

# Taking action to address child marriage: the role of different sectors



## Conflict and humanitarian crisis

Girls' vulnerability to child marriage often increases during times of conflict and humanitarian crisis, and programmes that provide social protection, alternative opportunities, and services for girls at risk of child marriage, as well as already married adolescents are often absent. This brief is intended to complement the existing guidance on [child protection](#) and gender responsive [approaches](#) available in the field, including the [Women Peace and Security](#) agenda.

There exist many recent examples of child marriage rates increasing in times of crisis and conflict, including the doubling of child marriage rates between 2011 and 2013 among [Syrian refugees](#) in Jordan. Forced marriage, where one or both parties do not give free or full consent to the marriage, regardless of age, increases in frequency during times of instability. The forced marriage of girls has also been utilised as a recruiting tool by religious extremist groups and by armed groups more generally, such as ISIS and Boko Haram. The 2015 earthquakes in Nepal and the environmental effects of climate change in the Sahel and parts of Bangladesh may also have contributed to higher rates of child marriage, as families have lost land and income as a result of these forces of nature. Indeed, many families view marriage as a form of protection for their girls, particularly due to the breakdown in legal and social services and social networks and in the absence of viable alternatives. However, girls who marry young are instead often made *more* vulnerable and face physical, sexual, and emotional violence, food insecurity, early pregnancy, a truncated education, and a loss in economic potential over their lifetimes. (For more information on climate change and child marriage, please refer to the *Agriculture, energy, and the environment* brief.)

All but one of the top ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage are also at the top of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) list of fragile states. Girls' and women's lack of access to quality education, economic opportunities, and lack of participation in peace processes and relief planning efforts can slow nations' economic and social progress. Addressing child marriage, and the underlying gender inequalities that cause it, can increase stability and future growth. At the same time, preventing and mitigating child marriage in crisis and conflict situations can go a long way toward improving the health, human rights, and transition to development for girls and societies, not only in the immediate future, but for generations to come.

### Integrating child marriage prevention and response into conflict and humanitarian crisis programmes

The best integration of child marriage prevention and response will depend greatly on the context, but potential strategies may include: training for humanitarian aid workers, strengthening rule of law, engaging women and girls in peace and reconstruction processes, implementing specific programming for girls, and ensuring adequate response services. Since families often view child marriage as the best or only option for girls, alternatives such as safe education, income generation, and/or the creation of safe spaces have the potential to make a dramatic impact. In times of conflict and crisis, the rule of law often lies in the hands of humanitarian actors, police, and peacekeepers, all of whom must be trained to protect and respond to cases of girls and women being trafficked and forced into marriage. Because the fracturing and insecurity of the



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family and community structure can drive child marriage during conflict and crisis, programmes should include efforts to keep family units and ethnic and tribal groups together. Women and girls best understand their own needs; therefore they should be at the centre of decision-making processes and disaster response efforts so that such efforts accurately reflect these needs. Reporting and response mechanisms to child marriage are vital to address the issue. Women and girls should be part of conflict monitoring/early warning, peace processes and Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) efforts as outlined by the UN Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security. Within each of these child marriage should be a factor teams are trained on, looking for and able to design prevention and response efforts to address.

Programmes should create safe spaces for married and at-risk girls to gather, form social networks, gain peer support, and access resources and information, which can be transformative for girls. Girls often lack such opportunities, but this is especially true in times of conflict and crisis. Educational, economic, and social programmes that offer alternatives to child marriage can safeguard girls and give them safe places to turn to in times of danger. Quality, safe education, particularly in secondary school, can be a powerful alternative to child marriage. To ensure girls and their families feel secure in sending girls to school, programmes need to consider risk mitigation strategies to ensure safe passage to, from, and in school, such as lighting and access to sex-specific toilets and feminine hygiene products. Finally, information and services including legal support, violence interventions, mental health, family planning and sexual and reproductive health must be available to married girls.

