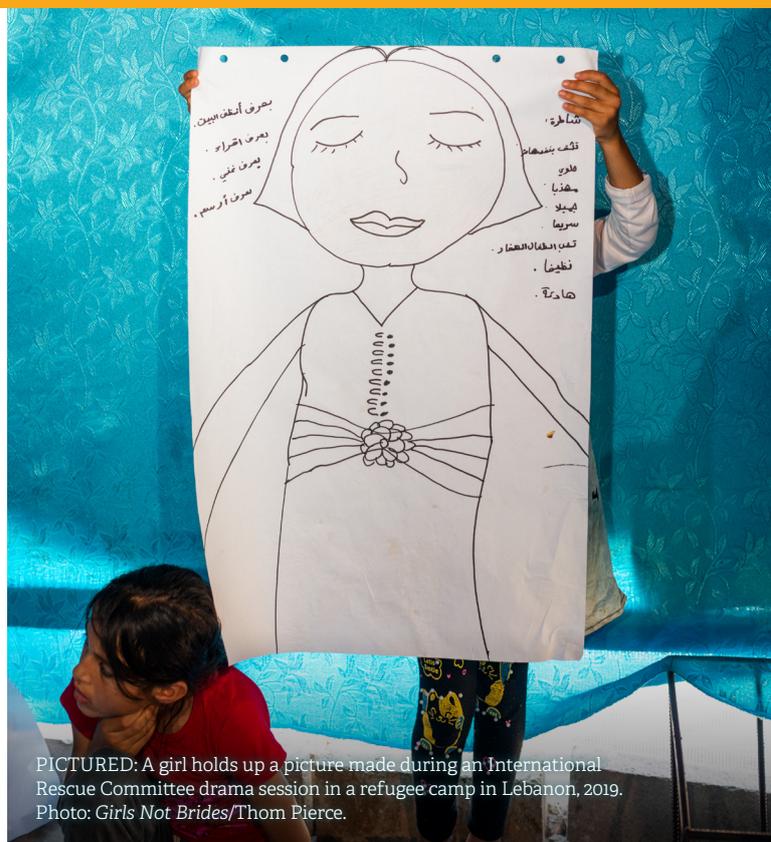


# PREVENTING CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE IS POSSIBLE AND REQUIRES URGENT ACTION

Adolescent girls are at increased risk of sexual violence and child marriage in conflict-affected settings, as social norms that discriminate against girls are exacerbated by rising violence and insecurity. This brief explores the drivers of conflict-related sexual violence and child marriage, presents evidence on what works to address it from around the world, and offers recommendations for advocacy, policy, programming, research, and UN Agencies and cluster leads.



PICTURED: A girl holds up a picture made during an International Rescue Committee drama session in a refugee camp in Lebanon, 2019. Photo: Girls Not Brides/Thom Pierce.

## Key messages

- 1) **Child marriage<sup>a</sup> considerations urgently need to be integrated into conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and gender-based violence (GBV) prevention strategies in conflict- and crisis-affected settings.** Greater attention needs to be paid to GBV – including CRSV and child marriage – in crisis-affected settings overall.
- 2) **CRSV and child marriage are preventable**, as demonstrated by the What Works to End Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) programme.<sup>1</sup> Funding is now needed to develop the evidence base on what works to prevent CRSV and child marriage in crisis-affected settings.
- 3) **Women's rights organisations are on the front line of preventing and responding to CRSV and child marriage;** they need flexible, multi-year, core funding to sustain their critical work.
- 4) **CRSV, including forced marriage, is a human rights abuse, and can constitute a violation of international humanitarian law and a war crime.** Impunity is widespread, despite significant progress in enshrining CRSV as a violation of international criminal law,<sup>2</sup> and the first conviction of forced marriage as a crime against humanity by the International Criminal Court in 2021.<sup>3</sup>
- 5) **A survivor-centred approach should be employed across all programmes and services,** which should be inclusive of and accessible to groups that have been marginalised, including adolescent girls; married, divorced and widowed girls; girls and women with disabilities; and LGBTQIA+ people.
- 6) **Protection is the foundation for girls' and women's full, equal and meaningful participation in political, social, economic and peacebuilding processes,** which in turn is critical to ending CRSV.
- 7) **Increased funding for violence and child marriage prevention programmes in the Global South is urgently needed to tackle all forms of GBV,** including emotional and physical abuse as a consequence of GBV, CRSV and child marriage.

