



ADDRESSING CHILD MARRIAGE IN MARGINALISED REFUGEE COMMUNITIES

THE CASE OF NABA'A, LEBANON

Girls Not Brides member organisation: Naba'a

Country: Lebanon

Programme start and end date: 2016 to present

Supported by: Malala fund, Embassy of Finland, UNFPA, UNICEF

Summary

This case study highlights the importance of mobilising families and communities to end child marriage in marginalised communities in Lebanon, particularly those in refugee camps. It examines the complexity of addressing gender inequality and harmful social norms with communities facing severe economic challenges, highlights successful approaches, and shares key insights provided by Naba'a.

Successful approaches **include building girls' agency through life skills, education and vocational trainings; mobilising communities to build a safe environment for girls; and providing services tailored to the specific needs of adolescent girls.**

These interventions have been successful thanks to strong relationships between Naba'a and families, communities, religious leaders and municipal officials.

This case study should inspire others and contribute to debate and learning between *Girls Not Brides* member organisations.

It also highlights the need for increased funding for civil society organisations to raise awareness and provide educational services to complement life skills and gender-based violence prevention interventions and ensure every girl can stay in school and avoid child marriage.



MAP: [Location of Lebanon](#) in the Levant. Adapted from NordNordWest, licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0 DE](#).

Background to the refugee situation and child marriage in Lebanon

Refugee status

Lebanon hosts more than a million refugees, including those from Palestine and Syria. While refugees from Palestine have sought asylum in Lebanon since 1948, those from Syria – including Palestinians who previously settled there – have only entered the country in significant numbers since 2011, as a result of the Syrian crisis.

The conditions faced by refugees in Lebanon also differ according to this history. Palestinian refugees mainly live in refugee camps, while Syrians live in urban areas or informal settlements. Palestinians from Syria have also found refuge in Palestinian camps, either because they can activate support networks to find shelter or because rents are lower there.

Livelihood options for refugees are also limited. Palestinians are allowed to work in a limited range of jobs, but Syrian refugees do not have any official right to work. Many have to work in the informal sector or find a sponsor to pay for their work permit. If a Syrian refugee finds formal employment, they have to abandon their UN Refugee Agency-recognised refugee status.

Host communities see refugees as a burden, putting pressure on services and competing for jobs, particularly as they often accept lower salaries in the informal sector than host communities. This has created tensions and hate speech.

Child marriage

Child marriage had a prevalence of 6% in Lebanon and 13% in Syria in 2006.¹ In both settings, the practice is linked to social norms and beliefs around women's role in society and a permissive legal framework. Women generally work in their homes, with a very low percentage in the formal labour market (29% in Lebanon).

Several studies² show that child marriage rates have increased in refugee communities as a result of displacement and poor living conditions, including a lack of access to education and health services, livelihoods and future prospects.

¹ World Bank, 2006, [Lebanon – Multiple indicator cluster survey](#).

² For example: UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP, 2018, [Vulnerability assessment of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, 2018](#); DeJong J., et al., 2017, "[Young Lives Disrupted: Gender and Well-being among Adolescent Syrian Refugees in Lebanon](#)," *Conflict and Health*, Vol. 11:1.

Drivers of child marriage in refugee communities

While **poverty and insecurity** push families – and sometimes girls themselves – to consider child marriage as a way to cope with difficult living conditions, the practice is rooted in deeper **gender inequality** and associated **social norms**, which are more difficult to challenge.

For example, rural Lebanese and Syrian communities in Lebanon often think that a girl who fails to marry early will never find a husband and will have to stay with her parents, putting additional financial pressure on them.

Girls who get divorced also face stigma within their families and communities, being considered an economic burden and a source of shame in the extended family and community. As a result, divorced girls are at risk of abuse from others, and of forced marriage.

Naba'a's approach

[Developmental Action without Borders](#) – Naba'a – is a non-profit organisation that was created in 2001 to support marginalised communities in Lebanon, including those of people displaced from Palestine and Syria. They do this by building protective environments where children and young people can thrive regardless of their gender, religion or nationality. They work with communities to improve the status of adolescent girls and women and support their equal treatment, awareness of their rights and ability to make informed decisions and build a more fulfilling future for themselves.

In their comprehensive approach to addressing child marriage, Naba'a's focus is on girls over 14 years old and their families and communities.

They act at all levels – from individual to society – and consider the specific issues faced by refugee communities.

They aim to achieve these outcomes by:

1. Building girls' agency through life skills, education and vocational trainings.
2. Mobilising communities to build a safe environment for girls.
3. Providing services tailored to the specific needs of adolescent girls.

Naba'a activities

1. Building girls' agency through life skills, education and vocational trainings

Organising life-skills sessions. Naba'a offers life skills trainings for groups of adolescent girls to develop their ability to make decisions about their lives and to become agents of change in their communities.

