

Thank you [presenter].

Sara, a 15 years old girl who was forced by her parents to marry her rapist. The groom was sexually assaulting her for more than 8 years.

Sara contacted ABAAD Resource Center for Gender Equality 3 years ago saying

“You have three hours to come save my life, they locked me in the house for 4 days ago, and I haven’t been able to get out since. After begging for help from my neighbors, they finally gave me a phone to call an emergency hotline, and that’s when I was able to contact you.”

Sarah is one of hundreds thousands of girls forced into marriage in the MENA region. Aside from socioeconomic reasons, cultural and traditional beliefs, intentions to traffic, and religious (Shari’a) considerations exacerbate the rates of child marriage.

For the purposes of this presentation, I will be using the term child marriage (forcing a person to marry while they are still under the age of 18).

Across the MENA region, several reports have shown that displacement and conflict have given rise to the prevalence of child marriage. Despite the availability of legal structures protecting against child marriage in most Arab countries, religious and legal officials, as well as families of girls, have used loopholes and exceptions in order to continue trafficking their girls through child marriage.

The Middle East adds 700,000 child brides every year to its 40 million child brides, including currently married women wed as children. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), 1 in 5 girls are married before 18 and early marriage is a negative coping mechanism for those affected by humanitarian crises.

And in Lebanon, the personal status laws are scattered across sects, and every religious law is followed by an exception that is often granted by officials in religious courts, where the laws differ from religious’ court to



another & there are 15 personal status laws, each has a different minimum age for marriage that varies between 9YRS till 15 YO.

For example, the legal age for marriage in Egypt is 18, as long as the marriage is registered. However, it is not Uncommon for parents to sell their girls (through marriage) to tourists from the Gulf in the summer Season without registering their marriage. The law does not protect them against informal or unregistered Marriages.

Now the question is, how do we create the link between child marriage and trafficking?

The fact is, guardians who sell their girls through child marriage always benefit at the cost of the girls being sold. Namely, they benefit financially, socially, or politically, while the agency of the girl being sold is stolen from her. An example of this is the aforementioned temporary marriage of Egyptian girls in the summertime, where they are sold to tourists though marriage multiple times throughout the course of tourist season, and then are returned pregnant to their parents when the tourist leaves. Another example of this, are guardians in Jordan and Lebanon selling their daughters to a man, knowing that she will be forced to enter a child sex trafficking ring, and forced to have sex with multiple other men. Unfortunately, there are no quantitative or prevalence studies on the matter, so it is unclear how widespread this is.

What can be done to combat such practices?

- Adoption of stricter laws on child marriage, without any exceptions
 - o These laws should abide by international conventions on child rights (such as the Convention on Rights of the Child)
- Formation of an observatory of relevant stakeholders (e.g. child protection agencies, UN agencies, lawyers, activists, among others) who lobby for legislative and policy change
- On national levels, an ecological model should be followed, by



education and awareness for girls, boys, family members, and community and religious leaders) is a must.

- National action plan, implemented hand-in-hand with national stakeholders including ministries and governmental institutions.
- Creation of a platform for survivors of child marriage in order to voice their experiences
- Establishment of a specialized shelter to protect the child marriage survivors
- Creation of a rehabilitation shelter that provides vocational training to support the girl's economic empowerment and their reintegration in the society.

