

Review paper on

Child Marriage In Lebanon Impact Of The Multiple Crisis

Prepared by:

Marcelle Dalal

Gender consultant and trainer

1st reader:

Patricia Al Aro

Protection consultant

2nd reader:

Sarah El-Outa - RDFL

Rasha Wazneh - RDFL

September 2022

CONTENT

1

Background ... 3

2

Overview of Child marriage
in Lebanon 2016 - 2019 ... 4

3

Implications of economic
and social crisis from 2019
till today ... 8

4

Programs' interventions to
end child marriage
(best practices) ... 10

5

Recommendations
and conclusions ... 12

6

References ... 14

Background



Child marriage is “any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child”¹. In international conventions, child marriage is considered a form of forced marriage due to the fact that children are not fully capable and free to take such life changing decision.

According to UNICEF², **the world is home to 650 million child brides**, including currently married girls and women who were first married in childhood, **of whom 40 million child brides are in the MENA region**. Those numbers are prone to increase over the next decade as a result of COVID 19 pandemic where an estimation of “**10 million more girls will be at risk** of becoming child brides”³.

Numerous causes can lead to child marriage but the fact **that girls are far more likely than boys to marry before reaching adulthood points to gender inequality as a principal driver of child marriage**⁴. Other **drivers** can be summed up into 3 main problems: **hunger poverty and access to education** where a strong relation was observed and studied in several countries. All of those factors constitute a **vicious circle of causes and consequences** correlating and aggravating the girls’ situation.

This review paper overviews child marriage status in Lebanon before and after the multiple crisis (2019) taking into account the economic and social challenges in addition to COVID19 outbreak and its consequences. **The main purpose of this paper is to study the crisis’ impact on girls’ in specific and showcase any emerging trend of policy and practice responses** to the current child marriage situation in the country.

¹ Child marriage threatens the lives, well-being and futures of girls around the world – UNICEF <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage> (accessed August 2022)

² A profile of Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa – UNICEF 2018

³ COVID19-: A threat to progress against child marriage – UNICEF – March 2021 (accessed August 2022) <https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-a-threat-to-progress-against-child-marriage/>

⁴ Save the Children, “No, I Don’t”: Abolishing Child Marriage in Lebanon, 2019, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/no-i-dont-abolishing-child-marriage-lebanon>

Overview of Child marriage in Lebanon 2016–2019

International and local legislation on Child Marriage in Lebanon:

Lebanon has committed to eliminate child, early and forced marriage by 2030 in line with target **5.3** of the Sustainable Development Goals. Additionally, the resolutions on child, early, and forced marriage adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2014, 2013, and 2018 as well as the resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council in 2013 were co-sponsored by Lebanon⁵. Lebanon also ratified the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) in 1991, which sets a minimum age of marriage of 18, and acceded to the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women \(CEDAW\)](#) in 1997, which obligates states to ensure free and full consent to marriage⁶.

Since the 18 officially recognized religious sects are in charge of regulating marriage and related matters through 15 Personal Status Laws that are often governed by outdated traditions, norms and cultures, there is no minimum age for marriage in Lebanon. However, some religious authorities determine the age of marriage as young as nine years old or when the girl "reaches puberty."⁷

Article 522 of the Penal Code, which permitted rapists to marry their victims in order to avoid punishment and prison, was abolished by the Lebanese Parliament on August, 16 2017. However, this abolishment was determined to be incomplete as it was reintroduced for the two articles 505 and 518. Mating with a juvenile is mentioned in Article 505 as a legal offense under the sub-chapter "rape crimes" and is referred to as such. The Administration and Justice Commission members' amendment to the Article, which Parliament then approved, gives the offender a second chance to choose between imprisonment and marriage with a victim who is between the ages of 15 and 18; in this case, a social worker would intervene to ensure the safety of the minor. On the other hand, Article 518 is about "deflowering" a girl by marriage promises. The impact of Article 522 on this Article has also been added by the legislators in the proposed change, where they again preserve the possibility of marriage as an exemption from punishment without assessing the victim's age⁸.

⁵ European Commission, Lebanon, [website], 2020,

https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/middle-east/lebanon_en (accessed September 2022).

