

Child, early and forced marriage in fragile and conflict affected states

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Question

What is the scale of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) in fragile and conflict affected states, what are the differences between countries and what are the drivers?

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1. Summary

It is difficult to gain an accurate picture of the scale of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) in fragile and conflict affected states (FCAS), as national data on prevalence are not yet robust enough to allow consistent, comparable analysis. However, a significant body of evidence on child marriage in FCAS has been produced by NGOs and UN agencies, often in partnership with academic institutions. These studies tend to involve empirical studies of specific populations within FCAS, which provide snapshots of the current situation not available through national data. More evidence is available on the key drivers of CEFM in FCAS.

Child marriage is defined as any formal or informal union that occurs when one or both parties are under 18 years old. Early marriage also refers to a union where one or both spouses are under 18. It is sometimes used to describe a marriage before the legal age of marriage in a country. Forced marriage is a marriage or union at any age that happens without free and full consent from one or both parties (UNFPA and UNICEF, 2019, p. 4). Forced marriage can include child and early marriage, as under 18s are considered not to have the maturity to make decisions around marriage. They may appear to accept marriage because they have little understanding of other options, or because they have been coerced or pressured to agree (Hodgkinson, 2016, p. 8). Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is used to talk about all three overlapping terms. CEFM disproportionately affects girls; evidence shows that they are five times more likely to be married during childhood than boys (UNICEF, 2017a). Girls suffer significant negative consequences as a result of CEFM, particularly around reproductive health and rights (UN ESCWA, 2015, p. 7).

CEFM has its roots in gender inequality, poverty and cultural and social norms (Girls Not Brides, 2019, p. 3). It occurs across all regions of the world, and is by no means confined to times of conflict, crises or fragility. The data that are available estimate that 650 million girls worldwide are married (UNICEF, 2018, p. 3). 285 million (44 percent) are in South Asia and 115 million (18 percent) are in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2018, p. 3).

In some circumstances, conflict can lead to a fall in CEFM rates, as marriage is postponed due to prohibitive costs or demographic imbalance (Girls Not Brides, 2018, p. 3; UN ESCWA, 2015, pp. 38-39). However, political unrest, insecurity, conflict and crises can also intensify the drivers of child marriage, as well as increase sexual violence, undermine the rule of law and damage social structures – all things that can threaten children’s rights and lead to girls being more vulnerable to CEFM (Girls Not Brides, 2019, p. 3; Myers, 2013, p. 7; UN ESCWA, 2015, p. 6, 36). Of the ten countries with the highest child marriage rates, nine were considered fragile or extremely fragile in 2016, and 17 of the top 20 countries for CEFM prevalence have needed international humanitarian crisis responses in the last five years (Girls Not Brides, 2019, p. 3).

The studies identified for this review highlight recent increases in child marriage in FCAS. They include studies focusing on the displaced Syrian population, the conflict affected population in Yemen, and displaced groups in several Sub-Saharan African countries. They are able to demonstrate differences and similarities between countries and contexts. For example, studies focusing on Syrian refugees have found that in the majority of child marriages in this population, girls are married to men who are significantly older than them. Meanwhile, studies looking at child marriage in conflict affected settings in Uganda found that child marriages largely occurred between young girls and boys of similar ages.

Analysis of CEFM rates *within* FCAS is also important in order to understand prevalence within different demographic groups.¹ While evidence shows that globally, girls from poor and/or rural backgrounds are more likely to be married than girls from richer and/or urban backgrounds, this is not a linear pattern and it varies across countries.

There are some consistent drivers of CEFM across countries, whether they are stable or fragile. These include gender inequality and unequal gender norms, poverty, barriers to education, unpaid family caring responsibilities, weak law enforcement, concerns around girls' safety, and fears around controlling girls' sexuality or 'honour'. In fragile and conflict affected states, some additional, interconnected drivers are at work. These include:

- Displacement
- Being out of school
- Threat or experience of violence
- Conflict or crisis fuelled poverty and food insecurity
- Conflict or crisis fuelled weakening of the rule of law
- Conflict or crisis fuelled strengthening of harmful social norms

These drivers are rarely experienced in isolation; a complex combination of structural and community level factors influence and shape families' decision making on, and experiences of, CEFM.

The evidence included in the sections below is not exhaustive; it represents what was found in the time allocated to preparing this report. The majority of studies identified were grey literature. The terminology most often used was child marriage. Fewer studies were identified focusing specifically on forced marriage. In addition, while some of the evidence identified refers to the existence of different forms of marriage, including legally registered marriages, unregistered, traditional or religious marriages, 'love' or 'own choice' marriages, arranged marriages, monogamous or polygynous marriages, and notes that the type of marriage used can alter in settings of conflict and fragility, there is little data available on the prevalence of CEFM that is disaggregated by these different forms of marriage (Hodgkinson, 2016; p. 15, Hutchinson, 2018, p. 4).