<sup>a</sup>We use the term "child marriage" to refer to all forms of child, early and forced marriage and unions where at least one party is under the age of 18. In this, we include all girls and adolescents affected by the practice – whether in formal or informal unions – and acknowledge the culturally-specific understandings of childhood and development, and the complex relationship between age, consent and force.

## Setting the scene - child marriage causes and consequences

### Key facts

- **One in five** women currently aged 20 to 24 were married before age 18.<sup>4</sup>
- Despite recent declines in child marriage, an estimated **12 million** girls married before age 18 in 2022.<sup>5</sup>
- Globally, **27%** of women aged 15 to 49 who have been in a relationship report having experienced physical or sexual violence by their intimate partner.<sup>6</sup>

**Child marriage is a global issue that threatens the lives, well-being and futures of girls and adolescents around the world.** While specific drivers vary by context, child marriage is consistently rooted in gender inequality and fuelled by poverty, social norms, insecurity and barriers to education. Girls facing multiple intersecting forms of marginalisation and discrimination are often the most at risk of child marriage, and the least likely to access support once married.

**The impact of child marriage can be devastating and lifelong.**<sup>7</sup> It can place children and adolescents at high risk of violence and abuse. Girls who are married or in a union are often forced to leave school and typically struggle to return due to increased domestic duties, stigma and legal exclusion. This has a knock-on effect on their ability to secure reliable work, make informed decisions, access health services – including critical sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and mental health services – and live independent lives.<sup>8</sup>

Married girls are often physically and emotionally isolated with little access to emotional and mental health support, especially if they are out of school. Negative health consequences can include maternal mortality or morbidity, sexually transmitted infections – including HIV – and higher rates of under-five child mortality.<sup>9</sup> Child marriage has been recognised as a gendered practice that can negatively impact virtually all aspects of girls' and women's human rights by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; this is the basis for the 2023 Human Rights Council Resolution on forced marriage.<sup>10</sup>

**The interconnectedness of child marriage – to gender inequality, education, livelihoods, health rights, social norms and beyond – is increasingly recognised** as a means of problem diagnosis and treatment, in humanitarian and development settings and across this nexus.

## Child marriage and GBV in conflict- and crisis-affected settings

### Key facts

- **8 out of 10** countries with the highest child marriage prevalence are experiencing humanitarian crises.<sup>11</sup>
- GBV affects **over 70%** of women in some crisis settings,<sup>12</sup> compared with 35% worldwide.<sup>13</sup>
- For every woman who comes forward to report sexual violence during conflict, an estimated **10 to 20** cases go undocumented and unaddressed.<sup>14</sup>
- About **72 million** children impacted by crisis are out of school; 53% are girls, 17% have functional difficulties, and 21% are forcibly displaced.<sup>15</sup>

**Child marriage prevalence in states experiencing fragility is almost double the global average, and child marriage often rises in conflict-affected communities.**<sup>16</sup>

These increases are due to intensified drivers of GBV and child marriage in times of stress and uncertainty – including social norms that uphold patriarchal systems and gender inequality – compounded with context-specific drivers of GBV like the loss and breakdown of individual, formal and customary support systems. In the face of displacement, conflict and instability, families can see child marriage as a way to respond to economic uncertainty, or to protect girls from the increased risk of violence. In some contexts, child marriage is used as a weapon of war by armed groups, and can serve as a cover for human trafficking.<sup>17</sup>

### Around the world

In Afghanistan, widespread loss of livelihoods after the Taliban takeover and subsequent inflation caused many to resort to negative coping strategies, with reports indicating the sale or forced marriage of girls and women, including to Taliban fighters.<sup>18</sup>

