

Desk review on impact of child marriage on children with disabilities in MENA/ASRO

Shirin Kiani
April 2024



1. Background	3
1.1. Purpose	3
1.2. Mapping methodology.....	3
2. Global findings	4
2.1. Association between child marriage and disability exists and is under-reported	4
2.2. Drivers of child marriage are the same and more severe for girls with disabilities.....	4
2.3. Family feels pressured to mitigate child’s disability with early marriage	5
2.4. Inaccessible services are an additional driver of early marriage for girls with disabilities	6
2.5. Children with disabilities may marry earlier or at same time as peers.....	7
2.6. Girls with disabilities enter the least favorable marital matches.....	7
2.7. Girls with disabilities given little power & may not understanding what is happening.....	8
2.8. Marriages of girls with disabilities lead to worst life outcomes than peers	9
2.9. Policies do not support the prevention of early marriage of children with disabilities.....	10
2.10. Early marriage is a cause of disability for both infant and child mother	10
3. MENA/ASRO findings	11
3.1. Global themes are similar in MENA/ASRO.....	11
3.2. IDPs in Northwest Syria.....	13
3.3. Refugees in Lebanon.....	14
4. Inclusive practices	14
5. Research considerations for MENA/ASRO region	17
6. Summary of recommendations.....	18
Conclusion.....	23
Annex 1- Questions sent to MENA/ASRO RAF on disability & child marriage	24
Annex 2 – MICS data extraction on child with disability marriage rates in MENA	25
Annex 3 - UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme to ECM – Donor Meeting 2023.....	26
Annex 4 – Disability inclusion elements of Phase 3 of global programme	28
Annex 5 – Disaggregated data in Global Programme ECM reporting.....	29
Annex 6 – Partial list of organization of women with disabilities in MENA/ASRO.	31
Annex 7 – Easy read booklet of forced marriage & persons with disabilities.....	32
Annex 8 – Testimonial on child marriage and disability	33

***This desk review was funded by UNICEF MENARO and supported by Stephanie Shanler, Evita Mouawad, Luzia Zeruneith and Dr. Shadia Elshiwiy.**

1. Background

1.1. Purpose

The purpose of this desk review is to carry out a desk review of available evidence on marriage of children with disabilities¹ globally and in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA/AS), and provide programming recommendations to the [Regional Action Forum to End Child marriage in Arab States \(ASRO\) / MENA \(RAF\)](#) and their members. The RAF is part of the UNFPA-UNICEF [Global Programme to End Child Marriage](#). Presently in Phase three, this latest phase has a strong focus on 'leaving no one behind,' including children with disabilities. The goal is to help end child marriage not only by addressing socio-economic and cultural drivers, but also by investing in preventative measures such as education, work opportunities, and social protection programmes. To that end, the inclusion of girls and boys with disabilities within these programmes is critical to the goal of ending child marriage.

The MENA/ASRO region is home to approximately [21 million children with disabilities](#)² (nearly 50/50 girls/boys). MENA/ASRO has the second highest rate of disability globally, after the West and Central African region, on average **13 percent of all children** (or 1 in 7) live with one or more disabilities. This rate is likely higher in conflict affected and humanitarian settings due to injuries resulting from war (e.g. hearing loss linked to proximity in war, burns, broken limbs), contexts such as Yemen, the State of Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Sudan. Over the years, the lack of reliable data and analysis on the link between children with disabilities and child marriage has contributed to furthering their exclusion and neglect and their access to programming. This desk review is an initial attempt to shed light on the issue, explore good practices, and provide recommendations for consideration.

1.2. Mapping methodology

This mapping mainly used a secondary data review of existing literature, documents, relevant websites and audio-visual materials available on the web. Key search words in English and French were used: 'child marr', 'CEFM', 'early marr', 'disab', 'handicap', 'mariage precoce' (French for Maghreb region), and 'girls with disab'. A limitation of this desk review is that it is suspected that there may be a scarcity of data in Arabic and Farsi on the topic of child marriage and disabilities. Going forwards, it will be helpful to ensure all Arabic and Farsi resources by RAF are disability inclusive - both in accessibility of document and content.

Secondary data sources reviewed included publicly available UN, NGO, or academic materials on child marriage, on children and youth with disabilities and on women with disabilities. Journalistic articles from MENA/ASRO that were included as there are few real-life stories shared on this topic openly. Additionally, the consultant shared a list of questions with the MENA/ASRO RAF network to share relevant reports, data or reflections. Questions are listed in Annex 1. An extraction of MICS6 data, containing the disability module, was done for the available MENA/ASRO countries to see what data for children with disabilities on child marriage illustrated. This can be found in [Annex 2](#). Lastly the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) concluding remarks³ were reviewed for top five MENA/ASRO countries⁴ (Sudan, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Egypt) with highest rates of child marriage. There was no limit on time period for inclusion of

¹ 'Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.' (Article 1 UNCRPR)

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>

² https://data.unicef.org/resources/children-with-disabilities-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-a-statistical-overview-of-their-well-being/?_gl=1*1r37tln*_ga*MTcxNTAwMDI5NS4xNjk0NjIwNjY0*_ga_ZEPV2PX419*MTcxMjg2NzA4Ni4xMjUuMS4xNzEyODY3MzQ0LjYwLjAuMA..

³ https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/TBSearch.aspx?Lang=en&TreatyID=4&DocTypeID=5

⁴ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/?country=saudi-arabia>

sources, though, generally all reports were published after 2005, with the exception of one piece of research in MENA/ASRO on gender and disability from 1997⁵.

2. Global findings

2.1. Association between child marriage and disability exists and is under-reported

In general, there is insufficient data and evidence to conclude whether children with disabilities are more at risk of child marriage compared to children without disabilities. There is also a lack of disaggregated data on child marriage and disability making it hard to confirm trends. Many community members assume, due to negative attitudes and stigma, that women and girls with disabilities do not marry and therefore, are not at risk of child marriage⁶. That said, research in the UK shows that the forced marriage of children and adults with learning disabilities is likely grossly underreported and can differ from the way in which forced marriage presents generally (e.g. live-in relationships without formal/legal marriage). It is therefore difficult to obtain accurate data on children with learning disabilities who are forced to marry.⁷

The UN - knowing it may be happening - has called for disability mainstreaming in interventions addressing child marriage. In June 2017 the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on child, early and forced marriage in humanitarian settings, which said, "...(*there is a*) (*sic*) need for States to improve the collection and use of quantitative, qualitative and comparable data on violence against women and harmful practices, disaggregated by sex, age, **disability**..."⁸ In areas where there is a link between child marriage and disability, there is a lack of age-disaggregation to show whether disability pre-dated the child marriage or was as a result of it.^{9,10} Furthermore, Girls Not Brides has shown that the link between disability and child marriage is poorly documented (i.e. lack of disaggregated data and intersectional approach), and girls with disabilities rarely made visible in this work.¹¹

2.2. Drivers of child marriage are the same and more severe for girls with disabilities

Available research suggests that the drivers of child marriage for children with and without disabilities are similar, including poverty and social norms.¹² This indicates that girls with disabilities are at risk of child marriage.¹³ Girls with disabilities are not only subjected to the same harmful gender stereotyping as other girls, but also have to deal with negative beliefs about their disability, creating double discrimination¹⁴. The majority of services are inaccessible or lacking (e.g. sign language, ramp, policies mandating inclusion, positive attitudes from service providers) and girls with disabilities do not have other community or home-based alternatives. The key services they are excluded from are: health services - including sexual and reproductive health, education, social protection, child protection and GBV protection^{15,16}. Lack of access to services and communication with others outside their family is a known driver of child marriage. There is also

⁵ <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/121184/bk-gender-disability-middle-east-010197-en.pdf;jsessionid=267AF375787F3580A12299A2CB1E4BE5?sequence=5>

⁶ https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/DISABI~1_2.PDF

⁷ <https://arcuk.org.uk/safetynet/files/2012/08/Forced-Marriage-Guidelines.pdf> (p.12)

⁸ https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/DISABI~1_2.PDF

⁹ https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/DISABI~1_2.PDF

¹⁰ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9819517/>

¹¹ https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/1695/An_intersectional_approach_to_child_marriage.pdf

¹² https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/DISABI~1_2.PDF

¹³ Presentation shared by Megan Tucker (UNICEF EAPRO, Donor Deep Dive on Child Marriage 2023)

¹⁴ https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/GIP02115_UNICEF_Children-with-Disabilities-Factsheet-final%20-%20accessible.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/GBV-CW-Guidance-on-Disability-Inclusion.pdf>

¹⁶ https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/GIP02115_UNICEF_Children-with-Disabilities-Factsheet-final%20-%20accessible.pdf

a strong correlation between poverty and disability.¹⁷ For girls with disabilities, poverty can lead to social isolation and exclusion from society at large (e.g. lack of ability to participate in social event as cannot pay for transportation, assistive devices to move around)¹⁸. Additionally, 9 out of 10 of the countries where child marriage is the most prevalent are fragile states¹⁹, and where disability prevalence may also be higher due to collapsing public and health services and higher levels of poverty being present.

Research done by Kanselaar et al. (2023)²⁰ in four countries (Uganda, Haiti, Pakistan, Mali) showed that girls with disabilities had a greater likelihood of experiencing child marriage. For those under 15 years of age, girls with disabilities were, on average, 1.7 more likely to be married; for those 15 to 17 years, they were 1.5 times more likely to be married, compared to nondisabled girls. Kanselaar explained this possibly being linked to families seeing their girl with a disability as an economic 'burden,' and wanting to transfer the financial 'burden' on to a spouse and their family. Alternatively, in the UK, younger women with intellectual disabilities are expected to be a carer and wife to an older husband, with little thought of her quality of life.²¹

2.3. Family feels pressured to mitigate child's disability with early marriage

The situation of girls with disabilities is complicated by tension between two concepts. One is that women with disabilities have lower rates of marriage²² globally due to ableist attitudes by community that perceive a woman with a disability as less capable to be a wife, mother and daughter in law.^{23,24,25} This belief leads people to think they are at lower risk of child marriage. The other phenomenon results directly from the fear of the first one, where parents fear their children will not get married and pre-empt this outcome by agreeing to early marriage of daughters with disabilities, often at the first offer. Sometimes, in the case of invisible disabilities, disability is not disclosed to the future husband²⁶ and leads to dangerous long-term outcome for girls with disabilities, such as intimate partner violence and mental health issues. In a case in South Sudan, a girl with a disability felt herself she needed to agree to marry someone who had resources to help her family who needed it, stating 'I thought about the struggles that my mother goes through to feed us, and so I just decided to get married so that I can at least reduce some responsibilities'.²⁷

Parents have a fear of dying and leaving their child with disability without proper care, so they seek a husband (and their family) to help provided this care and long-term support.^{28,29} There are examples from Pakistan of families not disclosing their daughters' disability as they worry that this would limit or eliminate their chance at marriage, and deny her the chance to become a mother and wife, which are strong parts of the feminine identity in many world cultures.³⁰ Girls with invisible disabilities, such as deaf girls, are at risk too. There are instances of deaf girls getting married and not even knowing what is happening, due to a lack of sign language interpreter.³¹ This is in clear violation of their rights.

