United Nations Population Fund

BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS TO PROGRAMMING

Delivering interventions to address child marriage in humanitarian settings in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen

UNICEF INNOCENTI – GLOBAL OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND FORESIGHT AUGUST 2025

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Contents

Acronyms

AND	Akkar Network for Development
CSO	civil society organization
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
GBV	gender-based violence
INGO	international non-governmental organization
LECORVAW	Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
NAP	national action plan
NGO	non-governmental organization
RAF	Regional Action Forum to End Child Marriage
RDFL	Lebanese Women's Democratic Gathering
SBC	social and behavioural change
SRH	sexual and reproductive health
SRHR	sexual and reproductive health and rights
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNO	United Nations organization
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
WRO	women's rights organization
YWU	Yemen Women Union

Executive summary

Child marriage, defined as any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child,1 is a violation of human and child rights. More than 120 million women aged 20-24 today were married as children. Although there is a significant body of research on the drivers, incidence and consequences of child marriage and how to prevent it, including in differing contexts, there is less evidence on these same factors related to child marriage in humanitarian settings, especially in the Middle East and North Africa region. The dynamic and sometimes unpredictable nature of humanitarian and acute emergency settings are thought to exacerbate the drivers. However, there is, to our knowledge, no mapping of programmes nor shared understanding of best or promising practices, especially as they pertain to holistic approaches, to effectively prevent, respond to and address child marriage in complex humanitarian settings. This lack of information likely prevents actors at all levels from adequately engaging in this space and responding to challenges. In response to this gap, UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Arab States Regional Office (ASRO) and UNICEF Middle East and North African Regional Office (MENARO), conducted a five-country study to identify key programmes and interventions addressing child marriage in humanitarian settings in the region and to understand the facilitators and barriers to their effective implementation.

Through consultation with UNFPA and UNICEF regional and country offices, five countries (Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen) in the region were selected for inclusion in the study based on their diverse humanitarian challenges. Humanitarian settings were defined for the purposes of this study as those “in which an event (e.g. armed conflict, natural disaster, epidemic, famine) or series of events has resulted in a critical threat to the health, safety, security and well-being of a community or other large group of people”.2 Given the diversity of humanitarian challenges across these countries and subnational areas, the definition of a humanitarian situation was further explored based on key informants’ perceptions in each country.

This study comprised two key activities. First, a desk review was conducted to map relevant programmes to address child marriage in humanitarian settings in the selected countries, and to identify stakeholders involved in implementing these programmes. Second, researchers from the selected countries conducted interviews and focus group discussions with programme implementers, government, senior staff of multilateral and international organizations as well as local and grassroots organizations, where available, to confirm the status of existing programmes and to further explore the challenges to and facilitators of child marriage prevention and response programming in humanitarian settings. This report details the study findings, by country and at regional level.

Key insights from the study are briefly summarized below:

1. Data on prevalence and incidence of child marriage is limited due to difficulty in collecting data with representative samples in protracted and transitional situations, and difficulty identifying relevant populations in transitional and geographic settings.

2. From the desk review, there is very little formal documentation on the programmatic content related to child marriage and no documented evaluations or impact assessments on prevention and response to child marriage in humanitarian settings in the region.

3. Notably, there are programmes that are intended to address child marriage in these settings, but little is formally or systematically known and documented.

4. Respondents offer a clear definition of humanitarian settings versus development settings and related priorities, but the distinction becomes blurred when it comes to implementation. The lack of clarity in definitions obscures the availability of evidence and collection of data, and also the understanding of implementation gaps that address the unique challenges of each setting.

5. Implementation of existing programmes with child-marriage-focused components takes many forms across country contexts and is often incorporated into other programming or is part of multisectoral programming, but as a secondary aim of those programmes. For example:

    a. Child marriage prevention and awareness programming is often embedded into other programmes, such as gender-based violence (GBV), sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), mental health and psychosocial support, education, and adolescent development and participation, among others.

    b. Monitoring and evaluation of child marriage incidence and outcomes within humanitarian situations is weak as it is often not tracked as part of programmes that have preventing child marriage as a secondary aim.

