



**Women's Refugee Commission**  
Research. Rethink. Resolve.



# **A Girl No More: The Changing Norms of Child Marriage in Conflict**

**Canada** 

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WOMEN'S  
REFUGEE  
COMMISSION

## Research. Rethink. Resolve.

The Women's Refugee Commission improves the lives and protects the rights of women, children, and youth 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.

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Cover photo: Somali refugee girl in Ethiopia (c) Lindsay Stark

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## Acronyms & Abbreviations

|      |                                 |
|------|---------------------------------|
| AUB  | American University in Beirut   |
| DRC  | Democratic Republic of Congo    |
| FGD  | Focus group discussion          |
| GBV  | Gender-based violence           |
| IASC | Inter-Agency Standing Committee |
| IDP  | Internally displaced person     |
| IMC  | International Medical Corps     |
| KII  | Key informant interview         |
| LRA  | Lord's Resistance Army          |
| WRC  | Women's Refugee Commission      |

## Executive Summary

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.

## 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 identified 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,<sup>1</sup> “*I’m Here*” approach,<sup>2</sup> or available guidelines such as *So You Want to Consult with Children? A toolkit of good practice*.<sup>3</sup>

1 Population Council, Girl Roster, <http://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). <https://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). <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/so-you-want-consult-children-toolkit-good-practice>



#### **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.<sup>4,5,6</sup> 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<sup>7</sup> provide practical 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

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4 International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), *Solutions to End Child Marriage: Summary of the Evidence* (2011). <http://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" <http://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). <http://www.icrw.org/sites/default/files/publications/IM-PACCT%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](http://www.gbvguidelines.org)

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. Multi-sector approaches to address child marriage, as a form of GBV, could also be piloted during the roll-out of the IASC GBV Guidelines.



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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## Introduction

Marriage before the age of 18 is a form of GBV and a violation of human rights. One in three girls in developing countries is married before 18 and one in nine before the age of 15.<sup>8</sup> Globally, 142 million girls will marry before the age of 18 over the next decade.<sup>9</sup> The majority have received little education, and are poor or living in rural areas.

Marriage at such a young age can pose multiple threats to young girls' lives, health, and future prospects. Complications during pregnancy and delivery are the second leading cause of death among 15- to 19-year-olds,<sup>10</sup> and 90 percent of early first births happen within the context of child marriage.<sup>11,12</sup> Married girls are also at risk of intimate partner violence, the most common form of GBV, which affects almost one third of women worldwide.<sup>13</sup> Child marriage increases exposure to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, particularly when the age difference between the girl and her partner is significant. In sub-Saharan Africa, HIV transmission is 50 percent higher among child brides than among their sexually active peers.<sup>14,15,16</sup> For a girl, marriage often means the end of her education and vocational opportunities. Child marriage perpetuates a cycle of poverty. It stalls progress towards sustainable development goals, and propels population growth. Child marriage has long-term, devastating impacts on global efforts to achieve universal primary education, improve child health and survival, and reduce maternal mortality.

In recent years, there has been a groundswell of attention to child marriage globally, and research is now emerging regarding what works to reduce risks faced by adolescent girls. The International Center for Research on Women has found that

- 8 UNFPA, *Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage* (New York, 2012). <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/MarryingTooYoung.pdf>
- 9 Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, *Fragile States, Fragile Lives: Child Marriage amid Disaster and Conflict* (New York, Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). <http://www.cfr.org/global/fragile-states-fragile-lives/p33093>
- 10 WHO, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs364/en/>
- 11 Nicole Haberland et al., "Early marriage and adolescent girls," *YouthLens*, no. 15 (Youthnet, August 2005). <https://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/3900613.html#5>
- 12 E. Murphy and D. Carr, "Powerful partners: adolescent girls' education and delayed childbearing," *Policy Brief*, (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2007).
- 13 World Bank, "Gender-Based Violence Prevention: Lessons from World Bank Impact Evaluations," *enGender Impact* April 30, 2014. Available at: <http://wrc.ms/1pkASW7>
- 14 Nawal M. Nour, "Health Consequences of Child Marriage in Africa," *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, no. 12 (November 2006). <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3372345/>
- 15 Shelley Clark, "Early marriage and HIV risks in sub-Saharan Africa," *Studies in Family Planning*, no. 35 (August 2004): pp. 149–160. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4465.2004.00019.x>
- 16 J.R. Glynn et al., "Why do young women have a much higher prevalence of HIV than young men? A study in Kisumu, Kenya and Ndola, Zambia," *AIDS*, no. 15 (August 2001) pp. S51–S60. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1097/00002030-200108004-00006>

enhancing household economic security and providing a girl with financial assets and life skills can help delay marriage.<sup>17</sup> The Population Council has found that education support to 12- to 14-year-olds, and the conditional provision of a chicken or goat to 15- to 17-year-olds was effective in reducing child marriage practices within these two age groups.<sup>18</sup> Economic empowerment and social protection interventions have also been shown to have positive effects on intimate partner violence, a significant problem facing married adolescents.<sup>19</sup> Building community knowledge around the benefits of educating girls and the harms of child marriage has also been effective in reducing child marriage among the youngest girls, 12 to 14 years old.<sup>20</sup> Efforts to prevent, mitigate, and respond to child marriage involve many sectors and are intimately connected with education, livelihoods, and health.

Research on child marriage is firmly rooted in major global policy processes and standards. Child marriage is an issue closely connected to child rights and protection, population growth, family planning, and women’s rights and protection. Child marriage rates have been proposed as a wide-reaching indicator within the new Sustainable Development Goals, and child marriage is also addressed within the United States government’s all-agency *Action Plan on Children in Adversity 2012-2017*.<sup>21</sup> Through this action plan, the U.S. has prioritized coordinated, multifaceted action to “eliminate barriers to care and support” for children, promote permanent family care, and minimize risks of family separation, to all of which child marriage contributes.

Fragility and conflict impact child-marriage decisions. However, the role they play is complex and not fully understood. Global trends demand a deeper, more contextual understanding of this relationship, given that child marriage and teen pregnancy appear to be particularly high in insecure

During a humanitarian crisis, many factors can exacerbate GBV-related risks. These include—but are not limited to—increased militarization, lack of community and State protections, displacement, scarcity of essential resources, disruption of community services, changing cultural and gender norms, disrupted relationships and weakened infrastructure.

