

## Causes of the Increased Rates of Child Marriage in the Za'atari Refugee Camp

Kylie McCabe

Department of Political Science and Global Affairs, Sacred Heart University

GS - 302 - IA

Dr. Akbulut

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### Abstract

The rates of child marriage within the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan have steadily increased since the camp opened in 2012. The leading explanation for this trend typically embeds itself in a lack of education, knowledge of reproductive services, financial stability, adequate police enforcement and legal jurisdiction, as well as play and socialization accessibility for children. This study seeks to enumerate the primary driving causes of the increased rates of child marriage for girls within the camp by analyzing data collected from the Inter-Agency Child Protection and Gender Based Violence Assessment in the Za'atari Refugee Camp conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). This assessment was conducted by a task force assembled by the CP and GBV Sub-Working Group in Jordan. The Task Force members used three main strategies for data collection: Key Informant (KI) interviews; focus group discussion (FGD) interviews, and a Safety Audit. Contrary to what has been presumed to be the most viable account for this phenomenon, and subsequent uptick within Za'atari, upon analyzation of the data, our findings indicate that the most significant factors in the increase of child marriage rates within Za'atari are limited accessibility to reproductive services, limited economic and employment opportunity, and a strong adherence to traditional gender roles and values of Syrian culture.

### Causes of the Increased Rates of Marriage within Za'atari Refugee Camp

When discussing the rampant increase of child marriage rates within the Za'atari refugee camp, it is first important to understand the circumstances surrounding the Syrian Civil War. At its most primitive level, the Syrian Civil War is an ongoing conflict between the Syrian Arab Republic and various domestic and foreign forces, who vehemently oppose the government, as well as each other. Over 10 years since its commencement in March 2011, the Syrian Civil War has forced more than 6.8 million Syrians to flee their country, while another 6.9 million remain internally displaced. Subsequently, 5.2 million refugees have sought asylum in neighboring countries, one of the most prominent of these being Jordan. (Unicef - How to Help Refugees, 2023) Thus, the Za'atari refugee camp, established in Jordan on July 29, 2012, has grown to encompass more than 80,000 refugees to accommodate this refugee crisis. Sizable enough to constitute itself as the fourth largest city in all of Jordan, (Oxfam International, 2022) Za'atari, is complete with palpable amenities of functioning societies.

And yet, despite the somewhat safe, temporal, functioning society Za'atari provides Syrian refugees, child marriages rates within the camp are increasing at alarming rates, exceeding that of the rates from the child marriage endemic in their war torn, home country. Child marriage, as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, is a recognition of the right to “free and full” consent to marriage. It further serves to determine that this standard is not met when a person is not mature enough to make such a hefty, considerable decision. (Pramila, 2013) While this is significant in establishing preliminary boundaries in the realm of child marriage, each country present to the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages, has the right to set the minimum age for marriage within their nation so as to be accommodating of cultural and religious customs,

traditions, and norms of society. (United Nations Human Rights Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages, 1962) Thus, there is currently no universal age limitation placed on when a child is able to marry.

The obscurity of child marriage at the international level invigorates its existence and provides for a variety of reasons for its usage. While several outstanding factors may contribute to the frequency of child marriages on a global scale, it can best be reduced to causes pertaining to financial hardship, enforced gender roles, protection from premarital sex, potential abusers, and defamation of character, a lack of contraceptive and reproductive health education, a lack of schooling and a reliance on husband for relevant, worldly information, a romanticized view of marriage as a means to an end, and, lastly, loosely interpreted and enforced marriage laws. But what of these sundry causes, (if any), are the sole contributors to the rising child marriage rates in the Za'atari refugee camp?

This research thereof, seeks to provide insight into the primary causes of the increased rates of child marriage within the Za'atari refugee camp. It aims to draw attention to the severity of the growing rates of child marriage on a global scale.

The abstract of this paper will provide an overview of the research, followed by a literature review assessing previous research conducted on the general causes of child marriage, causes of child marriage within Syria and Jordan, case studies of other refugee camps where child marriage is prevalent, and regionally specific problems for the former stated countries that are often experienced within Za'atari.

The methodology section of this paper will outline precisely what will be considered a cause of child marriage and how these areas will be measured. These area concentrations include

access to reproductive services, economic and employment opportunities, and gender roles and marriage values.

The paper will conclude with an analysis of the findings as well as discussion of the limitations of this study. It will propose possible explanations for eradicating child marriage within the Za'atari refugee camp.

## Review of Literature

The general causes of child marriage rates frequently reflect financial hardship, stringent gender roles and values, desires to protect one from premarital sex and potential abusers, a lack of education, limited play and socialization opportunity, as well as lack of reproductive knowledge. However, before discussion of the influence of these components on the rates of child marriage, it is necessary to comprehend the role and social construct of women in Middle Eastern society, and often, societies where child marriage is a norm. Typically, the family unit is considered essential, and a natural unit of society. Women contribute to the operation of this family unit as a social institution through their biological disposition to reproduce. From their sheer reproductive capabilities, women are deemed subordinate to men, and adopt domesticated roles and responsibilities. This creates patriarchal units and societies that are protected by overarching laws denoting women into these rigid social castes as in many socio economic institutions, women are neglected and perceived as inferior. (Moghadam, 2004)

This concept then sets the stage for considering the influence that economic security has on catalyzing the rates of child marriages. In low income families, girls are often viewed as economic burdens. Early marriage is used as a solution to ameliorate this hardship. Marriage arraignments can serve to settle debts, disputes, and other discrepancies held between families. (World Health Organization, 2016) For example, in Bangladesh, a prominent monte is that “the younger the girl, the lower the dowry.” (Varia, 2016) Essentially, because of limited economic funds and mobility, families fear that if they do not marry off their daughter when she is young, she will never be married, as the dowry increases with the age of each girl and with inflation.

Economic security thereafter translates as a driving factor for child marriages within Syrian refugee camps because of the finite opportunities for substantial work and attainment of resources.