6. Different factors point to possible lack of shared priority accorded to addressing child marriage as a pressing issue for governments, funders, implementing organizations and programme participants in humanitarian settings:

    a. Implementers are focused on specific life-saving activities as they define them in their mandates and activities responding to immediate protection needs (e.g., food, water, shelter, trafficking and violence).

    b. Programme participants are often limited in their ability to participate. Reasons include:

        i. Programme participants are often focused on meeting basic needs (e.g., finding work, shelter and food).

        ii. Prevalence of unequal gender norms hinders participation of women and girls in programmes that involve in-person activities where supervision may be outside of the control of parents, such as girls' clubs and, specifically, programmes that teach

empowerment. This concern seems to be particularly pronounced in humanitarian settings, where security concerns are more prevalent and people are residing outside of their communities and known spaces.

c. At the time of data collection, all national governments in our sample (not including governing authorities in contested areas) had committed to ending child, early and forced marriage by 2030.[3] However, implementation of these commitments is highly variable across country contexts, and changing political and legal situations leave some of these commitments in jeopardy:

    i. Country-level commitments to ending child marriage are seen as positive and have the potential to facilitate further action to prioritize programming.

    ii. Governments may be hesitant to engage in programming to end child marriage or enact policies and laws against child marriage where such interference is seen as sensitive or contradictory to community or religious traditions. In humanitarian situations, the resistance may be higher, especially as displaced populations are perceived to bring their own norms and practices.

d. Lack of funding and investment is seen as a hindrance to implementing child marriage programmes:

    i. Donor priorities are often not aligned with child marriage programming aims due to the significant needs of humanitarian settings.

    ii. Governments and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often focus on other priorities due to the political and social sensitivity of the topic and competing priorities.

Background and motivation

Humanitarian crises arise from a variety of natural and human-made events – including climate change, conflict, political instability, economic collapse and natural disasters – resulting in the displacement of millions of people worldwide. Today, more than 120 million people are forcibly displaced (both internally and as refugees)[4] and even before the 2023 war in Gaza, more than 15 million refugees and internally displaced persons were known to reside within the Middle East and North Africa.[5] As conflicts and disasters become increasingly part of the development landscape and affected populations grow more numerous, there has been a call for greater awareness of the poly-crisis – "where disparate crises interact such that the overall impact far exceeds the sum of each part"[6] – and how it affects the ability of development and humanitarian actors to implement appropriate programming. One area where this need is acutely felt is among practitioners and organizations seeking to end child marriage.

This study seeks to break new ground in understanding how to best prevent and respond to child marriage in humanitarian situations in the Middle East, focusing on five countries with varying degrees of humanitarian challenges: Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. These challenges include political instability, large populations of refugees and internally displaced persons – both in camps and in host communities – ongoing conflict, and protracted humanitarian crises. The selected countries showcase a variety of these challenges, and while this study was not intended to be comparative with respect to the depth or type of humanitarian situation present in each country, the findings do offer a regional perspective and associated recommendations that will apply differently depending on the context.

Child marriage is defined by UNICEF as a formal or informal union where at least one party is under the age of 18 and has not given free and full consent to the union. Child marriage affects more than 650 million women and girls worldwide, and more than 40 million women in the Middle East and North Africa were married as children.[7] In many cases, data sources are limited primarily to the dominant or host populations, so the prevalence of child marriage among particular refugee, displaced or other marginalized or conflict-affected groups is often unknown. Even where strong case management or data systems to track child marriage exist, they are often not sufficiently powered to estimate rates in emergency or humanitarian contexts, or at the rate necessary to closely monitor changes in challenging settings.

There is some evidence around the drivers and correlates of child marriage in humanitarian and crisis settings, but very little around programmes and implementation. For example, El Arab and Sagbakken[8] review the literature on child marriage among female Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, and Elnakib and co-authors[9] review incidence, correlates and consequences of child marriage among the same populations in southern Lebanon. In our search, we found no publicly available impact evaluations, assessments or evaluations of programmes targeting child marriage in humanitarian settings within the five countries, and thus there is a dearth of knowledge around the type of programmes that are in existence as well as their efficacy at reducing child marriage.

This study seeks to begin to fill this gap in knowledge of effective programming by first conducting a desk review to identify relevant stakeholders and programming that directly addresses ending, preventing or responding to child marriage. This report proceeds as follows. First, we present a discussion of the selection of countries and research questions that guided an iterative process to identify facilitators and barriers to implementation of child-marriage-focused programming. Then, we outline the methodology, sample and analysis framework, providing an overview of findings at the regional level, including regional-level recommendations and directions for future research. Finally, the paper reports country-specific findings and recommendations in five separate sections.

