

Lost Childhood...

Child, early and forced marriage
in a Syrian IDP camp:
Causes and effects



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The Centre for Civil Society and Democracy is an independent Syrian NGO whose mission is to support and strengthen civil society and democracy and promote the values of freedom, justice and coexistence. The organization was founded in 2011 by a group of Syrian civil society activists with a vision of a long term movement for peace and democracy in Syria. CCSD now supports a network of over 1,500 individual human rights defenders, peace builders, and democracy activists in Syria and refugee communities who represent more than 300 civil society groups. Our trainings and campaigns have reached more than 5,000 Syrians.

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Introduction

It is widely believed that there has been an increased prevalence of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) in the Syrian community, especially among those who are internally displaced or refugees. CEFM violates the rights of young Syrian girls, limits their futures, and negatively affects their communities by potentially preventing them from taking on leadership roles in building a peaceful and safe society. At the Centre for Civil Society and Democracy (CCSD) we believe that “No safe nor coherent society can be established in the absence of effectively empowered women.” For this reason, we seek to find effective ways to curb CEFM.

Since its establishment, CCSD has worked hard to support and empower all of Syrian civil society. We have focused particularly on increasing women’s roles in decision-making processes through our Women for the Future of Syria program. This program provides training, support, and advocacy for Syrian women at the local and national level. In conjunction with Women for the Future of Syria, CCSD launched the ‘Ana Hiya’, or ‘I Am She’ network on March 8, 2015 (International Women’s Day). This network of peace circles engage in a series of feminist, peace-focused dialogues which enhance peace and build towards the active participation of women economically, socially and culturally. The I Am She circles have spread throughout most of Syria’s provinces and into its neighbouring countries.

CCSD conducted research exploring the causes and consequences of CEFM in Syrian refugee camps. Our research focused on building an understanding of the reasons families chose CEFM, including the social pillars supporting their decision and the changes which have taken place in the camps that contribute to its increase. We see this as the first step towards planning interventions which could lessen CEFM and, in turn, be used to draw up a framework for all organizations working to limit violence against women.

Nour Burhan

Director of Women for the Future of Syria



Executive Summary

The issue of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is recently considered to have become a widespread issue in the Syrian community, especially due to the crisis of internal and external displacement. The consequences experienced by girls are mainly negative in terms of psychological and mental health. For this reason, it must be studied in order to identify the causes and effects, bearing in mind that such effects are not limited to the under-aged girls, but extend even to the level of the whole society. As such, CEFM represents a waste of the human resources of the community. It not only violates the rights of girls, but also the rights of the community in development. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to study and analyze this phenomenon in order to identify its causes and characteristics, especially following displacement. This research aims to identify the trends of Syrian internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the camps in regards to CEFM, including understanding the reasons behind its prevalence and its consequences. Additionally, it aims to come up with recommendations that could shape the work plan for restricting and limiting the spread of this issue.

This is categorized as exploratory research because there have been no other similar studies as accurate and detailed as this one in terms of detecting the causes and results of this phenomenon in Syrian displaced communities. The research adopted the methodology of descriptive analysis in order to fulfill its objectives. Despite the fact that this research does not provide a full picture of the reality of CEFM in displaced communities, it can still be used as an indicator for understanding this issue and people's attitudes towards it.

Field research was conducted along the Syrian-Turkish border from December 10, 2015 until January 18, 2016 inside Atma, Qah, and Al-Salam, the three largest camps for Syrian IDPs in Idlib Governorate. The research adopted two main tools, namely: focus group discussions that targeted 59 persons (26 women and 33 men) in the three aforementioned camps; and in-depth interviews which were carried out with ten under-aged girls who experienced CEFM.

The research resulted in several conclusions, the most important of which are as follows:

- CEFM did exist before, but it has increased after displacement for multiple reasons including: miserable economic situations; social norms and conventions; religious norms; relocation and changes in social ties due to displacement; increasing psychological pressure on girls themselves, pushing them to seek safety and stability; the absence of laws determining a legal minimum marriage age; and finally the loss of educational opportunities.
- On the other hand, the results indicate that the participants did not take a unified stance on CEFM. Some were in favor, while others were against it. There were also some who rejected the idea in principle, but who had resorted to CEFM to alleviate hardships they experienced due to their harsh living conditions.

As for the results of the interviews with the under-aged girls, conclusions were as follows:

- The majority of the girls only realized that they were victims of this type of marriage only after experiencing it.
- Most of them married willingly and were not forced to accept the marriage by decision-makers at home.
- Most of the girls had no knowledge of the adverse health, psychological and social consequences of CEFM.
- There were also many misconceptions regarding the negative consequences on the girls; parents thought the consequences would be largely positive and cited these to convince the girls to marry.
- Finally, most of the girls did not receive support after this type of marriage, neither from their parents, nor from their husbands.



Introduction to Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM)

CEFM is defined as an official marriage or unofficial coupling before the age of eighteen years old. It impacts both boys and girls, but more often affects girls negatively. CEFM is considered to be a violation of the rights of the child because it hinders their healthy psychological and social growth, as indicated the by the cases of CEFM.