¹⁷ <https://hpod.law.harvard.edu/pdf/Disability-poverty-and-development.pdf>

¹⁸ https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/GIP02115_UNICEF_Children-with-Disabilities-Factsheet-final%20-%20accessible.pdf

¹⁹ https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/1585/Decade_of_progress_Ten_years_of_Girls_Not_Brides.pdf

²⁰ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37665309/>

²¹ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/epidemiology-health-care/sites/epidemiology-health-care/files/wp-27.pdf>

²² <https://www.who.int/teams/noncommunicable-diseases/sensory-functions-disability-and-rehabilitation/world-report-on-disability>

²³ <https://www.who.int/teams/noncommunicable-diseases/sensory-functions-disability-and-rehabilitation/world-report-on-disability>

²⁴ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1081602X.2019.1663548>

²⁵ <https://summit.sfu.ca/item/8366>

²⁶ https://plan-international.org/uploads/2022/01/protect-us-child_protection_and_disability_study-full_report.pdf

²⁷ https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/early_marriage_iraq_kurdistan_south_sudan_2022.pdf/

²⁸ Samuel, M. 2008. Parents use forced marriage as care option for learning disabled. *Community Care*

²⁹ <https://arcuk.org.uk/safetynet/files/2012/08/Forced-Marriage-Guidelines.pdf>

³⁰ https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/25186/dissertation_akbar_sadia.pdf?sequence=1 (p. 121)

³¹ <https://hivos.org/ending-child-marriages-among-girls-with-disabilities/>

Families often do not see arranging the marriage of their child with a disability as ‘forced’ and see it as making positive consideration for their future (e.g. enabling them to have the rite of passage of marriage, older sibling with disability needing to be married before younger siblings can, gaining physical assistance for ageing parents thru spouse, belief that marriage may cure disability³², long term care option and financial security for child).³³ Having a child with a disability has also been reportedly negatively affected a siblings’ marriage prospects, according to research in Ethiopia.³⁴ Parents in Bangladesh and the Occupied Palestinian Territories noting that boys with disabilities may be more likely to find a marriage partner.³⁵ In Nepal, families also shared they had seen examples of girls with disabilities who were married and had non-disabled children, who would become a future caregiver and companion for their daughters and that they hoped the same for their daughters and why marriage could be advantageous.³⁶

2.4. Inaccessible services are an additional driver of early marriage for girls with disabilities

Child protection services: Barriers to child protection services can lead children with disabilities to experience on-going risks (e.g. discrimination by service providers; inaccessible services; unwillingness to report abuse, inaccessible reporting mechanisms when family members or caregivers are perpetrators).³⁷ Where formal child protection systems are ignored, sexual violence against girls with disabilities has reportedly led to child marriage, in some cases, as an informal dispute settlement. One survey in Bangladesh found that in 61 percent of cases of sexual abuse of girls with disabilities, the dispute was settled outside of court by forcing the girl to marry the man who raped her to preserve family honour.³⁸ As children and adolescents with disabilities are nearly three times more likely to experience sexual violence than their peers without disabilities, they are at particular risk of child marriage as a result.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and World Bank highlighted that girls and women with disabilities are more vulnerable to violence, including sexual abuse and exploitation, which can increase their risk of early marriage.³⁹ UNFPA confirms that children at risk of violence should be paid attention to, as this is a proxy with other harmful practices such as child marriage.⁴⁰

SRH services: Barriers to inclusion in SRH services may exacerbate the risks of child marriage for children with disabilities. These include negative attitudes of service providers, particularly towards young women with disabilities, assumptions that people with disabilities are not sexually active, inaccessible healthcare facilities; exclusion from SRH and rights education, particularly for girls with intellectual disabilities; lack of sign language interpretation for deaf girls, and in some cases, the need to be accompanied by a caregiver.

Education services: ADD International Uganda has reported that some girls with disabilities whose parents have prevented them from attending school have experienced abuse in the community, become pregnant, and then forced to marry. Reduced access to education due to the digital divide was also exacerbated during the pandemic for girls with disabilities and may likely continue to impact their futures and lead to early marriage. The past pandemics (e.g. Ebola and Covid-19) have also been drivers of child marriage due to the impact they’ve had on school closures. Girls with disabilities are more likely to stay out of school than their non-disabled peers during pandemics and may further face risk of child marriage and this should be studied

³² <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Preventing-Responding-to-Child-Early-and-Forced-Marriage-2021.pdf/>

³³ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/advances-in-psychiatric-treatment/article/forced-marriage-implications-for-mental-health-and-intellectual-disability-services/AC591C015B16EC5BC736227A00FCDADD>

³⁴ <https://odi.cdn.ngo/media/documents/12323.pdf>

³⁵ <https://odi.cdn.ngo/media/documents/12323.pdf> (p.84)

³⁶ <https://plan-international.org/uploads/2022/01/protect-us-child-protection-and-disability-study-full-report.pdf>

³⁷ https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/DISABI~1_2.PDF

³⁸ https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/DISABI~1_2.PDF

³⁹ <https://www.who.int/teams/noncommunicable-diseases/sensory-functions-disability-and-rehabilitation/world-report-on-disability>

⁴⁰ <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/young-persons-disabilities>

further.⁴¹ Lack of access to education or other learning opportunities compromises girls with disabilities capacity to cope with the present situation or to empower themselves to overcome difficult situations later in their lives⁴² socio-economic challenges are often guaranteed for women with disabilities who face a great level of adversity in most societies compared to non-disabled women or men with disabilities. In Nepal, most girls who enter child marriages have never been to school, or have dropped out early, also impacting their future livelihood opportunities, and increasing their perception as being ‘dependent’ on their in-laws.

2.5. Children with disabilities may marry earlier or at same time as peers

One of the most important studies on marriage of children with disabilities was done in 2017 and commissioned by Plan Nepal.⁴³ It found that children with disabilities are proposed for marriage **around the same age** as their peers without disabilities and for similar reasons. Researchers found that disability, however, added an **additional layer of vulnerability** linked to the perceived socio-economic advantages faced by children with disabilities.

In a report shared by Save the Children,⁴⁴ in some instances, children with disabilities are married even earlier than children without disabilities. These marriages are likely to hold because the girl with a disability may not know her rights, have difficult communicating or fear disclosing to anyone that she has been forced to marry and get support.⁴⁵ Girls with disabilities may be seen as economic burdens if they require health and rehabilitation services or if they are less economically productive or unable to contribute to the family through chores.⁴⁶ This feeling of desperation linked to poverty and the need to secure the child’s future is likely to push parents of girls with disabilities to accept marriage proposals sooner rather than later.

Unfortunately, in many cultures globally there is the perception that persons with disabilities are unmarriageable and so this inadvertently results in agreeing to risky and early marriages instead of waiting.⁴⁷ Sometimes, parents of girls with disabilities are expected to pay higher dowries to compensate future spouses for what is perceived as their daughters’ ‘imperfection’. Often families see paying this dowry as providing a form of financial or social security for their child. In a UK report⁴⁸, such a phenomenon was confirmed to be true for countries such as Nepal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Tanzania, Sudan, Rwanda, Uganda, and India.

Negative attitudes towards disability combine with social norms around gender and marriage. This may lead parents to get their child married to ‘normalise’ their child or overcome the stigma associated with their disability.⁴⁹ As such, research shows that children with disabilities will be at particular risk where marriage is considered a social convention that needs to be complied with. Similarly, in certain rural communities in Nepal, it is believed that a disability can be cured if the child is married at an early age.⁵⁰

2.6. Girls with disabilities enter the least favorable marital matches

A community’ idea of eligibility and compatibility in marriage is reflected in the proposals offered to girls with disabilities, which are often rooted in discriminatory attitudes towards them and offering them poor marital

⁴¹ https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/DISABI~1_2.PDF

⁴² <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/ReproductiveHealthRights/NGOS/PlanInternationalNorwayChildMarriageandDisabilityReport.docx>

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1D1szDvZnsxi25LcZaDzKNjddxd9XVifk/edit> (p.174)

⁴⁵ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1D1szDvZnsxi25LcZaDzKNjddxd9XVifk/edit> (p.177)

⁴⁶ https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/DISABI~1_2.PDF

⁴⁷ <https://www.unicef.org/media/127876/file/Child-marriage-2021-report.pdf>

⁴⁸ https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/DISABI~1_2.PDF

⁴⁹ https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/DISABI~1_2.PDF

⁵⁰ <https://plan-international.org/nepal/case-studies/disability-not-hindrance-leadership/>

options.⁵¹ Grooms who have limited possibilities (e.g. widower, someone with severe disabilities in need of a caretaker, a much older man, a union focused on child bearing only where the girl may still live with her parents and have children for the spouse⁵²) often think of approaching families of girls with disabilities. Additionally, girls with disabilities were more likely to be taken on as second or third wives in many contexts.^{53,54} In these cases, the girl's disability is expected not to limit her capacity to fulfil the intended purpose of the marriage (e.g. childbearing, caregiving, help in laws with house chores). And so, the proposals offered to girls with disabilities are not the kind parents find 'ideal'.

In Nepal, girls with disabilities have reportedly had limited power in the overall process of arranged marriages, as this is a family and community affair mainly. They have little ability to push back. Parents are the main decision-makers, and heavily influenced by community perceptions of the limited options girls with disabilities have. Even in cases of self-initiated marriage (more so done by boys with disabilities), it is not entirely by choice. Boys with disabilities may get pressured to marry as a result of social, economic and cultural context which gives them little options for livelihood and education.⁵⁵

Again, in Nepal, parents explained they tried to anticipate what may be a good outcome for their daughters with disabilities and feel that an older spouse may be less sexually aggressive and more compassionate towards their daughters with disabilities, and hence justify this age inequality in their agreement to a proposal from an older man. They may also fear younger men may leave their daughters and look for another wife when an older man may be less likely to do so. Parents try to factor all this into their decision-making.⁵⁶ Though many families may want the best for children with disabilities, they may not realize adhering to social norms of marriage ends up harming their children more than helping them.

2.7. Girls with disabilities given little power & may not understanding what is happening

Because of the three layers of negative attitudes towards girls with disabilities (i.e. gender, age, and disability), their agency and opinions are usually denied. Most of the time, adolescent girls with disabilities enter marriage without being in any way prepared for the challenges of fulfilling the 'marriage contract' and what it actually entails. The in laws will likely treat them as adults ready to take on the household work promptly.⁵⁷ In reality, children are unable to understand the social complexities of a marital relationship, even less so children with disabilities who are excluded from many community forums and discussions that their peers may have. Girls with disabilities will lack the skills and the confidence to effectively communicate, negotiate their positions within a new family and nurture these new relationships. Research shows persons with disabilities generally have less-developed social networks.⁵⁸ A person's social network is an essential asset in low-income countries. Many girls with disabilities have few people to rely on apart from their immediate family. When they marry and relocate, their friends are left behind, and household chores and children leave no time to make new friends and have confidantes to help them through the difficulties that an early marriage will bring (i.e. IPV, isolation, loneliness). In Nepal, research participants reported limited access to local groups (e.g. mothers' groups, savings groups, women's groups), which are primarily for 'adults' and found themselves excluded from youth groups.

