Child marriage in humanitarian settings:
Spotlight on the situation in the Arab region
“My ambitions and hopes have changed totally here in Jordan, we sacrificed our kids’ education so we can live, to save money for living…. We never thought about getting our daughters married in Syria; they were good at school, but here we are thinking of getting them married to decrease the disbursements…. ”

—quote from a Syrian father displaced in Jordan

**Sustainable Development Goal 5.3**

Child marriage is the formal marriage or informal union of any child under 18 years of age. Child marriage is considered a violation of human rights and a form of violence against children and women. In recognition of this, Sustainable Development Goal 5.3, calls for the elimination of all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage, which predominantly, but not exclusively, affects girls.

**Human Rights Council Resolution on Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings**

The 2017 Human Rights Council Resolution on Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings recognizes child marriage as a violation of human rights and calls for strengthened efforts to prevent and eliminate this harmful practice and support married girls in humanitarian contexts. It urges states to ensure access to protection, health and education services for girls who have been forced to flee violence and persecution or who are unaccompanied or separated, including protection and response to the practice of child, early and forced marriage.

**Why is child marriage an important concern in humanitarian settings?**

Child marriage can result in devastating consequences for girls including sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV, risky pregnancies, lifelong birth related complications, sexual and reproductive health diseases, not to mention maternal mortality and higher risk of domestic violence. Emerging evidence tells us that the risk of child marriage is exacerbated in humanitarian crisis. According to a recent multi-country secondary analysis conducted by UNICEF and ESCWA on the impact of conflict on children, child marriage was one of the issues identified to be most sensitive to conflict in some countries. In the MENA region, nine countries face or are impacted by humanitarian crisis. Despite this, child marriage programming is often not prioritized in humanitarian settings. This causes risk of serious set-backs in the gains made by countries affected by child marriage, including in countries that were on track to eliminate child marriage before the crisis erupted.

**Early pregnancies in humanitarian conflicts**

Ninety percent of early first births happen within the context of child marriage, and girls between 15 and 19 years of age are far more likely to experience complications during pregnancy and childbirth than those over twenty. Conditions for pregnancy and childbearing are worsened for girls and women living in conflict settings, and many may turn to unsafe abortion when facing an unplanned pregnancy. UNFPA estimates that, worldwide, 25 to 50 per cent of maternal deaths in refugee settings are due to complications of unsafe abortions.
What do we know about child marriage in humanitarian settings in the Arab States region?

Gender inequality is a root cause of child marriage both in stable contexts and in situations of crisis. In times of crisis, there are various factors that exacerbate the risk of child marriage, with a disproportionate impact on girls. Faced with insecurity, increased risks of sexual and gender-based violence and the break-down of rule of law, families and parents may see child marriage as a coping mechanism to deal with increased economic hardship, to protect girls from sexual violence, and/or to protect the honour of the family in response to the disruption of social networks and routines. In addition, forced child marriage is used as a tactic in conflict.

Crisis severely impacts on the mobility of girls, who according to studies, conducted in the MENA/Arab States region, are the first to be pulled out of school for security reasons. Such as the physical threat of crisis limits girls access to education. Limited education and increased confinement leads to increasing the sense that the girls in the family will become a financial burden.

In Iraq and Syria, in particular, armed groups and militias have systematically abducted girls and women and used rape, slavery, forced marriage as ‘weapons of war’. The Yazidi minority has been particularly affected.

As such, driving factors of child marriage include poverty and the challenges of providing for an adolescent girl, the perceived protection that marriage provides, increased gender inequalities, poor educational access, high levels of girls remaining ‘inactive’ at home and the perception that marriage is a positive transition for girls with limited options.

Furthermore, conflict and its related displacement have altered the social process of marriage resulting in shorter engagement periods, lower bride prices, change in cousin marriage practices, and a reduced age at first marriage.

Research undertaken in the past 5 years by different agencies and in different locations in conflict affected countries, has indicated that rates of child marriage has increased among displaced populations. Although survey data acquired through the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys or Demographic and Health Surveys exist on rates of child marriage in the Arab States region, are limited reflecting the rates during, or resulting from conflict, other studies are indicating that conflict has a severe impact on child marriage.

In times of crisis, there are various factors that appear to underpin child marriage in situations of forced displacement, and we know very little about girls and families who are vulnerable to, or at risk of, child marriage, but whom decide not to marry before 18 years of age.
Goals by 2021

- At least 4 countries are implementing evidence-based programmes in targeted areas that address and measure changes in practices and social norms related to child marriage.

Promote cross-sectoral engagement to scale

Diversify entry points to address child marriage prevention and response through engagement with other sectors as an opportunity during emergency contexts to expand and scale up interventions with a focus on health, education, protection and social protection.

GOALS BY 2021

- At least 4 countries will have in place cross-sectoral plans to deliver quality and cost-effective services to meet the needs of adolescents.

Empowering and strengthening girls’ voices and agency through education, health services, life skills and economic opportunities.

- Ensure access to education, health, life skills initiatives, psycho-social support and economic opportunities for girls at risk of child marriage by using existing platforms such as schools or safe spaces. Ensure that services are safe and empowering to reduce risks of marriage in humanitarian crisis. Promote girls’ education, access to health services and opportunities for economic strengthening in emergencies through cash-based programming, where feasible. Create opportunities of engagement and ensure girls voices are heard through accountability for affected populations mechanisms.

GOALS BY 2021

- At least 3 countries will have gender-responsive scalable programmes on life skills and citizenship education.

- At least 3 countries with scalable programmes to increase girls access to education, health, protection including psycho-social support and social protection services, in areas with high prevalence of child marriage.

- At least 3 countries will have in place mechanisms to provide a range of opportunities for girls participation including through accountability for affected populations mechanisms. Regional partnerships, networks and platforms will be in place, mobilized and leveraged to increase support and coordination of work to end child marriage in the region.

Strengthens evidence generation

- Ensure that research gaps are closed by coordination of research on child marriage in the region through a Regional Reference Group. Strengthens monitoring and evaluation of child marriage interventions through provision of training, guidance and tools and strengthens availability of routine national and sub-national representative data on child marriage in humanitarian settings. Generate reliable and robust evidence on child marriage to inform advocacy, policy and programming.

End goals by 2021

- At least 3 countries will have increased knowledge, capacities and access to mechanisms that can generate reliable evidence to prevent and address child marriage in humanitarian settings.

- At least 4 countries will have reliable and robust evidence on child marriage to address data gaps and inform advocacy, policy, and programming on what works in humanitarian settings.

End Notes:
1. UNICEF https://www.unicef.org/protection/57929_58028.html accessed on 6 June 2018
3. UNICEF 2016 report. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1d_l6Y6bX3GId Gv0YbYdK7uS7lI2 accessed on 6 June 2018
7. SDG 5.3.