Convention of the Rights of the Child:

This is the primary international instrument that legally binds states to include the entire human rights series - i.e., civil and political rights along with cultural, social and economic ones. It contains 54 articles and two optional protocols. It clearly states the basic human rights that children shall enjoy indiscriminately and everywhere. These rights are: the child's right to survival, development and growth to the maximum extent; protection from harmful influences, mistreatment and exploitation; and the right to complete participation in the family along with cultural and social life. The Convention's four basic principles are outlined as: non-discrimination, best interests of the child, right of living, survival and development, and respect for the views of the child. Each of the clearly stated rights in the convention is inherently linked with the child's humanitarian dignity and consistent development. The Convention protects children's rights by setting standards related to healthcare, education, and the child's social, civil and legal services. (Unicef.org)

The evidence indicates that girls who marry early leave the official education system and oftentimes become pregnant. Maternal mortality is a prevalent cause of death among girls aged 15 - 19 worldwide, causing 70,000 deaths annually. The children of mothers under 19 have a 60 percent higher death rate in the first year than those of mothers over 19. Even if the baby survives, it is more likely to have a low birth weight, malnutrition, and physical or mental stunting.

Girls who marry as children risk experiencing violence, assault, and exploitation, in addition to being at greater risk of contracting a range of gynecological diseases than women who marry as adults.

In addition to physical health risks, there can be psychological consequences of CEFM such as lifelong depression, social isolation, and identity confusion wherein the girl feels caught between womanhood and childhood, making her more physiologically fragile.¹

CEFM also hinders the social development of young girls. After marriage, most often girls stop studying, which eventually limits their job opportunities and hinders their professional mobility. Furthermore, CEFM deprives society from the potential energies of those girls, and which would be effective in the society-building process. This issue affects the process of raising children in the home. More broadly speaking, CEFM increases the overall loss of community members who could participate positively in developing the society.

Many factors interconnect in order to perpetuate the issue, such as poverty and social and religious norms. Many people believe that marrying a girl as soon as possible will provide her with ‘protection’ and preserve her family’s honour. There are also religious norms that condone CEFM even if it has proven to be harmful.

The reasons for CEFM are various, and even if they appear as social norms and traditions they are linked, more or less, to other economic factors such as, for example, obtaining or preserving a good home, leverage or rank. These interest-based reasons have transformed, over time, into deeply-ingrained norms and traditions in the social structure. Because the conditions and root causes behind CEFM have changed over time, the adherence to CEFM could be expected to

1- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders American Psychiatric Association. Arlington: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013. P 195–189.



wear off gradually. However, CEFM has surged suddenly with supported by social, cultural, and religious proofs and justifications.

Assuming that poverty is one of the reasons that make parents choose CEFM, whether in order to alleviate economic burdens, to obtain dowries, or to become in-laws with advantageous families, the improvement of the livelihood conditions for the family will affect the range of prevalence of this phenomenon in the society. This goes well beyond the system of traditional, tightly-knit families that are committed to marrying their girls to their cousins in order to preserve the name or the honour of their families. It also goes well beyond any other traditional norms created by the prevailing social situation, which impose a closed system inside certain groups. When such groups develop and transform from their closed state into a bigger one that consists of a non-finite collection of groups governed by a social charter along with a law regulating the relationship between the group's individuals, then eventually there will be a change in the pattern of the relationships inside the group. This will eventually lead to a change in the perspective of this group towards CEFM. Therefore, if a certain group loses the social charter that governs their relationships with other groups, or does not believe in the applied laws, they will resort to traditional mechanisms that could protect them and contribute to their continuity.

Pervading issues that have adverse effects on societies in the modern age are mainly linked to the crises that hit that society. Syrian society is no exception, especially following the social upheaval that started in March 2011. According to UNICEF, three percent of children under the age of 15 experienced CEFM in 2010, and 13 percent of children under 18. However, as the crisis increased in size on all levels, we started to notice the re-surfacing of CEFM along with the rise of new issues that the Syrian community had not witnessed before, such as the marriage of very young girls under the age of 15.

The issue of CEFM is tackled in a number of international conventions and treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against

Women. Article 16 states, ***“The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory.”*** A marriage cannot be officially recognised without “complete and free” acceptance according to The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration states that, “... consent cannot be ‘free and full’ when one of the parties involved is not sufficiently mature to make an informed decision about a life partner.” Although marriage is not mentioned specifically in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the issue is linked with other rights stated in the Convention. These include the right to freedom of expression, the right to protection from all forms of abuse, and the right to protection from unhealthy traditional practices. There are other international conventions that do address CEFM, such as the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages.²

2- <http://data.unicef.org/child-protection/child-marriage.html#sthashaJWsCMYo.dpuf>



Research Methodology

This research is categorized as exploratory, aiming to identify the dimensions of CEFM in the internally displaced Syrian community studied. It is categorized as such because of the lack of statistics about CEFM in the IDP camps along the Syrian-Turkish border and because there are no research publications detailing the changes in the prevalence of CEFM in the Syrian community following the displacement crisis, to the knowledge of the researcher.

This research aims to:

- Identify the trends of CEFM in the Syrian IDP community.
- Understand the reasons behind the spread of CEFM, especially after the crisis of displacement to the Syrian camps.
- Recognise the psychological and social effects of CEFM.
- Come up with results that contribute to developing a work plan to curb CEFM.

The research used an analytical descriptive approach to achieve these objectives. Even if this research does not give a full picture of the reality of CEFM in Syrian IDP communities, it can still be useful in creating a framework to approach this issue and people's attitudes towards it.

