



# The Endless Tunnel

The Consequences of Early Marriage on Women

A Brief Report that Includes Stories for Women from Deir ez-Zor about Their  
Early Marriage

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## Introduction

Early marriage is common<sup>1</sup> in Syria for reasons related to religion, traditions and norms. Following the conflict, it increased due to social and economic motives. In light of the sharp decline of living conditions, poor security situation that creates fear from kidnapping or abuse, unavailability of access to education in vast areas, and lack of job opportunities, Syrian families aimed at marrying off their daughters.

The UNICEF indicated<sup>2</sup> that early marriage among Syrian female refugees increased<sup>3</sup> from 12% in 2011 to 18% in 2013, and 32% in early 2014. In 2019, the First Religious Judge in Damascus also confirmed the increase of early marriage during the war to reach 13%, as it was below 3% before the war.

In this context, the Syrian Parliament agreed the amendments<sup>4</sup> of personal status law, that made the legal age of marriage of male and female teenagers to reach 18, as it was 18 for the males and 17 for females. The amendment came within the law no.4 in 2019, that amended some articles of the law no.59 in 1953<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, the Syrian penal code in amendment<sup>6</sup> of law no.24 in 2018 increased<sup>7</sup> the penalty of making marriage contracts outside the specialized courts. The amendments stated to impose heavier penalty on whoever makes a marriage contract for an underaged outside the specialized courts without the consent of the guardian.

Justice for Life collected stories of six women about their early marriage. All of the names mentioned in this report are pseudonyms to preserve the personal safety of the witnesses.

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<sup>1</sup> When Caged Birds Sing: Stories of Syrian Adolescent Girls, UNFPA, 2019.  
<http://bit.ly/35R0bXg>

<sup>2</sup> Early marriage in Jordan shows no signs of abating, UNICEF, 2014.  
<https://news.un.org/en/audio/2014/08/591142>

<sup>3</sup> Syria, Increase of Early Marriage Percentage during the Crisis with 13 percent., Russia Today, 2019.  
<http://bit.ly/3ag0wWx>

<sup>4</sup> Law no.4 that amends some of the Personal Status Law articles, issued by legislative decree no.59, 1953, and its related amendments.  
<http://bit.ly/2IW6O2a>

<sup>5</sup> The Syrian Parliament adopts the act that includes amendments for some articles of the Personal Status Law, SANA, 2019.  
<http://bit.ly/3bXoR3Y>

<sup>6</sup> Amending Some Articles of Penal Code Regarding Making Marriage Contracts outside the Specialized Courts, SANA, 2018.  
<http://bit.ly/2LLiSEX>

<sup>7</sup> Amendments of Penal Code Increases Penalties regarding Early Marriage, Enab Balaldi, 2018.  
<https://enabbaladi.net/archives/237193>

According to the women interviewed by Justice for Life, the most important reasons for early marriage are local customs and norms, with two women saying they had no right to refuse, and that they believed that refusing to marry early made it difficult for them to marry in the future. Another woman tried to refuse but the family's insistence was stronger and she could not face it. Family problems caused a decision by the father of one woman to marry off her. Another woman believes that her husband's financial situation encouraged her family to marry off her.

The age difference between the spouses, which in one story reached (27) years, had a grave impact on married women at an early age, where they faced problems related to dealing with the husband and his family and to carry out duties towards the family and children, as well as physical harm and psychological problems they suffered. One woman was severely beaten until she aborted, another divorced while still a minor and was not allowed to work or complete her education.

The practice and laws in force so far show that there is nothing to prevent the phenomenon of early marriage, which has negative effects on married minor women, both psychologically and physically, in addition to the consequences for children, where the unequal relationship between spouses due to the age difference and immaturity of the girl, which makes her be able to deal with her new life, increases the likelihood of divorce.

Justice for Life examined the underage marriage and met with a number of women who had married under the age of 18, who spoke during interviews about the reasons for their early marriage, the implications on their lives and the lives of their children, and the difficulties they faced.

## Why Did I Get Marry Early?

Women talked about several reasons behind their early marriage and the why could not they say no. Hala, aged 20-year-old, got married at 16-year-old. She says “The neighbors’ son proposed to me. He is 12 years older than me. I immediately said yes. All girls in my environment marry early. I thought that my refusal would delay my marriage. It also could make others to hesitate to propose to me again. Girls that get older would not be married unless by married men. I got married with my full will, and I was convinced.”

Mona is a woman that her mother passed away when she was 14-year-old. She told JFL “When my mother passed away, my father got married again. I and my father’s wife were not getting along well. She convinced my father to marry off me. One of her cousins, 9 year older than me, proposed to me”.

Shoukran had similar circumstances that Mona experienced. This pushed her to get married early. She says “My father passed away when I was a child. My brothers became my guardians. They decided to marry off me to one of their friends. My mother was an old woman and could not prevent them.”. “He was 25 years older than me. He was married and had sons of my age. I tried to refuse, but I could not as my brothers insisted to marry off me. I believe that the fact of my husband as a rich man, has encouraged my brothers to marry off me”.

