Barriers to Education of Syrian Refugee Girls in Jordan: Gender-Based Threats and Challenges

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to uncover and describe the barriers to education as experienced by Syrian refugee girls in the Za'atri Syrian Refugee Camp in Jordan.

Design: A qualitative nonexperimental design utilizing focus group discussions (FGDs), individual interviews, and participant and nonparticipant observation was used for this study. Four FGDs were facilitated in three dropout education centers (nonformal school) in the Za'atri Syrian Refugee Camp. Data were collected over a period of 5 months from December 2017 to April 2018.

Methods: Using an FGD format, the United Nations Human Rights ABC module in the Arabic language was used to educate, to empower with knowledge and skills, and to elicit participants' responses to perceived barriers to exercising their universal human rights, especially their right to education. Data were collected using a demographic tool, digitally recorded FGDs, an observation notebook, a flip chart, and a detailed interview schedule. Fifteen in-depth, individual, 1½-hr interviews of self-selected participants were conducted. Narrative statement and content analysis were used to analyze the data for each FGD. A constant comparative method was used to compare and verify codes, categories, and themes within and between groups.

Findings: The complex interplay of patriarchy, tradition, and religious practices, combined with the added vulnerabilities of protracted warfare displacement, prevent Syrian girls from being their own agents, prevent their access to education, and expose them to even greater health risks through coercion into early marriage. Several themes explained the process by which the interactive nature of patriarchy, traditional cultural, and religious practice influenced the girls' right to education and their right to make their own decisions about marriage. These are (a) gender role and the social position of girls in the family, (b) gender role and the cultural disvaluing of girls' education, (c) economic survival priorities and child labor, and (d) the intersection of environmental stressors with preservation of family honor as motivators for early marriage. Repeated exposure to threats and physical abuse seem to be the mechanisms that reinforce the girls' perceived gender-based vulnerabilities, submissiveness, and educational truancy.

Conclusions: Syrian refugee girls seem to consistently face conflicts and daily adverse experiences that pose serious physical and psychological risks to their health with potentially far-reaching negative health consequences. Gender-based physical and psychological threats and abuses, along with

the coercive practice of early marriage, while viewed as a way of protecting them, put Syrian refugee girls at greater health risk, psychological threat, and social and economic challenge. Evidence on refugees who experienced violence shows that they are more likely to experience posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dissociative disorders, depression, and anxiety, along with a host of life-threatening physical comorbidities.

Clinical Relevance: Syrian refugee girls are at high risk for gender-based abuse and violence. Nurses can play an important role in reducing the health risks associated with gender-based abuse by assessing clients for symptoms of physical and psychological abuse, including symptoms of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Maternal and child health assessment and health-promoting interventions should be included in the healthcare plan. Understanding the sociopolitical conditions, as well as the cultural and religious backgrounds, that shape the lived experiences of displaced girls is also essential for offering a congruent, culturally sensitive plan of care and for creating targeted and relevant educational and treatment intervention strategies and referrals.

Since 2011, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has received 1.3 million Syrian refugees, of whom over half a million were processed in the Za'atri Syrian Refugee Camp in the north of Jordan (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2018). Forced and protracted displacement of Syrian refugees to neighboring countries has created an environment that disproportionally increases the vulnerability of women and girls (Bartels et al., 2018; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2014). Close to one in three—226,000 out of 660,000—Syrians registered with the United Nations refugee agency in Jordan are school-aged children between 5 and 17 years old. Of these, more than one third (over 80,000) did not receive a formal education last year.

Tackling the issue of refugee girls' right to education is complex and multifaceted. It demands an understanding of the sociopolitical forces that led to the armed conflict, the process of forced displacement, and the norms governing behavior in the new environment. It also demands an understanding of the perceived threats and challenges that negatively influence the well-being and very survival of these families in exile. Notwithstanding the complexities, focusing efforts on providing opportunities for formal education especially for girls has proven effective in empowering otherwise vulnerable refugee girls. Research has long reinforced education as a powerful tool for supporting the development of vulnerable underage girls within a strongly patriarchal society (Nour, 2009). Girls' education is not only a fundamental human right that is essential for their development and economic independence (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2004), but also is a powerful pathway toward gender equality (Nasrullah & Bhatti, 2012)

Focusing on Syrian refugee girls' education became even more critical in light of the numerous reports about Syrian refugee girls who, as young as 13 or 14 years of age, were increasingly being given away in marriage to men who were twice or three times their age (Mourtada, Schlecht & DeJong, 2017; Sami, Williams, Krause, Onyango, & Burton, 2014; UNICEF, 2014). School dropout and child marriage are interrelated outcomes that have an enormous impact on girls (Nour, 2009).