The research adopted two main tools to understand CEFM:

- 1- **Focus group** discussions were conducted in three camps in order to identify people's varying attitudes towards CEFM.
- 2- **In-depth**, individual interviews were conducted with girls who experienced CEFM in order to understand the reasons behind their marriages, from their perspectives.

Research Details:

- 1- **Timeline:** the field data was collected from December 10, 2015 until January 18, 2016.
- 2- **Geographical scope:** field research was conducted along the Syrian-Turkish border inside Atma, Qah, and Al-Salam, the three largest Syrian IDP camps in Idlib Governorate.

First data collection tool: In-depth interviews

The in-depth interviews targeted 10 girls who were married as children. The objectives of the interviews were to:

- 1- Find out the reasons behind their marriages.
- 2- Recognise the psychological and social effects of their early marriages.
- 3- Familiarise the girls with the effects of this kind of marriage and identify the extent of their knowledge about such effects before marriage.
- 4- Identify the way through which their marriage was conducted.
- 5- Identify how much support the girls received after marriage.

Research sample criteria: the research sample targeted 10 girls who were married as children. They were aged 15-19 at the time of the interview. All of the girls were divorced except one, and two of them had been married and divorced twice.

Nationality of the husband: only one girl was married to a non-Syrian man, while the rest were married to Syrian men.

Educational level: six girls finished middle school and four girls only finished elementary school.

Occupational status: seven girls were unemployed, while three others had jobs (handicrafts, hairdresser, and tailor).

Occupational status of the husbands: five girls were married to fighters, and the five others were married to men with different jobs (doctor, teacher, construction worker, and mobile shop worker).

Challenges encountered during the field research:

In addition to security challenges and cold weather, several of the girls we had originally arranged interviews with refused to be interviewed, while three others did not accept to be interviewed in person, insisting instead to hold the interview over the phone.



Applied methodological concepts:

- “Girl” refers to an under-aged girl who experienced CEFM.
- “Survivor” refers to a girl who experienced violence and was reached by one of the service providers or needs assessment performers.
- “Victim” refers to a girl who experienced violence and was not reached by one of the service providers or needs assessment performers.
- “Marriage decision-maker” refers to the person who made the decision to marry the girl. This could be the father, mother, a brother, a relative or anyone else.

The framework of the in-depth interview was designed based on the following assumptions:

- The research assumed that survivors from the experience of CEFM in the target community belong to the age range of 16 – 18, not younger.

The results of the research contradicted the assumption; the ages of all of the girls in the research sample were in the range of 14 – 16. In addition to that, some of the girls had experienced CEFM twice, resulting in divorce.

- The research assumed that the husband of the survivor would be 10 - 15 years older than she, no more.

The results of the field research contradicted this assumption. There were six marriages in which the husband was 5 - 10 years older than the girl, three marriages in which the husband was 11 - 20 years older than the girl and three marriages in which the husband was 20+ years older than the girl.

- The research assumed that the survivor did not realize that she would be a victim before marrying.

In order to confirm or negate the truth of this assumption, there was an open-ended question with the objective of identifying the opinions of the girls regarding CEFM. Their answers can be divided into three categories.

First, seven survivors whose experience ended with divorce see CEFM as unfair, depriving them of enjoying life’s opportunities, and a cause of divorce, disease and loss of future.

“Families often are tempted by appearances, and they don’t know what’s in the best interest of their only daughter. The girl doesn’t know what is in her best interest either, but when she reaches a certain [older] age she can understand married life better and make a decision, take responsibility.”

-Response from one of the interviewed girls

Second, two survivors whose experience ended with divorce. The first one considered the marriage as ‘Sunna’ and complementary with her religion, demonstrating that the ‘Sahabeyyat’ – female companions of the Prophet- are considered ideal and they were married at an early age. The second survivor only lived with her husband for a few days before he went to Germany. The plan is that she will follow him there. Because of this she has not undergone an extensive experience of CEFM.

Third, one survivor answered only “I don’t know.”

- **The research assumed that the married girl would not realize the benefits of waiting until the age of 18 to get married until after her unsuccessful experience of CEFM.**

The results confirmed this assumption. The survivors considered the experience of CEFM as a failed and unfair one, based on their own experience. They had originally imagined that the marriage would provide happiness, better economic conditions and independence. After their negative experience, they realized that marriage should only happen when girls are older, which enables them to choose in a correct manner, and take responsibility. They did not mention the negative consequences of CEFM, i.e., they did not know the negative consequences of CEFM before age 18.

- **The research assumed that the survivors do not know that CEFM is a leading cause of disease and health problems.**

The results confirmed this assumption. Eleven survivors, along with one victim³ experienced health problems as the result of their marriage including hemorrhage,

3- Note to explain these results: 12 experiences were considered because there were two girls who experienced CEFM twice.



miscarriage, extreme gynecological folliculitis, and anemia. One survivor did not suffer from any health problems. Eight of them believed that CEFM was the main reason for their health problems after being told so by their doctor. They had had no idea before their marriage that they might encounter these health problems as a result of CEFM. On the other hand, three girls did not consider CEFM to be the main reason for such health problems. One girl said that she was suffering from the gynecological folliculitis before she got married and she saw this as proof that CEFM was not the cause. A second girl said that she had "...a fully mature body just like a 30-year-old woman, not too skinny or weak to consider CEFM the reason for the health problems". In other words, this indicates a belief that the outer body is the indicator for the age of marriage, and a fully 'mature' body (breasts, menstruation, etc.) are the indicators, rather than the age of the womb, degree of awareness, or psychological stability. A third girl said that women in their twenties and thirties are exposed to gynecological folliculitis and this proves that CEFM was not the cause. All of this lay in the domain of justifying or legitimising CEFM.

