

# Child marriage in humanitarian settings:

## Spotlight on the situation in the Arab region





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**Sustainable development goal 5.3**

**Human Rights Council resolution on child marriage in humanitarian settings**

**Key resolutions on child, early and forced marriage**

**“My ambitions and hopes have changed totally here in Jordan, we sacrificed our kids’ education so we can live, to save money for living.... We never thought about getting our daughters married in Syria; they were good at school, but here we are thinking of getting them married to decrease the disbursements.... ”. <sup>8</sup>**

--quote from a Syrian father displaced in Jordan

**Sustainable Development Goal 5.3**

Child marriage is the formal marriage or informal union of any child under 18 years of age<sup>1</sup>. Child marriage is considered a violation of human rights and a form of violence against children and women<sup>2</sup>. In recognition of this, Sustainable Development Goal 5.3<sup>3</sup>, calls for the elimination of all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage, which predominantly, but not exclusively, affects girls.

**Human Rights Council Resolution on Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings**

The 2017 Human Rights Council Resolution on Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings recognizes child marriage as a violation of human rights and calls for strengthened efforts to prevent and eliminate this harmful practice and support married girls in humanitarian contexts. It urges states to ensure access to protection, health and education services for girls who have been forced to flee violence and persecution or who are unaccompanied or separated, including protection and response to the practice of child, early and forced marriage.<sup>4</sup>

**Why is child marriage an important concern in humanitarian settings?**

Child marriage can result in devastating consequences for girls including sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV, risky pregnancies, lifelong birth related complications, sexual and reproductive health diseases, not to mention maternal mortality and higher risk of domestic violence<sup>5, 6</sup>. Emerging evidence tells us that the risk of child marriage is exacerbated in

humanitarian crisis. According to a recent multi-country secondary analysis conducted by UNICEF and ESCWA on the impact of conflict on children, child marriage was one of the issues identified to be most sensitive to conflict in some countries.<sup>7</sup> In the MENA region, nine countries<sup>8</sup> face or are impacted by humanitarian crisis. Despite this, child marriage programming is often not prioritized in humanitarian settings. This causes risk of serious set-backs in the gains made by countries affected by child marriage, including in countries that were on track to eliminate child marriage before the crisis erupted.

**Early pregnancies in humanitarian conflicts**

Ninety percent of early first births happen within the context of child marriage, and girls between 15 and 19 years of age are far more likely to experience complications during pregnancy and childbirth than those over twenty.<sup>9</sup> Conditions for pregnancy and childbearing are worsened for girls and women living in conflict settings, and many may turn to unsafe abortion when facing an unplanned pregnancy. UNFPA estimates that, worldwide, 25 to 50 per cent of maternal deaths in refugee settings are due to complications of unsafe abortions.<sup>10</sup>

According to a recent multi-country study conducted by UNFPA and ESCWA on child marriage in humanitarian setting in the Arab States, during crisis access to health services is drastically hindered.<sup>11</sup> Young girls are especially prone to this challenge, and may be the least positioned or placed to have a say in what sexual and reproductive health services they require, with little choice of what services to access. As a result, countries in conflict may see a rise in adolescent fertility rates or unsafe abortions.

## What do we know about child marriage in humanitarian settings in the Arab States region?

Gender in-equality is a root cause of child marriage both in stable contexts and in situations of crisis. In times of crisis, there are various factors that exacerbate the risk of child marriage, with a disproportionate impact on girls. Faced with insecurity, increased risks of sexual and gender-based violence and the break-down of rule of law, families and parents may see child marriage as a coping mechanism to deal with increased economic hardship, to protect girls from sexual violence, and/or to protect the honour of the family in response to the disruption of social networks and routines.<sup>12</sup> In addition, forced child marriage is used as a tactic in conflict.<sup>13</sup>

Crisis severely impacts on the mobility of girls, who according to studies, conducted in the MENA/ Arab States region,<sup>14</sup> are the first to be pulled out of school for security reasons.<sup>15</sup> As such the physical threat of crisis limits girls access to education. Limited education and increased confinement leads to increasing the sense that the girls in the family will become a financial burden.<sup>16</sup> This in turn limits access to medical care, sexual and reproductive health-care, psycho-social support and other protection mechanisms.

