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WAR HITS THE WOMEN: MARRIAGE AS SYRIAN WOMEN'S COPING MECHANISM AND ITS IMPACT ON TURKISH WOMEN*

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ABSTRACT

The peaceful public demonstrations that began in the Syrian town of Daraa in March 2011 against the Bashar al-Assad regime turned into a civil war when the regime forces attacked the protestors. The Syrian civil war that has now been going on for seven years, caused hundreds of thousands of Syrian citizens to die and millions to seek refuge in neighboring countries. As of September 2017, Turkey has become the country which hosts the greatest number of refugees in the world by serving as host to over 3 million Syrian refugees within its borders. In order to analyze the impact of the Syrian refugees on Turkey, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both Turkish citizens and Syrian refugees in Hatay and Gaziantep. The research revealed that, in addition to unfortunate consequences in the labor market, the housing market, and healthcare services, the Syrian refugees' arrival to Turkey caused serious social problems especially in the border provinces. Child brides and religious marriages have been central to these problems. It was observed that the Syrian families are inclined to consent to marry off their very young daughters because of the economic hardships they experience. By doing this, the families hope to lessen the burden of the household, guarantee more secure futures for their daughters, and protect their daughters' honor under the so-called protection of a husband. In addition, Syrian women enter into illegal marriages with both single and married Turkish men; these marriages have no legal basis, according to Turkish civil law. Therefore, the children who are born from these marriages are considered stateless. These problems have both had a considerable impact on life in Turkey. First, the prevalence of child brides among Syrians worsened the child-bride problem in Turkey.

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Second, the marriages that take place between Syrian women and married Turkish men serve to victimize the Turkish women and force them to unwillingly accept their situations (mostly due to financial dependency on their spouses); these marriages also damage the Turkish family structure.

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Introduction

The public protests that began in Syria in March 2011 as a continuation of Arab Spring spread throughout the country; this, along with the Bashar al-Assad regime's act of firing upon the peaceful demonstrators, ignited a civil war within Syria. The war that has been going on now for seven years has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands Syrian citizens, and has caused millions to be internally displaced or to seek refuge in neighboring countries. Though Turkey showed remarkable hospitality by unconditionally opening its doors to the Syrian refugees, the massive influx of refugees has, in some ways, had a negative impact on Turkey. Turkey, which hosts more than 3.4 million refugees, has experienced several problems related to security and socioeconomics (Aksu Kargin, 2016). Several academic studies that have analyzed the various economic and social impacts the Syrian refugees have had on Turkish society further support this view (ORSAM & TESEV, 2015). This paper carries importance in terms of providing in-depth analysis regarding only one of these social problems, a problem that has been insufficiently studied in the Syrian refugee literature: the increase in the number of religious marriages that have taken place since the arrival of the Syrian refugees to Turkey and its impact on the Turkish family structure.

Method

The analysis discussed below is based on fieldwork conducted in the Hatay and Gaziantep provinces of Turkey. Within the context of the fieldwork, a total of 60 Syrian and 60 Turkish citizens were interviewed; during these interviews, the ways in which the increase in illegal marriages between Syrian women and Turkish men have affected both Syrian women and the Turkish family structure were discussed in great detail. The interview records were analyzed in Dedoose qualitative data analysis program. First, the interview sections including the problems women faced were coded via a "women" code. Then, all the interview sections with "women" code were put together in Dedoose, and in the second set of analysis the sub-codes were applied having to do with child brides, religious marriages, etc.

Syrian Refugees' and Turkish Citizens' Thoughts Regarding Syrian Child Brides

The interviews conducted with Syrian refugees and Turkish citizens suggest that, although family elders forcing young girls to marry early is both a human rights violation and a form of gender-based violence, the number of child brides increased after the refugees arrived to Turkey. It has been stated that, as a result of financial hardships, some Syrian refugee families have forced their daughters to marry elder Turkish men

in return for dowry money or some other financial return. Further, on occasion, the daughters take it upon themselves to ease their families' financial burdens. In other words, some Syrian girls sacrifice themselves so that they can provide their families with money. However, the families who consent to these marriages overlook the fact that the marriages strip away these girls' rights to education and also force them to take on responsibilities and burdens for which they are not yet prepared (Özcebe-Küçük Biçer, 2013).

The illegal marriages, however, do not involve only Syrian girls; they also involve middle-aged Syrian women who are single, widowed, or divorced. As is the case of the Syrian girls, the majority of these Syrian women enter into marriages with Turkish men –unmarried men as well as those who are already married – in order to escape financial hardships or to protect their honor. However, since religious marriages have no legal validity according to the 1926 Turkish Civil Law, there is no way for the Syrian families to prevent their daughters from becoming victims. In Turkey, since these marriages are not rooted in any legal practice and thus have no legal standing, there is always the risk that these girls or women will be sent back to their families a couple of weeks or months after being married. When this happens, the victims rarely appeal to Turkish authorities for fear that they might face sanctions for violating Turkish laws.

