Early Marriage in Perspective: Practicing an Ethics of Dialogue with Syrian Refugees in Jordan

An Van Raemdonck

Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, VU University Amsterdam, Netherlands

Marina de Regt

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Abstract: This article discusses rationales for development and humanitarian intervention through the lenses of poststructuralist policy analysis and a postcolonial politics of the womb. It aims to show a variety of perspectives on early marriage and the limitations of dominant policy responses. The article argues that humanitarian logics easily blend with developmentalist models, especially in conditions of protracted displacement. The response to the rise of early marriage among Syrians in Jordan mainly consists of educational activities such as awareness raising that are based on imparting knowledge. The article suggests that responses based on an ethics of dialogue may be more adequate to meet refugees' needs and, second, may help to shift the balance from developmentalist reproductive governance towards realizing the humanitarian goal of identifying and addressing women refugees' needs.

Key words: Early marriage, Syrian refugees, Jordan, humanitarianism, ethics, reproductive governance

I. Introduction

This article discusses perspectives on early marriage in the context of humanitarian crisis, notably the context of Syrian refugees in protracted displacement in Jordan. Early marriage is defined as underage marriage—under the age of 18—which is also the official legal marriage age in Jordan. The goal of this article is to enquire into the different meanings of early marriage in conditions of forced displacement among policymakers, international agencies and Syrian refugees themselves. It is guided by a poststructuralist analytical approach that examines the different ways in which early marriage is 'represented as a problem' (Bacchi, 2009). Obtaining a better understanding of different problem representations of early marriage consequently

allows us to gain greater insight in the different (governing) effects these representations produce. Problem representations equally reveal implicit understandings of women's agency and choice-making. The purpose of knowing a variety of problem representations of early marriages by policymakers and refugees themselves is to divulge alternative potential policy options. Methodologically, the article follows a critical ethnography approach with a vertical dimension (Fassin, 2013). It brings together the results of multi-sited fieldwork that is 'vertically' interested in understanding a variety of perspectives (from international agencies, Jordanian agencies, Syrian refugees and Jordanian health care workers). We draw on literature reviews, qualitative and ethnographic research, including 11 recurring two-hour group talks with eight Syrian early married women, and 13 interviews with health care providers.

The first sections of this article provide the theoretical backdrop for the analysis of early marriage in forced migration. The Syrian crisis in the Jordanian context is first outlined before presenting the methodological approach. Second, discourses on early marriage are discussed while theoretically drawing from insights of critical anthropology of development and gender, and post-structuralist analysis of policy. International agencies' representations of early marriage are juxtaposed with our respondents' views. This analysis concludes with a discussion of a postcolonial politics of the womb (Thomas, 2003) at work in the context of early marriage in Jordan. We demonstrate that perceptions of early marriage as a primarily 'problem of culture' will lead to responses that focus on changing refugees' reproductive behaviour via educational interventions. The article suggests, instead, that interventions based on an ethics of dialogue that foreground listening and interaction may be more effective to identify and address refugee women's needs in relation to early marriage.

II. Critical and Postcolonial Interventions in the Anthropology of Humanitarianism, Gender and Development

Early marriage as a problem has been a long focus of attention for development workers and policymakers.[1] Over the past three decades, feminist knowledge has contributed to rethinking the way development and humanitarian assistance are conceptualized and implemented. Yet there has been growing attention on the discrepancies between the use of gender equality values in international declarations of donor and aid agencies and actual practices in development/humanitarian practice. Some scholars have pointed to the loss of radical transformative potential in the development gender agenda (e.g., Cornwall and Rivas, 2015), and the instrumentalization of gender and sexual equality to advance a global neoliberal regime (e.g., Chant and Sweetman, 2012). The more recent focus on girls as an unexplored asset of development has been critically interrogated for incorporating girls' lives into a particular growth-oriented neoliberal project (Hickel, 2014; MacDonald, 2016).

Research has shown how development and humanitarian policies' focus on education in gender and sexuality sometimes creates or reinforces sociocultural divisions between communities (e.g., Bernal and Grewal, 2014; Grabska, 2011; Miedema, 2019; Pigg and Adams, 2005). Sexual norms then start to operate as a mark of differentiation between groups: those with 'acceptable', educated (modern) practices and those with traditional, uneducated ('backward') practices in need of correction. These divisions reflect ingrained colonial ideas but are often unintentionally reproduced in the international development context (Arnfred, 2005). Such critical scholarship on the implementation of gender equality values in practice is interested in global/local interactions and resulting transformations of gender and sexual moralities. It examines how local actors—including local NGO's, trainers, activists—mediate and vernacularize

international development and humanitarian discourse on gender and sexuality. Local development actors can reproduce dominant developmentalist discourse while subverting the gender equality message as part of a delicate balancing act between conceding to new global norms and local sociocultural concerns and anxieties (Van Raemdonck, 2019).

Also in humanitarian contexts, gender and sexuality equality values have served as a means of differentiation between those (supposedly) supporting those values on the one hand, and the receiving side of refugees/ beneficiaries who supposedly do not have such equality values on the other (Olivius, 2016). In some cases, 'good' receivers of aid have been celebrated for successfully incorporating gender equality. Sahrawi refugee women in Algerian camps, for example, have been praised as 'ideal' refugees for reflecting back to donors and the international community the desired discourse on gender equality and women empowerment, to the detriment of the real needs of marginalized groups who were not represented as 'ideal' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010). Similarly, introducing gender equality in humanitarian action has been translated on the ground as efforts to activate women refugees and make them participate, for instance, in aid distribution (Olivius, 2014).

