POPULARITY OF CHILD MARRIAGES AMONGST THE AFGHAN COMMUNITY IN AUSTRIA

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Study on
the popularity of child marriages amongst
the Afghan Community in Austria

Author
Dr. Ourania Roditi

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Address
Möllwaldplatz 5/3, 1040 Vienna
Tel: +43/1/713 35 94
office@vidc.org
www.vidc.org

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Mag.ª Magda Seewald

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Abstract

In the poor, rural areas in Afghanistan, the tradition of child marriage persists. In fact, child slavery and debt bondage practices are flourishing, but are often disguised as ‘marriage’, since labour or family affairs do not require state intervention. Poverty, conflict and tradition reinforce these practices; religious leaders further encourage them by steadily opposing the idea of a higher, legal minimum age of marriage for girls as contrary to the Islamic law.

Due to the prolonged conflict in Afghanistan, which has resulted in the near total destruction of the country, many of these girls have relocated to Austria and encountered a number of challenges: a number of households are now led by females, who sometimes have had children at a very young age, lack education, a fixed income and adequate support. Almost all of them have been forced to marry at a very young age, have experienced violence and displacement, have seen loved ones die and tortured and are now struggling to understand and adapt to their new environment. These women suffer from severe psychological and emotional disorders because of their prolonged exposure to conflict, violence and displacement. Further, many of them live completely isolated, they have no contact with the outside world and they are constantly subjected to physical and psychological violence. Afghan women in Austria are in desperate need of emotional, social and psychological support, education, employment opportunities and awareness raising about their rights and the protection from discrimination that the Austrian legal system offers. They need to be empowered in order to think critically and make well-informed choices. This is the only path for a successful and long-term integration.

Keywords: Afghanistan, child marriage, empowerment, integration
1. Introduction

War-related stress and the prevailing social traditions in their home country have had a negative impact on the psychological well-being of all refugees who have resettled in Europe, men and women alike. In particular, the Afghans, are known to have customs and social traditions quite different from those of the host country. Since masculinity and tribal traditions dominate the collective thinking of the Afghan society, the Afghan women who live in Austria, are compelled to experience the clash between their own cultural capital and the mentality of the Austrian society. The encounter of these traditions can lead to an uneasy coexistence manifested in violent behavioral reactions.

This study will introduce the findings of a thorough research on traumatized women’s managing ability with forced displacement, migration and resettlement. These findings were primarily obtained through contacts, mainly, in Vienna and Afghanistan. In Austria, the refugee percentage of the population is steadily growing. Hence, policy makers, social researchers and service providers, such as those working in therapy, social work etc., are interested in understanding and addressing the social concerns and experiences of refugee women. These women are rightfully considered a hard-to-reach group, since their exposure to everyday life is minimal and their chances of integration in the job market almost non-existent. As a result, there is a growing need to investigate their experiences, listen to their stories and reach out to them.

Based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with refugee women who live in the country, this study looks into the experiences of these refugee women who got married at a very young age and then resettle in Austria. Generally speaking, these women represent one of the hardest-to-reach, isolated groups with slim prospects for full integration into the mainstream society. Furthermore, this topic was chosen not only because of its relevance in an Afghan context, but also because it represents one of the most severe forms of human rights violations against women. Afghanistan, sadly represents one of the most ‘stereotypical’ examples in that respect, being cited by everybody when discussing child marriages. For the needs of this particular study, I made use of 2 focus groups: one with married Afghan refugee women and the second one with widowed refugee Afghan women. In each group, up to 14-15 women, aged between 18 and 40 years old, originally joined, however, not all of them remained or agreed to participate to the discussions. Out of the 23 women who eventually agreed to participate to this research study, 20 of them had been married at a very young age. It was originally anticipated to research and include in this study cases of ‘temporary’ marriages as well. The idea was however quickly dismissed, since it was soon established that this tradition is rare among the Afghans and mostly prevalent in Iran and parts of Iraq. Furthermore, the number of women interviewed was also lower than

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1 ‘Temporary’ or ‘pleasure’ marriage is an Islamic tradition where a man and an unmarried woman are united for a very limited period of time; sometimes even for as little as half an hour. It is viewed by many as euphemism for prostitution. It usually consists of a written or verbal contract where both parties agree upon the conditions and time of their ‘marriage’.
expected. Many of the women contacted hesitated to come forward and despite the guaranteed anonymity, they refused to share their stories.

Further, this study follows these women’s efforts to integrate through their participation in various social realms, including but not limited to, the establishment of emotional relations with family, peer groups, school and community life. It also pinpoints the institutional and contextual aspects of the country that molded their migration experience, settlement and defined their sense of belonging and their social inclusion experience. Since all women contacted and interviewed for the needs of this study come from Afghanistan, it is worth mentioning at this point, that Afghanistan is perhaps one of the very few countries where women’s rights and their general standing in the society has always been - prior and following the fall of the Taliban - highly politicized (Abirafeh, 2006: 1-13). Throughout the country’s history and attempt at modernization, not only have women’s rights stood at the center of the debate, but they have also been used to exemplify the clash between Western civilization and traditional Afghan values.

