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## **Parliament raises 'exceptional' marriage age to 16**

***The move has been welcomed by women's rights activists, who hope it is the first step to phasing out the law, which allows child marriage, altogether***

By Taylor Luck

The National (09.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Z0Ee2P> - Jordan's parliament has voted to raise the minimum age of marriage in "exceptional" cases from 15 to 16 in a move that has been seen as an important step towards reducing child marriage rates in the country.

The minimum age for marriage in Jordan is 18, however, in some cases, a judge can approve a marriage to a minor if a sharia committee deems it necessary and both parties consent.

On Monday, politicians passed a measure to raise the minimum age for marriage in these exceptional cases from 15 to 16.

Women's rights activists in Jordan welcomed the move as a first step towards eliminating the exception rule altogether.

"We understand that it does not seem like a big increase, but for us every additional day matters," Eval Abu Halaweh, director of the Mizan Law Group, a Jordanian NGO that provides legal assistance to vulnerable people, told The National. The organisation consulted with MPs on the change to the law.

In 2017, 13.4 per cent of all marriage contracts issued were for underaged brides, but only 0.4 per cent were for underaged grooms.

By at least reaching 16 before marrying, activists say children will have had the chance to complete Grade 10. A completion certificate is a requirement for teenagers who want to take up vocational training or menial jobs and allows them to take university entrance exams.

Under Jordanian law, underage marriage can only take place if the age difference between the bride and groom does not exceed 15 years, and if the groom can prove they are able to pay a dowry and financially support their wife.

A court committee must also confirm that the groom is not currently married and that the union would not mean the bride would not be forced to drop out of school or stop her studies.

MPs argued that lifting the age of the exception from 15 to 16 will help reduce the overall number of child marriages in Jordan.

"We would be open to keeping the exception in the law if the rate of child marriage was between 1 and 5 per cent," said Ms Halaweh.

"But with almost 14 per cent of all marriages in Jordan involving minors, this is becoming a standard and not an exception, and we must work gradually to phase it out."

Jordan's Iftaa Department, the highest religious authority, however, said in a statement to local press that certain "moral and social necessities" may require families to seek marriage for their daughter before she is 18. They said that getting rid of the law that allows these exceptions could lead to social "corruption" as girls who became pregnant out of wedlock would not be able to wed.

Politicians and community leaders argued that the marriages allow families to save face and prevent so-called honour crimes, when social stigma may force a family to take extreme measures, even going as far as to murder a loved one, to clear their reputation.

In statements to MPs and senators, women's rights groups urged the government to find additional measures to protect vulnerable minors.

Last week, watchdog Human Rights Watch urged Jordanian politicians to end the "abusive practice" of child marriage and seize the opportunity to enforce the minimum age of 18 without exception.

Jordan has witnessed a surge in child marriages over the past six years, in part due to the influx of 1.2 million Syrian refugees — the highest percentages of child marriages occur in northern governorates where there are large Syrian communities.

Many Syrian refugees come from rural areas where child marriage is more common and their displacement has also driven families to marry their daughters off to "protect their honour" while they are living in vulnerable circumstances.

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## **Where life begins: reducing risky births in a refugee camp**

By Elizabeth Wang

New Security Beat (06.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2UjcBzi> - Zaatari camp, the largest Syrian refugee camp in the world, sits less than 12 kilometers away from the border between Syria and northern Jordan. Rows of houses disappear into the desert, making it hard to tell where the camp begins and ends. Metal containers pieced together like patchwork are home to around 80,000 refugees. The remnants of tattered UNHCR tents cover holes in the walls. Almost seven years after the camp opened, this dusty sea of tin roofs has evolved into a permanent settlement.

When I entered Zaatari camp to begin my internship with the Women and Girls Comprehensive Center, I saw signs of resilience and humanity everywhere—colorful

murals of smiling children, barefoot boys playing soccer, a wedding dress shop. Perhaps the greatest proof that life goes on can be found in the camp's maternity wards, which see an average of 80 births per week, along with 14,000 consultations per week for expecting mothers. About 1 in 4 of the Syrian refugees living in Zaatari are women of reproductive age. According to UNFPA, 2,300 women and girls in Zaatari are pregnant at any one time. The extremely high fertility rate demonstrates how vital it is to facilitate access to quality reproductive and maternal health services during complex emergencies.

At the Women and Girls Comprehensive Center in Zaatari camp, which is run by the Jordan Health Aid Society and supported by UNFPA, refugee women of all ages receive services such as family planning, pre- and post-natal care, vaccinations, gynecological check-ups, and culturally sensitive information sessions. Every day, the clinic delivers five to seven babies. As of September 27, 2018, the clinic has had 10,089 safe deliveries and zero maternal mortalities, a stunning achievement that remains posted on a scoreboard outside the clinic's gates.

### ***Risky Pregnancies, Dangerous Deliveries***

Despite this success, giving birth in Zaatari is not without dangers. The high prevalence of non-communicable diseases (such as anemia, diabetes, and hypertension) among Syrian refugees—and especially the inadequate management of these chronic conditions when they are fleeing conflict—increase health risks during and after pregnancy. Domestic and gender-based violence, which spike during complex emergencies, also cause extreme harm to women and girls.

One of the greatest challenges facing the Women and Girls Comprehensive Center involves caring for pregnant adolescent girls and young women under 20 years old. Due to instability, displacement, and poverty, the rate of child marriage among Syrian refugees is more than four times what it was in pre-crisis Syria. For Syrian refugees in Jordan specifically, the rate has doubled in the last four years. Consequently, many of these girls have multiple children before they even reach adulthood.

Seeing girls 16 years old and younger, in pain and alone in the delivery room, was one of the most difficult experiences of my time in Zaatari. As adolescents, they are much more likely to experience risky pregnancies, as well as premature birth and children with low birth weight, than women over the age of 20. Most of these girls are not aware of the risks of early marriage and pregnancy, and often do not feel safe during delivery.

At the center, refugees can access various forms of family planning, including birth control pills or IUDs. The midwives and doctors also host informational sessions on reproductive health topics, such as healthy prenatal behaviors and the risks of child marriage. The center's oldest midwife, who everyone fondly refers to as "Mama," makes home visits around the camp to discuss family planning and women's health with families.

Despite the clinic's efforts to encourage postponing and spacing pregnancies, the family planning services offered are not always used. Some women and girls are pressured by their husbands and families to avoid contraceptives and continue producing children without adequate time for recovery in between births. One patient I met at the clinic was famous in Zaatari, the midwife told me in a hushed voice, for having 12 children, all by cesarean section, over the course of 12 years. Women and girls who had IUDs placed often came back soon after to get them removed, per their husbands' demands. Many Syrians feel obligated to have a lot of children to compensate for the family and friends killed in the war or to increase the likelihood that their children will survive.

### ***Cultural Sensitivity Saves Lives***

To save lives, we need to not only offer reproductive health services, but ensure they are culturally sensitive as well. Unlike other host countries, Jordan does not face large language or cultural barriers when providing care to Syrian refugees. Jordanians and Syrians speak similar Arabic and come from predominantly Muslim societies with shared values. This is an advantage for healthcare providers in Zaatari because they already have a good understanding of their patient population, which facilitates patient-provider trust and overall better quality care.

For example, when treating a woman who insisted on fasting for the religious holiday of Ramadan while pregnant, the Jordanian midwives were the best people for the job. As Muslim women themselves, they had a deep understanding of the woman's motivations and could explain the serious health consequences of her decisions while still respecting the significance of the religious practice. By practicing empathy and non-judgment, they were able to help this woman find a balance between health and faith without alienating the patient and discouraging her from seeking care in the future.

### ***New Beginnings***

Early in my internship, we transported a woman in premature labor to a bigger hospital in Mafraq, the next closest city. As we all tried to maintain our balance in the back of the bumpy ambulance, the baby's head began crowning. We pulled over to the side of the road and safely delivered her baby right there.

This is where life begins in Zaatari: in the back of dusty ambulances with missing windows, in delivery rooms with flies buzzing, in clinics where Jordanians and Syrians work together to protect women and children. Despite the enormous challenges facing these refugees and the healthcare workers seeking to help them, every day is the first day for another new life.

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## **Lawmaker who changed Jordan's rape law takes on child marriage**

VOA News (12.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2tINrUN> - A Jordanian lawmaker praised for her role in abolishing a law that let rapists off the hook if they married their victims has targeted child marriage as her next challenge.

Nearly 10,500 girls in Jordan were married before reaching their 18th birthdays in 2017, according to the most up-to-date figures from the U.N. children's agency UNICEF.

Girls in Jordan can be married from age 15 with a judge's approval, even though the legal marriageable age is 18. Lawmaker Wafa Bani Mustafa said that even raising it to 16 would reduce the numbers.

"This is not an exception. This is something that is happening every day, and too many young girls are getting married," the 39-year-old told the Reuters during a recent visit to Beirut.

"I am very optimistic child marriage will decrease if we change the age to 16. It doesn't matter if they are Jordanian or Syrian — we need to protect all girls."

A significant proportion are believed to be Syrian girls after an influx of refugees from Jordan's war-ravaged neighbor, with families marrying off daughters young to give them financial security and protection from sexual violence.

Hundreds of thousands of Syrians have fled their homeland since the war started in 2011, and there are now more than 670,000 registered Syrian refugees in Jordan, according to the United Nations.

"If you are not old enough to vote or drive a car — how can you open a house and build a family," said Bani Mustafa, one of 20 women in Jordan's 130-seat House of Representatives.

"We need to first change the culture by raising the age of exceptions to 16 — then, slowly, maybe this will be the first step to making it to 18 with no exceptions."

In 2017, Jordan's parliament voted to abolish a law that allowed rapists to escape punishment by marrying their victims after a years-long campaign led by Bani Mustafa.

Now she is seeking a change to a section of the law governing inheritance, arguing that it disadvantages women.

### **Women's rights**

As things stand, the children of a father who dies before his own parents will inherit the assets he would have received had he survived them, while the children of a mother who dies before her parents will not.

"If we push changing women's rights through law it will change the culture of the society to accept women's rights. The law helps change our society's mentality," she said.

Globally, 12 million girls marry before age 18 every year, according to Girls Not Brides, a coalition working to end child marriage.

In Jordan, Bani Mustafa said there were legal provisions to protect child brides — including a maximum 15-year age gap and the requirement that they be allowed to continue their education — but they were not being adhered to.

"I will keep fighting for Jordanian women — nothing will slow me down. We deserve better lives and equal rights to men. It is not easy, but we have to keep fighting," she said.

"I think women's rights are slowly changing in Jordan."

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## **'Honour killing': "I wasted my life in prison"**

By Rana Hussein

Sisterhood.com (08.01.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2sLSw8M> – Shrouq was in her late 20s when her brothers had attempted to kill her for reasons related to family honour. She had tried to shield her sister from their axes and knives.

Shrouq, now in her mid-50s, recalls as if it were yesterday the horrific attack against her and her sister, who had delivered a baby out of wedlock.

'I still remember to this day how my brothers asked my parents and other family members to leave the house, and then brought a trolley to our room that carried several knives and axes', she said.

The result of the vicious attack by her brothers was the death of her 18-year-old sister. Shrouq herself ended up in hospital under tight security.

Six months later, Shrouq was discharged from hospital, only to be promptly sent to the women's correctional facility under the orders of the administrative governor as a means of protecting her from a possible second attempt on her life by her family.

'I spent 15 years of my life behind prison walls so I could be protected from my own family. I cried every day. For me the days were bitter and dark', she said. 'I wasted most of my life in prison. I grew very old. I went into prison looking like a doll and I left looking like a very old lady', Shrouq added.

While sitting and thinking about every moment of the day inside prison right up to the date she was released, Shrouq wished that neither she, nor any other woman would face the same bleak destiny she and hundreds of other women suffered over the past years.

'My experience was so depressing and horrible – I wish every day that the top officials in the country would not send women to prison, no matter what they have done, because it deprives us of our freedom, and forces us to live in tough conditions and to mix with criminals', Shrouq added.

Shrouq's wishes turned into reality when in July 2018 the first guesthouse for women whose lives are in danger from their families for reasons related to family honour started to accept them. The state-of-the-art guesthouse called 'Amneh House' (which means 'safe' in Arabic), which operates as a guest and rehabilitation house for women whose lives are threatened for reasons related to family honour, was opened by former Minister of Social Development Hala Lattouf.

'This is an important day for Jordan. Human rights and the dignity of women have always been our priority. We decided to open this house because we believe it is the right thing to do', Lattouf told diplomats and representatives of local and international organisations and various government agencies on July 31 as she inaugurated the facility on behalf of Prime Minister Omar Razzaz.

The imprisonment of women to protect them from their families has become a relic of the past in Jordan, Lattouf stressed. Any new cases will be sent to the guesthouse by the relevant authorities and not to the Jweideh Correctional and Rehabilitation Centre (JCRC). This will be their new temporary home until their cases are resolved in the appropriate manner, Lattouf said.

Hundreds of women have been imprisoned at the JCRC for indefinite periods in the past without any charges, under what is termed 'protective custody', including some for periods that have exceeded ten years, during which they could not leave the facility without the administrative governor's permission, or unless a male guardian signed a guarantee undertaking that he would not harm them if they were released. Dozens of women who had been imprisoned at the JCRC for their own safety were moved gradually to the newly-established guesthouse to ensure a smooth and successful transition. 'Our main concern now is to ensure the safety and security of these women and to help them get accustomed to this new situation', said Raghda Azzeh, the director of the new guesthouse. Azzeh said that 'the basic idea is to provide more fair alternatives for women whose lives are in danger.'

Around 40 female employees affiliated with the ministry underwent special capacity-building training in May so as to be ready to deal with newcomers and to manage the facility.

The guesthouse will provide meals and other necessary items for the women and their children. It is also equipped with several private rooms for women with baby cradles, a play area for children, as well as rooms that include sewing machines, computers and hair salon equipment for residents to learn new professions.

The facility also includes several kitchens, balconies, a health clinic, sports equipment, a garden and special rooms to receive the cases. It will be protected by male and female plainclothes police officers. 'We will receive any cases that qualify in our guesthouse. We will never turn our backs on anyone, even if we have to bring extra beds to accommodate the additional cases', Azzeh stressed.

Most of the women in protective custody were detained due to involvement in cases of rape, adultery and being victimised through incestuous abuse, or for leaving the family's home without parental permission.

On some occasions, women were reportedly killed after being bailed out by family members, even after their relatives had signed guarantees to inflict no harm to them. Around 20 women are murdered annually for reasons related to 'cleansing family honour' in Jordan.

The executive director of the MLG, lawyer Eva Abu Halaweh, who has partnered with the ministry to train employees and help women who are in protective custody described the facility as a 'temporary safe house for women until their cases are solved in a peaceful manner.'

'We have been working with civil society, government entities, and activists since 2005 in order to find a decent and humane solution for these women rather than spending many years of their lives behind bars. We are pleased that this day has finally come with this guesthouse', Abu Halaweh said. 'The new guesthouse will bring new hope and better protection for these women since in the past they were imprisoned despite not committing any crime.'

Regulations for the guesthouse stipulate that women whose lives are in danger are entitled to be admitted to the guesthouse willingly at any time, even during holidays, after being referred by the administrative governor. The guesthouse will be obliged to receive women, document their cases under strict security and provide them with necessary legal, psychological, social, medical and recreational services. The guesthouse can also receive children accompanying their mothers who are six years old or younger.

The services will be terminated in the event that women do not wish to stay, threaten other women residing in the guesthouse, or if the problem of a given guest is resolved and there is sufficient evidence that her life is no longer in danger.

Shrouq said, 'During my 15 years in prison I was always dreaming of smelling the soil and planting trees and roses. I am glad that I know that no other woman in Jordan will ever be deprived of these small but important desires. Thanks to the new guesthouse that has recently opened we now know for sure that women in Jordan will no longer be imprisoned to protect them from their families... and that there is a better place for them to start over.'

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## **Jordan on the brink of repealing law allowing rapists to marry their victims to escape punishment**

***Royal committee has recommended archaic legislation contravening women's human rights is abolished by parliament***

By Bethan McKernan

The Independent (29.03.2017) - <http://ind.pn/2nMVgBi> - Women in Jordan are holding their breath in the hopes that King Abdullah II will repeal a law that allows rapists to walk free as long as they marry the survivor.

A royal judiciary committee recently recommended that Article 308 of Jordan's penal code - which shields rape, statutory rape and kidnap perpetrators from prosecution if they marry their victims- be abolished by the King, who heads both Jordan's judiciary and parliament.

The decision could come at any time.

Jordanian law currently says that rape is punishable by up to seven years in prison or capital punishment if the victim is aged 15 or under. The outdated statute, however, creates a loophole which suspends any criminal prosecution if the two people involved get married for a minimum of three years.

According to figures from Jordan's ministry of justice, 159 rapists avoided punishment by marrying their victims between 2010 - 2013, and 300 rapes were recorded annually on average during the same period - although activists point out the true figure is likely to be chronically underreported in a country where extramarital sex is taboo.

In extreme cases, women in Jordan who report rape can be murdered in so-called 'honour killings'.

"It's 2017. How can a rapist be allowed to go free and at the same time make a girl or a woman's life living hell?" Suad Abu-Dayyeh, feminist campaign group Equality Now's Middle East and North Africa Consultant said over the phone from Amman.

Equality Now has worked with Noor - a pseudonym - who at the age of 20 became pregnant after being drugged and raped by her employer, a man in his 50s.

"I couldn't tell my family what had happened. I cried and cried not knowing what to do... He tried to make me calm by saying I will marry you and he promised to go and ask for my hand. In order to make me more confident, he brought a piece of paper and we both signed on as a marriage contract," she said.

While Noor was unwilling to marry her rapist, on realising she was pregnant she felt like she had no choice.

"With all the hatred I have in my heart, my family forced me to marry him so as to save the 'family's honour,'" she said.

"I married him and I moved to live with him with all the negative memories of rape and deception. I thought that my life with my baby might make me happy, but I was very

wrong; my situation deteriorated. My only hope from marrying him was to make my baby safe.”

Noor, with legal counsel, has since filed for divorce from her rapist, but faces a battle in court to ensure the man legally recognises and accepts custody of their child.

“When a man is allowed to marry his victim, the circle of abuse can continue with further emotional trauma, attacks and neglect,” Ms Abu-Dayyeh said.

“She will be more exposed to domestic violence and sexual assaults, and is likely to have restricted movement and a lack of power in decision making.

“Meanwhile, the man is rewarded rather than punished for his actions.”

Similar marriage clauses are present in the law regarding sexual consent in many modern Muslim states. They are usually hangovers from interpretations of Sharia, or religious law.

In recent years such loopholes have come under under intensified scrutiny, with protests aimed at getting the law changed in several countries across the Middle East - although Turkey abandoned attempts last year to pass a law that would have allowed men who had sex with underage children to be pardoned if they married the victim after the proposed legislation caused outrage both within the country and internationally.

Rape and sexual abuse affect nearly one billion women and girls over their lifetimes, UN data says.

Equality Now is hopeful that a repeal in Jordan will be another “positive example” for women’s rights in the region, Ms Abu-Dayyeh said.

In recent years, Morocco, Egypt and Ethiopia have closed similar legislative loopholes, and changes to the law are pending in both Lebanon and Bahrain.

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## **Calls for action as 'honour' killings in Jordan show sharp increase**

***As part of 16-day campaign against gender violence, activists demand stronger penalties for 'honour' crimes and an end to imprisonment of at-risk women***

By Olivia Cuthbert

The Guardian (09.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2gHNJkX> - On 8 October, an 18-year-old man from the Jordanian city of Madaba was charged with killing his sister as she slept after allegedly finding her with a mobile phone the family didn't know about. Five days later, two brothers were charged with murdering their sisters aged 27 and 34 at a farm on the outskirts of Jordan's capital, Amman.