In the humanitarian context, attention and special provisions to women, gender, gender-based violence (GBV) has over the last two and half decades been successfully mainstreamed in humanitarian training and practice. While there are crucial formal differences between the contexts of humanitarian crisis and development work, the underlying logics on which interventions are based often converge. For example, much of humanitarian crisis assistance is implemented in the context of radical uncertainty (see Horst and Grabska, 2015), when, it is argued, saving people's lives and creating immediate access to basic services is most important. Yet many situations of emergencies, progressively move towards protracted displacement and protracted

uncertainty. Thus, in practice, the logic of humanitarian crisis assistance easily shifts into one of development work, and as we will argue in this article, especially concerning women and gender issues. We develop this argument particularly against the backdrop of the tendency of international agencies and local governments to train, educate, and 'civilize' refugees, in much different contexts and locations (e.g., Hagelund, 2005). Equally for development practice, it has been argued that 'the arcane and ubiquitous practice of training' fulfils important functions in the development industry but often fails to bring change or adequate responses (e.g., Watkins and Swidler, 2013, 197).

III. The 'Presentation of the Problem' of Early Marriage

In this analysis of policy discourse and empirical data, we will look at early marriage interventions in the context of the Syrian crisis while theoretically drawing from insights of the anthropology of development and policy and post-structuralist analysis of policy. We give particular attention to the 'presentation of the problem' among policymakers. Following Bacchi and Goodwin, the present article argues that policy does more than merely addressing problems that pre-exist, but also produces '"problems" as specific sorts of problems' (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016, 16). We agree with them on the need to look at policies' representations of social problems to unravel underlying ideas, conceptualizations and rationales that serve to naturalize policy and to problematize the issue at hand. Bacchi theorized the 'representation of the problem' to propose an analysis that considers *how* and *why* policy problematizes a particular issue. This Foucauldian inspired theoretical lens interrogates how a specific way of problematization shows us the elements that in fact do governing work (Bacchi, 2009). While we disagree with Bacchi and Goodwin's radical (de)constructionist approach that might suggest that the issue at hand is not a

pre-existing social reality deserving a policy response, we believe that this approach to transnational policymaking in humanitarian and development work potentially enables a denaturalization of policy and therefore rethinks different analyses and policy options. Concretely, the next sections of data analysis will argue how dominant policy options based on imparting knowledge could be re-thought by considering alternative formats that rely on an ethics of dialogue.

In this effort, we join others who have argued for the importance of constructionist approaches in the study of sexuality and gender related issues in development action. In the words of Pigg and Adams, 'theories of sex and society have shifted from models stressing the social regulation of sexuality to those stressing the social production of sexuality' (Pigg and Adams, 2005, 5). The ethnographic scholarship in their seminal volume 'sex in development' shows that the encounter of sexuality with development is deeply interwoven with stories of modernity and science, and many others connected to these concerns (e.g., Groes-Green, 2009; Moyer et al., 2013). They draw our attention to the production of new subjectivities, by promoting new sexual behaviours and norms through activities such as sex education, awareness raising and family planning. Indeed, policies that prevent early marriages and early pregnancy, and promote a reduction of the number of children are crucial measures of reproductive governance. Such policies also 'introduce or foster notions of individual choice and responsibility, risk aversion, and personal independence' (Ali, 2002, 1). They construct new ways of being an individual, and new ways of being a family member, affecting one's understanding of oneself and one's relation to family.

In this sense, new sexual normativities are fostered and operate as biopolitical governmentalities, to continue on Foucauldian terms. The promoted policies for social change or behavioural change foster new selves who arrange, live and plan their sexual reproduction differently. The state or policies govern then through self-governance, or 'technologies of the self'. While these policies aim to serve the well-being of the population, they may not always succeed in this, and instead cause friction with the target groups. The underlying logic of reshaping and governing sexual subjectivity may conflict with self-defined needs and understandings of well-being. This process has been referred to as 'transnational feminist governmentalities' (Grewal, 2005). Ferguson and Gupta formulate the idea of 'transnational governmentalities' to denote these governance mechanisms that are declared for the general well-being of world population (Ferguson and Gupta, 2005). Grewal adds the term feminist to it to refer to those policies formulated to improve women's general well-being. These scholars emphasize the governance dimensions of transnationally formulated arrangements and argue that they overshadow women's actual well-being as they are often part of neoliberal forms of government and policy that increase global inequalities.

IV. The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Jordan and the Response to the Rise of Early Marriage

The case of Syrians in Jordan shows how attention for gendered practices has been broadly mainstreamed in humanitarian protracted displacement contexts. Currently, the number of registered Syrian refugees—'people of concern'—by UNHCR in Jordan totals 660 393, making up for 11.7% of the Jordanian population.[2] The government of Jordan has made much higher estimates but those numbers cannot be verified and are therefore considered unreliable (Bank, 2016, 3; Lenner and Schmelter, 2016). An overwhelming majority of refugees, about 80%, lives in urban areas in the Northern governorates of Mafraq, Irbid, Zarqa and the capital Amman (Lenner and Schmelter, 2016, 124). Others live in five camps that have been set up to address the Syrian

refugee crisis and are located in the Northern governorates as well.

Reports have been dedicated to the plight of women and children from early on in the crisis (UN Women, 2013) and showed that the number of registered Syrian marriages involving women under the age of 18 had increased remarkably (Higher Population Council Jordan, 2017; Save the Children, 2014; UNICEF, 2014). The percentage of registered marriages among underage Syrian women in Jordan rose especially between 2011 and 2015, notably from 18.4% in 2011 to 34.6% in 2015 (Higher Population Council Jordan, 2017, xv–xvi). Among those early marriages, the great majority in Jordan is between the age of 15 and 17 at the time of marriage (UNFPA, 2019; UNICEF, 2014, 8), and only 2% of women in Jordan get married under the age of 15 (Department of Statistics, Jordan and ICF, 2019). Literature points at the higher health risks (especially under the age 15) (WHO, 2018), higher likelihood of experiencing domestic abuse (Save the Children, 2014, 2), and broader social and psychological problems for early married women in general.

