



REGIONAL ACTION FORUM TO END CHILD MARRIAGE IN ARAB STATES (RAF)

FEBRUARY 2024

EXPLORING LINKAGES BETWEEN CHILD MARRIAGE AND FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION IN THE MENA REGION

INTRODUCTION

Established in 2018, the [Regional Action Forum to End Child Marriage \(RAF\)](#) in Arab States/Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region seeks to eradicate child marriage in alignment with ongoing UN reforms. RAF is a collaborative regional platform co-chaired by UNICEF MENA and UNFPA ASRO, that brings together members from more than 40 UN agencies, INGOs, NGOs and academic institutions. Our main objectives encompass coordinating programmatic interventions among regional organizations to tackle different aspects of child marriage – including harmful practices – while sharing knowledge and bolstering the translation of evidence into action. RAF members aim to collectively advocate against the factors driving child marriage and related marginalization in the MENA region.

RAF FOCUSES ON SEVERAL KEY AREAS:

- EMPOWERING GIRLS;
- PROMOTING POSITIVE PRACTICES WITHIN FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, AND AMONG THOUGHT LEADERS;
- IMPROVING SERVICE DELIVERY AND SYSTEMS;
- ENHANCING LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS;
- GENERATING RELEVANT DATA AND EVIDENCE TO DRIVE SUSTAINABLE CHANGE FOR THE ERADICATION OF CHILD MARRIAGE.

[The harmful practices of child marriage and female genital mutilation \(FGM\) continue to threaten the well-being and rights of millions of girls worldwide.](#)

Rooted in deep gender inequality and discriminatory norms, these practices have persisted for generations, perpetuating harmful beliefs about female sexuality and societal roles. Worldwide, 650 million girls and women were married in childhood, in parallel, at least 200 million girls and women have undergone FGM in 31 countries with representative data on prevalence. (1) Girls are exposed to varying risks of FGM based on country and background characteristics – with those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds facing increased risk – while FGM status is also closely linked to ethnicity, serving as a marker of identity within specific communities.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, where cultural traditions and social norms often dictate gender roles and expectations, child marriage and FGM remain significant challenges. Despite efforts to combat these practices, they continue to affect the lives of countless girls, perpetuating cycles of inequality and denying them their fundamental rights. By understanding the dynamics between these two practices, we can develop targeted interventions to address their root causes and mitigate their harmful effects on girls and women.

On 6 February 2024, the Regional Action Forum to End Child Marriage in Arab States / MENA (RAF) hosted an online discussion on the linkages between child marriage and FGM with more than 30 of its members and experts to mark the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation. The discussion covered global trends as well as in depth insight into specific contexts such as Sudan and Somalia where both FGM and child marriage remain prevalent.

The RAF online discussion on FGM and child marriage recording is [available here.](#)

1. CORRELATIONS BETWEEN CHILD MARRIAGE AND FGM AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL

Intervention by [Rachael Hongo](#), Senior Data, Evidence, and Policy Officer at [Girls Not Brides \(GnB\)](#)

Overview

Correlation between [child marriage and FGM](#) can be direct, where one practice leads to the other, or indirect, where they share common causes or drivers. Both practices are recognized as harmful, violating the human rights of girls and women, and are rooted in gender inequality and social norms with devastating consequences worldwide.

Child marriage and FGM are often used to control female sexuality, with justifications including the preservation of purity and family honour. In many cases, a girl's "marriageability" may be tied to whether she has undergone FGM. On the other hand, FGM may also be performed as a rite of passage into womanhood and as a precursor to marriage, often occurring in early adolescence. Societal and familial expectations frequently contribute to the perpetuation of both practices, with families feeling compelled to adhere to norms to maintain social standing and conformity within their communities.