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Global-Girlhood-Report-2022_Girls-on-the-Frontline.pdf/

⁵³ https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/DISABI~1_2.PDF

⁵⁴ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/double-burden-situation-analysis-hiv-aids-and-young-people-disabilities-rwanda-and-uganda/>

⁵⁵ <https://plan-international.org/uploads/2022/01/protect-us-child-protection-and-disability-study-full-report.pdf>

⁵⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/ReproductiveHealthRights/NGOS/PlanInternationalNorwayChildMarriageandDisabilityReport.docx>

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27152537/>

Boys with disabilities may also experience child marriage as highlighted in Nepal⁵⁹ and in the table below. However, there is more confidence they will find a marriage partner as they need to perform less of the household, reproductive and caregiving duties due to gender norms, though they may have to settle for a wife from a lower socio-economic status or a wife with a disability. Boys with disabilities may have more agency to choose their partners and think a bit about what they are looking for than girls with disabilities who may be expected to accept whatever comes their way. In Nepal, in a situation where a girl with a disability tried to take a tailoring course or join a saving group to improve her situation of poverty, her spouse and in laws blocked her from doing so.

Table 1: Key respondents with disabilities who were married as children⁶⁰

Nature of marriages in Nepal study:	
⇒ Arranged marriage with disclosure of disability	7
⇒ Arranged marriage without disclosure of disability	3
⇒ Self-initiated (often boys with disabilities pressured by community)	5
⇒ Community mediated forced settlement (following rape)	2
⇒ Forced marriage by deception (forced to elope)	1
Total cases	18

2.8. Marriages of girls with disabilities lead to worst life outcomes than peers

As mentioned above, marriage decisions are in theory in the ‘best interest’ of a child with a disability and for their own ‘protection and security’. In reality, the consequences do not favour girls with disabilities and does not necessarily ensure a positive change in her life. The negative conditions under which a marriage contract is entered for a girl with a disability worsens the consequences and impact of the marriage, often for the rest of her life course and impacting her capacity to cope and recover from the negative impacts. As mentioned before, decisions about marriage are often made by parents of adolescents with disabilities and often results in intimate partner violence (IPV)⁶¹, exacerbating pre-existing disabilities.⁶² In Nepal, it seems girls with more severe impairments experienced the highest levels of intimate partner violence.⁶³ More research is still needed in this area to ascertain trends. UNFPA reported that in cultures that require a bride price (i.e. dowry), women with disabilities are considered less marriageable⁶⁴ and are more likely to marry into poorer households and to less desirable partners. They are less likely to be valued in their new households and this may lead to high risks of violence. The same UNFPA study confirmed that women with disabilities who were able to get married were often married to partners who became abusive.⁶⁵ Ironically, one of the reasons presented to girls with disabilities and their families to marry early is that they will be protected from sexual violence, when they are often subjected to violence in early marriage too.⁶⁶

Other negative impacts reported in Nepal were:⁶⁷

- ⇒ **Gendered expectations** post-marriage, leading to physical hardship and emotional stress from in laws and lack of empathy on impact of disability on ability to perform these tasks.
- ⇒ **Extreme poverty** as girls with disabilities often marrying into families with lower socio-economic status or where their spouses and in laws may also have disabilities.

⁵⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/ReproductiveHealthRights/NGOS/PlanInternationalNorwayChildMarriageandDisabilityReport.docx>

⁶⁰ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/ReproductiveHealthRights/NGOS/PlanInternationalNorwayChildMarriageandDisabilityReport.docx>

⁶¹ <https://www.im-portal.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/12323.pdf>

⁶² <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37665309/>

⁶³ <https://gh.bmi.com/content/3/5/e000934>

⁶⁴ https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/early_marriage_iraq_kurdistan_south_sudan_2022.pdf/

⁶⁵ <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/young-persons-disabilities>

⁶⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/ReproductiveHealthRights/NGOS/PlanInternationalNorwayChildMarriageandDisabilityReport.docx>

⁶⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/ReproductiveHealthRights/NGOS/PlanInternationalNorwayChildMarriageandDisabilityReport.docx>

- ⇒ **Low sexual, reproductive and maternal health**, multiple miscarriages after domestic violence, forced abortions, still births, and cases of forced rape post-marriage. This is because girls with disabilities are unprepared and unaware of sexual relations and lack access to SRH information.
- ⇒ **Isolation, abandonment and separation**, most girls with disabilities stay with their laws while spouses may try to find work elsewhere due to poverty in rural areas. A girl with an intellectual disability was married with the intent to bear children only and not to provide her companionship by her spouse. Eventually, many girls with disabilities wish to return to their parents. Girls were forced to separate in cases where they were told that they were unable to fulfill their ‘marriage contract’.

2.9. Policies do not support the prevention of early marriage of children with disabilities

The CRPD concluding remarks⁶⁸ were reviewed for five countries⁶⁹ with highest rates of child marriage (Sudan, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Egypt). However, there were no disability findings on child marriage, and countries mainly wished to promote the rights of persons with disabilities to marriage and parenthood, while not speaking to the issue of preventing early, forced, child marriage. This is likely due to an absence of reporting, data and awareness on this topic in MENA/ASRO. Alternatively, Niger⁷⁰ mentioned in its CRPD concluding remarks the importance of protecting children with disabilities from early marriage, bringing attention to this issue.

Then there are laws which left unchallenged, could contribute to marriage of children with disabilities. For example, there are laws that restrict girls and women with disabilities’ ability to testify in court.⁷¹ In general, girls with disabilities do not get information on their rights to avoid early marriages, as there is a gap in inclusive information delivery to them in means they can understand (i.e. easy read⁷², sign language, in their local language). In Nepal, there are several cases where girls with disabilities will not get their share of property either in their family of origin (go to brothers) or family’s where they marry into.⁷³

2.10. Early marriage is a cause of disability for both infant and child mother

In the world of child marriage, the link between early child marriage and subsequent disability is well known (e.g. fistula issues, HIV, urinary incontinence, osteoporosis^{74,75}). This link was the focus of a campaign by [UNICEF Niger](#).⁷⁶ It is also likely the children born of girl-mothers will compete for nutrition in the womb, and the infants are more likely to be stunted, have low birth weight, and may have an increased risk of delays and disabilities themselves.^{77,78} Due to low levels of education provided to boys and girls with cognitive, communication and psychosocial disabilities, most do not have sexual and reproductive health knowledge to help build their awareness of their bodies and manage their fertility to delay pregnancies.⁷⁹

A study done across 37 low and middle-income countries⁸⁰ (e.g. ~423,000 women/95,000 men) looked at the link between early marriage and disability and confirmed those married in childhood had a stronger

⁶⁸ https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/TBSearch.aspx?Lang=en&TreatyID=4&DocTypeID=5

⁶⁹ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/?country=saudi-arabia>

⁷⁰

<https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2FPPRICAqhKb7vhsKf776tegxXev3vWGXexaCzXeNJKakEv6YIRLlviga2DGzOd%2B1f3GFa3PXA%2Fm3LQRWJnZR%2BWDW4TDfpB%2FY0EpB6Ebi83Qov2Ro%2BwikyN7H>

⁷¹ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Engaging-Men-in-the-Elimination-of-Child-Marriage.pdf/> (p.39)

⁷² <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/mymarriagechoice/documents/summary-easy.pdf>

⁷³ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/ReproductiveHealthRights/NGOS/PlanInternationalNorwayChildMarriageandDisabilityReport.docx>

⁷⁴ <https://en.antaranews.com/news/248525/early-marriage-causes-child-disability-osteoporosis-in-mothers-bkkbn>

⁷⁵ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Engaging-Men-in-the-Elimination-of-Child-Marriage.pdf/>

⁷⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iW-nXDZ7tA>

⁷⁷ <https://en.antaranews.com/news/248525/early-marriage-causes-child-disability-osteoporosis-in-mothers-bkkbn>

⁷⁸ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1D1szDvZnsxj25LcZaDzKNjddxd9XVifk/edit> (p.176)

⁷⁹ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1D1szDvZnsxj25LcZaDzKNjddxd9XVifk/edit> (p. 174)

⁸⁰ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9819517/>

likelihood of disability (i.e. especially when married under 16) compared to women and men that were not married in childhood.⁸¹ There is ample data that looks at the association, however, this desk review maintains focus on girls with pre-existing disabilities married as children.

3. MENA/ASRO findings

3.1. Global themes are similar in MENA/ASRO

Below we share examples from MENA/ASRO that align with global themes listed above.

Association between child marriage and disability exists in MENA/ASRO - As seen in data extracted from MENA countries from MICS6 ([Annex 2](#)), **children with disabilities do experience child marriage** despite there being stigma, negative attitudes and misconceptions that make people think this is not happening. In fact, in Tunisia the rate of marriage of children with disabilities is more than three times that of those without disability (3.9 percent v. 1.2 percent). In Yemen, the rates are similar for children with and without disabilities: 30.6 percent of children married between the ages of 15 to 19 have a disability, compared to 30 percent without disability.

Drivers of child marriage are the same and more severe for girls with disabilities - In MENA/ASRO, similar to global trends, girls and women with visible disabilities have more difficulty developing autonomy and getting married.^{82,83,84} This results in families addressing this feared outcome in different ways such as accepting early marriage and unfavourable proposals.⁸⁵ Some families in Palestine have had to deal with stigma that disability is contagious and that even being related to an individual with a disability will cause stigma for siblings' marriage prospects as society thinks disability is hereditary and siblings carry the gene. This leads some families to not disclose disabilities to their communities if the disability is invisible or in some cases to hide individuals with visible disabilities, again reinforcing isolation of children with disabilities.⁸⁶ There are reports of some families who do not take their child with a disability to family occasions to avoid carrying the stigma of having a person with a disability in their family, further isolating the child.⁸⁷

Family feels pressured to mitigate child's disability with early marriage - As seen globally, families perceive the marriage of a child with a disability as a transfer of responsibility from the family of origin to a spouse. In Sudan, ADD International reported that girls with vision and hearing impairments are more likely to be forced into child marriages as a second^{88,89} or third wife, to transfer the responsibility of care to families with more resources. They have also reported that because children with disabilities in Sudan often do not attend school, they are expected to marry rather than staying at home.⁹⁰ In a report from Egypt, parents justify forcing their daughters with disabilities to marry older partners out of care and concern that she wouldn't have other options and needs to take the opportunity when it comes for fear another may not come.