Living in displacement, in protracted uncertainty and under precarious socio-economic conditions, Syrian refugees have shown a higher tendency to marry their children at a younger age. Early marriage has been a common practice in many parts of pre-war Syria.[3] Refugees in the North of Jordan have often come from Syrian rural regions at the borderlands and upwards where early marriage has been a common practice for generations. Studies argued that a lack of general safety, worsening economic conditions and disrupted education for girls are important reasons behind this rise (Mourtada et al., 2017). Child marriage has been defined as an instance of GBV that humanitarians seek to address and integrate in their responses (ESCWA, 2015; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2015).

Researchers who studied early marriage practices among Syrians in Lebanon recommend providing women and girls with information, to improve access to education and to offer economic support and legal advice (Mourtada et al., 2017, 62). In the context of Jordan, the main strategy by a wide range of NGOs was a heavy investment in awareness raising for refugee women and girls, in camp and urban settings (UNFPA, 2019). While there may be important variations between different organizations, awareness raising is often built on educating refugees concerning early marriage, early pregnancy and reproductive health care by pointing at the negative health risks for early married women and their children to discourage the practice (UNFPA, 2019).[4] Studies have recommended the state of Jordan to develop a national strategy, and in these negotiations UNFPA has been promoting a two-pronged approach: (a) tailored to individual needs; and (b) allocates more resources for financial support to prevent early marriage. What is impeding its implementation is a general decrease in donor funds in all areas, including for the prevention of early marriage (UNFPA, 2019).

V. Methodology and Methods

This research is part of a larger collaborative anthropological research project on early marriage and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) among Syrian refugees in Jordan. The project investigates the meanings, perceptions and interventions on early marriage among Syrians in Jordan and includes the involvement of two NGO's as research facilitators. This article takes Bacchi's theory of 'representation of the problem' as a guiding question to discuss different discourses and empirical findings (Bacchi, 2009), which we explain at length below. The discussion draws from literature reviews, 13 interviews with health care providers, two focus-group discussions (FGD) and 11 recurring group talks with Syrian women that were conducted between February and December 2018 in the cities of Amman and Zarqa.

The first author conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with Jordanian and

international health care providers. This sample combines 6 different health care institutions that were contacted for their elaborate service provision to Syrian refugees, especially in the field of reproductive health. They are all located in the geographic triangle where most Syrian refugees in Jordan reside: Amman–Zarqa–Irbid. Six interviews were conducted with members of the international non-governmental organization (INGO) that participated in the research implementation, two interviews with medical doctors at two private hospitals, one interview with a professional of another INGO, two interviews with programme managers at UNFPA, and two interviews with medical professionals of a local NGO that provides primary health care to Syrian refugee women. The participating INGO in the research implementation, where the first author also conducted the PAR-based recurring group talks, has a particularly elaborate programme of free prenatal and postnatal care and serves therefore a majority of Syrian refugees compared to other NGOs. It has become one of the few remaining organizations that offers affordable health care and medicine for refugees.

The series of recurring group talks consisted of 11 meetings with a group of eight Syrian married women and seven meetings with a group of seven unmarried women. Based on the method of Participatory Action Research (PAR), the meetings aimed at building a bond of trust among the participants and gradually and creatively adapted to the possibilities and realities of the women involved. Unlike a typical PAR scenario, the participants in our research did not propose the initial research questions because these were already determined, or design strategies for social or public action towards the end of the project. We distinguish different reasons behind this development. The overall sociopolitical circumstances in Jordan, in addition to dominant gender regimes, do not encourage refugee women (or men) to speak out on social or public matters, articulate their social problems publicly and advise proposals for collective action. Additionally, the uncertain conditions of protracted displacement and waiting do not encourage refugees to undertake collective action either. For instance, two of the eight married Syrian women returned to Syria before the end of the one-year duration of meetings, and several other women were considering returning as well. These circumstances complicated a typical PAR scenario and led us to creatively adapt the sessions and refer to them as recurring group talks.

All women were between the ages of 18 and 28, and all meetings lasted on average two hours. These women were selected by the participating NGO and the first author after taking separate interviews with each individual. This first meeting served to introduce the goals of the research (i.e., to examine the shifting meanings and contexts of early marriage and reproductive health) and evaluate the interest of the candidates to participate. All women were invited to actively contribute to shaping and deepening the research questions by proposing topics of their own concern, and by relying on their own embodied knowledge and experiences. Women who showed interest and commitment to participate were selected. Other criteria apart of being married or unmarried refugees were not to be related to other participants to increase women's ability to speak freely without consequences.

The overall methodological approach is guided by the understanding of critical ethnography that consists of multi-sited fieldwork with a vertical dimension. Anthropologist Didier Fassin proposes instead of a horizontal approach that refers to multi-sited fieldwork in a variety of locations, to employ a vertical dimension that includes a 'variety of perspectives' among any sociocultural groups involved, such as policymakers at different levels or different health care providers (Fassin, 2013, 120). This article is guided by a vertical approach, which means concretely that a variety of involved actors is included: health care providers

working in NGO's, hospitals and international agencies (UNFPA), Jordanian officials (Higher Population Council of Jordan) and the Syrian refugee community (through recurrent group talks). This methodological approach entails that the article does not present findings of each separately used research method in an inclusive in-depth manner. Instead, findings will be presented inductively as the argument enfolds.

VI. The Problem of Early Marriage as a Manifestation of a Postcolonial Politics of the Womb

In the following sections, we turn to a discussion of early marriage interventions among Syrian refugees in Jordan. We discuss the presentation of early marriage as a problem, in Bacchi's understanding, first by looking at discourses from two international agencies, and second, by complementing them with empirical findings.

