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## 'THERE IS NOTHING ELSE TO ASPIRE TO IN OUR LIFE'

### Exploring the psychosocial wellbeing of married Syrian refugee girls in Lebanon

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#### **Introduction**

Lebanon has the highest number of refugees relative to population size, hosting around 1.5 million Syrian refugees as well as refugees of other origins, including around 200,000 Palestinian refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2020). Yet Lebanon has not ratified the 1951 United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees. Under Lebanese law, refugees are considered 'foreigners'; they have no special legal status and no civil, political or economic rights. The effects of protracted displacement under such conditions on the psychosocial wellbeing of adolescent refugees have been addressed in the literature. Refugee adolescents face increased psychological distress due to lack of access to basic needs and services, limited education and work opportunities, and tensions with Lebanese authorities and communities (Hassan et al., 2015; DeJong et al., 2017; Presler-Marshall et al., 2017; Youssef, 2020).

However, much of this literature has overlooked the gendered dimensions of the current ongoing crisis for refugee adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing. In addition to socioeconomic and violence-related stressors related to protracted displacement, Syrian adolescent girls also must navigate cultural restrictions on their freedom, choices and agency. Anxieties about the safety, honour and protection needs of girls are exacerbated by crisis and conflict. These amplified concerns have significant consequences for girls' life trajectories, including restricting their mobility, reducing opportunities for social interaction and increasing their risk of being married as children (UNFPA et al., 2014; DeJong et al., 2017; Anera, 2014; Presler-Marshall et al., 2020). These experiences collectively contribute to poor psychosocial wellbeing for girls (Bartels et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, there has been very little attention to how structural-, communal- and individual-level factors intersect to shape the age- and gender-specific

challenges facing adolescent refugees and the impact of these on girls' aspirations, ability to make choices and overall wellbeing. This chapter focuses on the convergence of these factors at different levels to explore how gender dynamics and socio-economic precarity shape the lived realities of married adolescent Syrian refugee girls living in informal tented settlements in Lebanon. The chapter also engages with what these findings mean for services that seek to better support adolescent girls in a context of protracted displacement.

## Literature review

### *Refugees' psychosocial wellbeing in Lebanon*

The current sociopolitical environment in Lebanon has a significant impact on psychosocial wellbeing for refugee families and communities. Lebanon's recent history is marked by instability, sectarian and ethnic cleavages and conflicts. The 15-year civil war (1975–1990) was driven by the state's inability to address mounting class, sectarian and regional inequalities. On the one hand, Muslim communities suffered most from poverty and supported the Palestinian militias in Lebanon. On the other hand, Christian communities were guarded and wary of the surge of militarisation among Palestinians and perceived it as a threat to the Lebanese state. The civil war ended with a peace settlement (the Ta'if Accord), which established power sharing between the Muslim and Christian communities. The deployment of the Syrian military during the civil war to control Palestinians (Traboulsi, 2012) and its extended presence in Lebanon until 2005 contributed to increasingly negative attitudes towards Syrians in the country. Since the end of the civil war, Lebanon has been struggling with internal socio-political conflicts, wars with Israel and a continually deteriorating economy. The Syrian conflict, which prompted a massive influx of refugees, has exacerbated existing socioeconomic instabilities in Lebanon.

Syrian refugees in Lebanon are extremely vulnerable and disadvantaged, with 73 per cent living in poverty (UNHCR et al., 2019). Refugees aged 15 and over have to obtain temporary residency permits, but most (especially adolescents) do not hold valid permits as there are challenges in obtaining them. Syrian refugees are allowed to work only in three sectors: agriculture, construction and environment. Consequently, unemployment rates are high and those who do work often face exploitative conditions. Of the 1 million Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR, half live in shelters that are below humanitarian standards, with around 200,000 living in makeshift informal tented settlements (Chaaban et al., 2016; UNHCR et al., 2019). The Lebanese authorities have rejected building formal camps for Syrian refugees for fear that this may lead to permanent settlement in the country, as is the case with the large numbers of Palestinian refugees who have been living in camps in Lebanon since the 1948 Arab–Israeli war.

Lebanese society is divided along political and religious lines, and there is a lack of social cohesion either within the Lebanese community or among different refugee and host communities. This is reinforced by a recent escalation in discriminatory

policies against refugee communities, amid an intensifying economic crisis. The year 2019 witnessed a crackdown on refugees, especially those from Syria. Lebanese authorities have: demolished and dismantled Syrian refugee shelters; conducted frequent army raids on informal tented settlements, arresting many Syrian refugees; increased forced deportations and departure orders; and introduced new obstacles to the renewal of legal residency and work permits (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Furthermore, in July 2019, the Ministry of Labour announced that all foreigners working in the country would need to apply for a work permit. This was followed by a crackdown targeting illegal foreign workers (including refugees) and the businesses employing them. These developments present refugees with significant daily stressors and worsening economic precarity.

