

Report about Child marriage

➤ Background:

Early marriage is one of the major violations of human and child rights and a barrier to gender equality. This problem has been aggravated by the influx of Syrian refugees who entered Lebanon since Mid-2011. According to UNICEF Baseline Survey published in 2016 on Lebanon, “the highest percentage of women married or in union between the age of 15 and 19 can be found among Syrian Refugees at 27 percent, followed by Palestinian Refugees from Syria at 13 percent, and four percent for both Lebanese Women and Palestinian Refugees. Having the highest proportion of refugees per capita in the world, Lebanon continues to suffer from a prolonged economic depression which is reeling from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of the massive August 2020 Beirut Port explosions, as well as persistent political instability. Faced with major inflation and rising unemployment, people are finding it increasingly difficult to access basic services. Thus, Children across Lebanon are the worst hit where their health and safety are at risk and their very future is at stake.

A growing number of parents are finding it impossible to provide for their children. Having exhausted all other options, families are taking desperate measures to survive, including sending their children to work, marrying off their young girls to minimize the expenses, skipping meals and incurring debt they can't afford. As per Johanna Eriksson, who heads UNICEF's Child Protection Program in Lebanon; “based on UNICEF's observations, child marriage is increasing as a result of the difficult economic circumstances”.

Moreover, the cultural beliefs and norms that are related to marriage in Lebanon discriminate between girl, boys, men and women. This can be seen in the gender roles that identify girls and women as wives and mothers responsible for the family and boys and men as husbands and fathers responsible for the economic share of the family. This deprives girls and women from their basic education, economic independence and political participation at a larger scale.

Furthermore, the cultural norms that govern chastity and purity are mainly confined to girls and women. For instance, women and girls, victims of sexual assaults, notably rape, are forced to get married to their perpetrators to preserve the honor of the family regardless of the endless harm caused by the violence itself.

In terms of laws, Lebanon's personal status laws - and the religious courts that apply them – clearly discriminate against women. There is no national law on the minimum age of marriage, divorce laws are unequal for men and women, and women are discriminated against children's custody and guardianship decisions. This contributes to the women's social and economic marginalization and their ability to be protected from the gender-based violence.

Besides, girls, victims of early marriage do not have full access to assets or income in comparison to adults who had the chance to pursue their education and have a certain financial independency. Lebanon does not recognize marital property. In case of divorce, even if a woman worked and contributed to

wellbeing or the belongings of her family, she has no right to claim her participations especially because, socially, husbands are the legal owners of assets and commodities in the family.

Furthermore, the Lebanese constitution states that all citizens are equal. However, women are deprived from major civil rights such as passing on the nationalities to their descendants. Consequently, their non-national children risk access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and civil rights. In Lebanon, many laws and codes that have economic impact such as the Labor Law, the Social Security law, the inheritance code, the laws of the civil servants, still have dispositions discriminating against women.

Within the above indicated context, there is a vital need for NGOs and CSOs to work on improving women's rights and status through raising the awareness of the public on women's rights in the aim of changing behaviors, attitudes and practices. Besides, efforts must be invested at the level of decision makers to provide the necessary legal framework that protect women from all types of discrimination, deprivation and violence and ensure their rights are equally enjoyed as men.

Within this framework, RDFL is working on addressing the issue of early marriage in Lebanon since 2017 and drafted a law on child marriage. In addition, RDFL worked on lobbying for the discussion of the law at the parliament through mobilizing a coalition of NGOs and stakeholders that was formed for this purpose. Moreover, RDFL launched several online and offline campaign and conducted intensive meetings with different political parties and parliament members to support the cause and persuade the decision makers to adopt and recognize the importance of passing the law on child marriage

➤ **Justification:**

Child marriage robs girls of their childhood and threatens their lives and health. Girls who marry before 18 are more likely to experience domestic violence and less likely to remain in school. They have worse economic and health outcomes than their unmarried peers, which are eventually passed down to their own children, further straining a country's capacity to provide quality health and education services.

Child brides often become pregnant during adolescence, when the risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth increases – for themselves and their infants. The practice can also isolate girls from family and friends and exclude them from participating in their communities, taking a heavy toll on their physical and psychological well-being.

Within this framework, and since its establishment in 1976, the Lebanese Democratic Women's Gathering- RDFL has worked extensively on the issue of child marriage through raising the awareness of communities all over Lebanon and providing legal and psychological support for women survivors of child marriage and other forms of sexual violence. Over the past two years, RDFL organized more than 100 awareness raising sessions, roundtables, focus groups, trainings and discussions about different issues related to GBV and sexual violence against women. We coordinated these events with various

stakeholders mainly municipalities, CSOs, youth and women groups, political parties, trade unions, ministries, official bodies, universities and schools. The main outputs of these events were action plans, drafting recommendations, influencing the change of attitudes and practices, supporting survivors of violence and tailoring comprehensive strategies that leads to a more protective society against the risks of early marriage.

Since 2015, RDFL focused on providing a legal framework that will advance the issue of child marriage at the Lebanese parliament.

In December 2015, RDFL formed a legal committee to draft a law on child marriage. The committee took into consideration the draft law prepared by the National Commission for Lebanese Women and aimed to fill out the main gaps in the proposed law. The committee ensured that the proposed draft law is developed in line with international conventions and Lebanon's international obligations in particular the Convention on the Rights of the Child, CEDAW, and International Bill of Human Rights.

In August 2016, the committee reviewed and finalized the proposed draft law which consisted of five articles that define the minimum age for marriage in Lebanon where article 1 stipulates that a "child" refers to any boy or girl under the age of 18, and therefore "the age of marriage in Lebanese territory [must be] 18. The draft law entitled "**Protecting Children from Early Marriage**" presented to the Lebanese Cabinet on the 28th of March 2017 after its adoption by one of its main members.

Additionally, RDFL worked on building a coalition to support the advocacy work in the aim of passing the law for protecting children from early marriage. More than 150 human and children's rights entities and civil organizations joined the coalition and engaged in setting up the coalition document. Moreover, RDFL plans to form a coalition of journalists and Lebanese artists who will work to raise the awareness and sensitize the general public on the issue.

RDFL has networked with all stakeholders working on the issue of child marriage including governmental bodies, INGOs and national organizations.

RDFL has launched national media campaign aiming to support the advocacy efforts on child marriage. Since the launch of the NotBefore18 campaign in 2017, RDFL has implemented more than 4 continuous campaigns, an opinion poll on the Lebanese Society Stand from Early Marriage, Awareness mobile vans, conferences, and school contests on child marriage in order to push towards the ratification of the law.