While early marriage in the region is not a rare practice, the rate of child marriage has sharply increased from roughly 12% in their home country of Syria to almost 37% among Syrian refugee girls in Jordan (UNHCR, 2018). The 2014 and 2018 UNICEF reports note that the vast majority of marriages have involved underage girls at an alarmingly increasing rate. In 2012, the rate of all marriages involving underage girls was 1.7%, but had jumped to 7.6% in 2014. Additionally, at an increasing rate, 16.2% of all Syrian girls who married between 15 and 17 years of age were married to men who were 15 or more years older.

Empowering girls through education can be effective in preventing child marriage and can foster change relatively quickly (Lee-Rife, Malhotra, Warner, & Glinski, 2012). Murphy (2016) reported that offering the opportunity for education to underage girls in Bangladesh had reduced the incidence of child marriage by one third. Sekine and Hodgkin (2017) found that early marriage is the most common reason given for leaving school, and that the risk for school

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dropout due to marriage increases after girls complete the fifth or sixth grade, peaks in the seventh and eighth grades, and remains noteworthy in the ninth and tenth grades. Kalamar, Lee-Rife, and Hindin (2016), in their systematic review of studies on interventions to prevent child marriage, identified the use of some sort of cash or economic incentive and a life skills curriculum geared toward both a decrease in child marriage and an increase in age at marriage. Six of the studies reviewed, including those that implemented a life skills curriculum, reported positive results in decreasing the proportion of early marriage or increasing the age at marriage

Undoubtedly, child marriage is dangerous to girls' health and wel-lbeing (Haberland, McCarthy, & Brady, 2017; Nour, 2009). Ample studies offer insight on the explanatory and motivating factors behind the practice, yet offer no direct evidence to link or explain the process for girls' school dropout and early marriage (Sekine & Hodgkin, 2017; Sperling & Winthrop, 2016). Current knowledge on Syrian refugees stems from reports by governmental and nongovernmental national and international humanitarian organizations, which offer important data on the scope and patterns of the problem, and document anecdotally the strategies for using education to reduce or eliminate child marriage. There is also a dearth of knowledge on understanding the variables that shape the lives of Syrian refugee girls as it pertains to education and early marriage. This study aimed to uncover and describe Syrian refugee girls' lived experiences with access to education, and to document the threats and challenges that act as barriers to their education. Conducting research with an extremely vulnerable refugee population demands offering a direct benefit to participants during the conduct of research. This study, structured within a human-rights training framework, was also motivated by a humanitarian objective to increase Syrian refugee girls' resilience by increasing their knowledge of their universal human rights and their right to education, and by demonstrating, through knowledge and skill building, the immediate and long-term benefits of education for their own development and for the development of their families and society.

Design and Methods

A qualitative design, which relied on focus group discussions (FGDs), interviews, and participant and nonparticipant observations, was used for this study. The study was conducted in the dropout educational centers in the Za'atri Syrian Refugee Camp. The camp occupies a space of 5.3 km2 and is located close to the northern border of Jordan with Syria. There are close to 80,000 residents living in prefabricated caravans. Almost 60% of the population is 24 years of age or younger, and about 20% of the population is under 5 years of age. On average there are 80 births per week, and 14,000 prenatal weekly consultations. Males constitute 50.4% of the population, and 20% of the households are headed by a woman (UNHCR, 2018).

