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### **Early marriage - a coping mechanism for Syrian refugees?**

IRIN (19.07.2012) - Some Syrian refugees arriving in Jordan are opting to marry off their daughters at a young age believing that marital status offers a form of protection and insurance.

"In Maraq, we have come across around 50 cases of early marriages since the day we started helping out Syrians. Most of them are married to Syrians, especially cousins," said Khaled Ghanem, from the Islamic Society Centre (ISC).

Hana Ghadban, a volunteer with the Syrian Women Association (SWA), told IRIN that in the Syrian cities of Homs and Dera'a many girls are married at the age of 13 or 14. "We know of so many girls who got married after moving to Jordan. Most of them were engaged in Syria."

Syria's personal status law sets the minimum age of marriage at 17 for boys and 16 for girls. However, religious leaders are allowed to make an exception and approve informal marriages at the age of 13 for girls and 16 for boys. These marriages are only registered with the authorities when both spouses turn 18. This informal marriage allows the couple to live together and have children.

Jordanian law sets the minimum age for marriage at 18 for both spouses, though in exceptional circumstances marriages involving 15-year-olds are allowed. It is illegal for anyone under 15 to get married.

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) is aware of the problem, said local representative Dominique Hyde: "We're concerned about early marriages - using that as a coping mechanism. Jordan has a very strict law: You can't be married before 18 but you can get a waiver, with authorization of two judges, for younger ages."

Difficult living conditions for Syrians in Jordan are also pushing families to marry their daughters off at a young age. Um Sarah, a Syrian refugee mother, arranged marriages for her daughters aged 15 and 14, because she could not support them.

"As a single mother, I cannot support them. I cannot feed them. I wanted to make sure they are OK, so I asked around if people know of good Syrian men they could marry," she told IRIN.

"They rape girls who are as young as her in Syria now. If they raped a nine-year-old girl, they can do anything. I will not feel OK if I do not see her married to a decent man who can protect her," said the father of Hanadi, a pregnant child bride in Jordan aged 14.

Hanadi's father told IRIN his daughter was engaged to her cousin Ahmad, 20, last year in line with tradition in Homs. "It is our tradition, but now it became a necessity. Syria is not a good place for women and girls any more," he said.

#### ***Informal marriages***

In order to register their marriages at a Shariah court in Jordan, foreign nationals must provide a letter from their embassy declaring they are single. Given the current conflict in Syria, it is impossible for Syrians to obtain any documents from their embassy in Amman, which leaves them with only one option - informal marriages ('urfi') performed by religious leaders, an aid worker who preferred anonymity, told IRIN.

However, Eva Abu Halaweh, a lawyer from the local human rights group MIZAN, warned that informal marriages leave girls vulnerable. "This is dangerous. It means girls could lose their rights if they are divorced or if they encounter disputes with their partners."

"Early marriage can have severe risks for girls including health risks. Early pregnancy is more likely to lead to birth complications and sometimes even prevent girls from having children later in life," said Samir Badran of UNICEF.

According to aid workers, lack of education on family planning and reproductive health is leading to early pregnancies among Syrian child-brides.

"Child-mothers come here and ask for assistance. People do not know about family planning methods, and that is why most girls get pregnant immediately after marriage," an SWA volunteer said.