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RAF ANNUAL THEMATIC BRIEF DECEMBER 2023

I. INTRODUCTION

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

RAF FOCUSES ON SEVERAL KEY AREAS:

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

II. CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE MENA REGION

In the MENA region, child marriage remains a prevalent issue, with around 700,000 girls affected by it annually.[1] Currently, an estimated 37 million women in this region were married during childhood.[2] Factors like poverty, limited education, societal pressures, gender-biased social norms, and weak implementation of laws contribute to this practice.[3] The likelihood of early marriage is higher among girls residing in rural areas or stemming from poorer households. [4] While the prevalence of child marriage varies across the region — from one in three girls in Sudan and Yemen to one in fifty in Tunisia[5] — most MENA countries have experienced a decline over the past 25 years.[6]

This reduction has been more uniform across different socio-economic groups compared to other regions, with countries like Egypt leading the way in decreasing child marriage among the poorest communities.[7] However, in terms of the overarching goal to eliminate child marriage by 2030, progress in the MENA region has been limited, with levels remaining static. If the current trends continue, approximately 9 million girls under 18 in the MENA region will be married by 2030.[8] Achieving the target is feasible if progress can be accelerated to match the rates of the more successful countries in the region.[9] This only stresses on the need to continue and enhance coordination at the programmatic and policy levels – through initiatives such as RAF – in order to end child marriage and empower women and girls as agents of change in the region.

III. OPPORTUNITIES TO ADDRESS CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE MENA REGION

1. GIRLS' LEADERSHIP AT THE CENTER OF THEIR WELLBEING

The 2023 International Day of the Girl Child (IDGC) focused on the themes of supporting girls' leadership, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging, celebrating, and nurturing their leadership roles, while advocating for further opportunities for girls to voice their opinions in all policy-making spheres.[10] To prevent early marriage, girls must be informed about their rights and able to truly embrace them. They should also have the ability to make decisions regarding their own lives, while gaining the confidence and autonomy to act upon those decisions.[11] This year's IDGC also highlighted the importance of aiding girls' movements and networks with direct resources, and ensuring that girls' perspectives, autonomy, and leadership are at the forefront of all initiatives.[12] Furthermore, it stressed the necessity of investing in crucial sectors such as health, education, violence prevention, and economic empowerment to ensure the rights and development of girls, thereby fostering their leadership capabilities.[13]

A year ago, the inaugural "Arab Girls' Summit" took place to mark IDGC 2022 from October 10 to 12 in Amman, Jordan. This event provided Arab girls from the region with an opportunity and space to discuss, exchange views, network, and engage in dialogues with stakeholders from UN agencies, members of the League of Arab States, INGOs, and more. The summit served as a platform for girls to set agendas on issues affecting their lives and fostered the development of roadmaps, outlining action plans and strategies for them to shape their own futures. Structured around specific pillars, the discussions over the three days were girl-led. A steering committee of adolescent girls was established to aid in planning and refining the detailed agenda, ensuring that the summit's discussions and outcomes would address their specific needs

The adolescent girls showcased their creativity and skills and communicated several key messages that target child marriage:

- **FIRSTLY, THEY EMPHASIZED THAT CHILD MARRIAGE IS A CRIME AND SHOULD BE SUBJECT TO LEGAL PUNISHMENT.**
- **SECONDLY, THEY CALLED FOR COLLABORATION AMONG VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS TO CURB HARMFUL PRACTICES AND ENSURE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR GIRLS.**
- **THIRDLY, THEY HIGHLIGHTED THE NECESSITY OF RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD MARRIAGE ON INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETY, AIMING TO STOP THE SPREAD OF MISINFORMATION AND ENSURE THAT ADULTS MAKING DECISIONS FOR CHILDREN ARE FULLY INFORMED OF ITS POTENTIAL IMPACTS.**
- **ADDITIONALLY, THEY POINTED OUT THE MENTAL HEALTH REPERCUSSIONS THAT CHILD MARRIAGE AND GROWING UP IN UNHEALTHY ENVIRONMENTS CAN HAVE ON CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT. AND LASTLY,**
- **THE GIRLS STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING GIRLS WHO ARE ALREADY MARRIED. THEY ADVOCATED FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SCHOOLS DEDICATED TO GIRLS WHO WERE FORCED TO DISCONTINUE THEIR EDUCATION, AND CALLED FOR THESE ESTABLISHMENTS TO OFFER A SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT - COMPLETE WITH KINDERGARTEN FACILITIES - THAT WOULD ENSURE YOUNG MOTHERS' ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES.**