*IASC GBV Guidelines 2015*

[www.gbvguidelines.org](http://www.gbvguidelines.org)

17 Anju Malhotra et al, *Solutions to End Child Marriage: What the Evidence Shows* (Washington, International Center for Research on Women, 2011). <http://www.icrw.org/files/publications/Solutions-to-End-Child-Marriage.pdf>

18 Population Council, press release. See note 5.

19 P. Pronyk et al., “Effect of a structural intervention for the prevention of intimate-partner violence and HIV in rural South Africa: a cluster randomised trial,” *The Lancet*, 2(368). [http://www.who.int/social\\_determinants/resources/articles/lancet\\_pronyk\\_kim.pdf](http://www.who.int/social_determinants/resources/articles/lancet_pronyk_kim.pdf)

20 Population Council press release. See note 5.

21 U.S. Government, *United States Action Plan on Children in Adversity* (Washington. 2012). <http://www.childreninadversity.gov/docs/default-source/default-document-library/apca.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

environments.<sup>22,23,24,25,26,27</sup> Nine of the top 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage are considered fragile states.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, many countries particularly vulnerable to natural disasters number among the highest in child marriage prevalence.<sup>29</sup> Child marriage is receiving increased attention from the humanitarian community. As a form of GBV, it is a component of the revised 2015 Interagency Standing Committee (IASC) guidelines on GBV.<sup>30</sup> Child marriage is also a concern for the Global Protection Cluster's Child Protection Working Group, given its relationship to protection and family separation. The crisis in Syria and the resulting response in neighboring countries have prompted a number of issue papers on this topic. Agencies, including the Council on Foreign Relations, UNICEF, and World Vision, have identified factors that drive child marriage during conflict, including new protection concerns (such as threats of sexual violence),<sup>31,32</sup> economic strain after displacement,<sup>33</sup> and gaps in education and vocational opportunities.<sup>34</sup> This report further contributes to this discourse.

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22 Mercy Tembon and Lucia Fort, eds., *Girls' Education in the 21st Century: Gender Equality, Empowerment and Economic Growth* (Washington. World Bank, 2008). <http://wrc.ms/1WeOdch>

23 Save the Children, *Unspeakable Crimes Against Children: Sexual Violence in Conflict*, (London, 2013), <https://www.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/libraries/Unspeakable%20Crimes%20report.pdf>.  
*Child Brides, Global Consequences How to End Child Marriage*. <http://archive.cmb.ac.lk/research/handle/70130/548>

24 Interviews with Afghan women on May 19 2014 (as cited in Council on Foreign Relations (New York. 2013). (2014).

25 Gayle Tzemach Lemmon and Lynn S. ElHarake, *Child Brides, Global Consequences: How to End Child Marriage*. (New York. Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). <http://archive.cmb.ac.lk/research/handle/70130/548>

26 Rose Wijeyesekera, *Assessing the validity of child marriages contracted during the war*, (Colombo, Sri Lanka. University of Colombo, 2011). <http://archive.cmb.ac.lk/research/handle/70130/548>

27 Lemmon and ElHarake, see note 25.

28 Council on Foreign Relations paper, *Fragile States, Fragile Lives: Child Marriage Amid Disaster and Conflict* (Lemmon, 2014). <http://www.cfr.org/global/fragile-states-fragile-lives/p33093>

29 As cited in Lemmon and ElHarake, see note 25.

30 Interagency Standing Committee, See note 7.

31 Save the Children. See note 23.

32 Rose Wijeyesekera. See note 26.

33 Lemmon and ElHarake. See note 25.

34 World Vision, *Untying the Knot* (2013). [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)

## Background

In 2011, the WRC initiated research to document factors that promote and mitigate child marriage during conflict and displacement, and to generate recommendations to reduce the vulnerabilities of adolescents to child marriage in humanitarian contexts. This research sought to understand how traditional practices around age of marriage may change during conflict, and what factors contribute to those decisions. At the time the research was initiated, anecdotal information suggested an increase in this practice, but very little had been done to systematically explore the intersecting individual and societal factors contributing to changes in customs and norms around marriage. Although many boys marry before the age of 18 (typically to adolescent girls), child marriage and its negative impacts disproportionately affect girls. Consequently, this research focused on child marriage among girls. It did not focus on forced marriage to combatants, due to existing literature documenting this practice during war.

### Study settings: Four conflict-affect communities

WRC, with collaborating partners, conducted research between 2011 and 2015 in four conflict-affected settings:

**Mucwini, Northern Uganda:** Mucwini is located outside Kitgum, a town in northern Uganda. Between 1987 and 2006, it was deeply affected by a conflict characterized by brutal attacks on local communities, abductions, and revenge killings by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).<sup>35,36</sup> During the height of the conflict, the LRA terrorized and traumatized entire communities, and Mucwini witnessed some of the worst atrocities. At the time of this research (August 2011), Mucwini was not in crisis, but was host to roughly 1,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs),<sup>37</sup> who were then attempting to move back to their lands.<sup>38</sup>

**Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Uganda:** Nakivale was established in 1960, and is the oldest and largest refugee settlement in Uganda, hosting a diverse refugee population of roughly 57,000, in addition to the local population.<sup>39</sup> The diversity of the local and refugee populations in Nakivale has presented challenges for both education and

35 Sverker Finnstrom, *Living with Bad Surroundings: War, History, and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

36 Justice and Reconciliation Project, *Field Notes, Massacre in Mucwini: Field Note 8* (Gulu District NGO forum. November 2008). [http://migs.concordia.ca/documents/MassacreinMucwini\\_Final.pdf](http://migs.concordia.ca/documents/MassacreinMucwini_Final.pdf).

37 Mirkka Henttonen et al., "Health services for survivors of gender-based violence in northern Uganda: a qualitative study," *Reproductive Health Matters*, no. 16 (May 2008): pp.122–31. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18513614>

38 Internally Displaced Monitoring Center, Uganda: difficulties continue for returnees and remaining IDPs as development begins (Geneva. November 2010).

39 UNHCR, Nakivale Fact Sheet (2014) <http://wrc.ms/1RKEPMt>

intergenerational communication for those refugees settling there for the long term.<sup>40</sup> At the time of this research (August 2011), refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) were continuing to arrive from across the border, driven by recurrent violence, and they were the focus of research in this context.