As such, driving factors of child marriage include poverty and the challenges of providing for an adolescent girl, the perceived protection that marriage provides, increased gender inequalities, poor educational access, high level of girls remaining 'inactive' at home and the perception that marriage is a positive transition for girls with limited options.<sup>17 18 19 20 21 22 23</sup> Furthermore, conflict and its related displacement have altered the social process of marriage resulting in shorter engagement periods, lower bride prices, change in cousin marriage practices, and a reduced age at first marriage.<sup>24</sup>

Research undertaken in the past 5 years by different agencies and in different locations in conflict affected countries, has indicated that rates of child marriage has increased among displaced populations.<sup>25</sup> Although survey data acquired through the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys or Demographic and Health Surveys exist on rates of child marriage in the Arab States region, are limited<sup>26</sup> in reflecting the rates during, or resulting from conflict, other studies are indicating that conflict has a severe impact on child marriage.

In Iraq and Syria, in particular, armed groups and militias have systematically abducted girls and women and used rape, slavery, forced marriage as 'weapons of war' The Yazidi minority has been particularly affected.<sup>27,28</sup>

**"I don't have anyone to resort to. My parents are dead and my brothers are not here. One of them died, the second lives in Za'tari Camp, and the third is in Canada. I don't have anyone to resort to here."**<sup>8</sup>

quote from a Syrian mother of 6 boys and 9 girls currently living in Jordan

## How do conflict-affected settings affect the drivers of child marriage

It is estimated by the UNHCR that, partly due to the protracted nature of the 'crisis', 86% of Syrian refugees now live below the poverty line in Jordan. Does this mean that all families living below the poverty line agree to any proposals of marriage made to their daughters under 18 years of age?

Does this mean that those living above the poverty line would not consider any proposals of marriage made to their daughters under 18 years of age? Similar interrogations can be made to all the drivers that appear to underpin child marriage in situations of forced displacement, and we know very little about girls and families who are vulnerable to, or at risk of, child marriage, but whom decide not to marry before 18 years of age.

## FORCED MARRIAGE OF GIRLS WITH ARMED GROUP FIGHTERS IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT<sup>29</sup>

In Syria, incidents of sexual violence against children attributed to belligerents remain highly under-reported. The Security Council-mandated Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on grave violations against children for Syria documented cases of girls, as young as eight years old, and boys, as young as 12 years old, having been subjected to rape, gang rape, trafficking and sexual enslavement, sexual assault while deprived of liberty, threats of sexual violence, and forced marriage to armed group fighters.

Since early 2014, the forced marriage of girls to armed group fighters and resulting sexual exploitation became commonplace, with the parents often coerced to comply. Accounts are recurrent of fighters demanding girls for marriage, in circumstances where it would be dangerous for the victims and their families to refuse. In some cases, however, girls or their families are persuaded by women delegations conducting home visits or through financial incentives. Negative coping mechanisms emerged to protect girls from forced marriage to fighters, including restricting their movement outside the home and early marriage.

Towards the end of 2014, Yazidi girls captured in Sinjar, Iraq, were trafficked into Syria, where they were openly sold and used as sex slaves. The enslaved girls were forced by fighters to self-identify by not covering their heads. Around the same period, official guidance was issued on the justifications for and the treatment of captured sex slaves, including children. Girls forcibly married to fighters seldom know their husband's true name and are frequently divorced or abandoned, when the fighters are re-deployed to other areas or return to their countries of origin. Of the girls, forcibly married fighters, some are married multiple times, either through temporary marriages or after the 'husband' was killed in combat. In the context of territorial losses, many of the girls moved along with their fighter 'husbands', putting them at physical risk, including airstrikes and use for suicide bombings.