This study discloses a complex picture of youth migration, settlement, and social inclusion in Austria, as Afghan women are active social actors in relation to their unique migration experiences and biographies and they attempt to make a life for themselves and their family. However, they fashion this new life within the context of complex institutionally structured supportive networks and constraints. In the migration and settlement processes, refugees face interchangeably opportunities, restrictions, inclusions, exclusions, openings, and barriers. In addition to those, Afghan refugee women, also carry the psychological and emotional scars that their exposure to the requirements of a marriage at a very young age and often to a considerably older and abusive husband, entails. These experiences are negatively charged due to their isolation and their perceived hopelessness of a bleak future.

Further, this study attempts to provide a brief and concise perspective of the institution of marriage in Afghanistan, the social and economic context and traditional values that shape its evolution. Last but not least, this study is also examining the current status of Afghan refugee women in Austria and explores the long-term ramifications that early marriages have on their possibilities for social advancement and integration.

Concluding and as it will be subsequently debated, it is of paramount importance to openly acknowledge that child and forced marriage should not be seen, justified or tolerated through the prism of cultural belonging, but they should be outright recognized as a form of Violence against Women and as such, dealt accordingly by the competent laws. This research will conclude through a succession of logical steps that the only way forward is the empowerment of the women, through a number of concrete measures and policies aiming at developing their critical thinking and their decision-making capacities.
2. The country and its people

During an international conference on child marriages, which took place at the premises of Sigmund Feud University in Vienna on 4 March 2019, the Ambassador of Afghanistan to Austria, her Excellency, Mrs. Khojesta Fana Ebrahimkhel, provided a statement, where she emphasized that the illegal, yet, widespread tradition of child marriages in Afghanistan is mainly driven by gender inequality, a belief that somehow girls are inferior to boys, low levels of education, displacement, family practices, limited awareness and traditional Pashtun practices.

When it comes to our own perceptions about Afghanistan, the image that most Westerners have about the country, is usually influenced by buzz words such as “culture of impunity” or “culture of female suppression”. Media outlets highly affect the way we view and perceive this country: it is hard to deny that for most of us the first image that comes to mind about Afghanistan is the burqa clad Afghan women or the heavily armed, bearded Afghan men. Yet, Afghan culture is more of a fusion of cultures and it is much more than this oversimplifying, generic view. The Afghan culture also includes notions and deep rooted concepts, such as honour, respect, hospitality and family. It is therefore critical to deconstruct the different notions about Afghan culture; to examine the link between cultural practices, social norms and values and other factors that leave their imprint on them, such as the education system or the impact of seven decades long of violence, war and destruction. Given this context, child and forced marriages cannot solely be perceived as typical traits of a patriarchal culture, but must also be seen in the light of other factors such as code of honour, poverty and power relations in the society.

Research reports as provided by women organizations, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and the Ministry of Women’s Affairs show that more than 50% of the marriages take place before the girls reach 16 years of age. The Human Rights Commission reported last year that around 80% of the marriages in the rural areas and districts are amongst children, in which at least the girl is below 16 years of age. The media have also reported cases of marriages between children, as young as 2-3 years, especially in camps where Internally Displaced People live or in areas where there is an ongoing conflict. There is a direct correlation between child marriage and conflict in Afghanistan. Analysis of the results and the reports received indicate that families are genuinely worried for their children’s safety. At the same time, the fear of local warlords raping young girls force the families to marry them at a very young age as a means of protection. Further research shows that child marriages are also connected to economic returns for the families. When girls marry at a young age, families get higher marriage dowry. This is a by-product of scarce employment opportunities for the largest part of the population and the impact of conflict on people’s lives.

The collection of personal narratives employed for the needs of the current research touches upon the experiences and stories collected from different parts of Afghanistan on child marriages that are the direct outcome of local conflicts, the power abuse of local powerful warlords and local
gunmen. Although the question of early marriage has always been a cause of debate in Afghanistan, in recent years, it has received more attention from the government, which in 2016, launched the National Action Plan to eliminate Early and Child Marriage. Numerous UN agencies, as well as the NGO community, have conducted research into its causes and what can be done to prevent it, or at best reduce it.

Furthermore, the international community involved in Afghanistan has also changed its approach when devising and implementing programmes aimed at combatting early and forced marriage. It is increasingly focusing on developing multi-sectoral programmes aiming at addressing discrepancies in the legal framework, challenges at the community and local levels, as well as schooling and economic incentive opportunities. These interventions have been generally considered the most efficient way to holistically combat a deeply entrenched tradition, such as child marriages. Yet, there are still many girls and women who are forced to marry at a very young age and are subjected to constant abuse and violation of some of their most fundamental human rights.

At this point, what is of paramount importance, is to reiterate that the practice of child marriage is above all a violation of human rights. Every day, girls are forced to leave their families, marry against their will, endure sexual and physical abuse and bear children, while still in childhood themselves. This practice is driven by poverty, deeply embedded cultural traditions, and pervasive discrimination against girls. According to some human rights experts, it is tantamount to sexual slavery. The fact that this ancient practice is, nowadays, widespread in many parts of the world is alarming: estimates show that nearly five million girls are married under the age of fifteen every year, and some are as young as eight or nine years old.