**Al Marj Settlement, Lebanon:** Al Marj settlement is located in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. Refugees in Al Marj, arriving from the now five-year crisis in Syria, live primarily in tented settlements and rented rooms or flats (paying roughly \$75<sup>41</sup> to \$100 per month, without any formal tenancy agreement).<sup>42</sup> Most settlements are located on agricultural land and are not far from urban centers. Tents are typically temporary wooden frames covered with plastic, cardboard, and/or old rugs. They are small and are often shared by numerous families, with minimal water and sanitation facilities. Each tented settlement is headed by a *shawish*, who is usually assigned by the municipality or community, and serves as a link between refugees and service providers. At the time of this research (November 2014), Al Marj hosted roughly 12,000 of the more than 1 million displaced Syrians seeking refuge in Lebanon.<sup>43</sup>

**Kobe Refugee Camp, Ethiopia:** Kobe refugee camp is located in Ethiopia's Dollo Ado corridor, on the Southeast border with Somalia. Kobe, which opened in June 2011, is one of five camps in this region hosting Somali refugees fleeing the conflict and food crisis. Up to 900 refugees continued to enter the Dollo Ado Corridor each month, with as many as 1,240 new arrivals per month at the height of the influx in 2014. At the time of this research (January 2015), 40,000 refugees resided in this camp, which was designed for 20,000 people.

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40 Calisto Mudzingwa, "KiSwahili: the lingua franca of Nakivale refugee settlement in Uganda," *Sociolinguistic Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2011).

41 All currency is in U.S. dollars, unless specified otherwise.

42 Save the Children UK (Blog), *Lebanon: the strain of living in informal tented settlements* (London. 2013). Available at: <http://blogs.savethechildren.org.uk/2013/04/lebanon-the-strain-of-living-in-informal-tented-settlements/>. Accessed December 2014.

43 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Syria Regional Refugee Response: Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal (Geneva. 2015). <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>



| Child Marriage Facts from Country of Origin  |   |   |  |  |
|--|---|---|--|--|
|  | Northeast DRC   | Northern Uganda   | Central-South Somalia  | Syria  |
| Prevalence of child marriage*  | <18 yrs=<br>46-50%  | <18 yrs=59%   | <18 yrs=56%  | <15=3%<br><18=13%**  |
| Legal context**  | Legal age of marriage is 18 for men and 15 for girls; both parties must consent.* | The minimum age for marriage is 18. Laws exist (defilement) for sexual relations with girls under the age of 18.* | Legal age of marriage is 18, but can marry at 16 with parental consent.* | Legal age of marriage is 18 for boys and 17 for girls. Religious leaders can authorize exceptions. |
| <p>*UNFPA country profiles, as made available through Girls Not Brides<br/> <a href="http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/reports-and-publications/unfpa-child-marriage-country-profile-uganda/">www.girlsnotbrides.org/reports-and-publications/unfpa-child-marriage-country-profile-uganda/</a><br/> <a href="http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/reports-and-publications/unfpa-child-marriage-country-profile-somalia/">www.girlsnotbrides.org/reports-and-publications/unfpa-child-marriage-country-profile-somalia/</a><br/> <a href="http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/reports-and-publications/unfpa-child-marriage-country-profile-democratic-republic-of-the-congo/">www.girlsnotbrides.org/reports-and-publications/unfpa-child-marriage-country-profile-democratic-republic-of-the-congo/</a></p> <p>**Girls Not Brides country pages on child marriage</p> |   |   |  |  |



The Kobe refugee camp in Dolo Ado, Ethiopia is home to 40,000 refugees from Somalia.



## Methodology

A social-ecological model served as the conceptual framework to guide both research design and analysis of findings.<sup>44</sup> Research in all four sites was qualitative in nature, and included focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs). FGDs were largely disaggregated by age and sex, although age groups and characteristics varied by site. In Nakivale, Uganda a total of 9 FGDs were held (3 male youth, 4 female youth, and 2 mixed adult groups) with a total of 61 participants. Additionally 8 KIIs were conducted with representatives from the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), local leadership and religious community, teachers and health providers, an international nongovernmental organization (INGO) working on health and legal issues, and a local women's group. In Mucwini, Uganda, a total of 9 FGDs were held (3 male youth, 3 female youth, 1 mixed youth group, 2 mixed adult groups) with a total of 72 participants. Additionally 9 KIIs were conducted, with the district education officer, local leadership and religious community, teachers and health providers, and an INGO working on youth protection. In Al Marj settlement in Lebanon, a total of 8 FGDs were held (4 with female youth, 2 with mothers, and 2 with fathers) with a total of 50 participants. In this context, given the sensitivities around interviewing children (those under 18) about marriage practices, it was decided that married 18- to 19-year-olds would be interviewed, on the assumption that they have married during the conflict; married 22- to 24-year-olds would be interviewed, assuming that they had married before the conflict. In addition to FGDs, 11 KIIs were conducted with local and international NGOs in the field of child protection, government officials in Al Marj community, camp (*shawish*) and religious leaders, Syrian teachers and health providers. In Ethiopia, four FGDs were held (2 with mothers and 2 with fathers) for a total of 19 participants. Additionally 2 KIIs were conducted with a religious leader and a women's group representative.

(See Appendix for a full summary of interviews conducted, page 29).

Data collection was conducted by researchers from the American University in Beirut (AUB) in Lebanon, International Medical Corps (IMC) in Ethiopia, and a team of four researchers trained by Makerere University and WRC in Uganda.

The WRC developed and adapted focus group and interview tools in collaboration with local colleagues and academic institutions in each site. It obtained ethical approval from Makerere University School of Public Health Higher Degrees Research and Ethics Committee and from the Uganda National Council for Science and Tech-

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44 U. Bronfenbrenner, *Ecological Methods of Human Development*, in *International Encyclopedia of Education* (1994). <http://www.psy.cmu.edu/~sieglar/35bronfenbrenner94.pdf>

nology (SS 2603) for both research sites in Uganda. Additionally, the Office of the Prime Minister Directorate of Refugees gave permission for this research in Nakivale. Ethical approval was obtained from the AUB in Lebanon, and the Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs in Ethiopia.

Research teams at each site undertook initial reviews and thematic analyses of transcripts independently, identifying and summarizing emerging themes and findings from each site. The teams then undertook cross-site analysis using NVivo 10.

