



Executive summary

Child marriage in conflict and crisis-affected settings: Evidence and practice

Child marriage is a global issue. It is rooted in gender inequality and affects millions of girls and women around the world. Its drivers – including poverty, social norms, insecurity and lack of education – vary by context, and are exacerbated by conflict and crisis.

Given the scale and complexity of child marriage and its consequences, a coordinated, adequately funded, community-based response from state- and non-state actors is needed across the humanitarian, development and peace nexus. Commitment to ending the practice is higher than ever, while evidence on how to end it in contexts affected by conflict and fragility is nascent but growing.

What this report is, and who it is for

In this summary, you will find:

- An exploration of the **causes and consequences** of child marriage in conflict- and crisis-affected settings, drawing on recent evidence.
- Examples of **promising research and practice** within and across key sectors.
- **Recommendations** to better equip local, national and international actors to prevent and respond to child marriage in these settings.
- **Practical tools** to support the implementation of evidence-based action.

The [full report](#) is designed to support anyone working to prevent and respond to child marriage in conflict- and crisis-affected settings, and advocates for a fundamental shift in how we approach child marriage programming in these contexts.

It builds on previous thematic briefs and key evidence reviews around child marriage in conflict- and crisis-affected settings.^a It mainly draws on evidence and research from 2020 onwards, and on resources focused on some form or stage of conflict or crisis, although it also refers to evidence from non-conflict settings, where there is potential for learning to be applied in conflict- and crisis-affected settings.

This evidence is supported by case studies from *Girls Not Brides* member organisations and allies from Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. These share practical examples of how practitioners and researchers have responded to the evidence and needs in different contexts. A collection of practical tools – organised by thematic area – is intended to support practitioners and researchers to take evidence-based action.

a. Previous briefs include: *Girls Not Brides*, 2020, [Child marriage in humanitarian contexts](#); *Girls Not Brides*, 2020, [Child marriage within the global humanitarian system](#), based on the scoping review by Jay, H.; The Child Marriage Research to Action Network (the CRANK), 2022, [Research Spotlight: 'Child marriage in humanitarian settings' and 'challenging gender norms to end child marriage'](#), *Girls Not Brides* and UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage; The CRANK, 2023, [Evidence Review: Child marriage interventions and research from 2020 to 2022](#), prepared by Harrison, A., *Girls Not Brides* and the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage; The CRANK, 2023, [Addressing child marriage and supporting married girls in conflict- and crisis-affected settings](#) *Girls Not Brides* and UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage; and *Girls Not Brides*, 2023, [Preventing conflict-related sexual violence in conflict is possible and requires urgent action](#).

Why focus on child marriage in conflict- and crisis-affected settings

In focus: Child marriage is concentrated in conflict- and crisis-affected settings

9 OUT OF 10 COUNTRIES

with the highest child marriage prevalence are experiencing humanitarian crises.¹



Child marriage prevalence is almost **2X THE GLOBAL AVERAGE**

in settings experiencing some form of fragility.²



OVER 1 IN 3 GIRLS in contexts considered fragile are married before age 18.³

- 1 Risk factors for child marriage increase significantly in conflict- and crisis-affected settings.** In states considered fragile, average child marriage prevalence is 35%, compared to 19% globally.⁴ This is because core drivers of child marriage and GBV more broadly – including social norms that uphold patriarchal systems and gender inequality – are exacerbated by stress and uncertainty. They are compounded by the breakdown of individual, formal and customary support systems.⁵
- 2 Adolescent girls are at increased risk of child marriage across different forms of crisis, including conflict, climate emergencies, displacement, pandemics and acute economic and food insecurity.**⁶ Where these forms of crisis overlap, or where girls face multiple intersecting forms of marginalisation – for example, refugee girls with a disability – risks of child marriage increase further, and girls are less likely to access support once married.
- 3 Child marriage is connected with many other thematic areas and rights, including gender inequality, poor educational access and outcomes, poor livelihood opportunities, limited access to health rights and services, and poor access to social protection.**⁷ Despite this interconnectedness, child marriage prevention is rarely adequately prioritised within humanitarian or crisis response systems, and the unique and specific needs of girls and adolescents who are – or have been – married (ever-married girls), pregnant and parenting are often unrecognised and unmet.

Solutions: Drawing from the evidence base

There is a nascent but growing body of evidence on what does and does not work to prevent and respond to child marriage across different contexts and sectors.