3. Context of study

In a recent study undertaken by UNICEF, it is suggested that a great number of Afghan families are fully aware of the negative impact that child marriage has on the girl, especially with regards to her maternal health and that of her future children. Yet, this acknowledgement rarely leads to a different course of action. As a result, the ramifications on the physical well-being, the emotional stability and psychological state of the affected women are colossal. In fact, the psychological impact of early and forced marriages on women will be a recurrent topic during the current study. In other words, I will, intentionally, revisit the trauma that these women have endured in different chapters, in order to highlight the extent of the problem and underscore their plea and urgent need for psychological support and rehabilitation.

Many of the girls and women who flee child marriage in Afghanistan or seek to find a legal solution to the constant abuse from their husbands and/or their in-laws, not only do they suffer from years of poor mental health, but are further victimised by the prevailing unwritten laws of not publicly
reporting the abuse. At the same time, the very same agencies which are supposed to protect them, such as the social services, the police and the judicial system, often end up re-traumatising them by ignoring and neglecting their needs. The result is a complete desperation, which no doubt, leads to further permanent psychological harm.

As already mentioned, child marriage is a tradition deeply rooted in the Afghan culture. Women make up for more than 52% of the total population in Afghanistan; it is roughly estimated that half of them have been married at a very young age. Poverty is one of the main factors fueling this surge in child marriages. According to statistics provided by the government of Afghanistan 42% of the entire population of Afghanistan live below the poverty line, another 20% live just above the poverty line and are highly vulnerable to fall into poverty. In a poor country like Afghanistan girls are not only married at a very young age, but they are also sold, exchanged, and given to other families to settle family debts, disputes, or to gain higher status among the communities.

Regarding the international legal framework, Afghanistan has committed to eliminate child, early and forced marriage by the year 2030 in line with the Millennium Development Goals, which anticipate countries to ‘eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations’. The target the country has set is to reduce by 10% the number of girls who marry before the legal age. Furthermore, Afghanistan backed both in 2013 and 2014 the United Nations General Assembly Resolutions on child, early and forced marriage. It has also signed both the 1994 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 2003 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. Further, Afghanistan’s legal framework clearly stipulates that marriage for girls under the age of 16 and for boys under the age of 18 is illegal. Section 6.1 of the Afghan civil code also states that all marriages should be registered, however, hardly any mechanisms exists in order to ensure that this actually happens.

What is actually happening is that child marriage is defined and interpreted by potentially overlapping and contradictory sets of laws deriving from international obligations, the national/civil law and religious and the customary laws. Customary law in Afghanistan, like everywhere else, is based on a common cultural and ethical code that generates binding rules on its members. Communities use this code to resolve disputes, evaluate actions for praise or blame, and to impose sanctions against violators of local norms. While systems of customary law are found universally throughout rural Afghanistan, their specifics vary widely and often idiosyncratically. In addition, far from being timeless and unchanging, they are subject to a great deal of manipulation and internal contest. First of all, these laws are normally issued by men and tend to be discriminatory against women. Furthermore, a number of local practices complicate the landscape of applied legal and cultural systems throughout the country. For example, ‘Baad’, a pre-Islamic method of settlement and compensation whereby a female from the criminal's family is given to the victim's family as a servant or a bride. It is still practiced in certain areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan,
mainly among the Kochis. ‘Badal’ (revenge) is the means of enforcement by which an individual seeks personal justice for wrongs done against him or his kin group.

In fact, how much the legal jurisprudence is actually respected depends on the geographical location, while decisions, which are often made at the community or individual levels on moral or legal grounds may differ from one place to another. Since the customary laws vary from region to region and are subjected to the interpretations by local leaders, certain of the decisions they dictate often contradict or contravene the requirements as elaborated in the national law or even clash with the Sharia Law. Customary law tends to be ad hoc, and since it is not defined in written form, but it is subjected to interpretation, the permissible age to get married is loosely defined and varies significantly. At the same time, customary law may also include elements of the official, state law or the Sharia law. This very complicated state of affairs means in simple words that if a women seeks justice for getting married too young or forcibly, then the outcome will depend on the combination of beliefs and systems practiced amongst a community in a specific location.

The overlapping of customary and religious laws together with other, tribal practices makes it almost impossible to monitor and control the number of marriages taking place throughout the country, since the state legal system, which should be the exclusive source of legal authority and enforceable all over the country, does not - really - apply much anywhere else outside Kabul.

3.1. Significance of the study

In brief, early and forced marriage is an oppressive tradition, which is usually justified under the name of religion, cultural beliefs, economic and political problems. This inhuman phenomenon, whose primarily victims are girls, is carried out with the complete backing of the religious leadership. In many cases, girls are actually sold to resolve the family’s financial problems, creating the additional complication that, in this way, they are easily exposed to human trafficking networks.