A significant proportion of the studies identified included a focus on Arab states, and more specifically, CEFM among displaced Syrian populations in a range of host countries. There was a general and clear consensus across studies on drivers of CEFM in FCAS contexts, but it was more difficult to find evidence on the impact or existence of intersectional drivers such as gender combined with religion, ethnicity/caste, and disability.

¹ While some Demographic and Household Surveys (DHS) break down national statistics on age of marriage into regions or state level data, searches for this review did not identify studies integrating this type of data into their analysis.

2. The scale of CEFM

Global data

The global number of child brides is estimated at 650 million (UNICEF, 2018, p. 3). 285 million (44 percent) are in South Asia and 115 million (18 percent) are in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2018, p. 3). When looked at in terms of the proportion of the global population, five percent of women aged 20-24 years were married before the age of 15, and 21 percent were married before they were 18. In sub-Saharan Africa, 12 percent of women aged 20-24 years were married before the age of 15, and 37 percent by the age of 18. In South Asia, the figures are eight and 30 percent respectively (UNICEF, 2019, online). While globally, child marriage has decreased by 15 percent in the last decade, no region is on track to meet the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target of eliminating child marriage by 2030 (UNICEF, 2018).

National data

National data collection on child marriage requires national censuses and household surveys, such as the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) or Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) to be regularly conducted. As these surveys can be time consuming and costly to carry out, there are significant data gaps in a number of countries. In both Somalia and Syria, for example, the most recent national data available is from 2006 (UNICEF, 2019). There are additional challenges around data on child marriage in fragile and conflict affected settings: the quality and quantity of data collected tends to decline during times of crisis and conflict; many marriages may go unregistered during these times; and social and economic changes may take place, so that data goes quickly out of date (UN ESCWA, 2015, pp. 9-11).

Data on child marriage under the age of 18 cannot be used to examine the differential impacts of CEFM on girls of different age groups, and data that does not include spousal age differences or generational differences do not allow analysis of how and why marriages involving children occur (UN ESCWA, 2015, p. 10). In contexts where populations are dispersed and displaced, there are additional data challenges. National data does not always take into account the fact that populations may be scattered across several countries, and it is not always clear whether national statistics and trends include refugee populations (UN ESCWA, 2015, p. 12).

These factors mean that estimates on CEFM can vary considerably, and for some countries even estimates are not available. In these cases, research focusing on particular subsets of populations are the only available evidence on CEFM, but generalisation and comparison is more difficult without robust national data (UN ESCWA, 2015, p. 13). Without nationally representative data in conflict areas, it is likely that CEFM rates are underestimated (Girls Not Brides, 2018).

The table below includes selected data from UNICEF's global database on child marriage. The countries included in this table are those that are: defined as fragile by the OECD (OECD, 2018); and are DFID focus countries. As the fourth column shows, the most recent data available for some countries is over a decade old, pre-dating the outbreak of current conflicts. Data comes from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) carried out by ICF International or country ministries, and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) carried out by UNICEF. It shows the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 who were married before the ages of 15 and 18.

| Country | Women married by age 15 (%) | Women married by age 18 (%) | Data source and age |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| Afghanistan | 9 | 35 | DHS 2015 |
| Bangladesh | 22 | 59 | DHS 2014 |
| DRC | 10 | 37 | DHS 2014 |
| Ethiopia | 14 | 40 | DHS 2016 |
| Iraq | 7 | 28 | MICS 2018 |
| Kenya | 4 | 23 | DHS 2014 |
| Liberia | 9 | 36 | DHS 2013 |
| Malawi | 9 | 42 | DHS 2015 |
| Mozambique | 17 | 53 | AIS 2015 |
| Myanmar | 2 | 16 | DHS 2015 |
| Nepal | 7 | 40 | DHS 2016 |
| Nigeria | 18 | 44 | MICS 2017 |
| Occupied Palestinian Territories | 1 | 15 | MICS 2014 |
| Pakistan | 3 | 21 | DHS 2013 |
| Rwanda | 0 | 7 | DHS 2014-2015 |
| Sierra Leone | 13 | 30 | MICS 2017 |
| Somalia | 8 | 45 | MICS 2006 |
| South Sudan | 9 | 52 | SHHS 2010 |
| Sudan | 12 | 34 | MICS 2014 |
| Syria | 3 | 13 | MICS 2006 |
| Tajikistan | 0 | 9 | DHS 2017 |
| Tanzania | 5 | 31 | DHS 2015 - 2016 |
| Uganda | 7 | 34 | DHS 2016 |
| Yemen | 9 | 32 | DHS 2013 |
| Zambia | 6 | 31 | DHS 2013 |

AIS: AIDS Indicator Survey; ALCS: Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey; DHS: Demographic and Health Surveys; MICS: Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys; SHHS: Sudan Household Health survey

Source: UNICEF global database: Child marriage (last updated 2019), accessed on 10th April 2020. Figures for the State of Palestine were found via the Girls Not Bride data atlas.