## Limitations

Because data collection for this research varied by site, there are variations in the number of participants and level of saturation achieved across the four research contexts. The methodology was most comprehensive for the two sites in Uganda. Saturation was achieved across population groups consulted on domains of inquiry in both of these contexts. In Lebanon, FGDs could not be conducted with adolescents under the age of 18 due to ethical and security concerns, leaving their perspectives excluded from this research. In this setting, there was more emphasis on reflections from young brides, and KIs were conducted in greater numbers. Again, themes that were highlighted were repeated with enough frequency to achieve saturation. In Ethiopia, FGDs that focused on early marriage were conducted exclusively with adults, in order to understand aspects of the changes in traditions and practices since displacement. However, this information complemented FGD data obtained from very young adolescents through a separate research effort looking at their overall risks, during which early marriage was raised.

Due to budgetary limitations, it was not possible to incorporate multiple coders for analysis. Thematic analysis and related reports were initially undertaken in three phases according to funding stream: first, examining data from the two sites in Uganda; second, analyzing the data from Lebanon; and lastly, looking at the data from Ethiopia. A second round of data analysis was undertaken for this report, to examine themes that came out across the four sites as a group.

As findings from this research are qualitative in nature, they cannot be assumed to represent all conflict sites. However, it is likely that they raise factors that may be present to varying extents in other locations.

## Findings

### Marriage provides protection

Child marriage was described by adolescents (both boys and girls), mothers, fathers, and key informants in each research setting as providing various forms of protection to adolescent girls during conflict.

**Young women from Syria (and particularly from rural areas within Syria) described an increased need to protect their reputation and honor since displacement.** They shared that in Syrian society, honor, or *al sutra*,<sup>45</sup> defines their futures, and therefore they and their families were invested in protecting it during unstable times. They understood that marriage provides a mechanism for this protection. Young women described how the fear of gossip by their neighbors, now unfamiliar since displacement and many times from different parts of Syria, prompted adolescent girls and young women to stay indoors. They expressed resentment of Syrian girls who did not protect their honor, or had been promiscuous since coming to Lebanon, as they felt that these girls' behavior tarnished their own reputations and pushed Syrian parents to be more restrictive. Syrian parents noted that they sought marriage to protect the honor of their daughters due to their newly ambiguous futures. They also believed that adolescent exposure to the less conservative Lebanese society and the modern technologies that came with it (cell phones, WhatsApp, Facebook, etc.) heightened the risks to adolescent girls, and enhanced the need to protect them through marriage at earlier ages.

*“Parents think that early marriage provides protection for the daughter, especially here in our society since they think that the Lebanese girls are too open....[T]hey marry them off, thus shielding their morality.”*

-- Al Marj, Key informant interview, INGO representative

Young women originally from urban centers in Syria were described by providers as experiencing the greatest change in marriage expectations since displacement. Many had been pulled from schools and universities due to the conflict, and now had few social, educational, or livelihoods opportunities. Many expressed great frustration with their newly restricted lives. Girls from urban communities that no longer practice child marriage in Syria found this practice had become more common since displacement, in order to provide a more secure future for these girls.

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45 The word *sutra* in Arabic translates to covering, so it is like a virtual veil from people so they won't expose any flaws in an individual or their family. Sometimes it is used as an opposite to scandal. When using it in a marriage context, it mostly reflects protecting a girl's honor, but it can also mean protecting livelihood.

**Fears of sexual violence fueled the perceived need for, and circumstances of, marriage at early ages in all contexts.** Not only was it believed that girls were physically safer in a married relationship, or with a man in the household, but also that marriage protected girls and their families from the social stigma associated with surviving rape.

*“Some girls in Syria are being raped and killed and harassed... Thus, it’s better for the parents to give their daughters to men in marriage.”*

-- Al Marj, FGD, married girls aged 22-24 years

*“[The] fear of insecurity is a major factor... many women are afraid of being raped. If a married woman is raped, she is more likely to be forgiven by her husband, but if an unmarried woman is raped, it will destroy her life.”*

-- Al Marj, FGD, 18- to 19-year-old married women

In Mucwini, parents were aware of increased risks of sexual violence during the peak of the conflict, and kept girls home from school, thereby contributing to an environment conducive to child marriage. During the height of the conflict, families moved to “protection camps” where large schools served the needs of multiple communities. It was not viewed as safe for adolescents, and especially adolescent girls, to go to these schools, given the frequent attacks by the LRA.

*“We have had a long period [of conflict]... girls had more troubles when leaving the home so they stayed home more often. You know they had to be protected from issues of rape that came in those days. Eventually this led to early marriages and early pregnancies. Parents start to think ‘what do we do with you now?’”*

-- Mucwini, KII, Kitgum District Education Officer

In Nakivale, adolescent girls and young women reported that incidents of rape during periods of conflict in DRC shaped experiences and decisions around marriage. Some were “married” to the perpetrator during adolescence, while others feared for their ability to find a partner given their experiences of sexual violence. Many married quickly, hoping to find stability for children born as a result of rape or out of wedlock. Others lost support systems during displacement and arrived at Nakivale feeling extremely vulnerable. Many did not attend school due to their need to earn an income when they reached Uganda. They, and at times their families, sought marriages at early ages because they had few other options, and hoped for protection and support. In both settings in Uganda, child marriage provided families with legal protection from defile-



Displaced Ugandan girls.

(c) Danish Refugee Council

ment (sex with a girl under 18), which is a crime in Uganda. Child marriage was also viewed as providing protection from rape, which occurred with some frequency when girls undertook work (most typically, domestic labor) outside the home.

**Conflict heightened fears of pregnancy outside of marriage, contributing to child marriage practices in the Somali community and to some extent the Syrian community.** Somali parents expressed the need to facilitate marriage decisions at an early age to ensure pregnancies did not occur out of wedlock. Most parents wanted to protect their daughters from sexual violence in Somalia, and some made arrangements for marriage when their daughters were not yet adolescents. Parents also feared relationships that could now occur in the camps. Somali culture was described as heavily divided based on gender. However, in Kobe camp, boys and girls were seen as able to mingle more than they had in Somalia, as a result of schools and adolescent programming. Some parents arranged marriages to adapt to these changes, but also to secure relationships before adolescents initiated plans themselves with partners that parents found undesirable.