In 2002 the legal minimum age of marriage for girls was raised to 13, although marrying children under the age of 13 was permitted upon the request of the custodian and permission obtained by the court. This meant that a male legal custodian or a judge could legally marry an infant girl to a man. However, the abuse of girls has been facilitated by the lack of a very concrete system of retributions for failure to acquire the court’s permission. Nowadays, according to Afghanistan’s civil law, the legal minimum age of marriage has been risen to 16, although it can still be as low as 15 with parental consent. Yet, official figures related to child marriage are not completely reliable because many marriages of this sort are never registered, since they are - after all - illegal. In most cases, the spouses of these girls are much older and sometimes, already married. Under these circumstances, such as a marriage aims solely at satisfying sexually the spouse and it is tantamount to rape. Many of these brides may end up joining prostitution rings, due to the social problems they face, as well as due to the pressure, physical and sexual abuse they endure.
As already mentioned, in Afghanistan, and in particular in poor rural communities, child slavery and debt bondage practices are growing, but are often disguised as marriage, since labour or family affairs do not requiring state intervention. Religious leaders are generally of the opinion that establishing a higher, legal minimum age of marriage for girls is not keeping in line with the Islamic law. The widespread belief is that since Islamic and Sharia law states that a girl should reach puberty before marriage. As a result, 15 years of age is considered an appropriate age for girls to get married, since most of them have reached puberty by that time.

Finally and as previously mentioned, this study delves into the experiences of Afghan refugees in Austria, and in particular in the city of Vienna. With no prior research being carried out in this field, this study focuses on the psychological and emotional violence these women have endured, as well as on the justifications provided by the establishment in order to ensure that this culture of violence persists. What is of particular significance in this research is also investigating the roots of this violence: why it is happening and how it can be prevented in order to ensure the successful and sustainable integration of these women into the Austrian society.

Further, it is hoped that this research will shed light into the desperate situation of Afghan women in the country; it is of great significance for researchers, social workers, NGO activists and decision-makers to comprehend the very complex background of the Afghan refugees, and in particular women, who have settled in Austria. Despite a vast support network and numerous interventions, Afghan women remain one of the hardest-to-reach groups. Their isolation and lack of prospects for the future creates a vicious circles of dependency and isolation. Their unique experiences, the traditions of a rich culture and a country that is marred by a several decades’ long war, as well as the psychological and emotional traumas they carry should be acknowledged and provide the basis for any future intervention.

4. Methodology

One of the main themes in the study is the relation between migration and violence amongst Afghan youth in Austria. In conceptualizing the analytical framework, I propose that in order to better comprehend the life of young immigrants, it is important to reflect upon their ability to internalize differences in the traditions of their country of origin as opposed to the host country. This is absolutely vital in order to comprehend the process of social and cultural integration.

The main argument is that the social status of these women significantly shapes their experiences in ways that produce a particular social relevance. In a sense, understanding their social status and experiences may also help us to conceptualize the underlying causes that create the violence they face. Further, besides certain programs of governmental or non-governmental organizations (e.g. Caritas and Diakonie etc.), and general work about migration in Austria (e.g. ICMPD, 1998; Perchini, 2002), very few studies, especially following the refugee wave of 2014, have addressed
the integration process of Afghan women. Thus, a major theoretical contribution of this research study is the development and demonstration of a useful analytical framework that assists researchers and policy-makers in comprehending the complexities of women who lived through the experience of a forced marriage in their home country, evaluate what kind of coping mechanisms they have developed, establish whether they have a good life in the host country, whether they live independently or not and determine if they still suffer from all those traumatic experiences they have endured in the past. The starting point of this analytical framework is the real concerns of the Afghan people in Austria. By expanding the analytical framework utilized in this case study to the refining concepts of aspirations and agency, embeddedness, and searching for belonging and confronting exclusion, it is possible to provide an analytically useful set of tools, which would help us define and analyze the complex lives and experience of refugees, as they unfold through the resettlement and integration processes.

As previously mentioned, the research component of this study is mainly based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with Afghan women who live, mainly, in the city of Vienna, as well as representatives of civil society who have long-term experience on the situation of Afghan refugees in Austria. It also includes interviews with activists and representatives of civil society in Afghanistan and international civil servants who worked in the country. In details, semi-structured interviews were conducted with only 23 Afghan women, aged between 18 and 40. Questions mainly aimed at establishing whether they had been forcibly married at a very young age, the reasons why these marriages took place, the relation with the husband and their in-laws, the way resettlement in Austria affected them, family relations, education and participation in the social and economic realms, interaction with the Austrian society and/or with other refugees. Data from Afghanistan was mostly collected through the Verein ‘Afghanische Kultur, Integration und Solidarität’, ‘AKIS’, which is based in Vienna, Austria.

Identifying and convincing the women to take part to the study was far more complicated than originally envisaged. Not all of them agreed to participate; all of them were scared of their immediate families, notably their husbands and they required that the interviews remained a secret. As a result, interviews could not be held in the presence of family and friends, as they were not willing to reveal the topic discussed. All interviews were conducted in the Dari and Persian languages and were subsequently translated to English.

4.1. Analysis

Merriam (2009:216-17) states that data analysis in a qualitative study is deliberated to supply an answer to the particular research question(s). This study has applied the data analysis approaches anchored in the qualitative paradigm. Generally speaking, qualitative data analysis is a process of searching samples and relationships in the data by contrasting individuals’ stories and experiences. In fact, data analysis is the way of making sense out of data and requires consolidation, reduction
and interpretation of what people had said and what the researcher saw and read. Meaning and understanding constitute the findings of the study.