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The summit's overall key advocacy asks and policy recommendations also proposed measures that aim to address child marriage comprehensively. They call for all countries, including those facing humanitarian crises, to establish a minimum marriage age of 18, in line with international standards, while also defining child marriage and eliminating impunity for it. To change behaviors and raise awareness, national strategies should be implemented, utilizing various tools, media platforms, and education curricula. Additionally, policies should be developed to discourage child marriage as a coping mechanism during crises, providing girls with better educational, economic, and social opportunities. Access to quality education and support services, as well as community mechanisms, should be established to prevent child marriage and assist survivors. More importantly, these measures should be integrated into emergency plans and longer-term strategies that can ensure lasting change when it comes to ending child marriage in the region.



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2. GIRLS IN CLIMATE ACTION

While gender inequality primarily drives child marriage, various other elements also increase its rates such as lack of schooling, poverty, food scarcity, pregnancy, childbirth, and exposure to different types of gender-based violence (GBV).[14] Climate disasters and the broader consequences of the climate crisis amplify these risk factors.[15] For instance, such disasters often result in schools shutting down and families losing their sources of income.[16] During these crises, there is a notable rise in GBV, leading families to pull girls out of school or arrange their marriages; this is done either to protect them from violence or to ensure their care and provision by another family.[17]

The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls has recently brought attention to the direct link between climate change and the rise in GBV.[18] In addition, Save the Children's "Global Girlhood" report of 2023 reveals that almost 9 million girls globally face an extreme risk of climate disasters and child marriage every year, with around two-thirds of child marriages happening in regions with above-average climate risks.[19] In various scenarios, the challenges posed by climate change intensify the likelihood of such violence, including the practice of child marriage as a desperate response to the economic hardships caused by climate-related issues.[20]



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A new advocacy brief by UNICEF and Karama entitled "[Climate Change: Impact on Adolescent Girls](#)" stresses that girls in the MENA region face acute challenges from climate change that require specific and gender-sensitive responses.[21] The advocacy brief details that several climate factors in the region such as water scarcity, heatwaves and droughts can have a dire impact on girls' education, health and livelihoods.[22] Meanwhile, only 2% of the national climate change strategies specifically mention girls, highlighting the urgent need to prioritize girls in climate funding, policies and resource allocation.[23]

In fact, incorporating the needs and perspectives of girls is essential in local, national, regional, and global strategies addressing the climate crisis.[24] Research highlights that women leaders often prioritize environmental issues, social welfare, inclusivity, and community well-being more than their male counterparts.[25] Girls don't have to wait until adulthood to impact climate policy. International human rights law affirms their right to have their opinions considered significantly in decisions impacting them.[26] As experts in their own experiences, girls are uniquely positioned to inform policymakers about their specific needs in the face of climate challenges.[27] This also means that girls must be at the center of the decision-making processes when it comes to climate action and adaptation aimed at securing a greener and safer future for younger generations in the MENA region and beyond.

3. CASH ASSISTANCE FOR THE PREVENTION OF GBV & CHILD MARRIAGE

Child marriage is intricately linked with poverty and economic insecurity, with these factors often influencing marriage decisions in several ways in addition to local customs or norms. Economic challenges may compel parents to hasten a girl's marriage as a way to alleviate the financial burden of her upbringing and education.[28] While some of the available data on cash transfers for the prevention of GBV/child marriage indicate a lower success rate for multi-component interventions, as opposed to a single-component intervention,[29] other recent findings reveal that Cash Plus programs can indeed be beneficial.[30] The plus components are specific to the context, but some successful examples include case management, social service workforce, education, information, and SBC.[31] Unconditional Cash Transfers (UCT) show efficacy in increasing school access and safeguarding against early and high-risk sex, but they generally do not reduce the likelihood of child marriage on the short term.[32] Nonetheless, when integrated with other policies and educational programs, cash transfers can enable girls to challenge unequal and detrimental social practices, fostering inter-generational change.[33] Over time, this approach leads to more educated girls who are likely to support later marriages for their children and have a greater influence in these decisions, contributing to a gradual but significant societal shift.[34]