Evidence on specific country contexts

In order to better understand CEFM in fragile and conflict affected states where national data are not available or not robust, a significant body of empirical evidence has been generated in recent years. A high proportion of this evidence focuses on Arab states.

There have been several recent studies focusing on countries hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees. These studies include mixed methods, qualitative and case study research that delves into not just prevalence of CEFM among dispersed Syrian populations but also generational patterns, spousal age differences, drivers and impacts. As the table above shows, in 2006 an estimated 13 percent of girls in Syria were married before they were 18. However, since the outbreak of conflict in Syria, evidence has emerged of significant increases in child marriage among the Syrian population in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Egypt, as families struggle to provide security and safety for their daughters (Ghazarian, et al; Spencer, 2015; UNICEF and ICRW, 2017).

One study states that by 2014, the number of registered marriages involving a girl aged 15-17 years old among the Syrian population in Jordan was just under 32 percent (Spencer, 2015, p. 7). Another study in Jordan, conducted in 2013, found that 51 percent of female Syrian respondents reported being married before they were 18, compared to 13 percent of men (UN Women, 2013, p. 29). A UNICEF baseline survey in Lebanon broke down child marriage data into populations; among Syrians in Lebanon the percentage of women aged 20-24 who had been married before the age of 18 was over 40 percent (UNICEF and ICRW, 2017, p. 5).

A study on child marriage in the Kurdistan region of Iraq notes that while further research is still needed on scope, child marriage is a serious and growing concern. The arrival of over one million people displaced from other parts of Iraq, as well as refugees from Syria, and the precarious conditions experienced by these groups, has meant that many families feel it is safer for their daughters to be married (Mahmood, 2016, p. 3).

Mixed methods research on child marriage in five provinces across Afghanistan found that current national prevalence statistics for the country are likely to be an underestimation (Government of Afghanistan, 2018, pp. 20-22). 42 percent of households included in the study reported at least one instance of child marriage, and 95 percent of young people under the age of 23 profiled in households were married. The most commonly reported age of marriage in this group was 16 years old. Boys and girls were being married as young as twelve years old, but girls were disproportionately represented in under-18 marriages (Government of Afghanistan, 2018, pp. 20-22).

In Yemen, one of the few countries in its region without a legal minimum age of marriage, studies undertaken since the outbreak of conflict in 2015 estimate that CEFM has increased as the crisis has intensified (UNICEF, 2017b, p. 7). The most recent national survey data showed that in

2013, 32 percent of women aged 20-24 had been married before the age of 18, and nine percent before the age of 15. Key informant interviews conducted as part of a study on child marriage in 2016 and 2017 highlighted that once the conflict began to cause displacement and economic hardship, child marriage began to rise dramatically as families used it as a coping mechanism (UNICEF and ICRW, 2017b, p. 8). In 2016, a UNICEF assessment in 30 communities within six governorates of Yemen showed a wide incidence of child marriage practices. 72 percent of respondents said they had been married before the age of 18, and 44 percent had been married before they were 15 (UNICEF and ICRW, 2017b, p. 9).

Studies from several Arab states also highlight concerns about the links between CEFM and human trafficking. For example, one study highlights 'tourist marriages' involving Yemeni girls and older men from the Gulf Arab region. The conflict is thought to have increased avenues for these type of arrangements as families desperately seek opportunities for their daughters to escape to a more stable country (UNICEF and ICRW, 2017b, p. 10). In addition, research focusing on Syrian refugees in Jordan found that one in ten survey respondents knew of at least one girl or woman who had been in a 'temporary marriage'; a contractually time-limited marriage, sometimes accompanied by a one-off payment, that requires the wife to renounce rights to financial support, including for any children resulting from the arrangement. While such marriages are illegal in Jordanian law, research participants reported that they take place in secret, and knew of examples involving Jordanian men and girls as young as 13 in the Za'atari camp (UN Women, 2013, pp. 33-34). Concerns have been expressed that in Arab states (and more widely, in countries such as Nigeria and Malaysia), CEFM is paving the way for new forms of trafficking in girls and women (UN ESCWA, 2015, pp. 36-37; Girls Not Brides, 2018, p. 3).

There is also a body of evidence looking at CEFM in Sub-Saharan African countries. A study of adolescent girls in sites in three countries (Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon) in the Lake Chad Basin found that the majority of girls interviewed felt that CEFM was a current threat to their wellbeing (Jay and Gordon, 2018). Some also spoke of kidnapping and forced marriage with armed combatants. In the sites in Nigeria, research participants also noted that girls had been forced to marry perpetrators of sexual assaults against them. 15 percent of adolescent girls (age 10-19) across all of the study's research sites were currently or had previously been married; among the 15-19 year old age group, the proportion was 48 percent (Jay and Gordon, 2018, pp. 21-22).