⁸¹ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36612410/#:~:text=The%20prevalence%20of%20disability%20was,and%20age%20at%20first%20marriage.>

⁸² <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED602307.pdf> p.30

⁸³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279619695_Voices_of_Girls_with_disabilities_in_rural_Iran

⁸⁴ https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/early_marriage_iraq_kurdistan_south_sudan_2022.pdf/

⁸⁵ <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/121184/bk-gender-disability-middle-east-010197-en.pdf;jsessionid=267AF375787F3580A12299A2CB1E4BE5?sequence=5>

⁸⁶ <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/121184/bk-gender-disability-middle-east-010197-en.pdf;jsessionid=267AF375787F3580A12299A2CB1E4BE5?sequence=5> (p.53)

⁸⁷ <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/en/publications/disability-arab-region-challenged-vulnerability>

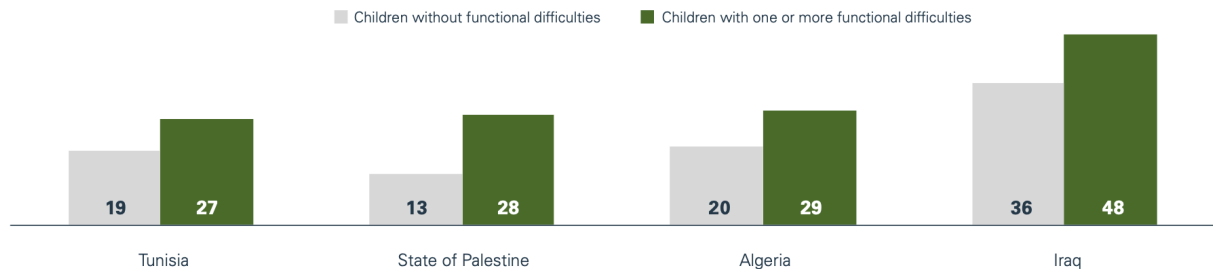
⁸⁸ <https://en.arij.net/investigation/marriage-of-deaf-womena-violation-of-natural-right-a-cause-for-loneliness-and-oppression/>

⁸⁹ https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/early_marriage_iraq_kurdistan_south_sudan_2022.pdf/

⁹⁰ https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/DISABI~1_2.PDF

Inaccessible services - an additional driver of marriage of girls with disabilities - A MENA report on children with disabilities showed lower education participation for children with disabilities at all levels (e.g. early childhood, primary, secondary levels). As shown in the picture below out of school children are more likely to be children with disabilities.⁹¹

FIGURE 24 Percentage of children of upper-secondary-school age who are not attending primary, lower- or upper-secondary school or higher



A study on child marriage in Iran explained that educational fees required for enrollment in specialized schools for girls with disabilities may be a reason for school drop-outs and early marriage.⁹² A study by UNFPA on disability in the Arab region⁹³ interviewed persons with disabilities and showed a general lack of understanding of sexual and reproductive health issues from the perspective of unmarried persons with disabilities. The perception was that only married people can seek out SRH information. As such, marriage is often the only entry point for persons with disabilities to legitimize why they would be seeking SRH information in MENA/ASRO. As you can see, this will exclude the majority of youth with disabilities from receiving SRH knowledge in MENA/ASRO and not knowing the consequences of sexual violence being pregnancy. In reality, many women with disabilities are curious to know if they can have children considering their disability.

Children with disabilities may marry earlier or at same time as peers - In Lebanon, a programme needs assessment in 2017 found that girls with ‘minor’ disabilities were more likely to be pressured into child marriage before they were perceived as less desirable due to both their (older) age and disability.⁹⁴

Children with disabilities enter the least favorable matches - There is another example in Egypt of a deaf women who was married twice, first to marry a man with a disability to be his caregiver. After he passed, she was married to a much older man who has been divorced twice and needed help with childcare. These options do not promote the mental and physical well-being of girls and women with disabilities, who are isolated and put in difficult situations.⁹⁵

Children with disabilities are given little power and may not understand what is happening – In Egypt, there are examples of women with disabilities being barred from marriage by their families, and where a deaf girl was falsely deemed as ‘mentally incapacitated’ to prevent marriage.⁹⁶ The lack of free will of these girls and women is a theme, whether it be them being blocked to marry or forced to marry. For deaf girls in Egypt, usually there is no sign language interpreter available at weddings, so the proceedings may be unclear to her unless she gives non-verbal consent in the form of wearing her wedding dress. The awareness of girls with communication difficulties or cognitive difficulties that a marriage may be taking place is not evident. Unfortunately, due to ableist attitudes pervasive in our societies, most people believe that a child or adult with a learning disability cannot communicate their wishes and feelings, or it is thought too difficult to obtain

⁹¹ <https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/MENA-Disability-report-English.pdf>

⁹² <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Children/2030/AllHumanRightsForAllInIran.pdf>

⁹³ <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/14385-disability-in-the-arab-region-final-report-web-version-opt.7.pdf>

⁹⁴ <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/disability-inclusion-gbv-lebanon-case-management/>

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ Ibid

their views and consent⁹⁷, which often prevents people from getting their consent. As per UNFPA Syria, there are harmful perceptions to address around girls with disabilities being incapable of feeling, deciding and dreaming.⁹⁸

There are positive stories of free will though. There are two deaf girls in Egypt, Marianne and Dina⁹⁹, who decided to never get married after seeing the unfavorable outcomes for other deaf women who have willingly or unwillingly married. Another story is just the opposite. A deaf girl in Egypt was allowed to marry a deaf boy, despite her family's fears their children would be deaf. Ideally, she would have waited until she was 18 but she married prior to that and had twin boys who are both hearing and help be interpreters for her and her husband.¹⁰⁰ Another girl in Iraqi Kurdistan who was disabled at 14 and married at 18 said she had a positive relationship with her husband, received adequate bride wealth from his family and community members who accommodated her disability.¹⁰¹

Marriages of children with disabilities lead to worst life outcomes than peers - Research from Lebanon reports that women with disabilities may be more prone to encounter intimate partner violence because they are perceived to have less power in relationships.¹⁰² It is also common for women with disabilities to receive unfavourable marriage proposals in MENA/ASRO¹⁰³ (i.e. example of a blind woman who worked and was married to an unemployed man with no intention to work, who imposed restrictions on her such as having her wear a veil after marriage). Conflict and crisis are likely to exacerbate a number of issues for women and girls with disabilities, including marriage, whilst humanitarian actors may ignore these because of a focus on health concerns and rehabilitation.¹⁰⁴

3.2. IDPs in Northwest Syria

⇒ World Vision and Action for Humanity did a study¹⁰⁵ in Lebanon (with refugees) and Northwest Syria (with IDPs) to see if there is evidence that children with disabilities are susceptible to child marriage compared to children without disabilities. The secondary objective of the study was to see if inclusive education has a preventative relationship with child marriage. This first section delves into data from Northwest Syria.

In Northwest Syria, a stunning 61 percent of respondents strongly agreed that families of girls with disabilities are more likely to choose child marriage and at a younger age than children without disabilities, if given the option. They explained that families are more likely to accept any marriage proposal for their daughters with disabilities as they may not receive as many offers compared to girls without disabilities. Families may feel pressured to accept compromising conditions because of the presence of a disability in their daughter and to put it crudely that she is of 'lower value'¹⁰⁶ in terms of marriage. This can potentially further marginalize girls with disabilities and put them at greater risk of exploitation and abuse. In Northwest Syria, caregivers reported that better access to inclusive education for children with disabilities would provide greater protection from child marriage (i.e. 67 out of 72 respondent "strongly agreed"). Interestingly and in keeping with global trends, there is a difference between girls and boys with disabilities in terms of perceived risk for child marriage (i.e. girls being at higher risk), likely due to traditional gender roles and on

⁹⁷ <https://arcuk.org.uk/safetynet/files/2012/08/Forced-Marriage-Guidelines.pdf> (p.9, 10)

⁹⁸ Shared by Luzia Zeruneith and Dr. Shadia Elshiwiy in April 2024 on behalf of UNFPA ASRO country offices

⁹⁹ <https://en.arij.net/investigation/marriage-of-deaf-womena-violation-of-natural-right-a-cause-for-loneliness-and-oppression/>

¹⁰⁰ <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/14385-disability-in-the-arab-region-final-report-web-version-opt.7.pdf>

¹⁰¹ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/early-marriage-iraq-kurdistan-south-sudan-2022.pdf/>

¹⁰² <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/disability-inclusion-in-child-protection-and-gender-based-violence-programs/>

¹⁰³ <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/121184/bk-gender-disability-middle-east-010197-en.pdf;jsessionid=267AF375787F3580A12299A2CB1E4BE5?sequence=5>

¹⁰⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b9a458540f0b67866ffbd56/032-Women_and_girls_with_disabilities_in_crisis_and_conflict.pdf

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.wvi.ngo/publications/lebanon/hard-lessons-f>

¹⁰⁶ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/early-marriage-iraq-kurdistan-south-sudan-2022.pdf/>

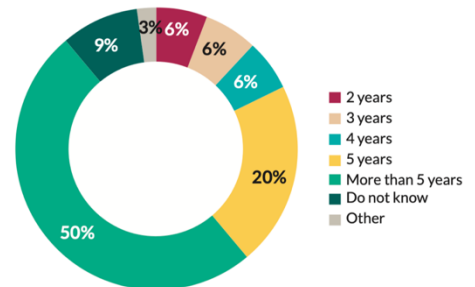
controlling girls' sexuality and reproduction, which may lead to CEFM as a way to prevent pregnancy outside of marriage for girls. Another reason may be that boys with disabilities are seen as having greater potential for economic independence and contributing to the household income and are kept from marrying early. This may also lead caregivers to prioritize investing in boys' education and skills development.

3.3. Refugees in Lebanon

A different picture was reported for refugees in Lebanon.

¹⁰⁷ Respondents reported that children with disabilities are less likely than children without disabilities to experience child marriage. When they believed they were susceptible they listed it was because they: are seen as a burden, have limited job opportunities, have to preserve family honor, and are more vulnerable to exploitation. One mother with three daughters with disabilities felt that her daughters were all unfit to manage a household and take care of their husbands due to their disabilities. However, respondents agreed that greater access to education for children with disabilities would offer more protection from harm. In fact, 82 percent of respondents thought there would be a decrease in likelihood of child marriage and that it would delay its onset by 5 years (see diagram).

Availability of inclusive education for girls with disabilities would delay the child's exposure to child marriage by has many years



4. Inclusive practices

There are a range of good practices below on programming to end child marriage that are disability inclusive.

Mainstreaming girls with disabilities in SRH programming in India.¹⁰⁸ In India, UNFPA worked to better reach adolescents with disabilities with information on SRH rights and developed user-friendly learning tools and training materials (e.g. Braille, tactile books and models, videos with sign language, scrolling text) for disseminations across 155 specialized schools.¹⁰⁹ UNFPA in Zambia and Sierra Leone are helping adapt materials for the accessibility needs of girls with disabilities, and choosing mentors who are proficient in sign language as part of their child marriage programming.¹¹⁰ Inclusive SRH programming may also be a portal into discussions about preventing child marriage, avoid the isolation of children with disabilities and increase their general knowledge about their bodies and rights. SRH needs to be community based because many girls with disabilities do not attending school. Additionally, UNICEF¹¹¹ and UNFPA¹¹² has inclusive menstrual health management materials, which can be another entry point for discussions on preventing child marriage.

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.wvi.ngo/publications/lebanon/hard-lessons>

¹⁰⁸ https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/GPECM_Child-marriage-leaving-no-one-behind_October2020.pdf

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.zonta.org/images/docs/MyZonta/Tools/AdvocacyTools/Ending%20Child%20Marriage/IndiaSiteVisit-English.pdf>

¹¹⁰ <https://www.unicef.org/media/127876/file/Child-marriage-2021-report.pdf>

¹¹¹ <https://www.unicef.org/documents/menstrual-health-hygiene-girls-and-women-disabilities>

¹¹² https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/submission-hc-report-child-marriage-others-UNICEF_UNFPA_joint_submission.docx

Inclusive child marriage communication materials in India. ChildLine India tackle child marriage and made a youth-friendly video called 'Like Sisters' with Audio description to reach girls who are low vision/blind¹¹³ and with sign language for girls who are deaf¹¹⁴. Another example of inclusive child marriage materials was made by DeafWomenToo India, providing Indian sign language to Ending Child Marriage video (photos below).¹¹⁵



Public forums highlighting marriage of persons with disabilities in Morocco.¹¹⁶ There is a forum for persons with disabilities that discusses different topics annually. In 2017, the national forum addressed the topic of reproductive and emotional health of people with mental disabilities and especially the issue of marriage for people with mental disabilities and autism. Though there was no focus on child marriage, there was a focus on preventing force unions which can be translated to work done on child marriage. The forum discussed the reproductive and emotional health of people with disabilities from the perspective of lawful marriage in Islam and not from the perspective of reproduction for the sake of reproduction alone. This topic was discussed with experts in Sharia, law, psychophysiology and more. The forum came out with a guidebook on marriage for people with mental disabilities with UNFPA and issued in 2018. This book talks about care and support for someone with a mental disability to ensure a 'complete marriage'.

