the complex nature of their stories and ambitions, contrasting them with insights from interviews with Jordanian academics, aid workers and policymakers. Our study adds nuance to existing humanitarian narratives by drawing attention to the interplay of multigenerational household dynamics, legal and economic constraints in host countries, but also younger and older women's aspirations, that shape marital decision-making within displaced families.

Keywords: Early marriage, displacement, Syrian refugees, Jordan, multigenerational households, humanitarian response.

Note on the authors: see end of article.

Introduction: 'Marriage is like a water melon'

In April 2019, we shared a cup of coffee with a group of Syrian refugee women in Irbid, a university town in northern Jordan. Um Ahmed,[1] a 40-year-old mother of eight, looked approvingly at her oldest child, 18-year-old Um Soraya. '*Before* [Um Soraya] *got married, she was ready for everything. On the day of the henna night* [a traditional ceremony before the wedding]*, we sat together for two hours.*' Um Soraya shrugged: some minutes earlier, she had joked that she had known nothing about human sexuality before her wedding night. '*It was a big surprise! Even now I don't know everything*', she had explained. By then, Um Soraya was pregnant with her second child.

In this article, we present ethnographic evidence of marital decision-making processes in Syrian families living in protracted displacement in Jordan, a country known for its high rate of marriage among female adolescent refugees. On a global scale, the consequences of early marriage for young women and their families are well documented: young brides are at an increased risk of early childbearing, maternal mortality and health complications. Problems during pregnancy and childbirth are the most frequent cause of death for girls aged 15–19 worldwide (Neal *et al.* 2012). Young wives often have to interrupt their education and struggle to find dignified employment. Early marriage reproduces cycles of poverty across generations, with children of young mothers also suffering from impaired access to education, work and sustainable livelihoods (Kerner *et al.* 2012). Indeed, deprivation is one of the major factors underpinning early marriage. In a situation of acute poverty, daughters may be considered an economic burden, and parents may consider marrying off their children in their best interest (UNICEF 2001). Girls in humanitarian settings are disproportionately affected by early marriage and childbearing, sexual violence, and lack of access to information about sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and restricted freedom of movement (Van der Gaag 2011). In recent years, young refugees' SRH has become a priority to the international community, as evidenced by various strategies of the World Health Organization (WHO 2016a, 2016b) and adolescent-friendly guidelines for SRH interventions during the early stages of emergencies (UNFPA 2009). A shared understanding of the health, social and economic implications of early marriage is also reflected in policymaking at national, regional and international levels, including, most recently, the UN Sustainable Development Goals which define 'child, early and forced marriage' as 'harmful practices' (United Nations 2019, Goal 5.3).

[1] The names of all our Syrian interlocutors have been changed.

Since the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011 and the ensuing refugee crisis in the Middle East, Jordan, where young women make up a sizeable population of the Syrian community, has come into the spotlight of humanitarian agencies. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2019), the country hosts approximatively 660,000 Syrian refugees, although the 2015 governmental census gives figures more than twice as many (Ghazal 2016). Almost 50 per cent of Syrian refugees are female; 7 per cent of all Syrians in the country are girls between the ages of 11 and 17 (UNCHR 2019). Early marriage of Syrian girls has drawn the attention of aid providers, resulting in a number of non-governmental organisation (NGO) reports and awareness-raising sessions for mothers and daughters (e.g., Save The Children 2014, UNICEF 2014, 2017, 2018a, 2018b). However, much higher rates of early marriage are found in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where 35 per cent and nearly 30 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 are married before the age of 18 (Girls Not Brides 2018, UNICEF 2020). In fact, early marriage in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, where 17 per cent of brides are under age, is closer to the global average, and over the last twenty-five years, the number of young women who have got married under the age of 18 has dropped from one in three to one in five (UNICEF 2019). However, large-scale displacement might reverse the decline of early marriage in this part of the world. In 2014, Save the Children noted a dramatic increase in marriages in Jordan that involved a Syrian bride under the age of 18. Between 2011 and 2013, the number of registered marriages including an under-age female Syrian rose from 12 per cent to 25 per cent (Higher Population Council 2017a). Reports by CARE have been instrumental in framing early marriage as a confluence of 'protecting girls and sexual violence' (CARE 2015: 3, 2019): humanitarian accounts maintain that displaced Syrian families marry off their daughters to save their honour and protect them from rape, involuntarily exposing them to health risks and gender-based violence at the hands of spouses. An age gap between spouses may also reduce young women's agency and status in multigenerational households (UN Women 2013). Contrary to assumptions about child brides in refugee camps who are married off to adults from host communities or the Gulf, the Higher Population Council (2017a) finds that most Syrian girls in Jordan marry equally young Syrian men, often under-aged themselves. The same report paints a more nuanced picture of the phenomenon, identifying a number of economic and sociocultural factors—entrenched poverty and lack of income, together with pre-war traditions of early marriage—which motivate some displaced Syrian families to arrange matches for their adolescent daughters, and sometimes sons.

In this article, we aim to breathe life into humanitarian statistics by presenting qualitative insights from a small-scale study that we conducted with Syrian refugees in Jordan in April 2019. Drawing on thirteen ethnographic interviews with young Syrian

women, their mothers and grandmothers, as well as key stakeholder interviews with international and Jordanian academics, policymakers and aid workers in Amman, we develop a multi-perspective approach to the study of early marriage. Our research adds nuance to existing humanitarian narratives by drawing attention to the interplay of multigenerational household dynamics, legal and economic constraints—but also younger and older women's aspirations—that shape marital decision-making within Syrian families.[2] While *early* marriage is singled out by international humanitarian discourse as problematic, we look at instances of marriage involving Syrian girls under the age of 18 in the context of broader social processes of marriages in the Middle East. This means that we foreground the complex negotiations of romance, compatibility and family obligations that take place within displaced Syrian families (cf. Adely 2016). As the vignette at the beginning of this article indicates, disagreements between mothers and daughters reveal that women who occupy different positions inside displaced families might perceive early marriage in distinct ways. A famous Arabic proverb goes, 'marriage is like a water melon' ("الزواج مثل البطيخة")—you never know what is inside before you commit to it. In a similar vein, we argue, we can only comprehend the persistence of early marriage if we are ready to accommodate the diverging, and sometimes contradictory, perspectives of the Syrian women involved.

We situate our research in the context of critical feminist scholarship that scrutinises the politics of humanitarian knowledge production on early marriage (for an overview, see Bessa 2019; also see Berents 2016, Gonick *et al.* 2019, Koffman & Gill 2013, MacDonald 2016, Moeller 2018, Sensoy & Marshall 2010, Shain 2013, Switzer 2013). Evaluations of existing humanitarian interventions, for example, awareness-raising sessions for girls, increasing girls' access to education and providing financial incentives to families to delay marriage, find no conclusive links to a decrease in early marriage—yet powerful humanitarian narratives about early marriage and how to fight it continue to inform policymaking, the allocation of resources and programmes targeted at girls in the Global South (Bessa 2019). First, feminist scholars have challenged some of the underlying assumptions about this particular female demographic as either helpless victims or as entrepreneurial agents of development (for example, see analyses of the Nike Foundation's Girl Effect campaign: Koffman & Gill 2013,

[2] Research for this article was conducted within the framework of a CAHSS GCRF-Internal Fund and a SFC/GCRC Scheme at the University of Edinburgh. The research team was composed of Dr George Palattiyil (Principal Investigator), Professor Harish Nair (Co-Investigator) and Dr Ann-Christin Zuntz (Research Fellow) from the University of Edinburgh, as well as academics and humanitarian practitioners from our partner organisations in Jordan: Dr Ruba Al Akash and Dr Ayat Nashwan (Yarmouk University, Irbid), and Areej Al Majali (Aman Jordanian Association). We also benefited from the support of Dr Abla Amawi (Secretary General, Higher Population Council Jordan).