**The climate crisis disproportionately impacts countries in the Global South.** More frequent and devastating droughts, floods, heatwaves and hurricanes put families at risk of further poverty, food and housing insecurity, and conflict, and severely limit access to essential services. There is growing evidence that extreme weather patterns increase child marriage prevalence.<sup>19</sup> Research from UNICEF confirms the relationship of conflict and climate on child marriage: for every 10% change in rainfall due to climate change, child marriage increases by 1% (child marriage also increases 7% for each tenfold increase in conflict-related fatalities).<sup>20</sup>



PICTURED: Pictures created during a meeting of the Mesa a favor de las niñas y adolescentes en Guatemala, 2022. The Mesa Niña is the Girls Not Brides National Partnership in Guatemala, committed to promoting the rights of girls and adolescents. Photo: Girls Not Brides

## Around the world

Approximately 54% of crisis-affected children worldwide live in West, Central, East and Southern Africa, driven by many factors including climate change and conflict.<sup>21</sup> Extreme drought in the Horn of Africa tripled the number of children at risk of **early school leaving** in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia in just three months in 2022. As a result, millions of adolescent girls are now at greater risk of child protection issues, including female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage.<sup>22</sup>

**COVID-19 dramatically increased rates of GBV, and has put an estimated 10 million more girls at risk of child marriage by 2030.**<sup>23</sup> Economic insecurity, enforced lockdowns and the redirection of funding away from GBV prevention and support services all served to create a “shadow pandemic” of GBV, and domestic violence in particular.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, school closures, economic stress, service disruptions and early pregnancy all increased girls’ risk of child marriage. In settings already affected by fragility and conflict, COVID-19 put girls and women at even further risk of violence.<sup>25</sup>

Against this backdrop, UNICEF estimates that progress on ending child marriage needs to happen 20 times faster to reach Sustainable Development Goal Target 5.3 on ending child marriage by 2030. **Achieving this requires urgent action, increased funding, targeted political and diplomatic action, and evidence-based programming.**<sup>26</sup>

## Conflict-related sexual violence and child marriage

### Key facts

- The UN definition of CRSV is “rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys directly or indirectly linked to conflict.”<sup>27</sup>
- CRSV is a human rights abuse and, when associated with armed conflict, a violation of international humanitarian law and a war crime.<sup>28</sup>
- Forced marriage is a form of CRSV.

**CRSV is an abuse of human rights and of international law, including international criminal law.** It can lead to death and to long-lasting injuries, trauma and distress for survivors. It also undermines their participation in social, economic and political life. Survivors’ families and communities can face discrimination, stigma and lack of support services for survivors. CRSV undermines efforts to reduce poverty, prevent/resolve conflict and promote gender equality.

Adolescent girls are at heightened risk of sexual violence and child marriage in conflict-affected settings due to intersecting discriminatory norms that devalue their gender, age and life stage. Forced marriage can result in situations that meet the international legal definition of slavery, including servile marriage, sexual slavery, human trafficking and forced labour.<sup>29</sup> Significant progress has been made to enshrine prohibition of CRSV in international law over the past decade, but impunity is still widespread.<sup>30</sup>

**Recent evidence shows violence trends are exacerbated by extreme events and climate migration, putting migrating girls and women at greater risk of GBV, including forced marriage and sexual violence.<sup>31</sup>**

Increased militarisation and rising inequality lead to mass displacement, exposing civilians – particularly girls and women – to heightened levels of sexual violence.<sup>32</sup>

## Around the world

The 2020 Supporting Safe Education in the Central Sahel / Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack study found that attacks on education – including **sexual violence** – often have differential impacts on girls and women. This includes **forced marriage**, forced pregnancy due to rape and stigma that reduces the likelihood of girls returning to school after an attack.<sup>33</sup>

**Understanding the connections between CRSV and other forms of GBV – including child marriage – before, during and after conflict is crucial for effective prevention and survivor-centred response.**