While there is scant research on the psychosocial wellbeing of adolescent refugees in Lebanon, the literature highlights the negative impact of lack of rights, services and opportunities on adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing. This literature, which is largely qualitative in nature, shows that adolescent refugees face mounting stresses due to poverty, isolation and discrimination, as well as community violence, and that many boys and girls resort to negative coping mechanisms such as school dropout, child marriage or peer violence (Presler-Marshall et al., 2017; Youssef, 2020). Most Syrian youth in Lebanon suffer from distress (Chaaban and el Khoury, 2016) owing to their dire economic situation, loss of education opportunities, isolation and lack of free movement, as well as experiencing violence at home, in their communities and in wider society (Hassan et al., 2015; DeJong et al., 2017).

Syrian adolescent girls in particular have poor life satisfaction and poor mental and psychological wellbeing. They lack access to psychosocial support networks and services, mainly due to patriarchal gender norms that limit girls' mobility (UNFPA et al., 2014; DeJong et al., 2017; Anera, 2014). Although child marriage has been decreasing among Lebanese girls and Palestinian refugee girls in Lebanon, the practice has been increasing among Syrian girls who remain most vulnerable due to financial hardship, lack of educational opportunities and parental concerns around sexual and gender-based violence. In this context, marriage is often seen as a protective option (Bartels et al., 2018).

The limited quantitative data on Syrian adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing largely focuses on the impact of conflict on youth who remain within Syria; this establishes the impact of trauma and the daily stress of the upheaval to their lives on their mental health and further identifies gender as a vector of vulnerability to poor mental health (Soykoek et al., 2017; Perkins et al., 2018). However, research by Roupetz et al. (2020) with married and unmarried Syrian girls in Lebanon offers some useful nuance of how child marriage intersects with other social identities and experiences to shape psychosocial wellbeing outcomes. While married and unmarried girls both expressed frustration and other negative emotions because of their own experiences of displacement, the authors find that unmarried girls were more likely to report negative feelings than married girls, including sadness (47 per cent vs. 22 per cent). Roupetz et al. (2020) suggest that these findings relate to the difficult experiences of unmarried girls in school, reporting experiences of

maltreatment, bullying and xenophobia. In contrast, while married girls were sad that they could not go to school, they saw marriage as a source of safety and protection. However, the authors noted that the married girls in their study felt they had chosen their marriages (rather than being in an arranged marriage) and generally felt positive about them.

While these findings are important, they do not engage with the issue of service provision, which shapes opportunities and access to support. Lebanon's mental health support services are characterised by weak referral systems and lack of availability and accessibility, especially for vulnerable populations (National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) and American University of Beirut (AUB), 2019). Most services are concentrated in the expensive private sector (Kik and Chammay, 2018). In 2015, Lebanon launched its National Mental Health strategy, which identifies refugee populations as one of the most vulnerable groups requiring attention. However, the strategy does not include an emergency or disaster plan for mental health.

Mental health and psychosocial support for refugees are integrated in programming provided by international and national organisations, and Syrian refugees are largely dependent on services provided by UNHCR (World Health Organization (WHO) and Ministry of Public Health, 2015; Kik and Chammay, 2018). The Lebanese government has not grasped a leadership role or engaged in effective coordination and implementation of programmes and services, leaving non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to fill the gap. Most programmes offer non-specialist support and community/family support, with specialist services particularly thinly spread. Lack of funding is the main challenge. The result is that refugees' basic needs (for food, shelter and health care) and their needs for mental health and psychosocial support services are both unmet.

Furthermore, the mental health needs of refugees in Lebanon have not been assessed thoroughly. Refugees face many challenges in accessing mental health and psychosocial support services, including limited mobility, lack of legal residency permits, lack of information and inability to afford transportation costs. And although most services are free of charge, some organisations require a token fee, which, although low, would still be prohibitive for most refugees. Activities provided under the guise of 'psychosocial support' often lack rigour and assessment as to how they will improve psychosocial wellbeing. Organisations tend to work with refugees they can access easily rather than those who may have the greatest need but may be harder to reach (Kik and Chammay, 2018; El Chammay et al., 2013).

Adolescent-targeted programming and services are particularly lacking (DeJong et al., 2017). Adolescents are often included with 'children and women' as a vulnerable category that requires specific attention; however, their age- and gender-specific needs are rarely addressed. Some studies partially refer to the factors affecting refugee adolescents' wellbeing but overlook the implications for young people's aspirations and choices. This chapter aims to begin to fill this gap by focusing on how factors at different levels converge to shape Syrian refugee girls' lived realities and the implications for their psychosocial wellbeing.

## Methods

This chapter draws on longitudinal participatory research with older adolescents (aged 15–19 years) by the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme. The sample includes more than 100 adolescent boys and girls from Lebanese communities and Syrian and Palestinian refugee communities. It includes the most vulnerable groups, such as out-of-school adolescents or those at risk of dropping out of school, working adolescents, married adolescents or those at risk of child marriage and adolescents involved or at risk of joining armed forces. The sample includes: Palestinian refugee adolescents living in Ein el-Hilweh camp in Saida city, south of Lebanon, and in Wavel camp, in Baalbek city in the Beqaa valley; Syrian refugee adolescents living in informal tented settlements and collective shelters; and vulnerable Lebanese adolescents from Baalbek city.