“Child marriage before the civil war mainly occurred in poor and rural settings...Refugees in camps have little to no employment, and often do not receive work permits. This makes them almost wholly dependent on aid from humanitarian organizations. Food rations often play into this equation, because the standard policy is to allot the same amount of food to each family, regardless of the actual size of the family....Secondly, since there is a gendered division of labor, with females usually performing unpaid labor in the household and men being the breadwinners, females are often viewed as burdens and are married off. Poverty disempowers these women and renders them unable to make decisions, leaving their fates up to the male head of the family instead.” (Harvard International Review, 2019)

Employment is a pivotal factor in exacerbating the rates of child marriages. Limited employment opportunities enforces a need for women to be secured off with a family so that their needs, as well as their families needs, can radically be reduced and cared for.

From this economic standpoint, child marriages are prevalent because they provide the opportunity for families with economic troubles to easily marry off their daughters while avoiding expensive marriage ceremony fees.

“With the aim of reducing the costs of wedding ceremonies parents often marry off their children early seizing the opportunity of collective/community marriage ceremonies, marrying off all girls/daughters in one ceremony when there are multiple daughters in a



family, and coupling a wedding with other celebrations – such as funerals - held in the community.” (Mahato, 2016)

Employment prospects within Jordan are bleak, a contributing factor to the existing rate of child marriages. Its preexisting, weak economy is further depleted through the stress of accommodating such a hefty influx of Syrian refugees. In 2015, the costs of housing refugees were equivalent to 17.5% of the country's budget, and an enormous contributor to its \$2 billion deficit. Given these preexisting conditions, it becomes tremendously difficult to continue to accommodate the growing needs and inflow of refugees. Thus, its unemployment rate suffers, as it culminates in a mere 12% of the population unemployed with its youth jobless rates reaching an astonishing 30%. (Satloff & Schnecker, 2016) Similar employment issues, or a lack thereof, can exist within the Za'atari refugee camp; the finite number of available jobs increases competition between Jordanians and refugees that can lead to significant unemployment rates within the camp. Child marriages provide an assurance that in spite of dismal employment opportunities, women will be shielded from the economic repercussions.

Aside from economic motivations, in Syria, child marriage is largely driven by cultural factors that intend to protect family honor; such is accomplished via preservation of virginity. Within refugee camps, however, this cultural norm is scarcely followed because high rates of sexual assault, violence, and rape obstruct many girls from adhering to this standard practice. For example, Syrian refugee camps within Lebanon detail that physical harassment in the camps, as well as sexual advances made by guards within the camp against young children pressure girls to marry young. (Arab & Sagbakken, 2019) Therefore, it is vital that girls are married off before such violence can jeopardize their virginity, and subsequently their family honor. (Chakraborty, 2019)

In addition, many cultures assert that child marriage will bring blessings to a family, thus justifying their implementation. (Hikmat, 2017) In Syrian culture, the word “sutra” is used to describe the social protection and preservation of the honor of the family through the honor of the bride. (Akash & Chalmiers, 2021) Additionally, it can also apply to the protection from financial hardship for the bride and her family. Families who fear that sexual assault incidents may spark rumors that their daughter somehow encouraged this behavior, thus detracting from her reputation and making her less desirable. This even occurs in countries with relatively low incidents of sexual assault. In order to preserve cultural traditions while protecting the reputation of a bride and her family, child marriages are supported as it provides a kind of loophole from facing the repercussions of not abiding to cultural norms.

Likewise, a lack of protection for young girls from heinous acts serves as a stimulant for child marriages being a commonly accepted norm. Child brides rarely have the opportunity to file formal complaints regarding their assaults and attacks. Obtaining a male partner through marriage is romanticized as it can potentially dissuade future attacks from unknown individuals. Also, because many men are preoccupied with serving in wars and armed conflicts, or working long hours to provide for their families, there is insufficient male protection for women and girls from potential attackers thereby enforcing child marriage as an acceptable practice for young girls to attain this kind of protection. (Arab & Sagbakken, 2019)

A lack of education for reproductive rights incites the rates of child marriages as young girls rely on the reproductive knowledge, information, and jurisdiction of their spouses to make these decisions for them. The challenges associated with a lack of access to healthcare and reproductive education coupled with a consistent pressure to get pregnant due to societal norms, reduces the ability to transmit knowledge and information about contraceptives, reproduction,

and their subsequent use upon marriage. Thus, girls are forced to procreate and have children, the ultimate objective of the husband in their family. With this ideology standardized within communities, most girls are unaware of international aid-driven efforts to increase access to contraceptive use, as well as to propel women toward sustaining the independence to make these decisions for themselves and their own reproductive health. (Arab & Sagbakken, 2019) Many girls that voluntarily agree to marry are misinformed of their choices and do not understand their additional, reproductive responsibilities to their husbands upon marriage. Had they understood the maturity required for such acts, as well as the health consequences of reproduction, it can be inferred that many girls would be more apprehensive to voluntarily agree to marry at such young ages. Often, this mindset enforced through community norms and standards that the girls who are victims of protracted violence will be protected by their husbands through marriage and their honor will be preserved significantly contributes to misinformed brides.

A lack of schooling for young girls also thoroughly influences the frequency of child marriages. Rather than pay expensive fees for girls to receive an education, child marriage acts as a substantial substitute as it provides a girl a husband who has the knowledge, and or working abilities, that can be received within school. This is a disservice to young girls as it commences a cyclical dependence on men. It eliminates the opportunity for young girls to grow and enhance their knowledge, become independent and self-sufficient, and ultimately to possess an income earning job of their own. (Invisible Children, 2014) As a key exhibition of this concept, in Nicaragua, 45 percent of girls with no education are married before they turn 18, compared to 28 percent of girls with primary education, 16 percent of girls with a secondary education, and 5 percent of girls with higher education. (Unicef, 2005)

Although formerly being a rather progressive, innovative, leading Middle Eastern country within the realm of education, Syrian entrance into the fifth year of armed conflict relapsed all progress, causing half of all school age children to no longer attend school. At that token, when examining educational prospects in Jordan, generally speaking, Jordanians are better educated than Syrians being that around 42% of Jordanians aged 15 years and older completed secondary education or more, compared to 15% of Syrians of the corresponding age group. Jordanians are four times more likely to pursue some post secondary education. Most strikingly, 60% of Syrians have never completed primary education, compared to a mere 25% of Jordanians.