Research focusing on CEFM in the conflict affected Nyal area of South Sudan found that 71 percent of 20-49 year old women surveyed had been married before the age of 18, and ten percent had been married before they were 15. This is a significantly higher rate than the pre-conflict figure of 45 percent of 20-49 year olds in 2010 (Buchanan, 2019, p. 5). In a study of adolescent Congolese refugee girls' experiences in the Nyarugusu refugee camp in Tanzania, research participants reported that early and/or forced marriages were part of a range of threats to the wellbeing and development of girls resulting from the closed setting of the camp (Paik, 2012). Similarly, a study of adolescent Somali refugee girls' experiences in the Sheder and Aw Barre refugee camps in Ethiopia reported that early marriage was one of the results of girls' lack of opportunities to build social and economic assets, participate in community activities and develop social networks, and move around freely and safely in the camps (Schulte and Rizvi, 2012).

Some studies also show important differences between countries. One evidence review on the dynamics of child marriage in Arab states considers child marriage rates in three categories of conflict affected countries: those with low historical rates (Lebanon); those where conflict is slowing progress in eliminating child marriage or is contributing to rising rates (Iraq, Libya and the

Occupied Palestinian Territories); and those where child marriage remains high (Somalia, Sudan and Yemen) (UN ESCWA, 2015). While CEFM is a concern in all of these countries, the review argues that the specifics vary considerably, particularly when looking at drivers (UN ESCWA, 2015) (see section three below for more on drivers).

Country comparisons demonstrate differences and nuances that national data cannot. For example, studies focusing on Syrian refugees have found that in the majority of child marriages in this population, girls marry men who are between five and 15 years older than them (Spencer, 2015, p. 7; Schlecht, 2016; UN ESCWA, 2015, p. 55). Their families see marriage with an older man as a protection and security mechanism for their daughters. However, a study looking at child marriage in conflict affected settings in Uganda found that child marriages largely occurred between young girls and boys of similar ages (Schlecht, 2016, p. 27). These marriages, while still influenced by socioeconomic and conflict-related factors, were in some cases more likely to be initiated by adolescents themselves, partly as a coping response to experiences of trauma, loss and a desire for intimacy (Schlecht, 2016, p. 27; Schlecht, Rowley and Babirye, 2013).

Evidence on differences within countries and populations

Analysis of CEFM rates within countries is important in order to understand prevalence within different demographic groups. While globally, girls from poor and/or rural backgrounds are more likely to be married than girls from richer and/or urban backgrounds, this is not a linear pattern and it varies across countries. For example, a qualitative study into the drivers of child marriage in seven districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, found that rates of child marriage were much higher in rural than urban areas (Ullah, 2019, p. 20). However, mixed methods research on child marriage in five provinces across Afghanistan found that geographical variation in prevalence was greater between provinces rather than between rural and urban areas. It hypothesised that this may be partly due to different levels of education in each province (Government of Afghanistan, 2018, p. 20).

Research into child marriage in Niger shows that prevalence rates are higher in regions with more people in need of humanitarian assistance (Girls Not Brides, 2019, p. 3). Another study focusing on the experiences of adolescent girls in South Sudan notes that the median age of first marriage for women in Juba was 18, but it was age 16 in the rural area of Rubek and in the Juba Protection of Civilians Camp (Lee-Koo and Jay, 2018, p. 13). This indicates that CEFM prevalence appears to increase in rural and displacement contexts as resources become scarce (Lee-Koo and Jay, 2018, p. 13).

Studies have highlighted that in the context of conflict and displacement, rural and urban differences can feed into attitudes and practices around CEFM. A study looking at child marriage among conflict affected, displaced populations from Syria living in the Al Marj settlement in Lebanon found clear differences in attitudes between rural and urban Syrian families (Schlecht, 2016). For refugees from rural areas, child marriage was seen as a customary practice from before the conflict, whereas for urban families, priorities for daughters who would previously have gone to university had been significantly amended, with child marriage being reintroduced as a coping strategy (Schlecht, 2016, pp. 26-27). In focus groups conducted as part of another study in Jordan there were disagreements between participants; many said that early marriage was customary in Syria prior to the conflict, while others who were from cities such as Damascus felt that early marriage was a rural tradition only (UN Women, 2013, p. 29).

Another study found that there were differences in the levels of risk perceived by families living in tented refugee settlements in Lebanon (who were largely from poorer rural backgrounds), and those living outside of settlements (who were largely from wealthier urban backgrounds) (Mourtada et al, 2017, pp. 61-62). The authors explain that those living in settlements were more insulated, often from the same region, and able to preserve community ties. In addition, women's mobility was more restricted. Outside of the settlements, parents were more concerned about their daughters' safety, including physical threats and exposure to Lebanese society, and lack of education. All of these factors impacted on prevalence and likelihood of child marriage (Mourtada et al, 2017, pp. 61-62).