Moeller 2018, Shain, 2013, Switzer 2013). In the Middle East, framing refugee women as potential economic actors has gained traction as assistance for Syrian refugees has gradually shifted from humanitarian relief to more long-term development aid (Representative of the Higher Population Council, key stakeholder interview, 19 April 2019). Hence, training on early marriage, targeting female adolescents and their mothers in Jordanian cities, often pursues an integrated approach: it combines education on reproductive health issues with livelihood approaches. Aid agencies' reports praise 'giving girls the tools to become financial assets' (UNICEF 2017: 91). In a similar vein, a representative of the Higher Population Council argues: '*This is the way out because the more she is empowered or economically viable, the less abuse she can get*' (key stakeholder interview, 19 April 2019). Yet, female empowerment campaigns individualise responsibility for fighting poverty, while obscuring the structural root causes of underdevelopment (Hickel 2014). Praise for refugees' entrepreneurship is often presented as a panacea for the absence of enabling legal and political conditions. Although young Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan are frequently enrolled in short-term vocational training programmes, this rarely leads to more long-term and dignified employment (e.g., Wagner 2017). Factors that curtail the success of livelihood programmes include legal restrictions on Syrians' employment in host countries, refugees' competition with other migrant populations and a mismatch between training content and labour market needs (e.g., Carpi 2017, Lenner & Turner 2018, Tobin 2016). In Jordan, a state with the lowest female labour market participation in the world in a country not at war, it is even more difficult for women to find dignified jobs (World Bank 2018). As an Oxfam representative points out, cultural factors, but also the lack of affordable childcare and reliable public transport limit employment opportunities even for better educated local women (key stakeholder interview, 19 June 2019). Female Syrians with few or no educational qualifications, who are encouraged by humanitarian actors to engage in home-based entrepreneurship, might face additional challenges: for example, their lack of business skills and capital to upscale existing activities (Ritchie 2018). In this study, we remain attentive to how young refugees weigh up their socioeconomic options in Jordanian exile.

Second, by locating the phenomenon of early marriage in patriarchal 'cultures', humanitarian discourse perpetuates racialised stereotypes about the Global South, while treating girls as a homogeneous mass, despite widespread differences in educational levels, marriage and fertility patterns. In Van Raemdonck and De Regt's (2020) study with Jordanian primary healthcare providers, interviewees downplayed the medical implications of early marriage and motherhood for Syrian refugees, reframing the discussion instead as 'a problem of culture and education' (319). For these medical practitioners, Syrian refugees are out of sync with Jordan's path towards modernity, and towards modern families. Ethnographic studies also find that political

and media attention on refugee women's marital choices in Jordan has not increased their protection, but instead fuelled stereotypes in the host society about Syrians as 'cheap brides', and further put them at risk of sexual harassment (Shanneik 2021). Feminist scholars bemoan that branding early marriage as 'traditional' or 'premodern' forecloses discussions about how different socioeconomic, political and cultural factors are combined in families' decisions to marry off their daughters early (Hickel 2014, Miedema *et al.* 2020). In this article, we investigate how older, established practices of early marriage are reshaped by Syrians' current experiences of displacement, the loss of social networks and economic hardship.

Third, even though this article focuses on Syrian *women*, we are keen to avoid a simplistic, binary understanding of gender that pits refugee girls against men. Humanitarian discourse tends to brand men as perpetrators of domestic violence, powerful gatekeepers within the refugee community or emasculated troublemakers (Olivius 2014, 2016). In Jordan, aid providers engage with Syrian men in their capacity as allies and enablers of Syrian women, but men's own experiences of precarity, labour exploitation and fear of arrest and deportation frequently go unnoticed (Turner 2019). By contrast, recent scholarship on gender and forced migration highlights the complex and fluid nature of gender roles during conflict (Chinkin *et al.* 2020), and that both women and men may occupy 'multiple positions within conflict and displacement situations' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014: 395; cf. Freedman *et al.* 2017, Hajdukowski-Ahmed *et al.* 2008). Ethnographic studies make visible the complex drivers of early marriage (for an overview, see Miedema *et al.* 2020) and of families' changing marital decision-making processes in the light of shifting socioeconomic realities and displacement (Archambault 2011, Van Raemdonck 2021). In reality, 'early marriage' is an umbrella term for diverse practices (Van Raemdonck & De Regt 2020). Research on arranged marriages also finds that arranged unions cannot be equated with 'forced' marriages, and that women and girls often show considerable agency in setting up these matches (e.g., Adely 2016, Pande 2015). We take our cue from anthropologists who have complemented studies of the harm that early marriage can do, with inquiries into the positive (short-term) effects of early marriages: for example, the promise of social and economic security that makes early marriage attractive to some young women and their families (Miedema *et al.* 2020). In this article, we paint a nuanced picture of women's gains and losses in displacement. Listening carefully to how female refugees themselves discuss early marriage, we make visible the different forms that Syrian women's agency may take in exile, and the socioeconomic and cultural factors that limit it.

In the first section, we attend to how questions of research methods and ethics are intertwined in the design of our ethnographic study. We explain how a feminist approach has informed the ethnographic fieldwork that was conducted for this study

and the way its results are presented: around a conversation with Syrian women of different ages and from different generations. In the empirical part of this article, we prioritise the perspectives of two young Syrian fiancées, Farah and Aisha. We do not aim to romanticise early marriage or downplay the impact of precarious refugee livelihoods and traditional practices of early marriage, but rather draw attention to how the adolescents we interviewed evaluate possible futures and negotiate their position within their families. Listening to Syrian teenagers, we hope, will give readers a more subtle understanding of the mix of dreams and frustrations that drive them to accept, and sometimes actively push for, getting married at a young age. In subsequent parts of the article, we complement these findings with insights from interviews with young mothers, grandmothers and mothers-in-law. Together, the ethnographic findings tell us about our Syrian interlocutors' opinions, disappointments, belated realisations and new aspirations. Throughout the article, we contrast Syrian voices with findings from interviews that we conducted with Jordanian academics, and Jordanian and international aid providers and policymakers. In the conclusion, we formulate recommendations for future humanitarian action.

A feminist approach to research: conversations among women

In April 2019, we interviewed thirteen Syrian women in Jordan (for an overview of participant demographics, see the Appendix). Most of our Syrian interlocutors were in their late teens or early twenties. What they all have in common are their rural backgrounds, from areas like Damascus, Dera and Homs governorates, and low educational levels. Except for a 17-year-old mother who lives with her husband's family in al-Hamra, a remote village in northern Jordan, all interviewees reside in low-income neighbourhoods in Amman and Irbid, home to almost 200,000 and 137,000 Syrian refugees, respectively (UNHCR 2019). In Irbid, most of our interviewees came from Nasib, a village in southern Syria so close to Jordan that the nearby border crossing is named after it. We used snowball sampling to recruit participants: in Irbid and al-Hamra, women were recruited through the professional networks of our research partners from Yarmouk University; in Amman, we spoke with former beneficiaries of a Jordanian NGO that Areej Al Majali, one of the co-authors of this article, is involved with. Because of the sampling method, and the limited number of participants, our findings are not representative of Syrian women in Jordan, who live in diverse urban, rural and camp settings. Rather, the goal of this study is to provide a deeper understanding of the life stories of some female refugees living in different family constellations. All participants were initially contacted by phone and asked whether they would be willing to take part in a two-hour interview on refugee

reproductive health inside their homes. Many of the participants, especially in northern Jordan, already had a trusting relationship with the Jordanian researchers, and interviews conducted for this project became part of a more long-standing dialogue between Jordanian academics and Syrian refugees.