The research tools include focus group discussions (FGDs) exploring six capability domains (GAGE consortium, 2019) and interactive activities such as participatory photography and peer-to-peer research. Fieldwork was conducted by researchers from different disciplines and technical backgrounds who have been trained in participatory methods and child protection.

Due to the complexity of the Lebanese context, GAGE researchers pay specific attention in the field to social and political sensitivities, striking a balance between giving each participant their own voice yet adapting discussions to avoid conflicts within groups. While discussions often lead to reflections on personal experiences, capturing such experiences without subjecting the participants to violation of privacy or harms requires strong facilitation skills.

This chapter focuses on the experiences of 15 married Syrian adolescent refugee girls and young mothers living in an informal tented settlement near Baalbek city. Baalbek region is heavily weaponised, and there are frequent armed clashes between Lebanese clans. The research participants originally came from villages in Raqqa governorate in Syria. The communities in these villages relied on agricultural work, so it was customary for girls and women to work in agriculture to support their families. Many girls and their families used to migrate to Lebanon each summer to work in agriculture in Baalbek city but fled to the area permanently during the Syrian conflict. The analysis in this chapter is based on 10 FGDs conducted between July and December 2019 as well as participatory activities (participants undertook three photography activities and conducted interviews with their parents and grandparents – known as ‘peer-to-peer interviews’ in the GAGE toolkit).

## Findings

Syrian adolescent girls experience a range of intersecting challenges related to exposure to war, displacement, loss of education, child labour and child marriage. Pressures arise from the precarious living conditions in the informal tented settlements, the responsibilities that adolescent girls take on from an early age, their

isolation and the discrimination Syrian refugees often face from within the Lebanese community. This section presents our research findings, building on adolescents' personal experiences and reflecting a combination of their experiences in Syria, community dynamics and how these have changed during displacement, and the impacts on attitudes towards education, child marriage and issues around violence. We also situate Syrian refugee girls' experiences within wider Lebanese society and explore the impact of the wider economic and political environment on refugee girls' wellbeing and aspirations.

### *Life in displacement*

Married Syrian girls endure harsh living conditions, with many in makeshift tents that offer little protection against the severe winter conditions of the Baalbek region. Due to economic hardships, they have to work in the fields to contribute to family income, in addition to their domestic and childcare responsibilities. Despite doing paid work, the high living costs in Lebanon make it extremely challenging to afford even basic needs. One girl explained: 'The hourly wage did not change since our mothers' time. . . . When we exchanged the money for Syrian lira, it was sufficient to buy many things . . . but here in Lebanon, we can only afford a few basic things.' The levels of hardship and inability to meet basic needs pushes girls (especially young mothers) to neglect their own needs, as they primarily focus on their children. As one girl explained:

We never rest until we sleep, we need to take care of everything. . . . Our last concern is ourselves, even if we are tired and psychologically ill. . . . If the economic situation is bad . . . the mother does not take care of herself well. . . . [S]he becomes only concerned about her child's needs.

Although working in the fields is physically demanding and tiring, it is one of the few opportunities for married Syrian girls to get out of their makeshift housing and so offers a way to cope with stresses rather than being confined to their housing and consumed with negative thoughts. One girl explained:

Working in the fields is the most beautiful thing. . . . [E]ven if it is more tiring and we work under the sun. . . . [I]t is still psychologically comfortable. . . . [I]t comforts the mind . . . and is more comfortable than staying at the house.

However, some girls expressed aspirations (even if subtle) to work in different fields that they consider to have better working conditions. For example, girls in a focus group discussed their perceptions of working in a store:

GIRL 1: *The person who works in the shop and has a salary at the end of each month is a lucky one.*

GIRL 2: *This is a luxury job.*

GIRL 1: *You go to your work clean and return back home clean.*

GIRL 3: *There is no sun in the summer and it would be warm in the winter . . . and if the person [employer] treats you in a good way, so really, this will be an excellent job and you would not care about the working hours and the salary.*

### ***Displacement and child marriage***

The Syrian girls explained that back in their home village, girls usually married at age 20, while in Lebanon, girls are getting married as early as 14. The girls believe that the proper age for marriage is after completing secondary education, at age 17 or 18. Nonetheless, in Lebanon, when a girl begins menstruation, it is increasingly seen as a sign that she is of marriageable age: 'When a girl gets the period, she becomes a lady. . . . It means she is about to get married.' The girls link child marriage to displacement, which has put their families under extreme economic pressure and has changed social and cultural views regarding the ideal age for marriage. Girls explained that child marriage started to become the norm within their community gradually after displacement, and when families started to see that more girls were marrying at an early age, they considered it more acceptable for their daughters as well. The girls often referred to having lost their opportunity for education, linking this to child marriage:

Back in Syria, it was rare for girls to get married at an early age. Girls used to study in school. But, after the war, there were not a lot of schools available for the Syrians. The girls stopped going to school and started working.

One of the girls explained the difference between her life under displacement in Lebanon and her older sisters' lives back in Syria, and how her father's attitude towards child marriage had changed following displacement:

All my older sisters have university degrees and married only after finishing their education in Syria. . . . When I came here I was still very young and I had to stop my education. . . . My father refused to marry me off at the beginning. . . . Gradually, the girls started to get married at 15 and 16 and it became the norm. . . . So when I became 16 they married me off.