- **Due to the economic and social pressures on the society in general, the research assumed that the families or the decision-makers had forced the girls into CEFM.**

The results contradicted this assumption. In only three of the cases of CEFM were the girls forced to marry by their families. One girl wanted to marry and forced her family to accept her marriage. For eight of the girls, the decision was made by their families, but the girls also wanted the marriage. Through the answers of the survivors, it is clear that there was no comprehension of the dangers of CEFM. The girls had a positive conception of CEFM, considering it, at best, as a salvation from the conditions lived by the family and the girl. This indicates that consent was absent even if the girl originally accepted the marriage. This is confirmed by the afore-mentioned international charters that deem marriages invalid when they occur without complete and free approval.

One of the girls was afraid that her family might find out [about the interview] and afraid to talk about her marriage to the extent that she did not wish to hold the visit in her house as it was planned. Despite the fact that she was forced to marry, she gave justifications every now and then, and interspersed her statements with prayers for guidance for her family. She did not blame her family, nor did she show any hatred. She said that her family was the decision-maker, and they forced her with the reason that they know her best interest.

-From the notes of the field researcher who conducted the interviews

- The research assumed that the decision-maker would believe that CEFM would have a positive effect on the girls' psychological health, but that in reality the consequences would be negative.

The psychological and social consequences for CEFM, as gathered in the answers of the research sample		
Psychological Consequences		
	Yes	No
Feelings of isolation	10	2
Feelings of permanent restlessness	9	3
Loss of the ability to enjoy activities	11	1
Affiliation to real age	11	1
Decreased ability to achieve	9	3
Lack of independence	7	5
Feeling safe	7	5
Social Consequences		
Feeling comfortable due to decreasing people's gossip	8	4



Feeling comfortable for completing the second half of her religion ⁴	8	4
Losing educational opportunities	12	-
Better economic conditions	4	8

1. Psychological consequences:

In 10 of the 12 cases, the survivor tended towards isolation after marriage. Two of the girls – including one victim – did not tend towards isolation after their marriage. Four of the decision-makers (families) knew that the girls would tend towards isolation after marriage, and it was one of the reasons for marrying them. Middle Eastern societies consider highly sociable girls to be impolite, so isolation is seen as a high ethical standard. The society considers a low quantity of communication as proof of high morals. Therefore, the highest compliment on the morals of a girl is her being shy, which indicates social withdrawal and a tendency towards isolation. In other words, it is a feeling telling its owner that she is ‘nothing’⁵.

“I developed a tendency towards isolation and had no desire to see anybody after marriage. I began to fear people when I walked through the streets because I felt like people looked at me and talked negatively about me”.

-One of the interviewees

In nine of the twelve cases, the survivor became more anxious after marriage. Two decision-makers knew beforehand that the girl would feel anxious after marriage. They considered anxiety to be proof of a girl’s awareness, intelligence, maturity and ability to take responsibility. It was clear in the answers of the survivors that

4- There is an Islamic doctrine which considers marriage to be the completion of one’s religion. This doctrine considers that one is born half religious, and through marriage one becomes fully religious.

5- “Shyness and Social Phobia”. Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 .2012 January 2014.

their decision-makers thought they would be good responsibility holders and smart/skilled housewives.

When we dove into the details, it was clear that the girls' anxiety reached an abnormal level. Many psychologists agree that it is normal for one to experience a little anxiety as the result of taking on new responsibilities. However, some of the girls were so anxious they did things such as double-check the gas cylinder ten times a day. Some of them considered that being in a new position where they would have to meet new people in their role as a housewife and 'get along with people' caused their anxiety. Some of the survivors considered their anxiety to be an indicator of having achieved awareness and maturity, despite the fact that it is considered by psychologists an aspect of some types of psychological disorder.⁶

In eleven of the twelve cases, the survivor lost the ability to enjoy activities such as painting, dancing, music, and makeup. Only one victim thought her joy was increased by CEFM. Two of the decision-makers knew that the girls' joy would lessen, and this was one of the reasons for choosing CEFM. They considered the girls' activities to be bad for her and a waste of her time. Therefore, they forced the girls to marry since they knew that the girls would take less joy in these activities. Nine of the decision-makers did not know that CEFM would cause their daughters to lose joy in such activities.

"I used to love listening to songs, dancing, and buying clothes and makeup, but after my marriage I lost the joy of these activities. I no longer loved dancing, shopping or listening to songs."

-One of the interviewees

6- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. American Psychiatric Association. Arlington: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013. P 195-189.



In ten of the twelve cases, the survivors lost their real age affiliation, i.e. they feel lost between childhood and adulthood. Two others have completely lost the feeling of being a child. One girl feels that she reached adulthood psychologically, and the other girl feels like she is in her 30s. Two of the decision-makers knew that the survivors would experience this feeling. This was another reason for forcing the girls to marry as they see it as the optimal solution for passing through the phase of 'indiscretion'. The rest of the decision-makers did not know this would happen.

In this case, CEFM deprived these girls of their right to growing up, as was stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

"I feel like an old woman and at the same time I feel like a little child. I do not understand life. I cannot get used to holding [so much] responsibility."