Women's lives resemble the experience of Um Ahmed, whose husband used to be a taxi driver in Syria, and now occasionally finds work as a security guard in Irbid. Like most women in her family, she has never been in paid employment. Our study gives voice to a demographic whose stay in Jordan has long turned into protracted displacement—all have spent between five and seven years in the host country—and who survives through a combination of infrequent humanitarian assistance, remittances from family members abroad and work in the informal economy, where men make an income as day labourers, on construction sites and in restaurants (Bellamy *et al.* 2017, Zuntz forthcoming). Most of our female interviewees have taken part in awareness-raising sessions on early marriage organised by Jordanian or international actors, either before or after they got married. Um Ahmed, the mother of two teenage brides, repeated a slogan from one of these training sessions: 'Early marriage is bad for the body and psyche.' These training sessions often pursue an integrated approach. For example, during sessions run by CARE, Syrian teenagers receive information on understanding their own bodies, the importance of schooling and the risks of early marriage. Young mothers are also told about sexually transmitted diseases, and how to take care of their bodies during and between pregnancies. While CARE does not provide contraceptives, other aid organisations do. At the same time, awareness-raising sessions are often coupled with cash assistance, psychosocial support, and vocational training (key stakeholder interview, 19 June 2019).

In the Jordanian context, the need for gender analysis in humanitarian action, but also pressure to deliver timely 'value for money' to international donors, has produced a rapid assessment culture that is extractive, prioritises quantitative over qualitative data, and works with strong presumptions about gender roles (Lokot 2019). Lokot (2018) criticises aid agencies' simplistic approaches that focus on husband–wife relationships and deviations from Syrians' 'traditional' pre-war lifestyles, but overlook the impact of different cultural norms, class and rural–urban divides. By contrast, our study situates itself in the continuity of academic scholarship that pays greater attention to the complexity of Syrian women's narratives, and avoids treating them as an undifferentiated mass. Before 2011, Syrian women's experiences varied greatly, depending on their class, region of origin, religious and ethnic affiliation, educational status and location in rural or urban areas (Chatty 2013, Kastrinou 2016, Rabo 2008, Rugh 1996, Salamandra 2004). Through the propaganda and institutions of the Syrian state, females were exposed to ideals of 'modern' working women, although real women often found it hard to reconcile the demands of their jobs and family lives

(Lei Sparre 2008, Rabo 1996). Studies of displaced Syrian women have investigated how they adopt or refuse the 'refugee' label (Gissi 2018), tailor their stories to different audiences (Shalaby 2018) and how women from different social strata and ethnic groups experience displacement (Alhayek 2015, Ozkaleli 2018). This article also adds to research on refugees' social obligations and survival strategies within extended kinship networks (Easton-Calabria & Herson 2020). Extended Syrian families often function as profitable economic units, with different household members taking on paid or unpaid tasks (e.g., Rabo 2008, Rugh 1996). Hence, female refugees should not be studied as atomised individuals, but rather in the context of mutual, and gendered, obligations towards their next of kin (Zuntz forthcoming).

We are also guided by feminist critiques of humanitarian representations of girls. A Save the Children report (2014) has on its front cover a Syrian girl with her mouth veiled; another UNICEF publication (2014) shows a drawing of a young female holding hands with an older—and taller—man. This chimes with older representations of the passive suffering of 'womenandchildren' during conflict (Enloe 1990, Hyndman & Giles 2011, Johnson 2011). More recently, though, humanitarian actors have shifted towards showcasing young women's narratives. But 'giving voice' in humanitarian reports and campaigns is often tokenistic, and only affirms what counts as success stories in the eyes of aid providers (Bessa 2019). In response, feminist scholars have asked: how can we ensure that real girls' voices and stories are being heard, especially when they do not fit binary representations as either victims or as empowered? As Khoja-Moolji puts it, doing 'the work of hearing' (2016: 745) includes staying attentive to moments when girls go off humanitarian scripts, and to their embeddedness into social contexts. Consequently, this article is structured around a conversation with Syrian women of different ages and belonging to two generations: Um Ahmed, 40, her daughters Um Soraya, 18, and Farah, 15, and Farah's friend Aisha, 13. In April 2019, we spent half a day with Um Ahmed, her daughters and their friend in Um Ahmed's apartment in Irbid, a university town in northern Jordan. We spoke with each of them individually and in separate rooms, but also in each other's company. During the interviews, 1-year-old Soraya, Um Soraya's first daughter and Um Ahmed's first grandchild, played at our feet, representing the third generation of a lineage of women. The intimate setting of this extended conversation illustrates our interlocutors' living conditions, different positions that Syrian women take on in their families, as well as our ethnographic approach. Wherever possible, we add to these findings insights from the interviews we conducted with other Syrian women in various locations in Jordan.

Our study was underpinned by strong ethical considerations. In advance of the research, the project obtained ethical approval from the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, at Level 3 (for studies involving vulnerable

populations and multiple and complex risks). For now, Yarmouk University, Jordan, does not have ethical review procedures in place. However, our concern with ethics went beyond administrative tick-box exercises. On the ground, we strove to make this research ethically sound by paying attention to how and where interviews were conducted, and by whom. All interactions took place indoors, as we recognised Syrian women's restricted freedom of movement in public space, especially of those who neither work nor study outside the home. We were hoping that Syrian women might feel more comfortable, and safer, in their own living rooms. We rarely met them alone, but rather in the company of daughters, sisters and female neighbours. We soon realised the advantages of a multivocal dialogue where women complemented, teased and sometimes policed each other. Starting a conversation among female family members and friends created an 'echo chamber' which allowed us to disentangle traditional and shifting household constellations and life course models, cultural sensibilities and older and younger women's dreams and frustrations, or, as Um Soraya put it, '*what it means to lead a happy life as a woman*'. One of the strengths of this study, we believe, is that we were able to investigate multigenerational dynamics within refugee households through a diverse team. In Jordan, all ethnographic interviews were conducted in Arabic by the female research fellow and female Jordanian research partners. We spoke to our Syrian interlocutors from different positions: as relative insiders and outsiders to their community, culture and language, but also, more importantly, as members of different generations of women ourselves. This gave us important insights into *who* gets to tell stories about early marriage, and *how*. For example, as a childless woman in her early thirties, the research fellow found it easier to elicit testimonies from young Syrian mothers and fiancées. By way of contrast, in the presence of the Jordanian research partners, themselves mothers of school-age and university-age children, older Syrian mothers and mothers-in-law took over the conversation. A dialogical set-up is more than instrumental—it is also the outcome of the feminist approach to ethnographic research that we are committed to. By this, we understand an exploration of factors that contribute to women's oppression, while remaining sensitive to the ethnographic process itself (Brooks & Hesse-Biber 2006, Jenkins *et al.* 2019, Lokot 2019). There is no denying that research with vulnerable populations, especially when facilitated by humanitarian actors, involves power inequalities between refugees and academics (Sukarieh & Tannock 2019), but we tried to address these in various ways. This article draws on the research fellows' and Jordanian partners' long-term experience of conducting ethnographic fieldwork with Syrian women in Jordan, and Jordanian academics' personal and professional ties with the families we interviewed in Amman, Irbid and al-Hamra. For their contribution in the study, all Syrian interviewees received compensation of 10 JOD (about £11). We chose to pay this amount because we estimated that it was roughly the equivalent of two hours of

work for women in the informal economy. It was meant to reimburse women not only for the time spent in their living rooms, but also the (often considerable) time it took to arrange interviews through WhatsApp and phone calls. In Jordan, and the MENA region more generally, there is a dearth of studies on the SRH needs of youth (Gausman *et al.* 2019). Because of the sensitive nature of our study topic, we asked indirect and open-ended questions, and encouraged our interlocutors to expand on topics that were important to *them*. To get a sense of their understanding of the temporality of displacement, we asked Syrian women to compare their current situation with their pre-war lives in Syria, and their dreams for the future. Like Guha (2019), we avoided questions which singled out a specific traumatic event in women's lives, instead putting early marriage in the context of women's lived realities and memories. Pursuing a feminist approach also implies breaking up distinctions between researchers and research 'subjects' or, in other words, allowing our interlocutors to turn the table. For example, one member of the research team had recently got divorced. Sharing this experience opened up opportunities for more honest conversations with Syrian divorcees and their mothers. Young Syrian mothers often pitied the younger, childless academic and wished her a swift wedding and childbearing. Reflecting on how interviewers and interviewees allocated pity differently helped us rethink how we, as scholars, could represent the protagonists of early marriage in non-victimising, respectful, ways.