Inclusive child marriage programming for deaf girls in Zimbabwe. The NGO Hivos has partner Deaf Women Included (DWI)¹¹⁷ and made educational videos and booklets for deaf girls clubs to help them know their rights, have sign language interpreters explain them, and avoid abuse and forced marriage. Besides these videos Hivos and DWI has done an extensive campaign on ending marriage for deaf girls, including activities such as: community dialogue meetings, production of accessible information on child marriages, conducted the trainings with girls with disabilities, established Deaf Girl Clubs, research, and developed a case management booklet (see image of DWI executive



¹¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-GNliPS3-3E>

¹¹⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aadL2_jRkVc

¹¹⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J_pYZPncOuE

¹¹⁶ <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/en/publications/disability-arab-region-challenged-vulnerability>

¹¹⁷ <https://hivos.org/ending-child-marriages-among-girls-with-disabilities/>

director). Each Girls Club consists of 20 girls, and they meet once a week for two hours. These clubs are led by deaf girls with the support from their mentors.

The trained mentors are sought from schools and the community, and these already have experience and knowledge of working in the disability community. The mentors act as role models to increase girls' aspirations. These clubs have a mix of deaf and hearing girls to create a peer to peer and a social inclusive environment. Below are photos from deaf mentors helping run the deaf girls club.¹¹⁸



Inclusive child marriage programming globally. Girls Not Brides have been active on child marriage globally and taken practical steps to reach girls with disabilities by partnering up with organization of women with disabilities. In fact, as per their website¹¹⁹, 25 partners are listed when using the disability filter in various countries around the world (e.g. Uganda, Sierra Leone, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Afghanistan, Dominican Republic, and Nepal). Unfortunately, no disability-oriented partner is listed in the MENA/ASRO region. However, the identification and partnering with women with disabilities' organizations could be a part of RAF members' work and as modeled by Girls Not brides. A non-exhaustive list of Women's OPD in MENA/ASRO is available in [Annex 6](#). One of the partners of Girls Not Brides, and funded by Girls First Fund is the [Mpigi Women with disabilities association in Uganda](#)¹²⁰, they addressed child marriage through various activities:

1. **A two-day training** on SRH, referral processes, and legal framework to support rights of girls with disabilities to end child marriage. This training was **given to 20 duty-bearers**, with a pledge at the end to include girls with disabilities in their plans and budgets. Dialogue with leaders also lead to ideas on community owned actions and how to help ensure girls with disabilities stay in school.
2. **An orientation session to 40 parents and caretakers or young people with disabilities** on rights, obligations and legal framework, SRH, all in relation to child marriage and early unions. With a pledge for caretakers to report any forms of violence including child marriage and commitment to play their role to end child marriage within their communities. **Hand in hand they also considered socio economic support at household level, knowing child marriage has as its root cause poverty.*
3. **Training for 40 young people with disabilities** knowing their bodies, reproductive health, SRH rights, reporting mechanisms for violence with a special focus on preventing early marriages and force unions.

¹¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcOyI0HMljo>

¹¹⁹ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/our-partnership/member-directory/?order=relevance&search=disability#listing>

¹²⁰ <https://www.mpwda.org/preventing-and-responding-to-child-marriage-and-early-unions-in-nkozi-sub-county-funded-by-girls-first-fund/>

4. **Training for 20 peer to peer supports** on SRH and prevention of child marriage, and importance of completing school. Peer educators included 10 girls with disabilities and 10 without disabilities (15 in school, 5 out of school). Plans are to have quarterly meeting with peer educators to support them.

UNFPA ASRO initiatives to better reach girls with disabilities¹²¹ - There are various initiatives that aim to integrate girls with disabilities better in UNFPA ASRO's programming and contribute to the prevention and protection of girls with disabilities at large and creates a connection with these girls and their families, which may also help prevent child marriage and create alternative life pathways. UNFPA Yemen supported 388 survivors with disabilities in 2023, who faced GBV and focused on interagency work, strengthening referral pathways to better service girls with disabilities and partnership with a government branch (HCRF) in charge of disability and offering 2 to 3 day trainings to various stakeholders on GBV and disability issues. UNFPA Syria has also reached 379 girls with disabilities in their GBV, protection and economic empowerment, literacy, and life skills programming in 2023. Similarly, UNFPA Palestine has worked to better include girls with disabilities in their GBV work (referral pathways and service packages), and ensuring their GBV service directory is available in Braille and sign language; they reached 688 girls and women with disabilities in 2023.

5. Research considerations for MENA/ASRO region

The deepest research to date on marriage of children with disabilities was done by Plan International (2017) in Nepal. Nepali researchers found service providers falsely assumed that child marriage does not affect children with disabilities because of stigma related to disability, and the issue had not been monitored. This is the same the world over. Their research highlighted that assumptions and stigma relating to disability and marriage can lead to exclusion of children with disabilities from programme implementation and monitoring, potentially leaving them at risk. As such, it is important to ensure that youth with disabilities (girls in particular) participate in programme design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation and to better understand and address the ways in which child marriage affects children with disabilities.¹²²

Recommendations for research institutions - "Adolescents with disabilities form their own opinions, thoughts and interest on marriage through the process of socialization. At the individual level, the choice or desire to get married (or not get married) is shaped by different life circumstances and experiences from a much earlier age as exemplified in the voices of the young participants."¹²³ (Plan Nepal, 2017). Children with disabilities and their families are not a monolith and we need to understand the range of experiences they have on this topic and thoughts for their future. Nepali researchers found there was a large difference between what youth with disabilities reported versus what parents and community members reported. **It is important to do research with and by adolescents with disabilities.** Action research with young girls and women with disabilities on child marriage would be helpful to see what is the most helpful way to reach them and their families. In another project in Nepal, western researchers partnered up with young researchers with disabilities, and paved the way for how to do this.¹²⁴ Another topic that the Nepali researchers felt lack of evidence and was important was findings on sexual violence and children with disabilities (before and after marriage) and that it would require further exploration. A range of recommendation are made below that could be incorporated as part of action research to see what is actually effective. The need for more disaggregated data is certainly a starting point. Additionally:

1. **Understanding the advantages of mixed clubs (with and without girls with disabilities) and specific clubs (see 6.1 - deaf girls club) to help service girls and piloting both types of clubs.**

¹²¹ Shared by Luzia Zeruneith and Dr. Shadia Elshiwiy in April 2024 on behalf of UNFPA ASRO country offices

¹²² <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/ReproductiveHealthRights/NGOS/PlanInternationalNorwayChildMarriageandDisabilityReport.docx>

¹²³ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/ReproductiveHealthRights/NGOS/PlanInternationalNorwayChildMarriageandDisabilityReport.docx>

¹²⁴ <https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/media/23451>

2. **To study the type of support women’s OPDs (see 6.2) may need to be engaged in this programming and their perspective on this issue (i.e. do they see early marriage as problematic or not).**
3. **Understanding what types of social and behavioral messaging are effective (see 6.2 below)**
4. **Understanding how boys and men with disabilities can contribute to ending early marriage of girls with disabilities, as well as the role of religious figures in promoting positive messages about the value and rights of persons with disabilities (marital and otherwise, deserving of respect).**
5. **Understanding how to reach girls with disabilities who are the most affected by digital divide.**
6. **Other topics may arrive when youth with disabilities may be consulted themselves.**

6. Summary of recommendations

This study demonstrates that marriage among children with disabilities is practiced, and exists in contexts where child marriage is practiced. This must be acknowledged by MENA/ASRO RAF and brought into members’ current work on policy, advocacy and programming work. There is a need for an in-depth understanding of the root causes that promote different types of discrimination and exclusion of children with disabilities from child marriage programming. The impact of child marriage on children with disabilities shows that it seriously affects their overall well-being and dignity. Child marriage leads to a cycle of violence throughout the life of girls with disabilities. It violates the rights enshrined by different conventions (e.g. UNCRC, CEDAW, UNCRPD). The document for Phase 3 of the Global Programme to end child marriage has put more focus on disability inclusion¹²⁵ by highlighting disability 13 times, see [Annex 4](#) on where disability inclusion is being promoted and where MENA/ASRO RAF can better align its work with the Global Programme document requirements. So far MENA/ASRO has yet to mainstream disability in their work in a meaningful way and could take the opportunity in future amendments or any new publications. For example,

- ⇒ In a 2017 study on child marriage in MENA/ASRO, disability was only mentioned twice in very general terms around whether service providers include ‘disability services’
- ⇒ None of the country briefs¹²⁶ (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan, Yemen) made any mention of children with disabilities in the form of disaggregated data or targeted approaches to reach them
- ⇒ RAF’s ToR¹²⁷ (2017), accountability framework (2018), Factsheet¹²⁸, do not list children w/disabilities.

In general, it is recommended that RAF co-chairs (UNFPA ASRO/UNICEF MENA) and its members consider including children with disabilities as an intentional subgroup of priority within the LNOB agenda going forwards, and not merely as part of list of intersectional factors where the approaches then get diluted and unclear. The suggestions below need progressive realization and can be embedded in the RAF future accountability frameworks and supporting UNICEF’s new disability strategy launched in 2023.

- ⇒ Recommendations are framed within the 5 key outcomes¹²⁹ of the Global Programme to ECM.