(Christophersen, 2015) How then are these Syrian children within Za'atari still not receiving an education? The Jordanian government spends more than 12% of its GDP on education, which is significant as it is twice the amount that the UK or the US spends. (Esveld, 2017) However, numerous aspects of Jordanian public policy prevent Syrian refugees from accessing education that is so vigorously funded. Refugee registration policies that require school aged children to obtain identification documents, or “service cards,” to enroll in schools may have contributed to this phenomenon. This is also a virtually impossible acquisition considering the mass of Syrian refugees in Jordan left Syria without being relieved by a guarantor, which for Jordan as of 2014, is a Jordanian citizen, first degree relative, and older than 35. Certification and documentary requirements prevent many Syrian refugee children in Jordan from obtaining an education. The inability for many of these refugees to show official Syrian school certificates as proof of their completion of specific years of schooling bars many from being enrolled in school. The most pressing requirement for enrollment in Jordanian schools is proof of a birth certificate, a specification to which 40% of Syrian refugees in Jordan cannot meet from the nature of their circumstances. (Esveld, 2017)

A vast number of Syrian refugees, because their education was disrupted/and or was not able to be continued, thereafter struggle to continue their education when they are able due to Jordanian educational policies. A newly enacted rule, the

“three-year rule” barred some 77,000 Syrian children from formal education. A plan agreed upon by the Education Ministry, foreign donors, and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) beginning in the 2016-2017 school year will help to boost enrollment of out-of-school children by allowing up to 25,000 children to enroll in a “catch-up” program, which will teach two grades of material in a single year, after which they will be eligible to re-enroll in formal education. However, the program will only be open to children aged 8 to 12...” (Esveld, 2017)

Children who aged out of this category, but did not receive the appropriate education for the school years they missed, cannot under this rule make up the education that they missed. Instead, they are grouped into a unique cohort of “lost” students per se, that must accept the primeval education available to them provided by limited funds of NGOs when contrasted with the mass funding that the Jordanian education system is receiving. At that token, many children who are able to attend school do not find reason to do so.

“Jordan’s effective bar on lawful employment for Syrian refugees has been a disincentive for Syrian children to finish secondary school. Few Syrians can afford to pay for vocational training colleges, while others lack necessary documents to enroll, and some NGOs said that Jordanian authorities had not approved their vocational training projects, possibly due to fears that Syrians will compete with Jordanians for jobs.” (Esveld, 2017)

Other factors that accompany the low enrollment and retention rates in Jordanian schools for Syrian refugees include poverty and work restrictions. Most Syrian parents cannot afford

school related costs like that for transportation and school supplies; lawful limitations placed on work permits and qualifications bar parents from attaining the funds to support the education of their children. Consequently, most children will inevitably drop out of school, simply to support the financial burdens this places on their families. (Esveld, 2017)

Contrasted with increased efforts to improve education for young girls, educating adolescent girls has been an integral factor in endeavors to increase the age of marriage in developing countries such as Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Taiwan and Thailand. In India and Pakistan, increased school enrollment has thereafter been associated with a decline in marriage among girls younger than 14. (Hussein & Bittles, 1999) Similarly, in Malawi, early marriage and pregnancy are cited as key reasons for discontinuation of schooling. The antithesis of this incidence is that delaying child marriages in Malawi results in girls completing more months or years of secondary school. Most notably, one avoided child marriage in Malawi avoids roughly 0.26 days lost to intimate partner violence per year for the working life. Although a seemingly small impact, this is significant when contrasted with the 24% of women in Malawi who experience physical or sexual violence every year with their intimate partner; that being married early in Malawi increases the chances of intimate partner violence by 4.8%. (Copenhagen Consensus Center, 2021) With this in mind, education for young girls is the best deterrent against child marriage; indicating that the inability to access, or refusal for young girls to receive schooling on account of it being too costly or radical in comparison to their accepted norms, will inevitably lead them to enter into a child marriage. As an aside, the delaying and/or avoidance of child marriage serves as an opportunity for girls to continue their education, and in consummation, increase their chances of avoiding or delaying potential marriages.

An estranged sense of belonging, and a loss of cultural identity or citizenship further serves as a motivation for child marriage. For many Syrian refugees, marriage is viewed as an opportunity to plan prospective futures, both in Jordan, and in an eventual return to Syria. Marriage, in its conceptualization for Syrian refugees, is a means of resuming life and compensating for losses incurred from displacement during the war. Although resulting from loss and trauma, often child marriages for Syrian refugees simultaneously represent an alleviation of arduous social conditions as it provides opportunity to rebridge social connections and work towards a prosperous life. (Zbeidy, 2020) Such a case is evident in Jordan where numerous counts of displaced women and girls seek early marriage as an alternative to statelessness. De facto statelessness often revokes the opportunity for Syrian refugees to lay claims to various protections afforded to them through citizenship as their country is incapable of doing so during the ongoing conflict. (Menz, 2016)

An extraneous factor that exacerbates the rates of child marriages within refugee camps, and for child marriage in general, includes loose interpretation of the law. In Syria and Jordan for example, the legal age of marriage is clearly demarcated. However, judicial exceptions can be granted to reduce the legal age for a girl to marry. In Syria, it can be reduced from 17 to 13, while in Jordan, it can be reduced from 18 to 16. (Hamad, et al., 2021) Within the context of the Za'atari refugee camp, its isolation from mainstream society permits illegal and illegitimate marriages from transpiring under the discretion of the law. As a result, marriages circumventing traditional processes transpire without a judicial party to oversee their safety and legality. Due to Syria and Jordan possessing a strong, traditional, rural culture, most marriages are conducted by a sheik, or a religious leader, and are thus not officially registered under the law. As a prime example of this, an independent study conducted in October 2015 with 51 married refugee

couples in northern Jordan found that about half of the couples had not formally registered their marriage in either Syria or Jordan. (Velasco-Regulez, 2019) A similar theme can be found within the National Crime Record Bureau. It is widely accepted that all marriages that are solemnized are not reported as a rough estimate of 46% of women in these solemnized marriages, from the ages of 18-29, are married before reaching the legal age of 18. (Pramila, 2013) This merely hints at the number of unregistered marriages, and consequently, unregistered child marriages that would not have garnered a judicial exception existing within the Za'atari refugee camp.

A look into the application of the law within refugee camps can provide insight into adherence to de jure legislation and practices. What happens to law within refugee camps? In a study of the Buduburam refugee camp in Ghana, West Africa, a heightened importance was placed on international law as opposed to the law of the host country. This camp saw the alienation of refugees from domestic legal institutions and an increased development of being legitimate, international legal subjects. (Holzer, 2013) However, the attainability of these rights within this refugee camp, and others, is questionable.

