

The Impact of COVID-19 on Forcibly Displaced and Marginalized Communities with a Focus on Child Marriages in Jordan

Jordan presents a puzzling case for studying the still emerging impacts of COVID-19. What began with one of the strictest lockdowns on March 17, 2020 and a successfully controlled spread of the virus during the summer took a sharp turn by the end of 2020. By March 2021, Jordan was reporting several days of 9,000 new positive cases and up to 100 deaths per day. The country counts 600,000 cumulative cases and over 6,000 deaths.¹ These high numbers, coupled with a devastating economy, overstretched health services and hospitals, and criticism of the government's human rights abuses, especially that of freedom of expression, has let those who were already marginalized before the pandemic feel even more vulnerable. To put it simply, due to COVID-19, the risks and impediments the forcibly displaced and marginalized in Jordan have always suffered from are now exacerbated.

Given Jordan's position as a host state to many refugee populations,² it may be tempting to focus on the impact of the pandemic on displaced populations only. In this paper I draw upon the work of our organization, the Information and Research Center, King Hussein Foundation (IRCKHF),³ to explain why attempts to analytically separate refugee populations from vulnerable members of the host population are problematic for policy responses, development programs, and scholarly understanding. I highlight how COVID-19 compounded preexisting structural inequalities, particularly gender inequalities, by examining the issue of child marriages in Jordan.

As an NGO research center in Jordan, we have the advantage of being in the liminal center between scientific social research and that of practitioners and development programs in Jordan. Over the last few years, IRCKHF has worked closely with international partners including academic institutions in the US and the UK as well as grassroots organizations focusing on gender and social justice in the various governorates of Jordan. IRCKHF has worked with some of the most marginalized and/or stigmatized populations in Jordan, including youth, girls (including homebound girls), women, people with disabilities, children of Jordanian mothers and foreign fathers who are denied Jordanian citizenship, stigmatized children, and youth born out of wedlock. Our approach

¹ "COVID-19 Statistical Report – Jordan 18/03/2021," Ministry of Health, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, <https://corona.moh.gov.jo/en>.

² In addition to Palestinian, Iraqi, and Syrian refugees, Jordan also hosts Yemeni, Somali, and Sudanese refugees. More information about registered refugees can be found at the UNHCR data portal (<https://data2.unhcr.org/>).

³ IRCKHF is a non-governmental organization in Jordan that serves as a catalyst for socio-economic development by conducting inclusive research, evidence-based advocacy, and knowledge sharing with practitioners, policymakers, and civil society on issues of human rights, gender, and social justice. IRCKHF was initially launched in 1995 as part of the National Task Force for Children, today IRCKHF promotes the welfare of children, youth, women, families, communities, and vulnerable groups by providing objective, multidisciplinary research and analysis to practitioners and policymakers in Jordan and the region, enabling effective socio-economic planning and decision-making. For more information: www.irckhf.org

has always been to focus on the most marginalized, which in Jordan prompts most to think about refugees. However, our research demonstrates that while forced displacement does cause vulnerability, the extent of it cannot be assessed unless contextualized with the situation of the host community and other vulnerable populations.

For example, while Syrian refugees in Jordan are vulnerable, our research with Arab women refugees indicates Palestinian refugees may be even more so, as they lack the international concern and support for their well-being that foreign countries and iNGOs provide to Syrians.⁴ Further, according to the World Bank, while the socio-economic crises caused by COVID increased poverty among Syrian refugees by 18 percentage points, poverty among Jordanians increased by 38 percentage points.⁵ As the baseline for Syrian refugees in Jordan was below the poverty line before the pandemic began, they fell relatively less in comparison to Jordanians,⁶ and were more able to cushion this fall with regular access to basic needs, health services, and livelihood opportunities provided through UN agencies, iNGOs, and donor-funded programs.

