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Early Marriage in Palestine

‘Survey of the physical and psychological impact on girls subject to early marriage’
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The practice of early marriage in the Arab world has been on the decline since the 1970s, thanks to general global changes that are impacting on the Middle East – higher education levels, women’s participation in the labor force, and the shifting economic and social empowerment of women. It is a common misconception that early marriage is driven by social norms or religious beliefs; however one of the main drivers is economic. The increasing absolute poverty has caused a spike in early marriage levels in some parts of the Middle East region, including Palestine. The legal age for marriage in the Palestinian territories is 18 years, (up from 14 years); however, the law is regularly ignored in place of Sharia law. There are two different versions of Sharia law that are currently practiced in Palestine – in the West Bank, the Jordanian example is followed, whereby the minimum age of marriage for girls is 15 and boys 16, while in Gaza, Egyptian law is followed, and the ages are 16 and 17 for girls and boys respectively.

Early Marriage patterns in Palestine

A number of studies conducted over the past few years have repeatedly shown that marriage patterns in Palestine are unique compared with other countries in the region.  

While other countries in the Middle East such as Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon continue to see an increase in the age of women when first married, early marriage in Palestine is relatively high, with about one in ten Palestinian women between the ages of 15 and 19 years marrying. Some reports speculate that this may be due to the religious and cultural norms of Arab society or the second Intifada. However, the most recent surveys suggest that the very difficult living conditions Palestinians face due to the occupation - mobility restrictions, increasing unemployment, and high poverty levels - are leading to communities establishing coping strategies to deal with the reality, and this includes marry daughters young to manage household poverty.

In many western countries the decisions around marriage are individual; however in Arab society, it is very much a family decision, with much emphasis placed on the wishes of the parents. If the family is suffering from difficult financial circumstances and cannot afford, for example, to educate their daughters, then it is much easier to begin the marriage process. Many young girls will consent to marriage in order to escape poverty and a difficult home life.

“**Marrying off their daughters is a coping mechanism for some families regardless of what the law says. Families with very limited financial sources may resort to several means of forging their daughters actual age.**”

Yara Jarallah, Birzeit University, Palestine

Once married, these young girls are placed in the precarious position of having to deal with the complexities of married life and child-bearing with very little experience to rely on. Some of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy occur in Mauritania, Yemen and Palestine, where one in every 10 women ages 15 to 19 years gives birth every year that she is part of that age group\(^3\) - an ominous statistic for Palestine. The risks surrounding early pregnancy and child birth are well documented, and combined with other wide-ranging health implications, the young women of Palestine experience (see table below) the work of medical organisations such as Médecins du Monde is imperative.

### Facts at a glance on Women in Palestine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area:</th>
<th>Percentage/Figure:</th>
<th>Year of data collection:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>89.8%</td>
<td>2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage of women in labor force</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date of women’s suffrage</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Median age of marriage</td>
<td>18 years</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of female headed households</td>
<td>9.5% (of those 73% live in extreme poverty)</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total fertility</td>
<td>4.6 births per woman</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of adolescent girls suffering from malnutrition, anemia with psychological stress</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
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Health implications of Early Marriage

There are several wide-ranging negative health impacts that arise as a result of early marriage which Médecins du Monde is trying to prevent through its early marriage workshops. Very little discussion has taken place about the health and social repercussions of early marriage, particularly on girls. Early marriage takes place during adolescence, and adolescence is one of the most important formative stages of a person’s development during which personality, individual identity and confidence is formed. Early marriage can be a strong inhibitor of development, and the consequences include: increased risk of violence; maltreatment; marriage problems and divorce; deprivation of the right to receive family care during adolescence; lack of protection and other civil rights, in addition to a deepening discrimination against girls and women.

As part of its overall strategy in Palestine to ‘reinforce access to psycho-medical and psychosocial support for the population of the Nablus governorate’, MdM aims to increase the levels of general wellbeing amongst the Palestinian community. This requires the ongoing dedication of the MdM field staff and volunteers to observe the physical and mental health levels of the community through regular surveys, and to determine the best approach to healthcare. This also involves making strategic recommendations to its local partners and health care services to ensure the best possible care is delivered to the community.

The MdM awareness sessions were designed following the delivery of a needs assessment which indicated that the health and wellbeing of girls in and around Nablus was being negatively impacted by the practice of early marriage. MdM gathered wide-ranging opinions on the issue of early marriage by working closely with various religious, social and scientific experts from the West Bank and An-Najah University in Nablus that specialized in gender issues. This ensured that the awareness sessions sensitively handled the issue of early marriage, and contained wide-ranging expert local advice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative outcomes observed due to early marriage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Denial of childhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lower levels of education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early child-bearing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poorer reproductive health</td>
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<tr>
<td>High fertility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher maternal and infant mortality</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Overall poorer health and well-being
Higher household poverty

“One of the major impacts of early marriage on young girls is the denial of their childhood and adolescence. This loss of childhood, the forced sexual relations and the denial of freedom and personal development have significant psychosocial and emotional consequences on girls, with one possible outcome being vulnerability to physical harm and violence.”