-One of the interviewees

In nine of the 12 cases the survivor experienced a sense of inability to achieve, and decision-makers were unaware that the marriage would have this effect. In contrast, there were three cases in which the survivor did not experience the inability to achieve. Gender-based violence programs indicate that CEFM reduces the state of achievement of the girl, as her role is limited to reproduction, which makes her unable to engage in other productive and political roles. At the same time, this reproduces and perpetuates stereotyped roles.⁷

In seven of the 12 CEFM cases the survivor experienced a lack of independence, compared to five in which the girl experienced independence. The decision-makers were aware that CEFM would have this effect on the girl, and this was one of the reasons for their encouragement of the marriage and a strong motivation for convincing the girl.

7- Domestic and Gender-Based Violence Program, the results of Lebanese Women's Democratic Association campaigns, Beirut, 2011. P 2.

In two of the 12 cases, the survivor married with the hope that CEFM would save her from the cruelty of her parents. However, in the ten cases where the cruelty of the parents was not the reason. When parents deal with their daughter in a harsh way and their daughter cannot cope with it, she often wishes to escape from them. The only way to escape from this situation, in the context of the Syrian crisis, is by getting married.

In seven of the 12 CEFM cases where the survivor experienced a sense of security with the husband more than she did with her family, the decision-maker was aware that the girl would feel more security with her husband, and this was one of the reasons to marry her in the first place and to convince her of it.

There were five cases in which the survivor experienced an absence of safety with her husband compared to her family home, despite the fact that she accepted marriage in order to have a greater feeling of security with the husband.

One participant said, "... I felt more safe with my parents. My husband is a predator, and I feel that he is a stranger."

2. Psychosocial consequences:

In eight out of the 12 cases where the survivor experienced a sense of satisfaction at reducing gossip about her through CEFM, the decision-maker was aware that they would feel comfortable because of this. Indeed, this was a motivation to accept the marriage. In comparison, in four of the CEFM cases, the girl did not feel comfortable due to reducing gossip, despite the fact that the decision-makers were expecting this to occur, and that this was one of the reasons they pursued the marriage.

In eight out of the 12 cases in which the survivor experienced a sense of satisfaction in 'completing half of her religion by marriage' (see footnote 4), the decision-maker was aware that they would experience this. Indeed, it was a motivation to accept the marriage. In comparison, there were four cases in which the survivor did not experience this feeling, and it was not expected by decision-makers.



In four out of 12 cases in which the survivor experienced a better economic situation through CEFM, the decision-maker was aware that this would happen because the husband enjoyed a better economic status than that of the girl's family, and this caused them to pursue the marriage. It should be noted that in three of the cases the husband was older than the girl by seventeen years or more, possibly an indication that in the presence of a good financial situation the age difference is ignored.

In the other eight cases, the survivor did not see any improvement in her economic situation. This was expected by the decision-makers because the husband's economic situation was the same as theirs or lower. Thus, the goal of the marriage was to pass off the economic burden of the girl.

All survivors lost the opportunity for education, which is a loss on all levels. Through the responses we noted that their loss of education encouraged them to marry. Eight girls out of 10 considered education a reason convincing them to marry, because it would save them from having to study, which they never liked.

Two girls out of 10 said that the war prevented them from completing their schooling because schools are not available in their areas. Two girls said that their parents found a solution to the school problem and costs by pushing their daughters to get married. The negative attitude towards school cited by some of the girls deserves more study, to understand its origins. One participant said, "I was a diligent student in school, and I love education. But I left school since my injury and my marriage."

The research assumed that the girl would not receive adequate support from her parents or husband after marriage in four areas: delaying pregnancy, increasing social communication, visiting community centres and attending educational courses. The results proved the validity of this thesis. None of the survivors were encouraged to delay pregnancy at all, and they were not told about contraceptive

methods. Only two girls received support in the previous four matters; one from her husband, and the second from her family.

Summary of the results of the in-depth interviews:

- Most of the girls in the research sample were 14 - 16 years old.
- The husbands were older than the girls by five to twenty years.
- Most of the girls became aware that they were victims of CEFM only after the marriage.
- Most of the girls were not forced into marriage by the decision-makers.
- Most of the girls were not aware of the negative health effects of CEFM until after a doctor told them, after their marriage.
- Most of the girls suffered from negative psychological and psychosocial effects after their marriages.
- Most of the decision-makers were not aware of the physical and psychological health dangers which could result from CEFM.
- There are many misconceptions about the negative effects on the psychological health of the girl, which parents considered as positive, and which sometimes motivated them to marry girls early.
- Most of the girls did not receive support from their parents or husbands in the following matters: delaying pregnancy, increasing social communication, visiting community centres, attending educational courses.



Second data collection tool: Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions targeted activists, influential people, and male and female local leaders in the three largest camps for Syrian IDPs on the Syrian-Turkish border in Idlib Governorate: Atma, Qah and Al-Salam. Two sessions were held in each camp: one discussion for men and another for women. Each discussion included 821- people. A total number of 59 people participated in discussion sessions, 26 women and 33 men.

These focus group discussions aimed to identify:

1. Individual attitudes towards CEFM.
2. The prevalence of CEFM in their communities after displacement.
3. Their views on what led to the proliferation of CEFM.
4. The extent of their knowledge about the effects of CEFM.