¹²⁵ <https://www.unicef.org/media/145651/file/Programme%20document%20.pdf>

¹²⁶ <https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/child-marriage-middle-east-and-north-africa>

¹²⁷

[https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/19611/file/Regional%20Action%20Forum%20to%20End%20Child%20Marriage%20in%20the%20Arab%20States%20and%20MENA%20\(TOR\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/19611/file/Regional%20Action%20Forum%20to%20End%20Child%20Marriage%20in%20the%20Arab%20States%20and%20MENA%20(TOR).pdf)

¹²⁸ <https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/17696/file/ChildMarriage-Factsheet-Feb22.pdf%20.pdf>

¹²⁹ <https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/child-marriage-middle-east-and-north-africa>

Area of work	Considerations to programme for girls and boys with disabilities
<p>6.1 Girls' voices and agency</p>	<p>Inclusive Girls clubs: As modeled by Hivos and 'Deaf Women Included' in Zimbabwe, deaf girls' clubs are a space to bring girls who are deaf together and ensure they have access to information via a sign language interpreter who may also be a mentor.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ The deaf girls club established helped identify cases of abuse, through trust building, people reported concerns to the clubs. Such programmes can also be piloted in MENA/ASRO to see their effectiveness. They can be mixed groups between girls with and without disabilities, or only for girls with disabilities.¹³⁰ ⇒ UNICEF/UNFPA in Sierra Leone also made sure the girls club roster included girls with disabilities in the community and who may not be in school.¹³¹ Where girls clubs are established, they can help a girl with a disability in many ways, not only to delay marriage and gain an education/life skills but also to also deal with societal expectations (i.e. especially those of in-laws) on her role in case she does choose to get married and how to advocate for herself within a new family system. ⇒ UNFPA Syria plans to better train Girl Shine mentors on disability issues and support more focus on girls with disabilities within such groups and ideally should include Girls Shine Mentors with disabilities.¹³² <p>Work with organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), especially women with disabilities' sub-groups or women's OPDs on various initiatives (e.g. awareness raising, mentorship of clubs, behavioral change work with families)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Ensure to fund these groups for their work as they are historically poorly funded and in difficult socio-economic situations. See Annex 6 for a partial list. Under Annex 5, the Global programme highlights how Bangladesh and India are working with disability rights group on ECM work. ⇒ These groups can help highlight and address power differentials girls with disabilities¹³³ will face with throughout their lives (e.g. from spouse, in-laws, community) and how to build a network of support to help her be able to know her rights and assert her needs and limits. UNFPA Lebanon and UNFPA Sudan both partnered up with OPDs to reach girls with disabilities at risk of early marriage to include them in preventative programming.¹³⁴ UNFPA Jordan also reached 1175 girls with disabilities in their general GBV programming and safe spaces in 2023, possibly helping prevent child marriages.¹³⁵ ⇒ In Nepal, a 16-year-old woman with a disability with agency and a supportive family is a peer supporter to other youth to talk about topics such as child marriage.¹³⁶ Saruna, who is low vision, is a part of an adolescent club where she co-led campaigns for other girls with and without disabilities on the prevention of child marriage; showing girls with disabilities can and should be encouraged and mentored into leadership roles within mainstream youth organizations.
<p>6.2 Household and community attitudes and behaviors – promotion of positive practices</p>	<p>Organizing widespread, community-lead campaigns on the rights of children with disabilities and need for protection from issues such as child marriage was shared as a practice in studies by Plan International and World vision/Action for Humanity.^{137,138}</p> <p>UNICEF and UNFPA are active in the space of social and behavioral change (SBC) work. Knowing that parents and communities drive the marriages of children with disabilities due to fear, concern, discrimination, it is important to embed different messaging in their consciousness. Messages such as:</p>

¹³⁰ **Ending Child marriages among girls with disabilities (Zimbabwe)** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcOyIOHMIjo&t=5s>

¹³¹ <https://www.unicef.org/media/127876/file/Child-marriage-2021-report.pdf>

¹³² Shared by Luzia Zeruneith and Dr. Shadia Elshiwiy in April 2024 on behalf of UNFPA ASRO country offices

¹³³ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Preventing-Responding-to-Child-Early-and-Forced-Marriage-2021.pdf/> (p.10)

¹³⁴ Shared by Luzia Zeruneith and Dr. Shadia Elshiwiy in April 2024 on behalf of UNFPA ASRO country offices

¹³⁵ Shared by Luzia Zeruneith and Dr. Shadia Elshiwiy in April 2024 on behalf of UNFPA ASRO country offices

¹³⁶ <https://plan-international.org/nepal/case-studies/disability-not-hindrance-leadership/>

¹³⁷ <https://plan-international.org/uploads/2022/01/protect-us-child-protection-and-disability-study-full-report.pdf>

¹³⁸ <https://www.wvi.ngo/publications/lebanon/hard-lessons> (p.27)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ “Educate your daughter with a disability so she can have better marriage prospects”, as shown by families in Pakistan¹³⁹ and India¹⁴⁰ stay within social norms while also helping empower a girl with a disability, gain her time, and frame it as ‘preparing her’ for life and married life. ⇒ “Early marriage of girls with disabilities will not improve her life and may start a cycle of poverty, violence and negative consequences.” Explicit messaging about likely outcomes and experiences that girls with disabilities may have thru early marriage could be another approach. Their lives are often worse than with their family of origin. This messaging is to help change the perspective that children with disabilities and their immediate family/community have were early marriage is not seen as a problem. Marriage is rather seen as a solution to existing problem or out of undesirable situations (e.g. poverty).¹⁴¹ ⇒ SBC campaigns on ending marriage of girls with disabilities can happen in mainstream school, specialized schools, but especially in the community and homes, as many girls with disabilities do not go to school or do not attend community events, due to stigma they are often kept at home. So, house to house visits or What’s app messaging using a decentralized approach may be needed in some instance to reach them and their families. OPDs may be able to do outreach. ⇒ Every major faith has condemned the concept of forced marriage being justified on religious grounds and the right faith leaders may also be allies in ECM work.¹⁴² For example, a religious leader in Egypt stated that marriage and having children are different things and that the fact that a person with a disability may have a child with a disability should not be a reason for them to not have the right to marry.¹⁴³ Work with such leaders to promote the right messaging in mosques. ⇒ Work with women with disabilities’ Organizations (OPDs) on these campaigns. Introduce women’s OPDs to mainstream women’s groups and youth groups for join forces. UNICEF Malaysia has a nice example of bringing women lead organizations and OPDs for joint work. ⇒ Although it is important to understand a family's motives (i.e. desperate to secure future of girl with a disability and may not think they are doing anything wrong and in fact doing their duty), these motives should be challenged. Approaching these discussions carefully and in a way that does not put a child with a disability at further risk could bring a positive outcome. For example, a respected community member, together with a woman with a disability from the community, who understand the risks of early and forced marriage could speak with families.¹⁴⁴ ⇒ In many documents, the role of men and boys (with and without disabilities) is missing¹⁴⁵ and could be strengthened in addressing the rights of girls with disabilities, especially since girls with disabilities are often married to boys with disabilities. In Egypt, there are positive examples of men who are sign language interpreters and children of deaf parents (i.e. power base is higher) and have tried to support deaf girls to know their rights and support those who have called out for help¹⁴⁶.
<p>6.3 Service delivery</p>	<p>Take a twin-track approach to disability mainstreaming by (1) including children with disabilities across all activities, while (2) providing targeted interventions to address specific barriers to inclusion in ECM programming.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Examples of targeted interventions may be funding of clubs for girls with disabilities and partnerships with groups of women with disabilities (informal or formal OPDs) to talk about rights, conditional cash transfers focused on the families of girls with disabilities getting cash if keep girls in school). ⇒ UNICEF EAPRO had a donor meeting on mainstreaming disability into ECM programs. See Annex 3.

¹³⁹ https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/25186/dissertation_akbar_sadia.pdf?sequence=1 (p.200)

¹⁴⁰ <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:14005c76-8e23-4817-b74f-64578861af18>

¹⁴¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/ReproductiveHealthRights/NGOS/PlanInternationalNorwayChildMarriageandDisabilityReport.docx>

¹⁴² <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/advances-in-psychiatric-treatment/article/forced-marriage-implications-for-mental-health-and-intellectual-disability-services/AC591C015B16EC5BC736227A00FCDADD>

¹⁴³ <https://en.arij.net/investigation/marriage-of-deaf-womena-violation-of-natural-right-a-cause-for-loneliness-and-oppression/>

¹⁴⁴ <https://arcuk.org.uk/safetynet/files/2012/08/Forced-Marriage-Guidelines.pdf> (p.20)

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.unicef.org/media/65371/file>

¹⁴⁶ <https://en.arij.net/investigation/marriage-of-deaf-womena-violation-of-natural-right-a-cause-for-loneliness-and-oppression/>

- ⇒ In general, due to the heightened vulnerability of girls with disabilities, they should be prioritized in programming and actively reached. Findings ways to **increase the social value of a girl with a disability** (e.g. conditional cash transfer, ensuring access to vocational training, promoting education/life skills, English language skills). Girls with disabilities see attaining education also as a way to be seen as ‘less dependent’, and every effort should be made to support children with disabilities to vocational training, livelihood opportunities and education.
- ⇒ Deaf Women Included worked on a booklet that guides professionals in GBV on case management when working with deaf children.¹⁴⁷ Similar resources have been developed by UNICEF Lebanon and though not specific to child marriages, GBV and child marriages have connections.¹⁴⁸ Share these booklets and ensure they are used for frontline working training of educators (formal/non formal educators) and anyone who has community contact (e.g. physical therapists, health workers, sign language interpreters, specialized school teachers) and close proximity with children with disabilities and their families. UNICEF has a frontline worker training on disability that could be adapted to have a focus on child marriage. This should be provided to education, CP, vocational training, health service providers, and all community members in proximity to girls with disabilities.

UNICEF MENA’s publication on child marriage (2017), examined whether service providers had ‘disabilities services’.¹⁴⁹ **A deeper analysis of accessibility of services should be standard part of the mapping and auditing of all services connected to the work of RAF members.**

- ⇒ Physical/digital accessibility and staff attitudes and training on servicing children with disabilities. This barrier analysis to key services could be done with girls and women with disabilities (e.g. inclusive girls clubs). Also consider doing a barrier analysis on reporting mechanism for protection from violence (e.g. sexual violence, child marriage) and seeking assistance.
- ⇒ Consider researching programs with good rates of inclusion of children with disabilities in education/life skills training to see if this has been protective against child marriage.
- ⇒ Value accessibility and budget for accessibility in key services that girls with disabilities encounter the most. Ask girl participants if any reasonable accommodations are required to ensure their active participation in all key services (e.g. livelihood, life skills, GBV, SRH, education, FGM).
- ⇒ Address digital divide between girls with and without disabilities and lack of access to information (i.e. especially for deaf girls, those with communication difficulties and those with cognitive difficulties) by designing inclusive SRH apps and service delivery mechanism. For example, the Autism Aid App was upgraded to include SRH information for adolescents with autism.¹⁵⁰ Most girls with disabilities may not have smart phones so think how to reach them.¹⁵¹
- ⇒ **The special rapporteur on rights of persons with disabilities is an Arab woman with a disability (Heba Hegress)** and has previously been active on the National Council of Women in Egypt. She could be a good champion for such topics in the region. She previously talked about the use of AI to support persons with disabilities. In Egypt, the government launched an app called ‘Wasel’ to help deaf persons communicate in emergencies¹⁵² to firefighters, ambulances and other key services. Similar ways to reach girls with disabilities could to be considered and apps launched to get support in situations of violence or forced marriage at home. The first step would be to help these girls get access to smartphones by using an intermediary route such as overall education or health or life skills as an innocent entry point, to establish accessible hotlines for girls with disabilities.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁷ https://awdflibrary.org/index.php?p=show_detail&id=1119&keywords=

¹⁴⁸ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/guidance-disability-inclusion-gbv-partners-lebanon-case-management-survivors-risk-women/>

¹⁴⁹ <https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/child-marriage-middle-east-and-north-africa>

¹⁵⁰ <https://www.unicef.org/media/127876/file/Child-marriage-2021-report.pdf>

¹⁵¹ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Engaging-Men-in-the-Elimination-of-Child-Marriage.pdf/>

¹⁵² <https://disabilityinsider.com/2020/04/24/covid/egypt-launches-coronavirus-information-app-for-deaf-people/>

¹⁵³ Shared by Luzia Zeruneith and Dr. Shadia Elshiyw in April 2024 on behalf of UNFPA Lebanon country office