The lack of access to education, coupled with family pressure on girls to marry early, makes girls feel that marriage is the only option they can aspire to, as one girl reported:

We are not studying and we are not doing anything. . . . Girls start to get married and the other girls become jealous. . . . Our families start convincing us to accept the groom . . . and we start accepting that we should also marry because we feel that there is nothing else to aspire to in our life.

However, some of the girls believed that parental pressure on young girls to marry – often in the form of ‘persuasion’ – was in fact a subtle form of forced marriage. As one married girl explained:

When someone asks your hand in marriage, you can refuse to get married . . . but only if your family does not like the groom. If they like him and think he is suitable, the persuasion will start. They talk above your head day and night until you are embarrassed from your parents and agree to the marriage. . . . With this ‘persuasion’ they are actually forcing us to agree.

The girls perceive that child marriage does not allow them to have any dreams or aspirations, especially as they did not complete their education. One described how an educated girl’s life might differ from hers:

Educated girls can go out whenever they want, they take their time to get married. . . . They have better things to do in their lives. . . . There are beautiful things to do in life which we [married girls] cannot do. . . . Educated girls can live their life . . . they can have their own dreams. . . . When the girl gets married, she will change, she will not be herself anymore.

### ***Married life***

Girls consider child marriage to be their most challenging experience as they become responsible for their own families (and, in some cases, for their in-laws) at a young age, while daunted by the prospect of child-bearing and parenting while they are still children themselves. One girl explained:

We take the responsibility at a very young age . . . while we are still children. When you get married, you become a woman who should take care of a husband and children. . . . When you get pregnant, the girl’s body gets tired, and her psychological status deteriorates. . . . How can a 16-year-old girl deal with a child? How can she breastfeed him and bring him up?

Married girls face a triple burden of doing paid work in the fields and being solely responsible for their household’s domestic and childcare responsibilities. This means they have limited mobility outside the house and very limited leisure time compared to their husbands, with notable impacts on their psychosocial wellbeing. As one married girl noted:

When we are married we have to work in the fields to help the husband. . . . The husband is out all day, and he hangs out with his friends at night. We spend all day shouting at the children and taking care of the house and cooking. . . . We are psychologically ill.



The girls reported that they do not go on outings with their husband because they cannot afford such leisure activities, and they would be criticised by the community if they did go out with their husband. This is because it is considered shameful for a husband and wife to have leisure activities together other than to visit family members and relatives. It is also considered shameful for the husband to participate in childcare and be visibly interacting with his children in the community, as one young mother explained:

The man cannot take care of the children; people will criticise him and gossip. Even if he plays with his children in the camp, they will say that this is 'shameful' and 'where is his mother?' Because we mothers are the only ones responsible for the children. . . . The husband can only play with the children inside the house.

The cultural gender roles that define domestic work and childcare as girls' responsibilities are challenging, particularly when girls live in large households that often include their in-laws. Although girls often complained about the gender division of labour at home, they also felt this was a valued part of their culture, even though it is discreetly contested. They commented on gender roles as follows:

According to our traditions and the customs, the man has more authority. . . . But we do not feel that we are complicated by it. We understand it because it is the culture of the Arabs. . . . We grew up on these traditions and we do not have any problem with them. . . . We are happy with them.

Intra-family dynamics – whereby husbands have more power in the marital relationship, with the support of their mothers who are also part of the household – make it hard for married girls (especially young mothers) who are experiencing marital problems to negotiate or leave their husband, for fear of losing their children. One of the young mothers explained: 'If your husband fights with you, you need to stay silent because of your children. . . . If you leave your husband, he will take your children, so you should be patient not to lose them.' Furthermore, married Syrian girls suffer from lack of privacy in their housing, either due to sharing a tent with in-laws or due to the proximity of other tents. As one girl explained:

If you want to talk with your husband, you whisper to him so that your neighbour does not listen to you or your in-laws. . . . [Y]ou cannot even laugh at home. . . . It is as if the whole camp lives in a single tent.

Although in-laws can be a source of additional stress for girls, as they have expectations of the girl's role within the household and would often interfere directly in their lives, some girls considered the mother-in-law to be a great support, particularly when they have their first baby: 'The in-laws' criticism can put us under great stress. . . . But sometimes it is better to live with them if the girl is young as

the mother-in-law can teach her and help her.' The support of the mother-in-law was seen to substitute for the absence of the girls' mothers who, in some cases, had remained in Syria.

### ***Intra-family and community dynamics***

Married Syrian girls lack communication with their natal families. Girls lack voice and agency within the family prior to marriage, which in turn impacts their ability to make positive life choices, especially around marriage, as parental negotiations with girls tend to take the form of pressurised 'persuasion'. The girls also described a lack of communication with their mothers about sexual and reproductive health (SRH) issues, which are considered taboo. Although girls receive basic information from older sisters or friends, they often enter into marriage with few expectations and little knowledge about marital life, which means that many start their married lives full of fear and anxiety, especially with regard to sexual relations.

