

Child Bride in Jordan Puts Daughters on Same Path

By Iqbal Tamimi

Monday, August 22, 2011

What kind of mothers subject their daughters to drudgery, deny them education and threaten them with early marriage and other human rights abuses? The answer, one family's story suggests, are women who've gone through just that themselves.

Fawzeyya, a 70-year-old Palestinian-Jordanian woman living in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan, raised her two daughters--now 53 and 47--with an iron hand.

She forbade them to read novels because they would be corrupting. She worked them hard at house chores, having them re-scrub floors and re-clean everything. If she exhausted them, then they would have no energy left for boy trouble or "other nonsense." She often regarded her oldest daughter--17 years younger than she--with inexplicable jealousy, as if she was her rival or competitor.

Fawzeyya and one of her daughters shared the story with Women's eNews. Fawzeyya's last name is being withheld to protect the family's privacy and safety, since some details could be considered harmful to the family's reputation and as grounds for divorce.

Under their mother's tyrannical domination, the daughters dreamed of escape through the only available route: marriage, and as soon as possible. This is a common dream for girls who grow up in drudgery, as they often find some of their happiest moments at weddings, where the brides look pampered and wear beautiful clothes and jewelry.

When one of Fawzeyya's daughters became engaged at 16, her mother took her to a family medical clinic and asked the doctor to examine her vagina and declare her hymen intact.

Virginity tests are becoming more frequent, Dr. Momen Hadeedi, head of the National Centre of Forensic Medicine in Amman, said in a July interview with Alghad newspaper; about 1, 200 women undergo them each year in Jordan.

A small percentage of prospective husbands ask for virginity tests, but in this case, Fawzeyya was the one to impose it. But her daughter said the test was humiliating and painful and did long-term damage to her sexual relationship with her husband. Thoughts of the test would recur when he wanted to have sex with her. She didn't feel she could tell him about the upsetting association because it might raise questions in his suspicious mind. Had his wife known other men? Is that why her mother ordered the test? Like many men in Arab societies, he would not keep a wife who he thought might have had sexual experience before marriage.

After marrying young to flee their mother's oppression, both daughters were forced to leave school and found themselves bound to incompatible partners. Any dreams of freedom were crushed by mothers-in-law who were even worse than their own mother.

The Same Path

A child bride.

Fawzeya was only 13 when she got married to her husband Yousef, who was then working in Kuwait.

The moment a girl menstruates she is considered a pregnancy risk in many Arab societies and, as such, a magnet for trouble. Many families try to marry their daughters off as soon as possible.

At the time of her wedding Fawzeya's father had died. Her mother was unwell and trying to care for seven other children. Without a father she was considered an orphan. Her mother, Fawzeya and her siblings automatically fell under the guardianship of male relatives, responsible for supporting them. These men saw her marriage as a way to simultaneously "protect" her and unburden themselves.

When elders from Yousef's family asked for her hand in marriage to their son, Fawzeya says she was delighted.

"I thought, at last, I will be allowed to wear nail polish, gold bangles, make up and jewelry, since only married women were allowed to do these things in the '50s," she said.

Fawzeya said her own mother knew she was too young. "She cries when she returns home from school and finds the meal not cooked yet," she recalled hearing her mother say to Yousef's family elders.

The legal age of marriage in Jordan is 18, but a judge can lower it to 15 in cases when the marriage is presented as serving the best interest of the young bride or groom.

Asma Khader, founder of the Amman-based Mizan Law Group for Human Rights, which provides legal aid to women, said underage marriage has declined in the past two decades. But the exception clause in the current law on the legal age of marriage is widely abused.

Negative Impact

The negative consequences of early marriage have been well established.

Over 60 million girls worldwide are child brides, married before the age of 18, according to a study published by UNICEF in 2000. Violence and abuse characterize married life for many of these girls. Women who marry early are more likely to be beaten or threatened, and more likely to believe that a husband might sometimes be justified in beating his wife.

The study revealed that 26 percent of reported cases of domestic violence in Jordan were committed against wives under 18. When young brides try to escape abusive husbands, they can get into even more danger.

"Those who do so, may be punished, or even killed by their families," the study authors found. "These girls run the risk of 'honor killings.'"

The loss of adolescence, forced sexual relations, the denial of freedom and personal development and isolation can have profound psychosocial and emotional consequences on underage brides, according to the UNICEF report.

Underage marriage is also common in many other Arab countries. In Yemen, 48 percent of girls between the ages of 10 and 14 are married. In some parts of the country brides can be as young as 8 and 10.

"Early marriage is a feature of Arab societies and is linked to a number of social and economic conditions, customs and traditions," said Sheikh Essam Arabiyat, director of the Islamic courts in Jordan.

He said this is particularly true in overcrowded urban neighborhoods and rural areas "where young men prefer to marry young girls because they believe they can 'mold' them and shape their personalities as they choose; besides the fact that men prefer girls who are at least two stages less educated than themselves."

Poverty Main Impetus

Dr. Majd Eldin Khamash, a sociologist at Jordan University in Amman, says poverty is the main factor in early marriage. In rural areas young women are regarded as a financial burden to be passed on to a spouse. This is particularly true for families contending with tight living quarters, common among the 2 million Palestinian refugees living in Jordan, particularly some 338,000 or so who--like Fawzeya's family--still live in 12 refugee camps.

Fawzeya's family was expelled from the West Bank in 1967, after the Israeli military invaded and occupied their hometown. They joined an exodus of hundreds of thousands to neighboring Jordan. At first they lived in tents. Eventually they relocated to a crowded, U.N.-financed refugee camp, where the seven members of her family lived in a small housing unit built out of cement blocks.

A leading Jordanian rights group ran a one-year public campaign to raise awareness about the dangers of early marriage in 2006.

"We need to educate people about the negative consequences of the practice on girls, from both the physical effects to deeper emotional scars," said Firas Azar, president of the Mizan Law Group.

Early marriage is considered a human rights violation, according to UNICEF. The organization notes that child marriage is often linked to abuse and results in the denial of education. It is also associated with heightened risks of maternal and infant mortality.

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