On the other hand, Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT) play a pivotal role in ensuring girls remain in school, effectively reducing the likelihood of child marriage in diverse matrimonial contexts.[35] These transfers work by offsetting the family and societal pressures to marry.[36] There's a clear correlation between increased educational access and a decrease in child marriage, with CCTs specifically targeting education proving consistently effective across various contexts.[37] By incentivizing school attendance, CCTs not only help prevent child marriage but also empower girls to have a say in delaying their marriage.[38] This correlates with another study's findings which state that interventions supporting girls' schooling through cash or in-kind transfers show the clearest pattern of success in preventing child marriage, while asset or cash transfers conditional on delaying marriage show a lesser success.[39] Such findings demonstrate that the enhancement of girls' opportunities and their own human capital is the best approach to delaying marriage.[40]



An example is the evaluation of the SAMA project in Akkar, Lebanon, of which the main component entails a cash transfer conditional on girls' retention in school.[42] The evaluation shows that cash conditional on school retention is a successful intervention in delaying child marriage and that, for girls, being in school can be a powerful deterrent to school marriage regardless of their school performance.[42] Nevertheless, there should be caution when leveraging such conditions on cash transfers as they can easily penalize the most vulnerable groups in communities that are often unable to fulfill some of these conditions.[43] For example, schools might not be available to them, or they might not be able to reach them safely.[44] Nevertheless, the benefits of conditional cash transfers can still be achieved through various alternative mechanisms, which do not rely on punitive conditions.[45] These alternatives include social behavior change communication and strategic messaging around cash transfers, as well as the use of labeling, contracts, and pacts with households.[46]



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These approaches are particularly effective in addressing the social behavior aspects prevalent in households where child marriage is a concern and tackle social and cultural norms with a softer form of conditionality.[47] For instance, explicitly labeling funds as intended for girls' education or creating an agreement with households to refrain from child marriage while receiving cash transfers are ways to achieve similar objectives without harsh conditions.[48] Overall, cash transfers represent an innovative social protection strategy that can be utilized to combat child marriage, especially when it takes into consideration social norms and behaviors at the family, community or even national levels.

For more information on cash transfers for the prevention of GBV/Child Marriage, watch our September 2023 webinar "How can cash transfers contribute to addressing child marriage in the MENA region."

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4. ADDRESSING CHILD MARRIAGE IN CONFLICT & CRISIS SETTINGS

In times of conflict and humanitarian crisis, girls' vulnerability to child marriage,[49] forced marriage[50], and sexual violence[51] are often heightened. The rate of child marriage in fragile states is nearly twice as high as the worldwide average[52] and girls affected by conflict are 20% more likely to be married than those living in peaceful areas.[53] In the MENA/Arab States region, crises severely restrict the mobility and education of girls as they are the first to be pulled out of school for security reasons.[54] Data from conflict affected countries also indicates an increase in child marriage rates among displaced populations.[55] Numerous examples from the region show a rise in child marriage rates during crises and conflicts, such as the doubling of these rates among Syrian refugees in Jordan between 2011 and 2013.[56]

In emergency contexts such as Gaza today, where the humanitarian situation is rapidly deteriorating due to heightened violence, a [rapid gender analysis by UNRWA](#) has shed light on the need for immediate assistance for the displaced, particularly vulnerable women and girls. Breakdown of the rule of law and social structures can heighten GBV risks in shelters where hundreds of thousands are currently seeking refuge, including increasing the risk of child marriage as a coping mechanism, particularly for larger households.[57] Even prior to the recent conflict escalation, 23% of all registered marriages in Gaza included girls under 18.[58] An increase in violence, displacement and poverty will only exacerbate child marriage in Gaza, which will inevitably be adopted as a negative coping mechanism by many displaced families with limited resources who are struggling to survive.[59]



The onset of conflict or crisis requires a shift in existing programs that tackle child marriage. In our latest [RAF webinar](#) “Responding to Child Marriage in Times of Protracted Conflict and Humanitarian setting”, important programmatic shifts with the onset of the conflict in Sudan were highlighted by UNICEF’s Child Protection Specialist. The scope of interventions related to child marriage prevention programmes was widened and maintained at the center of the emergency response, while also allowing for other forms of GBV and related life-saving SRH needs to be addressed in parallel.[60] In addition to expanding programs, a re-prioritizing within the theory of change was initiated by UNICEF Sudan and its local partners, while keeping close community engagement with key stakeholders to sustain initiatives that prevent child marriage.[61] Another response to the eruption of the conflict was to integrate new platforms such as child-friendly safe learning spaces, mobile clinics, women safe spaces, and IDP gathering points; these platforms become a point of community engagement as well as

service provision, particularly for women and girls at heightened risk of being exposed to various forms of GBV.[62]

