



## Child Marriage in Humanitarian Crises - June 2016

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### Introduction

Growing evidence shows that in times of humanitarian crisis, child marriage rates increase, with a disproportionate impact on girls.<sup>1</sup> Yet adolescent girls continue to be left behind in humanitarian response efforts. This brief outlines what we know about child marriage in humanitarian crises, highlights a number of initiatives which address it, and includes recommendations on what more needs to be done. It has been informed by the experience of a number of *Girls Not Brides* members working on this issue. It should be read with this brief: [taking action to address child marriage: the role of different sectors: conflict and humanitarian crisis](#), which includes indicators for tracking progress.

Four key messages are worth emphasising:

- **Nine out of the ten countries with the highest child marriage rates are considered fragile states.** We cannot ignore child marriage in such contexts.<sup>2</sup>
- **Child marriage rates have increased in some crisis situations.** While gender inequality is a root cause of child marriage in both stable and fragile contexts, often in times of crisis, families see child marriage as a way to cope with economic hardship exacerbated by crisis and to protect girls from increased violence. But in reality, it results in a [range of harmful consequences](#).
- **Child marriage is not being adequately addressed in situations of crisis.** It is a cross-cutting issue which requires coordinated action across all sectors from the earliest stage of crises.
- **More research is needed** to understand how different types of crises affect child marriage, how programmes which tackle child marriage can be adapted for these settings, and how child marriage can be integrated into humanitarian response efforts. However, research must support interventions to address child marriage, and the need for more research should not be used as an excuse for inaction.

### 1. What do we know about child marriage in humanitarian crises?

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- Humanitarian crises can encompass a wide range of situations before, during, and after natural disasters, conflicts, and epidemics.<sup>3</sup> They exacerbate **poverty, insecurity, and lack of access to education**, factors which drive child marriage.
- For poor families who have lost livelihoods, land and homes because of a crisis, **marrying their daughter may seem like the only option** to alleviate economic hardship by reducing the number of mouths to feed or in some places receiving a bride price.<sup>4 5</sup>
- Families living in crisis-affected contexts often anticipate a rise in violence and see marriage as a solution to **protect girls from sexual violence**, despite the fact that married girls face

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<sup>1</sup> See *Girls Not Brides* [list of useful resources](#) on child marriage in humanitarian crises.

<sup>2</sup> Burkina Faso, Bangladesh, Chad, Central African Republic, Guinea, Mali, Mozambique, Niger and South Sudan are listed as fragile states as defined by OECD. See definition in [States of Fragility 2016: understanding violence](#), 2016.

<sup>3</sup> According to the World Health Organisation (2007), a crisis refer to “an event or series of events representing a critical threat to the health, safety, security or wellbeing of a community, usually over a wide area. Armed conflicts, epidemics, famine, natural disasters, environmental emergencies and other major harmful events may involve or lead to a humanitarian crisis”.

<sup>4</sup> Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, [Fragile States, Fragile Lives Child Marriage Amid Disaster and Conflict](#), 2014 (accessed March 2016).

<sup>5</sup> In some communities, the groom’s family has to pay a certain amount of money to the bride’s family. A *Girls Not Brides* member working in Middle-East and Asia reported that the bride price is critical in parent’s decision to marry off their daughters in Afghanistan and Papua New Guinea.

increased sexual violence within marriages. In many communities, female sexuality and virginity are associated with family honour and parents marry their daughters young to guarantee their virginity at marriage.<sup>6</sup>

- In some conflict-affected areas, child marriage may also happen forcibly and **against parents' wishes**.
- Because the reasons for child marriage in such different contexts vary greatly, **solutions cannot be generalised**.

### Child marriage and conflict

During conflict, **women and girls are at increased risk of sexual violence**. Rape, torture and forced prostitution, sometimes under the disguise of "marriage", have been reported to be used as weapons of war weakening families and communities often with impunity from the law.<sup>7</sup>

- In **Iraq and Syria**, terrorist groups have abducted girls and women as 'spoils of war' to be raped, sold, offered, and forced into marriage. The Yazidi minority has been particularly affected.<sup>8</sup>
- In war-torn **Somalia** in 2010 and 2011, girls were abducted from school and forced to marry fighters of the Islamist armed group al-Shabaab. Parents refusing to give their daughters away were threatened or killed.<sup>9</sup> In **Nigeria**, the Islamist group Boko Haram uses similar practices as shown by the example of over 270 school girls who were abducted in 2014 and subjected to various forms of violence including forced marriage.<sup>10</sup>

In some contexts, families turn to child marriage **as a way to protect girls from other types of violence**.

- During the war in **Sri Lanka**, parents feared **forced recruitment** of girls by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the North and East of the country, and believed that the armed group would not recruit married girls.<sup>11</sup>

### Child marriage and displacement

Conflict drives displacement around the world. In some cases families flee conflict zones because of the risks that girls face in such contexts. Displacement itself can also increase girls' vulnerability to child marriage due to the **breakdown of social networks and risks of sexual violence for girls**.