These marriages do not only serve to victimize Syrian women, however; they also victimize Turkish women and spoil the Turkish family structure. During the interviews, the majority of Turkish citizens in both Hatay and Gaziantep stated that the Turkish men who marry Syrian women prefer since they are more well-groomed, younger and prettier, and do not have many financial expectations (e.g., gold, dowry) compared to Turkish women. Moreover, a number of Turkish women interviewed stated that their husbands began to threaten them, saying that they would marry Syrian women after the Syrians came to the region. Several other studies conducted regarding the ways in which Syrians have affected Turkish society also show that these unofficial marriages have become commonplace in provinces such as Şanlıurfa, Hatay, and Kilis, and divorce rates between Turkish men and women in these places have increased (ORSAM-TESEV, 2015).

Although it is considered unacceptable that a woman should permit her husband to take on a second or third spouse, there are some Turkish women who have agreed to it. It is assumed that the majority of the Turkish women whose husbands married Syrian women agreed to it because they do not have financial independence, which means that they do not have economic power sufficient enough to satisfy their own and their children's needs should a divorce take place. Moreover, in some cases, the women do not want to return to their fathers' houses, divorced and with children, or the family has not consented for their daughters' divorce. Under these circumstances, and out of desperation and a want to provide for their children, some Turkish women are forced to remain in these marriages.

Finally, there is the issue of legal ambiguity as it pertains to the children who are born as a result of the religious marriages that take place between Turkish men and Syrian women. Since the beginning of the war, 150,000 Syrian babies have been born in Turkey. While the children's fathers are Turkish, in order for the children to be granted

Turkish citizenship, their mothers' official Syrian documents must be brought from Syria and presented to the relevant authorities in Turkey. Since the women have no access to these documents, due to the existing conditions in Syria, and since no legal, official marriage took place between the parties, the children who born as a result of these marriages are considered stateless.

Recommendations

When assessed within the context of social issues, the Syrian refugees' mass migration to the border provinces in particular resulted in an increased number of child brides and instances of polygamy (Kirişçi, 2014). There have been instances of Syrian girls and women marrying Turkish men illegally in order to escape financial hardships or to protect their honor, and these marriages serve to victimize the Syrian women and spoil the Turkish family structure. Further, since these marriages are not considered official according to Turkish civil law, both the Syrian and Turkish women become victims as a result of these marriages. At this juncture, both the Turkish government and the NGOs that serve in the field should take concrete steps in order to properly address the victimization of both the Syrian and Turkish women who are harmed by these illegal marriages.

First, with regard to Syrian child brides, family elders forcing young girls to marry early is both a human rights violation and a form of gender-based violence. For instance, whether or not these girls can visit their families or friends, continue their education, use contraception, or make choices for themselves is up to their spouses (Kaynak Malatyalı, 2014). The majority of these girls are unable to continue their education, yet they are forced to take on responsibilities and burdens for which they are not prepared; this, combined with the other potential problems associated with marriage, can result in depression and suicide (Özcebe-Küçük Biçer, 2013).

Again, these girls being married early not only robs them of their right to education, but it also affects their personal development and their ability to mature into individuals that might benefit society (UNICEF, 2001). A key solution to the problem of child brides is to convince the Syrian families to send their children to school. To this end, via the government and NGOs, seminars might be given to the Syrian families regarding the importance of education and the physical and psychological harm associated with early marriages for both the girls and society in general. Further, it is found that increased household income generally allows for a decrease in instances of early marriage (UNICEF, 2001). If the government or NGOs were to provide financial aid or job opportunities to the Syrian families experiencing financial difficulties, then those families might be less inclined to force their young daughters into marriage and might be more inclined to send their children to school (Özcebe-Küçük Biçer, 2013). For instance, in the countries where child brides are common, fathers, older brothers, or elder family members make decisions regarding marriage on behalf of the girl. At this juncture, the religious and traditional leaders might use their influence in order to change these traditional understandings to prevent these marriages, which the Syrian families seek to justify by pretexting religion and honor (Tzemach Lemmon-ElHarake, 2014). Another step that might be taken to address

this problem involves the determination of the legal regulations regarding child marriages; these regulations should be more precise. For instance, although Article 124 of the Turkish civil law states that individuals under 18 years of age are considered children, the same article decrees that individuals who reach 16 years of age are able to marry in extraordinary situations and with a court's decision (Kaynak Malatyalı, 2014). As such, it is important to remove these contradictory expressions that might allow for abuse; and is worth considering clearer boundaries with regard to the necessary conditions for marriage (Özcebe-Küçük Biçer, 2013).