Finally, desk-based research, and key stakeholder interviews with policymakers and humanitarian practitioners, conducted by the principal investigator in Amman in April and in June 2019, gave us insights into the narratives that inform NGO-led awareness-raising sessions on early marriage. Interviewees included representatives from the Higher Population Council Jordan, Mercy Corps, CARE International, Oxfam, a newly founded Jordanian NGO that is an implementation partner of UNICEF, the Jordanian Institute for Family Health, and the University of Jordan. These interviews allowed us to situate our findings in the dynamic and evolving context of the Syrian refugee response in Jordan.

The fiancées

This section explores young Syrian fiancées' mix of affective, cultural and economic motivations for marriage, as well as their imaginations of marital life. Early marriage does not always equal *forced* marriage, and not all refugee families are alike: within the same wider refugee community, different families might agree to or oppose the practice for different reasons. In the following, our ethnographic material highlights the complex marital decision-making processes that underpin many matches, often

involving family members from different generations: girls and potential spouses, parents and future in-laws.

In al-Hamra, a Jordanian village a stone's throw away from the Syrian border, 16-year-old Amina grappled with boredom and exasperation. Seven years ago, she had fled southern Syria together with her parents and eight siblings. In Jordan, Amina had gone to school for another two years but dropped out at the end of fourth grade when boys began harassing her in the streets. At the time of our study, Amina had already been married for more than two years and was pregnant with her second child. Although the minimum age for marriage in Jordan is 18, Sharia court judges can grant exceptions for minors between the ages of 15 and 18 (General Iftaa' Department 2010, Human Rights Watch 2019, Tabazah 2019). Amina, though, had been even younger, and her parents had used personal connections to register her wedding in court. Recently, her older sister told her that she had started using an intrauterine device, and Amina planned to get one herself. However, she needed her husband's help, as she was not allowed to leave the house on her own. Amina's current lack of agency in her husband's household perpetuates earlier feelings of powerlessness against her parents' expectations. '*This is our tradition, we all get married early*', she said, shrugging her shoulders. She had not been consulted about the match, and between her engagement and her wedding to a young relative, there had only been four days. Amina's case is one extreme on a continuum of young women's experiences of early marriage in our study. There is no doubt that, in the light of protracted displacement, and left with few educational and career opportunities, all Syrian girls in our sample felt that they had no alternative to consenting to early marriage. However, the degree of pressure—or coercion—from parents and relatives varied, which highlights the complexity of decision-making processes inside families. As the following example shows, many girls regretted that they lost out on going to school when they got engaged. However, some also perceived early marriage and motherhood as an easy way out of cramped living conditions, and towards greater social status in their communities.

In Irbid, we heard from two Syrian girls who were engaged to be married: 15-year-old Farah, the daughter of Um Ahmed and sister of Um Soraya, and her friend and neighbour, 13-year-old Aisha. This day, we had come to interview only Um Ahmed and Um Soraya, but Farah and Aisha were keen to share their experiences. With the permission of Um Ahmed, we spoke with the girls in the mothers' bedroom, anxious to find a place where we could talk privately. Soon, we were joined by Um Soraya, Farah's 18-year-old sister. Keeping the door shut and sitting on their parents' marital bed all added to the sense of secrecy and 'girls' talk'. After a few minutes, Aisha, Farah and Um Soraya were all giggling. Farah, 15, certainly did not lack critical thinking. We were impressed by her clear discussion of the multiple factors that had

prompted her to accept the proposal of her older sister Um Soraya's brother-in-law, a 17-year-old Syrian who still lives with his parents and sells sweets in the street. That brothers marry sisters is not uncommon in her rural community of origin. Two years ago, when the family of a young Syrian man had asked for Um Soraya's hand, they had already announced that they would come back for Farah, her younger sister. Although the proposal did not come as a surprise, it was not exactly accompanied by fierce declarations of love. '*He didn't say much*', Farah remembered, '*he just said that he wanted to get engaged to me*'. Prior to her engagement, Farah had taken classes at the Jordanian Family Protection Department on the risks of early marriage. She had not expected that she would get married soon, '*it just happened*'. Still, she eloquently defended her decision, providing not one, but a multitude of reasons for her decision, and revealing a mature appraisal of the impact of tradition, but also the constraints of living in protracted displacement. '*It is our tradition that as soon as a girl turns 15, she stops school and gets engaged.*' While her mother, Um Ahmed, would have liked her to continue her education, Farah had quit high school two months earlier at the time of her engagement. Farah explained that the co-educational system in Jordan might have compelled some Syrian girls to leave school early; in pre-war Syria, most public schools had been gender-segregated until the end of grade 9 (WENR 2016). More importantly, Farah's decision was caused by a strong sense of alienation: '*This is not our country*.' In Irbid, Farah did not feel comfortable walking in the street, fearing sexual harassment. As she had concluded that '*we don't have a future here*', Farah sought her future elsewhere: not in higher education, but in familiar Syrian community structures and traditions—and the promise of an apartment of her own. Five years from now, she imagined herself as a married woman with children; educational ambitions were strikingly absent from her daydreams. In fact, early marriage among Syrian refugees in Jordan can be motivated by young people's desire to remake ordinary family life after the traumatic experience of displacement, and to restore a sense of rootedness in a host country that discourages Syrians from settling down (Van Raemdonck 2021). Importantly, Farah thought of education and marriage as exclusionary alternatives, and humanitarian statistics bear her out: in the Jordanian context, there is ample evidence that increasing levels of educational attainment are associated with lower rates of early marriage among Syrian girls (UNICEF & Higher Population Council 2018).

As a CARE representative explained to us, Syrian women from rural communities have developed new material ambitions in exile—and new ideas about their status in the family. '*In the Syrian culture, the mother-in-law dominates everything. But I think things are changing. Why? In Syria, the mother and her sons and their wives are living in the same house. Here in Jordan, … there are families who live together, but most of them are separate because there are no separate houses available, so this raises independence issues*'

(key stakeholder interview, 19 June 2019). However, the gap between young women's aspirations, and the help that they might receive from their loved ones, is striking. A gender expert from the University of Jordan explained to us: '[We witness] *promising change among young people,* [they don't accept] *the gender norms related to them, but they still cannot rebel against* [these norms]. *They don't have the* [sic] *sufficient understanding and support*' (key stakeholder interview, 19 June 2019). Although young, Farah was not naïve. She recalled the frustrations of her older sister, Um Soraya, who had to live with her in-laws after the wedding. During the first months of her family life, the entire salary of Um Soraya's husband had been handed over to his parents, causing tensions between the newly-weds. Finally, the young couple's living conditions had improved when they had found a cheap flat of their own. Hence, Farah had learned not to rely on young men's promises. Instead, she had fiercely told her fiancé that she expected him to find a flat and fully furnish it before she would move in. In a similar vein, she was planning to delay having children until her early twenties. '*I don't want to have children and become responsible for them at this early age. … I take the decision and not him* [that is, her future husband].'

