

# CHILD MARRIAGE IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS

Conflicts, generalised violence, disasters resulting from natural hazards are devastating millions of lives and severely impacting communities. Impacts for girls include multiple adverse outcomes, of which child marriage is one. This brief summarises what we know about this issue and where we need to accelerate action to meet global development targets by 2030.<sup>1</sup>



In June 2017, a Human Rights Council resolution<sup>2</sup> recognised for the first time the need to address child marriage in humanitarian contexts.<sup>3</sup> However, more needs to be done to achieve widespread acknowledgement of the issue and ensure that it is on the agenda for humanitarian responses.

This brief draws on academic research and the experience of *Girls Not Brides* member organisations and partners to highlight good practice in preventing and responding to child marriage during humanitarian crises. It includes recommendations for donors, governments, UN agencies, and community-based and civil society organisations (CBOs).

**"A humanitarian disaster occurs when the human, physical, economic or environmental damage from an event, or series of events, overwhelms a community's capacity to cope."<sup>4</sup>**

## Why should we address child marriage in times of crisis?

Short-term (acute) or longer-term (protracted) crises may result from conflict, generalised violence, disease outbreaks, mass migration, or natural hazards.

Child marriage in unstable and humanitarian contexts has multiple negative outcomes for girls and women. It undermines their health – including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) – and increases the risk of sexual and gender-based violence (GBV). Negative health consequences can include maternal mortality or morbidity, sexually transmitted infections – including HIV – and higher rates of under-five child mortality. Child marriage interrupts girls' education and compromises their economic and political participation.

Child marriage is rooted in gender inequality and driven by a complex set of factors that take root in

more stable contexts and are exacerbated in times of crisis, with the following consequences:

- Negative impacts on access to services, including education and SRH.
- Where poverty increases, families see child marriage as a way to cope with the greater economic hardship.
- Displacement and conflict can result in more girls being married by parents to “protect” them from increased 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.

### The numbers: Child marriage in humanitarian contexts

- **25 countries** are currently facing humanitarian crises.
- **168 million people** are in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>5</sup>
- **70.8 million people** have been displaced, including 25.9 million refugees, over half of whom are children.<sup>6</sup>
- The **10 countries** with the highest child marriage prevalence rates are either fragile or extremely fragile.<sup>7</sup>
- **12 out of the 20 countries** with the highest child marriage prevalence rates face the most severe humanitarian crises.<sup>8</sup>
- The prevalence of child marriage increases during crises, with a **20% rise** reported in Yemen<sup>9</sup> and South Sudan<sup>10</sup> as a result of conflicts.
- **0.12%** of all humanitarian funding went to address GBV from 2016-18.<sup>11</sup>
- **3%** of all humanitarian funding went to the education sector in 2020.<sup>12</sup>

## Harmful social norms and gender-based violence

The risk of GBV is exacerbated in humanitarian settings – such as camps – where security is compromised due to poor lighting or the absence of doors and locks, and where there is limited law enforcement and protection services.

When harmful gender norms related to masculinity and family “honour” are combined with real or perceived insecurity, this may lead families to marry their daughters as a way to ensure their virginity at marriage or prevent sexual activity and pregnancies outside of marriage, which are often taboo.<sup>13</sup> Child marriage is also used to cover sexual abuse perpetrated by men in the community.

- In Syrian refugee communities in Jordan and Lebanon, tradition, honour, economics, fear and protection-related factors are identified as major drivers of child marriage.<sup>14</sup>

## What do we know about child marriage, gender equality and humanitarian crises?

Crises are multifaceted and their causes and consequences are complex. Whether due to natural hazards, conflicts or generalised violence, these events can multiply the factors that motivate child marriage. The following sections set out some of the key drivers of child marriage in humanitarian crises and the importance of understanding the context in order to be able to respond effectively.



PICTURED: Girls take part in a workshop about child marriage delivered by Girls Not Brides member Solidarity of Refugee Women for the Social Welfare (SOFERES) in Dzaleka Refugee Camp, Malawi. Photo: Girls Not Brides/Thom Pierce

## Child marriage in conflict

Conflicts devastate millions of lives across the world, forcing families to adopt coping mechanisms to survive. They place women and girls at increased risk of sexual violence and trafficking.<sup>15</sup> Rape, torture and forced prostitution – sometimes under the guise of “marriage” – are reportedly used as weapons of war, often with impunity.<sup>16</sup>

Conflicts drive displacement around the world. In some cases, families flee conflict zones because of the particular risks they pose for girls. Displacement itself can also increase girls’ vulnerability to child marriage due to the breakdown of social networks, the lack of protection systems and the risks of sexual violence.