Married Syrian girls reported having limited access to mobile phones. They are not allowed to own a phone as it is considered *shameful* for married women to do so (and the few girls who did own a phone before marriage had to give it up once married). This is mainly related to limiting girls' ability to socialise online over fears of harassment they might face. Some girls reported having partial access to their husband's phone. The girls are also not allowed to have their own social media accounts and only passively use their husband's accounts for leisure. Such restrictions were often imposed by their natal family too prior to marriage, reflecting fears about the dangers of socialising with strangers and linking this to potential harm to girls' reputation and honour, which would be reflected in their family's reputation and honour within the community. Nonetheless, having some (albeit limited) access to phones does provide married girls with the opportunity to connect with family and friends, especially those who remain in Syria.

The main sources of emotional support identified by participants were family members, especially the mother, sister or sister-in-law, many of whom they contact by phone. Physical interactions are generally limited to family members and neighbours in the camp, especially given that it is challenging to visit relatives or friends outside the camp; however, confiding in them helps the girls when they are struggling emotionally. Older female neighbours were also identified as a source of support and comfort for married girls, especially those who are separated from their mothers.

The married Syrian girls who participated in our research did not directly address issues of intra-family violence, especially intimate partner violence. They often referred to physical violence against wives as less prevalent (now, in Lebanon) compared to their mothers' and grandmothers' lives back in Syria. They associated this decrease in physical violence with changes in community attitudes towards violence against women, which have been influenced by recent increases in girls' education (which the girls generally measured by ability to read and write). They also linked it to the influence of Lebanese society on Syrian men, as the girls

perceive that Lebanese men treat their wives better and are not violent towards them, which is influencing Syrian men to change their behaviour. The girls also described increased family support for girls who are subject to physical violence, as one explained:

In the past, they considered the man who hits his wife to be 'a real man' . . . The wife could not ask for her family's protection because they would consider this normal. . . . Nowadays, if the girl is exposed to physical violence, she leaves her husband's house. . . . Her family will support her and talk to the husband and her in-laws.

Even though the girls reported that intimate partner physical violence is not widespread now, compared to previous generations, they described being subject to verbal abuse from their husbands, citing it as the 'biggest challenge' in their marital relationship. One of the girls recounted:

The husband will treat you badly and shout and say all bad words to you . . . while you cannot talk back because this will make him mad. . . . He is only nice if he wants something from you at night [referring to sex].

The girls refrained from talking about personal experiences with sexual violence, which is taboo.

Overall, the married Syrian girls considered their husband to be their main confidante, even if he was also a source of distress. This stems from a cultural perspective that private marital issues should not be shared with anyone. Some of the girls described communicating marital problems with their husband as a way to decrease their distress, as one explained:

The husband is the only one who knows all your private issues, so he is the only one you can talk to comfortably. . . . The woman should talk about what is hurting her and annoying her and maybe, over time, the husband will realise this and soften. . . . Even if he ignores you and your feelings, then you will at least be comfortable by getting things out and talking about them.

In addition, some girls concealed their marital problems to avoid exacerbating them, as one girl commented:

You cannot go to the psychologists. You might tell your sister or your aunt, but not everything. Even your mother, you cannot tell her everything. Sometimes when you visit your mother telling her about your problems with your husband, she gets angry and she shouts that she will kill him. . . . Generally, you should not say everything, not to the mother, brother, psychologist, sister.

This also reflects a cultural perception that once a girl has married, she no longer belongs to her birth family: 'Your husband and his family should help with the problems because you live with them. You become a guest to your family once you marry.'

### *Intercommunity experiences*

The married Syrian girls reported that most of their interactions with wider society are negative, resulting in feelings of humiliation and feeling unwelcome in Lebanese society. Girls in a focus group discussion commented on their relations with the local Lebanese community:

GIRL 1: *There are a few good [Lebanese] people, but most of them are not good.*

GIRL 2: *All of them [the Lebanese] have the same perception . . . they consider us as 'gypsies'.*

GIRL 3: *They think we are barbaric. . . We feel that we are unwanted.*

GIRL 4: *They consider us people of no value.*

However, these shared negative experiences are serving to strengthen intra-community relations and conformity, as the local Syrian community inside the camp presents married girls with a haven of belonging where they are respected as part of their community. As one girl explained: 'In the camp, no one belittles the other, we don't feel this because all of us are Syrians like each other. That is why we prefer not to leave the camp. . . We have value among our people.'

The girls' physical appearance and their traditional dresses (*abaya*, a loose overgarment) make them more visible as 'different' within Lebanese society, where they reported being subject to harassment and negative experiences:

They know we are Syrians. . . It is clear from the way we dress. . . The Lebanese people don't wear this [the *abaya*]. . . When people see us on our way back from the fields, they laugh at us. . . They tell us in our face, 'you are gypsies'. . . They make fun of us in our face.

The girls also reported negative experiences based on differences between their dialect and the local Lebanese community's dialect, which can result in feelings of humiliation, as one girl explained: 'People laugh at us everywhere. . . They don't understand the way we talk [the accent] and they laugh. . . [T]hey mock us. . . We feel embarrassed by this.'