For income and economic strengthening interventions:

- **Cash-based support has the potential to significantly reduce the risks of child marriage in conflict- and crisis-affected settings, particularly if unrestricted, recurrent, and/or delivered alongside broader social and economic empowerment efforts.** Rigorous evaluations of cash-based interventions would build understanding of what works, who is best placed to receive transfers, and counter (real/perceived) risks around cash disbursements.
- **Girls value opportunities to develop their earning potential, and their sense of having employment opportunities can act as a protective factor against child marriage and early pregnancy, including in settings considered fragile.** More cross-sectoral partnerships are needed with organisations working on skills- or economic rights-focused interventions, to improve targeting of girls at risk of marriage and ever-married girls.
- **There is need to counter the “feminisation of poverty”⁸ and to engage with the structural, supply-side factors that limit girls’ and women’s opportunities and restrict them to (illegal) insecure, low-paid roles where they are put at risk of violence, abuse and conflict- and crisis-driven insecurity.**



For education and life skills interventions:

- **Supporting girls’ access to quality education – whether formal or informal, online or in person – offers significant protection against child marriage in emergency settings, especially at secondary level.** Addressing the practical barriers to attending school may be a critical and relatively straightforward step towards addressing child marriage in emergencies.
- **More research into the effectiveness of supporting girls’ schooling through cash and in-kind transfers in conflict- and crisis-affected settings is needed.** Education-tied conditional cash transfers may not be enough to sustain reductions in child marriage without additional community/place-based and/or multilevel programme components.
- **Structural barriers can drive early school leaving, even where girls and families value education.** This needs to be addressed through engagement with supply-side factors to improve access and quality in education, and through improved coordination between the education and protection sectors as part of education-focused humanitarian, development and peace nexus programming.



For interventions focused on girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and mental health:

- **SRHR interventions are most effective when paired with one or more norms-based or economic support-focused interventions.** There is growing positive evidence of flexible, tailored, creative approaches to providing SRHR services to girls in humanitarian settings.
- **Addressing taboos and awkwardness around SRHR – and sexuality specifically – is essential.** Further study is also needed on the positive potential of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) to address child marriage when integrated into formal and out-of-school education interventions in humanitarian settings.
- **Further research is needed to understand the links between child marriage and mental health; this research should engage communities and individuals with direct experience of child marriage in research design.** Monitoring of girls' mental health and how this shifts by context and intervention could be built into programme monitoring.
- **There is emergent evidence on the importance of building and facilitating girls' peer networks as a way to support their overall mental health,** particularly in displacement settings.



For girl-centred intervention and empowerment approaches:

- **Safe spaces can play a critical role for girls in conflict- and crisis-affected settings – for building peer support networks and improving girls' access to services (particularly around GBV), life skills development opportunities and CSE,** and providing opportunities for humanitarian actors to better understand girls' needs, challenges and agency.
- **Ever-married girls and young mothers may benefit from having their own, separate groups and tailored activities and curricula,** in addition to the involvement of mothers-in-law within these spaces where girls feel this would be helpful.
- **Peer support-focused activities may be more effective in improving the health and empowerment of (ever-married) girls,** and more likely to be sustained if implemented as part of a multi-sectoral, rights-based, contextually grounded programme, including norms-based interventions and economic support.



For interventions to change discriminatory gender and social norms:

- **Reducing GBV – including child marriage – and transforming gender inequitable attitudes is possible in conflict-affected communities over time, despite the often heightened harmful norms in these settings.** Engaging families and whole communities – including women leaders and women-led movements – as part of a multi-component, longer-term investment approach can reduce the prevalence and desirability of child marriage.^b

b. See also, Murphy, M., Hess, T., Casey, J., and Minchey, H., [What works to prevent violence against women and girls in conflict and humanitarian crisis: Synthesis brief](#). While not specifically crisis-focused, [Tostan](#) (including its [Community Capacity Building Programme](#)) also offers insights into how programmes can work in effective partnership with communities to address a broad range of issues, including child marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and education.

- **Further research is needed on how to engage and sustain different family members** – including husbands and partners – and to assess long-term impact, drawing on recent frameworks for how to engage boys and men without decentering the needs of girls and women.
- **Engagement with social norms in conflict- and crisis-affected settings should be based on a nuanced understanding of how these norms manifested before the crisis started**, and the need for social norms change interventions to be supported by investment in gender-transformative engagement with the structural and institutional drivers of child marriage.