The illegal marriages, however, do not involve only Syrian girls; they also involve middle-aged Syrian women who are single, widowed, or divorced. As these girls or women enter into marriage with Turkish men, the divorce rates in border provinces such as Şanlıurfa, Kilis, and Hatay increase (ORSAM-TESEV, 2015), and this does damage to the Turkish family structure. In addition, these marriages victimize not only the Syrian and Turkish women but also the Syrian children who are born as a result of these marriages. In particular, since the beginning of the war, 150,000 Syrian babies have been born in Turkey, and because most of these marriages are not effectuated by legal means, the children who are born of these marriages are considered *stateless* in Turkey. The Turkish government's willingness to grant these children citizenship is important in that it helps to prevent these children from being socially isolated and from being denied basic public rights such as education and healthcare. Further, since the marriages between the Syrian women and Turkish men materialized via religious ceremonies, they are not made official or recorded in any official way; this makes it more difficult to identify these marriages and to thus identify more solutions to the problem. To this end, it may serve as a deterrent to implement serious penal sanctions against those Turkish citizens who illegally marry Syrians as well as against those who mediate or facilitate these marriages by introducing the involved parties to one another or by officiating a marriage ceremony. Additionally, if the government or NGOs provide financial support and work opportunities to the Syrian women, then the women may feel less urgency to enter into these illegal marriages.

Keywords: Syrian refugees, child brides, religious marriages, women, Turkey

SAVAŞ KADINLARI VURUYOR: SURIYELİ KADINLARIN BAŞA ÇIKMA MEKANİZMASI OLARAK YAPTIKLARI EVLİLİKLER VE BUNUN TÜRK KADINLARINA ETKİSİ

ÖZET

Mart 2011'de Suriye'nin Dera kentinde Beşar Esad rejimine karşı başlayan barışçıl halk gösterileri rejim güçlerinin protestoculara ateş açmasıyla iç savaşa dönüşmüştür. Yedi yıldır devam etmekte olan Suriye iç savaşı, yüzbinlerce Suriye vatandaşının ölmesine, milyonlarcasının da komşu ülkelerden sığınma talep etmesine yol açmıştır. 2017 yılı Eylül ayı itibarıyla Türkiye, sınırlarında 3 milyonun üzerinde Suriyeli mülteciyi barındırarak dünyada en fazla mülteciye ev sahipliği yapan ülke durumuna gelmiştir. Suriyeli mültecilerin Türkiye'ye olan etkilerini

derinlemesine analiz edebilmek amacıyla, Hatay ve Gaziantep illerinde hem Türk vatandaşlarla hem de Suriyeli mültecilerle yarı-yapılandırılmış mülakatlar gerçekleştirilmiş ve Suriyeli mültecilerin Türkiye'ye kitlesel göçünün özellikle sınır illerinde iş piyasasında, ev piyasasında ve sağlık hizmetlerinde olumsuz sonuçlara yol açtığı tespit edilmiştir. Araştırma, bu sorunlara ilaveten, Suriyeli mültecilerin Türkiye'ye gelişinin özellikle sınır illerde ciddi sosyal problemlere de yol açtığını açığa çıkarmıştır. Çocuk gelinler ve dini evlilikler bu problemlerin başında gelmektedir. Araştırma süresince gözlemlenmiştir ki Suriyeli aileler küçük kızlarını yaşamakta oldukları maddi zorluklar dolayısıyla evlendirmeye eğilimli olabilmektedir. Aileler böylece hem hane halkının maddi yükünü azaltmayı, hem kızları için daha güvenli bir gelecek sağlamayı, hem de kızlarının namuslarını evlenecekleri eşlerinin sözde koruması altına almayı umut etmektedir. Bunlara ilaveten, boşanmış ya da eşlerini kaybetmiş Suriyeli kadınlar da hem bekar hem de evli Türk erkeklerle illegal evlilikler yapmakta ancak bu evliliklerin Türk Medeni Kanunu'na göre hiçbir yasal dayanağı bulunmamaktadır. Bu sebeple bu evliliklerden doğan çocuklar da vatansız olarak kabul edilmektedir. Bu problemlerin Türkiye'deki günlük yaşama ciddi etkileri söz konusudur. İlk olarak, Suriyeli mülteciler arasında çocuk gelinlerin yaygınlaşması Türkiye'deki mevcut çocuk gelinler problemini daha da ciddi boyutlara ulaştırmıştır. İkinci olarak, Suriyeli kadınlar ile evli Türk erkekler arasında gerçekleşmekte olan bu evlilikler Türk kadınlarını mağdur etmekte, Türk kadınlarını istemeyerek de olsa (çoğunlukla kadınların maddi bağımsızlıklarının olmaması nedeniyle) bu yasa dışı evlilikleri kabullenmeye itmekte ve Türk aile yapısına zarar vermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriyeli mülteciler, çocuk gelinler, dini evlilikler, kadınlar, Türkiye