	<p>⇒ UNFPA recommends addressing barriers to education by finding solutions to transport¹⁵⁴ for children with disabilities (e.g. financial cost or group solution) to avoid them being out of school or providing them with specific classes if they cannot be mainstreamed within existing systems.</p>
<p>6.4 Legal context and policy level</p>	<p>Inclusive justice systems and mitigating delays in justice for children with disabilities</p> <p>⇒ According to Hivos/Deaf Women Included in Zimbabwe, a lack of sign language interpreters make the justice around child marriages of children who are deaf a challenge. Often, when there are protection concerns such as child marriage, there is a delay in justice. Abuse cases for deaf children fail to receive justice due to lack of systems (e.g. sign language interpretation, attitudinal barriers) put in place to communicate with deaf people. As a result, most abuse cases go unreported. There is need for the justice system to be inclusive to cater for deaf people and people with disabilities at large.¹⁵⁵</p> <p>⇒ Consider researching whether laws or cultural norms restrict the provision of contraception to adolescents with disabilities and how this may affect their SRH and child marriage?¹⁵⁶</p> <p>⇒ Ensure any amended laws and policies around protection of children and child marriage explicitly mention children with disabilities, as they are invisible in this work, help make them visible in child marriage work.</p> <p>⇒ Ensure there is a rights-based approach for the inclusion of children with disabilities in all programming, similar to other girls, as they face more discrimination and exclusion.</p> <p>A legal focus needs to go hand in hand with socio-economic solutions</p> <p>⇒ Overall, a purely legal focus avoids the root causes of poverty¹⁵⁷, which is especially true for girls with disabilities. Focus should be on empowerment of girls and boys with disabilities to have options other than marriage and in many cases to be prioritize for socio-economic development¹⁵⁸ (e.g. ensure inclusive vocational training, literacy/educational attainment).</p>
<p>6.5 Evidence generation</p>	<p>There are various ways evidence generation can be more inclusive:</p> <p>⇒ Ensure there is an analysis of emerging MICS6/7 data on disability and child marriage.</p> <p>⇒ All evaluations and consultancies funded by RAF members to be disability inclusive and ensure all ToR templates include a sample or percentage (~10%) attention to children with disabilities.</p> <p>⇒ More research on the prevalence rate of marriage among children with disabilities as well as further research on specific issues and challenges faced by adolescents and youth with disabilities including vulnerabilities for child marriage is needed.</p> <p>⇒ As mentioned in UNFPA report, data needs to be disaggregated (using Washington Group Questions) for key marginalization factors such as disability¹⁵⁹ and as done by UNFPA India¹⁶⁰.</p> <p>⇒ At the bottom of Annex 4 where disability elements of Phase 3 of the Global programme to ECM lists 8 indicators from the results framework. RAF members can see how they can collect data in a more inclusive way to be able to contribute to these indicators. See Annex 5 for examples of UNFPA/UNICEF collecting and reporting more disaggregated data globally for MENA/ASRO reflection.</p> <p>⇒ To research and pilot disaggregated budgets to support better inclusion of girls with disabilities in ECM programming (e.g. sign language, outreach services to families, work with women’s OPDs). Additionally, ensure child poverty and social protection data linked to child marriage is disaggregated by disability.</p> <p>⇒ Ensure any qualitative studies done by RAF members in the region (interviews, FGD) includes sampling (~10%) to understand marriages of children with disabilities and family/community attitudes driving this, as well as protective factors on this. This was done by Save the Children in Iraqi Kurdistan having a</p>

¹⁵⁴ https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/GPECM_Child-marriage-leaving-no-one-behind_October2020.pdf

¹⁵⁵ <https://hivos.org/ending-child-marriages-among-girls-with-disabilities/>

¹⁵⁶ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Preventing-Responding-to-Child-Early-and-Forced-Marriage-2021.pdf/>

¹⁵⁷ <https://pldindia.org/advocating-for-adolescent-concerns/early-marriage.php>

¹⁵⁸ https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/1695/An_intersectional_approach_to_child_marriage.pdf

¹⁵⁹ https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/GPECM_Child-marriage-leaving-no-one-behind_October2020.pdf

¹⁶⁰ https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/submission-hc-report-child-marriage-others-UNICEF_UNFPA_joint_submission.docx

	<p>sample of girls with disabilities within a study on child marriage¹⁶¹ Ideally, RAF leads a stand-alone study focused on child marriage of girls with disabilities in MENA/ASRO, as done by Plan Nepal.</p> <p>⇒ Annex 8 has a testimonial of a woman with a disability married as a girl with disability. Ensure similar examples from MENA/ASRO are highlighted so people realize this phenomenon is happening and debunk the perception that girls with disabilities do not experience child marriage.</p>
--	--

Conclusion

Children with disabilities are at risk for child marriage in all settings where child marriages are practiced. Data shows they may be married earlier or at the same time as their non disabled peers. They often have worse marital matches and this can then lead to a lifetime of negative consequences such as intimate partner violence, worsening disability and functioning, mental health issues, extreme poverty, and isolation. They are less likely to recover from the negative impact of early marriage compared to non-disabled girls. As per the Global programme’s Phase 3, they need to be highlighted in a meaningful and concrete way as part of the ‘leave no one behind’ agenda. Concrete approaches need to be implemented to understand their needs, first by disaggregating data (qualitative and quantitative) and ensuring RAF members’ work on early marriage uses a twin track approach. **Child marriage programmes can and need to be more disability-inclusive.** This report is a first step to that end for MENA/ASRO RAF.

¹⁶¹ https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/early_marriage_iraq_kurdistan_south_sudan_2022.pdf/

Annex 1- Questions sent to MENA/ASRO RAF on disability & child marriage

1. If any of your programming on child marriage do you collect disability-disaggregated data?
2. If yes, which tool do you use to collect this information? (i.e. yes/no disability question, Washington group questions - short set, other)?
3. Do you have any qualitative data on children with disabilities, that you would be able to share to illustrate some of the situations children in our region have encountered (both boys and girls with disabilities)?
4. Do you have any examples of ways you have tried to reach children with disabilities in your programming or communicate in an inclusive way towards them on child marriage?
5. Do you have any examples of including discussion about children with disabilities with parents and communities when doing child marriage programming?
6. If you provide other programming such as education, life skills programming, vocational training alongside programming to end child marriage, to what extent have children with disabilities been actively included in these activities, to your knowledge?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share as an observation, suggestion, concern or idea on better programming to include children with disabilities in child marriage programming based on your experience?

Annex 2 – MICS data extraction on child with disability marriage rates in MENA

Country where MICS data came from ¹⁶²	# of women aged 15-19 years who are married		% of women aged 15-19 years who are married	
	With Functional difficulty (i.e. disability)	With no functional difficulty	With functional difficulty (i.e. disability)	With no functional difficulty
Algeria (MICS 6)	55	1,857	4.7%	7.3%
Iraq (MICS 6)	46	2,521	12.1%	29.1%
State of Palestine (MICS 6)	11	932	* (less than 25 cases)	15.8%
Tunisia (MICS 6)	39	598	3.9%	1.2%
Yemen (MICS 6)	166	2,682	30.6%	30%
Lebanon (MICS 6)	Processing data – be on lookout for fresh data.			
Qatar (MICS 6)	Processing data – be on lookout for fresh data.			
Morocco, Sudan, Libya, Iraq (MICS 7 planned) in Survey design phase in 2024, to be on lookout for fresh data this year.				

*Please note that the MICS6 data include functional difficulty (i.e. disability) for women aged 20-49 who were married as children, and the rates of disability are quite high in such cases due to the association between child marriage causing disability later on in the life course. However, as it is not possible to ascertain whether the disability pre-existed the marriage and that it was in fact a child with a disability that was married, only data stating the existence of a functional difficulty during the age range of 15-19 was used in the table above, and closer to the definition of a child with a disability.

¹⁶² <https://mics.unicef.org/surveys>

THEMATIC DEEP DIVE: DISABILITY

GLOBAL PROGRAMME OUTPUTS	[Output 1110]	[Output 1120]	[Output 1230]	[Output 3110]
	Life skills and comprehensive sexuality education that build girls' knowledge, skills, and awareness of their rights, and connect them to services	Adolescent girls are supported to enroll and remain in education	Women's and youth-led organizations are supported to mobilize marginalized voices	Capacity building and technical support to governments to enact, enforce and uphold laws and policies



CONSIDERATIONS						
	Is this activity being held in an accessible space – does the building have a ramp for girls who use wheelchairs? Is it well lit for girls who lip read or use sign language?	A life skills session is adapted to suit a group of girls with intellectual disabilities, adding pictures and Easy Read language to the presentation	Do schools enable accommodations for girls with disabilities – textbooks in large print for girls with low vision? Quiet spaces for girls with autism?	Are we reaching out to Organizations of Persons with Disabilities, either locally or through larger national or regional bodies?	A youth-led organization is supported to form a working group of adolescents with various disabilities, to ensure their voices are heard	Have we integrated the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and any national disability rights laws and policies?

17

Statement¹⁶³

This slide demonstrates how we could apply these concepts. At the top of the slide are some of the Global Programme outputs, and below are examples of considerations for disability inclusion – questions that can be asked to identify those barriers or opportunities; and ideas for mitigating those barriers or leveraging those opportunities.

- **Output:** Life skills and comprehensive sexuality education programmes
 - **Considerations:** Is this activity being held in an accessible space – does the building have a ramp for girls who use wheelchairs? Is it well lit for girls who lip read or use sign language?

¹⁶³ Slide shared by Megan Tucker at UNICEF EAPRO

- Important consideration because accessibility is the precondition for everything else – you can't have a seat at the table if you can't get to the table in the first place; can't have your voice heard if nobody speaks your language
- **Example of targeted approach:** A life skills session is adapted to suit a group of girls with intellectual disabilities, adding pictures and Easy Read language to the presentation
- **Output:** Adolescent girls are supported to enroll and remain in education
 - **Considerations:** Do schools enable accommodations for girls with disabilities – textbooks in large print for girls with low vision? Quiet spaces for girls with autism?
 - Girls with disabilities face many barriers to fully accessing education
- **Output:** Women's and youth-led organizations are included and supported to mobilize marginalised voices
 - **Considerations:** Are we reaching out to Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, either locally or through larger national or regional bodies?
 - Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, or OPDs, are representative organizations made up primarily of persons with disabilities themselves or of family members of children with disabilities. They can be focused on a particular group, such as adolescent girls, or a particular location or disability.
 - OPDs aim to empower their members and advocate for inclusion, and engaging with them can help with learning more about local situation.
 - **Example of targeted approach:** A youth led organisation is supported to form a working group of adolescents with various disabilities, to ensure their voices are heard
- **Output:** Capacity building and technical support provided to governments to enact, enforce and uphold laws and policies
 - **Considerations:** Have we integrated the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and any national disability rights laws and policies?
 - These provide essential guidance and standards on disability inclusion



Annex 4 – Disability inclusion elements of Phase 3 of global programme

Keep in mind, at least **10% of all girls in education, SRH, health, life skills training programmes** should be girls with different types of disabilities, remembering the average disability prevalence in MENA is 13% (excluding humanitarian context where this is higher).