*“[T]he main reason [for child marriage] is parents do not like to see their daughter [have a] child out of wedlock. According to their view, it is a*



*means to keep their daughter in a safe way....In this regard, the conflict influences marriage because there is a belief that girls will bring a man from a clan that may be enemy...so parents get girls married before the girl can make her own decision."*

-- Kobe, KII, Women's Association

In interviews, Somali girls expressed a longing to stay in school rather than be married. However, their views of marriage were positive, and most expressed a desire to be "blessed" through marriage arrangements determined by their families and religious leaders.

Among Syrians, both parents and adolescents feared pregnancy prior to marriage due to the social stigma and the related loss of honor.

Fears of premarital pregnancy were shared in all four sites. However, in both Ugandan sites, the resulting outcomes were notably different from the Syrian and Somali communities. Although adolescent girls and their parents viewed pregnancy outside of marriage as shameful, poverty and the inability of boys to accrue bride wealth<sup>46</sup> resulted in a general acceptance of its occurrence. In these settings, marriage (formal and informal)<sup>47</sup> resulted to ensure an adolescent had a spouse, most frequently after becoming pregnant. A few adolescent girls in Mucwini shared that there was even a belief that a girl needed to prove her fertility before a boy would marry her.

**Parents in all sites report that their ability to monitor adolescents' interactions and movements was more challenging following displacement.** During conflict, the disruption of community networks and routines introduced new challenges for parents, at the same time that parenting responsibilities became secondary to basic survival needs. In all contexts, parents reported that boys and girls now had more opportunities to interact with each other in the camps, settlements, and urban contexts, than had been the custom in their homes. In Ethiopia, these interactions came as a result of increased access to school and programs for Somali refugees; in Uganda, at both sites, interaction occurred due to increased time spent unaccompanied at marketplaces/trading centers; and in Lebanon, it resulted from movements within and outside tented settlements. Parents said that youth had more freedom than they had before the conflict, and that this motivated decisions to marry at young ages.

<sup>46</sup> Bride wealth and bride price refer to the similar custom or practice of property, money, or other being paid by the bridegroom (or his family) to the bride's parents. In many societies in sub-Saharan Africa, bride wealth confers the marriage and binds the family to a set marriage agreement.

<sup>47</sup> In both Nakivale and Mucwini, informal marriages were common. They were unions that were accepted by the community and couple to be a marriage (largely a result of cohabitation and child bearing), but did not include the formalities of bride wealth exchange and/or ceremonies/celebrations traditional for that community when wealth was available.



A majority of young Syrian girls interviewed (who were largely from urban centers) felt that their mobility had declined since moving to Lebanon, whereas in Ethiopia, Nakivale, and Mucwini, youth agreed that there was more freedom from supervision since being displaced.

*“We can’t go out. We’re not allowed to. It’s been two years we haven’t been out. We dream of getting an education but we can’t. Someone once came and taught us a few simple things and we were very happy about that.”*

-- Al Marj, FGD, unmarried girls 18 to 19 years old

In both settings in Uganda, parents and youth said exposure to people passing for commerce increased the risk of sexual relationships, pregnancy, and resulting child marriages among adolescent girls.

*“There is a difference [in child marriage practices], because before the war, girls used not to roam in centers. So meeting with men anyhow, wasn’t there. This confusion of the camps spoiled people in northern Uganda.”*

-- Mucwini, KII, religious leader

## Inability of families to meet basic needs drives child-marriage decisions

**Poverty, which increases as a result of conflict and displacement, was found to be a universal driver of child-marriage decisions in all four research contexts.** Parents and community members in all sites said that it was common for parents in extreme poverty to seek child marriage arrangements to secure their daughter’s future or to obtain help in caring for and raising their daughters.

In Lebanon, poverty was a pervasive theme throughout conversations with Syrian refugees. Their personal, educational, and livelihood decisions were now framed in terms of survival. Families recently arriving from Syria expressed that they had experienced the direst of circumstances, which families who had been refugees for longer may have been spared and could not fully understand.

**Young women from urban centers in Syria, experienced a resurgence in child marriage customs.** Young, educated women from urban centers within Syria found their current circumstances extremely discordant with their living standards pre-conflict. Such young women, who had often previously prepared to attend university, found themselves unable to pursue these plans as a result of the conflict, with their families turning to child marriage because it was perceived to provide security. Service providers reported that these young women would be more significantly affected by

changed marriage practices than those from more rural areas where traditional practices around child marriage were more culturally entrenched. Those from rural areas, then living in tented settlements insulated from Lebanese society, tended to maintain traditional practices of marriage occurring during middle adolescence.

In Somalia, some parents reported that daughters were promised for marriage during the conflict, when they were very young, in order to obtain support for schooling, or safe travel and refuge for the family. Families turned to other clan members for support of these basic needs in exchange for marriage that further linked the families. A young girl would be promised to a man who helped support her upbringing, and then married shortly after the start of menses. Sometimes such marriages took a young girl back to Somalia from the camp.

Parents in all sites acknowledged that when faced with extreme poverty exacerbated by conflict, marriage was perceived to ensure the safety and well-being of their daughters, while also reducing the financial burden on the family. This was especially true for girls in large families.

**Many young girls reported that they sought out marriage to meet their basic needs, knowing that their parents could not provide for them.** This was especially common in the Ugandan sites. Some needs included items as basic as soap, flip-flops, body lotion, or school notebooks. Although some relationships in this context were with wealthier, older men outside the community, it was far more common for relationships to be with young, impoverished peers who did not have access to bride wealth as a result of their circumstances, but shared a few small gifts. Parents and youth acknowledged that they wished for alternatives, but given the poverty, they did not feel there were other options and felt that under precarious circumstances, girls were safer when married.

*“Many families are not able to support their children. This pushes them out to seek money. Young girls say maybe ‘I need a new petticoat so that I can go to school’...and when a boy comes and can afford, of course she is lured. Parents are also strained. They may say ‘You! I think it’s time you get out of here and get married.’ All of this is due to economic hardship.”*

-- Mucwini, KII, NGO employee working on youth protection programming

**Poverty was also cited as a factor contributing to greater age differences between the bride and groom.** In all communities researched, it was widely accepted that older men provided greater bride wealth, which further increased when for a very young bride. Among Syrian and Somali refugees, older, wealthier, and more established spouses were sought for younger girls, a practice that had become notably more common since displacement. Syrian refugees observed that the traditional practice of cousin marriage

declined during the conflict, in exchange for more lucrative arrangements.