The dropout educational centers offer educational programs, designed as a catch-up system, to help truant students make up missed school years. As such, these programs complement formal education and offer quality, relevant, flexible, and diverse pathways to certified post-basic and tertiary-level learning opportunities. There are three dropout educational centers (the U.S.-funded, the Emirate-funded, and Saudi Arabia–funded centers) located strategically within the camp to allow for easy access. To maximize capacity, dropout educational programs are offered in two morning and afternoon shifts for girls, and one late afternoon shift for boys. Escort services are offered daily to accompany girls to and from dropout schools in order to offer secure passage and protection from harassment in the streets of the camp. Other services, including new student intake, recruitment, counseling, child protective services, and family protective referrals, are offered in each of the three sites. The dropout centers were selected for the study because the girls' population in these centers was already denied access to formal education and was more at risk for early marriage.

The caravan classroom setting was comfortable and had adequate resources. The noise of crying young children may have impacted discussions, but the participants seemed accustomed to and not fazed by it. One student brought along her infant to the class, who usually slept, and support teachers took care of the infant when it was awake. Another student brought her younger sister to class because no one could care for her sibling while she attended school. Classroom teachers were present in a supportive role.

A convenience sampling was used in the selection of participants. Only those participants who received parent's or legal guardians' consent and assented to participating were included in the study. The rationale for using convenience sampling was based on the camp's logistics, and on the fact that the nongovernmental organization (NGO) wished for as many participants as possible to be part of the FGDs. Two FDGs were selected from the U.S.-funded center, one group from the Emirate-funded center, and one from the Saudi Arabia–funded center.

Data Collection and Analysis

Demographic data on age, educational level, marital status, number of years in Jordan as refugees, and family size were collected. Qualitative data on FGDs were collected using digital voice recordings, notes, flipcharts, and handwritten notes of participants. Participants' and nonparticipants' observations and note taking took place over a 5-month period.

A total of four FGDs were facilitated in the camp. The first two FGDs (FGD I and FGD II), which were facilitated in the U.S.-funded dropout center, involved meeting with each group for 3 hr each day for four consecutive days. The other two groups, from the Emirate-funded center (FGD III) and Saudi Arabia–funded center (FGD VI), involved meeting with each group once for 3 hr. The process of data collection for FGD I and II involved using the first session to ensure that participants were informed of and understood the nature and emphasis of the focus group process, on engaging participants' in establishing ground rules for the process, and to offer opportunities for creating cohesion and trust among the members of the group. For example, participants were asked to write on a 2 × 4–inch card their response to the questions "who am I?" and "what do I dream to become?" without writing their names. The cards were shuffled and redistributed so that no participant would read her own response. This exercise was effective in offering a safe zone for describing self and for expressing desires and hopes. It was also effective in cross-validation of shared hopes and desires and served as a springboard for discussions. This approach also supplied data for an initial assessment of the participants' academic and maturational level.

The United Nations Human Rights ABC module in the Arabic language was used for the following 3 days to educate participants about their universal human rights, to empower them with knowledge and skill to negotiate their own wishes, and to elicit their reactions and responses to perceived barriers to practicing universal rights and, in particular, their right to education. On the last hour of the last day, participants were asked to summarize and identify the main barriers to their education. Then they were formed into groups. Each group was assigned an identified barrier, and each group was asked to define the barriers and its parameters and to develop workable strategies to help them overcome the barrier. FGD III and IV were used to further discuss the right to education and the barriers they faced or had faced. The process also involved discussing Group I and II's findings to elicit Group III and IV's reactions to these findings.

Individual 1½-hr interviews with 15 participants, and with teachers, counselors, child protective agents, mothers of Syrian refugee girls, and three religious clerks, were also conducted over a period of 2 months. Follow-up questions and answers with participants, to verify themes and address questions related to emerging themes, were conducted regularly over a period of 5 months.

Institutional review board approvals were secured from the home academic institution, the host University in Jordan, and the humanitarian NGO responsible for offering educational remediation for dropout students. After being granted permission for entry into the camp, an initial visit was conducted in December 2017 in order to conduct a feasibility assessment of the setting for the conduct of the project or study and to secure Syrian parents' consent and their girls' assent.