Farah did not elaborate on how she was going to make these dreams come true, nor how she would impose her will on her husband. Still, her sense of agency was remarkable, and it is worth exploring what made the teenager feel that she was in a position to negotiate her future marital life with her fiancé. First, their wedding was not imminent. In contrast to Amina, whose engagement and wedding were only four days apart, both Farah's and Aisha's parents had agreed to delay the ceremony by at least two years. While they were not allowed to socialise alone with their future husbands, this still gave the girls ample time to meet them during family get-togethers—and maybe even to secretly exchange messages on social media. Hence, both girls did not agree that they were too young to get married. '*But it's only the engagement*', Farah threw in. The mother of her friend Aisha had got engaged at the age of 17. '*She was old*', Farah explained to us. '*My own mother was 13 when she got married*.' Another reason that the girls did not mention could be that in Jordan, the minimum legal age for marriage is 18, with exceptions granted to teenagers as young as 15—while Farah had just reached the age limit for getting married as a minor, her 13-year-old friend Aisha was still too young to get married in the eyes of the Jordanian state (General Iftaa' Department 2010, Human Rights Watch 2019, Tabazah 2019). In the early years of the crisis, numerous Syrian adolescent girls failed to register their weddings and offspring with Jordanian state institutions, thus rendering their children stateless (Dean 2016). In this study, we did not ask whether families were planning to officially register the marriage at the beginning, or at the end, of the engagement period. However, it is quite likely that Aisha's family would have heard from the Jordanian Family Department about the need for a legally binding, not simply a customary Islamic, wedding.

Second, unlike Amina, Farah felt that her community's understanding of early marriage had changed in exile. Marital decision-making in the Middle East is not static; ethnographic studies with Palestinian, Jordanian and Syrian women indicate that it is repeatedly reshaped by shifting socioeconomic realities, including women's (and men's) newfound access to higher education, increased costs of living and displacement (Adely 2016, Latte Abdallah 2009, Rabo 2008). At the end of the 20th, and at the beginning of the 21st century, Adely, Latte Abdallah and Rabo all document the growing importance of individual marital choice for women, higher rates of divorce and female celibacy. But they also caution against mistaking contemporary women for isolated actors, as marital unions continue to be shaped by women's family obligations. Farah reminded us of the complexity of young women's negotiations with family, when trying to arrange a match for themselves. Farah argued that her Syrian peers had acquired greater freedoms, and getting married early was no longer expected by families and community elders. Instead, it had turned into a conscious choice: '[Families] *have become like Jordanians, they don't say anything when a girl is older than 18*'. When we asked Farah about her idea of freedom for women, she paused, and then explained. '*She should be allowed to give her opinion*. [For now]*, girls don't have freedom—maybe 30 per cent*.' By providing a percentage – which might seem random to her interlocutors—Farah tried to convey the idea that Syrian girls of her generation were experiencing more freedom than her mother's age group, but that this freedom was still limited. What made Farah perceive her engagement as a personal choice were shifting attitudes that she had witnessed in her wider community, and inside her own family. In the previous generation, girls had not been consulted by their parents, '*but our family is different. My father asked me, they gave me two days to make up my mind*.' Farah's experience contrasts with the predicament of her mother, Um Ahmed, who had got married at the age of 13 to a paternal cousin six years older than her, and emphasised during the interview that this had not been her choice, and a traumatising experience: '*No one asked me* [whether I already had my period]*, not even my mother.*' To convince Um Ahmed, her parents had promised her a house, a car and a wedding dress. When she failed to get pregnant right away, a doctor gave her hormones to speed up puberty. To Farah and her mother, Um Ahmed, the fact that Farah had been given the choice by her parents, made all the difference: the young fiancée experienced her engagement as her personal decision. Finally, Farah also thought ahead. As she did not expect to stay in Jordan forever, getting married to a Syrian from the same community would allow her to return to Syria together with her parents and siblings after the war.

Sometimes, girls' motivations for early marriage are less complex. Aisha, a 13-year-old who looked much younger than her actual age, made for a striking comparison with her outspoken friend Farah. Aisha was struggling to imagine her wedding day—

all she could think of was the white dress that she was going to wear two years from now. Together with Farah, she was already looking up different ways of wearing the hijab (the veil) and doing her hair. Like Farah, she came from the same community in rural Deraa and had recently got engaged—in her case to a paternal cousin. Unlike her friend, Aisha had never enjoyed school, and was happy to use the engagement as a pretext to drop out a year ago. Her 17-year-old fiancé is also a street vendor. She was happily surprised when he proposed to her—and relieved that he was not a stranger, but a member of her extended family. Similarly, Farah's sister, Um Soraya, who had dropped out in fifth class, had been happy to leave education behind, but had quickly realised that her new life was boring. '*I stayed at home, I didn't do anything.*' Hence, she had welcomed the proposal of a young Syrian man from Damascus, four years older than her. One month later, she had been married. Aisha and Um Soraya's cases point to the significant attitudinal barriers to education that exist among some Syrian parents, and adolescents themselves. While leaving school can be a direct consequence of engagements and weddings, for other girls it precedes considerations of marriage. Qualitative studies with Syrian refugees highlight young people's lack of interest in education, feelings of not fitting into the Jordanian system and the common perception that going to school could be a waste of money, as many people in their social circles seem to find (low-skilled) work without formal qualifications (UNICEF & Higher Population Council 2018). Taking these attitudes seriously is another step towards comprehending why some young Syrian women might opt for, or consent to, early marriage. It might also help understand why some teenagers, like Um Soraya, push for a quick wedding. As we witnessed in Um Ahmed's house that day, young female school dropouts like Farah and her neighbour Aisha had nothing else to do. Confined to their parents' apartments and the company of family members and female neighbours, they were unable to make plans of their own during the engagement period. For Syrian women, chastity is an important form of social capital when it comes to attracting potential spouses, and interactions with unrelated men may undermine the appearance of virtue and maidenhood (Salamandra 2006). As a consequence, many Syrian girls are discouraged from socialising outside their families of origin (Rugh 1996). In addition, without the necessary economic resources, the mundane pleasures available to young Jordanian women in Irbid, such as going to shopping malls, were out of reach for Farah and Aisha. Put more plainly, the Syrian teenagers we interviewed seemed bored to death, and the prospect of a husband and a baby brought with it the promise of a grown-up, and a more eventful, life.

Despite their love of wedding dresses, what was most striking about Aisha and Farah was their total lack of curiosity about marital life itself. While houses and happy family life were concrete dreams, the girls took no interest in the practicalities of childbearing and motherhood. '*It's shameful*', Farah told us. '*If I want to know*

anything, I can always ask my mother.' As her older sister, Um Soraya, confirmed, SRH issues were not discussed in the family, not even among female members. Before her wedding night, her mother had given her some very general information about what would be expected of her—evidence of the huge stigma around adolescent sexuality. The lack of frank discussions inside Syrian families is compounded by the absence of SRH education and services at school and in public health institutions and community centres (Boston University School of Public Health *et al.* 2013). SRH and family planning services are integrated into the primary health care system; however, relevant education programmes and services are only available to men and women after marriage. Oxfam Jordan's programme manager for gender justice sums up public and medical practitioners' attitudes: '*Adolescent reproductive health is a big issue because "they don't have needs", that's the vision, right*' (key stakeholder interview, 19 June 2019). Jordanian doctors often ask about marital status, effectively excluding unmarried youngsters from reproductive health services (Boston University School of Public Health *et al.* 2013), and Jordanian teachers are reluctant to discuss SRH issues at school (Higher Population Council 2017b). As human sexuality is only a study subject—in very general terms—in high school, Syrian girls who drop out in their early teens receive no information at all. Young women's lack of knowledge about—and lack of interest in—SRH, and the absence of female interlocutors inside and outside their families to whom they could turn with questions about intimate issues, further fuel the mystery of marital life and motherhood, and girls' romanticised ideas about their future relationships (Richards *et al.* 2020).