For interventions focused on laws and marriage/birth registration policies:

- **Laws alone cannot end child marriage, but they are an important foundation.** Laws on child marriage should be accompanied by investment in gender-equitable public services, employment opportunities, conflict and crisis resilience and/or recovery, and the transformation of discriminatory norms, attitudes and behaviours.⁹
- **Interventions that clarify local legal, health and other registration systems, and that provide accompaniment in navigating those processes, may help to prevent child marriage and support ever-married girls and their children, particularly in displacement settings or protracted crises.** Efforts to build girls' and families' understanding of their legal rights and ability to navigate local systems and processes should be accompanied by multi-sector training on gender justice and safe implementation.
- **Girls' and women's voices and needs are underrepresented in national and international legal and policy frameworks for addressing the climate crisis.** Intentional, coordinated effort is needed to ensure girls and women are meaningfully engaged and represented in all aspects of climate-related decision-making processes, policy and legislation.



For interventions involving women's rights organisations and movements:

- **There is significant evidence on the influential role women's rights organisations (WROs) and feminist movements play in pushing for and achieving tangible progress towards gender equality.** More research is needed to understand the role played by WROs with regards to child marriage.
- **WROs and women-led organisations (WLOs) are chronically underfunded and underrepresented in development and humanitarian work.** This is despite global commitments to localisation, and a growing body of guidance, recommendations and promising practice examples on how to meaningfully engage WROs and WLOs as core humanitarian and development actors.

Recommendations: Evidence-based actions for all actors

Drawing on the evidence, we call for:

- **Urgent, coordinated action at all levels** to better understand, recognise and respond to the **needs of girls and adolescent girls** – unmarried and ever-married – to prevent and respond to child marriage in conflict- and crisis-affected settings.
- Interventions that take a **girl-centred** and **gender-transformative** approach.
- Approaches that amplify **community/place-based expertise** and the expertise of civil society organisations, frontline women's rights and feminist organisations, and child rights organisations.

Here are **six actions** for UN agencies & cluster leads, governments, donors, civil society and researchers to address child marriage in conflict- and crisis-affected settings:

- 1 Integrate child marriage prevention and response as a priority across all actors and sectors within the humanitarian architecture.** Recognise it as a complex issue requiring change across sectors and levels. Support this with funded efforts to improve cross-sector coordination, collaboration and monitoring at all levels, with governments positioned to drive and coordinate change at the national and sub-national levels.
- 2 Address the structural and institutional barriers that impact the provision of key systems and services** – including girls' access to education and SRHR – as part of a political commitment to addressing the structural drivers of child marriage, and rights of refugees and displaced persons to access critical services.
- 3 Design, deliver and evaluate multi-sector, multi-component interventions** that recognise the huge and catalytic potential of engaging in key sectors – like education – to prevent and respond to child marriage in conflict- and crisis-affected settings.
- 4 Increase funding to and integration of girl-centred and – where possible – girl-designed interventions.** Engage at-risk and ever-married, pregnant and parenting girls and adolescents, and work in collaboration with families and communities to build support and trust on key issues, including SRHR.
- 5 Commit to multi-year funding for gender-transformative interventions and to pilot promising approaches, including robust measurement, evaluation and learning** to build the evidence base. This commitment to building the evidence base should be integrated across all child marriage interventions – including community/place-based and community-led (with appropriate adaptation) interventions – to ensure ongoing learning and appropriate scaling of promising interventions in different contexts.
- 6 Increase funding to women-led and community/place-based organisations.** Integrate these organisations as equitable partners – and as thematic and context experts and funding recipients – from the design phase of interventions and within key national and international decision-making fora.



Toolbox: Practical tools to support policy and programmatic work on child marriage in conflict- and crisis-affected settings

Education

Education Cannot Wait, Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) and UN Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI), 2022, [EiE – GenKit](#). Available in English, French, Arabic and Turkish.

This resource package includes practical tools for education practitioners to promote gender-responsive programming from crisis to peace and sustainable development. It offers tools for practical and immediate use, including checklists, tipsheets and assessment templates supporting practitioners to ensure that each phase of an EiE intervention is gender-responsive.

UN Women, n.d., [IASC e-learning on gender equality in humanitarian action](#). Available in English.

This three-hour e-learning course provides introductory guidance – through information and practical examples – on the fundamentals of applying a gender-equality approach across all sates of the humanitarian programming cycle, from assessment and planning to implementation and monitoring. It is intended for humanitarian actors from the UN, NGOs, government and civil society, and based on the [IASC gender handbook for humanitarian action](#).