Recorded data were transcribed and analyzed while the process of data collection was ongoing. Transcribed data were notated with observed verbal and nonverbal data. Codes within and across groups were developed and compared. Codes indicating barriers to education were grouped into themes and were defined by the parameters of the codes. This process was followed by comparing similarities and differences within and between groups, and by examining themes in relation to other observational notes and interview data. For example, in response to addressing a universal right to making one's own decisions, responses of Groups I and II were overwhelmingly similar in that respondents demonstrated having no voice in any decision making, including those decisions that have direct consequences for their own lives. Groups III and IV further affirmed that finding. The final thematic analysis of data was translated into English and back-translated into Arabic to ensure true symbolic and contextual representations of the translated data. For the purpose of this report, data exclusively detail the threats and challenges of Syrian refugee girls' lived experiences in relation to barriers to education, and the situational forces that seem to reinforce perceived notions of their gender.

Findings

Demographic Data

Although a nonrandom sampling was selected, the demographic profile of the groups shows homogeneity in terms of age, educational levels, marital status, years in protracted displacement, and family size. It is important to point out that almost 24% (22 participants) out of the 92 participants in the study were

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already either married with or without children, or divorced with or without children. One divorced participant with children remarried again, and one was widowed at 13 years of age. The demographic data for Groups I, II, III, and IV are presented in Table 1.

Barriers to Education

The complex interplay of patriarchy, cultural tradition, and religious practices, along with the added vulnerabilities of protracted displacement, prevent Syrian girls from being their own agents, prevent their access to education, and expose them to even greater health risks through coercion into early marriage. Several themes explained the process by which the interactive nature of patriarchy, cultural tradition, and religious practice influenced girls' right to education and their right to making their own decisions about marriage. These are (a) gender role and the social position of girls in the family, (b) gender role and the cultural disvaluing of girls' education, (c) survival priorities and child labor, and (d) the intersection of environmental stressors with the preservation of family honor as motivators for early marriage. Repeated exposure to threats and physical abuse seem to be the mechanisms that reinforce girls' perceived gender-based vulnerabilities, submissiveness, and truancy.

At the social, family, and religious levels, participants reported that they were not as equally valued or supported as their male siblings. Girls were kept away from school because education is not thought to be important for girls, because they are perceived as a liability and a burden, and because they are vulnerable and in need of a husband to protect family honor.

At the participants' level, traumas; loss; verbal, physical, and sexual harassment in the streets; verbal and physical abuse at home; gender-based expectation of self-denying and self-sacrificing caring and giving through domestic and child labor; lack of familiarity with Jordanian school curricular content; along with the family's and community's push for early marriage were among the major difficulties they faced. The processes by which barriers to education were enforced and reinforced are related to their preconceived gender role.

Gender Role and Social Position of Girls in the Family

Participants reported that they were not as equally loved, valued, or supported as their male siblings. Their gendered role as females offered a constricted range of possibilities and opportunities, and restrained and confined their lives and behaviors within clearly prescribed expectations that were reinforced with verbal threats and physical punishment. The mere rumor of violations of these expectations was invariably and swiftly met with punishment, beatings, and severe restrictions.

Participants spoke with ease and at times with smiles that reflected and denoted a degree of sarcasm, resentment, and disappointment, and at times outright rage about their devalued status and subservient gender role in both family and society. They spoke about their duties as females through the lens of sociocultural

Table 1. Average Demographic Scores for the Four Focus Groups

	Group I (*n* = 28)		Group II (*n* = 23)		Group III (*n* = 19)		Group IV (*n* = 22)	
Average age (years)	16.8		15.9		16.8		5.5	
Years in camp	5.6		5.4		5.7		5.5	
Average family size	7.3		7.2		7		6.9	
Marital status	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Single	18	64	18	78	12	63	17	77
Married with/without children	2	7.1	1	4.3	3	15.8	4	18.2
Divorced	4	14	3	13	3	15.8		
Divorced with children	4	3.6	1	4.3	1	5.3		
Widow							1	4.5
Educational level								
Elementary (4th to 6th grade)	9	32	13	56	7	36.8	14	63.6
Secondary (7th to 9th grade)	17	60	9	39	12	63.2	8	36.4
High (10th grade)	2	2.7	1	4.3				

role expectations of women in Syria—to serve, to give care, to deny self, to sacrifice self, to meet the needs of others unconditionally, and to behave in strict accordance with religious and cultural traditions. They were required to be submissive to the will of all males in the family, young or old, and to behave, by way of dress and action, in a culturally defined chaste and modest manner so as to protect family honor.