They also offer training for girls to lead participatory rapid assessments and identify and prioritise problems needing attention in their communities, thus guiding the development of Naba'a programmes, awareness sessions and advocacy programmes.

Making use of these new skills and knowledge, some girls have started leading sessions with their peers.

Outreach for peer-to-peer learning. Naba'a outreach workers offer awareness sessions and identify young people – including girls – who are particularly interested and willing to engage further with the issue.

Alignment with the Partnership's strategic pillars

Naba'a's actions fall under three of the four strategic pillars in the *Girls Not Brides Theory of Change*: empowering girls, mobilising families and communities, and increasing access to services.

Through these strategies, they work to achieve the following Theory of Change outcomes:

- Girls are increasingly aware of their rights.
- Girls have the opportunity to develop solidarity with one another through peer groups and collective action.
- Families, communities and young people are increasingly aware of the harmful impact of child marriage and alternatives available.
- Married and unmarried girls have increased access to health, education, economic and legal support.

Naba'a liaises with these young people and assesses their level of understanding and motivation. They then work with them to become trainers on issues such as gender-based violence (GBV), child marriage and child protection. The peer-to-peer sessions are organised under the supervision of a Naba'a staff member and take place in schools and in the community, using Naba'a materials and resources.

Girl-led advocacy. The girls involved in the peer-to-peer programme are also included in youth-led advocacy, along with young men. The groups are 65% comprised of adolescent girls and young women, all aged 14 to 22. There is almost equal representation of individuals of Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese descent.

Through participatory assessments, they identify issues in their communities and – with the help of an advocacy officer – choose a campaign theme and build an advocacy plan, defining their target audience and key messages.

There are currently three active groups involved in all ongoing activities, including activities organised in the community and community centres and – because of COVID-19 restrictions – online sessions.

During the pandemic, peer-to-peer and social worker contact has continued online. While 90% of Naba'a participants have a mobile phone, printed learning materials and in-person sessions are also offered, respecting physical distancing guidelines.

Vocational trainings. According to a market study carried out by Naba'a, 15 to 24-year-old married, unmarried and divorced out-of-school girls are involved in vocational trainings recognised by an official certificate to help them find a job. These trainings include accounting, hairdressing, hospitality management, graphic design and soap production. Through this programme, participants also have access to advice through an employment counsellor and – thanks to collaboration with the private sector – vocational training centres and financial support for transportation, refreshments and training fees.

After gaining their certificate – and depending on their chosen activity – girls are also offered a toolkit so they can practise their new skills at home. This is particularly useful for those completing the hairdressing and soap production trainings.

Lebanese law does not allow refugees to work, and girls usually find employment in the informal sector. Naba'a works with Syrian refugees to build their skills for the future, when they may return to Syria.

2. Mobilising communities to build a safe environment for girls

By mobilising families and communities, Naba'a ensure their activities are supported and girls are able to participate.

Peer-to-peer approach to working directly with families. Naba'a run multiple activities in nine centres across Lebanon, where they work with communities – and especially parents – to raise awareness of the consequences of child marriage and to support them in finding alternatives to it, including investment in the education of young people. Naba'a currently convenes 18 peer-to-peer groups – each with 12 participants and supervised by a trainer – to promote communication within the community. They use the peer-to-peer approach to engage men, fathers and husbands, tailoring and nurturing discussion around their understanding of child marriage and other related issues.

They offer sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and GBV prevention and response activities using an integrated protection approach. Participants can access awareness-raising initiatives on child marriage and sexual and GBV prevention, SRH services and community-based initiatives focusing on risks. Such integrated programming offers marginalised groups holistic support, which includes information on rights and access to safe, effective and affordable services. In this, Naba'a aims to support participants in taking well-informed decisions about their bodies to reduce gender inequality at all levels and improve family planning.

A monitoring and evaluation staff member makes assessments at the start and end of the project to measure progress.

Investment in community spaces. Naba'a social workers establish close links with communities by using the home space. They organise "home stations" – *sobhyeh* in Arabic – in women's homes at the traditional morning coffee time when women usually meet to discuss issues relating to their communities. During these sessions, Naba'a proposes discussion topics around gender and child marriage – including its consequences and alternatives – GBV and how to communicate with children in challenging circumstances. The group then selects discussion topics according to their own interests.

Dialogue with local decision makers. When starting a programme in a new location, Naba'a always reach out to active decision makers to discuss the project objectives and how they work. They speak with religious leaders – who have a particular influence on families' choices regarding child marriage and girls' futures – and the municipal officials responsible for overseeing the refugee camps. The latter may then sign a memorandum of understanding – a process that usually takes about a week – to agree the use of public spaces and centres for activities and popular committees, including life skills sessions. By involving local authorities in the project, Naba'a strengthens key advocacy messaging around the local-level integration of refugees.

Naba'a then invites parents and families to talk about the project and build trust within the community. Their outreach workers visit families in their homes, speak about the project, explain details and answer questions. They also begin to identify where girls may be at risk.