“In Buduburam, I found that many people living as refugees came to see themselves as rights holders under the protection of the international community—a legal consciousness that inspired some to claim rights in large-scale social movement activism in 2007-2008. Yet, the story does not end so straightforwardly with the emergence of refugee activists. Despite some efforts by the UNHCR and host government to promote legal practices in the camp, most camp inhabitants—including protestors—experienced host law as a proprietary resource of citizenship from which they could not benefit.” (Holzer, 2013)



This minimal promulgation of law within the Buduburam refugee camp was reportedly due to the refusal of Ghanaian authorities to assume responsibility for the administration of law within the camp. This includes failure to resolve civil disputes and the privatization and administration of criminal prosecutions on behalf of nongovernmental organizations rather than state authorities. Rather, the upholding of justice and the burden of maintaining peace and security is placed on refugees within the camps who do not have adequate means to protect themselves from criminals or breaches of the law. (Holzer, 2013)

Most strikingly, however, the lack of law enforcement was not the most significant deterrence in camp inhabitants adhering to the law. The accounts of discrimination, costliness, and insufficient support for interview transcripts and field notes impact obedience to the law and the extent of law enforcement. Within the Buduburam refugee camp, factors pertaining to ethnicity, religious affiliation, and gender influenced the rate at which one was inclined to report a crime or resort to the help of law enforcement. Policing in Ghana was characterized as corrupt and abusive; its legal institutions had repressive dimensions whereby camp inhabitants feared taking action against perceived wrongdoings in fear of retribution.

“No, the present manager...we could not hold him accountable for whatever is being done...from where we stand, we are completely at risk...You can't say anything because...they have a list of people who could be arrested and prosecuted so we don't want to see ourselves as being personal target to his leadership. Like what happened to some of our colleagues who had to flee from this camp. So we are afraid like for me when I got my little son. Who takes care of him when I'm going to prison?” (Holzer, 2013, p. 859)

The corruption and fear instilled within camp inhabitants in the Buduburam refugee camp parallels possible causes for the lack of law enforcement within the Za'atari refugee. While there is a lack of physical law enforcement and dissemination of law, ultimately, the fear of retribution for various facets of character like gender, ethnicity, and religion, provides for the primitive information and statistics reported on crime, marriages and child marriages, and other areas of legal jurisdiction. Evidence of fuel for this fear of retribution within Jordan is that cases of domestic violence against women within the home setting are resolved within the household, and inherently under the discretion of their husbands, as opposed to the direction of law or other formal agencies. (Joseph, 2018) The husband, and innately the head of household, is impartial to these matters and thereof cannot adequately, nor can he fairly, make amends for these matters. It can be interpreted therefore, that the previous discussions of the loose interpretations of law, finite legal propagation and subsequent law enforcement, as well as the diluted collections of facts and statistics for matters pertaining to the law within Za'atari, and other refugee camps, are indicative of a fear of retribution given the sociocultural innuendo practiced within a host country. For Za'atari, this may simply be the result of the recurring theme of the status of women considered inferior to that of men.

In efforts to combat the growth of child marriages, several countries have instituted new legislation raising the age of marriage within their respective nations. The power that this legislation holds, much like loose interpretation of the law, is subject to the different norms and pre existing laws in a society. In 2015, Malawi instituted a new law mandating the minimum age for marriage must be 18 years of age. (Varia, 2016) Although seemingly helpful, this new law does not override the national constitution, which does not explicitly outlaw child marriage under

the age of 15 and allows for children from 15 - 18 years of age to marry with parental consent. (Varia, 2016)

Another facet that can influence the rate of child marriages is the ability for children to play. Play, as a whole, can loosely be defined as activity that takes place outside of ordinary life and for its own, intrinsic sake. It involves a sense of illusion or exaggeration, and is distinct from reality. (From *Children to Red Hatters: Diverse Images and Issues of Play*, 2008) While it exists in many forms, play is deemed a crucial component of human development.

Play is frequently linked to healthy neurological development. It allows children to emulate the behavior of those around them while refining their social skills. (Cohen, 2018) The ability to play during the early years of childhood is critical to cognitive development and emotional wellbeing. (Whitebread, 2012) It permits for the development of ego mastery, or essentially the cultivating the capacity to overcome mistakes and the trivial experiences of everyday life, the capability to overcome emotional trauma, competence building, and the capacity for socialization, a skill relevant in all cultures of the world. (Isenberg, 1988)

Needless to say, because play is so pivotal to human development, the United Nations established the right to play as a human right. However, the right to play, as defined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is typically a universally forgotten human right. (Voce, 2015) In its essence, Article 31 declares that

“1) States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. 2) States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.”

(Article 31 United Nations Convention on the Right of a Child, 1989)

While child refugees often lose accessibility to this right, it is precisely the ability to play that can serve as a provisional intervention in a crisis a child is experiencing. In fact, play has been shown to be a useful tool in relieving and remediating experiences of trauma for children.

In a study examining abandoned Romanian children in 1999 and continuing today, these children demonstrated that the most powerful healing factor throughout the course of their life for facing this extreme circumstance of neglect was therapeutic play intervention; the most beneficial of this intervention was through play with each other. (Rintoul, 2018) This implies that play can serve as a source of relief and healing for those that have endured traumatic life experiences. Likewise, a number of case studies have shown that play therapy is an effective treatment for traumatized children. Specifically, the integration of toys and other objects into play facilitates healing from trauma for many children. In release play therapy, constructed by David Levy, a therapist gives toys related to a traumatic event his/her patient has experienced under the prospect that the child will reenact their trauma with their toys. This recreation of a traumatic situation is understood as a brief and directive approach toward helping children express what they experienced and reacquire their sense of control. In sum, the use of toys for play therapy serves as a crisis oriented intervention. (Ogawa, 2004)

In cases specific to the Syrian refugee crisis and averting trauma that children have garnered from their unique experiences, the Sirkhane Social Circus School has developed a unique approach to introduce play therapy to Syrian refugee children. Located in Mardin, Turkey, the Sirkane Social Circus School houses Syrian refugee children between the ages of 3 and 18 and teaches aerial arts, acrobatics, and juggling. Sirkhane seeks to replace, or at least supplement, the experiences many of the children lost due to ongoing conflict from the Syrian