Participants' responses were also invariably framed through the lens of what family and society expected from them, and rarely through their own valuations and desires. They spoke about having no right to make decisions. They discussed the challenge of having no choice but to be complaint with parents and male siblings or extended family males' wishes and expectations. They perceived themselves as less valued within the family and generally recipients of less attention or care. They spoke about how they were regarded as the weaker, vulnerable gender, they could not be trusted with guarding themselves against social and sexual misconduct, and they were vigilantly watched and guarded so as to protect family honor. This was especially the case when the girl was divorced. Divorced girls were always chaperoned, and, as in the case of one participant, her youngest brother, who served as her chaperone, was only 7 years of age. He was fully trained and instructed to ensure that his sister would not make contact with males and strangers on the way to and from school.

Although decidedly resentful about being ranked as a less valuable member of the family, and of being perceived as an unwelcomed load and a burden on the family, they also understood the pressures their parents faced in safeguarding them to protect their reputation and honor. While they did address their parents' hardship in securing their protection, they also clearly differentiated the less favorable regard in which they were held. Statements describing their pain and resentment of gender-based difference were openly shared and ratified by the majority of participants: "We are expected and demanded to be loving and giving and we receive very little attention and love"; "We are often cursed for being born females because we are regarded as a load and a burden"; and "Being born a Syrian girl is a curse. My brothers who are good for nothing expect me to serve them and follow their command and my mother is so unfair because she is quick to fault me instead of supporting me." Another stated, "You know! Our culture requires us as females to adhere to tradition and norms. Our culture in Syria expects girls to be submissive and obedient, and they are required to serve the needs of the family."

They all seem to have internalized the pain expressed by their parents in relation to grief and loss and in relation to worry and perceived threats in the new environment and how they have to rally together against these perceived threats, but they were also very outspoken about the unfair and sometimes exploitive extra demands placed upon them as females. Among the more poignant quotes: "I leave to God to give me justice, the unjust treatment we receive by our family (Thulm al Ahel) ends up destroying our lives." Another said, "I am expected to comply with the rules, serve the needs of the family, and accept their wishes and lift their burden, whereas my brother gets to do whatever he wants and no one dares to question him."

Such gender-defined roles were regarded by the participants as unjust, as exploitive, and as damaging or ruining their lives and their ability to feel good about being female. Closely related to the gender role is the value of education for girls.

Gender Role and Devalued Education for Girls

Overall, participants liked school and appreciated the opportunity to catch up on missed school years. They related their experience of the dropout school as a safe place to learn and socialize, and as a place of reprieve from the endless hassles of camp life. Apart from a low percentage of participants (about 15%), all demonstrated the energy to be engaged in study and learning and demonstrated enthusiasm for completing their homework. However, they faced great challenges and obstacles at home. Many shared their frustration with parents' continuous efforts to discourage them from going to school. Upon discussing their right to education, the responses were loud, sarcastic, and consistent. Participants reiterated how parents regarded girls' education as "a total waste of time" because "parents expected us to get married as soon as we become of child-bearing ability." They spoke about how parents "ridiculed and discouraged daughters" from doing school homework and how they were told frequently by parents that "soon enough you will soak your school diploma in water and drink the water," meaning that it is of no value to their role as wives and mothers, and that "they will end up hanging their diploma in the kitchen because there is where they belong," that "husbands are not looking for women who are enlightened by schooling and education, husbands instead are looking for malleable girls whom they can train according to their wishes."

Despite parental discouragement, few of the participants engaged in exploring the possibility of achieving

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their dreams and aspirations to overcome the current barriers of making up missed school years, and to make up needed examinations to re-enroll in regular schools. They expressed renewed hope for finishing high school and obtaining a university education, to achieve a degree of competency to work and attain economic independence. Some of the participants hoped to become lawyers to "defend the rights of Syrian women and girls." A few others wished to have the opportunity to become "nurses and physicians to care for Syrian children," while the majority believed that getting a certificate as a skilled person (beautician or seamstress) might be a better fit with their future family role as wives and mothers.