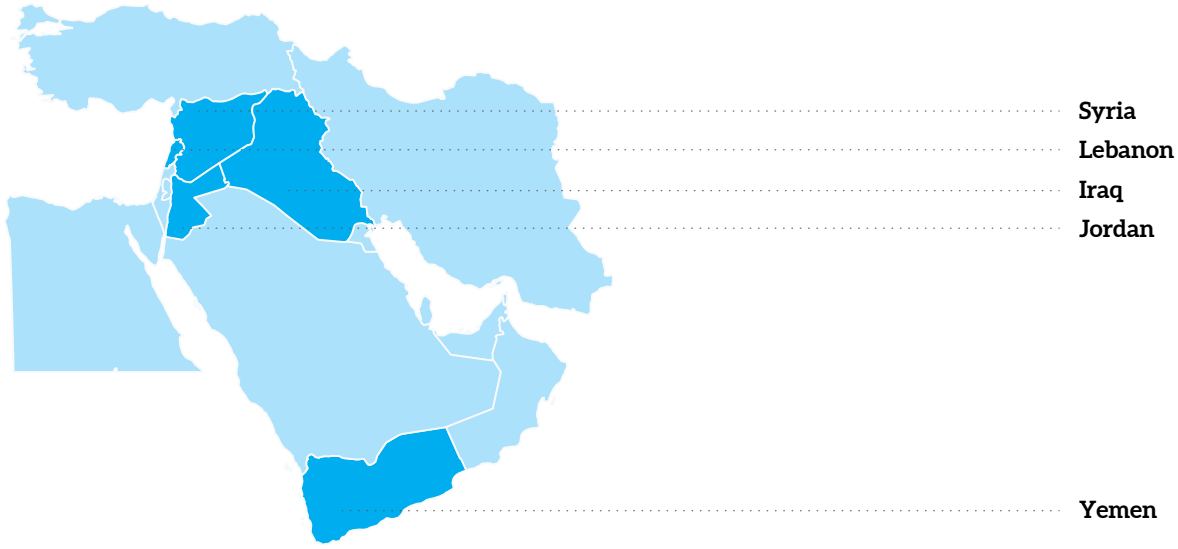
Selection of countries

In order to address the research questions with a regional lens, five countries were selected in consultation with the UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office and the UNFPA Arab States Regional Office. Extensive consultations with relevant UNFPA and UNICEF country offices in the region were also undertaken to determine willingness and availability of stakeholders to participate, especially given protracted and ongoing emergency and humanitarian situations. The study countries are Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. They are shown in Figure 1.

The five countries have diverse and dynamic humanitarian and political contexts, each of which affects design and implementation of programming on child marriage in both unique and universal ways. Yemen and Syria have been experiencing longstanding and country-wide crises, causing displacement internally and across borders since at least 2014 and 2010, respectively, and are often referred to as protracted crises.[10] Iraq has moved from a country-wide crisis towards a more geographically focused set of crises with refugee and internally displaced person populations in defined geographic areas, some of whom have attempted return to Syria at the time of report finalization at the end of 2024. Recent events in Lebanon have transformed the previously specific geographic and situational humanitarian settings to a broader one affecting most of the country, with additional displacement in southern Lebanon as a result of clashes between Hezbollah and Israel in the latter half of 2024. Jordan's humanitarian setting is largely confined to refugee camps and refugees living among host populations. Similar to Iraq, some of these refugees began attempting voluntary repatriation to Syria following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024.

Since data collection for this paper took place, the dynamism of the region has been on full display. There has been a major change of government in Syria, leading to the voluntary repatriation of large populations of refugees residing in Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan; significant new internal displacement in Lebanon; and a change in Iraq's personal status law. We stress that the recent changes to the humanitarian and political contexts of each of the study countries do not undermine the findings discussed herein, but underscore their importance to understand the various and dynamic challenges to addressing deeply rooted practices such as child marriage in the face of change.