International agencies usually connect early marriage to concerns with early pregnancy and family planning. Women who marry early tend to have children at an early age and tend to have a large number of children, without spacing between childbirths. Grey literature focuses on dangers and risks for women's health and a violation of their rights (Save the Children, 2014; UNICEF, 2014). A report prepared for the UN Expert Group Meeting on good practices in legislation to address harmful practices against women, describes early marriage as follows:

> Agreed upon and consummated before the girl is 18 years old, with her sexual organs not yet mature, and her consent irrelevant, early marriage is always a forced marriage and its outcome always a tragedy for the victim. For that reason, early marriage compares easily with child trafficking and as such, it deserves particular attention. (Kouyaté, 2009, 2)

While this fragment does not represent an official UN position, it is representative for a way of thinking that was often encountered during fieldwork. It makes certain definite

and universal claims about childhood and adulthood: any person under the age of 18 is physically immature, and is not able to give consent and is therefore by definition forced into an arrangement that results in tragedy. This manner of categorizing is indeed helpful when thinking about legislation and policy, but its effects may be very different on real women and girls. We will return to this point in the last section of this article.

The Higher Population Council (HPC) of Jordan, presented the problem of early marriage as follows:

> Undoubtedly, the child marriage is considered a phenomenon of violation of several legitimate human rights of girls, including the right to education, the right to develop abilities and conscious choice of the life partner without coercion, and the right to ensure equal marriage and the building of sound family relations. Moreover the violation of such rights negatively reflects on the life style and quality of the girl, her reproductive health as well as the economic effects, and the ability of the family to carry out its duties in the upbringing of young people, especially as the preparation of new generations is mainly dependent on their characteristics. (Higher Population Council Jordan, 2017, 1)

The Higher Population Council emphasizes different concepts than the UN expert group. Here we find a focus on violation of rights, and whereas it starts with the recognition of general understandings of women's and children's rights, it continues to mention 'the building of sound family relations' and 'the ability of the family to carry out its duties in the upbringing of young people'. In other words, this framing of the problem shows concern about family formation, and the maintenance of a sound family unit that can carry out its duties to raise new generations.

Such formulations resonate with the articulations that were heard in the recurrent talk groups with women refugees and in the interviews with reproductive health care providers. Women in the talk groups commonly referred to family duties as a too

heavy burden for early married women: *early marriage is certainly wrong, because of the responsibility for her husband and the children*. Early marriage is seen as problematic in terms of the wife's many responsibilities in the household and in the upbringing of children. A young woman (and a young man) often feel overwhelmed when confronted with the range of expectations of wives and mothers. One of the women expressed this as follows: 'when we first married, me and him did not understand each other. There was only a small age difference between us, only three years, he was young and I was young, but there was no understanding between us, and the responsibility is great' (married woman, recurring talk groups).

Many women in talk groups suggested this as a main reason why early marriage is better avoided. Here, our respondents' representation of the problem converged more with Jordan's Higher Population Council's articulation of the problem than with UN Expert Group meeting. This suggests that Jordan's population analysts have succeeded in either impacting on or in connecting with Syrian refugee women's concerns and articulations.

The theme of family responsibility was also represented in the semi-structured interviews with 13 Jordanian and primary health care providers, but other themes emerged more strongly. All interviewees were asked the following: (a) What are the most important (reproductive) health care needs of Syrian women who marry under the age of 18? (b) Whether pregnancies of Syrian women under the age of 18 encounter more negative medical complications than other pregnancies? Given the scope and aim of this article, this discussion is limited to a short presentation of the main findings by presenting the predominant answers to the two main questions. Virtually all respondents emphasized the lack of personal hygiene and poor nutrition as the most prominent health concern of young Syrian women refugees. Many respondents elaborated on this

observation and stated that specific advisory sessions were being held by their organizations to address this problem. The second question was predominantly answered by stating that teen pregnancies do not lead to major adverse health complications, but rather that, in their own view, 'the main problem is one of culture and education'. Interestingly, interlocutors responded negatively to the question of major medical complications occurring to early married women who delivered babies under the age of 18. Instead, virtually all respondents reframed this question by moving away from medical language and reformulating it as 'a problem of culture and education'. In other words, they understood the question in terms of culture, education, or in broader terms, within narratives of modernity and normative understandings regarding family formation in Jordanian society. These findings correspond to the current debate among international agencies such as UNFPA on the design of interventions to efficiently respond to the rise of early marriage, specifically the question which role a discussion of potential health hazards should have.[4]

Indeed, practices of marriage and family making act as a symbolic marker of cultural differentiation between health care providers and refugees (e.g., Pigg and Adams, 2005). Refugees are perceived to be in need of training and education in modern family values (to marry at an older age and have less children), and particularly girls and women are focused on to realize this change (e.g., Hickel, 2014). A development logic that aims to 'civilize' then dominates over the concern of identifying refugees' needs. Our interlocutors expressed, as physician and anthropologist Kamran Ali concluded in his research on family planning in Egypt, a desire to reshape subjectivities to fit a modern narrative and create new normativities on gender, sexuality and family (Ali, 2002). Similarly, in the context of programmes against teenage pregnancies in Malawi, medical anthropologist Pot observed a parallel tendency where culturalism is used

to represent the problem of early pregnancies (Pot, 2019).