## Yemen 2016 KAP survey indicating increase in child marriage during conflict

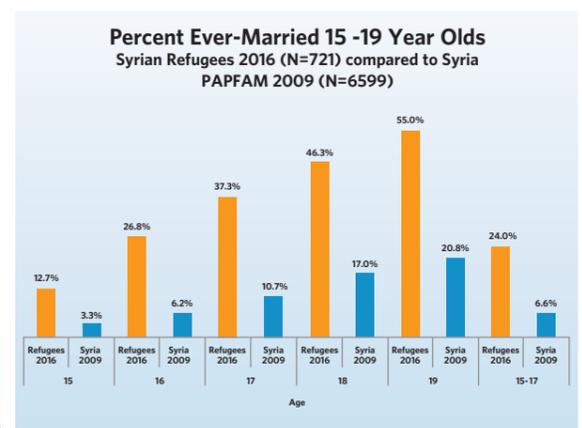
A 2016 UNICEF KAP survey from Yemen, administered with women aged 15-49 years old and men aged 18-60 years old in 30 communities across 6 governorates, indicates that a higher number of girls gets married early during the current war. **66% of women respondents cited dramatic increase of child marriage** as opposed to men who denied such change. The results show that 72,5% of females responded they got married before they reached 18 years, while 44,5 % responded they got married at the age of 15 years.<sup>30</sup> Respondents indicated that the high rate of child marriages among IDP girls is driven by the need of their families for money after the loss of their property and homes, and the worsening living conditions they face where a lot of them cannot access adequate housing and food. Economic conditions contribute too in reducing dowries paid to IDP girls, which encourages members in the host communities step in and marry young IDP girls paying little in return.<sup>31</sup>

### Increase in child marriage among Syrian refugees

A national household survey undertaken in Lebanon in 2015/16 found child marriage rates as high as 40% among Syrian refugees in Lebanon. This survey also found a two-fold increase in child marriage in Lebanese host communities.<sup>32</sup>

A 2016 UNFPA study from Beeka Lebanon<sup>33</sup> shows a clear increase in child marriage among Syrian refugees compared to the prevalence rate among Syrians from 2009. This suggests that Syrian refugees are more inclined to marry their girls at an early age, as compared to when they were living in Syria before the crisis erupted.

Data collected for Jordan's Population fund and Family Population and Family Health surveys show the same trend. While these surveys cannot show trends in child marriage amongst Syrian refugees because they were not included in the sampling frame until 2012, trends can be estimated using marriage registration data. According to UNICEF, 12.0 per cent of registered marriages amongst Syrians in 2011 involved a girl under the age of 18. This figure increased to 18.4 per cent in 2012, 25.0 per cent in 2013 and 31.7 per cent in the first quarter of 2014. Child marriages as a percentage of all registered marriages have therefore increased steadily and significantly for Syrian girls whilst the rates for other nationalities have held steady or slightly declined.<sup>34</sup>



### What's being done to address child marriage in the Arab states region?

UNICEF and UNFPA in collaboration with a consortium of partners established under the **Regional Accountability Framework of Action to End Child Marriage in Arab States/ Middle East and North Africa (RAF)** is prioritising efforts to end child marriage in the region including in humanitarian settings.

The *RAF Partnership* comprising CARE, ESCWA, Girls not Brides, Oxfam, Plan, Save the Children, Terre des hommes (Tdh), UNICEF, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNRWA, UNWOMEN, World Vision, and Women's Refugee Commission (WRC), was developed under the leadership of UNICEF and UNFPA as part of the Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage.<sup>35</sup> Extensive consultation with these partners at country and regional level identified key priorities and evidenced based strategies to address child marriage in humanitarian settings. These reflect the approaches taken in MENA/Arab States region to address child marriage both in development and humanitarian settings.