The young mothers

In the next section, we turn to the perspectives of young married women and mothers. After the wedding, girls' aspirations of newfound adulthood quickly give way to physical and mental exhaustion, poverty, reproductive coercion and sometimes domestic violence. While very young wives tend to live with, and under the control of, their mothers-in-law, the position of slightly older women in their late twenties and early thirties is different: through multiple childbearing, they have often secured their place in the family hierarchy, and established a more equitable and trusting relationship with their husbands. Our findings indicate that mundane forms of female agency over childbearing and household economics that young fiancées like Farah envision *do* emerge in marital life, but only several years after the wedding.

Back in Um Ahmed's family apartment, Um Soraya had one piece of advice for Farah, her excited little sister. '*Wait a bit*.' If she could go back in time, she would not get married again. Given her earlier eagerness to tie the knot, we were surprised.

'*Did you imagine your life like this?*', we asked. '*No, of course not. All the girls do this. They think of a beautiful life. But marriage is exhausting. I would like to be happy—and to have a house of my own.*' Um Soraya, now 18-years-old and bearing another child, was unhappy with her second pregnancy and her living conditions. While some fiancées like Farah and Aisha were under the impression that getting married might increase their freedom and comfort, Um Soraya was keen to stress that becoming a wife and mother had subjected her to the authority of her husband's family, and taken a toll on her physical and mental health. Like almost all our respondents in their late teens and early twenties, Um Soraya had never used contraception and knew little about it, but she was afraid that taking the pill might render her infertile. When she finally discussed the matter with her husband, she was already pregnant with their second daughter. Two pregnancies in quick succession had impacted her well-being. Um Soraya suffered from iron deficiency, and constantly felt tired and gloomy. Although SRH care is widely available at private and public hospitals in Irbid, the costs are often prohibitive. During her first pregnancy, Um Soraya thus underwent regular antenatal check-ups but had to leave the hospital right after giving birth. Basic items like diapers and baby formula milk put additional strain on their household finances. At least her living situation had recently improved as her husband had found a cheap flat. As a street vendor, he earned approximately 300 JOD (about £333) each month. Two thirds of his salary were spent on the rent. The young family survived because they also received food vouchers, with a total value of 45 JOD (about £50), from the World Food Programme, as well as financial support from Abu Ahmed, Um Soraya's father. Like Amina, the young wife we interviewed in al-Hamra village, Um Soraya also felt isolated and bored. She had no female friends outside her family, and only left the house twice a week to visit her mother. On her mobile phone, she could use WhatsApp, but no internet. Her husband did not even allow her to attend NGO classes. '*My husband doesn't like it. I am fully veiled. He demanded it after the wedding.*' While Um Soraya had been consulted by her parents about the match itself, her father had consented to full veiling on her behalf. Different from how her younger sister Farah imagined it, early marriage entraps some young brides in a series of decision-making processes over which they have little control: over the use of contraceptives (cf. Global Partnership to End Child Marriage 2016), sharing resources with in-laws, women's freedom of movement, access to NGO training (Girls Not Bride n.d.) and, further down the line, the future of their own daughters.

In total, we interviewed eight young Syrian mothers like Um Soraya between the ages of 17 and 30. Most were in their early twenties, and their life stories all resembled Um Soraya's. Their weddings, often involving young men from their extended kinship networks, took part in their mid- and late teens. Before the wedding night, the brides-to-be had received some general and vague information about human sexuality,

usually from their mothers or older sisters. Little time passed between the wedding and childbearing. Many young women experienced the first months of their marital life as a time of intense reproductive coercion, often at the hands of their mothers-in-law, who took them to see fertility specialists. On average, by the age of 20, young Syrian women had two children; several had undergone traumatic birth experiences and lost babies. Pressure to have many children adds to the financial strain of Syrian families with women of childbearing age. In the more distant future, the economic costs of multiple childbearing may put women at a higher risk of health issues as they age (Spence 2008). In March 2018, the Jordanian government enacted new rules that increased the costs of public healthcare for refugees (Dunmore & Sakkab 2018). From the point of view of most service providers, high operational costs, and Syrians' expenses, were the result of Syrians' going back and forth between different hospitals, women's lack of awareness and restrictive social customs (Higher Population Council 2016). As a consequence, Syrians' cost of giving birth at a hospital went up from approximately £66 to £263, and for C-sections from £263 to £658 (Karasapan 2018). In March 2019, the Jordanian government suspended maternity fees at public hospitals, but secondary and tertiary fees remain prohibitively high for many Syrian households (Jordan INGO Forum 2019). Syrian women's lack of legal protection and financial resources mean that they cannot hold medical practitioners accountable if their children suffer injuries during birth. Yet another risk factor for young women's health is within their own homes. Domestic violence, at the hands of spouses and mothers-in-law, is documented in academic studies on Middle Eastern families (e.g., Rabho 2015), and was also mentioned by some of our Syrian research participants, and some of the aid workers we interviewed. As an Oxfam representative confirmed to us, more extreme forms of violence, including marital rape, were not even understood to be a problem at all by many aid providers (key stakeholder interview, 19 June 2019). Young Syrian women who report abuse to the police, the Family Protection Department and the courts often do not always feel taken seriously. In our study, we heard of cases where young Syrian mothers were returned to abusive husbands, and longitudinal statistics are alarming: in Jordan, women who get married under the age of 18 are more likely to suffer injuries at the hands of their husbands than those who get married as adults (UNICEF & Higher Population Council 2018).

By their mid-twenties, most young mothers in our study had four children. This finding echoes humanitarian statistics; since the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) began its operations in Zaatari Camp in mid-2013, doctors have delivered more than 6,5000 babies in the camp, 5 per cent of them born to mothers younger than 18 (UNFPA 2016). Several of our respondents considered four the ideal family size—provided that they had given birth to at least one son. As most, like Um Soraya, had grown up with numerous siblings and had been involved in childcare early on,

they expressed a desire to have slightly smaller families than their mothers' generation. In their late twenties and early thirties, women's narratives often took a happier turn, and husbands were discussed no longer as remote love interests or enablers of hostile mothers-in-law, but as allies in the shared struggle for a healthy family. Our findings indicate that they can also be friends and supporters, as the relationship between spouses becomes more egalitarian over time. In our sample, young women with several children, including male offspring, reported that they had succeeded in creating their 'dream family', and were now in a stronger position to negotiate the use of contraceptives. Several respondents spoke lovingly of their husbands' support for their reproductive choices. Their decision-making power had grown as multiple, successful childbearing had increased their status in the family. Asma, a 20-year-old mother of two who lives with her family in Amman, told us that her husband regularly bought her the pill from a nearby pharmacy. And these discussions involved not only women's bodies, but also their daughters' future. Like the younger Farah, Asma felt that attitudes were changing among her peers, and even among the older generation. '*Our generation thinks that we will not marry off our daughters early*.' Frequently, young Syrian women, brides and mothers, emphasised shifting attitudes—but often with reference to the next generation, not their own. Similarly, 18-year-old Um Soraya had stopped being the protagonist of her own dreams, which now revolved around her future daughters, whom she imagined as lawyers. While she admitted that she had not benefitted much from education herself, she hoped to keep her own daughters in school.