Their resolve was also met with other conflicting situations. There was a consensus among the participants that if the adults or male siblings demanded that they stay at home and skip school for a day or two or more in order to attend to family needs, they had no choice but to comply. As one participant aptly put it, "We learn about our right to education and like many of my friends here, I really want to come to school and to study, yet when my parents forbid me from going to school, I get physically beaten by father and brothers if I resist."

The majority of the participants have missed, on average, 3 years of regular schooling. Although Jordan, with the cooperation of national and international humanitarian organizations, has facilitated opening schools to meet the needs of refugee children in the camp, the participants who dropped out from regular schools faced major difficulties adjusting to the Jordanian school system. They stated that the "regular school environment and the teachers were not helping them to keep up with the demanding curriculum"; "they did not understand the teachers, and could not keep up with school demands"; "they had difficulty performing on tests and could not focus on studying once back home in the caravan"; they "did not see the benefit of required effort to keep up with school demands"; and "teachers did not understand how much pain they feel due to the memories of horror of the armed crises."

Survival Priorities and Child Labor

Another variable that plays a major part in the participants' lack of sustained attention to school and consequent poor school performance is seasonal paid work. To ease the financial need of their families, many of the participants sought seasonal work picking fruit and vegetables. They spoke about how poverty and seasonal work opportunities drove parents and the males in the family to send their children to seek paid work. In all dropout school centers in the camp, school attendance noticeably decreased with seasonal farm work opportunities as observed, and as reported by teachers, truancy increased by about 75% among girls and boys enrolled in dropout schools. Although the camp was bordered with a fence (referred to as Al Sater) and adult camp residents were not allowed to work outside the camp or leave camp without official permission, children seemed to find a way to leave and walk the distance of a few miles to work in the fields. It seemed to be the parents' way to earn more money without having to endure stern security service consequences. Some of the more severe consequences for adults caught engaging in work outside the camp without an official permit were to be expelled from the camp and sent back to Syria—likely to face death.

About two thirds of the participants in the FDGs had been involved in farm work or other seasonal work inside or outside the camp. During seasonal farm work, a huge number of children seemed to be involved. One of the participants said while leaving the camp for the first time to work in a nearby farm, "I swear to God, I saw so many leaving the camp to work to a point I thought that no one is left inside the camp and when I returned, I felt that no one had left." Despite the associated danger, participants saw it as both an expectation and a duty to ease the load of their parents. Girls as young as 9 and 10 years old were involved in seasonal farm labor, which starts as early as March and may last through the summer months. One stated:

> I leave with two younger siblings before sunrise and climb the Al Sater to be among the first in line to get hired. We work from 6:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. and we get 6 J.D. (US$9). It is a back-breaking job but I do it to help my parents. Security forces cannot stop us because when they stop me and give me a citation, I do not give them my real name, and I do not carry on me any documents. It is a game of cat and mouse between us and the security forces.

Another stated:

> I have to support my family, even though I really like school and wish to finish high school. I often have problem and conflicts. My father is old (50) and cannot work. For Syrians [in the camp], it is often the women who work and men stay at home.

These and other similar quotes indicate a degree of dissonance. On one hand, sociocultural gendered definition of females roles impedes girls from exercising the same rights as their male sibling such as their right to

education and their right to self agency in making life-changing decisions. On the other hand, these strict socio-cultural rules and values become somewhat more elastic and permissive when girls are required to meet the family's economic needs, in that the girls are allowed to take the risk and walk the distance from the camp to the farm and to be exploited and beaten if they resist.

