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# CHILD MARRIAGE IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

Millions of lives are being torn apart by conflict, disasters and displacement. Girls are hit particularly hard and face many forms of violence. Child marriage has been rising at an alarming rate in humanitarian settings. This brief summarises what we know about this issue and what needs to be done.



## Why is this an important issue?

- Nine out of the ten countries with the highest child marriage rates are considered either fragile or extremely fragile states.<sup>i</sup> Seven out of the twenty countries with the highest child marriage rates face some of the biggest humanitarian crises.<sup>ii</sup> We cannot ignore child marriage in such settings.
- Growing evidence shows that in these settings,<sup>iii</sup> child marriage rates increase, with a disproportionate impact on girls. While gender inequality is a root cause of child marriage in both stable and crisis contexts, often in times of crisis, families see child marriage as a way to cope with greater economic hardship and to protect girls from increased violence. But in reality, it leads to a [range of devastating consequences](#).<sup>iv</sup>

- Yet, child marriage is not being adequately addressed in humanitarian settings. In their evaluation of the emergency response to the Syrian refugee crisis in Turkey, UNHCR highlighted the insufficient attention to child marriage as a major gap in the United Nation's protection response.<sup>v</sup>

## What do we know about child marriage in humanitarian settings?

- Humanitarian settings can encompass a wide range of situations before, during, and after natural disasters, conflicts, and epidemics.<sup>vi</sup> They exacerbate poverty, insecurity, and lack of access to education, factors which drive child marriage.
- For poor families who have lost livelihoods, land and homes because of a crisis, marrying their daughter may seem like the only option to alleviate economic hardship. It reduces the number of mouths to feed or in some places provides extra income in the form of a bride price.<sup>vii viii</sup>
- Families living in crisis-affected contexts often anticipate a rise in violence and see marriage as a way to protect girls, despite the fact that married girls face increased sexual violence within marriage. In many communities, female sexuality and virginity are associated with family honour and parents marry their daughters young to guarantee their virginity at marriage.<sup>ix</sup>
- In conflict, child marriage also happens against parents' wishes, as explained later in this brief.
- Because the reasons for child marriage in different contexts vary greatly, it is critical to understand a particular crisis context and tailor solutions accordingly.



## Child marriage and conflict

Conflict devastates millions of lives across the world, forcing families to adopt negative coping mechanisms to survive. It places women and girls at increased risk of sexual violence. Rape, torture and forced prostitution, sometimes under the guise of “marriage”, have been reported to be used as weapons of war weakening families and communities often with impunity from the law.<sup>x</sup>

- In Yemen, child marriage has increased at an alarming rate. Over 65% of girls are married off before 18, compared to 50% before the conflict.<sup>xi</sup>
- In Iraq and Syria, terrorist groups have abducted girls and women as ‘spoils of war’ to be raped, sold, offered, and forced into marriage. The Yazidi minority has been particularly affected.<sup>xii</sup>
- In war torn Somalia in 2010 and 2011, girls were abducted from school and forced to marry fighters of the Islamist armed group al-Shabaab. Parents refusing to give their daughters away were threatened or killed.<sup>xiii</sup>
- In Nigeria, the Islamist group Boko Haram uses similar practices as shown by the example of over 270 school girls who were abducted in 2014 and subjected to various forms of violence including child marriage.<sup>xiv</sup>
- In some contexts, families use child marriage to try to protect girls from other types of violence. During the war in Sri Lanka, parents believed that the armed group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) would not recruit married girls.<sup>xv</sup>

## Child marriage and displacement

Conflict drives displacement around the world. In some cases families flee conflict zones because of the risks that girls face in such contexts. Displacement itself can also increase girls' vulnerability to child marriage due to the breakdown of social networks, the lack of other protection systems, and the risks of sexual violence.