Crises exacerbate factors that drive child marriage, including insecurity and lack of access to services such as education.<sup>17</sup> In some conflict-affected areas, schools are directly targeted by state and non-state armed actors,<sup>18</sup> and gang violence in and around schools can prevent students from attending.<sup>19</sup> As education can help to prevent conflicts,<sup>20</sup> its disruption can have long-term impacts on communities; it can lead to increased violence directed at children and fear of accessing existing education services. In such circumstances, girls face a heightened risk of child marriage.<sup>21</sup>

- **In Nyal** – a village in South Sudan which has been severely affected by conflict – 71% of girls were married before the age of 18, compared to the national rate of 45% prior to the conflict.<sup>22</sup>
- **In Yemen**, over 65% of girls are married before 18, compared to 50% before the conflict.<sup>23</sup>

- In 2017, child marriage was in the top three key protection needs identified by communities **in Syria**.<sup>24</sup>
- Reports in rural **Damascus** say families were forced to allow the marriage of their girls to members of armed groups.<sup>25</sup>

## Child marriage and recruitment by non-state actors

In war zones or countries with high level of violence, forced recruitment of children by non-state armed groups and criminal gangs puts girls at risk of exploitation and abuse including slavery and child marriage. In these situations, families may use child marriage as a “protective” measure.

- **In Somalia** in 2010 and 2011, girls were abducted from schools and forced to marry fighters of the al-Shabaab Islamist armed group. Parents who objected were threatened or killed.<sup>26</sup>
- **In Nigeria**, over 270 school girls were abducted in Chibok in 2014 and subjected to violence including child marriage.<sup>27</sup>
- **In the Northern Triangle** – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – reports indicate that girls are forcibly recruited to be the girlfriends of gang members.<sup>1</sup> They are taken hostage and forced into unions in return for the gang’s “protection” of their families. Some girls are then trafficked, while others are forced to flee to other countries.<sup>28</sup>
- During the war in **Sri Lanka**, parents married their daughters, believing that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) armed group would not recruit married girls.<sup>29</sup>



PICTURED: Attending school can be life-threatening in San Pedro Sula – Honduras’ second largest city – as gangs try to recruit very young children. Girls are at particular risk of forced enlistment as the girlfriends of gang members. Photo: “[Honduras: providing protection and education to children victims of urban violence](#)” by EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid is licenced under [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)

## Child marriage in the context of forced migration

When displaced populations cross borders, their rights and protection systems are often weakened. They have to adapt to hostile environments that restrict their freedom of movement, access to basic services and livelihoods. In such contexts, girls become more vulnerable to child marriage. They can also lack access to reproductive healthcare and education, and child protection systems – including civil registration – which increases the risk and limits the registration of child marriage.<sup>30</sup> However, humanitarian activities and services in refugee camps can also have a positive impact on raising the age of marriage, if they improve access to education and increase awareness of gender equality issues.

- **In Jordan**, it is illegal to marry before 18 but the complex process of registering a marriage and the fact that many refugees lack official identification prevent girls from benefitting from legal protections.<sup>31</sup>
- **In Chad**, child marriage is the most commonly reported form of violence among young Sudanese and Central African refugee girls.<sup>32</sup>
- Many **Rohingya** girls who fled to neighbouring countries to escape persecution in Myanmar became child brides, as the bride's family saw this as a way to secure more food rations, and the groom's family saw it as a way to gain a free domestic worker.<sup>33</sup>
- **Syrian refugee** girls living in Lebanon are at increased risk of child marriage.<sup>34</sup> Economic strain and loss of educational opportunities during their displacement – and exposure to an unfamiliar and more liberal society in Lebanon – are drivers of child marriage and limits to girls' mobility.<sup>35</sup>
- **In Venezuela**, girls enter informal unions with older men, hoping to reunite with family members who have migrated to neighbouring countries.<sup>36</sup>
- **In Nepal**, child marriage amongst Bhutanese refugee communities living in camps has drastically *decreased* as a result of better access to education services and awareness of gender equality issues.<sup>37</sup>