As stated earlier, thematic analysis and interpretation have been employed in this study. The data analysis followed the bottom-up approach starting from primary data and then proceeding by breaking it into units of practical meaning that gradually gave way to the emergence of the main themes of this study. Critical analysis and a discussion of these categorized themes helped to make comparisons and identify contrasts among the women. In addition a set of theoretical ideas, such as poverty- psychological disorder and depression were also used while analyzing the raw data.

5. Research findings: A sample

Below follows a selection of interviews with refugee women.

5.1. Psychological trauma

**Interview 1, 23 years old, for 3 years in Austria**

*At the age of twelve, I married my cousin, because since we were born, our families agreed that we should marry each other. I am very happy to live with my two children, but I do not have a happy marital life and sexual relationship with my husband because I feel he is raping me. I do not take pleasure at all. Meanwhile, I suffer from physical weakness, anemia, and I have pain in my stomach and all over my body because of the early births. And because of the hard work I had to do at home, from the age of sixteen I was suffering from rheumatic pain and my hair was falling. I was so depressed and distressed.*

Her face looks well over 30 although she is no more than 23 years old.

Mashal etc. (2008) focuses on the assessment of independent associations between the health and nutritional status of children under 5 years old, as well as on family behavioral factors related to women with regard to child care and war-related experience as experienced in the households in Afghanistan. A number of studies explore the relation between children’s health with factors, such as family income, mothers’ education, sanitation and immunization. Women’s autonomy is also considered critical when examining its correlation with health problems that children experience.

Further, young children who are forcibly removed from the warm confines of a family, miss out on the sense of security and comfort that their parents/caregivers are supposed to instill in them. This can lead to a number of psychological disorders, such as conduct disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder. Securing attachment during childhood also leads to adults with stronger self-esteem, ability to disclose to others and form strong romantic and social relationships.
Interview 2, 32 years old, for 5 years Austria

At the age of 14, I got married, according to my family's wish. I have never liked my husband, but I am now used to him because he is being the father of my children.

She had been diagnosed with hepatitis B and has been treated to control the disease for years. She said her illness had rapidly progressed because of her husband's ignorance of her condition, as he did not take her health problems seriously and did not take her to the doctor. She also mentioned that she suffers from back injuries and most of the time she experiences joint pain, which is due to early childbirth and breastfeeding.

5.2. Domestic violence

Interview 3, 23 years old, for 5 years in Austria

She got married when she was 15 and she has 3 children: 2 girls and one boy. She is practically tortured by her husband; her lips are torn because of the beating. On her face, the terror of her husband beating her was visible.

She said that she could not stop bleeding and her husband did not take her to the hospital because he was afraid that if caught, he may get into trouble and go to prison. She had no other choice than to put tobacco on her lips in order to stop the bleeding. Eventually, she left her husband and she managed to divorce him. She also accused him of visiting often prostitutes. She finally mentioned that she is now in need of medication in order to sleep. She screams at night, she thinks of all the blood and she has to take medication in order to remain calm.

On a rare positive note, she also mentioned that she has now met someone new and that she is trying to learn the language.

5.3. Poverty and tradition

Interview 4, 24 years old, for 4 years in Austria

I had not completed the primary school and I was no more than 14 years old when my father told me to marry my cousin. The only criterion and reason was the wealth of my father-in-law. My two other sisters married the same way. We did not have the habit of talking to our father or maybe we were afraid of him.

My husband was already married, but I was indifferent toward his wife. The first days after the wedding I felt that certain aspects of his behaviour were abnormal. A few months later I realized the extent of the problem when I found out that he was addicted to certain substances. After a
while, when he got worse, his family was forced to take him to the doctor and it was only then that I realized that he was taking medicines to treat some sort of a ‘nervous’ problem he had and somehow, suddenly, his organism had stopped responding to the medication the doctor had prescribed. I came with him to Austria, but here he uses drugs. Now, I have the possibility to divorce him and I would like to divorce him, but I do not know how to do it. I am also afraid of my husband when he finds out about my intentions; I am worried about his reaction, as well as that he may take away our children.

Poverty forces parents to give their children away to marriage. Additional contributing factors include: drug use, poor education, deeply rooted traditional practices, such as, for example, when a family settles a dispute through marriage (Gomez, p. 1498). Attachment theories focus on how emotional security affect parent-child relations and children’s ‘adaptive development’ (Cummings & Cummings, 2002). They also refer to the broader social contexts that influence these relationships (Belsky, 1984; Cox & Paley, 1997) by examining the emotional security of children as a factor that influences and impacts the inter-parental conflict and their own long-term psychological distress.

**Interview 5, 27 years old, for 3 years in Austria**

She got married when she was 14. She has 3 children. She did repeatedly emphasize that she did not continue with her schooling because she was forced to marry. Currently, in Austria, she feels completely lost: she does not know what to do. She wants to learn German but she is unsure whether he husband would allow that.

Giulia Granataa (2015) emphasizes the distinction between early, forced and arranged marriages. Then she examines the causes of early marriage by citing economic, social, cultural and traditional factors, as well as moral factors, such as the notion of ‘honour’. She further examines the implications of early marriage on the young females: there are health risks involved, associated for example with high risk pregnancies; girls who are getting married at a young age are also more prone to experience violence. Obviously, early marriages also impacts the girls’ chances to be educated, which also results in their inability to develop the necessary social skills to form relationships outside the family circle and develop their own identity.