Civil War with positive accounts. It is a place of psychological healing through creative outlets, and an alternative to dismal pastimes that occur within refugee camps. Additionally, it gives these children a place to pursue their passions and space to develop as human beings. At Sirkhane, students become stronger physically and emotionally. They developed independence, leadership, and interethnic tolerance for their peers of different nationalities and religions. Sirkhane also offers students the opportunity to become instructors through their “Circus Heroes” program so they can share their skills with others.. In its entirety, the play therapy offered through the circus skills that Sirkhane teaches, as well as the safe and inviting space the school boasts, allows childrens to rectify their traumatic experiences with positive ones while fostering trust, cooperation, and communication. Through Sirkhane Social Circus School, while

“Society has taught children hatred, the children can teach society empathy. (Buehler, 2020)

This bubbly and beguiling alternative to life in a refugee camp for a child exhibits the scarce play spaces and subsequent opportunity for play there is in these camps. While the Sirkhane refugee camp enabled refugee children of a variety of ethnic backgrounds to intermingle and become friends through play, the inherent design of refugee camps prevents this play and socialization from occurring. For example, the generic design for refugee camps in Jordan is not inclusive of cultural contexts or audiences, and thus it garners a sort of perception of refugee camps as being a plain, uninviting space full of uniform manufactured models and equipment. This lack of variety inhibited social interaction and isolated refugees. (Alwan, 2017)

“Consequently, play as a placemaking tool for children was derived as a concept that could enhance the experience of refugee children in camps and combat recurring issues such as boredom, safety, isolation, and a lack of stimulating environments.” (Alwan,

2017)

Being that the adult refugees found it difficult to converse within the spaces allocated for socialization, it is an indication of the challenges presented to children, whose development is at a critical stage where socialization is required, to converse in inadequate spaces. This study can provide context for the inability of these Jordanian refugee children to fully enjoy and live out their childhood because of the interruption of their childhood for the adoption of adult responsibilities.

Largely, the importance of children being able to play, and fully enjoy their development as children impacts the rates of child marriage through its influence on the social and emotional needs of children affected by conflict. Physically and mentally engaging play based activity is a requirement of overall healthy child development. (Stegelin, 2005)

“During their first five years, children’s brains are developing at an astonishing rate.

Influencing that development can set young children who have adverse experiences on a positive path.” (Kohn et al., 2020)

Research examining the development of children exposed to traumatic situations can provide evidence for the nature of the prevalence and reliance on child marriages. Play, and simply, the opportunity for children to enjoy their youth, when disrupted, creates a kind of loss of normalcy, or loss of childhood. When this childhood experience, or play stage, is interrupted through some varying external factor such as a natural disaster, war, or political upheaval, a girl is more likely to enter into a child marriage or adopt adult responsibilities and end her adolescence prematurely. In Haiti, following one of its extreme earthquakes, the existing poverty was magnified, and forced many children into dangerous labor or sexual exploitation to contend with these tough socioeconomic conditions. (Woolley, 2021) Likewise, in Haiti, girls were found

to be more susceptible to attacks and sexual abuse in locations like refugee camps. (Woolley, 2021) A vital step toward recovery for children experiencing these traumatic, life altering events, is having a safe place to go to just be kids. This is particularly evident in Za'atari where endeavors to create more kid friendly play spaces has fostered meaningful social interactions necessary for children to heal. Za'atari has implemented Unicef supported areas where children can play, paint pictures, sing, dance, and as a whole, use their own imagination to express themselves. (Stern, 2015)

Further, in depth research has revealed that the type of “play space” also factors into the ability for children to effectively express themselves during times of growth and self realization. The loss of familiar spaces and places especially affects older children and adolescents who experience heightened needs for privacy, secret places, and emotion regulation outside the home base. Typically, these include secluded areas in nature such as up in trees or beside bodies of water. Studies in child environment based research have reported that school age children are the most prolific users of outdoor spaces for play and recreational activities. In forced evictions from Johannesburg, South Africa and Delhi, India, children yearned for private, outdoor spaces free from the gazes and troubles of adulthood. (Sudeshna, 2018) Being that the Za'atari refugee camp offers little to no space for adolescents to explore and express themselves privately, this can be a large contribution to interruptions within their childhood development and subsequent endorsement of adulthood through child marriage.

However, having the “right to play,” is not limited to a tangible play space. This can also include the accessibility of various programs and media networks for children to familiarize themselves and bond over pop culture. Exposure to books, television shows, and different mediums allows for children to develop a heightened sense of emotional understanding. The

“Ahlan Simsim,” show, a Middle Eastern version of “Sesame Street,” that translates to “Welcome Sesame,” follows two best friends exploring the world. It has an underlying focus on crafting the fundamental skills for identifying and managing all emotions, particularly that of which children who have experienced trauma, need to grow and thrive. (Kohn, et al., 2020) This is a particularly unique development as it provides the opportunity for children impacted by displacement, who have no knowledge of socialization skills, or parents to offer them necessary guidance in life, to learn important life skills, how to regulate their emotions under strained conditions, and above all, to differentiate between reality and what is simply an occurrence of living in a refugee camp. By providing children with access to mediums like “Welcome Sesame,” there are more opportunities for children to access their “right to play,” per se, as it would intercept severe and persistent stress from triggering an inundation of hormones that would prevent impair how the brain develops, and inherently, the overall growth and development of a child. (Kohn, et al., 2020)

While there are an infinite number of reasons as to why a girl may enter into a child marriage, the vast majority of these marriages are established for some kind of ulterior motive or goal. The multitude of causes of child marriage on a global scale can best be explained through economic reasons, cultural values, lack of reproductive knowledge, lack of education, and misconceptions about the future of refugee life.



### Methodology

The causes of the increased rates of child marriage within the Za'atari refugee camp will be analyzed using data collected from an assessment by the Inter-Agency Child Protection and Gender Based Violence Assessment in the Za'atari Refugee Camp conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) carried out in December 2012.

Using data collected from the Inter-Agency Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Assessment in the Za'atari Refugee Camp, accessibility to various causes will be analyzed. The assessment was conducted by a Child Protection and Gender Based Violence Sub Working Group task force in Jordan. The task force used a qualitative approach to collect data; this was achieved through key informant (KI) interviews, focus group discussion (FGD), and safety audits. The KI interviews were conducted with 27 participants (15 males and 12 females), representatives of both the community and of service providers. Criteria for participation was based on having lived in the camp/site for at least one month and playing an active role in their community.