The girls consider public spaces to be unsafe, but they often refer to feelings of being uncomfortable, or to verbal harassment or discrimination, rather than fears of physical violence. They reported encountering negative attitudes in the local market and while using public transport, for example:

When we use the bus, we feel that people are looking at us. . . They look at us with a strange look and we feel really awkward. . . They perceive us as

a different species. . . . We can't explain these situations . . . because honestly, these situations hurt us.

Over the past 30 years, Lebanon has undergone a transition from an agricultural to a service-based economy, such that doing agricultural work is now associated with being of a lower social status. This amplifies the stigma of being a refugee. The winter season is hardest for the married Syrian girls as they experience more negative attitudes owing to having mud on their feet and clothes. They have even been banned from entering healthcare facilities, pharmacies and supermarkets, and from travelling on public buses during the winter because their shoes are muddy. One girl described her experience as follows:

In the winter our feet are full of mud from the camp. . . . [Lebanese] people would not allow us to enter places. . . . They look at us with disgust. . . . They think we are dirty, but why can't they understand that it is not our fault?! We live in the camp and it is muddy, what can we do? . . . It is not that we like it! We hate the mud too!

The girls report that they have 'adapted' to such negative attitudes among wider society. While such adaptation can be a form of protecting themselves from the emotional and psychological harm that these experiences bring, it also results in unresolved feelings of rejection, withdrawal and increased isolation, which reveals a detachment from society as a whole and diminishes opportunities for positive interactions with Lebanese society. Moreover, these negative experiences contribute to married girls' isolation at home, as they tend to avoid leaving the camp in order to minimise any negative experiences they might face in the wider community. One girl stated:

Because of this [the negative experiences], the house is the most beautiful thing. In the camp, there are the people who can understand us, while we don't find this outside the camp. . . . In the camp, there are no people who mock you and there are people who appreciate you. . . . Usually, we experience an emotional breakdown when we go out of the home.

Although the Syrian girls consider the camp to be a safe haven relative to outside the camp, they also reported facing violence from within their own community. However, they tend to consider that this has less of a negative impact on them, downplaying its effects on their wellbeing. For example, one girl explained:

Generally, we were never exposed to any harm [physical violence] in the camp. . . . It is always verbal. . . . We may feel affected by this, but we do not take into consideration. . . . When this happens, we just remain silent and we go back to our tent. . . because it is better than making the problem bigger. . . . We avoid confrontations and we do not react.

Moreover, as already mentioned, Baalbek city (where the girls live) is a heavily weaponised area, and there are frequent armed clashes between local clans. The

married Syrian girls in our research also referred to fears that this violence would spread within the Lebanese community, which adds to their distress and further pushes them into isolation inside the camp. As one of the girls described: ‘They keep fighting each other here [in Baalbek], it is frightening! . . . It is scary to get out when they fight, they start shooting at each other.’

As well as encountering negative experiences from the wider Lebanese community, the girls also cited being subject to verbal and physical violence from some Lebanese employers. One described how she was treated by landowners and watchmen in the fields: ‘Some of the landowners and the watchmen shout and talk to us in a bad way. . . . They also hit us with a stick to make us work harder, especially the small children. . . as if we are animals.’

### ***The threat from Lebanese authorities***

The married Syrian girls in our research agreed that the Lebanese authorities rarely stop girls and women at checkpoints. Yet they still consider checkpoints unsafe for them, especially when travelling with their husbands. Although Syrian men and boys are more likely to be harassed or detained (Brun, 2017), the married girls were very afraid of Lebanese authorities and especially the army, due to negative experiences at checkpoints or army raids on their camp targeting men who have no valid residency permit. The girls describe how these raids impacted them:

One day, they surrounded us in the camp at 6.00 am. . . as if we made something or a crime. . . . [T]hey took all the men who didn’t have official papers and who had expired papers.

The Lebanese government’s recent crackdown on Syrian refugees (as noted earlier) (Human Rights Watch, 2019) has increased fears among married Syrian girls: ‘They are more serious with us regarding the papers now. . . . We are living in continuous fear.’

Nevertheless, the girls still perceive that their movement outside the camp, as individuals, is easier compared to men and could see that this would be a great source of stress for men, who are the main target of the authorities. However, the married girls cannot travel alone any real distance without their husbands, as to do so would be culturally unacceptable. To travel short distances within the city to the local market or services, the girls should be accompanied by an older woman (usually the mother-in-law), which in effect limits their movement (other than to go to the fields to work, which are usually close to their informal tented settlement). As one of the girls explained: ‘I can’t go out alone. . . . My husband comes with me, but really, we stay stressed and worried at the checkpoint.’ Another girl explained how this restricted movement impacts their social life and increases her fears for her husband:

It is not safe for us, we feel stressed and worried at the checkpoint until we pass it, this is even if they would not stop us. . . . We only go to close [nearby] places now. . . . We stopped visiting our relatives who live far from us.