All in all, the debate on the consequences of child marriage focuses, firstly, on the negative impact it has on the education prospects for the girls. Even married girls who wish to pursue education may face violence at home or they may even denied access to schools since their mere presence would be considered harmful to the morale of unmarried girls. Further, there are clear implications for the health of the mother-to-be, including growth and pregnancy risks. Another point to consider is that there is, apparently, a correlation between child marriage and increased risk to experience
domestic violence. In situations of absolute poverty, girls are sold into marriage. In this case, these girls are expected to be obedient. Any sign of disrespect will be punished with beatings.

Finally, a common trait amongst all interviewees is that they all opposed the concept and practices of child marriage. Despite this united front against it, there is also a widespread total lack of knowledge and understanding of the applicable legal framework; whether in Afghanistan or in Austria. Also, the majority of the interviewees were in favour of setting a higher, legal minimum age of marriage.

6. Lack of decision-making power

Empowerment is a procedure that reshapes the state of powerlessness; in a way, it transforms us so that we have relative control over our own life, the choices we make and the environment (Sadan 2004:144). Powerlessness derives from the inability of having control over our body and the happenings around us, or from being both physically and psychologically oppressed. People in a powerless situation often lack self-esteem, have an inclination to self-blame and prefer living isolated from their community and other people.

Solomon (1976) mentions that powerless people frequently develop adaptive mechanisms to deal with this particular state, which often include total isolation from the society, a tendency to subject themselves to humiliation and a surrender or acceptance of the society’s judgement about their triviality and ineptitude. They accept these social norms that separate them from other people. This situation makes sense to them, since they are in no position to oppose the oppression or injustice directed against them. For them it is necessary to accept the blame from others and consider themselves as the ones who are morally wrong. Powerlessness is not only the situation that deprives people of reaching the ability to advance power against social prejudice, but it is also a state that makes them vulnerable to new forms of injustice.

For example, another interviewee is N. Sh., who has been living in Austria for the past 10 years. She is 30 years old and has 2 children. N. Sh. was promised to marry her cousin the day of her 6th birthday. From the age of 5, she was separated from her mother to get used to her cousin's life. At the age of 11 she got married and she went to her house two years later. At the age of 15, she was mother of a 1 year old child and divorced. Her one-year-old son was taken from her and then she lived in her father's house under difficult conditions. She said she came to Austria with her mother but she is still unsure as to what to do next. She suffers from physical and psychological trauma; she has headaches on a daily basis and her mother does not allow her to take a decision about her own life.

According to tradition, child marriage is a practice that in many parts of the world happens, simply, because it has been happening for generations, while straying from this tradition could result in
exclusion from the community. Needless to emphasize at this point that this tradition has also to do with what men want; to put it in simple words: what men want is usually valued more than what women want. Girls are not valued as much as boys; they are seen as a burden. Widespread poverty and the possibility to give a daughter away to marry, as soon as possible, allows parents to reduce family expenses by ensuring that they have one less person to feed, clothe and educate. In communities where a dowry is expected or the bride is paid, families are relieved by the additional income. For those families, who have to give to the groom a dowry, they often have to pay less if the bride is young and uneducated. Furthermore, and as already mentioned, in many parts of the country, families choose to marry their daughters at a young age, because they feel it is to their best interest. Getting married ensures safety for the young girls, as they are usually at high risk of physical or sexual assault. This is the reason why, child marriages flourish in situations of conflict and displacement, as families try to save on their already diminishing resources or a marriage is perceived as a guarantee against sexual violence (Vogelstein, 2013).

These young brides are disempowered, usually dependent on their husbands and deprived of the very basic human rights, such as access to health, education and personal safety. Above all, child marriage is and should be considered a human rights violation and this is because it violates two very basic human rights principles: the right to choose when and whom you’ll marry and the right to sexual consent (Amber, 2008). Since, child brides, have usually discontinued their education, they tend to stay at home looking after their children and do housework. They are poor, uneducated, with local decision-making skills, isolated from their friends, the school, the community. They are vulnerable and unable to resist the physical and emotional violence they experience at the hands of their husbands. These brides have little bargaining power within their family household. This lack of knowledge combined with an inability for decision-making ultimately affects the choices of the household with respects to education and health choices, reproduction, as well as with regards to the upbringing of young children.

Unfortunately, according to numerous statistics, daughters of young mothers are also prone to drop-out of school and marry at a young age. Another worrisome figure is that young girls with low level of education are additionally likely to experience violence by intimate partners. All the more disturbing is the fact that given the very young age of these girls, coupled with lack of family planning and social services, they also do not possess the necessary information about their own anatomy and biological needs. Being forced to conjugal relations leaves them traumatized; intercourse feels more like rape and it often leads to post-traumatic stress and depression.

As a result of the above, the cycle of poverty continues: lack of education leads to unemployment, minimal possibilities for entering the workforce, limited access to opportunities to socialize and form a social circle; at the same time relationship problems grow, powerlessness, hopelessness and vulnerability prevail, inequality and poverty rise. Similarly, alcoholism incidents are on the rise, resort to violence for resolving disputes is frequent, violence against children is also common.
Children growing in this environment perpetuate this cycle, being totally disadvantaged and isolated from the society. Their development process is being disrupted, they develop mental health conditions and illnesses, the suicide rates rise.