Introduction

In December 2010, a street vendor named Muhammed Buazizi set himself on fire when a woman police officer publically degraded him in Tunisia; the vendor died a few days later due to his severe injury. Although Buazizi committed an individual act against the security force's arbitrary use of power against citizens, he unwittingly ignited the wick of what would become known as "Arab Spring." Not long after, the uprising that began in Tunisia with Bouazizi caused thousands of Arab citizens to take to the streets in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, as well to topple authoritarian and corrupt regimes. While the demonstrations had proven successful in their abilities to overthrow governments in the aforementioned countries, the movement mutated in Syria into one characterized by bloodshed and a prolonged civil war, as Syria's security forces attacked the country's peaceful protestors. The Syrian civil war that has now been going on for seven years has greatly harmed Syria's population, which stood at roughly 22 million before the war. Since the eve of the Syrian civil war, approximately 250,000 civilians have lost their lives, 6.5 million people have become internally displaced (IDPs) (UNOCHA, 2016), 5.3 million people have sought asylum from neighboring countries, and nearly 13.5 million people are in need of humanitarian aid (UNHCR, 2017a). The majority of Syrian refugees have taken refuge in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt due to geographical proximity. As of October 2017, the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey totaled 3.25 million, making Turkey host to more Syrian citizens than any other country (UNHCR, 2017b).

As the civil war in Syria first broke out, the first asylum movement from Syria to Turkey began; on April 29, 2011, 252 people entered the country at the Cilvegözü border gate in Hatay

(Dinçer, et al. 2013). With time, this number increased exponentially, as did clashes between the Syrian regime and opposition groups. This period also witnessed the emergence of radical actors such as ISIS.

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the Turkish government has maintained an open-door policy with regard to the Syrian refugees, and the country has taken remarkable steps to help improve the living conditions of the Syrian refugees. When the civil war in Syria first broke out, the Turkish government expected that the Syrian regime would not hold for so long and thus the inflow of refugees from Syria to Turkey would cease, making Turkey only a temporary host to the refugees. As such, the Turkish government established 21 temporary accommodation centers, namely camps, close to the Turkish-Syrian border to settle the incoming refugees. However, as the civil war in Syria continued and the resulting clashes turned more Syrians into refugees, the Turkish government, beginning September 2013, allowed the new incoming Syrian refugees to re-settle in the provinces (CHP, 2015). Today, more than 85% of all Syrian refugees live outside Turkey's temporary accommodation centers (Del Carpio-Wagner, 2015).

Though Turkey showed remarkable hospitality by unconditionally opening its doors to the Syrian refugees, the massive influx of refugees has, in some ways, had a negative impact on Turkey. In particular, the border provinces, such as Hatay, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa and Kilis, where most of the refugees have settled, have been most affected in terms of both security and socioeconomics. This paper, however, will provide in-depth analysis regarding only one of these social problems: the increase in illegal marriages after the arrival of the Syrian refugees to Turkey. The forthcoming analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in the Hatay and Gaziantep provinces of Turkey. Within the context of the fieldwork, a total of 60 Syrian and 60 Turkish citizens were interviewed; during these interviews, the ways in which the increase in illegal marriages between Syrian women and Turkish men have affected both Syrian women and the Turkish family structure was discussed in great detail. The interview records were analyzed in Dedoose qualitative data analysis program. First, the interview sections including the problems women faced were coded via a "women" code. Then, all the interview sections with "women" code were put together in Dedoose, and in the second set of analysis the sub-codes were applied having to do with child brides, religious marriages, etc.

The Reasons Why a Child Bride Problem Exists

According to both Article 1 of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 124 of the 1926 Turkish Civil Law, individuals who are under the age of 18 are considered children regardless of their gender. As such, if one or both parties entering into a marriage is/are under the age of 18, then the marriage is considered an early marriage or a child marriage; it makes no difference if the child is a boy or a girl. Accordingly, child brides can be defined as girls under the age of 18 who marry despite not being physically and physiologically ready to assume the responsibilities of marriage (Bayisenge, 2010). Article 16 of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which is the most inclusive legal document on women's rights, states that a marriage could be formed solely via the free will and full consent of the parties involved. Another legal document, Article 16 of the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights, restates that a marriage could be formed if and only if the parties involved give full consent via their own free will. However, although the aforementioned legal documents state that individuals may not marry until after they reach the age of 18 and are thus able to make their own free decisions, marriages involving children are still a serious social problem among underdeveloped and developing countries.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, between 2011 and 2020, more than 140 million girls will become child brides, and 50 million of these will marry while under the age of 15 (World Health Organization, 2013). A close examination of why child brides exist suggests that the

majority of them have resulted from the brides' families' poverty (Bayisenge, 2010; Kaynak Malatyalı, 2014; Otoo Oyortey-Pobi, 2003). As families begin to experience increasing and extreme poverty, then tend to view their daughter as additional mouths to feed and thus financial burdens (Özcebe-Küçük Biçer, 2013; Tzemach Lemmon-ElHarake, 2014). In particular, in contexts involving war and civil conflicts, families have been observed to look to child marriage as a means of protecting their daughters (Bayisenge, 2010).