⁶ Plan International. "Adolescent Girls in Crisis: Voices from Beirut.2019:

https://plan-international.org/uploads/12/2021/adolescent_girls_in_crisis-beirut-full_report_1-0.pdf (accessed September 2022).

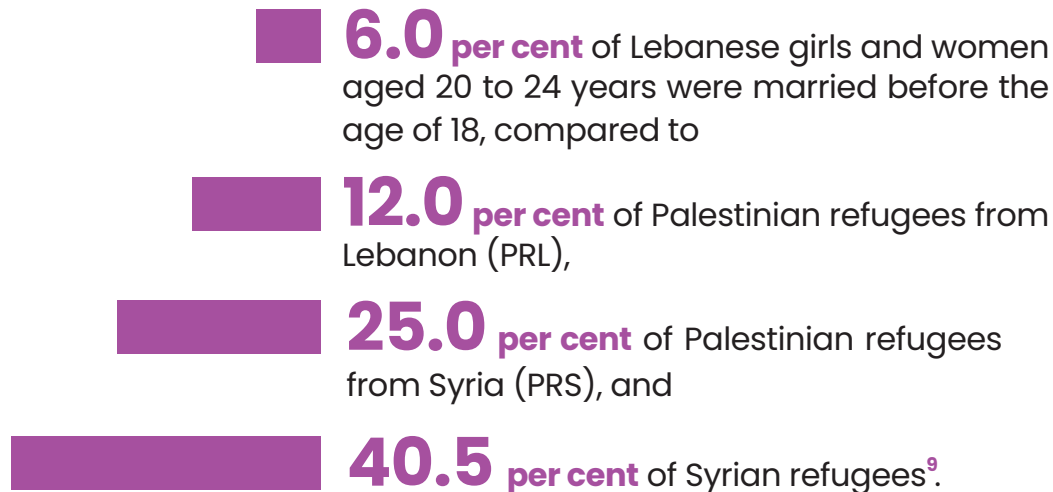
⁷ Save the Children, "No, I Don't": Abolishing Child Marriage in Lebanon, 2019,

<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/no-i-dont-abolishing-child-marriage-lebanon> (accessed September 2022)

⁸ Kafa. Article 522 is Not Fully Abolished.2017, <https://kafa.org.lb/en/node/124>(accessed September 2022)

Child Marriage in numbers:

A baseline study conducted by UNICEF in 2016 revealed that



It was the first of its kind report for a country lacking an updated official census to begin with (last census was in 1932). It's worth mentioning that UNICEF report made an outstanding impact on the public opinion where many media outlets highlighted the numbers and initiated debates on this harmful practice. In addition, it **shaped the non-governmental organizations' response** towards advocating for women and girls' rights for the next years and still constitutes, to current date, the only resource of a countrywide segregated data on child marriage.

Multiple causes hide behind those numbers in addition to the usual drivers (gender inequality, hunger, poverty, access to education): as presented above, the absence of legal legislation constitutes a main drive for child marriage in Lebanon.

⁹ Lebanon Country Brief UNICEF Regional study on Child marriage – UNICEF 2017

The below table, presents an overview of the recognized Marital age as regulated by various religious sects:

Denomination	Recognized Marriageable age		Age at which a marriage can be licensed		Authority granting the license
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Sunni	18	17	17	9	Judge
Sunni (after April 2021)*	18	18	15	15	With the consent of the minors, their guardians and a medical exam stating that his/her physical and mental/psychological condition is acceptable
Shi'a	Puberty	Puberty	15	9	Judge
Druze	18	17	16	15	Judge or Sheikh
Catholic denominations	16	14			
Greek Orthodox	18	18	17	15	Priest
Armenian Orthodox	18	14	16	14	Archbishop
Syriac Orthodox	18	14			
Evangelical	18	16	16	14	Spiritual court
Assyrian Church of the East	18	15			Bishop
Jewish	18	12.5	13	<12.5	By the authority of the father or with consent of the girl and agreement of the mother or a brother, if she is an orphan

*The Sunni law was amended in April 2021

These laws exacerbate the inequality between genders: the girls' recognized age of marriage is always less than boys' age (except for Greek orthodox) and girls under 18 can be married in all sects under some circumstances. The latter is usually related to cultural and religious traditions namely when a sexual relationship and or pregnancy has occurred before marriage.