- In the Kobane refugee community in Turkey, families reported fleeing partly to protect girls from sexual violence and forced marriage to armed combatants.<sup>xvi</sup>
- In Syrian refugee communities in Jordan, child marriage has rapidly increased. Between 2011 and 2014, the rates of registered child marriages almost tripled, from 12% to just under 32%.<sup>xvii</sup> Protection of family honour and control of girls' sexuality were major drivers in this context.<sup>xviii</sup>
- In Lebanon, 41% of young displaced Syrian women are married before 18.<sup>xix</sup>
- In displacement contexts in the Middle-East and in Europe, girls who divorce following a child marriage are left stigmatised and marginalised by their community.<sup>xx</sup>
- In Chad, thousands of cases of sexual and gender-based violence among refugees were reported in 2016. Child marriage is the most commonly reported form

of violence among young Sudanese and Central African refugee girls.<sup>xxi</sup>

- In northern Cameroon and Nigeria, families facing extreme poverty in internally displaced populations and refugee camps often marry off their girls because of a lack of other alternatives and the breakdown of social networks. In northern Cameroon marriage is also used as a way to recover family debts.<sup>xxii</sup>
- In India, Malaysia and Indonesia, many Rohingya women and girls who fled persecution in Myanmar became child brides and faced domestic violence within marriage. In Malaysia, child marriage is also arranged by brokers, with higher risks of being used as a cover for human trafficking.<sup>xxiii</sup>
- In Afghanistan, where thousands of refugees were repatriated from Pakistan in 2016, child marriage was identified as a major risk for returnee children who are not in school.<sup>xxiv</sup>
- The reasons and trends of child marriage in these contexts are complex and can vary over time. For example, in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, child marriage first decreased among internally displaced populations, as people became so poor that they couldn't afford the cost of a marriage. However, more recently, child marriage has increased among populations that escaped from Mosul. As single girls were at high risk of sexual violence by ISIS fighters in Mosul, families (even the more educated ones) saw child marriage as a form of protection.<sup>xxv</sup>

### Child marriage and natural disasters

Over the last few decades, the number of natural disasters has been increasing,<sup>xxvi</sup> which threaten access to basic services for girls such as education, thus adding to the risk of child marriage. Several countries with high vulnerability to climate change also have high child marriage rates.<sup>xxvii</sup>

- Following the 2004 tsunami, girls in Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka were forced into marriage with tsunami widowers and in many instances did so to receive state subsidies for marrying and starting a family.<sup>xxviii</sup>
- In Bangladesh and northeast India, extreme poverty and difficult access to education provoked by river erosion and floods often pushed families to adopt child marriage as a survival strategy.<sup>xxix</sup> Organisations working in urban slums in Dhaka saw many girls abandon school and migrate to work in the garment industry or as maids, and face high risks of sexual abuse in the slums. Most never returned to school and got married.<sup>xxx</sup>
- In Nepal, anecdotal evidence has shown an increase in gender-based violence and child marriage following the earthquake in 2015.<sup>xxxi</sup>
- In Somaliland and Mozambique, research suggests drought drives child marriage because marrying a girl off frees the family from providing for her.<sup>xxxii</sup> This contrasts with Ethiopia, where community members suggested that drought was one of the reasons for a

reduction in child marriage as families could not afford to organise weddings.<sup>xxxiii xxxiv</sup>



***In the last few years we've seen growing evidence that girls in humanitarian situations are particularly vulnerable to child marriage. Lakshmi Sundaram, Executive Director, Girls Not Brides.***

## What is being done to address child marriage in such settings?

There is still much to be done to address child marriage in humanitarian settings. Examples of the type of approaches *Girls Not Brides* members and partners are implementing include:

- Identifying girls at risk and girls who are already married, understanding their needs, and adapting programmes accordingly.** In South Sudan, the Women's Refugee Commission is piloting a mobile tool designed by the Population Council – the Girls' Roster – to help identify girls at risks and their needs.<sup>xxxv xxxvi</sup> In Lebanon, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) designed a package of life-skills sessions tailored to the needs of married girls, following their study on child marriage in the Bekaa region.<sup>xxxvii</sup> In various humanitarian settings, CARE International uses "Rapid Gender Analyses" to learn about why child marriage happens in different crisis settings, and identify key actors in the response. This helps them and their local partners to target the risk factors for child marriage.<sup>xxxviii</sup>
- Offering alternatives to marriage by providing safe spaces and services to girls.** For instance, the Protecting and Empowering Displaced Adolescent Girls Initiative, implemented by the Women's Refugee Commission in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda, the Non-Formal Education Centres set up by Plan International in Pakistan in 2010, and ALVF's service provision centre in the Langui refugee camp in Cameroon, all offered alternatives to child marriage in post-conflict or post-disaster settings. Services included safe spaces, access to non-formal education including life skills and discussion of gender-related issues, health and legal services, and financial literacy courses for married girls and out-of-school girls living in refugee camps.<sup>xxxix xl</sup>