Summary of the challenges faced by the field research team:

There were adverse weather conditions, namely a snow storm during the research period. Additionally, some women were afraid to attend the meeting after they heard its title, because they believed that the subject was related to things such as sexual harassment. It was difficult to target participants of the same age due to the conditions in the camps. However, the main criteria was to target participants who were the most active individuals in the camps.

Discussion sessions focused on four themes:

- Theme I: The existence of CEFM as a social issue, and the opinion of the participants about CEFM.
- Theme II: How this type of marriage takes place.
- Theme III: The reasons behind the increase in CEFM.
- Theme IV: Familiarity with the consequences of CEFM.

Focus Group Discussion Themes:

Theme I: The existence of CEFM as a social issue, and the opinion of the participants about CEFM

There was almost a consensus that CEFM had existed in the past, but had increased after displacement. The measure for this is the number of early marriages that occurred in the camp compared to in the sample's home villages.

One of the female participants was a teacher. She expressed surprise that two of her middle school students left school to marry and that they have now become mothers. She is stunned whenever she remembers their childish behavior during play time in the school yard and how quickly they became responsible for a husband and children.

The participants opinions were divided in two parts; the first part supported CEFM, believing it is a natural state of proving belief through religious teachings, and they cited successful experiences of CEFM, which they talked about in detail as evidence that CEFM is something normal and that negative effects actually occur with all women.

One female participant said that she married her three daughters below the age of 18, and that they did not suffer any health problems as a result. She said that the aforementioned health problems affect women of all ages, noting that her sister married when she was 23 years old and got a hemorrhage when she married, but that an immune weakness played a role in it.

There were participants who believed that CEFM is the only solution to alleviate the crisis imposed by war and displacement. They said that they were against CEFM in conditions of peace and stability, but that the war forced them to accept it against their principles.



One of the female participants said, “In the shadow of war and displacement, there is no safety and there are no educational opportunities for young girls. Therefore, marriage at an early age is better for them.”

During the men’s sessions, we found that they differed in their opinions about the appropriate age for marriage. Some said 15, others said 17, and still others said that age should not be a determining factor, but rather the maturity of her body, regardless of her age. They also mentioned the positive aspects of getting married to a young girl.

One of the male participants said, “[It is easier to marry a young girl because] you can teach her your way of thinking and your morals so she can understand you, more than a mature girl because you will find it difficult to deal with her.”

A participant in another camp said, “Getting married to a young pampered girl is better than getting married to an older pampered girl, because you can more easily have control over the younger so she will be obedient to her husband more than the older one.”

A second group of participants were dismissive of CEFM. They reasoned that a minor cannot bear the burden of marriage in addition to its physical, psychological and social consequences.

Theme II: How this type of marriage takes place

This included two aspects. The first aspect is related to the way this marriage takes place. There were many ways mentioned by participants, including parents, acquaintances, the man and the girl having met each other directly, and others mentioned that they were connected through a marriage broker.

The second aspect is the husband’s origin (e.g., is he in the same camp, from the same family, the same province, or from somewhere else). The discussions revolved around the theme that in the past CEFM primarily took place amongst relatives or with members of the local community, and cases were rarely seen of marriage with strangers from outside of the family or the local community.

One of the women participants: “The issue of CEFM existed before the revolution, but those marriages were among relatives or through acquaintances from the same town mostly. I know dozens of cases of marriages arranged by parents and acquaintances. But now the conditions have led to CEFM among strangers from different provinces for various reasons.”

Two cases were mentioned among the participants’ acquaintances of girls who married people of non-Syrian nationality, or so-called ‘immigrants’. These immigrants had come for ‘jihad’ in Syria after the outbreak of the revolution and its transformation into an armed conflict. Both marriages ended in divorce.

One of the female participants knew of a girl who married an immigrant at the age of 15 and gave birth to a child. He divorced her and did not allow her to bring up her child. A participant in another camp knew another girl who married an immigrant two years ago at the age of 19. This marriage was performed by an Islamic preacher (a lay person) who worked for the legal institute where the girl was studying. This preacher pushed her students under the age of 18 to marry Saudi and Kuwaiti immigrants.

Theme III: The reasons behind the increase in CEFM

The participants’ views on the causes of CEFM varied. They can be summarized in the following points:

Deteriorating financial situation: The economic situation is the long-standing factor which weighs more heavily than customs and traditions and is a catalyst for the prevalence of this phenomenon more than other factors, even if customs and traditions seem to be the motivation. This factor plays an important role in the prevalence of CEFM in Syrian society, especially after the displacement crisis.



Previously, with the improved economic situation, the rate of CEFM fell, contributing to the modification of some traditions related to the marriage-age of girls that were customary in Syrian communities. However, with the deepening economic crisis experienced by Syrian society as a result of the war, which has greatly influenced the low economic status of individuals, parents have been obliged to marry their daughters in order to ease the economic burden.

The deteriorating economic situation also has led girls to accept early marriage in order to have their needs met, or to mitigate the economic burden imposed on their families/parents. The motivation to accept such marriage by the girl is to support her family financially if she gets married to someone who is well off. In addition, war conditions have led parents to mitigate costs of marriage, whereas in the past the high cost of marriage played an essential role in raising the age of marriage.

One of the female participants, aged 45 years, talked about the marriage of her three daughters in the camp after losing her husband and her fear for her daughters.