Disability inclusion elements listed in programme document (13 times) ¹⁶⁴
1. Under UNFPA strategic plan - Output indicator 6.4 Improving the skills of adolescent girls: Number of marginalized girls, including girls with disabilities and girls affected by other core furthest-behind factors, reached by girl-centred programmes that build their life skills, health, social and economic assets.
2. Under 2.3 on Synthesis of Evidence - Greater attention to those adolescent girls that are most at risk of child marriage or whose experiences are little understood, such as girls with disabilities , girls who are divorced, married, separated or widowed, adolescent mothers and younger adolescent girls.
3. Under 3.2 for Programme coverage and achievements - Leaving no one behind: The programme made major strides to ensure an intersectional approach and to create implementation structures and monitoring mechanisms to ensure that the most marginalized and most vulnerable adolescent girls are included in interventions to end and respond to child marriage (in particular, but not limited to, adolescent mothers, married girls, girls with disabilities , girls in poverty, girls affected by humanitarian crises or conflicts, and out-of-school girls).
4. Under 6 for Programme strategy's 3 foundational principle (one being leave no one behind) - In Phase III, the Global Programme will broaden and deepen the inclusion of marginalized populations, especially those furthest behind and facing intersecting forms of exclusion and discrimination: adolescents with disabilities ; married girls and adolescent mothers; out-of-school girls, people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression (SOGIE); IDPs; adolescents from religious and ethnic minorities; girls living in extreme poverty; populations most affected by the polycrisis, etc.
5. Under 7.1 on monitoring - Lastly, Phase III will explore feasibility of further disaggregated monitoring data to fill evidence gaps (e.g., disability status or marital status)
6. Under Results framework in Annex- Intermediate outcome 1001 (disability disaggregation mandated) for 'Proportion of girls aged 15–19 years who make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use and reproductive health care' (using MICS, DHS and household surveys)
7. Under Results framework in Annex- Intermediate outcome 1005 (disability disaggregation mandated) for 'Adolescent birth rate' (using MICS, DHS & HH surveys)
8. Under Results framework in Annex- Intermediate outcome 1101 (disability disaggregation mandated) for 'Proportion of girls (10-24) who have comprehensive sexual and reproductive health knowledge' (DHS and survey of girls)
9. Under Results framework in Annex- Intermediate outcome 1102 (disability disaggregation mandated) for 'Proportion of girls who express increased sense of self-efficacy; who feel confident in their ability to negotiate and delay early marriage; who feel comfortable speaking without fear' (household surveys)
10. Under Results framework in Annex- Intermediate outcome 1103 (disability disaggregation mandated) for 'Proportion of adolescent girls of lower-secondary school age that are out of school' (administrative data and household surveys)
11. Under Results framework in Annex- Output 1110 (disability disaggregation mandated) for 'Number (and proportion) of adolescent girls (aged 10-19) who actively participated in life skills or CSE [comprehensive sexual education] interventions in programme areas' (Programme/ NGO records and relevant administrative data)
12. Under Results framework in Annex- Output 1111 (disability disaggregation mandated) for 'Number (and proportion) of adolescent girls (aged 10-19) who actively participated in life skills or CSE [comprehensive sexual education] interventions in programme areas' (Programme/ NGO records and relevant administrative data)
13. Under Results framework in Annex- Intermediate outcome 2000 (disability disaggregation mandated) for 'Girls' transition rate from primary to lower-secondary school' (DHS/MICS, household survey)

¹⁶⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/media/145651/file/Programme%20document%20.pdf>

Annex 5 – Disaggregated data in Global Programme ECM reporting

The UNICEF and UNFPA global partnership started reporting on inclusion of girls with disabilities in preventative programming around 2021, by disaggregating data across several indicators. This is a good start and all MENA/ASRO RAF members should follow suit to show to what extent children with disabilities being reached in preventative programming. Bangladesh in particular had a focus on reaching girls with disabilities in their preventative life skills training programme which was evident in their disability-disaggregated reporting, compared to other countries, showing success in large scale inclusion of girls with disabilities (see photo of table below).¹⁶⁵

Table 3. Indicator 1111: Number of adolescent girls (aged 10–19) who actively participated in life skills or CSE interventions in programme areas, disaggregated by age and disability

COUNTRY	2019 RESULTS	2020 RESULTS	2021								
			TARGETS	RESULTS	UNMARRIED	MARRIED	10–14 YEARS	15–19 YEARS	WITH DISABILITIES	GIRLS REACHED USING OTHER FUNDING STREAMS	BOYS REACHED WITHIN THE GLOBAL PROGRAMME
Bangladesh	89,974	88,770	80,720	96,592	77,255	3,465	35,705	60,887	6,294	57,414	35,513
Burkina Faso	310,042	112,123	103,016	44,825	44,825	0	21,964	22,861	257	88,709	23,665
Ethiopia	261,244	152,782	105,772	49,449	44,835	4,614	31,281	18,168	170	153,718	6,366
Ghana	20,046	27,274	18,690	19,376	18,328	1,048	7,790	11,586	15	100,189	2,816

¹⁶⁵ <https://www.unicef.org/media/127876/file/Child-marriage-2021-report.pdf>

Unfortunately, disability disaggregation with education programming has not been reported as well and could use some work and support, as seen below. Only Sierra Leone was reporting on the education of girls with disabilities as a preventative effort towards reducing child marriage.¹⁶⁶

Table 4. Indicator 1121: Number of girls (10–19) supported by the Global Programme to enrol and/or remain in primary or secondary school, disaggregated by age

COUNTRY	2019 RESULTS	2020 RESULTS	2021								
			TARGETS	RESULTS	UNMARRIED	MARRIED	10–14 YEARS	15–19 YEARS	WITH DISABILITIES	GIRLS REACHED USING OTHER FUNDING STREAMS	
Bangladesh	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Burkina Faso	27,197	32,956	9,752	14,070	14,070	0	6,894	7,176	0		32,829
Ethiopia	58,580	NA	39,000	7,413	7,043	370	2,055	5,358	0		2,513
Ghana	1,000	1,029	1,030	1,094	1,094	0	708	386	0		200
India	217,731	114,740	325,000	84,983							
Mozambique	1,576	1,226	1,740	384	361	23	241	143	0		
Nepal	7,908	7,716	11,908	7,691	7,691	0					
Niger	NA	276	5,000	1,649	1,649	0	0	1,649	0		52,335
Sierra Leone	NA	NA	500	2,593	1,614	0	859	755	76		70

Another positive development we are starting to see in other continents and that we need to increasingly see in MENA/ASRO, is engaging with disability groups as part of the Global programme to end child marriages, with Bangladesh and India, starting to include this as part of their approach and actually providing financial support to these organizations.¹⁶⁷

Table 17. Civil society partners in Global Programme countries, 2020 and 2021

TYPE OF ORGANIZATION	BANGLADESH	BURKINA FASO	ETHIOPIA	GHANA	INDIA	MOZAMBIQUE	NEPAL	NIGER	SIERRA LEONE	UGANDA	YEMEN	ZAMBIA
Women’s rights groups	19	2	1	3	10	3	7	2			3	
Children’s rights groups	1	19		1	23	2	4	2	1			
Youth-led groups	4			1	11	1	1				1	
Minority people’s groups	1				3							
Disability rights groups	1				2							

¹⁶⁶ <https://www.unicef.org/media/127876/file/Child-marriage-2021-report.pdf>

¹⁶⁷ <https://www.unicef.org/media/127876/file/Child-marriage-2021-report.pdf>

Annex 6 – Partial list of organization of women with disabilities in MENA/ASRO

Please note as organizations of persons with disabilities are not well funded, the information is changeable over-time and emails and webpage will change or no longer be active. UNICEF/UNFPA in MENA/ASRO could do a thorough mapping of groups of women with disabilities (e.g. formal and informal, stand alone or sub-group that is part of a OPD). There are several national OPDs that do events focused on women with disabilities (e.g. [FAPH \(Algeria\) event focused on women with disabilities](#), [Yemen forum for persons with disabilities – event on violence towards women with disabilities](#)) This list does not contain youth groups. UNICEF Jordan started a youth with disabilities groups that could be consulted.

→ **Many more organizations than the ones listed below exist**, they are just not listed on the web and meet informally in communities.

→ Global list of groups of women with disabilities see: <https://womenenabled.org/global-advocates/#mapSearchTbl>

→ For MENA/AS, you can reach out to these 2 regional forums for connections to women with disabilities leaders in your country of interest:

- [Arab forum of persons with disabilities](#)¹⁶⁸, president [Ms. Sylvana Lakkis](#)
- [Arab organization of persons with disabilities](#)¹⁶⁹, president is [Dr. Nawaf Kabbara](#)


Name of organization	Country of work	Contact information
Al-Aman Organization Blind Women Care (AOBWC)	Yemen	Web: https://alaman.org/en/home-2/ Address: Ahalathin Street, Soufan neighborhood, Behind Al Aqel, Sana'a, Yemen Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/alaman.org/
Stars of Hope Society for Empowerment of Women with Disabilities	Palestine	Web: https://www.starsofhope.org/website/ Address: Palestine, Al Beera – Al-mahseery, Ground 3 Email: info@starsofhope.org TEL : +970 224 22345 Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/starsofhopepalestine/ Previous president was Dr. Ola Abu Al Ghaib (now at UNDP)
Association marocaine pour la femme aveugle (group for blind women)	Morocco	Contact: Fatima SARHANE Address: 381, bd Mohamed Zerkouni, 20160 Quartier: Bourgogne, Casablanca, Maroc Email:
Association of Women with Disabilities (ENKAD)	Turkey	Address: Sanli İis Merkezi Ataturk Bulvari No:105/515 Kizilay/Cankaya ANKARA-TURKEY Phone: +90 312 362 31 50/ +90 549 362 31 50 Email: engellikadindernegi@gmail.com , idilseda@yahoo.com Web: http://www.engellikadin.com Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/engellikadin Twitter: https://twitter.com/eng_kad

¹⁶⁸ <https://afrpd.org/#:~:text=The%20Arab%20Forum%20for%20the,representing%20individuals%20with%20various%20disabilities.>


¹⁶⁹ <https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/AODP>

Annex 7 – Easy read booklet of forced marriage & persons with disabilities


Source - <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/mymarriagemychoice/documents/summary-easy.pdf>




What is this about?



People with learning disabilities have the right to marry. They also have the right not to marry.




Sometimes people may try to make you marry someone when you do not want to. This is a **forced marriage**.




With this **research** project we want to:

- find out about people with learning disabilities and forced marriage




- tell managers and staff what is happening

1




- write some rules to help keep **vulnerable** adults safe from this.




The law says a forced marriage is when:

- One or both people do not agree to the marriage and they have pressure or abuse to make them marry

OR



- One or both people do not understand what marriage means. So they cannot consent to the marriage.



Forced marriage is against the law. This means families may be in trouble when they force you to marry someone.

2

Annex 8 – Testimonial on child marriage and disability



Early marriage despite disability

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1069949940141611>



September 21, 2020 · 🌐

Overview

Comments

Early marriage despite disability

"My parents did not care for me when I had this disability because my father had two wives and several sons and daughters, I think they even did not need me" says Najia, a 23 years old woman.

Najia is from Tokzar village of the Sancharak district of Sar-e-Pul province. She is the mother of five children.

She got married to a 50 years old man when she was just 12 years old, "I often went back to my parent's house after the wedding, I did not know why I am here", she said with tears.

Although the UNICEF report in 2018 showed a 10 percent decline in child marriages but underage marriages are still considered as a major challenge in Afghanistan.

Her right leg was affected by polio, she said due to my disability I could not carry out all of the house chores such as cooking.
See less