*“These days, marriage is some sort of income-generating [activity] because if an older man marries younger, he can pay for the dowry of the girl—so that is income, or...he would help [her]...with everything, even after the wedding.”*

-- Kobe, FGD, mothers of married adolescent girls

*“Some people marry off their daughters at an early age because these are their traditions, but others do it to ease the financial pressure. For example, there are fathers who are jobless and who have to provide for five or six people, so marrying off one of his daughters will help.”*

-- Al Marj, KII, local NGO



Drawings by young Syrian refugee girls in a community center in southern Lebanon promote the prevention of child marriage.

## Education access plays a critical role

**Barriers to education were pervasive for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) and significantly influenced child marriage practices.** This finding was emphasized in Lebanon, as well as at both research sites in Uganda. Although high value was placed on education by these three communities pre-conflict (thematic analysis identified education as a priority for children within all individual and group interviews), barriers to access were faced during conflict and displacement, including foreign language of instruction, unfamiliar curricula (developed by the host population), long distances to school (having a disproportionate impact on girls), and prohibitive school fees. Refugees from DRC, for example, reported that if they walked the long distances across the camp to one of very few schools, they were taught by teachers who did not speak their language and whose behavior otherwise discouraged learning.

*“They walk and get too tired and at school they cannot speak [the language of instruction], the teachers beat them. This discourage them and make them hate school.”*

-- Nakivale, FGD, adults with unmarried children

Many parents and youth described their sadness at not being able to access the education that had been available in the DRC. Adolescents, both boys and girls, reported being so discouraged that they dropped out. In Mucwini, education could not be accessed for much of the conflict due to safety concerns and the unpredictability of violence in the north. Girls were disproportionately affected and kept home. In Lebanon, Syrian refugees reported that they felt hostility from the host community and struggled with both the dialects of instruction and the curriculum taught in Lebanese schools. Additionally, the distances to reach schools and costs were prohibitive, especially for girls, for whom protection concerns were greatest. Many girls interviewed spent very little time outside the home, and without transportation provided to schools and fees paid, were not able to attend. Similar to the situation in Uganda, many Syrian adolescents ended up dropping out of school due to these challenges. These experiences were closely tied to child marriage.

*“We were all pro-education; the priority was education before marriage, we wanted our daughters to reach at least the secondary education level. Things have changed now. Many young girls are resorting to early*



*marriage due to their fear of the ambiguous future. I married off two daughters after the war, one was eighteen and the other one was twelve.”*

-- Al Marj, FGD, mothers of 18- to 19-year-old married women

**Among Somali refugees in Ethiopia, school was more easily accessed after displacement and there was support for girls to attend.** This was significantly different than in Somalia, where girls' education did not occur. However, school enrollment dwindled in Kobe refugee camp as girls approached secondary school. Long-held traditions that prioritized marriage and domestic work for girls persisted and school drop-outs occurred with regularity. The fundamental shift in education access since displacement influenced the views that some parents, and many adolescents, had about their futures.

*“I [am happy] today for I saw my daughter’s child and am called grandmother and have a whole family that I am proud of....but now I know the reason is that my daughter is not educated like her other friends.”*

-- Kobe, FGD, mothers of married adolescent girls

Young girls expressed a strong desire to stay in school, and saw child marriage as



A Lebanese teacher talks to two Syrian refugee girls at an information session about gender-based violence and early marriage in southern Lebanon. © Russell Watkins/Department for International Development

the primary impediment to accessing education. However, cultural beliefs that emphasized the importance of marriage were pervasive, and most girls did not want to risk missing this important milestone that leaders, parents, or their religion may have wished for them.

### Stigma for those unmarried persists

**Stigma associated with being unmarried or being unable to marry was pervasive.** Being unmarried (by late adolescence or early-twenties) was viewed negatively by adolescents and adults alike, and believed to be linked to mental illness or social deficiency. As a result, there remained great cultural and social pressure to ensure a girl did not lose her opportunity for marriage by waiting too long.

*"[W]e...worry if she is not married early, like other girls. She is called names and fears that she will not ever marry anyone.....We don't want anything that could embarrass the clan or the family, so in fear of all that we parents bring the groom for our girls."*

-- Kobe, FGD, mothers of girls married before 18

*"If my daughter is twenty years old and is not married, it is bad because she will be desperate and go with any man. When a boy is thirty years and hasn't married, they say he is abnormal, is cursed, cannot produce. Even the parents regret for giving birth to such a kid."*

-- Nakivale, FGD, adults with unmarried children

Among Syrian refugees, the stigma of being unmarried was pervasive, especially among those coming from rural areas. Some young women from Syria noted that in Lebanon, however, there was some shedding of this stigma given the prevalence of educated working women in their mid-twenties.

*"We noticed that people here respect unmarried, educated women who are attending university or working. We were exposed to gossip in Syria, and from people we don't even know and who wanted to interfere in our lives."*

-- Al Marj, FGD, unmarried 22- to 24-year-old women



## Risks to married adolescents

**Marriages were less formalized than prior to the conflict.** Adults described context-specific shifts in marriage practices. This outcome was raised in multiple variations by site, and significantly increased the risks that child brides faced.

In Lebanon, many Syrians did not register their marriage with a legitimate court due to lack of knowledge about laws, misperceptions about the consequences of registration, or not having the required fees or official papers for such services. The consequence was that many girls did not legally have a spouse, and were therefore vulnerable should the marriage fail. In addition, undocumented marriage contributes to statelessness of some children born of these marriages, in cases where nationality is passed on only through the father.

**In Nakivale and Mucwini, the inability of young men to pay bride wealth significantly changed marriage customs and definitions of marriage.** In Uganda and neighboring countries, bride wealth is traditionally exchanged from a groom's family to the bride's family, in order to confer a union, and acts as a contract. The poverty at both sites, and resultant inability of young men to pay bride wealth, significantly changed how marriage was defined, with cohabitation and partnerships between children gradually becoming synonymous with marriage. Additionally, parents, community members, and youth from both research sites in Uganda said that without bride wealth, families were less involved in the marriage and therefore tended to be less supportive. This contributed to isolation of young couples. Many women expressed that the absence of bride wealth exchange placed them at higher risk of emotional or physical abuse from their husband. They also experienced a loss of family support from family (her own and her husband's) if the marriage dissolved.