Research that only includes a refugee population in its sample is not contextualized and therefore may assume its issues of study are caused by displacement. However, when just 30% of the research sample includes Jordanians, as demonstrated in studies we conducted with the University of Plymouth,⁷ it quickly becomes apparent that Jordan's wider socio-political dynamics, rather than solely refugee status, are at work. Here, the exacerbating impact of COVID on child marriages in Jordan provides compelling evidence for widening the study of marginalized populations affected by COVID beyond refugees.

Studying Vulnerable Populations in Jordan During a Pandemic

On March 17, 2020, the Government of Jordan instituted a full lock-down that only began to ease on April 30. During this time, the IRCKHF research team was able to remotely contact some of the most marginalized populations through

⁴ [Poverty alleviation and Arab women refugees in Jordan: empowerment through grassroots micro-entrepreneurship?](#) 2019, Study Report.

⁵ Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, World Bank Group, and UNHCR (December 2020). *Compounding Misfortunes: Changes in Poverty since the onset of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees and Host Communities in Jordan, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Lebanon*.

⁶ Batool Ghaith, "Jordan 'an exemplary host country' for Syrian refugees — UN official," *The Jordan Times* (Jordan), 16 March 2021, <https://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/jordan-%E2%80%98-exemplary-host-country%E2%80%99-syrian-refugees-%E2%80%94-un-official>.; Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, World Bank Group, and UNHCR (December 2020). *Compounding Misfortunes: Changes in Poverty since the onset of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees and Host Communities in Jordan, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Lebanon*.

⁷ Al-Dajani, Haya, Essaid, Aida, Abu Taleb, Hala, and Abu Azzam, Majed (2018). Policy Brief: Jordanian and Syrian Refugee Artisans and Cultural Heritage Entrepreneurship in Jordan. <http://haqqi.info/en/haqqi/research/policy-brief-jordanian-and-syrian-refugee-artisans-and-cultural-heritage>

its grassroots networks.⁸ What quickly became apparent to our research team was that those remaining underserved were those who did not fall under the auspices of the INGO or NGO radar of beneficiaries, including people with disabilities, the extremely poor, and youth deprived of family ties. Governmental outlets and larger NGOs were not reaching them, and it was only thanks to the small community-based organizations and local volunteers that they were able to survive. This made us realize the importance of the well-being and resilience of those who serve refugee and vulnerable populations. Front-line workers in the practitioner field continued to serve their beneficiaries virtually during the lockdown, as did volunteers who used every means necessary to get their beneficiaries the food and medicine they needed in order to survive.

During the lockdown, we reassessed all our research projects and provided donors and partners with two options. Purely qualitative research designs were converted to mixed-methods studies that included quantitative components that could be carried out online or over the phone. This was only done for projects where the research topic was not controversial or could put any respondent in harm's way. All focus group discussions were converted to in-depth individual interviews to minimize the risks of spreading the virus, and there was a short window during the summer of 2020 where it was safe enough to carry out both focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. However, all research pertaining to gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health rights and access to services, and other gender-sensitive research had to be postponed in order for it to be carried out face-to-face. We hope that current efforts to vaccinate the Jordanian population and refugees will allow us to recommence this research in May 2021.⁹

When carrying out research with vulnerable populations, the risks are greater. In a patriarchal society such as that of Jordan, much of the gender-sensitive research takes place in spaces and venues where the respondent not only feels safe but is able to access easily, such as a community-based organization. With the lockdown, restricted mobility left many gender-based violence (GBV) victims trapped with their perpetrators with no access to protection, rehabilitation, or support services. For those who were able to access or seek help, it was clear the amount of GBV increased, even though not all cases could be reported. A study conducted by UNFPA and local organizations with 360 Jordanians and Syrians showed that 69% of respondents agreed that GBV had increased since the start of the pandemic. The most common types of GBV mentioned were emotional and physical abuse.¹⁰

⁸ Information and Research Center – King Hussein Foundation (2020). [Glimpses of Hope in the Era of Corona: Our Stories from Jordan](#) (series of 25 stories from March 27 until May 21, 2020),.