The child bride problem, a result of both poverty and the traditions and sociocultural structures that normalize child marriages, is seen in some countries as being necessary to the sociocultural structure. As such, in some countries, when the girl begins to develop physically and begins to menstruate, early marriage is arranged as a means of protecting her honor and preventing her from becoming involved in an illicit relationship. For instance, in the regions where the virginity is considered important, such as the North East and Middle East, some families take their daughters out of school when they begin to menstruate so as to protect them from the would-be sexual inclinations of their male peers and teachers (Bayisenge, 2010). This approach to the problem (i.e., protective paternalism) suggests that the woman is weak by nature and is thus not sufficiently capable of protecting her own honor (Kaynak Malatyalı, 2014). Therefore, it is expected that her honor should be protected by a man (Kaynak Malatyalı, 2014). This man could be either the father or brother of the girl; the new spouse can also assume this responsibility.

In the next section of this paper, the Syrian child bride problem and the reasons behind the problem are discussed in the context of the interviews that were conducted with the Syrian refugees and Turkish citizens.

Syrian Refugees' and Turkish Citizens' Thoughts Regarding Syrian Child Brides

Before the civil war broke out, child marriages were not uncommon in Syria (UNHCR, 2013). Within the scope of the Sharia laws implemented in the country, there was no legal or religious downside to a man marrying up to four wives as long as he treated his wives fairly. Legal marrying age for a Syrian girl is 17, and for a boy, 18; however, religious leaders and sheikhs make exceptions when they deemed it necessary, and girls as young as 13 and boys as young as 16 could be married (Soguel, 2014).

In the interviews conducted with the Syrian refugees, however, there was no consensus regarding whether early marriages are customary and common in Syria. For instance, only a small minority of the interviewees stated that the Syrian girls who entered into marriage soon after arriving in Turkey are the same girls who would have entered into marriage in Syria since there would have been no legal or religious drawback. However, the majority of the interviewees claimed that the Syrian families who agree to marry their daughters in Turkey would not have agreed to these marriages if they were in Syria, but now, due to the socioeconomic hardships they face, they are forced to do so. Several academic studies on the conditions of the Syrian refugees in neighboring countries have stated that the number of child brides increased among the Syrian refugees in Turkey (Kirişçi, 2014), Jordan (Save the Children, 2014), Lebanon (UNHCR, 2013), and Iraq (Peace and Security: UN Women, 2014).

Zayna, an interviewee in Gaziantep, talks about under what conditions child marriages take places and what can result from a religious marriage that takes place between a Turkish citizen and a Syrian girl:

I have a relative. Her daughter was working in supermarket. A Turkish family saw the daughter in her workplace, and liked her. Her daughter is 15 years old. The Turkish family came and asked the family to give their daughter as a bride. They said that their son is doctor. My relatives said, "The boy is an educated guy; he came to us as a

doctor and wants our daughter. Why wouldn't we give our daughter?" My relatives also said that it is good for her to know her house, so they accepted and gave their daughter to the Turkish family. I said to my relative, "Sister, I will tell you something. Do not give your daughter." She asked, "Why?" She said, "It's a good family, the boy is doctor." I told her that the boy does not look like a doctor, and that I did not like him. I said, "This boy is a doctor at 25 years of age. Why doesn't he get marry someone from his nationality? Why seek out a wife from among Syrians?" I said, "There are wheels within wheels." Anyway, my relatives went to see the house where their daughter will live. Her mother says that the place where the house is located is a mountainous place; there is not a soul there. She said, "When we went to our daughter's home, we went outside for a while, and a bad smell was coming from outside." My relative asked my daughter's mother-in-law, "Are you feeding an animal?" She said that she wasn't. Then, her daughter's fiancée came out of a place that was like a barn. My relative asked what he did in there. He said, "Nothing." She asked, "What is here? A bad smell is coming inside." He said, "I like cats a lot, I am feeding cats." Anyway, my relatives returned to Gaziantep. The wedding had been here. The boy's family brought the girl. Do you know what the boy is a doctor of? Well, they do illegal drugs. He is a doctor of this. I asked my relative, "Why would a doctor live in a mountainous place?" I said, "Your daughter is young. Do not give her to him." But my relative said that her family suffered from poverty, and she wanted to let her daughter go live comfortably. They made the girl a bride and married her off with a religious ceremony. The girl did not stay 40 days. She returned, and was pregnant. The boy's family did not leave the girl alone. They threatened her. My relative took her children and escaped to İstanbul. They made the girl have an abortion. Right now, the girl is in her father's house. I mean, the Syrian families say that we escaped from Syria, and we suffered a lot, but at least our children will live in comfort. But they do not know that they destroy the lives of their children here.

As indicated in the story above, some Syrian families who escaped the civil war in Syria came to Turkey and agreed to marry off their daughters to Turkish men via religious ceremonies so that their daughters might not struggle with the social and economic problems and will have better futures. Families also believed that their daughters should be under the protection of their husbands so that their honors will remain intact. However, even though some Syrian families view these marriages as means of perhaps guaranteeing that their daughters will have better futures, since religious marriages have no legal validity according to the 1926 Turkish Civil Law, there is no way for the Syrian families to prevent their daughters from becoming victims. In Turkey, since these religious marriages have no legal connectivity, there is always the risk that these girls will be sent back to their families a couple of weeks or months after being married. And, in such cases, even though their daughters become victims, most of the Syrian families do not appeal to the Turkish authorities because for fear that they might face sanctions since what they do is not legal according to Turkish laws.