CRSV is grounded in social norms that uphold patriarchal systems (and vice versa) and normalise male violence against women and girls. Analysis conducted in 2015 shows a statistically significant relationship between measures of gender equality<sup>34</sup> and countries included in the UN Annual Report on CRSV, including a country's lack of legislation prohibiting domestic violence, and the acceptability of intimate partner violence.<sup>35</sup> Intersecting humanitarian, security and political crises – including economic hardship and political instability – can exacerbate the root causes of GBV, including child marriage and CRSV.<sup>36</sup>

## Around the world

A study from South Sudan<sup>37</sup> found girls and women who were directly exposed to armed conflict or were displaced were two- to three-times more likely to experience intimate partner violence. Qualitative data described the connection between armed conflict and GBV, and the role of bride price in perpetuating conflict: the practice of paying a bride's family for marriage led boys and men to raid cattle to secure payment, or to abduct girls and women when they could not pay, so driving further intercommunal conflicts and revenge attacks.

**Social norms shape the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of armed groups.** This helps to explain why sexual violence is used to achieve military or political objectives in conflict,<sup>38</sup> and why forced marriages – as a form of CRSV – are used by groups to manage combatants' sexual and reproductive lives.

## Around the world

- The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda forced many of the girls and women it abducted to marry combatants, institutionalising forced marriage and wider restrictions on sexual behaviour by LRA members as a means of socialising new recruits and maintaining control.<sup>39</sup>
- Boko Haram, a non-state armed group operating in northern Nigeria, abducted girls to marry conscripted male combatants as a reward for participation and to cultivate loyalty.<sup>40</sup>

**Secondary drivers of CRSV and child marriage include the breakdown of law and order, erosion of community-based protection mechanisms and the normalisation of more extreme forms of violence.<sup>41</sup>**

Impunity for CRSV is widespread – in a review of 18 countries, the UN estimated that, for the 3,293 UN-verified cases of CRSV in 2021, up to 65,860 additional cases went unreported.<sup>42</sup> Impunity is driven by breakdowns in security and the rule of law, and by the pre-existing norms that normalise GBV and stigmatise survivors.

## Around the world

The first conviction for forced marriage as a crime against humanity was issued by the International Criminal Court in 2021, with the conviction of Dominic Ongwen, a commander and former child soldier of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda. This significant judgement highlighted both the extent of impunity (as the first conviction issued), but also the potential for international criminal law to protect survivors of forced marriage (including child marriage) when these reach the threshold of international crimes. The judgement was also significant in its recognition of forced marriage as an ongoing crime, beyond the initial crime of forcing marriage.<sup>43</sup>

## Addressing CRSV and child marriage: The evidence

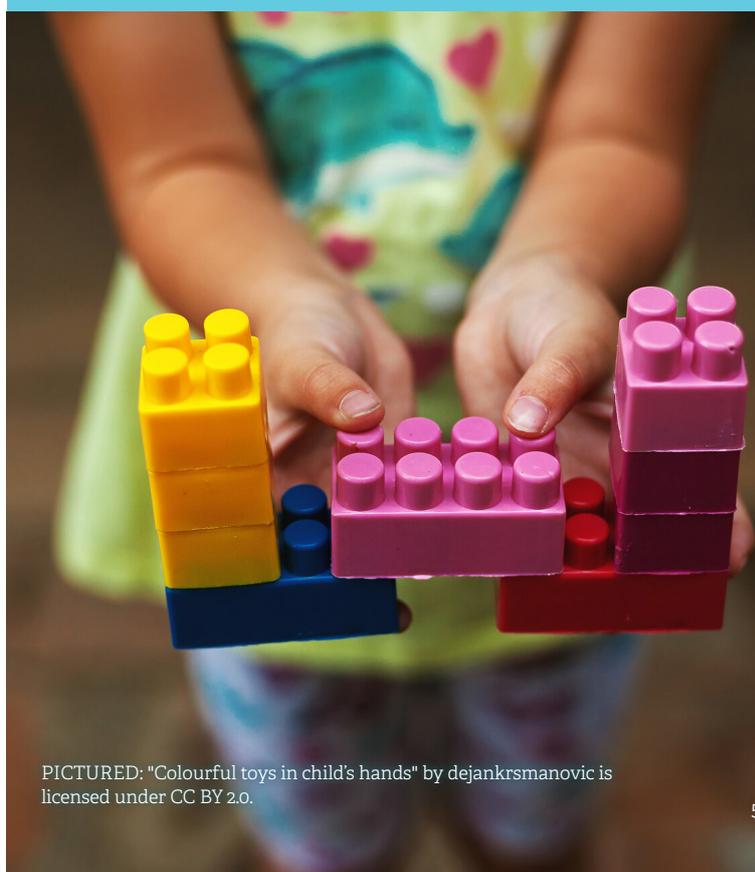
The experiences of *Girls Not Brides* member organisations reflect the evidence that engaging with community-based actors as part of a whole-community approach can be effective in shifting norms that drive gender inequality, GBV and child marriage – including in settings affected by fragility and conflict. This includes engaging with faith leaders, community dialogues and peer-led approaches through support for community activists and advocates on sensitive and taboo topics including CRSV and child marriage.