The disparity between these laws and international conventions defining a child as any person under 18 and considering child marriage as a forced one with harmful consequences; pushed local organizations to lobby for combating child marriage in Lebanon. It started with several campaigns from prominent feminist organizations between 2016 and 2018. KAFA Enough violence and exploitation video featuring people's reactions to a photoshoot of a child bride wedding an old man in a very busy area of Beirut brought public attention to the existence of such laws. The Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering (RDFL) campaign focused on the physical, psychological and social risks of early marriage on girls involving a medical point of view to the matter. In 2017, RDFL formed a **National Coalition for Protecting Children from Early Marriage with 58 partner organizations**. "Several organizations have launched videos, flashmobs, billboards, and online media campaigns under the title "Not before 18." This resulted in the issue being put on the public agenda and the parliamentary agenda in a sustained manner"¹⁰. In fact, **RDFL coupled its awareness events with a submission of proposal law to set the minimum age of marriage to 18 without exceptions**. It constituted a first of its kind because other proposed laws focused on increasing the requirements for marrying minors and granted Juvenile Judge exceptions to marry a **-16year-old girl**.



¹⁰ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/06-2022/submission-hc-report-child-marriage-others-UNICEF.docx>

Implications of economic and social crisis from 2019 till today

**It's important to note that there is no recent study targeting child marriage in Lebanon in specific after 2019. The numbers stated below were concluded from several reports on the current humanitarian situation in Lebanon. Lebanon's financial crisis since October 2019 has pushed prices up, leaving 80% of the population living below the poverty line. 2.2 million Lebanese, 208,000 Palestinian refugees and 78,000 migrants are in need of humanitarian assistance in the country. Around 89% of the 1.5 million Syrian refugees now live in extreme poverty. The Beirut port explosion and the COVID19- pandemic have accelerated the collapse of public services¹¹.*

According to the Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA) of the **Lebanese population** in December 2021, **“child marriage** (children between 8 and 19 years old married, divorced or widowed) **stands at around 1 per cent**, with rates for girls estimated at **1.5 per cent”¹²**.

As for child marriage **among Syrians: “One in five girls aged 15 to 19 were married at the time of the survey, a decrease of 4 percentage points from 2020 24%**. The highest rate of child marriage was found in the South at **34%**, with an increase in **10 percentage points from 2020”¹³**.

Despite the decrease above, **field trends and case management data from child protection and SGBV actors across Lebanon suggest that “this estimate is lower than the actual figures**. Given the social stigma, households may be reluctant to report it”¹⁴. In fact, **GBVIMS overview in the first quarter of 2022 reports a 5% increase in child marriage compared to the fourth quarter of 2021 “accounting of 14%.”¹⁵** And differences between governorates can be explained by the fact that **child marriage is usually a negative coping to times of crisis and poverty** and feeling its effect in rural areas is commonly higher than cities.

¹¹ European Commission. European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations – Factsheet. 2022 https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/middle-east/lebanon_en (accessed September 2022)

¹² Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA) Lebanon - December 2021

¹³ Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR 2021)

¹⁴ Increasing humanitarian need in Lebanon – OCHA April 2022

¹⁵ Gender-Based Violence Information Management System, Overview of Incidents of GBV and Women and Girls' access to services Quarter 2022-1, June 2022

And for nearly 3 years, **Lebanon has been facing an economic and financial crisis that World Bank ranked “in the top 10, possibly top 3, most severe crises episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century”¹⁶**. “Lebanon’s multiple crises – a collapsing economy, the COVID19- pandemic, the severe economic and social repercussions of the August 2020 Beirut Port explosions, and political instability have combined to plunge more and more families into poverty”¹⁷.

One of the main sectors affected by the multiple crisis and has direct impact on child marriage is Education. According to UNICEF’s recent report, **“3 in 10 young people in Lebanon have stopped their education**, while 4 in 10 reduced spending on education to buy essential items like basic food and medicine ”.¹⁸

But girls are not attending school for multiple reasons other than the increase in transportation fees and school supplies. **“Girls are not attending school when they have their period because they can’t afford buying pads”¹⁹ confirmed Safaa, a social worker in Akkar area**. Period poverty, a common consequence of financial crisis around the world is newly introduced to the Lebanon’ general public.