In another interview, Selim, a Turkish goldsmith in Hatay, discussed a child marriage:

It is regrettable that I must share this, as this happened with my relatives. The Syrian refugees came here [to Turkey] as victims. And my relative benefited from them, as he bought a girl from her family. I have a 36-year-old cousin whose daughter is around 14 or 15 years old, and he went and married a 16-year-old Syrian girl after offering her family a brand new house. This is abuse, and we told our cousin this. We said, "You have a daughter who is 14 or 15 years old. Would you let her marry a man who is 36 or 37 years old? Would you let her marry a man who is already

married and has four or five children?” He said he would not, so we asked, “Then, why would you marry a young girl like this?” I finally said, “Ok, get married.” The civil law in our country allows for only one wife, but a man may marry four women via a religious ceremony as long as he treats all of his wives fairly. My cousin will eventually, in the hereafter, be held accountable for this. We said, “Ok, get married, but do it in a way that befits you. There are Syrian women around 30 years of age, and there are widows. If you marry one of these women in order to protect her, then you will be marrying as our Prophet [Muhammad] commanded in his time, in a time of war.” My cousin said, “I got married – it’s my life.” But you know this is abuse.

As this story illustrates, there are Turkish men who have married Syrian girls who are no older than the men’s own young daughters. Surely, Turkish society is not accepting of this, as even some of the men’s close relatives are critical of these marriages. However, as noted in the story, some Syrian refugee families, as a result of the financial hardships they experience, sometimes force their daughters to marry elder Turkish men in return for dowry money or some other financial return. And sometimes the daughters take it upon themselves to ease their families’ burdens. In other words, some Syrian girls sacrifice themselves so that they can provide their families with money.

It is worth mentioning here that, regardless of conditions, when girls are deprived of education and are forced to marry early, they are being subject to human rights violations and child abuse, and this abuse will continue to affect these girls as they continue to mature into women (Kaynak Malatyalı, 2014). For instance, these girls who marry early do not generally have proper knowledge on the subject of contraception, which means that they often experience unwanted pregnancies during a period in which they are not psychically or psychologically prepared for a child. Further, since the reproductive systems of girls under 18 may not be mature enough, pregnancies could cause health problems such as hypertension, anemia, bleeding, and in death (Özcebe-Küçük Biçer, 2013). Further, the World Health Organization claims that the risk of death after delivery is twice as high among girls who are between 15 and 19 years old compared to those who are between 20 and 24 years old (Bayisenge, 2010:6). Additionally, maternal death rate is up to five times higher among girls who are between 10 and 14 years old compared to those who are in their 20s (Bayisenge, 2010:6). Further, the infant mortality rates among the children of young mothers is twice as high as that of children whose mothers are older (Bayisenge, 2010). Girls who marry early also are at increased risk of being exposed to diseases such as HIV/AIDS that are transmitted sexually (Bayisenge, 2010). Additionally, girls who marry older men tend to be weak in that they are no longer permitted to make their own choices or make decisions regarding their children’s futures (Bayisenge, 2010). According to the World Health Organization, the majority of girls who marry early are also subjected to torture and are beaten by their older spouses (World Health Organization, 2013). However, since these girls are not financially independent, and because they are burdened with supporting their families, they are unable to escape their marriages. When these girls – the ones who are unable to endure the psychical and psychological violence – flee their marriages, they are often captured and punished by the elder male members of the family via what are known as “honor killings”; this is especially common in countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey (UNICEF, 2001).

How Turkish Men’s Illegal Marriages to Syrian Women Affect Turkish Women?

When the Turkish interviewees were asked about their opinions regarding the marriages, a few interviewees stated that they are not well informed on the matter, but most of the respondents made it clear that they believe that the illegal marriages are negatively affecting the Turkish family structure and causing immoral degeneration. Although there are no drawbacks regarding these marriages in Syria, they are considered illegal in Turkey, according to 1926 Turkish civil law. Damla, a housewife in Gaziantep, discussed how the illegal marriages between Turkish men and

Syrian women affect the Turkish family structure:

I believe that the arrival of the Syrian refugees has been very negative. Most of the Turkish men married another women despite being already married. My elder sister's spouse did this. My brother-in-law is a true believer, so he offered assistance to the Syrians. He went house to house to collect items for the Syrians, and he distributed those items. He did this for a year, maybe a year and a half. In the meantime, I guess he met with this Syrian woman. She had three children and was separated from her husband. My brother-in-law left home for two days, saying that he was going to Mersin, a city here in Turkey. He has two children, a boy and a girl. He sent a message to them that said, "I got married; tell your mother." He set up a house for the Syrian woman. In the beginning, my elder sister was not content with this, and she told him that he had to choose between her and the Syrian woman. But my brother in law didn't make that choice. So, now, he goes back and forth, spending one day with the Syrian woman and two days with my sister; this is the agreement my sister and my brother-in-law have made. There is no love or sexual intimacy left in my sister's marriage, but my brother-in-law comes and goes so that he can provide materially for his family. I have heard that the Syrian woman is young; she is 30, 35, while my elder sister is in her late 40s. My brother-in-law and the Syrian woman entered into a religious marriage. My brother in law thinks that Syrian women view him favorably now that he married a Syrian woman who is a victim of war. I acquire a merit since they came from the war and are victims here. But he did not get my elder sister's consent, and no woman would be accepting of her husband to marry another women while she is still married to him. And since the Syrian women did not want anything [dowry, gold], many Turkish men married women despite being already married to women who did not consent to the second marriages. Many households were broken up, and it isn't right. Well, let the single men marry the Syrian women; I do not say anything to that, even though they are still unable to solemnize since the women do not have the necessary legal documents.