Customs and traditions prevailing in society: The customs and traditions of local communities affect the increasing phenomenon of CEFM. These customs vary; for example one family of a specific social class could use CEFM to preserve its fortune and many other assets that belong to it. This is what motivates parents in this case to accept CEFM.

One of the female participants noted several cases of CEFM among her cousins. She stated that in her family, which is one of notable families in the countryside of Maarat al-Numaan, it is not permitted for the girl to choose her groom or to marry a non-cousin regardless of whether he is older or younger than she. It is rare to see a girl unmarried by age 18.

There is a social fear that a girl could be stigmatized, as doubts and questions about their eligibility rapidly revolve around girls who delay marriage, and the colloquial term ‘spinster’ is used to describe them. In some cases people may question their morality, and so marriage becomes the antidote to the title of spinster. Thus, both the parents and the girl accelerate towards this solution at the first opportunity.

One of the women participants, age 20, said, “Society looks at girls who wait until the age of twenty as inferior, there are frequent rumours about their failure to get married and they question her morals as well as call her a spinster.”

Religious traditions that promote CEFM: It is known that religious traditions and customs in general play a dominant role in Syrian society. One of the attributes of the communities that follow these traditions is that they resort to the metaphysical (for example religious writings) to solve calamities and crises, a theme which appeared throughout the Focus Group Discussions. The participants advocated their perspectives with citations from religious texts in favor of CEFM, even in cases where CEFM would cause harm, contrary to the original Islamic law to prevent harm.

Feeling on the part of families that they cannot assume responsibility for their daughters in a situation of war and displacement: What is meant here is responsibility not only for the material aspects of care, but also as it is related to society’s perception of women, and particularly of ‘women’s honour’, which should not be negatively perceived. Any transgression is a breach of dignity and abuse of morality, because under the circumstances of war, responsibilities increase while the ability to meet them weakens, so the lessening of responsibility is the first attempt of parents, which is embodied by arranging to marry their daughter to a person who can be responsible for her.



One of the participants said, “If marriage at an early age is detrimental to women’s health, then the Prophet (peace be upon him) would not have married Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) at the age of 9 years”. Another participant added, “The Prophet (PBUH) said in the Hadith: ‘If there comes to you one with whose character and religious commitment you are pleased, then give (your daughter or female relative under your care) to him in marriage’ “. This participant also noted that the Prophet did not specify the age for marriage.

Changing of residence and social relations due to displacement:

The original communities of the displaced are traditional societies, where the prevailing mode is to limit women’s freedom of movement, their acquaintance and sociability, and the stereotyped image is that their natural place is in the home.

One participant said, “Due to our current situation it would be better for a girl under the age of 18 to marry because we do not know what will happen and it is possible that she could face dangerous (possibly fatal) situations if she does not marry. Pre-displacement it was better for girls to marry at the age of 19, when she had entered adulthood and become conscious.”

On the other hand, we can say that the transition from this somewhat closed, traditional society to displacement, which has different attributes in terms of the nature of the population and the nature of social relations, as well as the fact that tents are more open and close to each other, in addition to the shared public utilities of bathrooms among several tents, was a major turning point in these communities.

This is especially true for girls who used to live in a closed family and society and now must live in a more open social environment. Thus, parents developed new fears related to this change and the presence of girls within the family became a burden on the family, pushing them to think about how to shed this worry or catastrophe – as they consider it to be - that can occur at any moment as a result of the social mixing that could stain the honour of the family.

Also, some participants, men and women alike, expressed what has been called the fear of the concept of freedom for women in general, and girls in particular. Displacement and the decline of parental authority, as well as the misunderstanding of some vocabulary and terms which are used in politics (such as the word ‘freedom’ which was understood as ‘chaos’ or ‘disorder’), led parents to fear the degradation of their girls’ morality. Thus, the term ‘freedom’ is synonymous to the degradation of moral controls and other such prevailing social taboos, and has created fear among parents of daughters’ becoming uncontrollable under the influence of these concepts, which leads them to hasten early marriages.

In the words of one of the participants, “One of the main reasons for CEFM after displacement is the fear of mingling between people, and to avoid inappropriate behaviors after the openness that happened”. Fatima continued, “The freedom that has spread in the camps, with no privacy given to people because the camps are so close to each other, has made parents afraid that their daughters would indulge in a community that is different from their own community that they used to live within. They are afraid that they may lose control over their daughters. For these reasons they make them get married.”

The desire to do something related to joy and hope in the widespread conditions of war and death: Girls’ families hope for a better life for their daughters, therefore they marry her to someone who also looks for hope and happiness through marriage. In Eastern communities in general marriage is considered a source of joy and hope, particularly under war conditions. In the midst of war and continuous casualties, which impose a mood of sadness in the community, parents see no salvation and only through a marriage ceremony can they justify feeling joyful.

The migration of young people: In light of migration flows, most parents are keen to have their sons married so they will not deviate from their culture after migrating. In addition, parents of girls fear the decreasing youth population, which



leads them to marry off their daughters as soon as possible, in order not to miss the presence of a pool of young men from which to choose.

Lack of a strong legal framework: One participant said that because of the low level of awareness in society about the harmful and negative effects of CEFM, there must be something to prevent it such as a law that protects girls from such marriages.

Losing the opportunity to complete education: Most of the discussion groups pointed out that the lack of opportunity for girls to complete their education is one of the most important motives that leads parents to marry off their daughters. In the past there was a social culture just beginning to prevail that girls would not marry unless they had completed their education, or a husband would be required to help her complete her education as a condition for marriage.