- In the **Kobane refugee community in Turkey** one of the main reasons that families reported for fleeing was to protect their girls from sexual violence and forced marriage to armed combatants.<sup>12</sup>
- In **Syrian refugee communities in Jordan**, the proportion of registered marriages for girls under 18 years has rapidly increased. Between 2011 and 2014, the rates of registered child marriages almost tripled, from 12% to just under 32%.<sup>13</sup> Protection of family honour and control of girls' sexuality were major drivers of child marriage in this context.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> CARE UK, [To Protect Her Honour: child marriage in emergencies, the fatal confusion between protecting girls and sexual violence](#), 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.; World Vision UK, [Untying the knot: exploring early marriage in fragile states](#), 2013.

<sup>8</sup> UNFPA, [State of the World Population 2015, Shelter for the storm: a transformative agenda for women and girls in a crisis-prone world](#), 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch, [No place for children: child recruitment, forced marriage, and attacks on schools in Somalia](#).

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch, [Those terrible weeks in their camp: Boko Haram violence against women and girls in northeast Nigeria](#), 2014.

<sup>11</sup> FOKUS Women, [Post war trends in child marriage, Sri Lanka](#), 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Op.cit. CARE UK, [To Protect Her Honour: child marriage in emergencies, the fatal confusion between protecting girls and sexual violence](#), 2015.

<sup>13</sup> UNICEF, [A Study on Early Marriage in Jordan](#), 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Op.cit. CARE UK, [To Protect Her Honour: child marriage in emergencies, the fatal confusion between protecting girls and sexual violence](#), 2015.

- In Kousseri, **northern Cameroon**, families facing extreme poverty in internally displaced populations and refugee camps are reported to be more willing to marry their girls because of a lack of other alternatives.<sup>15</sup>
- In the **north of Nigeria**, girls in internally displaced population and refugee camps are reported to be at higher risk of child marriage due to extreme poverty and the breakdown of social networks.<sup>16</sup>

### Child marriage and natural disasters

Over the last decades, the number of natural disasters has been increasing,<sup>17</sup> which threaten access to basic services such as education, adding to girls' vulnerability and risk of child marriage. Several countries with high vulnerability to climate change also have high child marriage rates.<sup>18</sup>

- Following the 2004 **tsunami**, girls in **Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka** were forced into marriage with tsunami widowers and in many instances did so to receive state subsidies for marrying and starting a family.<sup>19</sup>
- In **Bangladesh and northeast India**, increased extreme poverty provoked by river erosion and floods often pushed families to adopt child marriage as a survival strategy.<sup>20</sup> Anecdotal evidence from northeast India showed that floods also lead to school dropout, limiting an important alternative to marriage for girls.<sup>21</sup>
- In **Nepal**, anecdotal evidence has shown an increase in the number of cases of gender-based violence and child marriage following the earthquake in 2015.<sup>22</sup>
- In **Somaliland**, research suggests that **drought is a significant driver of child marriage** because marrying a girl frees the family from providing for her.<sup>23</sup> However, this contrasts with the experience of **Ethiopia**, where community members suggested that **drought was one of the reasons for a reduction in child marriage** as families could not afford to organise weddings.<sup>24 25</sup>

## 2. What is being done to address child marriage in such settings?

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There is still much to be done to address child marriage in humanitarian crises. However, examples of the type of approaches *Girls Not Brides* members are implementing include:

- **Identifying risks and needs of girls, and integrating them into disaster risk reduction strategies.** For instance, the Girls in Risk Reduction Leadership (G.I.R.R.L) Project piloted by

<sup>15</sup> According to a *Girls Not Brides* member working in Cameroon, families fleeing regions where Boko Haram is present and facing extreme poverty in camps often send girls selling goods alone on the street, where they get asked to marry.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with *Girls Not Brides* member working in Nigeria reported that men often perceive that it is easier to marry young adolescents who have lost their family and live alone in the camps. Similar links were reported in the context of the civil war and Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone.

<sup>17</sup> 90 a year in the 1970s and almost 450 a year in the last decade, as cited in Plan International, *Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2013. In Double Jeopardy: Adolescent Girls and Disasters*, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Conversation with *Girls Not Brides* members from Bangladesh citing Center for Global Development, "[Mapping the impacts of climate change](#)".

<sup>19</sup> Op. Cit. Plan International, *Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2013. In Double Jeopardy: Adolescent Girls and Disasters*, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Marry before your house is swept away: child marriage in Bangladesh*, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> R.Mohan, "[Trouble Waters: child brides in flood-ravaged Assam](#), India" Aljazeera America, December 19, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Experience from two *Girls Not Brides* members working in Nepal.

<sup>23</sup> Op.cit. World Vision UK, *Untying the Knot: Exploring Early Marriage in Fragile States*, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Conversation with CARE International UK – the relation between drought and child marriage has been explored during a rapid assessment carried out by CARE in the region in 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Similarly, evidence from Niger showed that the food crisis led in increase of child marriage in some communities and decrease in others (Op. Cit. Plan International, *The State of the World's Girls 2013*).