Mental health

INEE, n.d., [Mental health and psychosocial support in and through education in emergencies \(EiE\)](#). Available in English.

[An online, self-directed course on how EiE programmes can incorporate activities to actively address distress caused by emergency situations for students and teachers in humanitarian settings.](#)

Girl-centred programming

International Rescue Committee, 2023, [Girl Shine: Early marriage curriculum for married/unmarried girls and their parents](#). Available in Arabic, English and French.

Girl Shine is a programme model and resource package that seeks to support, protect and ensure girls in humanitarian settings can make and act on their decisions. It supports them to build skills and knowledge on GBV and how to seek support services. It can be used in multiple humanitarian settings and phases of emergency response. It includes practitioner guidance, curricula for adolescent girls and caregivers,

and training manuals. Additional content is designed to comprehensively address delaying marriage and responding to the unique needs of married girls.

Norwegian Church Aid, 2023, [ENGAGE – Enhancing Girl’s Agency and Gender Equality: Lifeskills and group curriculum for girls, boys, parents, teachers, religious and community leaders](#). Available in English.

ENGAGE aims to support adolescent girls, mobilise families and communities, and improve the capacity of frontline workers to prevent and respond to child marriage within existing GBV programming in humanitarian settings. It does this through prevention/community outreach, response/service delivery and capacity enhancement. This toolkit includes an implementation guide; curricula for sessions with adolescent girls and boys, caregivers, teachers, religious leaders, community members; and training tools for those implementing the ENGAGE programme.

Plan International, 2020, [Adolescent programming toolkit: Guidance and tools for adolescent programming and girls’ empowerment in crisis settings](#). Available in English, French and Spanish.

This toolkit was developed to support frontline teams to work with and for adolescents in emergencies and protracted crises. It includes a Theory of Change to support adolescents in crisis settings; a programmatic framework; and a step-by-step guide for programming with and for adolescents, with key considerations for reaching and supporting adolescent girls.

International Rescue Committee and International Medical Corps, 2019, [Women and girls’ safe spaces: A toolkit for advancing women’s and girls’ empowerment in humanitarian settings](#). Available in English.

[This toolkit was developed to support girls’ and women’s sense of self and empowerment by providing a blueprint for safe space programming. It includes 38 tools and nine databases with step-by-step instructions and guidance on how to apply feminist principles, approaches and strategies in practice, within an accountable, girl- and women-led process.](#)

Gender and social norms

UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, 2021, [Transcending norms: Gender-transformative approaches to women’s and girls’ safe spaces in humanitarian settings](#). Available in English.

This resource provides practical technical guidance for UNFPA, community/place-based organisations and other GBV agencies operating safe spaces regionally and globally. It is intended to enhance the gender transformative potential of safe space programming and activities based on contextual knowledge and understanding. It also includes recommendations for donors to ensure GTA in the safe spaces they fund.

WROs

International Rescue Committee, 2023, [Why Wait? How the humanitarian system can better fund women-led and women’s rights organisations](#). Available in English, with executive summaries in Dari, French, Pashto and Ukrainian.

[This report provides analysis and insights from Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ukraine to show the systemic barriers to – and opportunities for – WROs/WLOs accessing humanitarian funding. The recommendations highlight changes that can be made at the operational and policy level, so policymakers can drive reform of the multilateral system they fund, helping them realise their commitments to localisation, feminist approaches and aid effectiveness.](#)

Child marriage: Technical guidance and context analysis and needs assessment

Al Hweidi, S., Jones, N., Malachowska, A., Pincock, K., Presler-Marshall, E., and Youssef, S., 2022, [Addressing child marriage in humanitarian settings: Technical guide for staff and partners of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage](#). Available in English and Spanish.

Guidance for UNFPA and UNICEF country offices on how to prepare for and respond to child marriage in humanitarian settings. It recognises current humanitarian architecture strategies and development context responses, and identifies how to improve synergies between actions taken in different settings, including at the humanitarian-development nexus.

Plan International and UNHCR, 2024, [Toolkit: Context analysis on child marriage in crisis and forced displacement settings](#). Available in English (Arabic and French forthcoming)

Guidance and practical tools to help plan, collect and analyse data about child marriage with adolescent girls and their communities. Can be used as a standalone study or integrated into broader child protection in emergencies, GBV Rapid Gender Analysis or multi-sectoral needs assessments.

