

Regional Action Forum to End Child Marriage in the Arab States/MENA region¹ (RAF)

Terms of reference

Background and rationale

With more than 700 million girls and women² alive today who were married as children and 1 billion girls and women who will be married as children by 2030 unless the trends change, child marriage is increasingly recognized as a major human, child and women's rights violation with significant impact on social and sustainable development. Considerable evidence proves that girls who marry as children are more likely to be out of school, socially isolated, unemployed, suffer domestic violence, and die due to complications during pregnancy and childbirth.

Prevalence of child marriage is often linked to educational status, especially at the secondary level, as well as the economic status of households³, with girls from families living in the poorest economic quintiles having a higher chance of being married as children. In addition, patriarchal structures, gender inequality and social and cultural norms also play a significant role in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region with respect to the prevalence of child marriages.⁴ In the MENA region, these are shaped by systemic discrimination, misinterpretation of religion and the impact of long periods of widespread instability, insecurity, conflict and displacement.

Child marriage impacts families and national economies and leads to intergenerational cycles of poverty. A recent World Bank costing study has highlighted that child marriage will cost developing countries trillions of dollars by 2030 if it continues unabated. In contrast, ending child marriage would have a large positive effect on the educational attainment of girls and their children, contribute to women and girls' empowerment and increase their expected earnings and household welfare⁵.

[The Regional Accountability Framework of Action on Ending Child Marriage](#) was set up in 2018. The RAF was developed using the recommendations and findings from the multi-country [Regional Study on Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa launched by UNICEF in 2017](#), as well as consultations with UNFPA and UNICEF country offices and external partners including UN, civil society, donors, and universities undertaken online and face-to-face in Amman and Cairo. The consultation highlighted the strengths of each of the partners, ensuring synergy and coordination rather than duplication of work. The RAF was intended to operationalize the UNICEF and UNFPA Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage in the region and is coordinated by UNFPA Arab States and UNICEF MENA Regional Offices.

¹ Formerly named Regional Accountability Framework of Action on Ending Child Marriage

² UNICEF Ending Child Marriage, Progress and Prospects, 2014.

https://www.unicef.org/media/files/Child_Marriage_Report_7_17_LR..pdf

³ USAID/ICRW, PACT and IGWG - New Insights on Preventing Child Marriage, April 2007.

<https://www.icrw.org/publications/new-insights-on-preventing-child-marriage>

⁴ A Social Norms Perspective on Child Marriage: The General Framework, Draft, for UNICEF by the Behavioral Ethics Lab, University of Pennsylvania, May, 2014. <http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=pennsong>

⁵ World Bank Child Marriage Costing Study, June 2017. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2017/06/26/child-marriage-will-cost-developing-countries-trillions-of-dollars-by-2030-says-world-bankicrw-report>

The purpose of this framework was to realize the rights of adolescent/young girls in the MENA/ Arab States (AS) Region in the most effective way, and to contribute to their well-being, participation, protection and empowerment.

The first phase of the RAF was from 2018-2021. During this phase, the RAF succeeded to bring together different organizations in the region and globally with a common agenda to address child marriage. The members exchanged information and knowledge products related to child marriage and defined key research priorities. COVID-19 disrupted the activities planned as part of the framework. In spite of the challenges posed, the RAF members were able to meet virtually to discuss challenges and programmatic approaches adopted during this period to address child marriage in the context of the pandemic.

Building on this momentum, in 2022, the RAF began the next phase (2022-2024) and at the same time, an agreement has been reached to reposition this regional platform to respond to emerging issues of post COVID-19 implications on social and economic crises, protracted conflict and instabilities in the region and their impact on child marriage. As RAF moves towards expanding its membership and mandate, it will coordinate with existing MENA/AS regional mechanisms such as Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group, Regional GBV in emergencies Working Group and No Lost Generation.

Based on the [RAF member's meeting](#) organized from 23rd-24th May 2022, it has been proposed to reposition RAF as the **Regional Action Forum to End Child Marriage in the Arab States/MENA region**.

The geographical coverage of this regional body will include countries that are a part of the Middle East and North Africa / Arab States region.

Objectives of the Action Forum-

1. Coordination among different organizations in the region on programmatic interventions to address different layers of child marriage
2. Knowledge sharing and strengthening evidence to action on child marriage and related issues
3. Joint advocacy on addressing drivers of child marriage and related marginalization

Priority areas

- 1) Girls' empowerment
- 2) Promotion of positive practices among families, communities and thought leaders
- 3) Service delivery and systems strengthening
- 4) Legal, policy environment and fiscal space
- 5) Data and evidence generation

Membership

The RAF is a collective body open to all organizations - non-profit organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs)/ International NGOs (INGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs) (including those led by forcibly displaced persons or migrants), United Nations (UN), women's organizations, youth led organizations, human rights organizations, and other civil society organizations working on child marriage prevention and response, along with addressing associated vulnerabilities in MENA/AS region.

Role of members

The members of the RAF will be expected to actively engage on a periodic basis to-

- i) Contribute and share knowledge, experience and learning with the Action Forum
- ii) Contribute to specific working group(s) based on their organization mandate and priorities (in alignment with RAF priorities)
- iii) Lead on key advocacy moments within national, regional or global platforms to raise the momentum for action on ending child marriage

Governance

The RAF has been set up under the ambit of UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage. UNFPA ASRO and UNICEF MENARO focal points, along with Terres de Hommes have been the co-Chairs for this Action Forum. In this next phase, UNFPA ASRO and UNICEF MENARO will continue to co-chair the RAF. The role of co-chairs will be to ensure implementation of the RAF's strategic goals, maintain visibility and momentum of the action forum; liaise with other global/regional/national bodies and ensure that the RAF agenda is well positioned in the forefront of action to end child marriage.

Secretariat

The Secretariat is an organization (from within RAF membership) that will host a human resource personnel- who will be the coordinator for overall RAF. UNICEF MENARO will support in placement of the Coordinator within the Secretariat organization.

As a hosting organization for the RAF Coordinator, the Secretariat will provide day-to-day operational, technical, and logistical support to facilitate the Coordinator's role⁶.

Language

All email communication related to RAF will be in English. All in-person and virtual meetings will be conducted both in English, Arabic and French (as per need) with availability of translation facilities.

⁶ Detailed role of the Coordinator to be shared in a separate ToR