After the interviews, there were 6 focus group discussions (FGDs) held, two with adolescent girls and boys between the ages of 15-17 years; two with women and men between the ages of 18-24 years and two with women and men over 25 years of age. A safety audit was simultaneously conducted through a series of observations and interviews. Interviews with community members included adolescent girls and boys between the ages of 15-17 years; men and women between the ages of 18-24 years and; women and men over the age of 25 years. (*Findings from the inter-agency child protection and gender-based ...2013*) This research will analyze the data collected from the study and draw conclusions from the presented data.

### Research Findings

After careful consideration, the increased rates of child marriage within the Za'atari refugee camp can be reduced to a limited accessibility to reproductive rights, limited employment/economic opportunity, and rigid gender roles and values upheld for marriage. These findings were made using data collected from the Inter-Agency Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Assessment in the Za'atari Refugee Camp. Additionally, these three causes were selected because they were determined to be the most significant and influential factors in increasing the rates of child marriage within the Za'atari refugee camp.

While extraneous factors, as discussed in the literature review allude to other potential driving causes of child marriage rates such as that of a lack of education, lack of knowledge or reproductive rights, limited play and socialization accessibility for children, etc, the three former causes were selected as the primary causes being that they differentiate the causes of the increased rates of child marriage within the Za'atari refugee camp from that of the causes of child marriages in a general scope. For example, lack of education is not regionally specific, and can be universally applicable to the causes of child marriage. Therefore, the limited accessibility to reproductive services, limited employment and economic opportunity, and promulgation of Syrian cultural values and the niche socioeconomic problems they pose specific to daily life within Za'atari, can be considered the strongest proponents in driving the rates of child marriage within the camp.

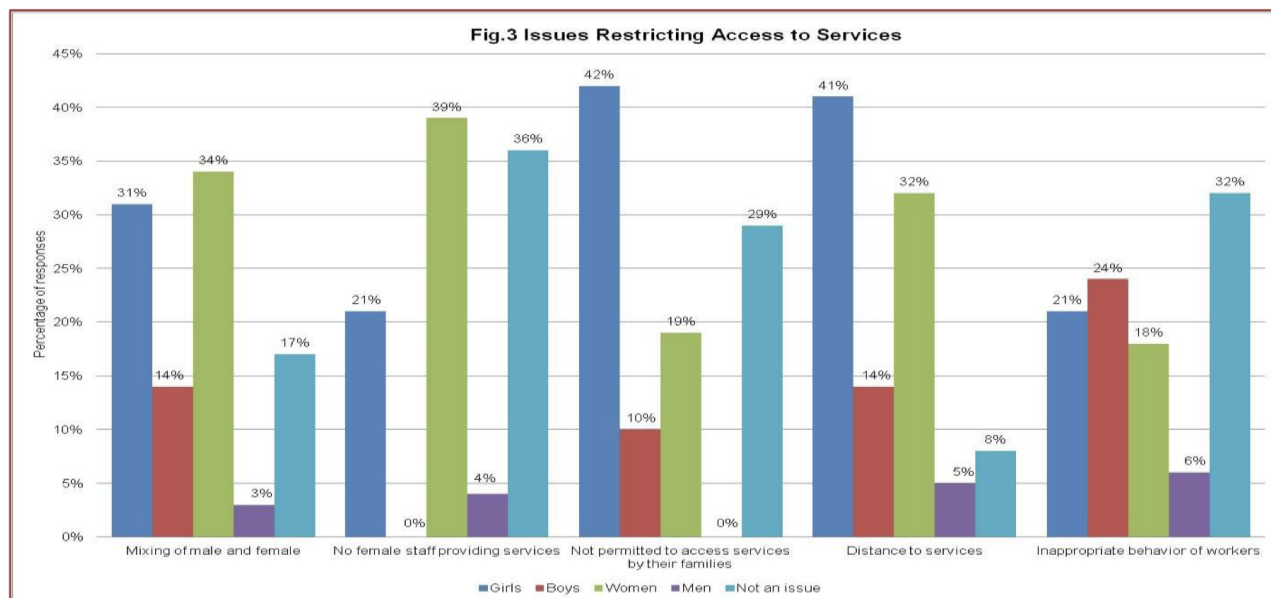
### Limitations of Research

It is important to note that before discussion of the research findings, there are certain limitations to the study. The most blatant of these limitations is the sheer accuracy of the data collected. While there is viable data published alongside the report used for the analysis, one must remember that at its core, Za'atari is a refugee camp. Therefore, its data fluctuates and is dependent on the nature of the resources used to collect data in an environment whose primary function is to preserve survival. Alongside this concept, one must also keep in mind that current data published is reflective of the government agenda of the nation producing the research. For example, the Jordanian government may be inclined to influence the data or fail to report the data to the most accurate extent because it reflects poorly on the country and its ability to handle this growing issue.

A second limitation of the study is that the data was collected in the aboriginal years that the Za'atari refugee camp had opened, leaving significant leeway for change within this data set and conditions within the camp to change. Thirdly, it must be noted that the data used to make conclusions within this research is entirely based on the opinions of a few individuals from the camp and is therefore, not fully representative of the ideas of the entire camp. This lends itself to an encouragement of future research conducted using a larger data set collection and more in depth research into the inner workings of the camp.