## Discussion

During the transitional years of adolescence, adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing is a vital element of their personal growth, which our findings reveal is directly affected by how they are situated within their family, community, wider society vis-à-vis the state. For refugee adolescents, different factors – starting with their experience of conflict and displacement, and their subsequent experiences in their refuge country – intersect to affect their overall wellbeing and shape their future aspirations and choices. This chapter has focused on the experiences of married Syrian girls living in Lebanon as refugees, while not dismissing the impact of their experiences in their home country and during the conflict, which led to their displacement.

Socioeconomic vulnerability emerges as a common stressor for Syrian refugee girls. Given its implications for the ability to meet basic needs such as access to food, education, housing and health care, socioeconomic vulnerability remains one of the main stresses Syrian girls and their families face each day, and it largely shapes their opportunities and experiences. Our findings indicate that married Syrian girls' experiences are determined by their gender, place of origin in Syria and the traditions attached to it, as well as their type of settlement within the Lebanese community. Syrian refugees living in informal tented settlements are perceived to be of lower social standing by the Lebanese than those living in collective shelters or shared apartments. They are looked down upon as 'gypsies', perceived as 'not clean' and as having infectious diseases. This is closely related to their living conditions and situation.

For the married Syrian girls who participated in our research, displacement has drastically changed their life, principally through the loss of education opportunities and enormous challenges they face due to living in the tented settlements in Lebanon. Although they used to migrate seasonally with their families to work in the Lebanese fields prior to the Syrian conflict, they still had access to free education in Syria and future career opportunities. This was evidenced by some of the girls who described the trajectory of older sisters or relatives who were able to continue their education, find work and marry at an older age. Being displaced by the war to permanently reside in Lebanon has put the girls and their families under even greater pressure and exacerbated their vulnerability, as their minimal wages and the high cost of living in Lebanon leave them unable to meet basic needs. This, coupled with lack of access to education, has pushed the girls permanently out of school and into child labour and child marriage.

The burdens of displacement on Syrian refugee families have led to a change in cultural practices and attitudes towards child marriage. Within the girls' community, child marriage has now become the norm, although not necessarily driven by economic factors, but rather by the need to protect the family's reputation and honour. Lacking any opportunities for the future and being persuaded to marry early by their family (reflecting newfound acceptance of the practice among their community), girls' future educational and career aspirations diminish and their opportunities – which they call 'luck' – revolve around marriage and having a family.

This pushes the girls into accepting their reality, but it does not eliminate the deep desire to envision a different life. Statements such as ‘They have better things to do in their lives’ or ‘they can have their own dreams’, to describe educated single girls, reflect a deep sense of lost opportunities and life prospects. The girls mostly related their child marriage to the loss of educational opportunities that were available to them in Syria.

The gendered division of labour in the family and community overburdens married girls with domestic and childcare responsibilities, which they often undertake without any support, in addition to doing paid work in the fields. These burdens result in physical and emotional strain related to pregnancy and the inability to ‘rest’ and ‘self-care’. Child marriage not only exerts intense psychological distress on young girls due to the multiple responsibilities they bear while they are still themselves children, it also results in a sense of loss of selfhood, as the following statement reflects: ‘When the girl gets married, she will change; she will not be herself.’ This is often manifested in the rhetoric of self-sacrifice that is echoed in married Syrian girls’ statements about their worries and aspirations for their own children rather than themselves.

The girls’ individual marital experiences vary. However, their relationship is typically one in which the husband has all authority, and husbands in general either play no part in parenting or play a negative role, such as inciting children to disobey and even hit their mothers. As noted earlier, husbands do not provide support in parenting and childcare due to cultural gender norms that consider such actions ‘shameful’ for men. While a range of factors combine to limit girls’ mobility (only leaving the camp for work), the community still places strong limits on opportunities for married girls to have space and time for leisure, even for a simple walk. And even though married Syrian refugee girls face different restrictions and additional burdens from their family and community that leave them physically and mentally exhausted, they still have a strong sense of belonging to their community as it represents safety, especially given the negative experiences girls often face in wider Lebanese society.

Syrian girls living in informal tented settlements experience discrimination in their frequent interactions with the Lebanese community and authorities, on roads, at markets and service facilities and in the workplace, reflecting weak social cohesion between the Lebanese host community and Syrian refugees and discriminatory attitudes towards refugees, who are often described as ‘dirty’. The girls’ career aspirations were to work in a closed place (not in the fields) away from the harsh winter conditions but also somewhere that would be considered ‘clean’ (they felt this was important, even if they were to be exploited at work in terms of salary or working hours). This reflects how negative attitudes and discrimination shape married Syrian girls’ aspirations.

Nonetheless, married Syrian girls’ negative experiences are more stressful when they encounter Lebanese authorities, especially at checkpoints, which have intensified recently with the government crackdown on Syrian refugees. Although men are more susceptible to harassment and arrest, the married Syrian girls in our



research would generally avoid travelling to far away places without their husbands for cultural reasons. While the girls had not experienced harassment directly at checkpoints, their husbands had, while accompanied by their wives. This creates heightened fears among married girls, making them want to avoid the checkpoints, which further limits their mobility as checkpoints are sited almost at every main road. This, in turn, further limits their social contact with family and relatives living outside their camp.