A study by Roe (1992: pp.1-8) discloses that psychological stability in women who flee their homes due to armed conflict and the subsequent war related trauma, is severely affected and it is the byproduct of a psychological disorder known as post-traumatic stress disorder, which causes significant manifestations through their lifetime. Most of interviewees suffered from trauma that they had faced during childhood.

7. Recommendations

The war-related anxiety coupled with the prevailing social practices have had a negative impact on the psychological well-being of all refugee youngsters who settled in Austria. Although many of them have exhibited impressive resilience, particular attention should be devoted to those who had endured traumatic experiences immediately prior to the displacement. Sometimes because of their young age, they lacked proper coping mechanisms and an encouraging family environment. As a result, they demonstrate high levels of stress-related symptomatology throughout the whole process of migration and resettlement and they are at risk of developing further psychological problems, which are usually manifested through violent outbreaks, in particular among the young male population.

Since masculinity and tribal traditions dominate the collective thinking in Afghanistan, most of the young Afghans who settled in Austria, experience this clash of beliefs, customs and expectations. It is therefore necessary to coordinate efforts towards shaping positive experiences for both men and women. Men’s involvement is equally crucial in order to achieve a viable future for all Afghan refugees in Austria. Men’s perceptions should be equally taken into account; they should be equally involved in the development process and included in all gender programming initiatives, as participants and as advocates and supporters of change.

Furthermore, focused, specialized workshops for women are needed. Their aim should be to assist young Afghan women to build a positive self-image and gain self-confidence. These workshops should also aim at providing them with information about opportunities and resources available, the Austrian legal framework, their rights and responsibilities in the host country. Women should learn that it is their prerogative to control their own lives, both within and outside the home, as well as that they, now, have the means necessary to bring about social change, by being actively involved in the economic sphere and forming their own social circle. Besides workshops, the same results can be achieved through initiating awareness campaigns, provide suitable training for all stakeholders involved in the process, improve education, provide economic incentives and through this way, enable families to achieve financial security so that they do not have to resort to practices
such as child marriages. Additional support ought to be also available for girls who have been married at a very young age, since divorce is not a concept that resonated with most of the participants of this study.

When it comes to one of the most common byproducts of early and forced marriage, the widespread domestic violence, I think it is necessary to reiterate an earlier point I made about the centrality of women in the clash of values between western ideals and Afghan moral beliefs. In other words, all stakeholders working with and towards the integration of refugees in the Austrian society have to comprehend the central, key position that women hold in the debate about defending traditional values and practices against Western notions of feminism. Even in cases of interventions focusing on economic revitalization, men in Afghanistan feel that the priority given to women in all development programmes erodes the foundations of traditional family values in the country and runs contrary to Islam (Abirafeh, 2016). When these efforts are perceived as being forced upon the local society, there is always a danger that the local population will resist any efforts towards modernization and progress.

At the same time, it has to be understood that the life-long experience of women in Afghanistan is marked by a vicious circle of violence, which is manifested in different forms: sexual violence, killings, beatings, honour marriage, early marriage, lack of educational opportunities, psychological violence. No matter how painful that may be for all of us, it has to be clear that violence against women in Afghanistan is viewed as something normal. It is something that happens within the family, it stays within the family; therefore it belongs strictly to the domestic sphere, and as such, it is usually concealed, it is not revealed to the outsiders and it is not considered a violation of women’s human rights. Because of these reasons, young refugee women do not report cases of domestic violence in Austria. Similarly, they do not contact the responsible institutions and services, which are intended to protect them. This situation creates the paradox that it may be difficult to track down these women, who are more in need of help and support.

Amendment of the legal and policy framework in Austria alone cannot fight child marriage and it cannot rectify the wrongs and the psychological damage that the affected girls have endured. As previously mentioned, policy interventions have to be accompanied by measures ensuring access to schooling, education, providing economic opportunities and support networks for the girls and families, as well as with maintaining open communication lines with all families involved. One of the most significant strategies employed in the fight against early marriage, is working with parents and community members. This approach is considered an enabling factor since the fate and the choices that concern young girls rest upon their families and the community in general. As a result, their inclusion and participation to all official interventions, not only ensures the programmes’ viability and success, but also sends a positive message by targeting social change in the long term.
Obviously, the fact that formal schooling and education is discontinued for these young brides, also negatively affects their productivity and chances for employment. Lack of schooling also impacts upon their ability to form friendships, develop their social skills and better engage in community affairs and activities. Incomplete education also affects their general knowledge with regards to health, use of family resources and child nutrition. Many of the girls interviewed for this study face similar problems as their parents: it is a vicious circle of isolation, dehumanization, social stagnation and misery, which is perceived as inevitable and is taken for granted by most of them.

The key role of education has to be widely understood and accepted: low education levels impact not only upon their chances for employment but also upon the economic growth potential of communities and societies in general. The fact that young brides are also having children at an earlier age, the spacing between children is also minimal, as well as the fact that they are expected to have more than one or two children, also influence their participation at the labour market. Repeated and frequent pregnancies at a very young age also contribute to a wide range of physical complications and psychological problems with very slim chances for recovering.