Child marriage and case management

Plan International and UNHCR, 2024, [Learning paper & staff checklists: Improving how we handle cases of child marriage in case management for refugee and forcibly displaced populations](#). Available in Arabic, English and French.

Resources – including a technical learning paper, brief and checklists for those undertaking case management – documenting experiences and lessons learned from cases of child marriage in refugee and mixed displacement settings in Bangladesh, Indonesia and Niger. They aim to improve the quality of child protection and GBV services for girls at risk of child marriage and ever-married girls, drawing attention to the issue and advocating for the strengthening of case management systems to better identify, support and protect girls who are forcibly displaced and in need of case management services.

Terre des Hommes and Kings College London, 2021, [Child marriage in the MENA region – Child marriage case management guideline](#). Available in English.

This document includes specific elements from Terre des Hommes and Kings College London research findings and existing child protection and GBV case management guidance, tailoring them to respond to child marriage. It uses the voices of Syrian refugee girls from research in Jordan and Lebanon, and should be reviewed and adapted if used in other contexts.

Minimum standards

UNFPA, 2019, [The Inter-agency minimum standards for gender-based violence in emergencies programming](#). Available in Arabic, Burmese, English, French, Korean, Portuguese and Spanish.

These 16 minimum standards define what agencies working on specialised GBV programming need to achieve to prevent and respond to GBV and deliver multisectoral services. They establish a common understanding of what constitutes minimum prevention and response programming in emergencies. They are universal and relevant for all emergency contexts.

The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2019, [Minimum standards for child protection in humanitarian action](#). Available in English.

These minimum standards were developed to support child protection work in humanitarian settings by establishing common principles, strengthening coordination, improving the quality of programming and accountability, defining the professional field of child protection in humanitarian action, synthesising promising practice, and strengthening advocacy around risks, needs and responses.

UNFPA and the Inter-agency Working Group for Reproductive Health in Crisis, 2020, [Minimum initial service package for SRH in crisis situations](#). Available in English, French, Portuguese and Spanish.

A series of crucial, lifesaving activities to respond to the SRH needs of affected populations at the onset of a humanitarian crisis. It is intended to ensure responsibility for implementation; prevent and respond to sexual violence, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections; prevent excess maternal and newborn morbidity and mortality, and unintended pregnancies; and plan for comprehensive SRH services.

INEE, 2024, [Minimum standards for education: Preparedness, response, recovery](#). Available in English.

This pack contains 19 standards, each of which includes key actions and guidance notes. It is intended to improve the quality of educational preparedness, response and recovery; to increase access to safe and relevant learning opportunities; and to ensure those who provide these services are held accountable.

Research

Johns Hopkins University, UNFPA, UNICEF, 2021, [A practitioner's guide to the ethical conduct of research on child marriage in humanitarian settings](#). Available in English.

This guide offers practitioners a framework for decision-making considering whether and how to conduct research on child marriage in humanitarian settings. It focuses on the ethical conduct of research among female and male adolescents and young people (aged 10-24) who are at risk of or have experienced child marriage and are living in challenging, low-resource and often insecure environments.

Pincock, K., Verhoeven, D., Jones, N., and Isimbi, R., 2023, ["They say it was her fault... This is not true!" Vignettes with adolescent girls to collectively address norms about sexual violence](#). Available in English.

This article discusses the piloting of vignette research tools in focus group discussions with adolescent girls aged 15-19 in Rwanda. It reflects on the opportunities of this method for expanding girls' understanding of the norms that enable sexual violence, and the context-specific ways they can respond.

Al Heiwidi, S., Jones, N., Małachowska, A., Pincock, K., Presler-Marshall, E., and Youssef, S., 2022, [Participatory research with adolescents and youth in the Middle East: A toolkit to explore how social, economic, environmental and political crises shape young people's well-being](#). Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence. Available in English.

A collection of participatory research tools that have been piloted and used by the GAGE programme in Jordan and Lebanon to explore how young people's lives are shaped by economic, social, environmental and political crises. It includes an overview of the literature on key principles and approaches; an introductory session on conducting participatory research sessions with young people and on conducting participatory photography; and a step-by-step guide to six key tools

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Girls Not Brides is a global partnership of over 1,400 civil society organisations from more than 100 countries committed to ending child marriage and ensuring girls can fulfil their potential.

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