This desire to reshape subjectivities in order to fit better modern society, however, is only one dimension of a multi-sided postcolonial politics of the womb. This section started with an outline of different dominant representations of early marriage as a problem, by international agencies and Jordanian actors. Early marriage and pregnancy figure as a means of 'extending women's reproducing years' (Boyden et al., 2012, 515) and form part of existing gendered norms and family ideologies. The international discourse illustrated in this article aims at limiting the period of those reproductive years by drawing a strict line between childhood and adulthood. The Jordanian HPC discourse that was discussed showed a preoccupation with young women's (and men's) ability to carry the responsibilities of raising a family, in the light of fulfilling their roles in a strong and productive nation. The Syrian refugee women who participated in the PAR-based recurring talk groups equally showed concern for the responsibilities that women carry when raising future generations but emphasized the everyday burdens and hardships. The primary health care workers, finally, found early marriage problematic by showing a concern with better educating Syrians to live up to modern cultural expectations. These different representations of early marriage as a problem point therefore at different underlying concerns that constitute 'the problem': safeguarding children's rights (international), protecting family life to raise future generations of the nation (Jordan), protecting kinship as an everyday social support system (Syrian women), and the promotion of modern cultural expectations of family life (health care workers).

All these concerns indeed revolve around biological and social reproduction, which is discussed in terms of existing 'traditional' norms and 'modern' norms. Historian Lynn Thomas has coined these debates as the 'politics of the womb' (Thomas, 2003). In the context of postcolonial African states, she noted how

'reproductive concerns have structured old hierarchies based in gender, generation, and kinship, and contributed to the construction of new ones grounded in racial difference and civilized status' (Thomas, 2003, 4). Issues of reproduction gain symbolic meaning as they come to signify which larger social order one adheres to. Jordan's Higher Population Council and the Syrian women participating in the research emphasized the importance of women's roles and responsibilities as wives and mothers. Indeed, their position can be understood in terms of 'old hierarchies of concerns based in gender, generation and kinship'. Health care providers on the other hand, formulated the problem of early marriage strongly in terms of culture and education, arguing to elevate Syrians to a higher 'civilized status', or, in Thomas's words, the more recent hierarchies. These positions on early marriage demonstrate therefore the postcolonial politics of the womb at work. The different representations of early marriage/pregnancy that we discussed, connect to critical concerns with transformations and interventions into matters of sexuality, intimacy, marriage and reproduction in postcolonial societies, and the resulting politicized and complex searches for self-determination.

Moreover, when early marriage remains expressed within the frame of a politics of the womb, little scope is left for perceiving women's agency and personal choice-making. Both old and new hierarchies of reproductive concerns reduce women's agency to the performance of social expectations and functions (as a responsible family member or as an asset of growth) rather than highlighting or expanding the range of options available to women. As argued earlier in the sections outlining the theoretical approach, the manner in which early marriage is formulated as a problem, influences and shapes policy responses. Consequently, when the problem is mainly perceived as one of culture and lack of 'civilization', policies will aim to address these

concerns and neglect others. The purpose of this poststructuralist policy analysis approach is precisely to question existing interventions and to discern alternative routes for policy responses.

VII. The Category of Early Marriage and Its Discontents

In the remainder of this article, we examine further the meanings and consequences of dominant policy representations on early marriage. The previous section focused on the different underlying concerns captured by the category of early marriage, while this section looks closer into early marriage as an umbrella term by holding it against emic understandings, drawing mainly from two focus group discussions and the PAR-based recurring talk groups. International humanitarian and development literature (e.g., ESCWA, 2015; Higher Population Council Jordan, 2017; Kouyaté, 2009; Save the Children, 2014; UNICEF, 2014) and common practice tend to portray early marriage as a homogenous category that seemingly involves a particular set of dispositions, feelings, acts and consequences, regardless of the great variety in concrete embodied experiences of early marriages. Findings, however, point at the difficulties to grasp the diversity of early marriage practices and contain them in one fixed, generalized category. The multitude of emic understandings by Syrian women contrasts with the predominant use of early marriage as a catch-all umbrella term. We will argue that interventions that commonly operate on this basis may therefore fail to understand lived experiences and meet refugees' needs.

Syrian women in the recurrent talk groups and focus groups discussed the many shapes early marriage can take in their understanding and experience. Early marriage includes cousin marriage, arranged marriage (both forms are also referred to as 'traditional marriage'), large age-difference marriages and small age-difference marriages, marriages between spouses of the same nationality and marriages with male spouses with other nationalities, and any combinations of the above. Women talked about experiencing varying degrees of social pressure or space for personal negotiation with their parents or other family members concerning the marriage partner, decision or timing. Additionally, parents may accept romantic love to play a role in choosing a suitable spouse, or not. Some girls and women attached great value to romantic love while others did not. In an effort to prevent girls under the age of 18 of marrying, however, this great variety of practices with very different concrete outcomes is often glossed over.

This neglect can be explained by the ultimate aim to prevent all early marriages and using a category that homogenizes practices is therefore effective. Moreover, funding logics of international development agencies contributes to the reiteration of early marriage as an all-encompassing category. The competition for funds amongst different development fields (e.g., health, rights, economic empowerment, gender, etc.) leads to a situation in which topics that are lobbied for and receive much international attention receive funds more easily. This means that certain stories and narratives of complex social realities such as early marriage are often (un)intentionally simplified and mainstreamed because this facilitates an easy circulation and presentation of the problem (Archambault, 2011). A homogenization of early marriage practices serves well to draw affective responses from the international donor community. These logics have led to criticism from anthropologists that representations of early marriage amongst NGOs and international population and health agencies are not helpful when they only serve judgement of the practice rather than addressing its underlying socio-economic and material reasons (Giaquinta, 2017).

In this article, however, we have been interested in contextualizing early marriage by unravelling its different meanings in the concrete context of Syrians in Jordan

who resort to early marriage while living in conditions of immobility and displacement. Research findings show both congruences and incongruences between early marriage as presumed by the category, and early marriage as lived experience. Many women in the talk groups confirmed the negative aspects that are often mentioned in regard to early marriage. They most regretted not having graduated from secondary education, having carried responsibilities within the household too early and entering into marriage without fully realizing what it implied.