Environmental Stressors and Family Honor: Motivations for Early Marriage

In all FGDs, the discussion about barriers to education quickly shifted to discussing the parents' expectations of their daughters. They shared their parents' desire to find a suitor as a way to secure Sutra. Sutra literally means to secure "a cover." However, through a cultural lens, it means to transfer the responsibility of protecting girls' chastity and family honor to a suitor through marriage. It was referred to as a time-sensitive issue and was to be accomplished as soon as daughters reached puberty. Successful guarding of their daughters' chastity while unmarried is a strong social declaration that parents are honorable, worthy of society's respect, and a testament that they have successfully protected and maintained family honor. All participants genuinely believed that they were a burden on the family for the very reason of protecting family honor. As one stated:

> As a girl, I am a liability and a burden on my parents because they worry about my safety. If something bad were to happen to me even against my own will … these mistakes that can happen because we are in a strange environment with people we do not know … will have a bad impact on my family reputation.

Finding Sutra or a suitor seems to be motivated by finding a protector, but it is also compounded by the perceived danger and insecurity in the camp environment. Participants spoke of their parents' genuine fear of forces outside their control that may violate their daughters' chastity, which would dishonor the family. They recounted being the recipients, frequently and unfairly, of parents' psychological and physical threats, and actual physical beatings, to ensure their compliance with parental expectations. They stressed the points that the actual and perceived insecurity and sexual harassments of girls within the camp's environment were among the reasons that pushed parents to forbid them from going to school and to find them a suitor as soon as possible. As one participant stated:

> My parents are overwhelmed by fear that I may be exposed to social rumors and a bad reputation. They threaten me to follow our norms and religious values, to be chaste, and to avoid situations that may expose me to danger. I am also so afraid that someone sees me being followed by boys in the camp. It is very difficult because boys sometimes walk alongside me and appear to be having a conversation with me.

Others stated that marriage and divorce have become fashionable in the camp. "There comes a groom and then there is a wedding only to end in a short period of time in a divorce." Marriage to a cousin or a relative is preferred because, as one stated, "Parents believe that a relative will protect their daughters better than a stranger would, but these days people from all over the area come seeking marriage to a Syrian girl." Girls are convinced, coerced, and sometimes forced to accept a suitor. One now-divorced, 16-year-old participant stated, "You are beaten before appearing before a judge to be asked if you agree to the marriage, and you are beaten if you do not give your consent."

There was a value that was being pushed by the marriage market in the camp. It was that young girls are preferred over older girls, and that girls who did not get married before their 17th or 18th birthday were considered "old maids" or had "missed the train," "were less desirable," and "received no or a lesser dowry." These conditions constituted another form of barrier to education and created a competitive environment among girls to accept the first suitor. One participant stated, "I am afraid to refuse marriage because I may miss my chance to get married before I am labeled an old maid." Another stated, "The man I refused to marry went to my neighbor's caravan, asked their daughter's hand in marriage, and ended up marrying my best friend."

However, those who had been married and were now divorced openly stated, "My advice to all of you [is] not to get married and to stay in school," and:

> My life was ruined because I got married early. Look at me! I got married to my 17-year-old cousin when I was 14 years of age. I have two children and my life is truly ruined. He was too young to be a man. His mother controlled him, if I did not obey her command, she complained to him and he would beat me to show respect to his mother. I tried to kill myself twice

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> by taking medicine but I ended harming myself more. He remarried and I am now left with raising my children and with no proper education.

Increased child marriage practices in the camp were compounded by myriad factors involving loopholes in the religious law, *sub rosa* marriage practices including illegal contracts for girls below 15 years of age; marriage contracts made for sex-for-a-price, only to be followed by quick divorces; and by undocumented marriages leading to birth of undocumented children, among several other factors. The psychological trauma and the coping patterns of participants seemed to closely intersect with the experience of turbulent, quick marriages. Detailing these complex multidimensional factors was beyond the scope of this paper and will be addressed elsewhere.

Discussion

The findings of this study shed important light on the threats and challenges Syrian refugee girls face in attaining and sustaining their need for education. The findings uncovered troubling exploitative and abusive practices used to keep Syrian girls in line with traditional cultural and religious teachings. Gender-based denials of their basic human rights, with the alarming recurrence of verbal threats, physical punishments, and abuses, expose them to immediate and far-reaching negative health consequences. Loss of Syrian girls' opportunities for education, gender-based abuses, and domestic violence, as well as practices of coercion for early marriage, are likely to expose these girls and their children to a life cycle of poverty, neglect, violence, exploitation, and abuse.