⁹ "Jordan has become one of the world's first countries to start vaccinations for UNHCR-registered refugees," UNHCR (14 January 2021). [First refugee COVID-19 vaccinations commence in Jordan](#).

¹⁰ UNFPA, Institute for Family Health – Noor Al Hussein Foundation, Plan Jordan, (2020), [Daring to Ask, Listen and Act: A Snapshot of the Impacts of COVID-19 on Women and Girls' Rights and Sexual and Reproductive Health](#)

As with all sectors, civil society organizations such as ours have tried to continue working even under the volatile circumstances. While the many of our research methodologies were modified from purely qualitative research to mixed-methods where possible, with vulnerable populations it is not as straightforward. The priority is to ensure that no harm comes to any individuals who participate in the research, but also to ensure the safety of the researchers themselves. For example, even when conducting research that was not concerning “sensitive” issues, while obtaining the informed consent over the phone, an “exit word” is established with the respondent in case they felt they needed to stop the interview.¹¹

Impacts of COVID on Child Marriage in Jordan

The implications of these problems can be seen in efforts to study and combat the problem of child marriage in Jordan. Even before COVID, a great deal of research was focused on child marriage, and it was often written off as an imported Syrian phenomenon in Jordan.¹² Feminist researchers, human rights advocates, and social protection practitioners are all in agreement that child marriage is impacted by high levels of poverty and the lack of economic opportunities, resorting to families pressuring girls into a child marriage.¹³ Child marriage is a form of GBV and therefore it is no surprise in a patriarchal society, whether Syrian or Jordanian, that when the socio-economic situation worsens, there is an increase in child marriage as one of the many kinds of GBV. According to Demographic Health Survey 2017-2018 figures for Jordan, “more than one in four children are married before the age of 18 and nearly one in 10 are married before the age of 15.”¹⁴ In 2019, the Jordanian Parliament raised the minimum age of a girl for which judges could permit exceptional marriage cases from fifteen to sixteen. However, the pandemic, and particularly the closure of schools, became an obstacle to efforts to combat child marriage. Whether Syrian or Jordanian, one of the key factors that can help prevent her from entering a child marriage is staying in school. When the pandemic began, the situation for girls from poor socio-economic situations not only worsened financially for them and their families, but

¹¹ Similar safety protocols were also taken in another research project in partnership with the University of Berkley’s Human Rights Center, which focused on child marriages and the implications of COVID-19 on Syrian girls in Jordan. For more information, see Freccero, Julie, and Audrey Taylor. *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Crises: A Participatory Study of Risk and Protective Factors, Decision-Making, and Community-Driven Solutions*. Human Rights Center, 2021. Print.

¹² R. El Arab & M. Sagbakken (2019) Child marriage of female Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: a literature review, *Global Health Action*, 12:1, DOI: 10.1080/16549716.2019.1585709; Higher Population Council (2017). *A Study on Child Marriage in Jordan*.

¹³ Jones, N., Baird, S., Presler-Marshall, E., Malachoswka, A., Kilburn, K., Abu Hamad, B., Essaid, A., Amaireh, W., Sajdi, J., Banioweda, K., Alabbadi, T., Alheiwidi, S., Ashareef, Q., Altal, S., Kharabsheh, W., Abu Taleb, H., Abu Azzam, M. and Abu Hammad, B. (2019) Adolescent well-being in Jordan: exploring gendered capabilities, contexts and change strategies. A synthesis report on GAGE Jordan baseline findings. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence.

¹⁴ Abu Zaid, Sarah (20 January 2021). [Child marriage on the rise again — survey](#), *The Jordan Times*.

pushed families into deciding a detrimental future for their daughters as a last resort.

In 2019, with the support of IM Swedish Development Partner, IRCKHF designed a 5-year longitudinal study to capture the transition of marginalized girls (ages 14-19) into adulthood. While all marginalized populations are uniquely vulnerable, this study was designed to research the impact of overlapping vulnerabilities on the challenges these girls face in their journeys into adulthood. As part of IRCKHF’s mission to mobilize knowledge for positive social change, it is hoped that this nuanced research will better inform future programming and policies concerning girls and young women in Jordan.