Further, the physical well-being of girls who are married at an early age is also affected; they often suffer from malnutrition, isolation and depression. They are also unable to negotiate safe sex with husbands and they are usually under pressure from the extended family to reproduce as soon as possible.

In an Afghan context, ensuring that legally binding decisions are observed throughout the country, as well as providing and enforcing compulsory schooling for all girls are considered two effective strategies for combating child marriage. Despite a number of violent incidents registered in the Afghan schools, a proper schooling environment guarantees a childhood for the girls, creates the best possible safe environment and helps them creating those social networks that will contribute to their socialization, while at the same time acquiring the appropriate life skills for better negotiating with family and peers. Both in an Afghan context, but also in Austria, providing tailor made economic opportunities for girls, with a focus on income generated projects, could prove to be an efficient deterrent strategy against early and forced marriages.

Concluding, female empowerment should be the focus of all intervention policies and strategies.

In brief, empowerment can be achieved through different channels:

- Provide accurate information in a timely manner is of critical importance.
- Mobilization of families and communities alike; involve the girls alone will not contribute to a sustainable solution.
- Ensure that support networks are available to provide emotional support, counseling and psychotherapy if necessary. Mental illnesses and psychological disorders are not
something that finds a lot of resonance with Afghan people. In fact, many of the marital problems they face, may be traced back to mental disorders connected to the individuals’ development process. More emphasis should be paid to the emotional security of individuals, since lack of it leads to behavioral problems, or it can have lasting physiological consequences, e.g. ranging from sleep disruption to problematic environmental adjustment. Lack of emotional security affects all cognitive, biological and social processes and it definitely heavily influences the way young mothers raise their children. All in all, there is a vicious circle of abuse and lack of emotional security, where everybody’s developmental processes are severely disrupted, with long-term consequences for the cohesion of the community and the society in general.

- Ensure schooling, qualification and requalification courses for young girls.
- Offer economic incentives to females and equally involve males as agents of change.

8. Concluding Remarks

Through the information gathered from the Afghan women interviewed for this study, as well as through the information and data provided by their friends, acquaintances and competent organizations, it is necessary to address the psychological, behavioral and social problems that these women face through: targeted emotional support, counselling, focused and targeted information about the laws and culture in the host country, development of competencies aimed at empowering them and developing decision-making skills. The current state for most of them is that they are not even allowed to leave their homes without their husbands’ consent. Many of them cannot read or write in their mother tongue; learning German is a distant option for the majority and so are the prospects for integration. Because of their upbringing and position within their community, they have needs so diverse that sometimes they escape the attention of those working for them. For example, many of them lacked very basic information about sexual education and reproduction, childbirth and raising young children. Empowerment is the only way forward. Only through timely and precise information, education and awareness will they be develop those skills necessary to take decisions about their life and the lives of their children. Many of them remain terrified at the idea of a divorce: some are simply opposing it; others are worried that their husband will take their children. Hence, information has to be channeled and tailor made; address their particular needs and expectations.

Finally, it has been truly a unique experience conducting this study. Contrary to the original expectations, women did not come forward to share their stories. Lack of trust, fear and ignorance were evident. During all interviews they cried and asked desperately for help. The first step for these women is to find the strength to get out of the house. With adequate support they will regain their lost self-confidence, they will make friends and create their own little circle, who will give them joy and courage. Counselling, language classes and vocational training are the next step. Independence and self-reliance will only naturally follow.
The truth is further research is required. This study has only touched the tip of the iceberg. Studies should lead to the organisation of focused events where these issues are openly debated and information about them is provided to the wider audience. Victims and offenders should be trained and go through a psychological evaluation and treatment at the same time. A conference should be organized; after all, child and forced marriage are a universal phenomenon; they affect many countries in different continents. The cultural context has to be clarified. Policy makers and the competent institutions have to reach out in order to impact upon those who cannot be easily reached. The plight of children who are born from underage mothers and have grown in a violent environment should be also addressed. Experiences have to be shared, personal narratives have to be heard. Positive examples have to be also presented; challenges can turn into opportunities for improvement and radical change.

Empowerment is the final goal, in a sense that women should be masters of themselves and capable of taking their own decisions. A truly inspirational intervention will not be the one that will teach them what to do, but one that will provide them with the necessary skills to develop critical thinking and abilities to take informed decisions. A truly successful and sustainable intervention will also include men and will strive for a holistic, multi-dimensional approach to overcome traditions and practices that not only negate basic human rights, but they also devalue human beings, both the oppressor and the oppressed.
Annex

Interview with AKIS manager

Interview with Dr. S. Behnaz Hosseini, researcher on child marriage and gender in Middle East in University of Vienna.

Excerpt from a speech on child marriages in Afghanistan, as provided by the Ambassador of Afghanistan to Austria, her Excellency, Mrs. Khojesta Fana Ebrahimkhel, during an international conference on child marriages, which took place at the premises of Sigmund Feud University in Vienna on 4 March 2019

Interview with Journalist in Kabul

Interview with women activists in Kabul

Interview with human right activists in Vienna

Interview with refuge stakeholders in Vienna

Interview Caritas der Erzdiözese Wien

Interview with Orient express

Interview with Charlemagne Gomez, freelance consultant

Interview with Verein Frauentreff in Vienna
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