Figure 1: Study countries



Research questions

To understand the programmatic responses to child marriage in humanitarian settings in the five countries in the region, this study aims to answer the following research question:

How do programming and policy initiatives incorporate and address prevention of and response to child marriage in humanitarian settings in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen?	(RQ1)

Additionally, we identified the following two sub-research questions:

What programmes have been implemented, by whom, in what contexts, and under which aid modalities in the last 10 years to address child marriage in humanitarian settings in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen?	(SRQ1)
How does the socioeconomic/sociopolitical and organizational context influence the design, delivery, funding and implementation of programmes to address child marriage in humanitarian settings in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen?	(SRQ2)

Within the scope of this study, child marriage is defined as any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child.[11] Deviations from this definition, as defined by a country's legal system or individual respondents, are discussed in country sections as appropriate and relevant.

Methodology

This study employed an iterative approach to qualitative research and design and relied on a combination of primary and secondary data sources. Each stage of the research informed the next, beginning with a clearly defined desk review, followed by targeted hand searches to identify programmes, activities and actors relevant to child marriage in the region and each country. The desk review and programmatic mapping was used to identify key stakeholders for primary data collection using a semi-structured instrument. All primary and secondary data were analysed using thematic analysis and used to inform a validation workshop with country actors from UNICEF, UNFPA and partner organizations to refine the findings and draft recommendations.

Desk review

To understand the scope and scale of programmes that have been implemented, and by whom (SRQ1), we conducted a desk review of published programmes, including design and results documentation, evaluations, assessments, or mentions of programmes or indicators related to child marriage and associated terms active in the last 10 years (2014–2024). Addressing child marriage was conceived of broadly and could be a programme or activity focused on prevention or response.

The desk review was designed to identify programmes and stakeholders working in prevention and response to child marriage in humanitarian situations in the five focal countries. Initial searches targeted programmes with a primary aim of addressing child marriage. However, as few programmes were found in each country with a primary focus on child marriage, be it prevention or response, the selection criteria were expanded to include programmes with a secondary focus on child marriage. For this study, a secondary focus on child marriage was determined as programming documentation that explicitly mentioned a target population of married children, pregnant girls or girls at risk of marriage.

The desk review of programmes was also used to identify stakeholders – the relevant government ministries, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), local civil-based organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on addressing child marriage. The study then conducted semi-structured key informant interviews and focus group discussions to understand these stakeholders' experiences with programmes to address child marriage and to gain further insight to the presence or lack of programming to address child marriage (SRQ2).

The search strategy, using the keywords listed in Table 1, was conducted for the region as a whole and individually by country. The search included peer-reviewed literature and grey literature in English, Arabic and Kurdish, languages that are widely used in the focus countries and in the literature.

Table 1: Desk review search terms

Concept	Search term employed
Child marriage	'child bride' 'girl bride' 'child marriage' 'forced marriage' 'girl marriage' 'early marriage' 'girl bride' 'early forced marriage' 'underage marriage' 'teenage marriage' 'early pregnancy' 'risk of child marriage'
Programming to prevent/respond to child marriage	'intervention' 'program*' 'project' 'prevent*' 'activity' 'response' 'mitigation' 'evaluation' 'cash transfer' 'conditional cash' 'ending child marriage' 'preventing child marriage'
Humanitarian setting	'refugee' 'displace*' 'IDP' 'internally displaced p*' 'refugee camp' 'informal settlement' 'urban refugees' 'forced migration' 'humanitarian' 'humanitarian response' 'humanitarian context' 'humanitarian cris*' 'humanitarian emergency' 'humanitarian setting' 'humanitarian intervention' 'emergency action' 'emergency response' 'humanitarian emergency' 'humanitarian response' 'resettlement' 'war' 'armed conflict' 'humanitarian assistance'

Note: For each of the five countries, the desk review included contextualized search terms. For example, the desk review for Jordan included the search term 'Zaatari refugee camp'.

Hand searches

Following an initial desk review resulting in a small number of documents matching the search criteria, the search methodology was expanded to include hand searches of organizations that were identified as relevant to the child marriage space in each country based on a snowballing approach using UNICEF and UNFPA country office recommendations and professional network recommendations. Publicly available data were supplemented by programme documents shared by UNICEF and UNFPA country office focal points and individuals at relevant organizations.