Evidence shows that religion and ethnicity correlate with prevalence of child marriage within countries, and that this pattern varies on a country by country basis. For example, one study on child marriage in Nepal found that the majority of married children in the research sample were from Dalit or indigenous communities (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 5). Another study focusing on adolescent girls in Zimbabwe asked research participants from the Ndebele indigenous group for their perceptions on indigenous culture and child and early marriage. The majority did not feel their culture impacted significantly on the likelihood of them being married early (Casey and Campbell, 2016, p. 61). However, there are very few studies that include data on CEFM disaggregated by religion, ethnicity or caste (Hodgkinson, 2016, p. 12). In addition, this review did not identify many studies looking at the impact of disability on child marriage, either in terms of prevalence or as a driver, although some studies do discuss disability as part of the intersecting vulnerabilities that make girls vulnerable to violence, abuse of power and early pregnancy and/or marriage (for example, Casey and Campbell, 2016, p. 54).

3. Drivers of CEFM

There are some consistent drivers of CEFM across countries, whether they are stable or fragile. These include gender inequality and unequal gender norms, poverty, barriers to education, unpaid family caring responsibilities, weak law enforcement, concerns around girls' safety, and fears around controlling girls' sexuality or 'honour' (Spencer, 2015, p. 12; Hodgkinson, 2016, p. 19; Schlecht, 2016, p. 1). Some groups of girls are more vulnerable to CEFM due to intersectional factors including gender and caste or ethnicity (Human Rights Watch, 2016, 6). However, in fragile and conflict affected states, some additional, interconnected drivers are at work.

Displacement

A significant body of evidence exists to demonstrate the ways that displacement impacts on CEFM, across countries and contexts. For example, focus group participants in a study looking at CEFM in Nyal, South Sudan, described how girls who had been displaced were at greater risk, especially if they were separated from their families (Buchanan, 2019, p. 18). Rates of CEFM were thought to be particularly high among the large group of IDPs who had taken refuge in Nyal in 2018 (Buchanan, 2019, p. 18).

Similarly, evidence on child marriage among Rohingya refugees shows high prevalence. One study of adolescent Rohingya girls living in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, found that 22 percent of girls aged 15-19 were, or had been married (Gordon et al, 2018, p. 19). While it was difficult to determine whether this rate was higher than it would have been in Myanmar, girls discussed their fears that the camp conditions would contribute to the likelihood that they would be married

(Gordon et al, 2018, p. 19). Data from the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) study, looking at 15-17 year old Rohingya girls living in Cox's Bazar, show that 12 percent were married (Guglielmi, S. et al, 2020, p. 4). Spousal age was significantly higher, at 24 years. This study also highlighted that the rate of early marriage among older girls living in camps was four times the rate of girls living in host communities (Guglielmi, S. et al, 2020, p. 4).

Qualitative research conducted by the Women's Refugee Commission between 2011 and 2015 looked at child marriage among conflict affected, displaced populations from Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Syria and Somalia living in Uganda, Lebanon and Ethiopia (Schlecht, 2016). It found that parents in all of the settings were concerned that monitoring their adolescent children's movements and interactions was more difficult following displacement. Community networks and routines were disrupted, and children were spending more time unsupervised. In the Kobe refugee camp in Ethiopia, some child marriages were arranged in Somalian families in an attempt to address concerns that girls and boys were able to mix more within the camp than they had been in Somalia, where gender divisions were strong (Schlecht, 2016, p. 17-18). Syrian girls in Lebanon however, felt that their mobility inside the Al Marj refugee settlement was more restricted than it had been at home. These girls, who were often educated and from urban centres in Syria, found that their families were now considering child marriage in an attempt to protect them and provide security (Schlecht, 2016, p. 17-18).

One qualitative study of child marriage among Syrian refugees in Lebanon found that displacement and conflict had brought changes to attitudes and practices around marriage (Mourtada et al, 2017). Some parents said they had married their daughters early because they had been exposed to Lebanese social norms, which the parents felt were more liberal than Syrian norms. They were concerned about their daughters being influenced by Lebanese culture and marriage practices. Research participants also observed that engagement periods had become shorter, because girls and their families no longer expected presents and as girls were out of school, it was no longer necessary to wait for them to complete their education. Some participants also observed that marriages between cousins had declined, as families had become dispersed due to conflict (Mourtada et al, 2017, pp. 58-59).