- Incorporating child marriage as a key issue into other sectors.** In Iraq, Terre des Hommes has integrated child marriage as a key issue in their child protection work. They provide case management<sup>xli</sup> to refugee, internally displaced and host communities, discuss it through theatre in their child-friendly spaces, and work with girls and families to promote girls' education. As part of their broader work on gender-based violence, the organisation Women for Afghan Women provides shelter to both girls at risk of child marriage and girls who are already married. They respond to their urgent needs and refer them to appropriate services.

- Running awareness sessions on child marriage with community members in refugee populations.** Save the Children and CARE have adopted this approach with the Syrian refugees in Jordan and Turkey.<sup>xlii</sup> The interagency Amani Campaign developed for the Syrian crisis response uses behavioural and social change communication and contains key messages for communities, children and parents, on how to better protect children and adults from violence, including child marriage.<sup>xliii</sup>





## What more needs to be done to address child marriage in humanitarian settings?

Despite these initiatives, child marriage is not adequately addressed in situations of crisis. Considered a development issue, the practice fails to be addressed within the humanitarian sector, and is not well understood. The following recommendations have emerged clearly from *Girls Not Brides* members:

### Recognise child marriage as a critical issue in times of crisis as well as in times of stability

Child marriage has devastating consequences for girls in these settings. It deprives them of any chance of a bright future after a crisis. Child marriage is caused by a complex set of factors that take root in more stable contexts and are exacerbated in times of crisis.

Humanitarian and development efforts to prevent child marriage and enable girls to thrive must be complementary. In June 2017, a [Human Rights Council resolution](#) recognised for the first time the need to address child marriage in humanitarian settings. However, more needs to be done to achieve widespread recognition and ensure child marriage is on the agenda of humanitarian actors.

### Identify risk factors for child marriage by involving adolescent girls from the early stages of crises and including their issues in assessments and planning

Better programming requires gender-sensitive assessments from the early stages of crises. These assessments should be carried out by trained staff and informed by mapping and participatory consultations with girls, including married girls, who are often especially vulnerable and isolated.<sup>xliv</sup> Key community members that have a major influence on adolescent girls' lives should also be engaged to ensure comprehensive assessments.

### Integrate child marriage prevention and support to married girls across sectors in any humanitarian response from the early onset of crises

Child marriage is a cross-cutting issue, which requires coordinated action across all sectors from the earliest stage of crises. The lack of a framework to address child marriage within emergency management systems and structures aggravates the problem. Examples of responses that can be integrated and, which address both the risk factors for child marriage and support and services for married girls include:

- Provide services to adolescent girls - e.g. access to quality non-formal education, reestablishment of formal education as soon as possible after a crisis; safe spaces coupled with life skills programmes; economic empowerment; alternatives to marriage; access to comprehensive health information and services including sexual and reproductive health and psychosocial counselling; support to victims of sexual and gender-based violence; legal support; access to asylum seeking process, etc.
- Consider girls' safety and well-being in all other services - e.g. lighting and security in places such as detention centres, water points, and latrines; dignity kits, changing rooms; attention to distances to schools and health services, etc.
- Ensure that families' basic needs are met and that they have the resources to care for their daughters without turning to child marriage as a coping strategy.
- Increase efforts to keep families together where possible in order to avoid the breakdown of social networks, especially among displaced populations.
- Work with families, communities and young people to address social and cultural norms which influence decisions of child marriage.<sup>xlv</sup>
- Recruit female humanitarian staff on the ground and train all staff - including camp managers - to be able to address issues faced by adolescent girls.

### Invest in the evaluation of programmes addressing child marriage

More funding should support efforts to pilot and evaluate programmes to understand what works to address child marriage in these settings. More research is also needed to understand how different types of crises affect child marriage. Reliable data disaggregated by marital status, gender and age should be collected to understand the

needs and risks of girls affected by crises, including for adolescents in the 10-14 age range. Field research and quality data analysis is critical to understand how programmes can be adapted for such situations.