Others explained how their experiences of childhood radically changed due to war and displacement and how this made them feel much older than they were. Amina (aged 21) is a young woman who participated in the recurring talk groups. She married at age 17 in Syria and fled in 2013 together with her husband and son from Kunaytra to Zarqa in Jordan. She was the first participant to state; I feel as if I am 40 while I am only 22', while others nodded and showed recognition. Being forced to leave home, undertaking an unpredictable and hard journey to find safety in a new place and dealing with this new environment was very demanding for many women. Another participant, Wesam (aged 28), agreed and explained: 'because we came here and we had to deal with people, we became much older than our actual age'. Wesam particularly felt as having matured very rapidly and forced to become 'tough' in order to deal with experiences of alienation and the difficulty of adjusting to new environments. She explained, 'the major difference between my childhood in Syria and my childhood after coming here to Jordan is that here you have to carry a lot of responsibility and that everything is difficult'.

Additionally, there were often experiences of discrimination and harsh interactions with the host society, demanding from them to develop particular coping skills. Wesam, who lives in the old city centre of Zarqa told about her experiences soon after arriving in Jordan:

there was great discrimination, our neighbours would say bad things to us on the street, only because we are Syrians (bizaytu 'alena shaghlat mu mneha bas le'innu ihna suriyin) […] Some shops in the market refused to sell things to us and we were faced with insults (nat'arad lishata'im).

Living through all these drastic events demanded more maturity and responsibility from them. This entails that also the idea of marriage and starting a family may be experienced differently than it would have been in pre-war time. Lubna (aged 24), another participant in the same recurrent talk group, arrived in Jordan at the age of 18. While she initially did not want to marry early, she married after only one year, which she still considered early. For her, marriage was a conscious decision 'to bring back purpose to her life'. The flight and life as a refugee in Jordan had left her feeling 'empty'. Marrying and starting a family felt more in line with the responsibilities that she was already carrying by necessity in a new environment. The fast-paced aging these women described seemed to accommodate more naturally the idea of marriage than it may have done before. The complex interplay of different childhood experiences by war and flight, altered ideas of childhood and adulthood in displacement, altered sense of safety, and how these factors affect refugees' thought about marriage and family making are important new dimensions of early marriage that are highlighted by our findings.

In a focus group discussion in the North Eastern city of Zarqa, most of the two-hour long talk was dominated by an exchange between women debating whether early marriage has inherent negative consequences, resulting in small 'camps' taking different positions within the group. One group argued that all early marriages are wrong and should be prevented by principle, while another group of women continued to argue that their lives with their husbands—who they married early—have been good overall because there

was enough love, understanding and care to make for a harmonious relationship. Other participants who can be regarded as a third group stated that they occupied an in-between position. These women disagreed with a strong condemnation of all early marriage practices as necessarily negative, but at the same time they held many reservations and would not enter marriage under the age of 18 again. These findings illustrate the diversity in perceptions and experiences of early marriage and the difficulty to grasp them all under one umbrella term. This research therefore suggests that a manifold of 'early marriage practices' is better suited to capture social reality than the single category of 'early marriage'. Moreover, allowing time and space to discuss that variety of lived experiences corresponded better to the self-defined needs of many participating women.

VIII. Calling for an Ethics of Dialogue

This research enabled us to, simply stated, enter conversations that contextualize (early) marriage. This process opened up space to hear alternative narratives and helped to reach a greater understanding of refugee women's experiences and needs, particularly concerning intimate topics such as husband-wife and family relationships. The PAR-based recurring group talks focused on how marriage in general is conceived, what really matters to these women and what does not, what works for them and what does not in what they consider as early marriage and otherwise. At the same time, the group talks offered something that many women enjoyed and had been missing. Some women told the first author that they found great emotional and psychological support in the group meetings. 'We calm down when we talk' (nertah lama nehky) was a recurring phrase of feedback. After a few weeks, Rania (aged 28), mother of four, came up to ask whether the meetings were part of a family support programme that runs in the NGO (despite the initial explanation of the research nature of the project at each first

individual meeting during recruitment and in the first group meeting). She added that she was attending a family support programme at another NGO but 'found ours much better and satisfying than the other one'. In the other organization, 'the woman [facilitator] just talked and talked and was not really interested in listening to us'. Rania felt that the trainer delivered her predetermined messages and did not ask what was going on in their lives. As researchers we responded that we were trying to set up a safe research environment and did not intend to work towards offering family support though planned to feedback insights such as hers to development agencies.

Rania's questions revealed the importance of 'just' listening. Being able to talk and being heard seemed a simple act as part of a research method but carried more weight than we imagined. Social work researchers have pointed at the value of using 'reciprocal dialogue' as a research method, referring to communication in which 'each of those involved treats the other as an equal' (Yassour-Borochowitz, 2004, 179–80). Furthermore, intersubjective dialogue and allowing for a plurality of voices has been understood as a core feature of postmodern ethical practice. Whereas the typical modernist subject aims to incorporate or 'dominate' the other, a postmodern dialogical ethics starts from an understanding of the other as a 'neighbour', not necessarily a foreign or menacing other that needs to be appropriated or assimilated (Nealon, 1997, 130–33). The adoption of an ethics of dialogue in the frame of the PAR-based research method has consequently translated into a finding, as this working method was experienced as meeting women refugees' needs.

Let us return to the theoretical framework we set up earlier. A poststructuralist analysis of policy by focusing on the 'presentation of the problem' showed us different underlying concerns of the same issue, early marriage. A prominent concern among them was a perceived 'lack of culture and education' and

the corresponding policy response to this perception is to offer training and education. Our research findings suggest in this respect that formats favouring interaction and dialogue may correspond more to refugees' needs. We had invited our participants to be part of a research project on the experiences of early marriage, but they found a trustful space where they could talk freely and even make friends. Finding an open space to share personal experiences was unexpected and new to them.