## 1. Access to Reproductive Services

### a) Issues Restricting Access to Services



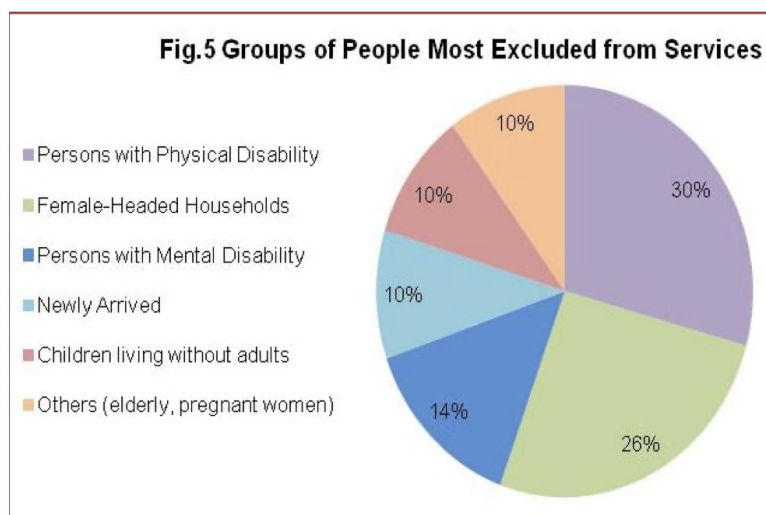
According to the assessment, services where males and females were mixed hindered women's access to receiving these services whereby 39% of women in the study felt that mixed services prevented them from receiving access while 21% of girls felt the same when. The limited provision of female staff in these services also served as a deterrent toward accessing them whereby 39% of women felt this restricted their access and 42% of girls felt that this restricted their access. The most significant factor in restricting access to reproductive services was that 13 KIs demonstrated that 42% of girls may face difficulties in accessing services because they are forbidden by their families in doing so while 6 KIs from women in the study exhibited that 19% of them shared this ideal. This is representative of social and cultural norms for females coupled with the sheer concern of personal safety that limits their access to these services. Lastly, the distance of services was considered an issue in accessing reproductive

services by 41% of girls and 32% of women. (*Findings from the inter-agency child protection and gender-based ...*, 2013)

### **Discussion**

The child marriage rates within the Za'atari refugee camp are increasing because of the fear of gender marginalization. Early marriage serves as a means of evading this marginalization. Within the context of reproductive services, the limited accessibility to reproductive services makes girls more inclined to marry early so they can evade marginalization associated with using these resources while being unmarried. The distance of the services, harassment while walking to use the services, lack of female staff to support girls utilizing these resources, and the fear of being stigmatized when accessing these services prevents many girls from getting the help that need; this is especially problematic in a camp where sexual assault, violence, and harassment occurs. Early marriage thus preserves the purity of a girl and prevents her from being marginalized when accessing these services.

### b) Exclusion from Reproductive Services



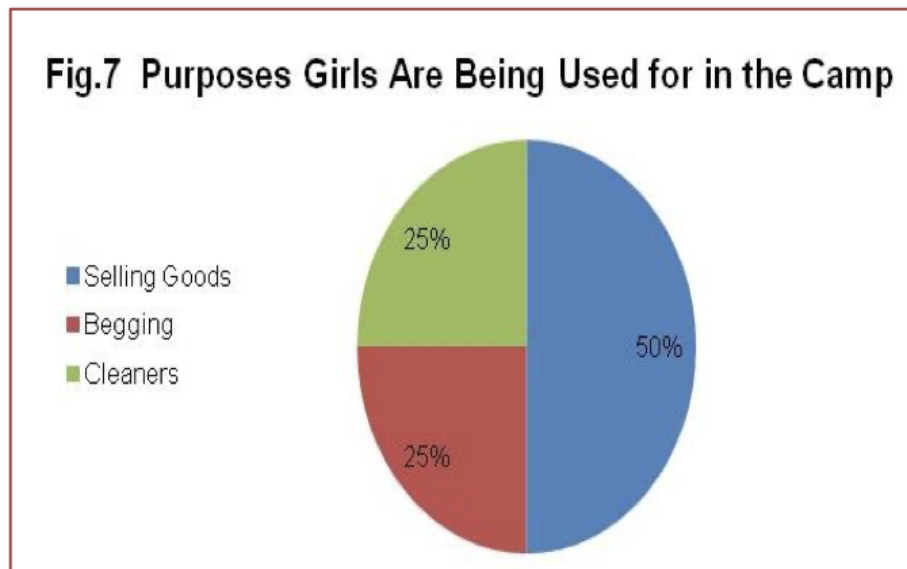
KIs identified persons with physical disabilities, female-headed households and persons with mental disabilities as being among the groups of people most excluded from reproductive services. Female Headed households are excluded from accessing reproductive services by roughly 26%. (*Findings from the inter-agency child protection and gender-based ...*, 2013)

### Discussion

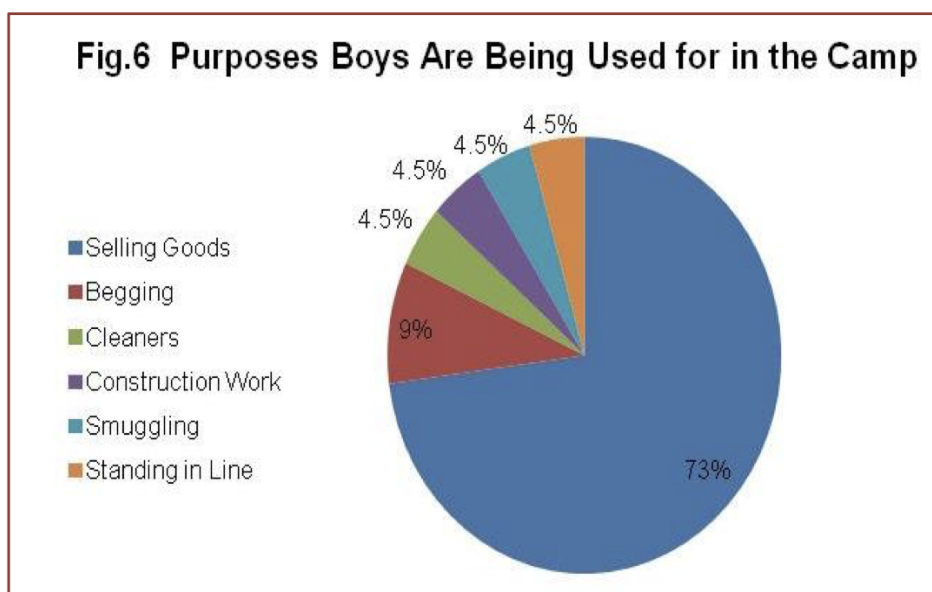
Being that many female heads of households are excluded from receiving reproductive services because they are unmarried or single, it reinforces the need for young girls to marry early so that they can avoid being identified with the same stigma and can subsequently have access to these necessary services. It is demonstrable of the manner in which spouseless women are treated within the Za'atari refugee camp and inclines young girls to marry so that they do not face similar treatment.