These negative experiences with the Lebanese authorities and community render the wider society unsafe for married Syrian girls, who feel that the only safe place for them is their own home and community. This, in effect, results in 'self-imposed' isolation, which is forced on the girls by their experiences. The emotional toll this puts on the girl is considerable, as the following statement reflects: 'We experience an emotional breakdown when we go out of the home.' The girls' shared negative experiences beyond the camp have served to reinforce intra-community cultural conformity, as the girls displayed acceptance of the prevailing gendered cultural norms despite the limitations and stresses these restrictions involve. Married girls' isolation, as well as their strong attachment to their culture and community identity as a way of self-protection, amid feelings of rejection and alienation from the wider Lebanese society, weakens their opportunities to challenge and negotiate the restrictions placed on them. Conforming with these norms has also resulted in girls suppressing and nullifying the impact of violence they experience from within their own family and community and its effects on their psychosocial wellbeing.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Our findings demonstrate that the psychosocial wellbeing of married adolescent Syrian girls is closely related to how they are situated at different levels, from the family and community to wider society and the state. The intersection of these challenges at different levels, and in policy and programming, has a direct impact on adolescents' aspirations, choices, opportunities and future prospects. Their precarious living environment means they often perceive no positive future beyond marital life and lack support from social networks, as well as resources and opportunities. These aspects combine to prevent refugee adolescent girls from developing their full capabilities and aspiring to a better, more fulfilling life. Gendered cultural norms and practices further impede their healthy growth and development. The socio-political and economic instabilities of Syrian refugee families in Lebanon and the complex socio-political histories of different groups of refugees play a fundamental role in shaping adolescents' worlds, and hence their aspirations and opportunities.

Lebanon now stands at a critical juncture; the country's complex political history and ongoing economic and socio-political instability, coupled with the impact of regional conflicts on an already fragile state, render the refugee situation in Lebanon unlikely to be resolved by state-led intervention. In light of this, the weight of responsibility falls to UN agencies, NGOs and donors to implement

programming that takes into consideration the wider context as well as the specific needs and capacities of diverse refugee communities. Moreover, programming needs to respond to adolescents' age- and gender-specific needs. Given the weakening social cohesion amid the country's ongoing socioeconomic crisis, it is necessary to push for policies that would at least temporarily include refugees. We acknowledge that working in a socially and politically complex environment such as Lebanon, and facing shortages of funding, presents unique challenges for UN agencies, civil society actors and donors. While the Global Compact on Refugees recognises the context-specific capacities, resources and interests of host countries, this needs to extend to recognising the political economy dimensions of complex conflict-affected contexts such as Lebanon. The policy and tools for such recognition fall beyond the scope of this work.

Acknowledging these limitations, the emerging crisis in Lebanon requires a comprehensive approach that tackles the different challenges facing adolescent refugees at different levels and provides them with more sustainable opportunities. Unless there is action now, adolescent refugees – and particularly Syrian adolescents in Lebanon – risk becoming a lost generation. Understanding the different factors at play in adolescent refugees' lives requires greater attention to enabling their participation in taking decisions about their lives. Programming and services must build avenues of communication with and promote active participation of refugee adolescents (especially adolescent girls) who are isolated and alienated within their own communities as well as among Lebanese host communities. Successful inclusion of adolescent refugees and strengthened social cohesion requires investment in service delivery personnel on the ground working within the organisations and services that cater for refugees. Reports of negative experiences at the service and programme levels contribute to feelings of dissatisfaction and distrust among adolescents, in the only external space where refugees are supposed to find some protection and a sense of understanding and acceptance.

As our findings reveal, given the deteriorating socioeconomic situation in Lebanon and weakening social cohesion, refugee adolescents face even greater strains on their psychosocial wellbeing. There is an urgent need to expand and enhance access to mental health and other psychosocial support services and programming for adolescent refugees, especially married girls, who enjoy little support at the family and community levels and bear mounting responsibilities from a young age.

Mainstreaming psychosocial wellbeing in programming is essential; however, there remains a lack of knowledge of specialist services among refugees, as well as issues on affordability and accessibility. Expanding programmes and services that have clear evidence-based tools and measurable targets is necessary to improve adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing. Interventions should take into account refugee adolescents' limited mobility, the impact of cultural traditions and gendered norms around privacy, and broader cultural norms. This applies to social cohesion programming as well. While social cohesion is often mainstreamed in programming that includes participants from both Lebanese host and refugee communities, adolescent refugees' lived experiences reveal that there is very little social cohesion

in practice, which leads to persistent feelings of discrimination and alienation. Social cohesion should be one of the main issues tackled directly and through targeted programming, given its potential to positively impact different aspects of adolescent Syrian refugees' lives.

Expanding interventions to address refugees' immediate survival needs is essential as a foundation for other effective interventions to address psychosocial wellbeing, especially among adolescent refugees. Concomitantly, as well as interventions to alleviate social inequalities, family-based participatory programmes are much needed to address family dynamics and strengthen the communities that provide adolescents with their sense of security and protection. Adolescents have thus far not been a priority in refugee interventions, and greater efforts are needed to support them to develop their full capabilities and to improve their psychological wellbeing.

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