Three key issues come to mind upon recalling what Damla had to say. First, the marriages that take place between the Syrian women and the married Turkish men, where Syrian women become the secondary spouses, are effectively spoiling the Turkish family structure. As is seen in Damla's story, even though it is illegal in Turkey, and even though it victimizes Turkish women and upsets the Turkish family structure, some Turkish men and Syrian women do not hesitate to enter into illegal marriages wherein the Syrian women became the secondary spouses. Second, it is worth noting that some Turkish men invoke religion in order to marry the Syrian women. In a number of interviews, including Damla's, another common theme comes up – the Turkish men who opt to marry the Syrian women tend to choose very young women or girls who are well-groomed to become their wives, and the men claim that this is permitting them to fulfill their religious duties. An additional thing of interest here is illustrated via a comment she made that suggested that she had no real problem with single Turkish men entering in to religious marriages with Syrian women, but she seems to be overlooking the fact that most of these marriages have no legal validity according to Turkish civil law since the majority of the Syrian refugees do not have the proper legal documentation that would permit them to officially marry in Turkey. Damla normalized the idea of single Turkish men marrying Syrian women, and interviewee Selim normalized the idea of married Turkish men entering into illegal marriages with adult Syrian women. These are both examples of social distortion.

The majority of Turkish interviewees in both Hatay and Gaziantep reiterated what Damla said and stated that the Turkish men who marry Syrian women prefer them since they are more well-

groomed, younger and prettier, and do not have many financial expectations (e.g., gold, dowry) compared to Turkish women. Moreover, a number of Turkish women interviewed stated that their husbands began to threaten them, saying that they would marry Syrian women after the Syrians came to the region. However, one salient point from the interviews, which is supported by a study conducted in the Kilis region (MAZLUMDER, 2014), is that the Turkish women blame only Syrian women for seducing their husbands, and they shy away from blaming Turkish men for victimizing both the Syrian women and the Turkish women themselves. It should be noted here that the social degradation seen within the society does not stem solely from arrangements wherein the Syrian refugee women are accepting of becoming second spouses, as there exists some Turkish men who demand this.

Several studies conducted regarding the ways in which Syrians have affected Turkish society also show that these unofficial religious marriages have become commonplace in provinces such as Kilis (Cengiz, 2015), Şanlıurfa, and Hatay, and divorce rates between Turkish men and women in these places have increased (ORSAM-TESEV, 2015). On the other hand, although it is considered unacceptable that a woman should permit her husband to take on a second or third spouse, there are some Turkish women who have agreed to it. It is assumed that the majority of the Turkish women whose husbands married Syrian women agreed to it because they do not have financial independence, which means that they do not have economic power sufficient enough to satisfy their own and their children's needs should a divorce take place. Moreover, in some cases, the women do not want to return to their fathers' houses, divorced and with children, or the family has not consented for their daughters divorce. Under these circumstances, and out of desperation and a want to provide for their children, some Turkish women are forced to remain in these marriages.

Finally, there is the issue of legal ambiguity as it pertains to the children who are born as a result of the illegal marriages that take place between Turkish men and Syrian women. While the children's fathers are Turkish, in order for the children to be granted Turkish citizenship, their mothers' official Syrian documents must be brought from Syria and presented to the relevant authorities in Turkey. Since the women have no access to these documents, due to the existing conditions in Syria, and since no legal, official marriage took place between the parties, the children who born as a result of these marriages are considered stateless. Haydar, the manager of an olive oil company in Hatay, mediated some of the marriages that took place between Turkish men and Syrian women, and he shared this:

Since we cannot operate via legal procedure, they are sustaining their lives with religious marriages now. They had children. The children are stateless. We cannot register the children, since official information with regard to the Syrian woman is required. If the information regarding the woman does not come from the consulate, then the child cannot be registered under the name of the Turkish man. All of the children born into this situation are stateless.