### Around the world

- The “Effective social norms approaches in fragile and conflict-affected contexts” (2021) guidance **reinforces the importance of whole-community social norms approaches in contexts affected by fragility and conflict**, informed by a deep understanding of the dynamics of gendered exclusion, community power relations and the influence of conflict on these factors. It highlights how social norms approaches should work holistically with families and communities – including women and men – to influence household and community-level change, and how the most effective interventions involve community activism or mobilisation approaches.<sup>44</sup>
- Findings from the “Engaging with faith groups to prevent VAWG in conflict-affected communities” study in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2020) show a decline in all forms of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence, more equitable gender attitudes, less acceptance of VAWG and reduced levels of internal and external stigma faced by survivors. This demonstrates that reducing forms of GBV and transforming gender inequitable attitudes is possible in conflict-affected communities.<sup>45</sup>
- A recent study “Conceptualising conflict-related child and early marriage as insecurity: At the intersection of gender and age” highlights how **the intersections of age, gender and violence as a cause and consequence of insecurity remain understudied**. It found that child marriage, by negatively impacting girls’ physical and mental health and ability to access education and employment, also restricts their engagement in community-based crisis response efforts and access to services in crisis-affected settings. The study argues that an **age-responsive, critical feminist security framework should be used to draw the connection between gender inequality, child marriage and security**.<sup>46</sup>

## Addressing CRSV and child marriage: Examples from *Girls Not Brides* members’ work

- In Palestine, [Sawa](#) offers support, protection and social counselling for survivors of violence. They network with civil society and decision-makers to raise awareness and promote human values, equality and a safe society that addresses all forms of violence against women, children and other marginalised groups. They also raise issues of violence from the family to the societal level, and are the main reporting channel for cases of sexual exploitation and abuse in Palestine.
- In Iraq, [Terre des Hommes](#) provides comprehensive child protection and GBV case management, comprised of accompaniment and follow-up on access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, psychosocial support, and legal and education services for refugees, internally displaced persons and host communities. They train community-based child protection committees to establish community-led avenues for information and support for girls at risk of marriage and married, divorced and widowed girls.
- In Cameroon, the [ALVF-EN](#) has implemented empowerment and education projects in safe spaces for girls and women following a rise in child marriage prevalence in the refugee and displaced communities in the north of the country. They offer vocational trainings tailored to the needs of girls at risk of child marriage and fund income generating activities to support their economic independence. They also promote activism by linking married girls and girls at risk to “girl leader groups” and girls’ rights associations.