In 2019 IRCKHF began the baseline study for this project, which was completed in early 2020 just a few weeks before the lockdown began in Jordan. In interviewing 62 girls with varying socio-economic and legal vulnerabilities, what quickly became apparent was the impact of having left school versus being in school.¹⁵

Main Vulnerability	Number of Girls	Of Which are Out of School
Living in Poverty	9	1
Married as Children	11	6
Not Jordanian Citizens because mother is Jordanian and Father is not	7	2
With Disabilities (physical)	8	3
10 (6 Syrians in ITS¹⁶; 4 Jordanians)	10	10
Living in Care Centers	10	0 (5 in school and 5 in vocational training)
Out of School (only)	7	7
Total	62	34

A total of 34 were already out of school and the three main reasons identified for them leaving school were:

- the need to work and support their family

¹⁵ For both the baseline study in 2019-2020 and the rapid assessment in 2020, IRCKHF received IRB approvals for the research tools and methodology from the Jordan University for Science and Technology.

¹⁶ ITS stands for Informal Tented Settlement, which are informal settlements for those Syrian refugees in Jordan who are either unable or unwilling to reside in a formal refugee camp, or cannot afford to live in residences amongst the host community.

- low academic achievement in an unsupportive environment
- customs and traditions

Of the 29 girls who were in school, 23 hoped to complete their education and continue to higher education. Those girls who were working were actually the ones who expressed the greatest desire to return to school and finish their education in order to be able to change their professions:

“I have to go back. I dream of becoming a teacher when I grow up, to teach. But if I want to teach, I have to study first.” (girl child laborer, age 17).¹⁷

Recognizing education as the most significant factor in determining the future of these girls, IRCKHF developed a video to raise public awareness in Jordan about the importance of girls staying in school.¹⁸ It was inspired by the Girl Effect video, and shows how staying in school can transform the future of the girl child.

As part of a 5-year project with research having been completed in early 2020, we had not planned on further research until 2021 other than interventions to match the girls with the needed social protection services. However, the pandemic and lockdown changed those needs, so the baseline findings were no longer an accurate account of their situation. Fortunately, because the girls knew the research team, our researchers were able to conduct a rapid assessment via telephone in October 2020.

Nevertheless, IRCKHF researchers could only reach 45 of the original 62 girls. The majority did not respond to mobile calls or messages; eight had changed their place of residence; three girls moved after getting married; one moved with her family to a smaller residence due to their financial situation, and one Syrian girl from an Internal Tented Settlement (ITS) moved to a different settlement with her family after their tents caught on fire. Of these 45 girls, 31 said that their families’ economic situation worsened over the last year as a result of the pandemic.

“We were not able to buy masks and similar things because we didn’t have money. We were barely able to pay for water and electricity...My brother was the only one working, and he had debts to pay.”