Interviews and focus groups

Respondents for interviews (and focus groups where appropriate) were purposively selected based on their role in addressing child marriage in humanitarian settings in each country in order to gain a better understanding of details of existing programmes already identified in the desk review, to uncover new or previously undocumented programmes, and to understand the facilitators and challenges to conducting these programmes in each country. Final selection of respondents was determined in close coordination with UNICEF and UNFPA country office focal points. Each country targeted approximately 9–12 informants, and stakeholders actively implementing programmes to address child marriage were prioritized. Interviews were conducted with government officials where possible, upper to middle management of international organizations, and upper to middle management of national NGOs.

In the case of Syria, Yemen and Iraq, there was limited access to government officials as part of the interviews. The reasoning for this varied and is detailed further, along with implications for analysis, in the relevant country sections but was largely due to sensitivities around the topic or reluctance on the part of respondents.

The interviews were conducted in English and Arabic based on the preference of each respondent in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. In Iraq, respondents were given the additional option of conducting the interview in Kurdish. Interviews were conducted in person when possible or remotely on a private Microsoft Teams call if preferred by the respondent or if travel was not feasible.

Data were collected in each of the five study countries in April and May 2024. The final sample was 66 semi-structured key informant interviews and focus group discussions, reported in Table 2; per country samples are detailed further in the country sections.

Table 2: Study sample size

	Iraq	Jordan	Lebanon	Syria	Yemen	Total
Government officials	2	5	2	–	3	12
International NGOs	4	5	5	7	7	28
National NGOs	3	3	5	9	5	25
Total	9	13	12	16	15	66

Note: This table reports the number of interviews and focus group discussions conducted over the course of the study, rather than the number of individual respondents. In some interviews, more than one individual joined the interview, and focus group discussions included multiple respondents.

Validation workshop

A validation workshop was conducted at the end of May 2024 with representation from a wide group of stakeholders from the study countries and additional countries in the region (Egypt, Morocco, Somalia and Sudan). Organizations represented included: UNFPA and UNICEF at the country and regional levels and representatives from civil society and academia. Preliminary findings were presented and discussed in plenary and small groups, leading to refinement of the main messages and the formation of recommendations. The recommendations herein are reflective of this consultative process as well as an output of the analysis from the qualitative data collection.

Ethics

Study-wide ethical approval for this study was granted by the ethical review board Health Media Labs, 848MIDE24.

All interviewers conducting data collection received training on ethical data collection, informed consent and data protection procedures prior to the start of data collection. Verbal and/or written consent was obtained from all respondents prior to the start of the interview for the interview and the audio-recording of the interview. Written consent forms were provided to all respondents in their preferred language – English, Arabic or Kurdish. Verbal consent was conducted in the language of the interview as indicated by the respondent. Informed consent forms and verbal consent included information on the objectives of the study; privacy and data protection; voluntary participation; the right to skip any questions or end the interview at any time without consequences; and study team contact information. Interviews were audio-recorded where consent for recording was granted. The study team reported no irregularities, refusal to participate or cancelled interviews due to participant discomfort or unwillingness to continue following consent procedures. Refusals or inability to record audio were noted and detailed notes were taken by the interviewer instead. All recordings were destroyed upon completion of this paper.

Analysis

Audio recordings in English were transcribed verbatim and translated-transcribed simultaneously in cases where the interview was conducted in a language other than English. English transcripts were used to conduct the analysis. In the absence of audio recordings, analysis relied on the detailed written notes of the interviewer.

The study relies on thematic analysis primarily using a deductive approach, where codes were drafted a priori based on the interview instruments and underlying research questions. An inductive approach was then used to supplement the codes, allowing for subcodes to emerge and adjust as the data was analysed, allowing for contextualization to each country's data.

Findings

Describing the humanitarian context

As a precursor to identifying programming best practices and challenges to programming on child marriage, the study sought to better understand the context in which respondents were working. In particular, the study asked how policy and programme managers' and implementers' framings of emergency, humanitarian response and other conflict- and climate-affected contexts are related to their approach to prevention and response, especially vis-à-vis development programming. These impressions about the individual contexts that are derived from the descriptions provided by respondents are summarized below. In each case, respondents mostly converged on a common definition or set of characteristics of humanitarian settings specific to that country.

We do not attempt here to provide a rigorous comparative assessment between programming on child marriage in different types of humanitarian settings, but rely on respondent answers and definitions, as well as the existing literature and standard definitions, to organize the findings and note some similarities, as they may be useful for future programming.