The impact of displacement on marriage practices was also highlighted in a study on child marriage in Jordan, which found that Syrian families were no longer making thorough inquiries into the character, qualifications and backgrounds of their daughters' prospective husbands. Instead they focused on the groom's ability to provide short-term financial security (UNICEF, 2014, p. 10). Mourtada et al argue that the drivers of child marriage in these conflict and displacement settings are 'very different from, or more intensified than those in stable settings because of the changing nature of marriage, economic hardships, and heightened concerns about their daughters' safety in the new environment' (Mourtada et al, 2017, p. 62).

Qualitative research conducted with internally displaced persons and refugees in Uganda revealed a different picture of conflict-induced changes in family relationships and marriage patterns. Research participants described marriage practices pre-conflict as most often involving a bride and groom in their early to mid 20s, as being formal, with family members and village elders directly involved in negotiations as to how and when the marriage would take place (Schlecht, Rowley and Babirye, 2013). Post-conflict, early sexual relationships followed by 'informal' marriages were more common, with bride price payments postponed or replaced with smaller gifts. Conflict had splintered family networks and experiences of loss and trauma meant that adolescents were more motivated to enter into early relationships and marriages (Schlecht, Rowley and Babirye, 2013).

Being out of school

Girls who marry early are more likely to drop out of school (Clement et al, 2018, p. 2). For example, in Nyal, South Sudan, where 71 percent of girls are married before age 18, 76 percent of girls are out of school (Buchanan, 2019, p. 5). When thousands of refugees were repatriated from Pakistan to Afghanistan in 2016, child marriage was identified as a risk for returning girls not in school (Girls Not Brides, 2018, p. 3). However, because early marriage can be both the cause and consequence of school drop-out, evidence proving that being out of school is a direct causal driver of CEFM is limited (Birchall, 2018; Hutchinson, 2018, p. 9).

Qualitative research conducted in conflict affected settings in Uganda between 2011 and 2015 found that during the peak of conflict, girls had been kept home from school or moved to 'protection camps' with large schools that were not deemed safe. This contributed to an environment conducive to child marriage (Schlecht, 2016, p. 14). Two conflict affected settings in Uganda were included in the study; Mucwini, which had experienced intense conflict and was hosting around 1,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the Nakivale refugee settlement, which hosted around 57,000 refugees, many from Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In both contexts, a high value had been placed on education pre-conflict, but adolescents were facing a range of barriers to accessing education. While both parents and children expressed sadness about this lack of access, they described child marriage as bringing greater security in their current contexts (Schlecht, 2016, pp. 20-22). The same study found similar patterns within Syrian families in the Al Marj refugee settlement in Lebanon (Schlecht, 2016, pp. 20-22).

Another study focusing on Syrian refugee families living in Lebanon found that while in rural Syrian communities, education had been a key factor in delaying marriages, the limited access to education for refugee girls in Lebanon contributed to an increasing number of child marriages (UN ESCWA, 2015, p. 63). Almost all of the girls interviewed for the study said that the level at which they had left school was not the one at which that they would have completed their education at home in Syria (UN ESCWA, 2015, p. 63).

Threat or experience of violence

In times of conflict or crisis, families can be more likely to marry girls in an attempt to protect them from sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) from combatants, harassment from suitors, and premarital pregnancy (Buchanan, 2019, p. 9). In communities where virginity and female sexuality are associated with family honour, CEFM is seen as a strategy to protect this honour (Spencer, 2015). Girls may also be forced to marry by militants, as well as being abducted, raped and sold, as in the cases of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Shabaab in Somalia and the Taliban in Pakistan (Clement et al, 2018, p. 2; Girls Not Brides, 2018, p. 2; UN ESCWA, 2015, p. 40).

One study of child marriage in Bangladesh, Niger and Somaliland found that conflict and fragility, along with the absence of child protection measures in these countries, meant that many parents felt marrying their daughters was their only option to protect them from SGBV and 'illegal pregnancies' resulting from rape, and to secure the girls' honour (Myers, 2013, p. 26). Qualitative research in four conflict affected settings in Uganda, Lebanon and Ethiopia found that child marriage was described by mothers, fathers and male and female adolescents as offering protection to girls during conflict (Schlecht, 2016, p. 13).

A qualitative study of child marriage among Syrian refugees in Lebanon found that “al Sutra” – the social protection and preservation of girls’ honour, was cited as a main driver of child marriage by almost all research participants (Mourtada et al, 2017). War and displacement had ‘increased refugees’ sense of insecurity and vulnerability and their real and perceived risks of sexual harassment’, and child marriage was chosen by many parents as a way to protect their daughters’ and their family’s honour (Mourtada et al, 2017, p. 63).

Research looking at child marriage in the Nakivale refugee settlement in Uganda found that previous experiences of sexual violence during the conflict in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) had shaped decisions around girls’ marriages (Schlecht, 2016). Some were ‘married’ to the perpetrator, while others married quickly in order to find stability for children born as a result of rape (Schlecht, 2016, p. 14). Most of the community members interviewed in a study on the Nyal area of South Sudan felt that the risks of SGBV for women and girls had increased as a result of conflict, and many families wanted their daughters to marry as soon as possible to protect them from sexual violence (Buchanan, 2019, p. 19).