Grandmothers and mothers-in-law

In the final section, we disentangle the different roles of older women, grandmothers and mothers-in-law. Female elders often control the marital choices of their children, and also young couples' life choices, and household economics after the wedding. But they are more than just tyrants: our data show that older women may encourage early marriage because of their own affective needs. At the same time, many have acquired new economic responsibilities in exile, and continue to care for their grown-up children, and sometimes grandchildren, in monetary, and non-monetary ways.

Contrary to simplistic assumptions about the control of men over women in patriarchal societies, ethnographic studies of Middle Eastern families have highlighted the considerable power that many matriarchs wield over their grown-up children, and over younger females, especially daughters-in-law (cf. Rabho 2015, Rabo 2008). As academic scholarship shows, conflicts between women often unfold in the context of competition over limited economic resources, income and living space, and

are exacerbated by many families' economic interdependencies. Recently, the 'evil mother-in-law' has also made an appearance in humanitarian discourse (for example, representative of Mercy Corps, key stakeholder interview, 19 June 2019). One of the aid workers we interviewed portrayed mothers-in-law as exploitative, and sometimes violent, towards young brides. Indeed, our findings confirm that mothers-in-law are often the ones who arrange early marriages and supervise their grandchildren and the household finances. Again, Um Soraya's unhappy experience of staying with her husband's family resonated with the stories of other young women. In Amman, we spoke with Abeer, a 20-year-old mother of three from rural Homs who had come to Jordan six years ago. Abeer had got engaged to a former neighbour only one month after her arrival. When she began to tell us about her engagement, her husband's mother, relaxing on the only bed in the corner of the room, chipped in: '*We were already here for four months. … I came for a visit, saw her and we took her. It was fate*.' The presence of her mother-in-law increased the value of the food vouchers that the young family received every month. But she was also clearly in charge of younger household members. As we got up to leave and hand over some money to Abeer, in recognition for her participation in the interview, the older woman quickly grabbed it.

It is worth hearing how mothers-in-law themselves perceive their relationship with young brides. In al-Hamra, 16-year-old Amina bitterly complained about her mother-in-law: '*Life with my mother-in-law is very difficult. She interferes with everything. Everything is forbidden*.' Not allowed to leave the house on her own, Amina was responsible for all the household chores, but did not have a say in the upbringing of her own baby daughter. Her husband's meagre income from his job as a waiter went directly to his mother, who took care of the shopping for the entire household. At the end of the conversation, her mother-in-law arrived and Amina got up to serve us tea. Sensing an opportunity to tell the family's story from her point of view, her mother-in-law explained that she was well aware of diverging attitudes in the host community: '*Jordanian women appreciate education more than Syrian women. That's why they get married ten years later*.' Still, she did not consider changing her own traditions. Having got married at the age of 15, she had arranged a wedding for her own daughter when she was 15, and found her teenage son Amina, a young bride in her early teens. As became clear during the conversation, after a lifetime of hard labour, the mother-in-law was ready to pass on the burden: '*I wanted someone to be with me in the house*.' But her words also spoke of a strong sense of isolation. Despite having lived in the village for seven years, she had never socialised with her Jordanian neighbours. In Amina, she had also hoped to find a companion. The example of Amina's mother-in-law is a powerful reminder that we should not take acts of female solidarity, especially between younger and older women with experiences of early marriage, for granted. While Amina's mother-in-law knew all too well what kind of life Amina and her own teenage

daughter could expect, she considered their future a normal form of intergenerational burden-sharing. Increasingly, humanitarian actors in Jordan recognise older women's greater freedom of movement, their economic contribution to refugee households and their role as decision- and match-makers in multigenerational families (Yount 2006). As a consequence, mothers and mothers-in-law have become the targets of awareness-raising sessions on early marriage. As a CARE representative reasoned, '*Most of the time we give this information* [on reproductive health issues] *to the mothers. Our research and reports have found that the major channel of information for the girls is through their mothers.* [For example, CARE provides information on] *the importance of regular medical counselling*' (key stakeholder interview, 19 June 2019). Other older women like Um Ahmed would have preferred for their daughters to delay their marriage, but were overruled by teenagers like Farah, equally frustrated with the Jordanian educational system and enthusiastic about the prospect of starting a family—and a household—of their own.

Middle-aged mothers are of even greater importance to a subset of young women: early divorcees. Although data on pre-war Syria are often piecemeal, they indicate that, in the 2000s, roughly one in eight women between the ages of 20 and 25 had got married under the age of 18 (CARE 2015). By contrast, the erosion of social networks during displacement has led to an increase in early divorces (Enab Baladi 2016). There is only one NGO-run women's shelter in Jordan, while government-run institutions have a more punitive character (Oxfam representative, key stakeholder interview, 19 June 2019). Consequently, many young divorcees return to their parents, and often their mothers—their children's grandmothers—become economically responsible for them. Nisreen, now 21, comes from a rural area in the Damascus governorate. Five years ago, the offer of getting married to the son of her maternal aunt, who had married a Jordanian and had lived close to Irbid for many years, was like a silver lining on the horizon: the match would allow Nisreen to continue her education in Jordan. Hence, Nisreen and the young man got engaged on the phone while she was still in Syria. A month later, the wedding took place in Jordan, but, as in many other cases, material and professional promises never materialised: '*He destroyed my dream.*' Instead, Nisreen had two daughters in three years. When she was pregnant with her first child, the headmistress of her school expelled her, for fear she might be bullied by other students. Her husband, a school dropout, has tried to make a living, first in Amman and now in Abu Dhabi. For years, Nisreen was exposed to harassment and reproductive coercion at the hands of her aunt and her daughters. '*I thought my husband might help me. But no one helped me*.' In April 2019, however, our interview was held in the living room of Um Faisal, Nisreen's mother, who had since moved to Irbid and supported her daughter to go to court and claim her children. Although Nisreen was still married on paper to her husband, she had not seen him for several

months. '*Maybe I'll just stay with my parents for ever*.' Returning to her mother's home gave Nisreen access to free childcare and allowed her to, once again, nurture dreams of continuing her high school education and applying for scholarships for university. In addition to her daughter and her two granddaughters, Um Faisal, a woman in her fifties who had only studied until sixth grade and never worked in Syria before the war, also provided for her sick husband and two sons who were injured during the conflict. '*I became responsible for everything*', was how she described her new role. Through attending NGO classes, for which she received transport money, and home-based cooking that she sold to the neighbours, Um Faisal sustained three generations. In fact, while aid agencies encourage home-based, small-scale entrepreneurship (Ritchie 2018), older women often bring the necessary cooking skills that many young brides lack. That does not mean that Um Faisal had abandoned traditional ideas about women's life course, as becomes clear when she talked about her granddaughters. '*Tomorrow, the girls* [Nisreen's daughters] *will grow up, they will get engaged—who will provide for them?*' But she also acknowledged new opportunities, and new financial pressures, on young Syrian women: '*In Syria, we didn't care much about education. Here, it has become the most important thing. … Girls have become stronger. And life has become more difficult. How is she supposed to survive?*' These contradictions are not uncommon. In many places in the Global South, women, especially mothers, increasingly make a financial contribution to the survival of their families, in addition to all the unpaid labour they *also* do. However, while women's responsibilities towards their families often grow in times of economic hardship and displacement, their rights and entitlements often remain limited (cf. Chant 2014). The ambitions of Um Faisal, who supports her daughter's education, but also arranged her early marriage and envisions herself as a future matchmaker for her granddaughters, encapsulate the complex situation of older women: through their control over marital decision-making processes and the allocation of family resources, and their newfound access to waged labour in exile, they can enable, but also impede, different types of futures for young women: as wives, mothers, students and career women.