In Lebanon, as well, the less formal nature of unions also left girls and their children more vulnerable. In a society where a women's reputation is paramount, less formal partnerships are risky for her ongoing safety and protection. If a marriage dissolves, she may have few if any supports. Additionally, her children may face issues of statelessness, should she not be able to pass her citizenship to her child.

**The conflict-related loss of traditions, celebrations, and ceremonies around marriage was consistent across all four sites.** The loss of customs around marriage was reported to be a result of poverty, more pressing survival concerns, or the splintering of communities and families.

*“Weddings are not considered as happy occasions anymore. How can a girl whose father was killed because of the war think about celebrating*

*and dancing? We have lost our joy. These celebrations are only for formal and official reasons.”*

-- Al Marj, FGD, mothers of 18- to 19-year-old unmarried girls

**During conflict, marriage decisions tended to be hastier, or without family involvement.** Grooms were less likely to be familiar to the bride or the bride’s family. In Uganda and Lebanon, parents and community members shared that sometimes the choice of marriage partner was poorly thought out, because the perceived need to marry was so great. In Uganda these hasty decisions were largely driven by adolescents, whereas in Lebanon decisions were facilitated by parents and community leaders.

*“They still have the same practices, but what is happening now is hasty marriages without thinking or studying the groom’s situation. They give her to her cousin if he is available, but if not, they give her to anyone without even thinking.”*

-- Al Marj, in-depth interview, INGO representative

**Child brides were consistently described by program implementers and adults in each community as being particularly vulnerable after marriage.** In Mucwini, young couples were said to face more conflict within their relationships, sometimes due to the lack of skills needed to care for their children.

*“[T]here are difficulties [with young marriages]...they have immature minds. [A young husband] can come home with his friends, and when he finds food is not ready, he feels it is such a big shame for him. So he just starts by beating the woman...even if she tries to explain, he will not listen. If the woman is doing casual labor, he wants the money for drinking and if the woman refuses, he beats her and stops her from working. Saying that those who don’t work, still survive.”*

-- Mucwini, KII, Deacon

**Isolation was raised by married girls, and their families, as a particular challenge among those who married young.**

*“[Y]oung [married girls] don’t have anyone to talk to when they have questions or need advice.”*

-- Nakivale, FGD, adult community members with children married before 18 years

*“Those of us who have children cannot leave the house.”*

-- Al Marj, FGD, married girls 22 to 24 years old

Somali refugee girls also reported that married girls were typically at home caring for children, unable to engage with others or in programs that would help to overcome the challenges they faced as a result of marriage. In Lebanon and at both sites in Uganda, married girls identified few opportunities to connect with peers or to access much-needed livelihood or education programs. Some noted that they did receive individual support from religious leaders or family members, but they lacked peer networks and the opportunity to gain practical skills. Community members, parents, and program implementers felt that more should be done to reach this largely neglected group and ensure that their futures could be improved.

*“We can do much. We can sit with [married girls] and see what problems they have and what happened to them....we can improve the situation. There’s room for that. Some of them can understand.”*

-- Al Marj, KII, female doctor

Some interviewees mentioned promising approaches that they hoped would continue or expand. In Mucwini, for example, there was a program implemented by the NGO Echo Bravo Uganda to get married girls back in school that was perceived to be largely successful, as it helped to accommodate girls with young children (although further sensitization with partners was needed). In Lebanon, married girls remained largely unreached through existing, centralized programs, but outreach activities were thought to be far more successful.

*“So far, no one has ever tackled [the needs of child brides]. Most of them are focusing on food aid and improving the situation in the camp, in addition to securing the sewage system....No one is dealing with this matter now.”*

-- Al Marj, KII, government official

## Conclusion

Among conflict-affected, displaced populations from Uganda, DRC, Syria, and Somalia, decisions around child marriage are driven by the inability of families to meet the basic needs of adolescents, concerns around various forms of protection, inaccessibility of education, and religious or cultural norms. Conflict also introduced additional risks to child brides entering into unions. The informal nature of many unions during unstable times, and the lack of available programs for married adolescents, contributed to their vulnerability and isolation.

These findings corroborate the existing, although sparse, research on child marriage during conflict, and present some additional nuanced considerations. For example, similar to work presented by World Vision on this topic, the WRC found that issues of child marriage in crisis contexts go well beyond traditional or cultural norms and that there is a space to prevent the exacerbation of this practice in humanitarian contexts.<sup>48</sup>

Additionally, this research supports anecdotal information that education can help to mitigate risks to child marriage. As education interventions are rarely implemented solely for child marriage outcomes, it remains challenging to prove this link, but WRC's qualitative work speaks strongly to this suggestion, as does the work of others.

This research also found, similar to that of World Vision, UNICEF, and CARE, that honor and protection play a critical role in child marriage decisions during conflict and instability. Concerns around safety and securing a future for adolescent girls are heightened which result in attempts to ensure there is a man in the home and, frequently, that a girl is married.<sup>49,50,51</sup>

The WRC's research also expanded upon a suggestion made within a UN Women report that refugee communities from rural Syria are impacted differently by child marriage post-displacement than those from urban settings.<sup>52</sup> This finding helps to fill a gap within UNICEF's research in Jordan with Syrian refugees, as that research was primarily conducted with those from rural areas, and thus, child marriage was posed

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48 World Vision (2013). *Untying the Knot* [http://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/UNTYING\\_THE\\_KNOT\\_-\\_March\\_2013.pdf](http://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/UNTYING_THE_KNOT_-_March_2013.pdf)

49 Ibid.

50 CARE, "To protect her honour": *Child marriage in emergencies – the fatal confusion between protecting girls and sexual violence* (2015). <http://insights.careinternational.org.uk/publications/to-protect-her-honour-child-marriage-in-emergencies-the-fatal-confusion-between-protecting-girls-and-sexual-violence>

51 UNICEF, *A study on early marriage in Jordan 2014* (2014). Available at: [http://www.unicef.org/mena/UNICEFJordan\\_EarlyMarriageStudy2014%281%29.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/mena/UNICEFJordan_EarlyMarriageStudy2014%281%29.pdf)

52 UN women, *Gender-Based Violence and Child Protection among Syrian Refugees in Jordan, with a Focus on Early Marriage* (2013). Available at: <http://wrc.ms/22tXwNd>

as a customary practice both before and after the conflict.<sup>53</sup> The WRC's research found that, although this is true in many communities, those from urban centers (who were included in some of the FGDs) described child marriage as being reintroduced as a coping strategy during this crisis, and would have been less common in their home in Syria.