To programme on child marriage in humanitarian settings in the MENA/Arab States region, barriers to programme implementation and security threats need to be addressed. The **RAF** identifies five key strategies in line with the Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage:

**Empowering and strengthening girls' voices and agency through education, health services, life skills and economic opportunities.**

Ensure access to education, health, life skills initiatives, psycho-social support and economic opportunities for girls at risk of child marriage by using existing platforms such as schools or safe spaces. Ensure that services are safe and empowering to reduce risks of marriage in humanitarian crisis. Promote girls' education, access to health services and opportunities for economic strengthening in emergencies through cash-based programming, where feasible. Create opportunities of engagement and ensure girls voices are heard through accountability for affected populations mechanisms.

**GOALS BY 2021**

- At least 3 countries with gender-responsive scalable programmes on life skills and citizenship education.
- At least 3 countries with scalable programmes to increase girls access to education, health, protection including psycho-social support and social protection services, in areas with high prevalence of child marriage
- At least 3 countries will have in place mechanisms to provide a range of opportunities for girl's participation including through accountability for affected populations mechanisms. Regional partnerships, networks and platforms will be in place, mobilized and leveraged to increase support and coordination of work to end child marriage in the region.

**Engage with household and communities to change social norms and behaviours**

In the face of crisis, existing negative social norms and behaviours are often exacerbated or altered. Change social norms and behaviours that promote child marriage, including economic and social inequities and cultural norms through continued investment in behaviour-change interventions. Ensure that humanitarian response programmes address the underlying drivers and norms of inequality and resilience building through a gender transformative agenda.

**GOALS BY 2021**

- At least 4 countries are implementing evidence-based programmes in targeted areas that address and measure changes in practices and social norms related to child marriage

**Promote cross-sectoral engagement to scale**

Diversify entry points to address child marriage prevention and response through engagement with other sectors as an opportunity during emergency contexts to expand and scale up interventions with a focus on health, education, protection and social protection.

**GOALS BY 2021**

- At least 4 countries will have in place cross-sectoral plans to deliver quality and cost-effective services to meet the needs of adolescent girls

**Strengthen evidence generation**

Ensure that research gaps are closed by coordination of research on child marriage in the region through a Regional Research Reference Group. Strengthen monitoring and evaluation of child marriage interventions through provision of training, guidance and tools, and strengthen availability of routine national and sub-national representative data on child marriage in humanitarian settings. Generate reliable and robust evidence on child marriage to inform advocacy, policy and programming.

**GOALS BY 2021**

- At least 3 countries will have increased knowledge, capacities and access to mechanisms that can generate reliable evidence to prevent and address child marriage in humanitarian settings
- At least 4 countries will have reliable and robust evidence on child marriage to address data gaps and inform advocacy, policy, and programming on what works in humanitarian settings

**Strengthen legal and policy frameworks**

Work on legal and policy reform is challenging in humanitarian contexts given the protracted nature of many emergencies in MENA. Promote resilience programming with focus on systems strengthening and social work force capacity. Integrate child marriage in emergency preparedness planning to address policy gaps.

**GOALS BY 2021**

- At least 4 countries have strengthened systems and social work force capacity at central, local and community level.
- At least 4 countries integrate child marriage in emergency preparedness planning to address policy gaps

**Joint Action: A regional reference group on research**

UNFPA and UNICEF, in partnership with WRC, Tdh, CARE, University of Bedfordshire, Johns Hopkins University, and the Lebanese American University launched, in 2018, a regional reference group on research with the aim to:

- Standardize data collection and evidence generation tools and methodologies used in research in the region, in order to have comparable data
- Identify key research gaps in the Arab States for future research to improve programming
- Provide specific support to organizations undertaking research in the Arab States region, in terms of technical advisory on the scope, methodology and potential partners
- Leverage existing resources and mobilize new funds to address emerging research questions and improve programming
- Exchange knowledge, data, best practices through yearly evidence symposium
- Build local organizations' capacities on quality data collection and analysis

**End Notes:**

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