Broadly in this region, conflict and post-conflict contexts with large populations of refugees and displaced people constitute the relevant humanitarian settings. Although some displacement may be climate-induced, conflict-affected populations were top of mind for respondents across the region.

In Jordan, respondents noted that the humanitarian setting referred to either clearly delineated geographic locations – such as refugee/internally displaced person camps – or populations – such as refugees or internally displaced persons – within the countries.

In Iraq, respondents converged upon a clear description of the context as a transition away from previous country-wide crisis to a more limited and confined context. The humanitarian setting in Lebanon is similarly in a state of transition, although in the opposite direction, expanding beyond localized situations. Previously, the humanitarian setting had referred to specific refugee populations or geographic locations where refugee populations were situated. However, the humanitarian setting in Lebanon has come to refer to an increasingly larger proportion of the population since more recent crises, such as the 2019 economic and financial crisis, the 2020 Beirut port explosion, and clashes in late 2024.

In contrast, Yemen and Syria were characterized by respondents as experiencing widespread protracted crises that impacted the entire country, both in terms of geographic and population reach. In these cases, the entire country was considered a humanitarian context by respondents, with large swathes of the population experiencing hardship as a result of the conflict. In Syria and Yemen, local NGO representatives reported targeting programming at all regions and groups, all of which constituted a humanitarian setting. They reported that even those not actively affected by displacement and conflict were affected by the deteriorating economic and political situation.

Understanding the practice and drivers of child marriage in humanitarian contexts

Many of the drivers and contextual factors associated with child marriage are common across both humanitarian and development settings. Drivers and contextual factors take on increased importance as their severity is exacerbated by the humanitarian context, leading to a greater degree of vulnerability to child marriage for girls in these settings. The most mentioned contextual factor was *economic constraints*, with families facing poverty and reduced or limited incomes driven by the humanitarian setting, be it armed conflict or economic crises. Respondents reported that in these situations, families will turn to child marriage in an effort to reduce expenses. The other recurring contextual factors associated with child marriage mentioned by respondents were protection and social norms.

In all countries, a discussion of child marriage primarily encompasses the experiences of girls, rather than boys. Most respondents spoke of the practice of child marriage, its consequences and even programme target audiences – discussed in the next section – using the words 'child' and 'girl' interchangeably. Only respondents in central and northern regions of Syria spoke of factors relating explicitly to boys, highlighting that child labour is a gateway to child marriage, especially for boys. Weak enforcement of child labour laws due to weak institutions in a humanitarian context meant boys often engaged in child labour in response to economic constraints. In turn, a boy who was earning money was perceived by society to be ready to start a family, and child marriage was seen as protection from pre-marital relations. Outside of this context, drivers related to marriage of boys and boys as girls' marriage partners were scant.

Respondents reported that target populations and communities in their countries perceived child marriage as *protective*, described explicitly as protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and violence by many respondents, though some respondents did not provide a clear definition or expand upon the perceived dangers. There was also a perception by respondents that in affected communities, child marriage is considered protection from participating in pre-marital relationships that are not culturally or religiously condoned and, relatedly, protection of reputation and social standing of the family and the girl. Protection concerns were perceived to be exacerbated by the humanitarian setting due to the increased close interaction of boys and girls, both within extended families and with strangers, due to displacement. It was of particular concern in the confined and mixed settings of refugee and internally displaced person camps, but is also relevant for displaced persons residing in urban or other host community settings.

Most respondents characterized child marriage as a *social and religious norm and tradition*, regardless of the setting, making it particularly difficult to address in humanitarian contexts:

"Changing social patterns and customs is one of the biggest difficulties that any programme faces because this requires long-term commitment."
– UNO/INGO, Jordan

There is significant variation in the operation of these norms across settings. Respondents highlighted how social norms around child marriage differed between urban and rural communities, provinces, and cultural or religious subcommunities. Social norms were perceived to be tied closely to religious norms and beliefs and were often spoken about interchangeably. Although there was some discussion about how certain religious sects encourage, or at least do not condemn, child marriage, the prevailing sentiment was that "in reality all the religions here are having early marriage" (UNO/INGO, Syria).