In Akkar, a region of northern Lebanon, Naba'a works closely with religious leaders from two religious sects to raise awareness of the consequences of child marriage. The religious leaders now participate in monthly discussion circles examining cases of child marriage. Three religious leaders have become very active in the sensitisation and advocacy sessions, engaging with the discussions around the risks facing child brides and the importance of education for the adolescent girls.

3. Providing services tailored to the specific needs of adolescent girls

Support for out-of-school girls through informal education. Naba'a works with the Ministry of Education and higher education teachers – trained through UNICEF programmes – to offer basic literacy activities for out-of-schools girls. They also offer learning support for girls at risk of dropping out of school and – in response to COVID-19 restrictions and in collaboration with UNICEF and Save the Children – remote e-learning for grades seven to 12.

Offering multidimensional support. Naba'a also offers psychosocial support services (PSS), SRH services and legal support. They do this through a GBV specialist, PSS worker, gynaecologist, social workers and a lawyer – in addition to community mobilisers, supervisors and advocacy officers – who are available for consultation at the training centre.

Naba'a's achievements

- Over 2,700 girls in South Lebanon have enrolled in Naba'a activities since 2017, participating in sessions on public speaking, negotiation, action planning and group dynamics, and learning about laws, child protection and women's and children's rights.

Advocacy:

- At the international level: A group went to Geneva, Switzerland, in the context of the Universal Periodic Review and discussed findings related to refugees in 2017.
- At the national level: The group addressed Parliament and presented the problems and consequences of child marriage in 2016. They met with Members of Parliament and the Minister for Women's Rights in the North. They are advocating with the Lebanese Parliament to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 and to encourage secondary education for girls, especially in rural areas.
- At the community level: Girls have met with leaders in municipalities and camps – camp leaders (*shaweesh* in Arabic) and Popular Committees – so they can express themselves directly and more powerfully to decision makers.

The challenges Naba'a faced

- **Community and religious leaders can resist change and limit girls' participation.** While outreach is essential in engaging the most marginalised girls, the community can be reluctant for them to participate in the programme. Men tend to limit their daughters' involvement and religious leaders sometimes refuse to question the practice of child marriage. By recruiting their outreach team within the community, Naba'a has built trust with community members and leaders, parents and local authorities, and are able to reach girls at risk of child marriage as well as married girls.
- **Discussion on child marriage is not considered a priority.** Refugee communities face harsh economic conditions and often prefer to discuss livelihood opportunities rather than child marriage or GBV, which they consider secondary topics. The lockdown

“The Syrian refugee girls I work with — Nariman, Iman, Rania — face barrier after barrier to their education and still they are fighting. They are fighting to go to school because they know it is their only hope for a better future [...] As a result of our work and conversations, mentalities are changing. Girls are speaking out, parents and communities are listening — but there's still a lot of work to be done.”

Naba'a staff member

implemented to curb the spread of COVID-19 has worsened these economic conditions, making programme implementation increasingly challenging.

- **Challenging harmful gender norms is complex, takes time and can have psychosocial consequences for girls.** Social norms rooted in gender inequality support the idea that a girl or a woman can only be independent if she is married and can leave her parents' house. While the situation varies across communities, girls are often not allowed to work or even go out by themselves. Girls that do may be considered deprived, with psychosocial consequences for them. Child marriage is more common in rural areas and refugee camps than in urban areas.

Three key insights that made Naba'a's programme successful

1. **Outreach workers play a key role in getting in touch with community members.** Outreach workers mobilise a wide range of people to organise advocacy and awareness-raising activities with community leaders, school teachers and families. Organising a combination of open and closed outreach sessions improved access for different community members. Open days organised in schools, municipalities or informal settlements were a good opportunity to engage with a broad section of the community, while women-only sessions organised in family homes supported their active engagement in a safe space.
2. **Encouraging community members to take an active role in awareness-raising activities improves community engagement and programme relevance and sustainability.** Naba'a identifies and supports active and progressive parents from Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian communities to become trainers and raise awareness among their peers on issues around protection and children's rights, including child marriage. They are also part of a larger process and continued engagement with communities. For example, community members and girls are invited by the Naba'a team to participate in the organisation of open days, and they are trained to lead participatory assessments so that they are not only on the receiving end but also co-creating activities with their communities.
3. **Building long-term relationships with participants is key to ensuring their rights are upheld.** The staff at Naba'a regularly call participants to follow up and facilitate capacity development so they can claim their rights and advocate against rights violations. In addition, participants build skills and capacities to reject further abuse.

Looking forward

Each person within the civil society organisation has the power to make a difference for girls living in conflict. More awareness sessions and education programs – including remedial education, basic literacy and numeracy and vocational training – should be implemented with girls to complement life skills and GBV prevention interventions. Naba'a wants to support girls so they know they are not alone in striving to claim their rights. More funding and support are needed to ensure every girl can stay in school and avoid child marriage.