One study of child marriage among Syrian refugees in Lebanon found that physical security was one of the most cited factors in decision making around child marriage. Some research participants reported marrying their daughters to cousins or relatives just before they left Syria, for fears that the girls would be raped or harassed as they fled the country or when they arrived in Lebanon (UN ESCWA, 2015, pp.60-61). Another study of Syrian refugees in Jordan found that 29 percent of parents agreed with the statement: “Marriage of children under 18 could be a way to provide protection” if their child was a girl (compared to 22 percent referring to a male child) (UN Women, 2013, p. 31). Research participants noted that since arriving in Jordan, it was more often the case that young girls would marry much older men, who were seen as capable of protecting the girls. Mothers expressed their concerns about offers of marriage for their young daughters since arriving in Jordan, from both neighbours and strangers, usually accompanied by very low dowry offers. They said they felt worried about letting their daughter leave the house, and felt immense pressure to accept the offers due to their vulnerable position in Jordanian society (UN Women, 2013, p. 32).

Some studies have looked more deeply at differences between countries, communities and even within families when it comes to SGBV as a driver of CEFM. For example, a mixed methods study on the experiences of Syrian refugee girls in Lebanon found that female research participants were more likely to discuss child marriage in the context of protection and security concerns, whereas male participants were more likely to stress financial reasons for child marriage (Michael, Roupetz and Bartels, 2018, p. 14).

An evidence review on the dynamics of child marriage in Arab states, including Lebanon, Iraq, Libya, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen, found that sexual violence played more of a role as a driver in some countries than others (UN ESCWA, 2015). In Somalia, Sudan, Syria and the Kurdish region of Iraq, the threat or experience of sexual violence was particularly strong. In Somalia, there was evidence not only of high child marriage but also of forced marriage being used to terrorise the population. In Lebanon, while sexual violence was a problem, evidence did not show that it acted as a significant driver for CEFM (UN ESCWA, 2015, pp. 52-53).

Conflict or crisis-fuelled poverty and food insecurity

The lack of social protection and the breakdown of welfare networks and informal protection systems in fragile and conflict affected states mean that families and communities are less secure, less resilient and more vulnerable to poverty. Conflict can significantly change the economic situation of families, and CEFM is often used as a response to crisis and a reaction to both real and perceived risks (Myers, 2013, p. 11, 17; Lemmon, 2014, p. 6).

One study of child marriage in Bangladesh, Niger and Somaliland found that lack of food and drought was a commonly cited reason for girls being married (Myers, 2013). Parents explained the economic factors that had influenced their decisions to marry their daughters, and thereby increase their ability to feed their other children and themselves (Myers, 2013, p. 24). Similarly, a qualitative study into the drivers of child marriage in seven districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, found that widespread poverty was one of the most common, widespread and significant factors driving child marriage (Ullah, 2019). Families from communities impacted by conflict felt that they had no option but to marry their daughters in order to alleviate hardship and insecurity (Ullah, 2019, p. 22).

During the focus groups and interviews undertaken as part of a study looking at CEFM in Nyal, South Sudan, participants cited a rise in poverty as the most significant driver of CEFM (Buchanan, 2019). While CEFM existed in Nyal well before the most recent conflict, participants said that the lack of resources and income, and difficulties around farming and food production that the conflict had brought, meant that dowry payments were one of the only ways to gain resources to ensure survival of the rest of the household (Buchanan, 2019, p. 17).

A study of Syrian refugees in Jordan found that 30 percent of parents agreed with the statement: “I would accept the marriage of my child (under 18) for economic reasons” if their child was a girl (compared to 22 percent referring to a male child) (UN Women, 2013, p. 31). 28 percent of parents agreed with the statement “marriage of children under the age of 18 can help resolve the family’s financial problems” if their child was a girl (compared to 18 percent referring to a male child) (UN Women, 2013, p. 31).

When research participants in a study into child marriage in five provinces across Afghanistan were asked what needed to change so that no one was married before the age of 18, 31 percent chose “a better economic situation” (Government of Afghanistan, 2018, p. 24). The study noted however, that the economic arguments used by households to explain the persistence of child marriage were not necessarily related to being in debt or having limited resources; they were also linked to perceptions of future economic uncertainty (Government of Afghanistan, 2018, p. 25).