Our suggestion is therefore to incorporate an ethics of dialogue in the design of initiatives that aim to address the needs of early married women or aim to prevent more early marriages from occurring. Based on our research process and findings, a larger focus on listening may be more rewarding than activities that focus on the transmission of information. Second and related to the first point, we suggest giving more attention to understanding the individual level of concrete experience when formulating responses to women in need of help due to early marriage or when aiming to prevent it. Cases of early marriage differ greatly based on a host of personal conditions, for instance, young women who are living isolated from their own (extended) families have different experiences from those who live in relative proximity of family members. It may therefore be equally relevant to understand different levels of problematization of early marriage by individual refugees themselves when designing responses. In sum, rather than investing strongly in collective awareness raising activities that is fundamentally based on imparting information, this research shows that a dialogical model based on participants' existing views, knowledge and experience may address women's needs more efficiently.

IX. Conclusion

This article demonstrated the fundamental tension between reproductive governance concerns and humanitarian response with regard to the rise of early marriage among Syrian refugees in Jordan. Research findings illustrate this tension and raise the question to which side the balance shifts. Poststructuralist analysis of policy and our empirical findings show that the problem of early marriage is understood in various ways by different actors and this reveals important differences in underlying concerns: safeguarding children's rights (international), protecting family life to raise new generations of the future nation (Jordan), protecting kinship as an everyday social support system (Syrian women), and the promotion of modern cultural expectations of family life (health care workers).

The predominant format in the response to the rise of early marriage consists of training and education for target groups, especially Syrian refugee women. Initiatives aim to train refugees by providing new models for reproductive behaviour (i.e., to marry at a later age, to have less childbirths). In other words, reproductive governance concerns may threaten to outbalance the humanitarian concern with understanding and addressing women refugees' needs. This inherent risk results from the blending of developmentalist rationales and humanitarian emergency logics which often occurs in contexts of protracted displacement. The priority of understanding refugees' needs becomes then overridden by development thinking and formats. Problem presentations of early marriage and corresponding responses often remain locked within a postcolonial 'politics of the womb' (Thomas, 2003) that restricts perceptions of women's agency and choice. Prioritizing refugee needs may not involve a rather passive model of receiving training, education and awareness raising but could equally lead to an active model that is based in an ethics of dialogue, in which care givers and receivers are entirely equal participants. Developmentalist assumptions threaten to override an in-depth understanding of women's self-defined needs and strategies of coping and decision-making.

Our findings result from a long-term anthropological engagement with the research

questions and draw from a 'vertical' critical ethnography methodology and in-depth qualitative research methods. The in-depth character of this research project has also the limitation that findings cannot be generalized. At the same time, it allows for a critical rethinking of predominant policy responses. The article suggests that a diversification in the design of responses can help to conceive other possible modes of action. Short-term and long-term recurring interactive group meetings that focus on dialogue and foreground women's own articulations, for instance, may offer more adequate responses and support in concrete circumstances. Dominant formats of existing initiatives can be refined by incorporating more interaction between care givers and participants. The research findings presented here support alternate methods of intervention based on an ethics of dialogue.

Acknowledgments

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

ORCID iD

An Van Raemdonck (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4881-2529

Notes

1. UNICEF started to focus on child marriage as early as 2003 (see https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/)

2. An up-to-date overview of the registered Syrian refugees by UNHCR in the region can be found here: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria

3. UNICEF's MICS report of 2008 on the Syrian Arabic Republic offers data on children's well-being in pre-war Syria including some rare indicators of early marriage. This report states that 3.4% of women married under the age of 15 and 17.7% of women married under the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2008). It remains difficult to know to which extent displacement has caused an increase in early marriage (Higher Population Council Jordan, 2017; UNICEF, 2014).

4. In an interview with program managers on SRHR and early marriage at UNFPA Jordan, the first author was told that currently a debate is held among international agencies about the design of responses to the rise of early marriage among Syrians in Jordan. While many organizations hold awareness raising activities with a heavy emphasis on potential hazardous health risks for early married/early pregnant women, UNFPA has been promoting a different approach that recognizes the lack of strong medical evidence for this claim.

References

Ali, K. A. 2002: *Planning the Family in Egypt. New Bodies, New Selves*. The American University in Cairo Press

Archambault, C. S. 2011: Ethnographic empathy and the social context of rights: 'Rescuing' Maasai girls from early marriage. *American Anthropologist* 113(4), 632–43.

Arnfred, S. 2005: *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa*. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

Bacchi, C. L. 2009: *Analysing Policy: What's the Problem Represented to Be?* Pearson Education.

Bacchi, C. and **Goodwin, S.** 2016: *Poststructural Policy Analysis: A Guide to* Practice. Palgrave Macmillan US.

Bank, A. 2016: *Syrian Refugees in Jordan: Between Protection and Marginalisation* (GIGA Focus Nahost, 32016). GIGA.

Bernal, V. and **Grewal, I. (eds)** 2014: *Theorizing NGOs, States, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism*. Duke University Press.

Boyden, J., Pankhurst, A. and **Tafere, Y.** 2012: Child protection and harmful traditional practices: Female early marriage and genital modification in Ethiopia. *Development in Practice 22*(4), 510–22.

Chant, S. and **Sweetman, C.** 2012: Fixing women or fixing the world? 'Smart economics', efficiency approaches, and gender equality in development. *Gender & Development 20*(3), 517–29.