Conclusion

Drawing on ethnographic interviews with Syrian women of different ages and generations in Jordan, this article highlights the complex decision-making processes around early marriage in displaced families. Older, and sometimes younger, women show considerable agency in arranging these matches, but the frustrations and dreams that motivate them differ according to their positioning in multigenerational households. In a situation of protracted displacement and few educational and career

opportunities, Syrian girls in our small sample felt that they had no alternative to early marriage. As reproductive health costs in Jordan can be prohibitive, impaired access to public healthcare for displaced populations further compromises the safety of young mothers and their children. Hence, early marriage cannot be addressed in isolation from wider legal and socioeconomic instability in a host country where 58 per cent of Syrian men, but only 8 per cent of Syrian women are economically active (Higher Population Council 2018). In addition, our interviews demonstrate that well-meant gender equality interventions risk failing if they do not take into account family dynamics in multigenerational refugee households, as well as young Syrians' own changed ideas about marriage and parenthood. At least among the specific demographic of our study sample, young Syrian women dream of being able to afford dedicating the next years of their lives to starting a family and caring for their children and spouses. By contrast, finding employment might not be one of their short-term goals; this chimes with the results of a cash assistance programme for internally displaced women in Raqqa who used the money not to start small businesses, but to stop working under exploitative conditions (Blackwell *et al.* 2019). Older women are often in charge of household economies and the upbringing of their grandchildren—this makes them important mediators.

Given the legal and economic constraints on Syrian livelihoods in Jordan, we do not expect that early marriage will go away any time soon. Due to the small size of our sample, our findings hardly provide definitive answers on how to approach this phenomenon. Rather, we hope that, through providing in-depth ethnographic portraits of individual Syrian women, we can indicate possible entry points for humanitarian action. Our study shows that, despite many young Syrian women's high degree of isolation, there are three types of Jordanian institutions that they interact with: the judiciary system, schools and hospitals. These interactions can provide windows of opportunity for governmental and non-governmental aid providers to reach young women. First, all women in this study were aware of the legal requirements of registering marriages in Jordanian courts, and of the Jordanian minimum legal age for marriage. Syrians' interactions with the judiciary system in the host country could be improved through strengthening the confidentiality of reporting, providing female contact persons and improving follow-up procedures. Second, our study shows that Syrian students drop out of secondary education at the time of their engagement, but Syrian families often decide on a lengthy waiting period between the (sometimes unofficial) engagement and the wedding. Encouraging engaged students to stay on would allow them to extend their education significantly, and facilitate their transition to vocational or other forms of training after the early years of motherhood. In a similar vein, schools should create safe conditions that allow pregnant girls to continue their education, and to return later on. Several of the young mothers we

interviewed expressed the wish to finish high school and enrol in vocational training, or even university. Making these aspirations come true would require free childcare and a study schedule that is compatible with women's household chores. Syrian adolescents also reported that they knew next to nothing about reproductive health before—and even *after*—the wedding; and, perhaps most problematically, they did not think that this was a problem. As many girls abandon their education at the age of approximately 14, basic information on bodily changes during puberty and family planning should be transmitted earlier, and in age-appropriate and culturally sensitive ways, to raise girls' awareness of the relevance of reproductive health issues for their personal, but also for their future children's, health. Besides destigmatising the schooling of engaged, married and pregnant students, aid providers should consider providing 'start-up grants' for newly-weds, coupled to premarital counselling. In Amman, Islamic charities already provide similar services to young working-class Jordanians before their wedding (Hughes 2017). Besides facilitating conversations about family planning, this would address some of the biggest livelihood stressors for young brides: by helping them to move out of multigenerational households and substandard accommodation. Third, while many Syrian women who live in Jordanian cities have access to various types of public and NGO assistance, some young mothers live in a greater state of isolation, especially in the countryside. Often, the only type of institutional contact that young women like Amina make is with doctors and midwives when they attend hospitals in bigger cities for antenatal check-ups and to give birth. Hospital maternity services might create safe spaces for young mothers to learn about family planning without the presence of husbands and mothers-in-law.

Ultimately, combating early marriage might come down to refugee women's other options, and the prospects of a future worth waiting for. At the national level in Jordan, important discussions about the more long-term inclusion of refugee women are already happening, and Jordanian policymakers have called upon the international community to rethink short-lived livelihood programming. In cooperation with stakeholders from government ministries, civil society organisations, security sector and international partners, the Jordanian National Commission for Women produced the (2018–21) Jordanian National Action Plan (JONAP) for advancing the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325) (Jordanian National Commission for Women 2018). What makes JONAP special is its comprehensive approach to Jordanian and refugee women's roles in Jordanian society and economy: it calls for recognising women's needs, and involving women themselves in the design of humanitarian services, and in the fostering of a broader inclusive community culture. JONAP also, importantly, acknowledges the critical role that women can play in peace-building in the region. Making Jordanian, but also displaced, women, a part of protection and prevention programmes will help

young Syrians reconsider their situation in Jordan not as aliens, but as people with the right to stay and build their lives.

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Appendix
Demographics of female Syrian interviewees in this study

All names are the pseudonyms used in this article.

	Age (in years)	*Region of origin*	*Length of stay in Jordan (in years)*	*Age at the time of the wedding (in years)*	*Husband's age at the time of the wedding*	*Number of children*
IRBID (city in northern Jordan)						
°1 (lives with her husband and daughter) **'Um Soraya'**	18	Rural Deraa	7	17	21	1 (and pregnant)
°2 (mother of °1, lives with her husband and four children) **'Um Ahmed'**	40	Rural Deraa	7	13	19	5
°3 (sister of °1, lives with her parents and siblings) **'Farah'**	15	Rural Deraa	7	Engaged at the age of 15	Engaged at the age of 17	0
°4 (neighbour of °2 and °3, lives with her parents and siblings) **'Aisha'**	13	Rural Deraa	6	Engaged at the age of 12	Engaged at the age of 16	0
°5 (separated, lives with her parents, her siblings, and her own children) **'Nisreen'**	21	Rural Damascus	6	15	Approx. 17	2
°6 (mother of °5, lives with her husband, children and grandchildren) **'Um Faisal'**	Ca. 50	Rural Damascus	6	Approx. 15	N/A	5

	Age (in years)	*Region of origin*	*Length of stay in Jordan (in years)*	*Age at the time of the wedding (in years) (in years)*	*Husband's age at the time of the wedding*	*Number of children*
°7 (divorced, lives with her mother and sister)	27	Rural Damascus	6	19	Approx. 24	2
°8 (sister of °7, divorced, lives with her mother and sister, studies at university)	24	Rural Damascus	6	20	Approx. 25	0
AL HAMRA (village in northern Jordan)						
°9 (lives with her husband, child and parents in-law) **'Amina'**	17	Rural Deraa	7	15	N/A	1
Al HAY AL HASHIMI AL SHAMALI (low-income neighbourhood in East Amman, Jordan)						
°10 (lives with her husband and children)	30	Rural Homs	6	17	N/A	4
°11 (lives with her husband and children) **'Asma'**	20	Rural Homs	5	17	N/A	2
°12 (sister-in-law of °11, lives with her husband, children, and mother-in-law) **'Abeer'**	20	Rural Homs	6	15	25	3
°13 (neighbour of °11, lives with her husband and children)	22	Rural Homs	6	15	N/A	3

To cite the article: Ann-Christin Zuntz, George Palattiyil, Abla Amawi, Ruba Al Akash, Ayat Nashwan, Areej Al Majali and Harish Nair (2021), 'Early marriage and displacement—a conversation: how Syrian daughters, mothers and mothers-in-law in Jordan understand marital decision-making', *Journal of the British Academy*, 9: 179–212.
DOI https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009.179

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk