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## **Broken promises on women's rights**

***UN review should focus on increased protection against violence, bias.***

HRW (04.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3nfm7BH> - Lebanese authorities are falling short of their international legal obligations to protect women and girls from violence and end discrimination against them, Human Rights Watch said today.

Human Rights Watch has [submitted a report](#) to the United Nations Committee reviewing Lebanon's compliance with the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which is tentatively scheduled for June 2021. The country has not made progress to carry out a number of recommendations from its

previous review in 2015, including not creating a unified personal status code that would guarantee equal treatment for all citizens and amending the discriminatory nationality law to ensure that Lebanese women married to non-Lebanese men can pass on their citizenship to their children.

“Another five years have passed, and Lebanon has done little to end discrimination against women and girls under its international obligations,” said Aya Majzoub, Lebanon researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Lebanon’s authorities should show that they are serious about women’s rights by coming through on long-overdue reforms before they have to answer to the United Nations again for their failures.”

Lebanon has not taken any steps to issue an optional civil code or to reform its 15 religion-based personal status laws and the religious courts that apply them. These courts discriminate against women across the religious spectrum and do not guarantee their basic rights, especially in matters such as divorce, property rights, and responsibility for children after divorce.

The authorities have also not reformed the nationality law, which prohibits Lebanese women married to foreigners from passing citizenship to their spouses and children, while men who marry foreign nationals can pass on their citizenship. This prohibition affects almost every aspect of the children’s and spouses’ lives, including legal residency and access to work, education, social services, and health care. It leaves some children at risk of statelessness.

Legal protections from domestic violence, sexual assault, and harassment remain inadequate. In August 2017, Lebanon repealed article 522 of the penal code, which allowed rapists to escape punishment by marrying their victims, but left a loophole with regard to offenses relating to sex with children aged 15 to 17, and sex with virgin girls, with promises of marriage.

The current domestic violence law defines domestic violence narrowly and fails to specifically criminalize marital rape. Members of parliament have introduced multiple draft laws since 2017 on sexual harassment, but parliament has yet to take any action. A lack of coordination in the government’s response to sex trafficking continues to put women and girls – especially Syrians living in Lebanon – at risk.

Human Rights Watch has documented how women and girls, especially trans women, sex workers, refugees, and asylum seekers, have experienced systemic violence from Lebanese authorities, particularly in detention centers. Trans women have described being placed in men’s cells, being denied food and water, and being coerced to confess. Allegations of sexual violence, including rape, against women in custody are common. As an example, Loyal al-Kayaje was arrested on September 21, 2015 for “harming the military’s reputation” after she alleged being raped and tortured by two soldiers in military custody in 2013.

Lebanon has consistently failed to properly investigate, prosecute, and punish those responsible for torture. In 2016, parliament passed legislation creating a national body, the National Preventive Mechanism Against Torture, to monitor and investigate the use of torture, and in 2017 it adopted a new anti-torture law. The body’s five members were named on March 7, 2019, but the government has still not allocated its funding.

Lebanon’s economic crisis, compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic and the port explosion in Beirut on August 4, 2020, has made life worse for marginalized populations, not least for migrant domestic workers, the majority of them women from African and Asian countries. Many have reported increased incidents of abuse by their employers during the lockdown, and at least seven have taken their own lives since March. Migrant domestic

workers remain excluded from Lebanon's labor law protections provided to other workers, and their legal status remains tied to their employer under the kafala (visa sponsorship) system.

On October 14, 2020, Lebanon's State Shura Council, the country's top administrative court, delivered a sharp blow to migrant domestic workers' rights when it struck down a new standard unified contract adopted by the Labor Ministry on September 4. The new contract introduced new protections for migrant domestic workers, including vital safeguards against forced labor, and would have been an important first step towards abolishing the abusive kafala system.

"For the past year, women from all walks of life have taken to the streets to demand equality and an end to all forms of discrimination," Majzoub said. "While the authorities have taken some steps, they need to heed calls for systemic change for equality."

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## **UNFPA helps maintain dignity of women and girls affected by Beirut port blast**

UNFPA Arab States (06.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/33ps4nc> - A month after the Beirut Port explosion, essential needs of affected women and girls have changed. Initially, the top priority concerns were safe access to healthcare, food and shelter. Now that many have resettled in their homes or in temporary shelters, their worries have shifted to their economic situations and the challenges in accessing medical services and acquiring medicines and other health supplies, including hygiene products.

An estimated 150,000 women and girls have been displaced as a result of the 4 August explosion, 81,000 of whom are women of reproductive age, including 48,000 adolescents. In order to respond to their critical hygiene needs, UNFPA is working with 12 partners on the ground to distribute prepackaged and ready to use dignity kits. The kits, which include sanitary pads, soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste and towels, are intended to facilitate the mobility of women and girls, to help them maintain their personal hygiene and, most importantly, their dignity.

"Just like I would want my girls to be fed, I would also want them to have these basic hygienic needs," said Hayat Merhi, a mother of three adolescent girls.

### ***Importance of sanitary material***

The lack of hygiene items does not solely impact women and girls' dignity, but also their health, mobility, community involvement, family functioning, and security as well as increasing likelihood of period poverty. These supplies restore women's confidence and provide them with the basic products to overcome these issues.

Rima Al Hussayni, director of Al Mithaq Association, has been canvassing impacted areas to distribute the kits door-to-door. "The look on the faces of young women and girls is so gratifying, no picture can capture that. It's a small caring gift to say 'hamdallah al salameh' [Thank God for your safety]," says Rima. "Bringing light into their broken homes and telling women and girls that their dignity, safety and personal needs matter to the world in these difficult times is the least we can do."

Many people in Lebanon have lost their jobs in the last few months as a result of the country's unprecedented economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, which has drastically curtailed purchasing capacity across the country. "There was a time when my

daughters were using a piece of cloth instead of pads," said Lina Mroueh, a mother of three adolescent girls.

### ***Raise awareness through distribution***

The distribution of dignity kits also serves as an important opportunity to listen to women and girls' primary concerns and raise awareness about the importance of sexual and reproductive health and rights, including for women and girls with disabilities.

"These products can be difficult to afford sometimes, and we believe that everyone has the right to feel fresh, clean, and comfortable," said Gabby Fraidy, of The Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Woman. "We trained our staff to demonstrate how to use and maintain the items in the kit. We had 11 year old girls who came to us, and our role was to share information about menstruation and explain to them that it is a natural and a biological process that occurs, and that it's a part of growing up," she added.

Ensuring that women and girls with disabilities receive this crucial support is equally as important. We estimate that approximately 12,000 disabled persons have been affected by the blast. Dignity kits are included in the pressing aid services being distributed to women and girls with disabilities by Akkarouna and Al Makassed associations in partnership with UNFPA.

"It is very important to remember that dignity kits are helpful to women and girls, not only for the menstrual hygiene products, soaps and other items, but also as a way to reach women and girls with key messages about sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse services and information", said Felicia Jones, UNFPA's humanitarian coordinator. "This becomes even more critical when we are reaching out to the most vulnerable among us, including women and girls living with disabilities who often do not have access to the SRH or GBV services and information that they need to live healthy lives with dignity".

Together, with our partners and communities, we are creating a world with dignity, health and opportunity for all.

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## **The Syrian women and girls sold into sexual slavery in Lebanon**

***Syria's refugee crisis has shone a light on sex trafficking in Lebanon, where victims are often treated as criminals.***

By Daniela Sala

Al Jazeera (11.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2uLjXUU> - "How do I know most of the women working as prostitutes are controlled?" asked Paul, a volunteer for the Jesuits, a religious order of the Roman Catholic Church, before answering his own question. "[Because] the last time I tried to help one of them get in touch with an NGO, I got beaten and threatened by her captors."

Everyone in Lebanon's "sex trade" seems to be involved in trafficking in one way or another: Sources at both the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the General Directorate of General Security (GS) in Beirut told Al Jazeera that even pimps working further down the chain of command ultimately report to a bigger network of organised traffickers.

Paul has learned the ins-and-outs of Lebanon's trafficking world over the years. Beirut, the Lebanese capital, and Jounieh, a coastal town about 10km (6.2 miles) north of it, are where most victims of sex trafficking end up in Lebanon.

A GS officer estimated that there are at least 800 women and girls who have been forced into prostitution in these areas. But the numbers are hard to verify because of the hidden nature of the problem.

While the ISF formally identified 29 victims - 10 of whom were Lebanese and 13 Syrian - of sex trafficking in 2017, the most recent year for which there is data, other sources, including officers at the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and NGOs, put the number in the thousands.

### ***The law***

The plight of these women is compounded by the way the law is applied in Lebanon. Article 523 of the Lebanese Penal Code criminalises "any person who practices secret prostitution or facilitates it". The punishment is a prison sentence of anything from a month to a year.

It is not illegal to work as a licensed prostitute but seeing as the government has not issued any such licences since the 1970s, those working as prostitutes are vulnerable to being arrested and punished.

Beirut is no stranger to the sex industry. Prostitution was legalised in Lebanon after World War I when the government decided that concentrating prostitutes in one area - Mutanabbi Street, which became Beirut's downtown red-light district before it was destroyed in the Civil War - would protect Lebanese women from French and Senegalese soldiers.

According to the Lebanese Prostitution Law of 1931, brothels were divided into two groups: public brothels and escort houses. The law also set conditions for those working outside the brothels, dividing them into groups of workers; cafe girls, mistresses and "artistes".

After Lebanon's Civil War, which lasted from 1975 to 1990, secret - meaning unlicensed - prostitution became a crime.

But hundreds of women enter Lebanon each year, particularly from Eastern Europe and Morocco, with an "artiste" visa, to work as dancers in clubs. "Artiste" is widely understood to be a euphemism for "prostitute".

### ***Life on the streets***

It is about 8pm on a Saturday, close to the Daoura intersection near Bourj Hammoud in Beirut's Armenian district, on a crowded road full of busy shops and cafes. From his car, Paul has just spotted a woman leaning towards a black SUV. She and the driver talk for a few minutes. Eventually, she gets in the car. The transaction is quick, and people passing by do not even seem to notice.

"They found a deal," explains Paul's wife, Ray. The couple, both in their 40s, have been volunteering for the church for years. Paul first got involved 20 years ago when he discovered that one of his neighbours was being forced into prostitution. He says he considered it his "Christian mission" to help. Ray decided to join him soon after they met in 2010.

Paul and Ray are Armenian-Lebanese and asked that their real names be withheld because of the sensitivity of their work. For the past 10 years, they have distributed food and

medicine once a week to "people in need", the couple's term for the homeless, drug addicts, beggars and women exploited into prostitution in Beirut.

As they drive around Doura, in the eastern suburbs of Beirut, the main road is still crowded. Two policemen are patrolling the area. But right around the corner, Ray spots another woman sitting in a car with a man. They have seen her here before, waiting on the street corner.

"We meet women who are Lebanese, East Africans and, in recent years, a lot of Syrians, of course," says Paul. "In my experience, they all want to leave the job, but the only ones I have seen leaving a trafficker - it was because they were handed to another [trafficker]."

### ***The Chez Maurice case***

It came as no great shock to Paul when, in 2016, news broke that 75 Syrian women had been trafficked and held captive in a Jounieh brothel for years.

What became known as the "Chez Maurice case", after the brothel in which they were held, only came to light because four women managed to escape.

Legal Agenda, a Lebanese NGO that collected several testimonies from survivors of the Chez Maurice brothel, described the place as a "torture chamber".

"I didn't think there was a state [law and order] in Lebanon," one of the trafficked women told Legal Agenda. "[One of the traffickers] told me that he bought the state with his money. I believed him the moment I was detained in the General Security building for 24 hours and then released scot-free."

Despite the media uproar surrounding the case, the owner of the brothel, a Lebanese businessman, was soon released on bail. Hearings into the case have been postponed multiple times and, three years on, the trial is only just about to begin.

### ***'No trust in the system'***

In 2011, the US State Department had placed Lebanon on its tier 2 watchlist of countries not fully complying with standards to combat human trafficking. Following pressure from civil groups such as Legal Agenda, Lebanon passed a new anti-trafficking law.

Since then, however, the Syrian crisis has precipitated a mass influx into Lebanon. Many of the refugees are women and children who have already suffered trauma and may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

Al Jazeera heard accounts of several scenarios in which Syrian women and children ended up in the hands of traffickers. One involved marriages, either in Syria or Lebanon, where the "husband" later revealed himself to be a trafficker. Another involved groups of women and children being trafficked across the border. There are also cases of women and girls being forcibly recruited within refugee camps or even sold by their families to traffickers.

However they arrived in Lebanon, human rights groups and aid workers say not enough is being done to protect them. Ghada Jabbour, head of the anti-trafficking unit at NGO Kafa ("enough" in Arabic), which focuses on gender-based violence, explains: "There is no trust in the system. Victims do not ask for help and do not report. And, at the same time, there is no outreach programme for the victims."

### ***When the numbers do not add up***

According to Lebanon's ISF, the number of identified victims of trafficking - including those forced into begging, labour exploitation and prostitution - has remained steadily low: 19 in 2015, 87 in 2016 (mainly the Chez Maurice survivors) and 54 in 2017. Most were Syrian.

However, Dima Haddad, programme officer at the IOM, says the official statistics do not come close to conveying the magnitude of the problem.

From her office at the IOM headquarters in Beirut, she coordinates a regional taskforce to counter human trafficking in Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Jordan - the countries most affected by the Syrian refugee crisis. Sitting at her desk, surrounded by charts showing the dozens of tasks her team has planned for the next few months, she says: "Wherever there is a crisis, there is human trafficking.

"Vulnerability is increasing, hence trafficking is increasing."

Asked whether there are gaps in the system for identifying the victims, Haddad answers immediately. "Absolutely. If I have to be more diplomatic, I would say there is a lot of work to do. It is urgent, as we consider anti-trafficking a life-saving intervention."

There are also great obstacles to women being able to tell their stories. Aside from the shame and stigma that prevent victims from coming forward, it can also be difficult to access them. Approaching women on the street is dangerous - as Paul has found over the years - as they are watched by their traffickers.

In researching this feature, Al Jazeera tried to speak to survivors through NGOs, local journalists and local refugee camp leaders. However, those who were prepared to speak asked for money in exchange, requests that appeared to come from husbands and other relatives. Permission to access Baabda female prison - where many of the women arrested for prostitution are held - was not granted.

### ***Falling through the cracks***

During 2017, the ISF adopted a policy of trying to root out all cases involving potential trafficking victims through its Human Rights Unit. As of 2018, at least 108 training sessions had been given to the 37 law enforcement agents attached to the unit to help them identify and deal with suspected trafficking cases. But, according to Alef, a human rights watchdog based in Beirut, and other organisations, these training sessions are rarely given to those on the front lines and are, therefore, missing their target.

Ashraf Rifi, who served as minister of justice between 2014 and 2016, and who was ISF director-general from 2005 to 2013, says it could take 10 to 15 years before there are significant changes in how cases of human, and specifically sex, trafficking are identified and combatted.

"It is a cultural problem," he explains in his office, referring to the low numbers of women - and particularly Syrian women - identified as victims of trafficking. "It's not unusual, because of stigma and discrimination, that Syrian women are considered 'just' prostitutes."

The ISF is also responsible for investigations into exploitation networks. And yet, Rifi adds, one of the main challenges is the "high level of corruption", including within the ISF itself.

In August 2018, the head of the ISF's Human Trafficking and Moral Protection Bureau, Johnny Haddad, was arrested on charges of corruption in connection with a prostitution ring. To date, he is still under investigation by the ISF's ethics committee, meaning that all information related to the case is classified.

Meanwhile, hundreds of women continue to fall through the cracks - treated like criminals instead of victims.

In 2016, 304 women were arrested on charges of prostitution, according to the ISF's data. More than half of them were Syrian. All were placed in prison.

The only support available to these women after they are released comes from charities. Dar Al Amal, a local NGO, helps women recuperate in its sparse offices in Sin el Fil, in the eastern suburbs of Beirut.

Here, the volunteers provide emotional and practical support to women who were forced into prostitution, trying to address their legal, medical and psychological needs.

Ghinwa Younes, a social worker who regularly visits the Baabda women's prison, says: "All the women I met want to quit this life. Most of them are in fact trafficking victims - but ISF did not understand they were victims. As soon as they leave the prison, they rarely get any kind of support and they are immediately back in the network of their exploiters."

When Al Jazeera spoke to Joseph Mousallem, a spokesman for the ISF, he acknowledged that the difference between prostitution and trafficking is not well understood by police officers. "But it is a cultural issue involving the whole of society, not only the security forces," he says.

"Countering trafficking is a priority, but we do have thousands of priorities: the whole system is under pressure. We do our best, but not have the means or the resources to track the victims."

### ***'Of course they are victims'***

Lawyer Hasna Abdulreda meets dozens of these women during detention visits. For 10 years, she has provided legal support to women in jail, and she is currently the head of the legal department at the Lebanese Centre for Human Rights, a local NGO.

"In the past five years, every month at least two or three [women] reach out to me, after being arrested as prostitutes," she says. "Most of them are Syrians and, of course, they are victims of trafficking."

But there is little she can do.

"The trials are very fast and if the judge is given any reason to think that the woman is consenting to prostitution (for example because she keeps a share of the money), then he will just send her to prison without any further investigation," Abdulreda explains.

This is despite the fact that both the UN Convention on Human Trafficking and Lebanese law state that the victim's consent should be considered irrelevant.

"The only thing I can do is to give [detained women] my phone number and ask them to call me once they leave so that I can refer them to a shelter or an NGO. In prison, they do not have a phone, so I can't contact them once they are released," Abdulreda adds.

Despite many women asking for help, in 10 years nobody has called back.

For Syrian women, it is more complicated. Because they are foreigners, they are held by the GS for up to two days after being released from Baabda, Abdulreda says.

"I'm not allowed to access their files. I just lose every contact with them."

### **'Double standard'**

Even when trafficking cases go to court, the odds appear stacked against victims of sex trafficking.

Legal Agenda analysed the 34 trafficking cases that made it to court in Lebanon between 2012 and 2017. According to lawyer Ghida Frangieh, who put that report together: "There is a clear double standard in the judges' attitude towards prostitution and begging.

"While in all cases involving forced begging, judges were quite fast in ruling that it was a trafficking case, when it comes to prostitution, they were digging deeper into the means of exploitation, asking for proof that the woman was actually forced into it. In certain cases they ruled that the woman was not to be considered a victim of trafficking as she consented, at least to some extent."

Frangieh says that as well as reflecting a general prejudice against women in prostitution, this view has also been influenced by the Chez Maurice case.

"[Chez Maurice] became the victim paradigm. If you do not fit into this stereotype, you are hardly considered as a victim of trafficking," she explains.

But this is not how trafficking works.

According to a former senior GS officer, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the media, sex trafficking generally happens in one of two ways: through highly organised rings operating in brothels (such as Chez Maurice) or through so-called "free agents".

But, despite their name, free agents still operate under the protection and control of a trafficker. "There is no prostitution that is not linked to the main traffickers," the former officer says.

### **'Long-term solutions'**

"Alone, we cannot do much," says Jabbour from Kafa.

Along with the Catholic NGO network Caritas, Kafa runs a shelter for female survivors of violence, mainly domestic workers who have been abused by their employers. The ISF occasionally refers trafficking victims to them.

But their resources are limited: Since 2015, Kafa has been able to offer protection to approximately 100 women, 20 of whom (all Syrians) were sex-trafficking survivors.

"These shelters are just a starting point," says Jabbour. "What we need are long-term solutions."

Some of these women were relocated overseas, some got married, but others, without a proper support mechanism, simply went back into prostitution - either forced or out of desperation.

"Countering trafficking and identifying victims is something that cannot be done by NGOs. It is a state's responsibility," says George Ghali, director of Alef.

According to Ghali, the problem is not the law but rather in the implementation of the law. "Where are the investigations? We are talking about organised crime. This is not something you can expect NGOs to deal with."

Back in Doura, Paul and Ray keep providing basic help to people in need. They do not have success stories to share.

Paul says he has not received any further threats from the traffickers. "[Why? Because] we make no change in the situation. And even if a girl manages to quit, they would have another one."

He admits that lately, he has considered stopping his volunteer work because of the emotional toll it has taken.

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## **Refugee girls in Beirut 'face sexual violence, forced marriage'**

***More than half the refugee girls living in Lebanon's capital face sexual violence and harassment regularly, report says.***

Al Jazeera (18.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2ZuKqzt> - More than half of the girls living as refugees in Beirut have reported that they face sexual violence and sexual harassment with alarming regularity, new research by Plan International, a development and humanitarian organisation, has revealed.

Based on surveys of 400 girls aged between 10 and 19, the study on Tuesday described the multiple threats of abuse girls faced growing up in Lebanon's capital city.

Close to 70 percent of those surveyed reported feeling unsafe if they travelled around the city alone during the day, while nearly 90 percent said they feared for their safety at night.

Girls spoke of being harassed or chased by men and boys, while others expressed concern about being kidnapped or raped.

"We're too afraid [to go out alone]. There are always drunk men who harass us and even the ones who aren't drunk harass us," an 18-year-old Syrian girl from Burj al-Barajneh, in the Beirut suburbs, told the researchers.

Ten percent of girls surveyed reported being married or engaged - a practice becoming increasingly common, according to Plan International.

"Some girls, their parents oblige them to leave school to get married. My friends all got married and now they have kids," a 13-year-old Syrian girl in Burj al-Barajneh said.

The report, launched in the run-up to World Refugee Day on June 20, called on governments, the United Nations and civil society actors in Lebanon to take action to support refugee girls.

"Adolescent girls rarely get their voices heard, and during humanitarian crises, this neglect only becomes exacerbated," Colin Lee, Plan International's regional programme director for the Middle East, said.

"Child marriage is on the rise because parents are so fearful for their daughters' safety. Few girls are able to go to school for the same reason, and far too many report desperate

feelings of isolation because of the restrictions placed on their freedom of movement by their parents."

### **Plummeting school attendance**

Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees per capita in the world, which includes a recent influx of 1.5 million fleeing the Syrian war, as well as Palestinian families who have been in the country since 1948.

In April 2019, the UN's refugee agency (UNHCR) estimated that in Beirut alone there were 239,005 registered refugees - just under 11 percent of the total population.

Despite the negative environment, the report noted that many refugee girls remain optimistic and ambitious about their future.

"The importance girls placed on getting an education is obvious," Lee said. "Many girls expressed a desire to become a lawyer, a doctor, or an engineer.

"But what was even more striking was the fact that they didn't just believe that education would benefit them directly. They also saw it as a way to support and enhance the resilience of their community and broader society as a whole."

However, school attendance among girls aged 14 or older plummeted, according to the report.

Eighty percent of 10 to 14-year-olds regularly attend school, compared with just 39 percent of 15 to 19-year-olds.

"It is clear from these findings that while teenage girls have unique vulnerabilities, they also have huge potential. As humanitarian actors, it is not only our duty to provide programmes that protect adolescent girls, but also to make it possible for them to have the same opportunities as girls in other parts of the world whose lives have not been disrupted by war," Lee said.

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## **Women empowerment stories: Ibtesam**

By Madison White, volunteer with SB OverSeas in Lebanon

*Thread of Hope is a campaign in order to raise funds for new sewing machines for refugee women in Lebanon where a sewing machine equals an opportunity to not only earn a source of income, but to build a community. Read more about SB OverSeas' campaign here.*

SB OverSeas - Ibtesam (إبتسام) means smile in Arabic. Befittingly, it is the name of a student enrolled in the SB OverSeas Bukra Ahla Center in Beirut. She not only has the brightest smile, but also the brightest mind.

Ibtesam, 36, was born and raised in Syria. She comes from a family of six brothers and four sisters. She, the youngest of the girls, was unable to finish her studies past the age of 12 because of the cost to her family. Ibtesam married at the age of 21, and is now a

mother to six children. At the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, when the tensions of war became too great a threat to their safety, Ibtesam, her husband, and her children sought refuge by relocating to Lebanon.

Relocation came with its own set of problems, as Ibtesam and her husband found it quite difficult to find consistent work. Job security was difficult to guarantee, not only because of their refugee status, but also because they spoke neither English nor French. Eventually her husband found varying forms of work to support the family, but Ibtesam was largely relegated to her home- as the main caretaker of her children and their home.

About a year ago, a friend of Ibtesam mentioned a school in the Shatila area that not only offered English classes to children, but to adult women as well. Ibtesam immediately sought out this opportunity, and joined us here at the SB Overseas Center, as soon as there was space available.

My first encounter with Ibtesam was on my first day of teaching at the Bukra Ahla. She was the first of the students to arrive in class and sat patiently, with her four year old son seated on her lap, as we waited for the other women to arrive for class. As we sat, in a comfortable silence, I saw her reach into her purse and pull out a sweet treat for her son. She then reached back into her purse and pulled one out for me. Despite my protestation, Ibtesam graciously gave me the treat as if I were no different or older than her own child. This first encounter, is a just a glimpse into the larger picture of who Ibtesam is, and how quick she is to give whatever she has to those around her.

Ibtesam is one of the most active students in the classroom. She does not hesitate in the slightest to ask me questions, to ask me to slow down, to translate for the other women, and ask for extra work. Time and again after class she hands me little scraps of paper with stories scribbled on them, or sentences that she wants tailored so that she might improve. In my first few weeks, I attributed this eagerness to just keenness in the classroom. But what I was missing the larger picture of who Ibtesam was, like when she first gave me that candy treat.

A few weeks ago it came to the attention of SB that Ibtesam was doing something quite special with the lessons she was learning in our centre. Ibtesam was so urgent in her desire to master the English language, not just because she was looking to better her situation with this skill, but more importantly she wants to give it away. To her home of six children, she brings back lessons and instructs her children in a manner similar to the way she was taught in class. The lesson range from the sounds of the letters in the English alphabet, new vocabulary, speaking, reading, and writing. These in-home lessons have gone on to grow beyond her own family as she now teaches an additional 8 children from her housing complex.

Bukra Ahla is the name of the SB schooling centres in Beirut. Bukra Ahla, (بکرا اھلی) translated into English means, A Better Tomorrow. Ibtesam could not be a better embodiment of the name and the mission of this school. The education being given to our students is not limited to the four walls of our centre. The lessons taught in the center, because of students like Ibtesam, have reach, and have depth; reach and depth that bring us one step closer to a better tomorrow. Ibtesam's urgency and eagerness to share, means that one more student is being empowered by education. Who is to say where that child may go, or with whom that child may share their newfound knowledge.

It goes without saying that SB Overseas mission is an important one in the effort to educate and empower those that the world has cast aside in so many ways. More to the point, however, what we are doing here is working. The education being given to our students is not limited to the four walls of our centre. It is reaching out into the greater community in ways that a teacher could only hope for. With students like Ibtesam at the helm, the resilience and vision, of those we are helping is boundless. It is such a privilege to work in class with each of our students, and to be a part of something so much bigger than I, personally, could have ever envisioned.

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## **Women empowerment stories: Mervat**

SB OverSeas - Mervat is one of the teachers at SB OverSeas, an organisation working to provide education and empowerment programs to refugees in Lebanon. She was also married at a young age, deprived of a childhood. In this story, you will learn about this woman who at the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, found herself in Lebanon where she sought means to find economic independence by learning how to sew leading her to teach classes at SB OverSeas' centres and this platform provided her with a means to help empower other women in her situation.

Mervat was married at the mere age of fourteen. Despite protestations, she found herself married against her will due to her grandfather's wishes. This marriage, along with many other early marriages, signaled an end to her education. Her own dreams were replaced by a child and a life of marriage. Mervat had always enjoyed working with her hands to create beautiful products but was restricted by the responsibilities she bore and was unable to pursue this dream.

Following the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, she found herself, along with her husband and children seeking refuge in Lebanon. In Beirut, she searched for a way to make a meagre earning by learning how to sew. Ignoring the comments of her family, she started classes with SB OverSeas in 2014. Her warm and welcoming personality, along with her natural talent for creating products meant she was a born teacher. Mervat started leading classes in our centre in Bukhra Ahla. With this, she was able to help other women in similar situations to create products that they could sell in local shops so they could gain a sense of financial independence.

Through this, she found a way to empower herself and use her experiences to empower other women. By teaching classes, she had a platform to talk to many of the young girls about her own experience of being married young. She hopes that she will be able to help those girls who are already married to not feel so alone by always being there to lend a listening ear, and those who are not married, to equip them with the tools to reject marriage.

*Read here about SB OverSeas' empowerment programs for refugee women in Lebanon.*

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## **Life at thirteen years old – a future stolen**



*Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon*

SB OverSeas (19.09.2018) - Amara was the girl in the front row of every class, hand always raised begging to answer the teacher's question. She had little inside jokes with her teachers in both English and in Arabic. The head of the organization saw in her a chance to show to the world how hard they had been working to make a difference. Amara was the 'difference' - the change SB OverSeas sought to make in the community. At 13 years old, she was intelligent, respectful, and gaining the skills she needed to be independent. Then she stopped coming to school.

There was no warning, no explanation, no compromise. She had always been in class, and if not in class, just outside the entrance playing games and running free. She adored the school and the staff admired her; it was unfathomable to think that she would just not show up, but everyone falls ill now and then. Or maybe she had to take care of her younger sister. Or maybe her mother was ill. Or maybe she went to join a relative in Germany. Or was it England? Any one of the rumors that started to float around during the early days of her absence would've been easier to swallow than the truth: Amara was getting married. Marriage in the shelter is always a party. It's pure happiness, dancing, the best food. It's the beautiful outfit, the laughter, feeling gorgeous. It's a slight glimmer of pre-war normalcy, a return to a time many of the children will never know, a time the adults will never forget. Growing up in the shelter, Amara dreamed of her day, her moment, dancing and crying tears of joy at the sight of her Prince Charming. She wanted to be "like a princess from the movies", but whenever someone asked which one, she'd shrug and say, "all of them!" She dreamed of her "pretty pink dress with all the sparkles" and her makeup rivaling that of a celebrity. On her wedding day she got everything she wanted. She was Jasmine, she was Cinderella, she was stuck.

Amara soon moved into her husband Ali's family home kilometers away from the shelter she'd come to love. Ali was 6 years older than her and possessed no real education. With a full-time job in Saida, he lived with his parents and was more than ready to consummate the marriage. Within days, her 13 year old innocence was invaded and conquered and replaced by new life. In a community where the thought of contraception and family planning are more foreign than a foreign language, her first painful night with him led to pregnancy. Her mother never wanted her to get married. She saw such beauty in Amara's mind that to her Amara was the future of Syria. Her father saw her marriage as a way out of a situation he still couldn't wrap his head around. He saw it as one less child to provide for, one less mouth to feed, and maybe even a better future than what he could provide her on his meager wage.

Amara's perception of the marriage at 13 didn't extend much farther beyond the wedding day itself. She didn't understand that she'd now be responsible for cooking and cleaning not only for her husband, but for both of his parents. She didn't understand that she'd rarely get to see the people that made her laugh and smile, that she'd never get to make silly faces at her favorite teacher again. She didn't understand that her immature body couldn't physically handle the pregnancy.

As her stomach grew each day, she grew weaker. She wasn't allowed out of the house much and was still expected to cook and clean like a maid. Her mother had never really taught her how to cook, or how to clean, and she had much difficulty figuring it out on her own. That's where the beatings from her husband started, not gradually, but suddenly, receiving blows from the fists of a now 20 year old man at the slightest mishap in her spousal duties. His parents didn't care. They never intervened, they encouraged and enabled. To them she deserved it. The girl that every volunteer used to see a light in, had that light extinguished by black and blue bruises and busted lips.

Less than a year before this, Amara used to sit outside with the girls playing with baby dolls, sometimes swinging them at the boys that would bother them, if necessary. She

used to squeeze them and hug them close to her chest, wondering what it would be like to have one of her own. She wasn't a stranger to babies at the shelter. When her younger sister was still a baby Amara would often carry her outside to meet her friends. She played with the babies in the school and knew every trick to make them stop crying. Now she was crying in the hospital after receiving the news that she wouldn't be having a baby after all. Six months into her pregnancy, she suffered a miscarriage; a miscarriage at 14 years old. This worried Ali's family even more, as to them and to many in the community, a miscarriage meant something was wrong with her and that she'd never be able to bear children for them. She became ill afterwards and spent even more time in the house isolated. She stayed in bed for entire days, sick and barely able to stand on her own. The moment she gained some of her strength back, she was pregnant once more. During this pregnancy Ali decided that she wouldn't be allowed out of the house at all, and she obeyed him. Her parents were allowed over sometimes, which gave her a few hours of happiness a few times a week. The months passed and she was back in the hospital. This time, she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl with light brown eyes – Amina.

Now that she'd have the responsibility of cooking, cleaning, and taking care of Amina, Ali made the decision to have her spend more time at home learning how to be a housewife from her mother. Walking back into the shelter was hard for her. She felt alien in a place that was once her home. People stared, the new volunteers didn't even look twice at her as they never got the chance to know what an amazing girl she was. She was happy to be home though. She was delighted to hear how well her little sister was doing in school, and enjoyed being able to confide in her sister how much she regretted her marriage, but she always had to go home to Ali.

Her father was proud, and her mother wasn't as angry about it as she used to be. Amara herself was starting to get used to it, but she still wasn't happy with him. The time she got to spend at her family home became the world to her once more. She sat in the kitchen eating fruits, learning her mother's recipes, and even listening to the songs she liked to dance to but soon enough, her parents started to argue often. Although the arguing seemed to appear out of nowhere, it didn't take long for her to overhear: her father was making plans for her little sister to get married.

*SB OverSeas is working to end child marriage. Read more about our advocacy [here](#). The artwork used for this post are created in our centres as part of our empowerment programs.*

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## The Chief's Daughter



*Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon*

*Written by Kevin Charbel, Project Manager in Saida, Lebanon*

I still see her sometimes, walking through the maze of corridors in the shelter she lives in. Our eyes will meet for the briefest of moments as she smiles nervously before dropping her gaze, and passing me by silently. In that instant I feel the urge to reach out to her, to ask her how she's been and what she's up to, but I always hold back, because I know that any interaction between us carries a risk to her safety.

Sarah was married under duress three months ago, at the age of 14. For some time, she openly defied her father, the community's chief, resisting his attempts to marry her to another teenager. She wanted to stay in school, to keep learning and to be with her friends. Eventually though, her father grew tired of her refusals, resorting instead to beating her into submission. It didn't take long after that for Sarah to be engaged. When I found out what had happened I made sure she knew we could protect her and that we would defend her right to choose, but by then, in her mind, the only thing worse than getting married to a stranger was to stay living with her father.

The once vibrant, cheeky student who would knock on my office door just to say hello disappeared from one day to another. Her marriage precludes her from continuing her education as she is now expected to prioritise domestic duties. This 14 year old girl is under pressure to learn to be a "good wife", meaning she must quickly master the skills to keep a clean home and satisfy her husband's appetite, as well as learn not to flinch when he makes sexual advances. Sarah's own desires and thoughts no longer matter; her position in society limited by the four walls of her modest home, where she is expected to remain while her husband is at work.

Child brides are often told that the more compliant and submissive they are, the easier the transition will be. They are the ones who must adapt, not their husband. They are the ones who must sacrifice, who must accept hardships and who must, all of a sudden, become women. Sarah's imagination and fiery stubbornness were once assets in the classroom, where they could be put to good use. Now these traits are a risk to her; she must lose this part of herself if she is to fit into the mould her father has set for her. She has no real choice in the matter, as if she were to end up discarded by her husband, she would not have the option to start again, she would be tainted.

Her friends, who are still in school, tell me that Sarah's father threatens her with more violence should she seek to continue contact with any of our staff members. If she is isolated there is much less risk of her rejecting her conditions and, as time goes on, the combination of aloneness and intimidation will numb Sarah into accepting a reality she would otherwise never have chosen for herself.

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## **A lost childhood – Syrian refugees in Lebanon**



***Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon***

By Jade-Leigh Tenwick, Communications and Development Officer at SB OverSeas

*This story is part of our child marriage series which aims to highlight this increasingly prevalent practice amongst the refugee community in Lebanon.*

SB Overseas (31.05.2018) - This article tells the story of Ream, an eighteen year old who attends one of our SB OverSeas centre. SB OverSeas has three centres in Lebanon where we run education and empowerment programs.

Ream left Syria at the age of twelve shortly after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. A conflict which led her not only to lose her home, but also her childhood and education.

Ream, along with her family, followed the same path as many other Syrians escaping the conflict to Lebanon. She was enthusiastic to start her life in Lebanon and continue her

education. She dreamed of being a human rights lawyer, giving a voice to those who had none.

This dream did not last long. Registration requirements and safety concerns of her family thwarted her educational opportunities.

Left at home. Without routine. The monotony and the hopelessness of the situation began to erode at the once happy and ambitious child. Her mental health deteriorated. Her mother charged her with more responsibility in the household in a bid to lift her out of her depression. This was her existence for two years.

At the age of fourteen, Ream was told about her impending marriage to a family friend. This was her chance to start a new life. Excited for the wedding day, she dreamed about wearing her white dress. After an idyllic day, she was filled of hope for a new life with her husband. A husband nearly double her age.

This story follows the same narrative as the other stories we have heard. Cracks began to appear and her feelings of hope shrunk. They were unable to register the marriage as Ream was too young. This legal status had consequences for her the child she was bearing. Without legal status, the child would be born statelessness - a life without clear rights or legal status.

Their problems also extended to the husband's family. Living in a small space caused tensions to heighten. She tried to ease this by shouldering more household responsibilities. This included not only household chores, but walking to retrieve water. Overwhelmed by the responsibilities and pregnancy, she would often find herself in tears.

With problems escalating, she felt more and more overwhelmed and asked for a divorce so she could return to her family. Her husband refused. He threatened her stating he would not register the marriage, renounce their child and marry another woman. The ramifications of these actions were sufficient to convince her to stay.

Things did not get better. Her husband began to beat her, sometimes daily, and she worried about the physical affect of the trauma on her unborn child. She fled her family to seek their support. Yet, they were not as supportive as she had hoped. With over 70% of Syrian refugees living below the poverty line in Lebanon, food is scare and hunger is rife. They told her to forget about her old family and to return to her new one.

Ream had to choose either to be vulnerable and alone on the streets or to return to her husband. She chose the latter. With her baby born, she had not only herself to worry about, but another human. With another mouth to feed, she was often hungry, barely able to provide for her child.

Her health deteriorated and her husband decided took her back to the family visiting her sporadically. After three months, her family decided it was time for her to fend for herself. Left out on the street, she begged her husband to look after her and her son. He rented a small room for her. This came at a cost. He appeared to only visit her when he wanted to have a target for his anger and frustration.

Her family realising the extent of the situation, took her back in. After three years of limbo, Ream is now trying to rebuild her life and find the girl who once dreamed of being a human rights lawyer. She comes to SB OverSeas centre four times a week and attends our courses. At our centre, she also speaks of her story with the other girls to raise awareness of her and many other girls' experiences with child marriage.

## No choice left for a girl but to marry



*Painting by an SB Overseas beneficiary in Lebanon*

SB Overseas (04.05.2018) - No one escapes war unchanged. Who can lose the past and the future at once without bearing a scar? The young and old are marked, though for most, these marks take invisible forms.

Nadine wishes hers were less apparent. The burns on her hands, neck, and face tell of her loss before she can say a word. She never meant to carry her village's story this way, to become to her community an unmistakable reminder of their suffering, but she did not get to choose.

When war came to Syria, it did not take long for the bombing to reach even her quiet village. If she ever manages someday to forget what the explosions sounded like, she will not forget what they felt like on her skin.

Her family fled to Lebanon four years ago, settling reluctantly in the skeleton of an unfinished and abandoned building where they live again amongst their neighbors from their hometown in Syria—now amid garbage and dust instead of sweet air and green fields. Their small rooms are stifling in the summer and bitterly cold in the winter, but they rarely leave the shelter, feeling out of place in the rest of the city.

Nadine began attending school, where she was confident and talkative in class. This education allowed her to make progress in Arabic, English, math, and science and to quickly make up for years of school she had missed since leaving her village, where her school had been bombed. She excelled in her schoolwork and was placed in the most advanced classes. Besides academics, Nadine and other girls her age took art lessons at school with a Syrian artist who encouraged them to express themselves: their experience as young girls, their ambitions, and their country, thus building on their self-worth.

She told her friends and teachers that she did not want to be married at an early age, as some of her peers were doing. School was important to her, and she planned to finish her education before getting married. She would marry after completing university, she said.

But there was a boy who lived in the same shelter whom Nadine liked, and this worried her parents. They were afraid that he would propose marriage and that she would find herself trapped in conditions like these for the rest of her life: between the dirty walls of a dark building in a city that was not hers, a country that did not want her.

When Nadine's parents remembered her grandfather's hope from her childhood that she would marry a certain man from her village, they acted quickly. He was still living in Syria. Within days, they sent Nadine away to marry him. She was fourteen.

Nadine returned to an area that was still unsafe, plagued by the same war that she had fled, the same bombs that once had almost taken her life.

And piece by piece, her own life and childhood continued to be stolen from her.

When her husband saw her burns, he refused to marry her. He had been told that they were less noticeable. Eventually, his mother forced him to marry Nadine because she had already moved back to Syria to accept his offer. They had no wedding.

Nadine's friends feel sorry for her because they have heard of the couple's problems. They wonder if her husband will marry another woman, or if she will soon be divorced, but her grandfather lives nearby in Syria and would not want to allow her to give up on a marriage he requested. Everyone who lives in her family's shelter knows that Nadine and her husband do not love each other, and that she will soon be expected to have children. But she is only a girl herself.

And so, again, without a choice, and this time in a way that is not so outwardly evident, Nadine has become a keeper of her country's sorrow.

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## **A better tomorrow, 'Bukhra Ahla'**

*Part of the child marriage story series.*



*Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon*

*Written by Jade-Leigh Tenwick, Communications and Development Officer at SB OverSeas*

SB OverSeas (18.04.2018) - Lamis is a seventeen year old girl. A seventeen year old girl who is called 'the divorced woman'. Yet she is barely a woman. Born a year post millennium, she enjoyed her childhood in Syria which was spent going to school and playing with her friends. This all changed in 2012 when the Syrian war broke out. Her family, along with many other Syrian' families fled their country as the conflict intensified and she found herself at eleven years old seeking refuge in Lebanon, a country where 1 in 4 people is a refugee.

Due to the harsh residency policy in Lebanon,<sup>1</sup> Lamis and her family were often moving from place to place and this constant upheaval prevented her from attending school. With over three-quarters of Syrians in Lebanon living below the poverty line,<sup>2</sup> there has been an increase in the rate of child marriage as it is viewed as the only viable way to provide protection for girls.

Lamis' family were no exception. Struggling to provide security and food for the family, they viewed marriage as a way to secure Lamis' future. Therefore, when a 22 year old boy from the neighborhood asked for permission from her family for Lamis to be his wife, they accepted, telling her it would be like a fairytale. Not having any experience of marriage or what would be expected of her, she went along with this agreement.

Shortly after the wedding, cracks began to appear. Her husband had different preconceptions as to what it meant to be married. These preconceptions were not ones that she could live up to. He and his family, started to punish her for this by beating her, sometimes until she bled. She could not understand what she had done wrong and experienced this abuse for six months before securing a divorce and escaping to her family.

However, her problems did not end here. Divorce in her community, like most communities, carries along with it a stigma. People on the street called her the 'divorced woman' and refused to acknowledge her by her name. She became an outcast and her family began to fear for her safety warning her not to be on the streets alone.

We know of this story as Lamis is one of students at our SB OverSeas school. Despite the difficulties in coming to our school due to street harassment, she attends our classes as she wants to have a better future. She talks openly with others at the school of her experience and encourages them to make their own decision telling them that she wishes she was not married so young as she feels chained by the stigma. She hopes that her message will empower other girls to make their own decision and chose education instead of marriage as a means of security. For herself, she hopes that education will be the key to unlocking a better future and having, like the name of our centre, a better tomorrow: 'Bukhra Ahla'.

*Lamis is just one of the many girls at our schools who have been affected by child marriage. SB OverSeas works to prevent the practice of child marriage by providing access to education for 1,400 refugee children in Lebanon and by economically empowering women and girls through our vocational courses, as well as our self-development courses.*

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<sup>1</sup>Over 70% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon do not have legal residency:  
<http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/1/5a548d174/survey-finds-syrian-refugees-lebanon-poorer-vulnerable-2017.html>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/1/5a548d174/survey-finds-syrian-refugees-lebanon-poorer-vulnerable-2017.html>

## Education and Empowerment to #GiveHope to young girls



*Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon*

*As written by Zuzana, a volunteer at SB OverSeas in Lebanon. SB OverSeas is currently working to provide education in Lebanon for 1,400 refugee children. This story shows how education and empowerment is an important tool in preventing child marriage from the perspective of those in the ground in Lebanon. Find out more about the work SB OverSeas does here: <http://sboverseas.org>*

SB OverSeas (29.03.2018) - Before the war began, child marriage in Syria was on the decline. But this progress has become a mere memory during the past seven years of conflict as marriage for young girls has become for some, the only promise of protection and economic stability.

Parents who find themselves as refugees in a new country, as outsiders living in harsh and overcrowded conditions, are often more inclined towards immediate solutions, struggling to see or be persuaded by the long-term consequences of seeking or accepting marriage for their young daughters. And their children, whose lives were yesterday defined by going to school, playing, dancing and laughing with their friends, are today characterised by the load they carry—the weight of others’ expectations, responsibility and punishment for circumstances out of their own control. Child brides are left as onlookers, cut off suddenly and prematurely from their own childhoods and from the world of their friends.

Grandparents once had a particularly influential position in deciding when a parent or child asked for marriage; in many cases, they argued against their granddaughter’s marriage and for her right to learn and play. But the war has broken communities and separated

generations, meaning that many are making decisions without the trusted voices of older family members, religious elders, and other senior authorities.

Teachers are often amongst the first to witness the drastic shift in young girls' lives when they marry. They are saddened by every empty desk, where their former students once explored their ambitions and worked towards creating their own futures.

Ahmed, himself a Syrian refugee, teaches maths, Arabic, and English in an educational center hosting students from rural Syria, where the practice of child marriage had not completely diminished even before the war. When telling his experience over the past year, he expressed disappointment at the number of students he had seen forced to trade their school days for marriage and at the lack of understanding of the costs. For these girls, getting married means isolation in small, dark rooms of an unfinished shelter: their new home.

"They are not ready for this. They are the victims," Ahmed said. Ultimately, parents make the final decision about the proposed marriage, a decision for which the girls are not accountable, he explained.

Aisha, who a psychologist in the same center, adds that girls marrying at a young age, often as young as thirteen, are especially vulnerable to emotional and physical abuse. They are unprepared for the traumas that may accompany marriage, she said, including miscarriage, loss of childhood and divorce. A young divorced girl may face mistreatment for the rest of her life because of the stigma associated to the latter in her community. This stigma may keep her from regaining normalcy: a childhood and an education.

Ahmed, as a father, has been able to speak with some of the students' fathers, who are normally the family's decision makers. From his experience, several fathers are open to discussion and reconsideration. Aisha leads awareness and empowerment sessions with young girls at the center teaching them about healthy relationships, self-worth and goals for the future. She also encourages mothers to help their daughters feel comfortable talking about their fears and dreams. One mother in the community now takes her daughter for daily walks. During this time together they talk about anything and everything, thus breaking harmful taboos.

Only education and long-term engagement within a community that has lost critical support systems can shift today's trends in child marriage. Ahmed and Aisha's strategy to bring their community closer and building trusting relationships is a long-term one; it is careful, and it is effective. Their work has allowed lasting change for girls and their families. They hope not only to preserve the future of this generation, but to place the power of decision in their hands—hands that will one day rebuild their country.

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## Sherine's Story, a story of child marriage



*Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon*

*As written by Raisa Elhadi, who is currently volunteering with SB Overseas in Lebanon*

SB OverSeas 522.03.2018) - This is a story of a girl named Sherine, but her name could be Amina, or Amal, or Sara, or any one of hundreds, even thousands of names of girls with almost the same story. Girls whose futures have been wrested from their control over and over again in so many different ways and who, somehow, still manage to feel hope and passion and optimism for a different, better life than their own. Sherine is only one of those girls.

Sherine's family, like so many others, came to Lebanon seeking safety from violence. As a thirteen year old, Sherine had studied up until the fifth grade in Syria. Growing up she had aspirations of becoming a doctor, a dream only reinforced by the sight of all the violence she saw around her during the war. Sherine thought her family's stay in Lebanon would be brief, and she would soon return to Syria to complete her studies and fulfill her dream.

Shortly after their arrival in Lebanon, Sherine's mother asked her what she thought about getting married. There was a young man from the family's town back in Syria who was interested in taking Sherine as a wife.

"It's up to you," Sherine shrugged, ambivalent. Marriage didn't seem like a very big deal to her. How different could it be from the wedding games she played with her friends in her yard in Syria or in the streets of Shatila?

So Sherine's family decided to wed her to the man from their town, and Sherine went along with it, unaware of the gravity of the union she was about to undertake. Within a month

of fleeing to Lebanon, Sherine, still just thirteen years old, married a twenty-five year old man she barely knew.

Her ambivalence didn't last long. From the very beginning, Sherine's marriage darkened her life like a cloud. Rather than spending time with her parents and siblings, playing in the streets with her friends, or studying, Sherine spent her days cleaning and cooking for her husband. The only times she left the house were to fetch groceries and household supplies from the market, or on rare visits to her family's house. Real marriage was nothing like a game. Instead, it was full of responsibilities and obligations that took up all her time and energy, crushing her youth and depleting the reading and academic skills she had built up in school.

Sherine's family had tried to explain, before her wedding, the physical expectations that would befall Sherine as a wife. But Sherine had been a child, naive and unaware, and she hadn't understood. Her wedding night came as a nasty shock.

Things got worse over time. Sherine's housewife skills fell short, and that angered her husband. When he came home to an empty table or messy house, his temper swelled, and he began hitting her as punishment. Jealousy festered, and he forbade Sherine to put on makeup and forced her to wear long, loose abayas. Before long, Sherine's husband was intervening in every part of her life. She spent her days trying to appease him, afraid of his anger and violence, fading to a quiet shadow of who she once was.

When her husband's anger was especially bad, she would flee to her family's house for comfort and safety. She asked her family to help her divorce her husband, but her mother tried to placate her instead.

"No marriage is ever perfect in the beginning," she said. "Just be patient, and you'll get used to him and begin to accept him."

One day during a particularly fiery bout of rage, Sherine's husband smashed the furnace in the kitchen. In his anger, he beat her and swore divorce upon her. Through her fear and pain, she felt a wash of relief and hope that maybe she could escape and go back to her life before. But as refugees, their marriage wasn't registered, and both their union and their divorce were bound only through words. Soon after the fight, her husband took her back, and the nightmare resumed.

Sherine tried to be patient, but her marriage wore her down. Her husband's anger carried into the bedroom, where he was rough and brutish with her. Evenings soon became a nightmare that was nearly too horrible for Sherine to bear. When she escaped to her family's house, she begged them for a divorce.

Finally her family agreed, and they managed to register her marriage with the court so that her divorce could be officially recognised. Sherine's nightmare was over, and she returned to live with her family. But she didn't want any other girls to be put through what she had experienced.

She began to spread the word among her friends and peers about the true meaning of marriage. As a young teenager, Sherine had agreed to marriage blindly, without any understanding the responsibilities and realities of married life. She advised other girls never to accept early marriage, and revealed the details of what marriage could be like. She hoped that with the necessary knowledge and insight, other girls would be more aware than she was and would be able to protect themselves and, ultimately, their futures.

## Chasing a childhood in Shatila



*Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon*

**HRWF editor's note:** HRWF is working with SB Overseas to address the issue of child marriage in refugee camps. Education is essential to keeping girls out of marriage. The story below is about Majeda, a Syrian girl living in a camp. It highlights the importance of education in protecting girls from marriage but also in giving a glimmer of happiness and hope to displaced youth.

*Written by Maria Polland, SB Overseas*

SB OverSeas (08.02.2018) - Originally from Syria, Majeda, her mother, and five siblings left their native village Dayr Hafir in search of a stable life. The conflict between ISIL and other groups fighting for power had forced the family to cross the mountain chain on the Syrian Lebanese border whereby the family entered Lebanese territory. In the year it had taken for the family to reach Lebanese soil, their father was lost, never to be heard of again. Majeda, her mother, and her siblings arrived in Lebanon in 2017 after a year of transitory, living to escape conflict.

Finally, the family reached the [Shatila refugee camp](#) situated on the outskirts of Lebanon's capital along with thousands of other Syrian refugees. Majeda is 11 years old and her brother Mohamad is 10; they are the only able providers for the family. The eldest girl, considered to be at a vulnerable age, is not allowed to work alone in the streets, while their mother must look after the smallest children. Majeda and Mohamad therefore spend their days selling tissues in the streets – a [common sight in Beyrouth](#).

Majeda is embarrassed that she must work and does not want people to know that each morning she wakes up at 7 am to sell tissue for 1000 LL per parcel (0,50 €). The tissues

come in packs of six for 5000 LL, allowing her to keep a 1000 LL profit. She brings her seven year old brother with her because it is unsafe for her to sell tissues alone. The two spend hours on the street talking and playing "Hazura." Majeda would say, "Something is green, and when it's opened it is pink and black." Her brother would think for a while until finally shouting the correct answer, "Watermelon!" She walks the same route in Shatila every day until it gets dark, with a three-hour break when she comes to Bukra Ahla for school. Majeda is careful to stay away from areas she does not know and only walks where her mother tells her it is safe. Majeda says that she feels safe and protected around her mother; a testament to her mother's strength through an unimaginable situation, guiding her six children alone through war-torn Syria.

Shatila is famous for its crime, violence, and abuse, to the dismay of its vulnerable inhabitants. During Ramadan last July, when the family was only just beginning to settle in Lebanon, Majeda went ask for leftover fruits and vegetables from the shops. For the neediest families, spoiled fruits and vegetables that are unfit for sale are essential to their survival. That day, Majeda and her brother set out, and the owner agreed to give them left overs. He told Majeda to follow him alone to the backroom where the old fruits were stored. When they entered the room, the man grabbed Majeda and tried to harass and touch her. She began to scream and ran away with her brother.

As time progressed after the incident, Majeda began to recoil and fear others. When her mother took her to see a medical organisation in Shatila, she was advised to followed up with psychologist. Unfortunately, the family cannot afford this expense and volunteer psychologists are not enough. Majeda, therefore, continues to sell tissues on the streets with her brother while avoiding the street where the shop owner who attempted to assault her is still selling fruits and vegetables.

Every day, Majeda goes straight from work to school. School is her favourite part of the day because during these hours Majeda can relax and have fun. She is among Bukra Ahla's brightest students; her voice carries over the others as she shouts correct answers in class. In her notebook, she records words in Arabic and English so she can study them later. She is excited to learn and be helpful to the other students around her. Her favorite subjects are Arabic and math. She enjoys Arabic because she wants to learn how to read and write in her native language. She enjoys math class because it constantly works mind. She says she does not like it when her brain is "off", she likes to always be thinking. She is able to listen to instructions in class and then explain to her peers. Not only is Majeda a joy to have in class, her ability to lead in class discussions is encouraging to her peers, and it promotes their learning as well. Majeda must continue her education because there is no doubt that she will succeed if the circumstances allow it. Her education is key to bettering her life, as well as her family's.

When Majeda has free time after dinner, she likes to play with her siblings and her barbies. She has a baby doll whom she has named Amina, given to her by her favorite teacher, Estaz Abdullah. Majeda named Amina after her favorite doll she left in Syria. Amina has a pink dress and long black hair and is still in Majeda's house in the countryside of Aleppo. Majeda misses her house in Syria, specifically her roof where should could play with Amina. In Syria, Majeda's father worked, she went to school, and played with her toys and her siblings at home. Majeda studied in grades 1 and 2 in her village.

In Syria, Majeda was a child. In Lebanon, Majeda is obligated to act years beyond her age. After all that she's endured in her young life, Majeda is strong, caring, smart, and enthusiastic. She deserves much more than she has been given.

## Nine Lebanese women murdered by partners in single month

By Florence Massena

Al-Monitor (26.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2EyNPUH> - Nada Bahlawan was shot and killed by her husband at dawn Jan. 22 in Beirut. The same day, a man stabbed his wife in south Lebanon after a dispute over doing the dishes. On Dec. 16, British diplomat Rebecca Dykes was raped and murdered.

Nine women were killed in December and January by their fiances or husbands. There seems to have been a rise since Dykes was killed, feminist activist Maya Ammar told Al-Monitor. She and others held a vigil in front of Beirut's National Museum on Jan. 23.

"In the last week of December, four women were killed. The night we organized the vigil about violence against women, we learned about Malak Moukdad, who was stabbed to death by her husband. Two days later, a woman killed herself because she couldn't handle the violence at home," Ammar added.

On Jan. 6, Zarifa Z. was stoned to death and her body was found on a beach in south Lebanon five days later. Her husband admitted to having committed an honor killing. A woman and her baby were found dead on Jan. 12, killed by repeated blows to the head.

Ghida Anani, the director of ABAAD, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that fights for gender equality, told Al-Monitor, "With the absence of national statistics on domestic violence in Lebanon and monitoring mechanisms, we cannot confirm for sure if domestic violence crimes are rising."

She added, "What can be confirmed for certain is a rise in women's awareness about reporting domestic violence incidents, seeking help outside their social and family spheres and disclosing [what happened to them], as the stigma around gender-based violence has been broken thanks to the persistent efforts of women's movements and campaigns in the last decade."

However, Minister of Women's Affairs Jean Ogasapian told Al-Monitor, "The people working in specialized associations and NGOs say that at least 12 women die annually as a result of their husband's violence."

"It was not the first time that we've had no cases for two months and then five in a week," Ammar said. "Because people can now see the situation is changing, women no longer accept violence and discrimination. There is some resistance and backlash from some men who want to prove they still have power in an extreme way."

Women are seeking support from the ABAAD-affiliated Model Community Holistic Care Unit, which provides safe spaces for women in the north, Bekaa Valley, south, Beirut and Mount Lebanon provinces. The centers were established in partnership with the Ministry of Social Affairs. Based on that and on the number of women turning to these emergency safe houses, Anani observed that violence against women in 2017 seems to be changing in nature. There is more sexual violence reported than physical and psychological violence and murders are more common than in previous years. The civil society NGO Lebanon Support and the feminist organization Kafa (Enough) developed a map to display statistics on violence against women per year. In 2017, 12 women have been killed, five more than in 2016, most of them victims of their husband, ex-husband, fiance or boyfriend.

Law 293 was adopted in April 2014 to address domestic violence, but several organizations have criticized it for being incomplete. Human Rights Watch said after the law passed that it “has serious flaws and the parliament should consider amendments to fully protect women from domestic violence.” The law defines domestic violence very narrowly, doesn’t criminalize marital rape except if physical violence can be proven. Protection orders are a difficult and lengthy process to obtain.

“According to recent NGO reports on the Lebanese judicial system, the number of unofficial documented cases of women killed as a result of family violence crimes since Law 293 was passed reached 40, and the number of official protection orders issued to date exceeds 500,” Ogasapian said. The data shows that a growing number of women know they can be protected and don’t hesitate to ask for help.

“The work done by the judges is very encouraging since the law passed, they answer to these women with efficiency,” Kafa media and communication officer Diala Haidar told Al-Monitor. “We have been campaigning in the media and social networks for years and now women are becoming more aware. But the media shouldn’t hesitate to call these crimes femicides and should stop being apologetic toward the killer, like we see sometimes.”

Kafa has been collaborating with the Ministry of Justice to amend Law 293 with a draft proposition that was accepted by the government in August 2017. They are now waiting for the vote by Lebanese parliament. “In light of all these recent crimes, we hope the vote will be pushed forward,” Haidar said. The draft amendments will improve the implementation of the law, for example with a faster process for a protective order, stricter penalties and immediate custody rights for the mother in cases of domestic violence.

The Ministry of Women also started to develop an action plan for gender equality. “We are in the process of developing a national strategy on gender-based violence,” Ogasapian said. “It will be developed with an action plan and a monitoring process and be submitted for implementation with the relevant stakeholders.”

He added, “We are conducting a study on the economic cost of gender-based violence in Lebanon. It will result in the development of policies to prevent violence against women.”

Ogasapian insisted that the ministry is taking the issue of women’s rights very seriously, with seven draft laws processed in a year. “Three draft laws were approved by the council of ministers and now sent to the parliament for approval: one against sexual harassment, one granting paternity leave and another for equal privileges in Social Security funds. We are also supporting all the amendments proposed to Law 293.”

Even if the draft amendments are passed and applied quickly, some fear the Lebanese justice system is too slow to prosecute these crimes fast enough for the victims' families. “Roula Yaacoub's murderer still hasn’t faced a judge since 2013,” Haidar pointed out. “This needs to change.”

## A cup of tea served by child brides



*Written by Veronica Lari, edited by Soizic Le Leslé Fauvelle – SB OverSeas*

SB OverSeas (26.01.2018) - It was the beginning of this past fall when Louma Albik went on her regular trip to Lebanon to visit SB OverSeas centres and assess the needs of the families, mostly Syrian, living in refugee camps. At SB OverSeas, the role of Chairwoman is not limited to managing the organisation from the Brussels headquarter. Frequent visits to Lebanon are a priority for SB OverSeas to facilitate coordination between the Brussels staff and the team on the ground. This enables the organisation to understand the real living conditions of refugee families and adapt programmes accordingly. SB OverSeas enjoys an authentic bond with the refugee community thanks to years of heart felt support and exchange. This gives the organisation an exclusive insight into the reality of its beneficiaries, allowing harsh personal stories and cultural dilemmas to emerge.

On a crisp sunny day of September, Louma arrived in the mountainous city of Aarsal, close to her native Syria. Located in North-Eastern Lebanon, between the Anti-Lebanon mountains, the town hosts tents as far as the eye can see for more than 60,000 refugees. The area is remote and arid, with no trees growing on its slopes. Political tensions are high, with frequent outbreaks between government forces and ISIL fighters. When combat broke out in the summer, SB OverSeas closed its centre until the violence died down in September. The re-opening offered Louma the occasion to re-evaluate the security situation of the area in person and take into consideration the needs of the 320 children enrolled in SB OverSeas' Aarsal school.

As she arrived, one member of the community offered Louma to accompany her on a visit around the camp. Walking close to his own tent, he invited his guest to enter and have a cup of tea. Once inside, three young girls approached, offering Louma tea and fruits. They were aged 11, 12 and 13. The man proudly explained Louma that the three young girls were sisters married to each of his three sons. The boys were aged between 15 and 17, already working in the construction sector, manufacturing bricks from the surrounding

mountains' stones. Smiling, the man explained that marrying the girls to his sons ensured them a better future and protection. He would continue to send them to the SB OverSeas school, they would be happy. At the same time, he expected them to become good wives and mothers, which was already the case for the oldest.

In Louma's head, a flow of thoughts started turning and spinning around. The casual way in which he described his new enlarged family stunned Louma to silence. She did not know how to react to her host, who had behaved so kindly and was full of good intentions. She became aware of the difference in perspectives due to the dramatic situation in which the family lived, and she tried to understand the nature of his choice. Louma asked an educator how these six children were married so young. The answer came from poverty, from the solitude of the encompassing area and the lack of opportunities. The boys accepted to get married to find in their wives a new friend and a person to lighten up difficult days.

A feeling of confusion invaded Louma. Her own principles could not let her accept the justifications for those marriages, but understanding the daily struggles of the camp was equally out of reach. She left the camp few hours later, but the experience could not leave her heart. Since then, Louma has been working to address the issue of early marriage, trying to understand the causes and complexity of the phenomenon, and seeking ways to raise awareness and prevent such a [detrimental practice](#).

The rate of early marriage has increased drastically in response to the poverty and vulnerability of Syrian families in the face of the crisis. In every aspect of its activities, SB OverSeas is committed to protecting children and young women's rights by bridging the education gap caused by the war and by raising awareness on the impact of early marriage on Syrian refugees.