"In contexts where both practices are common, girls at risk often share certain characteristics, such as low levels of education, rural residence, and living in poorer households." – [Rachael Hongo](#), Senior Data, Evidence, and Policy Officer at [Girls Not Brides \(GnB\)](#)

Child marriage and FGM are not isolated issues; CM and FGM are both core to development and human rights, hindering the achievement of many Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly [Goal 5](#) and [Target 5.3](#), which aim to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Both practices can disrupt a girl's education, with child marriage often leading to early school withdrawal, and FGM resulting in physical and psychological trauma, affecting a girl's ability to pursue education. Additionally, both FGM and child marriage pose significant health risks to girls and women: FGM can potentially result in immediate and longterm complications, and child marriage can expose young girls to early and potentially risky pregnancies, as well as increased vulnerability to sexual and reproductive health issues.

Tackling FGM and child marriage together

"Innovative approaches to tackling child marriage and FGM together include integrating and working across different sectors such as health, education, and economic empowerment." – [Rachael Hongo](#), Senior Data, Evidence, and Policy Officer at [Girls Not Brides \(GnB\)](#)

Appropriate strategies to invest in girls' education and women's empowerment, with effective engagement of religious and community leaders, might support changing attitudes and practices of FGM among younger generations. Engaging communities in developing local and sustainable solutions to ending child marriage and FGM, as well as utilizing technology for awareness campaigns and involving youth as advocates for change, are also effective strategies. Lastly, investing in legal identity and ensuring that young children have access to birth certificates to verify their actual ages, is crucial in addressing child



2. CORRELATIONS BETWEEN CHILD MARRIAGE AND FGM IN SUDAN

Intervention by [Tamador Ahmed Abdalla](#), Child Protection Specialist at [UNICEF Sudan](#) and [Dr Amira Azhari](#), Director of the States Coordination Unit at the [National Council for Child Welfare \(NCCW\)](#) in Sudan

Overview

While FGM is more common than child marriage in Sudan, there is significant overlap between the two practices, with FGM impacting [88% of women and girls between the ages of 15 and 49 \(2\)](#), and child marriage affecting [34% of women and girls before the age of 18 \(3\)](#). Economic hardship often motivates parents to marry their daughters young as well as growing insecurity in the country that is currently experiencing renewed conflict resulting in the world's largest child displacement crisis.

"Recently, displaced mothers in Sudan whose daughters had already undergone FGM prior to the conflict are expressing relief due to widespread misconception leading them to believe the procedure would protect their girls from prevalent sexual violence in urban areas like Khartoum." – [Dr Amira Azhari](#), Director of States Coordination Unit at the [National Council for Child Welfare](#)

In response to these challenges, the government of Sudan has adopted various approaches to tackle child marriage and FGM. This includes enforcing the [renewed child act of 2020](#), which addresses both child marriage and FGM, and rolling out roadmaps aligned with approved national action plans for ending these practices by 2030. Nevertheless, the recent rise in violence, conflict, and displacement, mean that women and girls will continue to be at [heightened risk](#) of child marriage and FGM which are often mistaken as protective measures by families and communities.

Tackling FGM and child marriage together in Sudan

Innovative strategies tailored to the context of increased conflicts and tensions in Sudan include using local dialects for broader outreach, implementing case-management and early warning systems, and diversifying outreach tools such as mobile cinema implemented by UNICEF Sudan in partnership with the Red Crescent.

Targeted advocacy efforts aimed at changing social norms, strengthening legislative frameworks, improving access to multi sectoral services, and garnering community support are needed. For instance, efforts to criminalize FGM have paved the way for legislative changes to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 in Sudan, while community-based initiatives like the [Saleema initiative](#) launched by UNICEF Sudan and the NCCW facilitate engagement with youth movements, medical students, and religious leaders to promote positive social change.

Engaging with boys and men on child marriage and FGM is also crucial and often very challenging in contexts like Sudan. Even though initial encounters with male sports clubs showed that there would be resistance to discussing such issues, innovative approaches to initiate dialogue can still be facilitated through sports, art and community dialogue. Discussions on FGM with men and boys are often more sensitive than those on child marriage, necessitating careful selection of participants, timing, and communication strategies.