Respondents in Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon perceived child marriage as a tradition that was practised within displaced populations prior to the crises that led to displacement. Specifically, in Iraq, a respondent in Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) shared that the communities in camps in the area were not indigenous to the region and that child marriage in camps reflected customs that communities had brought with them, not a practice that was driven by local practices. In Jordan and Lebanon, respondents spoke of the cultural tradition of child marriage among displaced Syrian communities. Though respondents acknowledged child marriage had traditionally been practised in host communities, some respondents felt that child marriage had increased in host communities because of the norms of the displaced Syrian population:

"After the Syrians started coming into the area, marriage between the men of the host community and the young Syrian girls living in tents started to increase. The economic environment was also something that contributed to this phenomenon."
– Government official, Lebanon

Respondents in Syria reported that child marriage was a part of local culture and traditions for some communities but noted the reliance on the practice had been exacerbated by the humanitarian situation, specifically the economic implications and displacement due to the war, a sentiment echoed by respondents in Yemen.

While school dropout can be "both a cause and consequence" of child marriage,[12] there is a perception in the study countries that norms around girls' education also contribute to the prevalence of child marriage. Respondents mentioned that if parents feel the school is not a worthwhile endeavour – specifically, if they do not feel education for girls is a priority, that the girl is not performing well, or the school is physically distant – families will often turn to marriage as an alternative for their girls. Disruption in schooling due to displacement and changes in access to school as a result of a humanitarian context likely exacerbate these parental concerns, potentially pushing parents towards a preference to have their girls married.

The *legal framework* around child marriage differs across the five countries. In Yemen, respondents shared that a lack of codified law that imposes a minimum age of marriage makes it difficult to reduce the prevalence of child marriage. Despite a legal minimum age of marriage in Iraq, Jordan and Syria (see *Box: Legal age of marriage*), respondents pointed to religious laws which established different minimum ages for marriage, legal exemptions, weak enforcement, or commonly practised workarounds. Respondents in all countries mentioned it was common for families to delay the registration of marriage until the married children reached the legal minimum age. This was said to create several issues later, as it provided no legal protection in the case of divorce and any children born during this period of legal limbo could also not be registered. Lack of civil documentation in cases

of displacement is an established challenge to providing adequate services in humanitarian contexts.[13] In the case of child marriage, it can also provide an opportunity to skirt existing laws when protections for girls requiring legal documentation of age are not required for a marriage to be legally recognized.

BOX: LEGAL AGE OF MARRIAGE

Iraq: The legal age of marriage is 18 for boys and girls with exceptions down to age 15 for compelling reasons and with parental and court permission. An amendment to the Personal Status Law in 2025 allowed couples to choose to apply secular or religoius laws to their marriage and recognizes unregistered marriages but requires that religious laws comply with the 1959 Personal Status law with respect to age of marriage.

Jordan: The legal minimum age for marriage is 18 years old for both males and females. There are some exceptions, where individuals as young as 15 can marry with judicial consent, though this is less common.

Lebanon: Lebanon does not have a unified civil code for marriage, as personal status laws are governed by different religious communities. Generally, the minimum age for marriage varies according to religious sects, but in many cases, it can be as young as 15 or 16 with parental or judicial consent.

Syria: The legal minimum age for marriage is 18 years old for both males and females. However, there are allowances for younger individuals to marry with judicial consent or under exceptional circumstances.

Yemen: Yemen has no codified framework for minimum age of legal marriage.

Facilitators and challenges to extant programming to address child marriage

In this section, we review the mapping of programmes to address child marriage in humanitarian settings in the Middle East and North Africa and detail the challenges to implementing programmes.

Primary versus secondary aim

The desk review found few well-documented programmes detailing implementation of programmes with a *primary aim* of addressing child marriage in humanitarian settings, be it prevention or response. One example of a programme that explicitly aims to address child marriage is the Child Marriage Programme in Yemen, implemented by the Yemen Women Union (YWU) and funded by UNFPA, from 2017–2023. YWU has 22 branches and 132 sub-branches nationwide. Through YWU, UNFPA provides quality multisectoral services for child marriage survivors and girls at risk, using a survivor-centred approach as per a case management process, and through a well-trained female caseworker. Gender-based violence (GBV) multisectoral services include legal, medical, psychosocial, shelter, cash and economic empowerment. Service provision also entails ongoing capacity-building to GBV caseworkers and service providers, ongoing monitoring, ongoing promotion of guiding principles

and survivor-centred approach, ongoing update to service mapping and enhanced referrals between service providers in both the district and governorate level. However, the desk review was unable to find many such programmes across study countries in which the primary aim was addressing child marriage in humanitarian settings. In Syria, the desk review found no programmes with a primary focus on child marriage, a finding that was validated by key informant interviews.