PICTURED: “Colourful toys in child’s hands” by dejankrsmannovic is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

# CRSV and child marriage recommendations

## Policy and advocacy

- **Recognise child marriage in conflict- and crisis-affected settings as a complex problem requiring change – and therefore engagement, planning, funding and monitoring – at the international, national, community, family and individual level.** Commit to systematically monitoring trends in child marriage in relation to instability; adopt clear national strategies for addressing child marriage, including among refugees, internally displaced persons and other marginalised groups; ensure these strategies align with National Action Plans on UN Security Council Resolution 1325<sup>b</sup> (which should themselves include budgeted provisions for addressing CRSV and child marriage); and include budgeted provisions for survivor-centred, ethical data collection and monitoring (e.g., [Murad Code](#), [GBVIMS](#)) to track the effectiveness of these initiatives.
- **Support global efforts to implement [UN Action's Framework for the Prevention of CRSV](#);** support countries to develop and implement action plans to meet CRSV and child marriage commitments.
- **Ensure that adequate systems and funding are in place at the international and national level to investigate, document, report and address impunity for CRSV, including child marriage.** Support access to justice and ensure the law provides for adequate legal guarantees and protection measures to ensure the safety, psychological and physical wellbeing of survivors and witnesses of CRSV.

## Programming

- **Invest in evidence-informed, holistic, survivor-centred programmes that seek to prevent CRSV by addressing its root causes as one of many interconnected forms of GBV in conflict** – including child marriage and intimate partner violence – and recognising prevention as a cost-effective long-term approach to tackling violence. Seek to address the structural gender inequality and social norms that perpetuate GBV, including through: promoting girls' and women's leadership in political, peace-making, security and rule of law institutions; community-based social norms change programmes; and life skills interventions combined with gender-transformative approaches targeting adolescent girls, and boys and men as part of a whole-community approach. Integrate systematised monitoring, evaluation and learning into these programmes, to further develop the evidence base on child marriage and CRSV.

- **Support longer-term initiatives to strengthen the enabling environment to prevent CRSV and other forms of GBV,** including through flexible funding for women's rights organisations and survivor-led organisations, strengthening legislation and its implementation, investing in girls' higher education, and ensuring women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding and accountability mechanisms.
- **Support programming focused on strengthening support and protection systems for girls and women in conflict- and crisis-affected settings,** recognising the lack or breakdown of support systems as a key driver of CRSV and child marriage in these contexts.

## Research

- **Support rigorous, ethical, applied research to develop the evidence base around how different types and phases of a crisis affect GBV trends, including child marriage and CRSV;** understand what works to prevent these in different contexts; and share learning to promote evidence-based action. Priorities for research should include understanding how existing GBV interventions used in conflict-affected settings (e.g. girls' and women's safe spaces) influence CRSV outcomes; piloting how newer approaches (e.g. social norms change within institutional security sector actors) can most effectively be implemented and with what impact; and testing how to adapt approaches to reach girls and women facing multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination, including age, ethnicity, disability and sexuality.
- **Support women's rights organisations and other frontline organisations to document their successes and lessons learned from child marriage, CRSV and broader GBV programmes in crisis-affected settings.**

## UN agencies and cluster leads

- **Take urgent action to integrate child marriage into humanitarian assessments and programming in response to CRSV,** including within the Child Protection and/or GBV Areas of Responsibility and as an identified issue within other humanitarian clusters, as part of a comprehensive approach targeting unmarried girls, girls who are or have been married and their caregivers. For example: integrate child marriage (prevention and response) in Humanitarian Needs Overviews and Humanitarian Response Plans – including Refugee Response Plans – in the early stages of a crisis; ensure a clear division of labour in relation to child marriage, including effective collaboration between the GBV and Child Protection sub-clusters on Child Marriage Prevention and Case Management; and, ensure adolescent girls are considered and consulted in each cluster's work from the outset.

<sup>b</sup>UN Security Council [Resolution 1325](#) is a landmark Resolution on Women, Peace and Security. 104 UN Members States have developed at least one National Action Plan to implement the Resolution.

- **Position and prioritise child marriage alongside VAWG within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee GBV Guidelines**, drawing on the growing evidence base on what works to prevent and respond to child marriage in emergencies. Advocate for the funding and prioritisation of VAWG and child marriage prevention and response programming during conflict and humanitarian crises.

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