**Learn more about SB OverSeas at:** <http://sboverseas.org>

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## **A firsthand account of child marriage in a Lebanese refugee camp**

***She got married for protection. She escaped for survival.***



***Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon***

*By Kevin Charbel, SB OverSeas*

SB OverSeas (11.01.2018) - When the bombing started, at first people were paralysed by fear and uncertainty, having never experienced something of that kind before. Then the school was hit while children were attending classes inside.

Sarah, along with the majority of the village's parents, decided that it was necessary to seek refuge elsewhere in order to survive. She left for a camp on the Turkish/Syrian border with her six children, planning to have her husband follow shortly. She'd heard that families would be safe there.

Months passed without any news until eventually she was informed that her husband had been arrested on his way to meet her and hadn't been seen or heard of since. Her situation becoming unsustainable without him, she was forced to undertake a second perilous journey to a camp in Saida, southern Lebanon where she was aware that some members of her community had found safety.

Nour, Sarah's daughter, was 8 when they settled in the camp where she would spend the next four years growing up, spending her time minding her younger siblings while Sarah went to work. Living conditions are difficult there, most families residing inside a huge, five-story concrete shell of a building that was one day meant to be a university.

The grey unplastered walls of the camp tend to stifle the natural curiosity and imagination that children are born with, but Nour never lost it. She continued to exude light and energy, cultivating social links indiscriminately within her community. These attributes, coupled with her precocious nature, is what Sarah believes to be the reason that her neighbours and friends started to whisper doubts about Nour's morality and virginity.

A family without a male protector in this context is vulnerable to many forms of attack, especially if their standing in the community is threatened. Sarah did not see it as normal for Nour to be married so early, particularly as she herself had married at 20 years old, but she saw no other option to guarantee the protection of her daughter and the rest of her children. With a heavy heart, she made it known that she was looking for a husband

for Nour, which almost immediately drew the attention of a woman from a community close by who proposed her son as a suitor. Nour was introduced to the 18 year-old construction worker the next day and, a few hours later, agreed to marry him.

One of the most difficult moments in Sarah's life was explaining to her 12 year-old daughter what to expect on her wedding night. To explain that her husband would want to get close to her and to not push him away if he kissed her. That he would teach her how to be a wife to him.

The ceremony was carried out quietly and without legal documentation as Nour's age prevented any official recognition. The cleric who administered the ceremony was careful to remind the families that they should not discuss his involvement.

Nour moved in with her husband's family after the wedding, some ten kilometres away from Sarah. She regularly called to say that she was unhappy and didn't like how her husband and his family treated her. She was allowed to visit her mother only very rarely, but she took every opportunity to express her discontent, her sadness and loneliness. Eventually, after four months had gone by, Nour turned up alone at her mother's doorstep, explaining that she had run away from her husband and no longer wanted to go back. Sarah contacted the husband's family to find out what had happened; she was told that Nour was not welcome back as they were frustrated with her childishness and ineptitude for household duties.

The divorce was finalised a week later. Nour is now back at home with Sarah and her brothers, but all she wants is to be left alone, refusing to leave her home. The light that was in her eyes has been replaced by dullness, her energy replaced by apathy.

When asked about her daughter's future, Sarah cannot hold back the tears. She hastens to explain that she regrets having ever made her child go through such an ordeal and that she just hopes that Nour can get back to being herself again one day.

**Learn more about SB Overseas at:** <http://sboverseas.org>

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## **Poverty for Syrian refugees could push children to marry and work**

The Gulf Today (10.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2EsiYb6> - BEIRUT: Nearly seven years into Syria's civil war, Syrian refugees in neighbouring Lebanon are becoming poorer, leaving children at risk of child labour and early marriage, aid organisations said on Tuesday.

A recent survey by the United Nations children's agency UNICEF, UN's World Food Programme, and refugee agency, UNHCR showed that Syrian refugees in Lebanon are more vulnerable now than they have been since the beginning of the crisis.

Struggling to survive, more than three quarters of the refugees in Lebanon now live on less than \$4 per day, according to the survey which was based on data collected last year.

"The situation for Syrian refugees in Lebanon is actually getting worse - they are getting poorer. They are barely staying afloat," Scott Craig, UNHCR spokesman in Lebanon, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Around 1.5 million refugees who fled Syria's violence account for a quarter of Lebanon's population.

The Lebanese government has long avoided setting up official refugee camps. So, many Syrians live in tented settlements, languishing in poverty and facing restrictions on legal residence or work.

"Child labour and early marriage are direct consequences of poverty," Tanya Chapuisat, UNICEF spokeswoman in Lebanon said in a statement to the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"We fear this (poverty) will lead to more children being married away or becoming breadwinners instead of attending school," she said.

According to UNICEF, 5 percent of Syrian refugee children between 5-17 are working, and one in five Syrian girls and women aged between 15 and 25 is married.

Mike Bruce, a spokesman for the Norwegian Refugee Council, said without sufficient humanitarian aid and proper work Syrian families would increasingly fall into debt and more could turn to "negative coping mechanisms" like child labour and marriage.

Cold winter temperatures in Lebanon would also hurt refugees, he said. "Refugees are less and less able to deal with each shock that they face and severe weather could be one of those shocks," said Bruce.

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## **Engaging male caregivers to end early marriage in Lebanon**

### ***Training modules to accompany programs with adolescent girls***

Women's Refugee Commission and Danish Refugee Council (03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2RVnXbe>

#### ***Why engage male caregivers?***

Male caregivers, especially fathers, have a profound influence in the lives of girls. Whether positive, negative or lacking, male caregivers exert considerable impact on girls' development and opportunities. As a result, targeted programming for girls should identify opportunities to strategically engage fathers in being champions for their daughters' safety and well-being. Research affirms that engaging male caregivers matters; when fathers adopt more equitable viewpoints about their daughters and when they become more positively involved in their lives, this involvement is associated with increased school participation and achievement and with elevated self-esteem. Therefore, when engaged, male caregivers can become champions for girls' participation in formal education and non-formal educational programming that can build their capacities and mitigate their risks, including risk of child marriage. This work should complement, not detract, from an intentional and equitable focus on adolescent girls.

Read the full 69-page report: <https://bit.ly/2RVnXbe>

## **New study finds child marriage rising among most vulnerable Syrian refugees**

United Nations Population Fund (31.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2jSY0s7> - An alarming rise in child marriages has been seen among the most vulnerable Syrian refugee populations in Lebanon, according to a newly completed survey conducted by UNFPA, the American University of Beirut and Sawa for Development and Aid.

The survey covered some 2,400 refugee women and girls living in Western Bekaa, and found that more than a third of those surveyed between the ages of 20 and 24 had been married before reaching age 18.

Among refugee girls currently between ages 15 and 17, some 24 per cent are married.

Before the devastating conflict erupted in Syria, child marriage was significantly less common among Syrians. Estimates vary, but some show [child marriage](#) rates to be four times higher among Syrian refugees today than among Syrians before the crisis. This indicates that displacement, instability and poverty are driving the underage marriages.

Even some of the data collectors, who were selected from the community being surveyed, are struggling with the pressure to marry off their daughters.

"I am convinced that no girl should get married before the age of 18. But when it comes to reality, it is different," said Iman\*, a Syrian refugee who was one of the data collectors.

She explained that, as a widow and the sole breadwinner for her family, she has trouble supporting her three children and ageing father.

"For this, reason my cousin, out of his good heart, wanted to help out by getting engaged to my daughter and supporting us financially," she said.

Her daughter is 15.

### ***Awareness needed***

The survey was conducted in August and September 2016 in Bar Elias, Kab Elias and Marj, areas in Western Bekaa selected because of their large refugee populations and high levels of vulnerability.

The survey showed that school enrolment declined among girls as they aged. At age 9, over 70 per cent of surveyed girls were enrolled in school; at age 16, less than 17 per cent were. Girls with less education are more vulnerable to becoming child brides, [reports have indicated](#).

Among all surveyed women aged 20 to 24, nearly 35 per cent were married before reaching 18 years old. Another way to look at the figures – as a percentage of married women – shows that 47 per cent of married women, ages 20 to 24 years old, were child brides.

The study also had clear recommendations for addressing the trend. For example, it called for improving school enrolment among girls, especially as they transition into secondary school, and for better enforcement of policies barring child marriage.

It also recommended raising awareness of the consequences of early marriage among refugee communities. These consequences include an increased risk of pregnancy-related complications for girls, as well as worse health and economic outcomes for themselves and their children.

Such information can be powerful.

"Because of what I have learned and experienced, it is impossible for me to let my daughter get married at an early age," said one parent who learned about child marriage from a UNFPA-supported outreach programme in the southern city of Saida.

### ***Youth reject child marriage***

These outreach programmes are engaging parents, community leaders, health-care workers and others. UNFPA is also supporting safe spaces, legal counselling and psychosocial care for vulnerable women and girls, including those affected by early marriage.

Young people are also being empowered to advocate for change. Through the UNFPA-supported Y-Peer programme, youth – including refugees – are spreading the word about the harms of child marriage to their friends and peer networks.

Youth leaders have been eager to take on the challenge.

"It is up to us to spread awareness on its negative effects to our family and friends," said Sara, part of a peer education programme in Baalbek.

"When I saw my cousin getting married at the age of 15, my heart ached," said Mohamad [not the Mohamad pictured], who received peer education in Beirut. "The man should be buying her toys instead of a wedding dress."

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*