Not to forget **the impact of COVID19 pandemic on school attendance** where children stayed home for **2 academic** years. “About **700,000 children**, a third of the school-age population, received no education last year (2020), and the **1.3 million** children who were enrolled often received little education during prolonged school closures due to anti-government protests, Covid19-, and the Beirut port explosion, which damaged **163 schools**. **Distance learning was inaccessible for children who lacked devices, internet connections, or reliable electricity”²⁰**.

Nevertheless, the increase in school drop outs implicates the vicious circle of child marriage as a consequence and a cause. And the numbers from VASyR can be considered as a recent example where “marriage was reported by **22%** of girls (15 to 18) as the main reason for not attending school”.²¹

UNOCHA, in their latest report on Humanitarian needs in Lebanon, shared their concern **“that child marriage rates are likely to increase as households are forced to take desperate measures to cope”²²**.

¹⁶ World Bank Lebanon Economic Monitor (LEM) – June 2021

¹⁷ <https://www.unicef.org/lebanon/stories/all-children-lebanon-my-children-missed-school-over-year-nadia-mother-three> (accessed September 2022)

¹⁸ Searching for Hope, A Grim Outlook for Youth as Lebanon teeters on the brink of Collapse – UNICEF 2022

¹⁹ Safaa Hannouf – Social Worker in Aneira Lebanon

²⁰ <https://www.hrw.org/news/11/10/2021/lebanon-planning-lapses-endanger-school-year> (accessed September 2022)

²¹ Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR 2021)

²² Increasing humanitarian need in Lebanon – OCHA April 2022

Programs' interventions to end child marriage (best practices)

Several local and international organizations, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), have been responding to child marriage since the Syrian refugees' crisis such as UNICEF, UNFPA, International Rescue Committee, Plan International, Anera, RDFL and their coalition partners to name a few. Programs' purposes vary between prevention and response and are implemented through **a wide range of projects and activities**: awareness raising, advocacy, Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), case management, legal and health services, etc. Moreover, lobbying with policy makers and advancing draft laws to parliament's agenda is the purpose of a smaller part of these organizations. A detailed study was done by Terre Des Hommes (TDH) to map responses to child marriage between 2012 and 2020.²³

Work continues on both **programmatic and policy** levels with the launch of the Strategic Plan (2027-2020) for the Protection of Women and Children by MoSa and UNICEF. A special focus is given to Social and Behavioral Change within QUDWA plan which is "Lebanon's first national **Social and Behavioral Change and Communication (SBCC)** plan"²⁴. Qudwa engages several local partners and addresses different harmful practices against boys and girls including child marriage as a trend to the country's crisis.

In fact, **localization of child marriage responses** has been relatively fostered by engaging actors at the community level for better results. "Let us keep our childhood" campaign by Women Now for Development between 2019 and 2020 is a tangible example where **community organizing and participatory leadership methodologies were used to push towards grassroots community change**. The campaign was predominantly led by women, as well as adolescent girls, men and adolescent boys from the Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian communities living in the Bekaa Valley²⁵. They secured pledges from **1826 households** and **176 families** changed their stance on child marriage. The campaign continued in 2021 with a focus on men/fathers' engagement and a better effective social change²⁶.

²³ Mapping responses to Child Marriage in Lebanon: Reflections from practitioners and policymakers – Terre Des Hommes March 2020

²⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/lebanon/qudwa> (accessed August 2022)

²⁵ <https://women-now.org/let-me-keep-my-childhood-report/> (accessed September 2022)

²⁶ Let me Keep my childhood Community Organizing against child marriage – A case study by Women Now for Development 2022

