Women's Refugee Commission
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A Girl No More: The Changing Norms of Child Marriage in Conflict

Executive Summary

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Somali refugee girl in Ethiopia.   (c) Lindsay Stark

Marriage under the age of 18 is widely considered a human rights violation, though it is legal with parental consent in many countries. It falls within the definition of gender-based violence.

Married girls are at risk of intimate partner violence and exposure to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Marriage often means the end of a girl's education and limits her vocational opportunities. Ninety percent of early first births happen within the context of child marriage and complications during pregnancy and delivery are the second leading cause of death among 15- to 19-year-olds.

Nine of the top 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage are considered fragile states. Similarly, many countries particularly vulnerable to natural disasters have the highest child marriage prevalence.

Fragility and conflict impact child-marriage decisions. However, the role they play is complex and not fully understood. The need to protect girls from rape, as well as the stigma of surviving rape; from pregnancy outside marriage; and from the influence of other communities are factors that lead to child marriage. Poverty, exacerbated in displacement, is a driver of early marriage as parents hope to secure a

daughter's future or to meet basic needs.

Child marriage is both exacerbated by barriers to education and an impediment to school for the girls. Additionally, marriage isolates adolescent girls from friends and programs that would help them overcome the challenges of marriage.

In 2011, the Women's Refugee Commission began a project to understand how traditional practices around child marriage may change during conflict, and what factors contribute to those practices. We researched internally displaced Ugandans in Mucwini, Northern Uganda; Congolese in Nakivale Refugee Settlement in Uganda; Syrians in the Al Marj Settlement in Lebanon; and Somalis at the Kobe Refugee Camp in Ethiopia.

We found that in order to reduce child-marriage practices, programmers must ensure that the basic needs of families are met during the acute phase of an emergency, and ensure that programming is designed to promote the agency and value of adolescent girls.

A girl holds up a drawing of a bride and groom during a discussion about child marriage with teenage Syrian refugee girls in a community center in southern Lebanon.
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Recommendations

1. Donors, national governments, policy makers, and programmers should ensure that the basic needs of families are met, as one of the most effective means to mitigate the risks of child marriage during emergencies.

Families consistently identify poverty as a primary driver of child marriage during and immediately following conflict or displacement. Existing research identifies the transformative power of economic interventions in reducing child marriage practices. Families must be able to feed, clothe, house, and protect their children in order for there not to be a perceived benefit in marrying their daughters out of the family at early ages.

2. Donors, national governments, policy makers, and programmers should invest in girls in order to build and/or reinforce girls' intrinsic value within communities.

Resources for child-marriage interventions should focus on girls: providing health, education and/or livelihood opportunities; teaching life-skills and decision-making; and/or fostering economic literacy. In particular, research highlights the importance of education in protecting girls from child marriage. However, barriers to accessing school (distance, language, curriculum, fees), as well as other education and skills programming, persist in many humanitarian contexts and, in all cases in this research, were connected to child-marriage decisions.

3. Programmers should ensure that adolescent girls, including child-brides and adolescent mothers, are identified and reached with programming.

Adolescent girls are a diverse group with unique needs, whether out of school, orphans, married and/or parenting, living with disabilities or caring for family members who are disabled, or heads of household. In order to reach them, it is critical first to know who and where they are. Donors and program planners should engage in mapping activities and consultations to ensure identification of, and engagement with, the many adolescent girls in need of support. They may wish to consider using the Girl Roster,[1] *"I'm Here"* approach,[2] or available guidelines such as *So You Want to Consult with Children? A toolkit of good practice*.[3]

4. Policy makers and donors should recognize that child marriage is best addressed across a variety of sectors.

Designing and implementing child-marriage interventions is complex. Rarely do the root causes of this practice, which research shows are diverse, fall under the auspices of only one sector. Effective interventions require coordination across a variety of sectors, and should be developed based on existing learning from development contexts.[4,5,6] Actors from education, livelihoods, health, and protection are all critical to discussions and planning around preventing and responding to child marriage.

Although interventions may most often be designed by those working on gender-based violence (GBV), much of the implementation and monitoring needs to be done by other sector actors. The new Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) guidelines on the prevention of GBV[7] provide practical

Displaced girls in Uganda.   © Danish Refugee Council

steps for how various sectors should be involved in prevention of all forms of GBV, and funding must be made available to support this model.

5. Policy makers and donors should understand the importance of, and provide support to, assessment and adaptation.

As crises move beyond the acute emergency phase, interventions to address child marriage within a displaced community will need to address the many nuanced factors that may be impacting child-marriage decisions within that community. This research highlights the importance of understanding context and diversity of displaced populations through participatory assessments with a diverse group of community members, including gate keepers.

While girls are the primary beneficiaries, programs cannot ignore the influential persons in their lives or the environment around them. This includes engaging mothers, fathers, husbands, and community leaders in assessments and possibly in engagement strategies prior to, or during, planned interventions. Additionally, it is critical that the humanitarian community examine existing tools and

determine whether they are sufficient for understanding these complexities, or whether there is a need for revisions or the development of new tools specific to this issue.

6. Donors and policy makers should support the piloting of child marriage interventions and the documentation of learning.

Evaluation research has identified promising interventions, but research is lacking on how these can be integrated within emergency response. In humanitarian contexts, approaches to preventing and responding to child marriage should be piloted and specifically monitored for child marriage outcomes, including: skills and asset building of adolescent girls; parent and community education; economic interventions for household self-reliance; improving access to education; and outreach strategies to married girls, inclusive of comprehensive health and livelihoods programming. Multisector approaches to address child marriage, as a form of GBV, could also be piloted during the roll-out of the IASC GBV Guidelines.

Notes

1. Population Council, Girl Roster, www.popcouncil.org/research/adolescent-girls-programming-community-of-practice
2. Women's Refugee Commission, I'm Here: Adolescent Girls in Emergencies (New York 2014). www.womensrefugeecommission.org/girls/resources/1078-i-m-here-report-final-pdf
3. Save the Children, So You Want to Consult with Children?: A toolkit of good practice (UK 2003). www.savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/so-you-want-consult-children-toolkit-good-practice
4. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Solutions to End Child Marriage: Summary of the Evidence (2011). www.icrw.org/files/publications/Solutions-to-End-Child-Marriage.pdf
5. Population Council, press release, "New Research from the Population Council Shows Child Marriage Can Be Delayed" www.popcouncil.org/news/new-research-from-the-population-council-shows-child-marriage-can-be-delaye
6. ICRW, Making Change with Cash? Evaluation of a Conditional Cash Transfer Program to Enhance the Value of Girls in Northern India (Nanda, 2015). www.icrw.org/sites/default/files/publications/IMPACCT%20Synopsis%20October%202015.pdf.pdf
7. Inter-Agency Standing Committee, Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action: Reducing risk, promoting resilience, and aiding recovery (New York. 2015). www. gbvguidelines.org

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