The victims were among five women killed during one week in Jordan for reasons related to family “honour”. Thirty-eight women have been victims of “honour” killings this year.

The country typically reports between 15 and 20 such crimes a year, according to Human Rights Watch.

Women's rights activists have used the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, which ends on Saturday, to call for stronger penalties against the perpetrators of "honour" crimes and to end the practice of imprisoning women at risk of being killed for their own protection.

In Jordan, women considered to be at risk can be detained indefinitely under the country's 1954 Crime Prevention Law. Some spend years in prison before being granted release, which usually requires signed assurances from their families that they will not be harmed.

"It's actually a violation of the constitution because freedom of movement is a constitutional right," said Hadeel Abdul Aziz, executive director at the Justice Centre for Legal Aid in Jordan.

A 2014 report by Dignity, the Danish Institute Against Torture, on Conditions for Women in Detention in Jordan described how some women have resorted to "extreme and degrading measures, such as marrying men who have raped them in order to be released".

"These are the saddest stories of all," said Asma Khader, executive director of the Sisterhood Is Global Institute's (Sigi) Jordan chapter, which provides legal, financial and psychosocial support to women in administrative detention. "Instead of protecting and supporting her, she is threatened [by relatives] as a person who has brought shame on the family and, in some cases, forced to marry her attacker."

For many women in protective custody, marriage is the only route to release. Asheel, 30, spent seven months in detention after fleeing violent abuse at home. "At first being in prison seemed better than the beatings, but I was always afraid and there was nothing there to distract me from the worry. My options were to stay in prison or be married, so I preferred to marry. A lot of other girls did the same."

Asheel's husband is poor and they have little to live on, but he treats her and their children well. "I am happy now but I want all this to be deleted from my memory. I don't wish any woman to face what has happened to me in my life."

Sigi regularly visits women in protective custody at the Juweida women's correctional and rehabilitation centre, to try to broker their release. This involves working with government bodies and families.

If the risk is from the father or brother, Sigi approaches family members who can influence them and prevent any attack.

"Unfortunately, we are not a forgiving society. For men particularly, the sense of shame lingers," said Rana Sundos, programme and activities manager at Sigi. She added that "honour" crimes have sometimes been committed many years after a woman's release. She recalls the sad outcome of a case involving a teenage girl who was placed in protective custody after the family threatened to kill her. She had become pregnant following an alleged assault.

"While she was in prison, the family came to the governor and signed a letter promising not to kill her, and she was released into their care. Within a few days, the brother had carried out the crime." He bowed to pressure from relatives, said Sundos. "He told us:

inside I loved my sister, she was the youngest, the fruit of our family. I didn't want to kill her, but they said if you want to be a man, you must."

A petition launched by the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) last month to "stop murder crimes committed against women and girls" outlined the need for legal reform. It highlighted articles 340 and 98 of the penal code, which grant judges discretion to reduce sentences for the perpetrators of "honour" crimes in mitigating circumstances – including adultery and crimes committed in a fit of anger. The petition also called for an end to the detention of women for protective purposes.

"The presence of these articles contributes to the continuation of social attitudes that view the body of women as a vessel for family honour," said Salma Nims, the JNCW's secretary general.

Last week the country's Iftaa' Department, which is responsible for religious decrees, issued a fatwa for the first time, prohibiting the murder of women in the name of "honour".

The government has also announced plans to open a shelter in which women can stay for protection, rather than go to jail. "We realise that these women deserve a better place to stay in than prison, and that is why we are opening a shelter for them," Mohammad Ensour, director of the human rights and family affairs department at the justice ministry told the Jordan Times.

"We welcome this development, but the most important thing is to keep the location secret," said Khader. While lives have been saved and many women released as a result of Sigi's efforts, these women, she said, "are only partly free, because they can never walk outside without the fear that someone who knows them will be in the street".

*\* Names have been changed to protect identities*

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