



The girl refugee

Bride business and Palestinian-Syrian mothers on love, education and stateless struggles

Henriette Johansen

MIDDLE EAST M●NITOR

The Middle East Monitor is a not-for-profit policy research institute that provides research, information and analyses of primarily the Palestine-Israel conflict. It also provides briefings on other Middle East issues. Its outputs are made available for use by journalists, academics and politicians with an interest in the Middle East and North Africa region.

MEMO aims to influence policy and the public agenda from the perspective of social justice, human rights and international law. This is essential to obtain equality, security and social justice across the region, especially in Palestine.

Title: *The girl refugee: Bride business and Palestinian-Syrian mothers on love, education and stateless struggles*

Cover Image: *Basmeh wa Zeitooneh's women's workshop and shelter, Beirut*

First Published: May 2014

Copyright © Middle East Monitor

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior permission of the copyright owner.

This report is available to download free of charge on the Middle East Monitor Website: www.middleeastmonitor.com



MEMO Publishers
419-421 Crown House
North Circular Road
London, NW10 7PN

t: +44 (0)20 8838 0231
f: +44 (0)20 8838 0705
e: info@memopublishers.com
w: www.memopublishers.com

The girl refugee

Bride business and Palestinian-Syrian mothers on love, education and stateless struggles

Henriette Johansen

The girl refugee

Bride business and Palestinian-Syrian mothers on love, education and stateless struggles

Last week, Facebook banned “Syrian refugees for marriage”, a page that had had numerous complaints about its abusive message. Promoting the capitalisation of vulnerable Syrian refugee girls and their desperate families, such online gateways for contracted, candid sexual exploitation and trafficking of very young girls have led to tragic consequences. As the situation of Syrian refugees worsens, and with little optimism for the future, families are in some cases forced to accept “offers” in the hope that they will secure futures for their daughters. “She agreed to it so she could help her family,” said one mother in Beirut’s Shatila refugee camp, “but ever since she went to Jordan, she calls her mother every day, crying, that she hates it there.”

One story of many, the prospect of these liaisons prompts many discussions amongst the mothers in the camp. “The girls are not respected as ‘wives’,” they say. Instead numerous reports and interviews have detailed their new lives as servants and, in most cases, sex slaves. The corrupt deal is kicked off through a Facebook page providing photos of young Syrian women under the pretext of “helping” those who are described as “financially well-off Arab men” to marry Syrian refugee women. Drastically volatile, managed by anonymous administrators, this page offers different kinds of legal and secret marriages, and then publish lists



source: Daily Star the banned page of “Syrian refugees for marriage”

of the names of the refugees and their places of residence.

I spoke to Hilary Margolis, the Human Rights Watch researcher for women's rights in Syria, who condemned activity such as these Facebook pages as an "unfortunate reflection of the very real vulnerabilities of female refugees" who fled Syria, and the fact that "intermediaries – whether in person or via the internet – will attempt to take advantage of such vulnerability." Aside from providing increased protection to the Syrian war's most vulnerable victims, she suggested that governments should target any intermediaries who attempt to exploit refugees. "We all need to ensure that they are investigated properly and held accountable," she insisted.

To gain more "legitimacy", the latest substitute Facebook page promotes itself through religion. It has a verse from the Qur'an as a background photo and claims that, "once the real work has started, sheikhs will be involved in contacting the potential grooms for coordination." A similar page under the same title, with unidentified administrators, gained over 6,000 likes in less than 24 hours.

Learning how to dodge proposals

I spent a day with the women of the Syrian NGO Basmeh wa Zeitooneh's women's workshop and shelter in Shatila in Beirut, in order to decipher this issue of early marriage from their point of view. Yarah, a Palestinian-Syrian mother of three, described her situation to me: "It is difficult to be both the mother and the father at once," she explained, smiling modestly; her husband is missing in Syria. Their neighbours in the infamous Yarmouk camp near Damascus assume that he has been killed, but a thorough investigation is impossible.

Before leaving Syria, Yarah would never have considered accepting a marriage proposal for her teenage daughter, but in their current circumstances she is "not so against it". Her uncles and brothers have pushed for this, as it could relieve the family of some responsibility. "We talk a lot about this in the women's

workshop,” she confided. This particular morning, one of the women’s daughters gave birth at the age of 13; “Many of us had a problem with this,” she argued. The new mother’s extremely young age and the fact that she is an only child really startled the other women. If you are an only child, how big a burden could you be for the family? The women had no problem with the fact that she is married at thirteen, but rather with the bodily stress that she’s had to go through at such a young age.