Psycho-social specialist, Dr. Maisa Alawneh

“There are so many cases of domestic violence due to early marriage. The couples lack of maturity to deal with the pressures of being married. One example I remember is of a girl who was married at 14 to a man 30 years of age. From the very first day he hit her. She was terrified and as a result went to her mother-in-law crying and asking for help. Her mother-in-law told her that it was ‘normal’ in marriage for women to be hit by their husbands. So she continued to live with this violence and slowly her mental health deteriorated. She tried to continue with her studies, but this suffered and she then fell into a depression. She didn’t trust anyone, and began to isolate herself. She also stopped talking to her parents, and that’s when they knew something was terribly wrong. Her parents found out she was being hit and they came and took her from her husband’s house.

When I started having sessions with her I told her that we need to rebuild her self esteem, and that she needs to start to express what she feels inside. I also told her it was her decision if she decided to go back to her husband, that no one could force her. So she left her husband and returned to her studies and eventually married again. This is one of the happy endings, but this girl went through a terrible experience.”

Sociologist, Sumaya Safidi, MdM Early Marriage Workshop trainer

Work of Médecins du Monde on Early Marriage

With general awareness of the negative impact of early marriage being low in Palestine, there is extensive scope to undertake education workshops or awareness sessions targeting both parents and youth.

In conjunction with local partners and the community in the Palestinian territories, and with support from the European Commission Humanitarian Aid & Civil Protection Office (ECHO), Médecins du Monde launched a series of 10 workshops in five villages around the city of Nablus in December 2010. Young people in Burin, Madama, Asira, Urif and Einabus were invited to attend early
marriage workshops in the local Primary Health Care Centre (PHCC) in their village, with either their mother or father.

The workshops are mixed and the parents are encouraged to participate. This unique approach ensures that both genders are able to interact with, and understand one another, on this very important issue. Topics that are covered include the physiological impact of early marriage, religion, and the psychosocial effects. To date, Médecins du Monde has reached over 320 young people and their parents in and around Nablus through the following workshops:

- One central workshop for five villages held in Madama village in June 2010 with 85 attendees;
- One central workshop for five villages around Nablus, with 150 women and 40 men attendees;
- One workshop in Urif PHCC, attendees were 35 females; and
- 1 workshop in Asira village, attendees were 17 females.

“Parents choose to marry their daughters early for a number of reasons. They may think that early marriage offers protection for their daughter from the dangers of sexual assault; or there are many poor families around Nablus and they may see their daughter as an economic burden. Therefore, it may be a necessary survival strategy for the family, to marry her off. Whatever the reason may be, this can have a negative impact on the girl’s development and MdM is trying to guard against this by running these workshops to increase awareness in the community.”

Médecins du Monde Field Coordinator for the West Bank, Salah Daraghmeh.

The last survey undertaken in the Palestinian territories\(^4\) shows that approximately 20 per cent of marriages involved young people aged between 15-19 years old, and of that, over 18 per cent were girls. In two percent of cases, girls younger than 15 years were married.

Médecins du Monde is also addressing the issue of early marriage and violence against women in the Palestinian community by arranging two types of interactive sessions: Women’s Speaking Sessions, and Madafas or cafes for men. These separate sessions encourage community members to discuss openly the issue of gender-based violence in a culturally appropriate forum.

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\(^4\) Palestinian Bureau of Statistics 2004

Local Palestinian Organizations fight the negative phenomenon of early marriage
Along with the early marriage workshops being delivered by Médecins du Monde-France in conjunction with its partners in the West Bank – The Centre for Women’s Studies, the Women’s Affairs Centre, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education & Higher Education, the Union of Health Care Committees and Friends of Life, many local Palestinian NGOs are ensuring programmes are being run to educate young people about the impact of early marriages and to advocate for changes to the law. For example, the Society of Women for the Welfare of Young People has held a number of symposia over the years in northern West Bank on the issue of early marriage. The initiative sought to inform young people on the importance of getting a good education and experiencing the ‘childhood years’ prior to marriage. Society Violence Foundation, also based in the West Bank, recently held a public meeting to discuss what they referred to as the “worrying phenomenon of early marriage that must be addressed.”

Fatima, 67 year-old MdM beneficiary from Einabus

“I was 15 years old when I was married, this was normal for us. I gave birth to seven children and I had one abortion. I am lucky in that I did not suffer form major health problems after having so many children at such an early age, but I know many women who have. Because of what I experienced I swore that I would educate all my daughters, and that they would not marry young. Both my girls finished their studies and married at 21 and 22 years of age. My life was not easy, being married and having babies so young, and trying to work out if I was a girl or a women…It was confusing sometimes. But I think there was love between me and my husband and this helped.

I am so happy that Médecins du Monde is running these early marriage workshops in our village, because the girls and the parents need to understand what can happen if you marry early. These days' young girls need a better education if they are going to get a job and help their families. Our lives here under occupation are very difficult and we need to do everything we can to help our young people to have a chance in the future. Our girls are smart, but I know if money because a problem, families think they have no choice but to marry off their girls...”

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