## Child marriage and natural hazards

Over recent decades, climate change has triggered extreme weather events – including floods, droughts and cyclones – leading to a number of acute and protracted crises, which have in turn affected economies and social structures.<sup>38</sup> Several countries with high vulnerability to such climate “shocks” also have high rates of child marriage.<sup>39</sup>

- **In Bangladesh**, studies show that bride price encourages child marriage, as the dowry paid by the bride's family becomes more expensive as she gets older. Thus, with climate change creating uncertainty, families marry their daughters younger in case they cannot afford a more expensive dowry later on.<sup>40</sup>
- **In Nepal**, there is evidence that GBV and child marriage increased after the 2015 earthquake.<sup>41</sup> A similar increase was reported following disasters in Laos and the Philippines.<sup>42</sup>
- **In Ethiopia**, drought is cited as a reason for *reduced* child marriages, as families cannot afford to organise weddings.<sup>43</sup>
- **In Mozambique**, floods, droughts and cyclones Idai and Kenneth meant child marriage was seen as a way of alleviating the perceived burden of girls for families who lost their livelihoods.<sup>44</sup>

## Child marriage and disease outbreaks

Epidemics and pandemics – in addition to having direct health impacts, including increased mortality and pressure on health services – often disproportionately impact women and girls and adversely impact on child marriage.<sup>45</sup>

- During the **Ebola outbreak**, school closures in West Africa contributed to spikes in child labour, neglect, sexual abuse and adolescent pregnancies. In Sierra Leone, cases of adolescent pregnancy more than doubled from before the outbreak.<sup>46</sup>
- During the **COVID-19 outbreak** and associated lockdowns and curfews, surges in violence against women and girls – including intimate partner violence,<sup>47</sup> child neglect and sexual abuse<sup>48</sup> – have been reported in many countries. As economic hardships deepen and services and programmes to protect women and girls are disrupted,<sup>49</sup> we could see 13 million additional child marriages over the next 10 years.<sup>50</sup>



PICTURED: Rohingya families arrive at Cox's Bazaar refugee camp, Bangladesh. Photo: *Girls Not Brides*/Antolin Avezuela

## Child marriage and economic distress

Humanitarian disasters create significant economic distress.<sup>51</sup> Loss of livelihoods and increased household poverty can accelerate harmful practices including child labour, survival sex and child marriage. These can be seen as temporary coping mechanisms to ensure girls' financial security or to reduce the economic burden they place on their family.<sup>52</sup> In these cases, child marriage is a financial transaction and is decided based on short-term economic reasons.<sup>53</sup> This also explains how, in times of crisis, such marriages can be delayed if families cannot afford to pay the dowry.

- **In northern Cameroon**, marriage is used as a way to recover a family's debts.<sup>54</sup>
- **In Malaysia and Jordan**, child marriage of refugee girls is arranged by brokers, increasing the risks of it being used as a cover for human trafficking.
- Following the 2004 tsunami, girls in **Indonesia, India** and **Sri Lanka** were forced into marriage with tsunami widowers. This practice was linked to the state subsidies offered to new families.<sup>55</sup>
- **In the Kurdistan region of Iraq**, child marriage first *decreased* among internally displaced populations, as people became so poor that they could not afford marriages.

## Addressing child marriage during humanitarian crises

Child marriage is a harmful practice which is found in both development and crisis contexts. The distinction between these contexts is often blurred, as fragile states can quickly move from crisis to recovery and back to crisis within a few months.

The risk of child marriage is greater during and after humanitarian disasters, and the needs of adolescent girls and the issue of child marriage are often inadequately addressed. They require coordinated action across all sectors – including with development actors – from the earliest stages of a crisis. Key actors include states, UN agencies and civil society organisations (CSOs).

When states are unwilling or unable to respond to a population's needs, a humanitarian coordination structure – the cluster approach led by OCHA or refugee response coordination led by UNHCR<sup>56</sup> – can support them. Community-based and civil society organisations intervening during humanitarian disasters are key actors in addressing the needs of affected communities, as they are usually the first

to respond. They can provide substantial support to adolescent girls and contribute to preventing child marriage during humanitarian disasters.

*Girls Not Brides* makes the following recommendations for key actors.