### Ensuring access to response services

Humanitarian health response services also have a significant role to play, and should consider the unique needs of adolescent girls, particularly with regard to their psychosocial and sexual and reproductive health. This includes prioritising protection programmes such as those that provide access to psychosocial care provided by social workers, counsellors, educators, and health practitioners who intervene, report, and rehabilitate children, youth, and families who are at risk or are victims of child marriage. Adolescent girls often lack information on sexual, reproductive, maternal and child health, and nutrition, and pregnant adolescents are at high risk of maternal complications, including obstetric fistula. (For more information, please see the *Health* brief.)

### Strategies for integrating child marriage

- Safety and protection mechanisms
- Safe spaces
- Involve women and girls in designing response efforts
- Safe, accessible, and quality schools
- Income-generation opportunities
- Sexual and reproductive health and psychosocial services and counselling
- Strengthen legal frameworks
- Engaging women and girls in the peace process

### Programme examples

The ***Girls in Risk Reduction Leadership (GIRRL)*** Project in Lesotho, Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe engaged girls in a participatory process of identifying risks and vulnerabilities both in their everyday lives and in the hypothetical context of a disaster such as a flood. CARE and the African Center for Disaster Studies (ACDS), with support from USAID and OFDA, piloted GIRRL from 2012 to 2013. The programme also engaged community leaders and existing disaster risk-reduction planning structures to inform them of the added vulnerabilities faced by girls. Though this programme was not specifically designed to address child marriage, disaster preparedness programmes like this one could incorporate child marriage by engaging already-married girls, explicitly discussing child marriage when identifying risks in humanitarian crisis situations, and measuring the prevalence of marriage and shifting dynamics of marriage formation and relationships among participants.

The ***Protecting and Empowering Displaced Adolescent Girls Initiative*** works with girls ages 10-16 in refugee camps in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda. Implemented by the Women's Refugee Commission, the aim is to increase access to school, safe spaces, health services, and financial literacy courses, based on the local context and needs. The programme targets girls who are already married or mothers in Tanzania and out-of-school girls in Uganda. The programme provides vulnerable girls in post-conflict settings with social networks, skills, and alternative opportunities to address child marriage. Although the endline results are not yet available, the programme evaluation will include child marriage indicators related to education, marriage, and sex.



### Monitoring and evaluation: illustrative examples

An initial and powerful way to integrate child marriage prevention and response into programming is by measuring changes related to child marriage, learning how these changes impact other programme areas, and then adjusting programming accordingly. The following are sample indicators that can be used in conflict and humanitarian crisis programmes to understand child marriage-related impacts. For a more complete list of indicators, please refer to the [USAID Child, Early, and Forced Marriage Resource Guide](#) or [Girls Not Brides' Measuring Progress: recommended indicators](#).

### Monitoring and evaluation: illustrative indicators

Indicator	Data source and notes
Extent to which violations of girls' human rights are reported, referred, and investigated (by human rights bodies, police, or other entities as appropriate).	A survey of individuals in the target population.
Extent to which measures to protect girls' human rights are included in peacekeeper and police directives.	Review law and policy documents within target jurisdictions.
Extent to which measures to protect girls' human rights are included in national security policy frameworks.	Review national security policy frameworks.
Existence of child-friendly safe spaces in a community during the assessment phase.	A survey of the target population
Existence of child-friendly multi-sectoral services for child survivors of gender-based violence	A survey of the target population
Ratio of girls and boys in child-friendly community spaces	Organisational record review, disaggregated by sex and age



### Suggested further reading

The briefs in this series are based on the Child, Early, and Forced Marriage Resource Guide (2015), written for USAID by Allie Glinski, Magnolia Sexton and Lis Meyers on behalf of ICRW and Banyan Global. References, programme examples, and further information can be found in that guide, located here:

<https://www.usaid.gov/documents/1865/child-early-and-forced-marriage-resource-guide>.

For additional information, see:

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Myers, J. (2013) **Untying the knot: exploring early marriage in fragile states**. London: World Vision UK. Available at: [http://www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/press-reports/\\$file/Untying-the-Knot\\_report.pdf](http://www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/press-reports/$file/Untying-the-Knot_report.pdf)

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United Nations. (1979). **Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women**. New York, NY: United Nations General Assembly. Available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm>

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