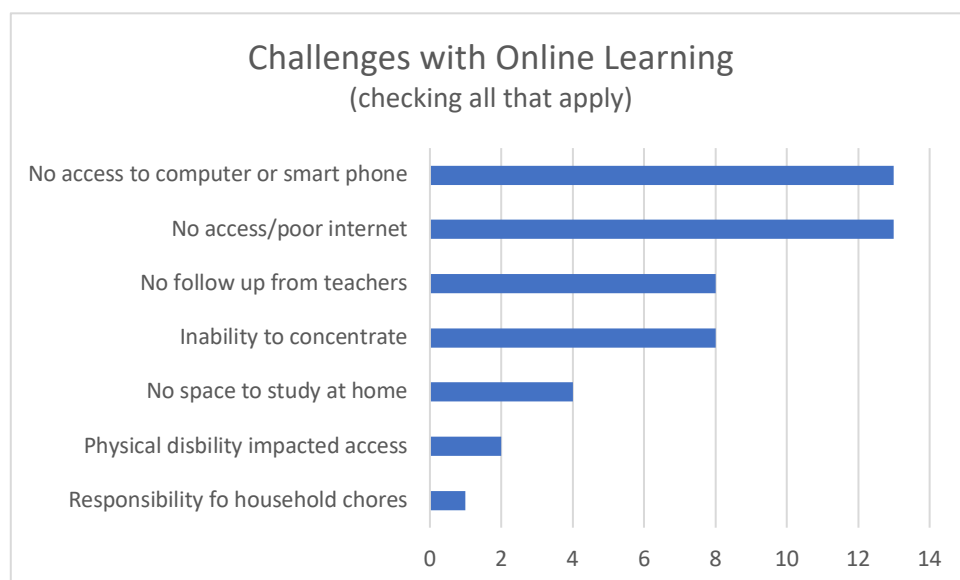
(Girl Child Laborer, age 15)¹⁹

¹⁷ Information and Research Center – King Hussein Foundation (2020). [Marginalized Girls in Jordan: Baseline Research Results](#), p. 18.

¹⁸ Information and Research Center – King Hussein Foundation (2020). We Have a Story (video), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEEoT2VmFLc&list=TLPQMTkxMDIwMjAPFtMhM7m-BA&index=2>.

¹⁹ Information and Research Center – King Hussein Foundation (2020). [Marginalized Girls in Jordan: Rapid Assessment of the Impact of COVID-19](#), p. 3.

Of those 45, none had developed COVID-19, but only 23 girls were still in school.²⁰ Of these 23 girls, 11 were facing challenges with online learning, and only 3 felt that they were able to keep up with school. The assessment showed that one of the main challenges for girls to continue online learning in 2020 was the lack of access to smart phones, computers, and/or the internet. Two girls with physical disabilities said that online learning was a continuous challenge.²¹



In September 2020, schools re-opened for a brief period of time before switching back to online earning. Only 16 girls registered, and five dropped out. While others may have chosen to continue online learning instead (this remained an option for those who opted not to attend physically), those five who dropped out clearly stated that they had no intention to return. Also, five girls each from a different vulnerability group all either got engaged or married in 2020, one of these five also got divorced. From those that were already married in the baseline study, two had children and another two got divorced, one of whom got remarried. Finally, due to the impact of COVID on their families, all 45 girls can be considered to be now living in poverty.

The number of studies about child marriage in Jordan rose shortly after the Syrian Crisis began. It was clear that it was an increasing issue, but the common narrative amongst those in the development sector in Jordan, as well as the public, was that this was something Syrians did back in Syria, and that it was not necessarily an issue for Jordanians. However as more and more studies were done where a small sample of the research respondents would include Jordanians, it became clear it was not only a Syrian problem in Jordan but a Jordanian one as well. As economic hardship drove the families further into poverty, education became less of a priority for daughters, and parents

²⁰ Information and Research Center – King Hussein Foundation (2020). [Marginalized Girls in Jordan: Rapid Assessment of the Impact of COVID-19](#), p. 5.

²¹ Information and Research Center – King Hussein Foundation (2020). [Marginalized Girls in Jordan: Rapid Assessment of the Impact of COVID-19](#), p. 2 and 5.

resorted to child marriage as part of the solution in the hopes of financial security and economic support for the family. For the daughter though, in addition to all the identified consequences that come with a child marriage, she becomes stuck in a cycle of poverty. Other studies have shown will resort to her one day also depending on marrying her daughter off before becoming of adult age.²² So as soon as schools shut down in Jordan, it set back what the development sector has been working on for almost a decade now: keeping girls in school and preventing girl child marriages. The rate at which child marriages have increased in 2020 alone, based on the studies mentioned above, shows that as the economy becomes less stable and schools remain closed, we will continue to see more child marriages for both Syrian and Jordanian girls.

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²² Information and Research Center - King Hussein Foundation (2013). Homebound Girls in Jordan, <http://haqqi.info/en/haqqi/research/homebound-girls-jordan>.