## Recommendations for donors

- **Increase funding to ensure the delivery of high-quality services to all, including adolescent married and non-married girls and programmes to address child marriage.**
  - In line with the **Agenda for Humanity** and commitments formulated on localisation during the **World Humanitarian Summit** in 2016, ensure greater focus on nationally-led responses in humanitarian planning structures. Include CBOs working on gender equality and child rights in decision making processes to ensure actions respond to the needs of girls and women on the ground.
  - Increase humanitarian funding to support the needs of adolescent girls, including addressing child marriage. This should include greater direct financial and technical support for CBOs.
  - Increase funding for the piloting, monitoring and evaluation of programmes that provide comprehensive support for adolescent girls to understand what works to address child marriage in these situations, and to support practitioners operating in challenging crisis contexts.
  - Finance quality accessible education services and SRH services for all, at all stages of a crisis.

## Recommendations for governments

- **Understand and respond to the causes and consequences of child marriage, and ensure quality services are accessible for the most marginalised people – including adolescent girls – during times of crisis.**
  - Invest in the collection of data disaggregated by marital status, gender, age and place of origin to better understand the needs and risks faced by girls, and the trends and changes among displaced and affected communities. Particular attention should be paid to collecting data on younger adolescents aged 10 to 14.
  - Ensure access to quality formal and informal education for adolescent girls and re-establish formal education as soon as possible after the acute phase of the crisis.
  - Ensure access to comprehensive health information and youth-friendly SRHR services including comprehensive sexuality education, contraception, safe abortion services and psychosocial support.<sup>57</sup>
  - Support child protection initiatives such as helplines and services to identify and respond to girls at risk of GBV and child marriage.
  - Increase access to social protection programmes to mitigate economic shocks and combine with other gender transformative interventions, including case management, financial literacy and communications to prevent child marriage.

## Recommendations for UN agencies and cluster leads

- **Consider child marriage in humanitarian assessments and programming.** Child marriage must be integrated within the child protection and/or GBV areas of responsibility (AoR), and identified as an issue within other humanitarian clusters – including education, health and protection – to ensure a comprehensive and multisectoral response for married and non-married girls, their caregivers and their families.
  - Integrate child marriage in Humanitarian Needs Overviews and Humanitarian Response Plans – including Refugee Response Plans – in the early stages of a crisis.
  - Ensure there is a clear division of labour in relation to child marriage within the protection and other relevant clusters. This should include effective collaboration between the GBV and child protection sub-clusters on child marriage prevention and case management.
  - Ensure adolescent girls are considered and consulted in each cluster's humanitarian programmes, and especially education, health, camp coordination and management, WASH, and shelter.
  - Consider girls' safety and wellbeing in all other services. This includes lighting and security in places such as detention centres, water points and latrines; dignity kits and changing rooms; and consideration for the distances that separate girls from schools and health services.
  - Build civil registration systems for refugees – including birth, marriage and divorce – and strengthen access to them.<sup>58</sup>
  - Promote greater coordination between the protection and education clusters to identify girls at risk of dropping out of school and child marriage. Promote access to education for unmarried and married girls, and identify measures to ensure the poorest girls can continue their education. This could be through cash transfer and livelihoods programming.
  - Develop partnerships with development actors to prepare for the recovery phase and to build stronger systems and services that will support national actors in responding to the needs of adolescent girls more efficiently.

## Recommendations for civil society organisations

- **Identify risks faced by adolescent girls from the early stages of a crisis and include their needs in assessments and planning.**
  - Better programming requires early, gender-sensitive assessments, including through household surveys.<sup>59</sup> These assessments should be informed by mapping and participatory consultations with girls, including married girls.<sup>60</sup>
  - Assessments should capture household economic status and girls' engagement in social networks, including their access to protection services.
  - Community leaders – including religious and traditional leaders – with influence over adolescent girls' lives should also be engaged to ensure their support.