Cornwall, A. and **Rivas, A.-M.** 2015: From 'gender equality and 'women's empowerment' to global justice: Reclaiming a transformative agenda for gender and development. *Third World Quarterly 36*(2), 396–415.

Department of Statistics, Jordan and **ICF.** 2019: *Jordan Population and Family Health Survey 2017–18*. Author.

ESCWA. 2015: *Child marriage in humanitarian settings in the Arab region: Dynamics, challenges and policy options*. Author.

Fassin, D. 2013: A case for critical ethnography: Rethinking the early years of the AIDS epidemic in South Africa. *Social Science & Medicine* 99, 119–26.

Ferguson, J. and **Gupta, A.** 2005. Spatializing states: Toward an ethnography of neoliberal governmentality. Iin Inda, J X, editor, *Anthropologies of Modernity: Foucault, Governmentality, and Life Politics*. Blackwell, 105–31.

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. 2010: 'Ideal' refugee women and gender equality mainstreaming in the Sahrawi refugee camps: 'Good practice' for whom? *Refugee Survey Quarterly 29*(2), 64–84.

Giaquinta, B. 2017: Silenced subjectivities and the international child marriage discourse. *LOVA Journal of Gender Studies & Feminist Anthropology 38*, 66–85.

Grabska, K. 2011: Constructing 'modern gendered civilised' women and men: Gender-mainstreaming in refugee camps. *Gender & Development 19*(1), 81–93.

Grewal, I. 2005: *Transnational America*. Duke University Press.

Groes-Green, C. 2009: Health discourse, sexual slang and ideological contradictions among Mozambican youth: Implications for method. *Culture, Health & Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care 11*(6), 655–68.

Hagelund, A. 2005: Why it is bad to be kind. Educating refugees to life in the welfare state: A case study from Norway. *Social Policy & Administration 39*(6), 669–83.

Hickel, J. 2014: The 'girl effect': Liberalism, empowerment and the contradictions of development. *Third World Quarterly 35*(8), 1355–73.

Higher Population Council Jordan. 2017: *A Study on Child Marriage*. Author.

Horst, C. and **Grabska, K.** 2015: Introduction. *Social Analysis 59*(1), 1.

Inter-Agency Standing Committee. 2015: *Guidelines for integrating gender-based violence interventions in humanitarian action: Reducing risk, promoting resilience and aiding recovery*. Author.

Kouyaté, M. 2009: *UN Expert Group Meeting on good practices in legislation to address harmful practices against women*. https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/vaw_legislation_2009/Expert%20Paper%20EGMGPLHP%20_Morissanda%20Kouyate_.pdf

Lenner, K. and **Schmelter, S.** 2016: Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: Between refuge and ongoing deprivation? *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2016*. European Institute of the Mediterranean, 122–26.

MacDonald, K. 2016: Calls for educating girls in the Third World: Futurity, girls and the 'Third World woman'. *Gender, Place & Culture 23*(1), 1–17.

Miedema, E. 2019: 'Culturespeak' is everywhere: An analysis of culturalist narratives in approaches to sexuality education in Mozambique. *Comparative Education 55*(2), 220–42.

Mourtada, R., Schlecht, J. and **DeJong, J.** 2017: A qualitative study exploring child marriage practices among Syrian conflict-affected populations in Lebanon. *Conflict and Health 11*(1), 27.

Moyer, E., Burchardt, M. and **van Dijk, R.** 2013: Editorial introduction: Sexuality, intimacy and counselling—Perspectives from Africa. *Culture, Health & Sexuality 15*(sup4), S431–S439.

Nealon, J. T. 1997: The ethics of dialogue: Bakthin and Levinas. *College English 59*(2), 129–48.

Olivius, E. 2014: Displacing equality? Women's participation and humanitarian aid effectiveness in refugee camps. *Refugee Survey Quarterly 33*(3), 93–117.

Olivius, E. 2016: Constructing humanitarian selves and refugee others: Gender equality and the global governance of refugees. *International Feminist Journal of Politics 18*(2), 270–90.

Pigg, S. L. and **Adams, V.** 2005: *Sex in Development: Science, Sexuality, and Morality in Global Perspective*. Duke University Press.

Pot, H. 2019: INGO behavior change projects: Culturalism and teenage pregnancies in Malawi. *Medical Anthropology 38*, 1–15.

Save the Children. 2014: *Too Young to Wed. The Growing Problem of Child Marriage Among Syrian Girls in Jordan*. Author.

Thomas, L. M. 2003: *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction, and the State in Kenya*. University of California Press.

UN Women. 2013. *Inter-Agency Assessment: Gender-based violence and child protection among Syrian refugees in Jordan, with a focus on early marriage*. https://jordan.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2013/7/gender-based-violence-and-child-protection-among-syrian-refugees-in-jordan

UNFPA. 2019: *Interview UNFPA*. Author.

UNICEF. 2008: *Syrian Arabic Republic: Mulitple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)*. Central Bureau of Statistics, Pan-Arab Project for Family Health/League of Arab States.

UNICEF. 2014: *A study on early marriage in Jordan*. https://www.unicef.org/media/files/UNICEFJordan_EarlyMarriageStudy2014-email.pdf

Van Raemdonck, A. 2019: Paradoxes of awareness raising in development: Gender and sexual morality

in anti-FGC campaigning in Egypt. *Culture, Health & Sexuality 21*(10), 1177–91.

Watkins, S. C. and **Swidler, A.** 2013: Working misunderstandings: Donors, brokers, and villagers in Africa's AIDS industry. *Population and Development Review 38*(s1), 197–218.

WHO. 2018: *Adolescent pregnancy, Fact Sheet, 2018*. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-pregnancy

Yassour-Borochowitz, D. 2004: Reflections on the researcher–participant relationship and the ethics of dialogue. *Ethics & Behavior 14*(2), 175–86.