Research evidence on the effect of gender-based abuses (de Haan, Ganser, Münzer, Witt, & Goldbeck, 2017) demonstrates that there is an interaction effect of gender and age, with female adolescents showing the most dysfunctional cognition. Evidence also shows that trauma-related cognition correlates highly with chronic stress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; de Haan et al., 2017). PTSD is very common in areas of armed conflict, especially among displaced refugees. Hustache et al. (2009) reported that refugees from violent areas are more likely to experience PTSD than returning combat veterans, and are 10 times as likely to experience PTSD compared with the general population. Research on adverse child events, which includes various forms of physical and emotional abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction, shows a powerful and persistent correlation between the more adverse events experienced and the greater likelihood of poor outcomes later in life, including poor health outcomes. Poor health outcomes include dramatically increased risks for heart disease, diabetes, obesity, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, smoking, poor academic achievement, time out of work, and early death (Anda et al., 2006).

The United Nations Human Rights ABC module for empowerment of participants toward completing education was deemed a very promising life skills curriculum in that it helped raise participants' awareness about their universal human rights and increased their resilience and resolve to enhance their academic performance. While the findings are not quantifiable, it is noteworthy to add that behavioral changes were evident among the participants in the form of taking charge of changing the prospect of their lives and the lives of other girls. Both of FGD I and II had developed posters that detailed the strategies needed to support one another in completing their education. These posters were copied and distributed to all dropout centers and were shared during monthly staff meetings involving teachers, parents, and students. Group I also developed and filmed a very well-acted play detailing the practice of what they referred to as the "new phenomenon of early marriage," while highlighting the dangers of loss of education and early marriage. The film concluded with a scene where a student leader (who is now divorced) stated forcefully the strategies needed to help girls stay in school and to end early marriage. To stop child marriage, in their own words, efforts must focus first and foremost on empowering girls by addressing the dissonance between the legal age of marriage (18 years) and the untoward religious clerical exceptions for early marriage (at 15 years), and that changes must be addressed at the policy, community, and family levels. They also asked for sustainable education tailored to their needs that involve parents and raise awareness of local and religious leaders.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The experience of Syrian refugee girls is emblematic of the documented suffrage and the social location of women throughout history, especially for those who find themselves operating under culturally and religiously shaped oppressive paternalistic norms (Fowler, 2015). The devastating health consequences of underage marriages have important clinical, educational, and research implications for nursing. Nursing needs to begin incorporating a full range of women's health issues, including child marriage, into nursing education, practice, and research. Nursing need to incorporate

evidence of the health consequences of loss of education and child marriage into nursing education and clinical practice and to devise clinical guidelines for promoting the health of this population. Nursing research questions should incorporate the full range of global women's health issues, including social resistance to female education, culturally based denial of education, forced child marriage, rape as an instrument of war, physical and sexual abuse, sex trafficking, coerced polygamy, and other social issues that profoundly affect women's health, education, and human rights.

The findings of the study, on the basis of several factors including the nonrandom sampling and a possible researcher's effect, should be interpreted with caution. The researcher spoke fluent Syrian Arabic and understood fully the background of the participants. The participants were also quite intrigued with the researcher's level of accomplishment and autonomy. Participants asked many questions about the ability of the researcher to travel to the camp alone and to leave her spouse and children behind, and the fact that the spouse would trust the researcher to travel alone. The researcher's effect also seemed to have a positive impact on empowering participants to view the full spectrum of life choices when one is empowered with education. Other limitations pertained to children being accompanied by participants to FGDs, the total reliance on qualitative data, and the inability to collect systematic assessment data. On this basis, while the findings are truly grounded in data and offer a much-needed insight on the lived experiences of Syrian refugee girls, they are to be interpreted with consideration of these stated limitations.

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Clinical Resources

- Child, early and forced marriage resource guide. https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/USAID_CEFM_Resource-Guide.PDF
- Child marriage. https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/
- Child marriage. https://www.unfpa.org/child-marriage-frequently-asked-questions
- Child marriages: 39 000 every day. https://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2013/child_marriage_20130307/en/

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