## 2. Economic/Employment Prospects

### a) Employment for Girls and Boys



Out of four responses for girls engaging in material work, two identified them as selling goods while one response each was given for begging and working as cleaners. (*Findings from the inter-agency child protection and gender-based ...*, 2013)



Out of 22 responses for boys, 16 (73%) respondents perceived selling goods as the most common form of work for boys followed by two (9%) responses for begging and one response each (4.5%) for working as cleaners, construction work and standing in line for adults waiting to receive food or NFIs. (*Findings from the inter-agency child protection and gender-based ...*, 2013)

## **Discussion**

When analyzing this data, it is evident that there is a greater variety of employment opportunities for young boys in comparison to young girls within the Za'atari refugee camp. Thus, it can be interpreted that many girls must enter into child marriages to seek financial security due to the limited availability of employment opportunities for their gender.

### **b) Remote Employment/Leaving the Camp for Opportunity**

“Some KI respondents had a sense that children were being offered opportunities (work) outside of the camp. Nine (33%) respondents confirmed this happening in the camp, equally for boys and girls. FGDs highlighted that adolescent boys and young men are sometimes offered jobs and are bailed out from the camp to work with Jordanians. While FGD highlighted that offers to take girls out of the camp are usually connected to marriage proposals, there is a general sense that in the majority of cases these offers are not accepted. However, lack of adequate monitoring mechanisms at this time do not allow service providers to quantify or estimate this situation... There is a general agreement amongst respondents that families seem inclined to delay marriage of their girls due to the unstable



environment and generally tend to reject marriage offers from outsiders because they believe these proposals are presented in a dishonourable way.”

### **Discussion**

Unlike boys, who are frequently offered employment positions and opportunities outside of the refugee camp, girls are often offered equivalent “opportunity” through marriage proposals outside of the camp and outside of Syrian culture. However, since marriage outside of Syrian culture is often frowned upon and considered shameful, many girls do not accept these outside proposals. Therefore, the rate of child marriages within Za'atari consistently increases because these girls are not leaving the camp, nor are they marrying outside of the camp which would decrease these rates. As a result of the stagnant emigration of girls from the camp leaving by their own accord, or through a marriage proposal, there is consistent growth of girls entering into child marriages as the influx of refugees into the camp continues to grow.

### 3. Gender Roles and Marriage Values

“Traditional marriage customs including early marriage were highlighted by the KI and reiterated in FGD sessions. The majority of the KI believed that the socially acceptable age for marriage for girls within the Syrian community is 15-18 years. This is generally regarded as the accepted age range for marriage in Syria and therefore it is not necessarily considered as early marriage. In FGDs, males including adolescent boys confirmed that the age considered normal for marriage for a girl ranged from 13 years and above. Both KI and FGD interviewees affirmed boys were married mainly between the ages of 18-25 years. It was raised in a FGD session that boys were generally engaged after their military service, which is usually when they are 18 years old.”

*(Findings from the inter-agency child protection and gender-based ..., 2013)*

### Discussion

The Za'atari refugee camp predominantly offers asylum for Syrian refugees, thus the overarching ideologies for gender roles and marriage values reflects that of Syrian culture. The finite influence of other cultures, as well as the gross number of Syrian refugees within the camp permits for ideas concerning child marriage to be upheld, whether these marriages be legally recognized by the Jordanian state, or the marriage being legitimized through cultural and customary reasons. Therefore, the rates of child marriage within the Za'atari refugee camp have increased because Syrian marriage and gender ideals are promulgated without facing any kind of opposition or outside influence.

### Conclusion

After analyzation of the data collected from “Findings from the Inter-Agency Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Assessment in the Za’atari Refugee Camp” by the United Nations Children Fund (Unicef) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), it is evident that the child marriage rates within the Za’atari refugee camp are increasing largely due to three driving factors: limited accessibility to reproductive services, limited economic and employment opportunities, and a potent institution of Syrian gender roles and marriage values.

The limited accessibility to reproductive services has increased the rate of child marriage by forcing girls to enter into marriages prematurely to access these services without facing shame or discrimination associated with doing so as an unmarried, young girl. Furthermore, child marriage provides a shield from gender based violence and harassment taking place within the camp by preserving the status of a girl as pure to her peers. The unavailability of these services to single, unmarried women is indicative of the fate a girl may face should she not marry. The camp, and the culture of the Syrian refugees is disdainful toward unmarried women. Thus, child marriage upholds ensures a girl follows the norms of her culture and provides access to necessary services she would otherwise not receive should she not marry.

The limited employment and economic opportunities increases the rate of child marriages within the camp because it decreases the potential for girls to leave the camp and become financially self-sufficient. Lack of job diversity for young girls and the infrequent opportunity for them to leave the camp for reasons other than marriage proposals is evidentiary for this phenomenon. Thus, the stagnant movement of girls leaving the camp and the consistent flow of girls into the camp constantly increases the rate of child marriage.

Lastly, the unscathed cultural norms and values held by the Syrian community are upheld within the camp due to the dominance of Syrian refugees seeking asylum within the camp. This allows for aboriginal child practices from Syria to embed itself in the culture of Za'atari and be promulgated. Thus, the child marriage rates in the Za'atari refugee camp because of the commitment to uphold Syrian values within a new country and culture.

The research conducted within this study creates opportunity for further research to be initiated on the causes of the increased rates of child marriage within the Za'atari refugee camp, and specifically, the limited accessibility to reproductive services, limited employment and economic opportunity for girls, and the promulgation of Syrian cultural values.

Furthermore, the research conducted within this study encourages proposals for ameliorating these causes of child marriage rates within Za'atari. With respect to the restricted accessibility to reproductive services, more outside intervention can be instituted within the camp to protect girls that try to utilize these services and ensure that all girls have equal opportunity alike to exercise their right to use these services. The limited economic and employment opportunity for girls can be improved through the aid of the Jordanian government facilitating movement from the camp, into Jordan and/or other states willing to house these refugees or grant paths to citizenship. This would alleviate the limited economic and employment opportunity for girls within the camp by decreasing competition for the already minute array of jobs. Finally, insertion of more NGOs and organizations promoting liberal ideals straying from traditional Syrian values may lower the rates of child marriage within the Za'atari refugee camp. This would circulate and encourage different pathways to be undertaken within the realm of marriage, gender roles, and gender values, which were previously entirely dependent on traditional Syrian customs.

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