Khawla was married at age of 15. She says “Since I have been a young girl, I always was thinking that a girl that does not marry early, she would miss the train of marriage. That is why, I was dreaming of getting married. I left school early and started putting cosmetics. The neighbor’ son proposed to me. I did not hesitate. I accepted at once, and my family did so.

Noura is a 20-year-old woman. She is not divorced but separated from her husband. “My early marriage was the gravest mistake I have ever committed. I was 16-year-old where I could not say no. The word “No” was related to impoliteness, or at least this was in my mind. When my husband proposed to me, I thought that I have no right to refuse as my family are fully aware of my best interest” she says. “He was 10 years older than me. He was based in Turkey. He proposed to me after I passed the elementary school. I was dreaming of my life and study. My family told me that I will be married to one of the family friends, and he will be my children’ father. I did not even try to refuse”.

Ayda is a married woman with no children. She says “Since I have been a child, I had no right to express my opinion. I was dreaming of continuing my study, but this was not acceptable for my family. They even did not allow me to go out unless for visiting our relatives”. “I was 14-year-old when one of the family friends proposed to me. He was 41-year-old. My family believes that a girl must be married as soon as she is mature, fearing a scandal. For this reason, they immediately agreed to marry off me” she says.

## Consequences of Early Marriage

The witnesses talked about the consequences they suffered due to the early marriage. Hala says “At the beginning of my marriage, I faced many problems in dealing with my husband’s family. I had not a life experience and I did not how to deal with my husband and his family”. “I was afraid of pregnancy and giving birth as I heard a lot from the family women about this experience. My mother remained at my side and guided me how to deal with all these details, including giving birth to the first child after two years of my marriage”, she said.

The most prominent challenges faced by Mona is raising her children. She talks about some details starting from her engagement: “Since the very beginning, I did not feel comfortable and I felt that we do not share a lot in ways of thinking. He always says that the woman’s place is her house, and she must not get along with neighbors all the time. He was holding me responsible if he comes back home and he did not find everything is ready. I was silent in front of his behavior and feedback in order to avoid any disturbance”.

Shoukran decided to separate from her husband following a year and half of marriage. “During my marriage period, I suffered from a grave stress due to the disputes with my husband, his first wife, and his children.

“As a result of disagreements with his wife, my husband beat me even though he knew I was pregnant, and I aborted the baby the next day as a result.”

The family of Shoukran's did not allow her to work after her divorce. “our society treats the divorced as guilty, without any appreciation of what she went through before she made this decision. I thought I would be free after the divorce and I would be able to continue my education and make my own decisions, but what happened was that everyone stood up to me so that I could no longer express my opinion regarding any issue”.

"On the first day we were together for the first time, he was violent with me, and he repeated it. I was crying and he didn't care about me. I told my mother, who advised me to be patient. His sexual violence increased after we moved to Turkey. He only cared about my body. I got pregnant with my first child and the pregnancy increased my physical and psychological fatigue. I asked my brother help, who insisted not to go back to him. I tried to break up with him, but that would have taken time, but we went back to Syria and my brother' wife helped me through the birth.", Noura says.

Ayda is the third wife of her husband. After a period of her marriage, her husband married for the fourth time. "My husband got sick and became no longer able to have children. I asked him to see a doctor, but he refused and said that he did not want children and was not ready to take responsibility again. He did not take into account my desire and right to have children".

## What After?

The harsh experiences of women who spoke to Justice for Life brought them to new convictions. "A girl should not get married until she is 24 years old, so that she is more aware of the responsibilities of her new life," Hala says.

Mona says that the age of marriage must be at least 20 years: "I will try very hard for my daughter to complete her education and make her own decision, although I know that this is very difficult because everytime I talk to my husband about this, he always repeats that a woman has only her husband's house and children, and if she is given her freedom, her mind will be corrupted."

"It was a physically and psychologically harsh experience, and to this day I still feel like my body is tired after the abortion. I believe that a girl should not marry before the age of 25, so that she is mentally mature and able to take responsibility and understand and deal with the life of marriage.", Shoukran expresses her opinion.

"I am now 23 years old and I have three children and am waiting for the fourth child. I feel that my life today is about my husband and my children. I have not achieved anything for myself, I have not completed my studies, I have not lived the stages of my life as I should have. I look much older, my body is tired and I am easily sick because I got married and gave birth at an early age. I will not allow my daughters in the future to get married before they are self-reliant and fulfill their dreams." Khawla says.

"I really don't know how I was worthless so my parents married off me to a greedy person in this way. I don't know how they wiped my personality until I couldn't make any decision about my life, including having children, where they consider it a decision that a man, not a woman, should make," Ayda says.