Research in the Kobe refugee camp in Ethiopia found that girls in some Somalian families had been promised for marriage during the conflict in exchange for support with basic needs and safe travel. On reaching adolescence these girls would be returned to Somalia from the camp to be married (Schlecht, 2016). Similarly, in a study examining adolescent girls’ experiences in South Sudan, focus group participants noted that girls in refugee camps in Uganda were being sent back to South Sudan to become second or third wives, in return for financial support for their families (Lee-Koo and Jay, 2018, p. 13). Some focus group participants in this study noted that girls were being forced into marriage at a young age in order to fund the marriage of their brothers or other family members (Lee-Koo and Jay, 2018, p. 13). Across several different countries and contexts, studies show poverty being cited as a reason for wide age differences

between bride and groom, with older men providing greater bride wealth for families (Schlecht, 2016, p. 18).

In some examples, girls talk about their own decisions in the face of poverty and food insecurity, as well as those of their parents. For example, girls taking part in focus groups for a study on adolescent girls' experiences in Zimbabwe talked about getting married in an attempt to avoid burdening their families, and to escape hunger, abuse and neglect at home (Casey and Campbell, 2016, p. 60).

Some studies look into the varying strength of economic drivers of CEFM in different countries and contexts. An evidence review on child marriage in Arab states found that in countries such as Syria, Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Somalia and Sudan, poverty exacerbated by violence has created a 'fertile environment for an increase in child marriage' (UN ESCWA, 2015, p. 7). However, in other fragile or conflict affected countries, such as Lebanon and Algeria, there was only limited evidence of the role of economic hardship as a driver for CEFM (UN ESCWA, 2015, p. 53).

Conflict or crisis-fuelled weakening of the rule of law and strengthening of harmful social norms

In contexts of fragility, legislation on child marriage is often not effectively enforced, and penalties are weak or non-existent. There may be gaps and inconsistencies between customary and formal marriage procedures, and, as discussed above, social norms may dictate that child marriage is a protective community measure for girls. Where families feel that the consequences of transgressing traditional practices and norms will be more severe than the risks of breaking the law on child marriage, CEFM may continue to be chosen as the route with least risks (Myers, 2013, pp. 17-18; Lemmon, 2014, p. 5).

One mixed methods study into child marriage in Afghanistan notes that the Afghan government has a limited ability to enforce frameworks around child marriage because marriage is not seen as the business of the government; rather, this role is allocated to religious institutions, communities or household members (Government of Afghanistan, 2018, p. 24). Some studies have highlighted the link between conflict and decreasing birth registrations, meaning that it is more difficult to establish a child's age when she marries, and therefore to enforce the legal age of marriage (UNICEF and ICRW, 2017b, p. 12; Myers, 2013, p. 19).

There is a significant body of evidence to demonstrate the strength of unequal gender norms as a driver of child marriage across countries and contexts (Greene and Stiefvater, 2019; Marcus and Harper, 2015). In fragile and conflict affected states, harmful masculinities are often strengthened and reinforced, and go unchallenged. In one study of the Nyal area of South Sudan, where many young men were armed and had been fighting in national and/or community level conflicts, community leaders felt there had been a breakdown in young men's respect for authority (Buchanan, 2019). They said they felt they had little control over male youth, and that this could lead to increased CEFM, as families tried to gain protection from these men for their daughters (Buchanan, 2019, pp. 19-20).

A complex, interrelated mixture of drivers

The drivers discussed above do not work in isolation to each other. Most often, a mixture of factors influence families' and communities' attitudes and practices around CEFM. A study of

adolescent girls in sites in three countries (Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon) in the Lake Chad Basin found that girls, boys, parents and community leaders agreed that the protracted crisis in their region – encapsulating a mixture of conflict, security threats, food insecurity, displacement and gender based violence – was increasing the likelihood of CEFM (Jay and Gordon, 2018). They cited the lack of livelihood and economic opportunities, the cost of school fees, the closure of schools and the threats to girls from armed groups as drivers (Jay and Gordon, 2018, pp. 21-22).

Similarly, a study of adolescent girls' experiences in South Sudan identified a range of interrelated drivers of CEFM, including: ingrained cultural practices such as bride price and polygamy; economic insecurity; family separation and the loss of parents; and a lack of education and livelihood opportunities (Lee-Koo and Jay, 2018, p. 13). Other studies in South Sudan have echoed this combination of drivers; in the conflict affected Nyal region, rising poverty and food insecurity, displacement, disrupted livelihoods, increasing sexual and gender based violence, and militarisation of the community are attributed as drivers of CEFM (Buchanan, 2019, p. 8).

A recent literature review looking at child marriage among different communities in Jordan found that the drivers of such marriages are multiple and complex, and usually a number of drivers are at work at the same time (Hutchinson, 2018). The review includes an ecological framework of child marriage drivers at the institutional, community, school, family, peer and individual levels. It argues that we need a better understanding of how the different drivers – at structural and community level – impact on decision making in families (Hutchinson, 2018, pp. 6-7).

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Key websites

- Girls Not Brides: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org>
The [resource centre](#) section includes a publications catalogue for 2018-19
- UNICEF Data: <https://data.unicef.org>
Includes curated data on [child marriage](#)

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