- **Create an “enabling environment” and address harmful gender norms.**
  - Create safe spaces for girls as part of a comprehensive package of support, including life-skills education, social networks and access to training opportunities.
  - Involve girls' families, communities, boys, men and traditional leaders in conversations about the harmful effects of child marriage.<sup>61</sup>
  - Support community conversations to address the social norms that influence decisions around child marriage in the community.<sup>62</sup>
  - Where physical safe spaces cannot be provided – for example during pandemic lockdowns – consider virtual safe spaces and remote education curricula.<sup>63</sup>
- **Integrate child marriage prevention and support for married girls across sectors in all humanitarian responses from the early stages of a crisis.**
- **Tailor child marriage interventions to address the different drivers of child marriage and stages of a crisis response.**
  - Where poverty and food insecurity are the primary drivers of child marriage, ensure that food distributions do not place girls at risk of abuse, and ensure adolescent girls and their families have access to livelihood programmes.
  - Long-term community engagement to change social norms and mitigate risks for adolescent girls might be more feasible during protracted displacement and recovery situations.<sup>64</sup> In some instances, such interventions can also contribute to conflict prevention.<sup>65</sup>
- **Advocate for girl-centred programming and coordination.** Adolescent girls and child marriage are seldom identified as a priority in the humanitarian coordination system, so greater advocacy toward UN agencies, cluster leads, Humanitarian Country Teams and donors is needed to include them in global and cluster-sectoral responses. National organisations – either independently or through national partnerships and coalitions – should propose concrete actions for this inclusion.
- **Use UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security to increase the role of women and girls in conflict prevention and resolution.**<sup>66</sup> This is a powerful tool to ensure women and girls are fully included in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and post-conflict reconstruction. National organisations can push for its implementation by advocating with UN agencies and governments for women's and girls' participation and consideration in these processes.
- **Invest in the evaluation of child marriage programmes and the impact of other interventions – such as those addressing education, food security or poverty – on the practice.**

- **Recognise the importance of evidence-based research on what works to address child marriage during humanitarian crises and post-crisis recovery.** More research is needed to understand how different types and phases of a crisis impact on child marriage. There also needs to be a greater focus

on what works to prevent it in different contexts. Field research and quality data analysis is critical to understanding how programmes can be adapted to such situations.<sup>67</sup> Capacity building should also help organisations to document their successes and lessons learned.

## Examples from the field: How *Girls Not Brides* member organisations are addressing child marriage in humanitarian contexts

- In Lebanon, **ABAAD** promote gender equality as an integral part of any humanitarian action. They aim to reduce the risk of GBV across all areas, including through disaster risk reduction and GBV prevention and response from pre-emergency preparedness, through response and on to recovery. They provide shelters for those who have experienced GBV and link women and girls to the services they need – including SRH and education – protecting their rights and wellbeing and ensuring no further harm, while promoting the positive transformation of gender norms.
- In Lebanon, **Sawa** offer Lebanese and refugee girls education services and vocational training so that they have the knowledge, tools and economic freedom – through small businesses opportunities – to avoid child marriage.
- In Iraq, **Terre des Hommes** provide comprehensive child protection GBV case management – comprised of accompaniment and follow up on access to SRHR, psychosocial support, legal and education services – for refugees, internally displaced and host communities. They train community-based Child Protection Committees to establish community-led avenues for support, information and awareness for girls at risk of child marriage, and married, divorced and widowed girls. They also support girls who are in detention for child marriage-related issues.
- In Mozambique, where affected communities have been relocated to resettlement centers, **AMODEFA** provides GBV prevention and response services. This includes mobile brigades, health and mental health services and awareness sessions for community leaders, out-of-school girls and their families, with an emphasis on the importance of education. They also distribute dignity kits as a way of reducing vulnerability and restoring respect.
- In Lebanon, the **IRC** implement a package of life skills sessions tailored to the needs of married girls. They have also worked to develop a Multi-Sectoral Child Marriage Package to mainstream adolescent

girl-focused interventions across different sectors. The GBV, child protection, education, health and livelihood sectors were involved in the roll-out of the package.

- In South America, **HIAS** supports forcibly displaced and refugee adolescent girls through the provision of activities in safe spaces, SRHR, psychosocial and legal services and comprehensive health information in camp, urban and border settings. They also engage with men to transform social norms that contribute to child marriage and early unions.
- Following a rise in child marriage rates in the refugee and displaced communities in north Cameroon, the **ALVE-EN** has implemented empowerment and education projects in safe spaces for women and girls. 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.

*Girls Not Brides* is partnering at the regional level to ensure research and advocacy efforts are coordinated and informed by evidence through a Regional Accountability Framework of Action to End Child Marriage (RAF) in the Middle East and North Africa, led by Terre des Hommes, UNICEF and UNFPA.



PICTURED: Girls from Syria take part in a drama session organised by the International Rescue Committee in a refugee settlement in Lebanon. Photo: *Girls Not Brides*/Thom Pierce

## References

- <sup>1</sup>In this brief, "child marriage" refers to any formal marriage or informal union in which at least one of the parties is under the age of 18. It includes early and forced marriages and unions.
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- <sup>59</sup>Save the Children & UC Berkeley School of Law, **Toward an end to Child Marriage, Lessons from Research and Practice in Development and Humanitarian Sector**, 2018.
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