This brief was originally developed in May 2016 with the input of a number of Girls Not Brides members working on child marriage in humanitarian contexts. It was updated in August 2017 to incorporate new insights from the field and in October 2017. It should be read with this brief: [Taking action to address child marriage: the role of different sectors: conflict and humanitarian crisis](#), which includes indicators for tracking progress.

## End notes

<sup>i</sup> Burkina Faso, Bangladesh, Chad, Central African Republic, Guinea, Mali, Mozambique, Niger and South Sudan are listed as fragile states as defined by OECD. See definition in [States of Fragility 2016: understanding violence](#), 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Child marriage rates are about 40% in Somalia, Ethiopia and Nigeria, above 50% in South Sudan and Mali, and almost 70% in Chad and Central African Republic. Moreover, the lack of nationally representative data in conflict areas such as Syria and Yemen means that child marriage rates might be underestimated those countries.

<sup>iii</sup> By “humanitarian settings” we mean contexts of sudden onset or protracted conflicts or natural disasters, contexts in which other events represent a critical threat to the health, safety and wellbeing of communities (e.g. epidemics, famine and environmental emergencies), and situations of forced migration resulting from these events.

<sup>iv</sup> See *Girls Not Brides list of useful resources* on child marriage in humanitarian crises.

<sup>v</sup> UNHCR, [Evaluation of UNHCR's Emergency Response to the influx of Syrian Refugees into Turkey](#), 2016

<sup>vi</sup> See definition of “crisis” by [World Health Organisation](#) (2007).

<sup>vii</sup> Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, [Fragile States, Fragile Lives Child Marriage Amid Disaster and Conflict](#), 2014 (accessed March 2016).

<sup>viii</sup> In many communities, the groom’s family has to pay a certain amount of money to the bride’s family. A *Girls Not Brides* member working in Middle-East and Asia reported that the bride price is critical in parent’s decision to marry off their daughters in Afghanistan and Papua New Guinea.

<sup>ix</sup> CARE UK, [To Protect Her Honour: child marriage in emergencies, the fatal confusion between protecting girls and sexual violence](#), 2015.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid; World Vision UK, [Untying the knot: exploring early marriage in fragile states](#), 2013.

<sup>xi</sup> Female respondents aged 15 to 49 years in six governorates. UNICEF, [Falling through the cracks. The Children of Yemen](#), 2017.

<sup>xii</sup> UNFPA, [State of the World Population 2015. Shelter for the storm: a transformative agenda for women and girls in a crisis-prone world](#), 2015.

<sup>xiii</sup> Human Rights Watch, [No place for children: child recruitment, forced marriage, and attacks on schools in Somalia](#).

<sup>xiv</sup> Human Rights Watch, [Those terrible weeks in their camp: Boko Haram violence against women and girls in northeast Nigeria](#), 2014; New York Times, Stephanie Sinclair “[Child, bride, mother: Nigeria](#)”, 27 January 2017

<sup>xv</sup> FOKUS Women, [Post war trends in child marriage, Sri Lanka](#), 2015.

<sup>xvi</sup> Op.cit. CARE UK, 2015.

<sup>xvii</sup> UNICEF, [A Study on Early Marriage in Jordan](#), 2014.

<sup>xviii</sup> Op.cit. CARE UK, 2015.

<sup>xix</sup> [Lebanon crisis response plan 2017-2020](#).

<sup>xx</sup> Conversation with *Girls Not Brides* members in the region; CNN “[Saving Syrian refugees from early marriage](#)” 21 February 2017; The Global and Mail “[For Syrian refugees, child marriage robs a generation of its future](#)” 31 March 2017

<sup>xxi</sup> UNHCR, [2016 Annual report on SGBV incidents among refugees in Chad](#).