But the economic crisis is imposing financial measures to be taken into account when responding to child marriage and that's what pushed Anera in Akkar to pilot a **cash for education** project in 2021. "Over the past three years, Lebanon's cascading series of crises has pushed vulnerable and refugee families deeper into poverty and socioeconomic marginalization. Amongst the many unhealthy coping mechanisms that families are reverting to, is forced child marriage. Coupled with toxic patriarchal and cultural norms, girls as young as twelve and thirteen are being forced to leave school and face dramatic risks to their mental and physical wellbeing. Not only does this phenomenon impact the girls' lives, but eventually it contributes to increased poverty rates. This is why we at Anera are currently in the process of scaling up our pilot project; **Safeguarding Adolescents through Multidisciplinary Assistance, or SAMA for short. The SAMA project's** methodology is assessment-based cash transfer programming. We believe that by lifting some of the families' economic burdens, we incentivize them to prioritize their daughter's education. In fact, unlike other similar programs in the region, Anera's **cash assistance is conditional, and the condition is that the girl/s remain enrolled in school.** We are aware that cash transfers will not change social norms. That is why the SAMA project also encompasses other holistic and psychosocial-support components such as community awareness sessions with boys, men, and influential community members, on gender-equality and the impact of such harmful social practices."²⁷ The pilot program provided **cash for 665 girls aged between 13 to 16 years old (70% Syrians, 20% Palestinians and 10% Lebanese)** to go to school in addition to awareness raising sessions to the community on child marriage, harassment and other related topics.



²⁷ Samar El Yassir, Anera Lebanon's Country Director

Recommendations and conclusions



New report on child marriage on a national level (similar to UNICEF 2017 Baseline) is needed to capture possible emerging trends after the multiple crisis in Lebanon.



Interventions in the Education sector to reduce school dropouts and enroll out-of-school girls is a must. Previous studies have shown that “higher levels of education negatively affect attitudes towards child marriage. For example, a study by Saint Joseph’s University in Lebanon (USJ) found that **37.2 per cent** of girls surveyed who had no education were totally against child marriage, compared to **45.0 per cent** of those who had dropped out and **62.3 per cent** of girls who were going to school.²⁸



Unified Reporting Mechanisms to properly capture the incidents of child marriage and stronger invitation for compliance to these unified mechanisms amongst local, international civil society organizations, NGOs and agencies is a must. Lebanon has in place a system for reporting incidents of child marriage. However, many agencies do not comply to the use of these mechanisms including government institutions, rendering the possibility of statistical analysis and reporting limited to some organizations.



Continuous work and involvement of Government Institutions is key for increasing state ownership in addressing child marriage in Lebanon.

²⁸ Lebanon Country Brief UNICEF Regional study on Child marriage – UNICEF 2017



Reactivate the National Coalition for Protecting Children from Early Marriage to coordinate the programmatic and policy work on the topic among local and international actors. While the responsibility of protecting children against child marriage relies under the state policy framework, The National Coalition could play an intermediary role between organizations and the government to facilitate the work of state actors and contribute to establishing policies.



Increased advocacy efforts by civil society organizations, legal institutions and International Commissions and organizations could support the awareness raising and could serve as drivers to change and legislation amendments. Law makers – such as lawyers, judges and parliament members – should be sensitized on the impacts of child marriage on the socio-economic fabrics of the community in Lebanon so they engage actively in advocacy initiatives.



Increased collaboration between Livelihoods, Food Security and Protection sectors to prioritize assistance to vulnerable households is a must. Households at increased risks of food insecurity are more likely to engage in negative coping mechanisms such as child marriage and child labour. As such, offering sustainable solutions such as livelihoods opportunities, food generating activities and financial education trainings could offer these households economic stability.

References

- A profile of Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa – UNICEF 2018
- Child marriage threatens the lives, well-being and futures of girls around the world – UNICEF
- COVID19-: A threat to progress against child marriage – UNICEF – March 2021
- Increasing humanitarian need in Lebanon – OCHA April 2022
- Lebanon Country Brief UNICEF Regional study on Child marriage – UNICEF 2017
- Let me Keep my childhood Community Organizing against child marriage – A case study by Women Now for Development 2022
- Mapping responses to Child Marriage in Lebanon: Reflections from practitioners and policymakers – Terre Des Hommes March 2020
- Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA) Lebanon - December 2021
- “No, I don’t” Abolishing child marriage in Lebanon policy note – Save the children October 2019
- Public Policy Lite: Regulating Underage Marriage in Lebanon – The Legal Agenda 2014
- Searching for Hope, A Grim Outlook for Youth as Lebanon teeters on the brink of Collapse – UNICEF 2022
- Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR 2021)
- World Bank Lebanon Economic Monitor (LEM) – June 2021