

Talk by Dr. Sarah Tobin

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Presentation title

Understanding Early Marriage: Amplified Agency, Decreased Regulation, and Structural Violence of Syrian Refugees in Za'atari

Western reports of sex- and gender-based violence of Syrian refugees in Jordan, namely the world's largest refugee camp, Zaatari, are rife with alarmist reports of rape, assault, and early marriage of young teenage girls. My own research found that early marriage is reportedly occurring in Zaatari for a number of prominent and expected reasons, including economic vulnerability of large, female-headed households; demographic limitations due to the absence of men age 18-40 in the camp; and self-proclaimed adherence to "Syrian traditions," among others. More immediately, however, I argue that an unspoken underpinning of the marriage of young girls is that, rather than enhanced controls and regulation on women and their bodies, parents and adults are granting young girls enhanced and amplified agency. As previous literature has articulated, solutions to bodily, everyday suffering are often indexed in terms of expectations of agency. The results of this refugee experience are that many rapes are recast as consensual "zina" or "adultery," and young girls can and do consent to marriages with either very young men or very old men. These practices ultimately disenfranchise them from education and employment opportunities long into the future. While enhanced agency might, at first glance, appear to be deregulation of women's bodies for the sake of amplified agency in the refugee context, the larger structural impacts are actually an intensification of regulation of women's bodies and control of women's movements and possibilities.

Dr. Sarah Tobin's work explores transformations in religious and economic life, identity construction, and personal piety in Jordan, including Syrian refugee camps. She is the author of *Everyday Piety: Islam and Economy in Jordan* (Cornell UP, 2016).

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