<sup>xxii</sup> Conversations with *Girls Not Brides* members, 2016 - 2017

<sup>xxiii</sup> Survey with 85 Rohingya women and girls conducted by UNHCR. Thomson Reuters Foundation “[Over half of Rohingya girls who fled violence became child brides - UN survey](#)” 4 May 2017.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Save the children, “[thousands of children face early marriage and child labour as education crisis takes hold among afghan children repatriated from Pakistan](#)”, 14 December 2016

<sup>xxv</sup> Conversation with a member of *Girls Not Brides* in Iraq, 2017.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Ninety a year in the 1970s and almost 450 a year in the last decade, as cited in Plan International, [Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2013. In Double Jeopardy: Adolescent Girls and Disasters](#), 2013.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Conversation with *Girls Not Brides* members from Bangladesh citing Center for Global Development, “[Mapping the impacts of climate change](#)”.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Op. Cit. Plan International, 2013.

<sup>xxix</sup> Human Rights Watch, [Marry before your house is sept away: child marriage in Bangladesh](#), 2015; *Girls Not Brides*, “[How is climate change driving child marriage?](#)” 2017; R.Mohan, “[Trouble Waters: child brides in flood-ravaged Assam](#)”, India” Aljazeera America, December 19, 2014.

<sup>xxx</sup> Conversation with *Girls Not Brides* members in Bangladesh, 2017.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Experience from two *Girls Not Brides* members working in Nepal.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Op.cit. World Vision UK, 2013; CARE, [Hope dries up? Women and Girls coping with Drought and Climate Change in Mozambique](#), 2016.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Conversation with CARE International UK – the relation between drought and child marriage has been explored during a rapid assessment carried out by CARE in the region in 2016.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Similarly, evidence from Niger showed that the food crisis led in increase of child marriage in some communities and decrease in others (Op. Cit. Plan International, [The State of the World's Girls 2013](#)).

<sup>xxxv</sup> Women’s Refugee Commission, [I’m Here: Adolescent girls in emergencies, approach and tools for improved response](#), 2015; [Case study in South Sudan](#).

<sup>xxxvi</sup> The Women’s Refugee Commission also partners with International Medical Corps, International Rescue Committee and Danish Refugee Council to pilot interventions to prevent and respond to child marriage in multiple humanitarian contexts..

<sup>xxxvii</sup> IRC, [interactive format](#) of a study about child marriage in the Beeka region, Lebanon, 2016.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Conversation with CARE International UK, 2017.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Op.cit. ICRW and *Girls Not Brides* brief, 2016.

<sup>xl</sup> Department for International Development, briefing paper, [Violence against women and girls in humanitarian emergencies](#), October 2013.

<sup>xli</sup> GBV Case management is a structured method for providing help to a survivor of violence. It involves informing survivors of all the options available to them, following up on the issues that they face in a coordinated way, and providing emotional support throughout the process. [Interagency case management guidelines](#), 2017.

<sup>xlii</sup> Save the children, [Submission to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights \(OHCHR\) report on Child, Early and Forced marriage](#), UNGA Resolution 69/156, February 2016. Op.cit. CARE UK, 2015, pp.4-5

<sup>xliiii</sup> Save the children, [Amani Campaign: Interagency child protection and GBV campaign](#).

<sup>xliiv</sup> Although the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Gender Marker assesses whether a humanitarian intervention works towards gender equality is also a positive step for more gender-sensitive action,

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it does not include an age distinction to help capture efforts towards adolescent girls.

<sup>xiv</sup> E.g. bridging development and humanitarian practices by implementing community-based interventions involving community dialogues and collective process of questioning harmful social norms.

## Photographs

In order of appearance and copyright:

- Somali women and their children wait in a line outside the registration and food distribution point at the IFO camp, part of the Dadaab refugee camp. Hossein Fatemi/Panos.
- Sunday, 18 was captured by Boko Haram but managed to escape. Her mother and sister are still missing. Chris de Bode/Panos.
- A young girl wades through flood waters in Bangladesh to get to her class. She has exams coming up so must persevere. GMB Akash/Panos.
- Rohingya refugees walk through at partly flooded Balukhali camp at dusk. Tommy Trenchard/Panos.
- Young girls jumping skipping ropes in a child protective space at a UNICEF camp for flood affected people, Pakistan. Warrick Page/Panos.
- Syrian refugee girls in an English class in Jordan. Giacomo Pirozzi/Panos.