According to Turkish laws, in order for Syrian women to officially or legally marry Turkish men, they must provide the necessary marriage license obtained from the birth registration office in Syria. However, due to Syria's internal strife, these documents are impossible to procure, which means that these marriages cannot ever really be legal (Kirişçi, 2014). This also means that the children born as a result of the religious marriages that take place between Syrian women and Turkish men cannot be registered and thus cannot benefit from the rights that are granted to ordinary Turkish citizens. Former Deputy Prime Minister Lütfi Elvan stated that prior to 2016 the Syrian women in Turkey had given birth to 150,000 children (Hurriyet Daily News, 2016). In order to preclude the possible victimization that these children born in the last seven years may experience, and so that the children may have access to the rights and services made available to other Turkish

citizens, it is necessary that the Turkish government grant the children Turkish citizenship as soon as possible.

Recommendations

The public protests that began in Syria in March 2011 as a continuation of Arab Spring spread throughout the country; this, along with the Bashar al-Assad regime's act of firing upon the peaceful demonstrators, ignited a civil war within Syria. The war that has been going on now for seven years has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands Syrian citizens, and has caused millions to be internally displaced or to seek refuge in neighboring countries. Turkey, which hosts the largest number of refugees, has experienced several problems related to security and socioeconomics (Aksu Kargın, 2016). When assessed within the context of social issues, the Syrian refugees' mass migration to the border provinces in particular resulted in an increased number of child brides and instances of polygamy (Kirişçi, 2014). There have been instances of Syrian girls and women marrying Turkish men illegally in order to escape financial hardships or to protect their honor, and these marriages serve to victimize the Syrian women and spoil the Turkish family structure. Further, since these marriages are not considered official according to Turkish civil law, both the Syrian and Turkish women become victims as a result of these marriages. At this juncture, both the Turkish government and the NGOs that serve in the field should take concrete steps in order to properly address the victimization of both the Syrian and Turkish women who are harmed by these illegal marriages.

First, with regard to Syrian child brides, family elders forcing young girls to marry early is both a human rights violation and a form of gender-based violence. For instance, whether or not these girls can visit their families or friends, continue their education, use contraception, or make choices for themselves is up to their spouses (Kaynak Malatyalı, 2014). The majority of these girls are unable to continue their education, yet they are forced to take on responsibilities and burdens for which they are not prepared; this, combined with the other potential problems associated with marriage, can result in depression and suicide (Özcebe-Küçük Biçer, 2013).

Again, these girls being married early not only robs them of their right to education, but it also affects their personal development and their ability to mature into individuals that might benefit society (UNICEF, 2001). A key solution to the problem of child brides is to convince the Syrian families to send their children to school. To this end, via the government and NGOs, seminars might be given to the Syrian families regarding the importance of education and the physical and psychological harm associated with early marriages for both the girls and society in general. Further, it is found that increased household income generally allows for a decrease in instances of early marriage (UNICEF, 2001). If the government or NGOs were to provide financial aid or job opportunities to the Syrian families experiencing financial difficulties, then those families might be less inclined to force their young daughters into marriage and might be more inclined to send their children to school (Özcebe-Küçük Biçer, 2013). For instance, in the countries where child brides are common, fathers, older brothers, or elder family members make decisions regarding marriage on behalf of the girl. At this juncture, the religious and traditional leaders might use their influence in order to change these traditional understandings to prevent these marriages, which the Syrian families seek to justify by pretexting religion and honor (Tzemach Lemmon-ElHarake, 2014). Another step that might be taken to address this problem involves the determination of the legal regulations regarding child marriages; these regulations should be more precise. For instance, although Article 124 of the Turkish civil law states that individuals under 18 years of age are considered children, the same article decrees that individuals who reach 16 years of age are able to marry in extraordinary situations and with a court's decision (Kaynak Malatyalı, 2014). As such, it is important to remove these contradictory expressions that might allow for abuse; and is worth considering clearer boundaries with regard to the necessary conditions for marriage (Özcebe-Küçük

Biçer, 2013).

The illegal marriages, however, do not involve only Syrian girls; they also involve middle-aged Syrian women who are single, widowed, or divorced. As these girls or women enter into marriage with Turkish men, the divorce rates in border provinces such Şanlıurfa, Kilis, and Hatay increase (ORSAM-TESEV, 2015), and this does damage to the Turkish family structure. In addition, these marriages victimize not only the Syrian and Turkish women but also the Syrian children who are born as a result of these marriages. In particular, since the beginning of the war, 150,000 Syrian babies have been born in Turkey, and because most of these marriages are not effectuated by legal means, the children who are born of these marriages are considered *stateless* in Turkey. The Turkish government's willingness to grant these children citizenship is important in that it helps to prevent these children from being socially isolated and from being denied basic public rights such as education and healthcare. Further, since the marriages between the Syrian women and Turkish men materialized via religious ceremonies, they are not made official or recorded in any official way; this makes it more difficult to identify these marriages and to thus identify more solutions to the problem. To this end, it may serve as a deterrent to implement serious penal sanctions against those Turkish citizens who illegally marry Syrians as well as against those who mediate or facilitate these marriages by introducing the involved parties to one another or by officiating a marriage ceremony. Additionally, if the government or NGOs provide financial support and work opportunities to the Syrian women, then the women may feel less urgency to enter into these religious marriages.

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