CARE and the African Center for Disaster Studies (ACDS) in Southern Africa in 2012-13 used a participatory approach to encourage girls to identify issues they face and link with community leaders and disaster risk reduction (DDR) planning structures to share their input.<sup>26</sup> The Women's Refugee Commission is also piloting a mobile tool in South Sudan – the Girls' Roster – to help produce profiles of girls living in the camps to better reach them and address their needs.<sup>27 28</sup>

- **Offering alternatives to marriage by providing safe spaces and services to girls.** For instance, the Protecting and Empowering Displaced Adolescent Girls Initiative, implemented by the Women's Refugee Commission in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda and the Non-Formal Education Centres set up by Plan International in Pakistan in 2010, both offered alternatives to child marriage in post-conflict and post-disaster settings. Services included safe spaces, access to non-formal education including life skills and discussion of gender-related issues, health services, and financial literacy courses for married girls and out-of-school girls living in refugee camps.<sup>29 30</sup>
- **Running awareness sessions on child marriage with community members in refugee populations.** Save the Children and CARE have adopted this approach with the Syrian refugee communities in Jordan and Turkey.<sup>31 32</sup>

### **3. What more needs to be done to address child marriage in humanitarian crises?**<sup>33</sup>

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Despite these initiatives, **child marriage is not adequately addressed in situations of crisis.** Considered a development issue, the practice fails to be addressed within the humanitarian sector, and is not well understood. The following recommendations have emerged clearly from *Girls Not Brides* members:

- 1. Recognise child marriage as a critical issue in times of crisis as well as in times of stability.** Humanitarian efforts and development programming to prevent child marriage and enable girls to thrive must be complementary.
- 2. Identify risk factors for child marriage in humanitarian crises by involving adolescent girls from the early stages of crises and including their issues in assessments and planning.** Better programming requires gender-sensitive assessments informed by mapping and participatory consultations with girls from the early stages of crises carried out by trained staff.<sup>34</sup> Key

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<sup>26</sup> ICRW and *Girls Not Brides* brief, [Taking action to address child marriage: the role of different sectors: conflict and humanitarian crisis](#), 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Women's Refugee Commission, [I'm Here: Adolescent girls in emergencies, approach and tools for improved response](#), 2015

<sup>28</sup> Additionally, the Women's Refugee Commission, in partnership with the international Medical Corps, International Rescue Committee and Danish Refugee Council are piloting interventions to prevent and respond to child marriage in multiple humanitarian contexts.

<sup>29</sup> Op.cit. ICRW and *Girls Not Brides* brief, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Department for International Development, briefing paper, [Violence against women and girls in humanitarian emergencies](#), October 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Save the children, *Submission to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) report on Child, Early and Forced marriage*, UNGA Resolution 69/156, February 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Op.cit. CARE UK, *To Protect Her Honour: child marriage in emergencies, the fatal confusion between protecting girls and sexual violence*, 2015, pp.4-5.

<sup>33</sup> Recommendations are based on consultation with a number of *Girls Not Brides* members working on child marriage in humanitarian contexts, completed by available research used to develop this brief.

<sup>34</sup> Although the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Gender Marker assesses whether a humanitarian intervention works towards gender equality is also a positive step for more gender-sensitive action, it does not include an age distinction to help capture efforts towards adolescent girls.

community members that have a major influence on adolescent girls' lives should also be engaged to ensure comprehensive assessments.

**3. Integrate child marriage prevention and support to married girls across sectors in any humanitarian response from the early onset of crises.**

Examples of responses which address both the risk factors for child marriage and support and services for married girls, who are often especially vulnerable and isolated, include:

- Providing **services to adolescent girls** (e.g. providing access to quality non-formal education and prioritising reestablishment of formal education after a crisis; providing safe spaces coupled with life skills programmes; economic empowerment; alternatives to marriage; access to comprehensive health information and services including sexual and reproductive health and psychosocial counselling; providing legal support; facilitated access to asylum seeking process, etc.)
- **Considering girls' safety** and well-being in all other services (e.g. providing lighting and security in places such as detention centres, water points, and latrines; considering distances to schools and health services, etc.)
- Ensuring that families' **basic needs** are met and that they have the resources to care for their daughters without turning to child marriage as a coping strategy.
- Increasing efforts to keep families together where possible in order to avoid the breakdown of **social networks**, especially among displaced populations.
- Working with **families, communities and young people** to address social and cultural norms which influence decisions of child marriage.<sup>35</sup>
- Recruiting female humanitarian staff on the ground and **training the staff** – including camp managers - to be able to address issues faced by adolescent girls.

**4. Collect data and do further research.** Reliable **data disaggregated by marital status, gender and age** should be collected to provide a detailed understanding of the needs and risks of girls affected by disaster and conflict in various contexts, including for adolescents in the 10-14 age range. Field research and quality data analysis is critical to understand the drivers of child marriage in different crisis-affected contexts and to understand how programmes can be adapted for such situations.

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<sup>35</sup> E.g. bridging development and humanitarian practices by implementing community-based interventions involving community dialogues and collective process of questioning harmful social norms.