

Report Snapshot

Background

Child marriage affects one in five adolescent girls globally and presents a significant public health concern for girls and their communities in many contexts. Research shows that the negative effects of child marriage range from tolls on the physical and mental health of girls to a reduction in economic opportunities and outcomes for their future children. Adolescents impacted by conflict and other humanitarian emergencies are some of the most vulnerable to this harmful practice, but the extent to which these contexts affect rates and drivers of underage marriage is not known.

In 2016, the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC), in partnership with Johns Hopkins University Center for Humanitarian Health, International Medical Corps, International Rescue Committee, Kachin Development Group, and the Arab Institute for Women at the Lebanese American University, launched a multi-country study to assess the prevalence of child marriage, investigate factors related to the practice, and garner feedback on programs aimed at reducing it in humanitarian contexts. The study undertook household surveys in Ethiopia (2019), Lebanon (2018), and Myanmar (2018) and gathered qualitative information on life skills programs that engaged adolescent girls to improve their psychosocial well-being in Ethiopia and Lebanon. Findings emerged that will enhance understanding of the relationship between child marriage and humanitarian contexts while informing future programming to prevent child marriage.

What We Found

Prevalence and protective factors

- In Lebanon, 32.6 percent of girls aged 15-19 were estimated to be married by age 17. In Ethiopia, 11.15 percent of girls under 18 were married; however, many of these girls had not yet reached the age of 18 and so remained at risk. Due to limited sample size, results on prevalence from Myanmar were not conclusive and are therefore not included.
- **Education, both of girls and their parents, is an important protective factor against child marriage.** In Ethiopia, the survey demonstrated that if girls had ever attended school, it reduced their risk by 75 percent; in Lebanon, girls currently in school were significantly less likely to be married and those whose fathers were educated were 40 percent less likely to be married underage.

Risk factors

- **Economic instability and poverty are significant drivers of child marriage across contexts.** Girls in both Ethiopia and Lebanon whose households were in more precarious economic situations (such as an unemployed head of household, a female head of household, or deceased parents) were more likely to experience underage marriage.
- **Community and family attitudes, traditions, and gender norms play a key role in determining whether a girl is married underage.** In Ethiopia, 98 percent of adult survey respondents cited religion as the main reason for child marriage, and girls in households where women reported a younger "ideal" age for marriage were more likely to be married.
- **Perspectives on marriage held by girls themselves are also related to child marriage practices.** In Myanmar, married girls were more likely than unmarried girls to agree that marriage was important for maintaining family honor and reputation. In Lebanon, girls who scored medium or high on an assessment scale that examines harmful attitudes toward child marriage were 1.6 and 2.3 times more likely to be married, respectively.

Our Recommendations

For life skills program providers

1. Programs should engage girls and communities through outreach that speaks to their values and goals, especially improving education and health.
2. It is crucial to engage communities and families that play roles as influencers or gatekeepers to adolescent girls' participation in programs. This may require specific approaches (such as using male community liaisons).

3. Adaptive sessions that work to include girls who may have limited time and availability or specific needs (such as childcare) are very helpful to improve participation—and the flexibility is appreciated by attendees.
4. Meaningful engagement includes men and boys as critical allies in work to elevate the voices and value of women and girls in society.

For humanitarian service providers

1. Livelihoods and other economic-oriented support programs should integrate gender-transformative approaches to reduce the risk of child marriage.
2. Programs across sectors must consider the broader systemic factors that contribute to child marriage and other harmful practices and work to include advocacy and outreach to families, communities, and stakeholders through this lens.

For researchers

1. While programs should make significant efforts to minimize the risk of indirect harm to girls participating in life skills or other empowerment programs, more research is needed to identify what drives the practice of child marriage and what can be done to prevent or mitigate girls’ risk in emergencies
2. Future research should target gaps in knowledge and attitudes about age at marriage among female caregivers and key decision-makers within communities.



The full report is available at <https://wrc.ms/child-marriage-humanitarian>.

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Women’s Refugee Commission

The Women’s Refugee Commission improves the lives and protects the rights of women, children, and youth who have been displaced by conflict and crisis. We research their needs, identify solutions, and advocate for programs and policies to strengthen their resilience and drive change in humanitarian practice. Since our founding in 1989, we have been a leading expert on the needs of refugee women, children, and youth and the policies that can protect and empower them.

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