Another woman let her daughter marry a Jordanian man at the age of 13 through an “agency” like the “Syrian refugees for marriage” page, about which many of them had been warned. “She calls her mother every day and cries,” she told me.

Early marriage is only an option for Yarah and her daughter if the man is “good”. That is, if he has a good family, manners and job, and is religious. Although such a man could offer their girl a “better life”, Yarah emphasised that she would like to spend more time with her little girl before getting her married; she thinks that it is still too early. A proposal has already been assessed but declined by Yarah, against her uncle’s will. “In our generation, love was not an option; let them love,” she said with a warm smile.

In the rural areas in Syria, the average age for a girl to be married is 14, Yarah told me, whereas in Damascus it’s around 20. As she is from Damascus and her husband (who is her cousin) is from the countryside, they married later, at the age of 20. “Love was not there, but it grew.” She told me how, despite the pressure from the men in the family, “I can help her; in secret I can help her.”

Amina, a mother of six, wanted a traditional marriage for her children, with a relative or neighbour suggesting a girl to a young man, upon which he decides to propose. Her daughter is aged 23 and a fashion designer. Educated in Syria, she agreed that “if there is an ‘appropriate groom’” she can go back where her brother lives. At the moment, they are offered refugee status in Sweden and Germany, but her daughter would prefer to be secured by marriage and then go back to Yarmouk.

When Amina's son proposed, it was his decision completely, even though the girl was selected by Amina, according to her standards. They now live in Yarmouk where he owns a patisserie but because of the conditions there, he has had to close it down.

Education

As with many other refugee families, Yarah is now supporting her three children with the help of her brothers and uncles in order to survive; top priority is their education. Her eldest daughter is very keen and successful in school, but they only just managed to find a place in a more or less affordable public school after months of waiting.

Yarah's daughter is currently going through her teenage years and Mum is desperately trying to make her feel like the others with the little money that they have. "Alhamdulillah, my daughter understands and does not want me to worry."

Interestingly, in her view, her son has fewer options than her daughters, as she sees them working harder in school. The son prefers to quit education soon to support his family and will probably end up less well educated than his female siblings, she tells me. The same is true of Amina's sons. The fact that the sons in both families are eager to step into the labour market at an early age relieves them of having to marry their girls too early. This strategy is very agreeable to the women, as it also secures the girls their education.

One of Amina's two sons is a carpenter while the other is a patisserie chef; the girls have degrees in international law, fashion design and English literature. One of them had to leave her job, as the Lebanese government refused to renew her Palestinian visa, which her employers required.

"It is very hard, but we are trying," Yarah said self-effacingly as we touched upon the difficult conditions and inbuilt bias against Palestinians in Lebanon. With the predicted estimate of ten years of displacement for Syrians and their current restricted renewal of

visas and access for any new Palestinian-Syrian refugees at the Lebanese border, the government's refusal to grant Palestinians equal rights is now confirming the state of limbo in which they find themselves, with no hopes for the future.

Lebanon has a 2003 Memorandum of Understanding with the UNHCR that only allows registered refugees to obtain a temporary circulation permit for up to 12 months, during which time the UN commission is supposed to resettle the individual. This system is only available to non-Palestinians. As in Jordan, Palestinians are the exclusive responsibility of UNRWA and what the agency can provide; they are excluded from UNHCR assistance. Palestinians without valid permits are getting detained and removed, although the numbers are hard to determine, as UNRWA has not had much success in intervening in, or monitoring, those cases.

Even in Syria, the seemingly pro-Palestinian (Hamas - not Fatah, their supporters have been assaulted for years) government, receives help happily from Lebanese Hezbollah fighters, whilst using the Palestinian cause to improve their support. It recently started to check aid distribution points in Yarmouk camp by asking for passports, in order to divide Syrians from the Palestinians. Amina's son was denied food recently because of his Palestinian background. This entrapment of Palestinians also pushes internally-displaced Syrian families to be more accepting of foreign marriage proposals.

Socio-economic and rights constraints sometimes drive families to accept such marriage offers, with the prospect of remedying their daughters' conditions abroad under the patronage of a "husband". While the women in the camp try to dodge proposals, they are encouraging their daughters to believe that love, education and healthy traditional marriage remains an option, even under their most pressing of circumstances.

Please note: All names used in this report are pseudonyms in order to protect the interviewees' identities.

MEMO ●
MIDDLE EAST MONITOR
Creating New Perspectives

middleeastmonitor.com