One of the participants pointed out, “My little sister was married at seventeen because of she wasn’t able to attend university due to the war conditions. Keep in mind that my other sisters and I got married at the age of 32 after completing our studies before the revolution.” Another participant noted, “The lack of schools, institutes and universities increased the spread of CEFM. In the past, parents held the opinion it was better to postpone a girl’s marriage until she finished her studies. Now there aren’t any universities, so there is no longer hope for the future through education.”.

Theme IV: Familiarity with the consequences CEFM

Health issues: There was a divergence of views about the health effects of CEFM. Some participants said that it causes negative effects such as hemorrhage, complications with pregnancy and childbirth, miscarriage, infections and infertility. Others said that CEFM has no negative effects, and that these health complications could occur with any married female and are not necessarily unique to girls married at an early age. In the discussion sessions with men they said that women would be more prone to dorsodynia, and that they also may be exposed to miscarriage and inflammations of the cervix.

One of the women participants stated that she herself had witnessed cases of CEFM that led the bride to experience severe bleeding on the wedding night, and she said that both her cousin and her brother's wife suffer from severe infections as the impact of CEFM.

Likewise, women participants pointed out many cases in which the husband forced his wife to have a child, and pushed her to go to the doctors and take different fertility medications that may be harmful to their health.

One of the participants talked about her daughter, age 16, who got married in the camp with a 20 year old. She said, "They are both children, both teenagers, however, she lives happily with him, as they are under the auspices of his family, but he wants her to give birth to a child. A gynecologist said that she had no problems, but still she has a young womb which will not be ready before she is 18 years old. Yet he insists, and he is going to cause his wife to become sterile because she has taken a lot of fertility medications and seen many doctors in order to get pregnant, but it is all in vain."

Psychological issues: Participants believe that CEFM may have psychological impacts; they said that it could cause depression and isolation, constant sadness, and that the reason behind it is the girl's inability to recognise her husband's needs and requirements.

One female participant stressed that the psychological issue is the most important. When a girl gets married at an early age and is unable to fulfill her husband's requirements, she would feel depressed and sad, which would adversely affect their relationship and may lead to a divorce.

Another woman expressed that she personally was exposed to depression and felt the absence of anything worth living for.

One of the participants who got married at an early age indicated the loss of a girl's identity between being a child or wife: "I cannot remember childhood", she added.



One of the women participants, 27 years old and a mother of six children, lost her husband due to the war. She mentioned that she was married at an early age so that she could not remember her childhood at her family's house, and confirmed that she will not marry her daughters early and would let them live their childhoods: «I'm a woman at the age of 27 and a mother of a family. I feel old because I got married at an early age, and have many children,» she added.

Social issues: Participants stated that CEFM affects the community in terms of increasing divorce cases in general, especially CEFM involving marriages of immigrants⁸, which may result in rupture or creating a conflict between couples' families. Likewise, CEFM marriages, whether they succeed or fail, may lead to building a fragile family since the mother is still a child and does not have sufficient awareness for raising small children. In addition, one of the negative social effects of CEFM is increased violence against women in particular, as a result of disagreement between husband and wife.

One of the women participants, working as a teacher, mentioned that the prevalence CEFM nowadays would build an ignorant generation, as the mother usually plays an important role in the education of her children, and CEFM deprives girls of education, hence she will not be able to teach or educate her children or help them in their education.

Some participants noted that the social impact of CEFM affects society on the grounds that the family is the smallest unit in the community, its well-being benefits society, yet its destruction means the destruction of the community.

8- Immigrants: Individuals from non-Syrian nationalities, who came to fight in Syria with Islamist militant factions.

Focus Group Discussion Summary

- Participants in the discussion sessions agreed that CEFM had previously been prevalent, but that it has increased dramatically following displacement.
- According to the participants the most important reasons that led to the spread of this phenomenon are: bad economic conditions; social customs and traditions; religious customs; changing the place of residence and the changing nature of social relations as a result of displacement; psychological pressure and lack of independence and security that the girl feels because of displacement, leading her to consider early marriage as a solution that may meet these needs; the absence of laws which set the age of marriage; and the loss of educational opportunities.
- There was disagreement in the positions of male and female participants about CEFM, primarily between those who supported CEFM from a religious perspective (or from the perspective of social norms or as a result of war and displacement), and those who objected on the grounds that the early marriage of girls has negative effects on the girl as well as on society, or from their personal experience with this issue.
- With regard to the extent of participants' knowledge of the effects of CEFM on girls, there was a controversy about the effects of CEFM. In addition, there were differences in the reasons cited by male and female participants. It was noted that women most frequently cited the negative health and psychological effects of CEFM than men.



Through the previous presentation of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions results, the researcher finds that there is a difference in perspectives and orientations related to this issue. Many participants indicated that the displacement crisis and its implications are the main reason behind the increase in CEFM, and some who were against CEFM are in favor of the marriage of underage girls as one of the solutions available to mitigate the effects of the crisis. The girls who experienced CEFM, either by their choice or their parents decision, as well as their parents hoped that such a marriage would have positive effects and results. However, this research demonstrated that CEFM often has negative effects on girls on the health, psychological and social levels.

I tend towards isolation and don't like to see anyone. After the marriage I became afraid of people. When I walk down the street I feel like people are looking at me and talking bad.

Focus group participant who experienced early marriage