Migrant child brides put Europe in a spin

30 September 2016 | Europe

Should a 14-year-old married girl who migrates to Europe be viewed as a child - or a spouse?

The issue has put European governments in a spin: forcing a policy U-turn in Denmark, new legislation in the Netherlands and an agonised debate in Germany.

Analysts say early marriage is often carried out in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey by families trying to protect girls from poverty or sexual exploitation. Elsewhere, poor families might marry off their young daughters in exchange for dowries.
The question is one of rights and protections - but which? When authorities stop minors cohabiting with their older spouses, are they combating child abuse or breaking up (often already traumatised) families?

Depending on where you go in Europe, you'll find a radically different range of responses to the issue.

- **Migrant crisis: Changing attitudes of a German city**
- **Germany to enforce ban on polygamy**
- **Dutch alarm over child bride from Syria**
- **What is it like to be a child bride?**

**Denmark's dilemma**

Denmark's response has swung first one way and then the other.

In February, Integration Minister Inger Støjberg vowed to act after a review found dozens of cases of girls living with older men in asylum seekers' accommodation - which the minister called "totally unacceptable".

Couples would require "exceptional reasons" to live together below the age of 18 (the legal age for marriage in Denmark) and no cohabitation would be allowed whatsoever if one party was below 15.

But separation reportedly prompted two migrants under 18 to attempt suicide.

The policy was reversed earlier this week - with children as young as 14 reunited with their husbands - after the issue was raised with the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) by lawmaker Josephine Fock.

"It is completely outrageous. We are talking about people who have fled to Denmark who are being split from each other. Some of them have children together and investigating individual [asylum] cases takes an unbelievably long time," Ms Fock told Metroxpress news service.

The DIS cited Denmark's "international obligations" as the trigger for its policy change, concluding that enforcing separate living quarters would violate the **UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child** and Article 8 of the **European Convention on Human Rights**, which guarantees the right to one's "private and family life".

That has prompted conservative politicians to call for Denmark's withdrawal from such treaties.
Dutch clampdown

In the Netherlands, policy has shifted in the other direction - with the government moving swiftly last year to close a legal loophole which allowed child brides to live with older husbands in asylum centres.

And politicians have grappled with the same dilemma elsewhere in Europe - though on the whole each country is dealing with just a handful of cases.

German indecision

The issue takes on much broader significance in Germany, which has greeted some 1.2 million migrants since last year under Chancellor Angela Merkel's "open-door" policy.

Here the authorities' response has been inconsistent and, some claim, confused.

Data suggest that in Germany there are at least 1,000 marriages where one or both parties are under the legal marriage age of 18, of which more than half are in the southern state of Bavaria.

Legal marriage or state-sanctioned abuse?

The official confusion is reflected in one reported case: a 15-year-old Syrian girl married to her 21-year-old cousin. She was first separated from him in the city of Aschaffenburg, Bavaria, for reasons of child protection.

Her husband lost an appeal to a family court, but the decision was eventually set aside by a regional court, which judged that the marriage should be recognised as it was legal in the country of origin.

But the city appealed, and the pair are now awaiting a judgment from Germany's federal court.

In response, Germany's justice ministry has set up a working group to agree a consistent response.

Ironically, the Family Affairs Minister Manuela Schwesig cited the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to argue against under-age cohabitation, claiming that violated children's rights to "play, education and health".

Desperate choice

And the issue only threatens to become more pressing, despite the efforts of global campaign groups to eliminate child marriage - which they claim in many cases is in fact forced marriage.

Unicef figures from the vast Syrian refugee camps in Jordan suggest the proportion of registered marriages where the bride was under 18 rose from 12% in 2011 (roughly the same as the figure in pre-war Syria) to 18% in 2012, and as high as 25% by 2013.

And Jordan's Chief Islamic Justice Department was recently quoted as saying child marriages represented about 35% of all marriages of Syrian refugees in 2015.

"There are a number of reasons why families are opting for child marriage for their daughters," says charity Save the Children.

"As refugees, Syrian families are reliant on dwindling resources and are lacking economic opportunities. At the same time, they are all too aware of the need to protect their daughters from the threat of sexual violence."