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3. CORRELATIONS BETWEEN CHILD MARRIAGE AND FGM IN SOMALIA

Intervention by Nunow Abdirahman, Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Analyst at UNFPA Somalia

Overview

In Somalia, there is a significant correlation between child marriage and FGM, with girls married at a young age often subjected to FGM as a prerequisite for marriage and a marker of maturity. Records indicate that **98% of girls (4)** aged between 5 and 11 have undergone the most severe form of FGM (Type 3), highlighting the widespread prevalence of this practice. Additionally, around **36% of Somali girls are married before the age of 18, and 17% are married before turning 15.(5)** These practices in Somalia are deeply rooted in cultural norms and gender inequality, where early marriage is perceived as a religious and cultural obligation. Moreover, forced marriages are not uncommon, with examples like the forced marriage of widows to relatives of deceased husbands, often perpetuated as cultural practices or to prevent conflicts between different tribes.

Observations from Somalia reveal the severe psychological and physical consequences of child marriage and FGM on women and girls, including early pregnancies, high mortality rates, and long-term complications during childbirth. [The lack of a legal framework](#) for protection against these harmful practices exacerbates the challenges faced by girls seeking refuge from FGM in Somalia. The slow progress in legislation has hampered their ability to access justice and protection, perpetuating a cycle of discrimination and fear that must be urgently addressed.

Tackling FGM and child marriage together in Somalia

To address these challenges, UNFPA Somalia has emphasized the need for comprehensive programming that tackles both early marriage and FGM simultaneously. This approach includes sustained community engagement, awareness campaigns, legal advocacy and reforms, access to education and reproductive health rights. In addition, economic empowerment through vocational training and engaging families and communities in decision-making processes are essential to sustain progress.

Innovative strategies, such as leveraging technology for outreach in hard-to-reach areas, engaging boys and men to challenge gender norms, and building trust with community leaders, have also been implemented. These efforts aim to create sustainable change and protect the rights and well-being of girls and women in Somalia.

“Engaging with men and boys, as well as religious leaders, is crucial for both FGM and child marriage prevention in Somalia. Awareness campaigns emphasizing that there is no mention of FGM in the Quran and discussing its associated health risks with the community may help change certain perspectives and beliefs.”
– Nunow Abdirahman, UNFPA Somalia Gender-Based Violence (GBV)/Gender Specialist and Analyst

3 KEY ADVOCACY CALLS FOR STAKEHOLDERS INVESTING IN THE PREVENTION OF CHILD MARRIAGE AND FGM

1 INVEST IN EVIDENCE-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Stakeholders looking to invest further in prevention efforts should emphasize the importance of understanding the correlation between FGM and child marriage and the need for evidence-based interventions. Regular monitoring and evaluation are essential to track progress and adjust strategies as needed. It is crucial not to overlook girls who have experienced both FGM and early marriage.

2 ADOPT HOLISTIC APPROACHES THAT ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES & CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD MARRIAGE & FGM:

It is crucial to adopt holistic approaches that address the root causes and consequences of child marriage and FGM, particularly in complex contexts such as Somalia and Sudan. By combining legislative reforms, community engagement, comprehensive programming and innovative strategies, stakeholders can work towards ending these harmful practices and safeguarding the rights and well-being of girls and women. This is particularly needed in times of conflict and displacement when risks of child marriage and FGM can increase.

3 ENGAGE WITH BOYS, MEN & RELIGIOUS LEADERS FOR LASTING CHANGE:

Engaging with boys, men and religious leaders for lasting prevention of FGM and child marriage is key, particularly in contexts where patriarchal norms and misconceptions persist. This can be done through innovative and contextually sensitive approaches such as engaging through sports, art or community dialogue.



UNICEF/UN0211031

ENDNOTES

1. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/understanding-the-relationship-between-child-marriage-and-fgm/>
2. <https://www.unfpa.org/data/fgm/SD>
3. <https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/17696/file/ChildMarriage-Factsheet-Feb22.pdf%20.pdf>
4. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/female-genital-mutilation/>
5. <https://somalia.unfpa.org/en/news/joint-declaration-against-fgm#:~:text=Over%2036%25%20of%20girls%20in,cycle%20of%20this%20harmful%20practice.>