According to [Girls Not Brides](#), effective strategies to prevent and address child marriage during conflicts include training humanitarian workers, upholding the rule of law, involving women and girls in peace processes, offering girl-focused programs, and providing adequate response services.[63] Awareness of child marriage risks and responses should be integrated into all humanitarian assessments and strategies is essential, to ensure a comprehensive and harm-preventive approach.[64] Responses should be girl-centric[64] as women and girls understand their needs best and should lead in decision-making and disaster response in addition to being involved in conflict monitoring and peace initiatives.[66]

Prioritizing girls' education in times of conflict and crisis is also crucial, focusing on enrolment, retention, and attainment, especially for the most marginalized.[67] [UNFPA’s technical guide to addressing child marriage in humanitarian settings](#) highlights education as a key approach with a focus on including adolescents in educational programming and assessment, and integrating awareness of child marriage into education.[68] Moreover, both [Girls Not Brides](#) and UNFPA highlight the need to address the mental health and wellbeing of displaced girls as they often face emotional distress; this involves providing tailored mental health services, psychosocial support, peer counseling, and creating safe spaces for social interaction and support.[69] [70] In summary, child marriage must remain a priority at the center of the GBV response in times of conflict escalation or compounded crises that can have an irreversible impact on girls’ futures in the long term.

For more information, watch our [December 2023 webinar](#) “[Responding to Child Marriage in Times of Protracted Conflict and Humanitarian setting.](#)”

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although some progress has been made in the past few years, child marriage continues to impact millions of girls in the MENA region today. Increased coordination at the programmatic and policy level is needed now more than ever – through initiatives such as the Regional Action Forum to End Child Marriage in Arab states/MENA (RAF) – to end child marriage once and for all and empower girls to become leaders and agents of change.

This thematic brief has outlined key opportunities and recommendations for the prevention of child marriage in the MENA region, including:

- 1 INVESTING IN GIRLS' LEADERSHIP:**
Empowering girls' leadership roles so that they can understand and advocate for their own rights, particularly in discussions around early marriage, is crucial. Insights from the girls-led Arab Girls' Summit stress the need for legal measures, awareness campaigns, and tailored support services to prevent child marriage and assist survivors.
- 2 INCLUDING GIRLS IN CLIMATE POLICY AND ACTION:**
The intersectionality of gender-based violence, climate change, and child marriage underscores the urgency of incorporating girls' perspectives into climate policies. Only girls can translate their unique experiences to decision-makers who need to ensure that climate action and adaptation measures are gender-sensitive and tailored to their needs.
- 3 DEVELOPING AND TAILORING INNOVATIVE APPROACHES SUCH AS CASH ASSISTANCE FOR GBV AND CHILD MARRIAGE PREVENTION:**
Cash assistance for the prevention of GBV could present a unique and innovative approach for addressing child marriage in challenging contexts. However, it must come hand in hand with close consideration of contextual factors, social and behavioural norms, so that it can effectively challenge the harmful practices associated with child marriage.
- 4 PRIORITIZING CHILD MARRIAGE PREVENTION IN ONGOING CONFLICT AND CRISIS SETTINGS:**
The increased vulnerability of girls in conflict settings and the heightened risk of child marriage demand tailored responses from the onset of the emergency response. Girl-centric approaches must be maintained in humanitarian settings to avoid irreversible harm in the longer term. Quick programmatic shifts are needed in times of conflict and crisis which are still arising today, to ensure continued access to key protection, education, health and mental health services that can protect girls from child marriage.

Our examination of emerging opportunities to address child marriage in the MENA region underscores the necessity for comprehensive, multifaceted strategies that prioritize girls' rights and empowerment in policy, practice, and humanitarian response. These insights serve as a crucial roadmap toward effectively combating child marriage and ensuring a safer, more equitable future for girls in the MENA region and beyond.

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