Migration to Europe explained in seven charts

Germany's Syrians now waiting for their families

Related Topics

- Denmark
- Europe migrant crisis
- Germany
- Migration
- Children

Share this story

About sharing

More on this story
Germany polygamy: Minister says migrants must abide by the law
15 June 2016

Migrant crisis: Dutch alarm over child brides from Syria
20 October 2015

Syrian conflict: Untold misery of child brides
20 August 2014

Germany's Syrians now waiting for their families
20 February 2016

What is it like to be a child bride?
4 October 2011

Migrant crisis

Features and analysis

What next after the Jungle?
24 October 2016

The desperate children of the Calais Jungle
17 October 2016

How are the ages of child migrants verified?
19 October 2016

Migrant crisis: A Syrian's struggle to become German
16 October 2016

Jungle visit moves Lily Allen to tears
12 October 2016

EU migration: Crisis in seven charts
4 March 2016

Greece's stranded refugees fear being forgotten
7 July 2016

Anatomy of a shipwreck
24 May 2016

Europe's migrant story enters new phase
10 May 2016

Migrants recount harrowing ordeal
18 April 2016

Turks look to EU to scrap visas for travel in Europe
3 May 2016

**Where are drowned migrants buried?**
9 May 2016

**Migrant Crisis: Changing attitudes of a German city**
28 April 2016

**Schengen: EU free movement deal explained**
24 April 2016

**In depth report**
22 April 2015

---

**Video**

- **The Forgotten Shipwreck**
  6 December 2016
- **Winter freeze hits refugees in Greece**
  11 January 2017
- **Refugee camps in winter**
  12 January 2017
- **'I watched my husband drown'**
  16 May 2016
- **Syrian refugee reads poem**
  16 May 2016

---

**In depth**

- **World on the move - BBC coverage as it happened**
  16 May 2016
- **Turkey has European Union over a barrel**
  17 March 2016
- **The tricky business of solving Europe's migrant crisis**
  8 March 2016
- **EU-Turkey 'one-in one-out' migrant plan**
  8 March 2016
- **Migrant crisis: Have EU promises been kept?**
  3 March 2016
- **Why is EU struggling with migrants and asylum?**
  3 March 2016
- **How is migrant crisis dividing EU countries?**

Desperate migrants plead to escape 'hellish' Greek camp
2 March 2016

EU tensions as Turkey set to get visa waiver
3 May 2016

Migrant crisis: Who does the EU send back?
9 September 2015

Migrant attacks reveal dark side of Germany
22 February 2016

Cologne's profound impact on Europe
11 January 2016

Migrant stories

BBC correspondents' migrant pictures
28 September 2015

Alan Kurdi: Why one picture cut through
4 September 2015

From Turkey to Sweden: Syrian migrant's perilous journey
1 September 2015

Afghan boy's lonely start in Germany
15 September 2015

Europe
Catalonia leaders decry direct rule plan
21 October 2017 | Europe

Billionaire candidate wins Czech election
22 October 2017 | Europe

UK's Labour 'could back Tory rebels on Brexit'
22 October 2017 | UK Politics

More Videos from the BBC
Recommended by Outbrain
Migrant child brides put Europe in a spin - BBC News

New £25m 'superyacht' hotel opens in city

'Worst' storm sinks five dinghies

New wave electricity device unveiled

'Selling everything' because of universal credit

Sir Tom: Encounter 'made me feel terrible'

Bull escapes New York slaughterhouse

Elsewhere on BBC

BBC News

MI5 boss warns of 'intense' terror threat

BBC Future

The hidden signs that can reveal a fake photo
Top Stories

**Catalonia leaders decry direct rule plan**
President Carles Puigdemont says Catalonia will not accept Madrid’s plan to curb the region's powers.
7 hours ago

**Japan goes to the polls in snap election**
32 minutes ago

**WHO 'rethinking' Mugabe's appointment**
4 hours ago

---

**BBC News**
The fateful life of history's most famous female spy

**BBC Future**
How will we deal with all of the world’s rubbish?

**BBC News**
500,000 'nurdles' collected from beach

**BBC Travel**
The remote ranch at the bottom of the world