Another key difference between WRC's work and that of UNICEF in Jordan is that there was notably no mention of Gulf Arab State marriages within WRC's group and individuals interviews. Additionally, although issues of space in the home, or unmet needs related to poverty were raised as contributing to child marriage decisions, an "abusive home" was not explicitly mentioned in any site as a factor. Similar to UNICEF and CARE's work, however, the WRC found that the risks to married girls are significantly greater in settings of conflict, where marriages are not formalized (whether through registration or bride wealth exchange).

Similar to UNICEF's and CARE's bodies of work, married adolescents were found by the WRC to be quite isolated, largely unreached by programs, and at higher risk than their older married peers to violence and abuse. NGOs should not back away from efforts to support the registration or formalization of these marriages, for fear of being seen to endorse or support them, as this only further endangers the girls we aim to protect.

WRC's research in Uganda, in which child marriages largely occurred between young boys and young girls of similar backgrounds, demonstrates a possible scenario of child marriage occurring in conflict, when cultural underpinnings to this practice are absent or rare. The long-term (more than 20 years) loss of social structures and culture, combined with a sense of hopelessness and trauma, may have served as additional drivers of youths' decisions to enter unions at very young ages. In both settings in Uganda, it was more common for marriage decisions to be influenced by the loss of a parent or traumatic events during the conflict. In these settings there was a sense of apathy and resignation expressed on the part of both youth and adults when it came to child-marriage practices.

The development of effective interventions to confront these circumstances will depend on the ability to gather nuanced information from communities about child marriage practices in those specific contexts. Although factors driving child marriages were largely similar across research sites, the noted differences present significant considerations in program design.

This research affirms that programmers, policy makers, and donors should leverage

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<sup>53</sup> UNICEF (2014), see note 51.



learnings from other types of development contexts for adaptation in displacement settings—such as skills and asset building of adolescent girls, parent and community education, economic interventions, and improving access to education.<sup>54</sup>

## Next Steps

Over the next year, the WRC will focus on identifying programmatic learning on integrated approaches to addressing child marriage among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Somali refugees in Ethiopia, and IDPs in conflict-affected eastern Myanmar. The humanitarian community has an obligation to ensure that girls at risk of this practice, and those already affected by it, have access to prevention and response programming.

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54 Anju Malhotra et al, *Solutions to End Child Marriage: what the evidence shows* (Washington, International Center for Research on Women 2011). <http://www.icrw.org/files/publications/Solutions-to-End-Child-Marriage.pdf>



“Sunny and Serious Awbare Girls,” Somali girls in Ethiopia

(c) Lindsay Stark



## Appendix: Qualitative Research Conducted

| UGANDA- Nakivale  | Participants |
|---|--------------|
| <b>Focus Groups (9)</b>   | <b>61</b>    |
| Females 10-14 in school (unmarried)   | 11           |
| Males 10-14 in school (unmarried)   | 6            |
| Females 10-14 out of school (unmarried)   | 8            |
| Males 10-14 out of school (unmarried)   | 6            |
| Females 15-19 in school (unmarried)   | 7            |
| Males 15-19 in school (unmarried)   | 6            |
| Females 15-24 married before age 18   | 5            |
| Adult community members (parents) with children married before age 18   | 10           |
| Adult community members (parents) with unmarried children   | 2            |
| <b>Key Informant Interviews</b><br>representatives from the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), local leadership and religious community, teachers and health providers, an international nongovernmental organization (INGO) working on health and legal issues, and a local women's group | <b>8</b>     |

| UGANDA- Mucwini   | Participants |
|---|--------------|
| <b>Focus Groups (9)</b>   | <b>72</b>    |
| Females 10-14 in school (unmarried)   | 6            |
| Males 10-14 in school (unmarried)   | 8            |
| Females 10-14 out of school (unmarried)   | 7 *          |
| Males 10-14 out of school (unmarried)   |              |
| Females 15-19 in school (unmarried)   | 8            |
| Males 15-19 in school (unmarried)   | 8            |
| Females 15-24 married before age 18   | 6            |
| Males 15-24 married before age 18   | 10           |
| Adult community members (parents) with children married before age 18   | 12           |
| Adult community members (parents) with unmarried children   | 7            |
| <b>Key Informant Interviews</b><br>District education officer, local leadership and religious community, teachers and health providers, and an INGO working on youth protection | <b>9</b>     |

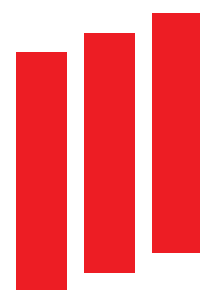
\* These groups were merged

| LEBANON- Al Marj Settlement   | Participants |
|---|--------------|
| <b>Focus Groups (8)</b>   | <b>50</b>    |
| 18- to 19-year-old married women who married before 18*   | 6            |
| 18- to 19-year-old unmarried women  | 6            |
| 22- to 24-year-old women who married before 18**  | 6            |
| 22- to 24-year-old unmarried women (outside settlement)   | 6            |
| Mothers of unmarried 18- to 19-year-old daughters   | 6            |
| Fathers of unmarried 18- to 19-year-old daughters   | 6            |
| Mothers of married 18- to 19-year-old daughters   | 6            |
| Fathers of married 18- to 19-year-old daughters   | 8            |
| <b>Key Informant Interviews</b>   | <b>11</b>    |
| Local and international NGOs in the field of child protection, government officials in Al Marj community, camp ( <i>shawish</i> ) and religious leaders, Syrian teachers and health providers |              |

*\*\*Due to sensitivities around interviewing children about marriage practices (those under 18) in the Syrian context, it was decided that married 18- to 19-year-olds would be interviewed, assuming that they had married during the conflict, and that married 22- to 24-year-olds would be interviewed, assuming that they had married before the conflict.*

| ETHIOPIA- Kobe Refugee Camp                         | Participants |
|---|--------------|
| <b>Focus Groups (4)</b>                             | <b>34</b>    |
| Mothers of unmarried adolescents                    | 6            |
| Mothers who had an adolescent married before 18     | 10           |
| Fathers who had an adolescent married before 18     | 9            |
| Fathers of unmarried adolescents                    | 9            |
| <b>Key Informant Interviews</b>                     | <b>2</b>     |
| Religious leader and a women's group representative |              |





**WOMEN'S  
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