In many instances, there were mentions of interventions that touched on child marriage in reports or articles, but with few other details, to the extent that we could not verify the focus or implementation of these programmes. For example, there was documentation on toolkits such as the Adolescent Mothers Against All Odds Initiative Toolkit; however, there was no documented evidence of the details of implementation in humanitarian settings nor evidenced impact in the study countries.

As noted in the *Methodology* section, the definition was expanded to include programmes that had a *secondary aim* or objective of addressing child marriage in humanitarian settings, defined as an explicit targeting of married or pregnant girls within programming. The desk review found that child marriage is often embedded in other programming, most commonly GBV programming and health, and the degree of integration is varied. In some cases, child marriage is an explicitly mentioned aim of an activity. An example seen across countries was girls' or women's safe spaces or similar centres that included awareness sessions on the harmful implications of child marriage. In Iraq, the Ministry of Youth and Sports and civil society organizations (CSOs), in partnership with UNICEF, reported targeted awareness-raising sessions on early marriage at their youth centres. In Jordan, the UNICEF-funded Makani programme and the Adolescent Girls Empowerment Led Centre in Zaatari camp, run by UNFPA and Save the Children, similarly reported awareness-raising sessions in communities and among caregivers about child rights and child marriage. In Lebanon, the desk review found many organizations – ABAAD Resource Centre for Gender Equality, KAFA, Akkar Network for Development (AND), and the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women (LECORVAW) – providing different awareness campaigns and educational programmes on preventing child marriage. In other cases, married girls were a feature of the target population. For example, the Iraq Health Access Organization is implementing the Adolescent Girls project, which targets adolescent girls aged 10–19 years, including internally displaced persons, refugees, returnees and host communities. The project promotes adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and GBV services, with target beneficiaries explicitly including married girls.

The desk review found no publicly available programme evaluations of child marriage programming in the five study countries. In the case of programmes with a secondary aim of addressing child marriage in humanitarian settings, child marriage was a feature of the population targeted, but was often not explicitly monitored, leading to low levels of information on prevalence and programming efforts. This can also result in married children or adults who were married as children falling through the gaps in the system if preventing or responding to child marriage is not an explicit aim. In Syria, a United Nations organization (UNO) respondent explained how "child marriage is meant to be identified in case management" (UNO, Syria). However, if a child is married but there is no reported violence or other issues, the case management protocol does not offer any referrals to additional services, as the criteria does not recognize that "every girl married under 18 is at risk" (UNO/INGO, Syria).

Humanitarian versus development setting

As detailed in the *Describing the humanitarian context* section above, respondents had a clear sense of how the humanitarian settings were defined for their country-specific context. These primarily pertained to contexts where refugee and internally displaced persons reside in Jordan and Iraq, while referring to most of the country in Yemen and Syria. However, the *distinction between humanitarian and development contexts was blurry* when it came to implementation. Respondents offered a few distinctions, but these were not common across or even within countries. Some examples of distinction include: only one respondent mentioned the programming cycle that characterized humanitarian emergency response programming as distinct from development programming. Another respondent noted, "in development the focus is on prevention but in humanitarian settings requires prevention go hand and hand with response" (UNO/INGO, Yemen). In general, respondents spoke of child marriage broadly in their countries rather than focusing solely on the humanitarian setting (where the distinction was presumed to exist). When speaking of programmes to address child marriage, there was similarly a lack of distinction between those implemented in humanitarian versus development settings, with the same programme often targeting both host and refugee or internally displaced person populations. The interviews were unable to yield elaboration of how the programming was adapted to accommodate the two different populations.

Data

Data – on prevalence and drivers of child marriage – were seen as necessary but lacking. Data on child marriage could come in many forms, including rates of marriage from representative household surveys, evaluations of programmes, monitoring data and more.[14] Data collection of any kind is challenging in humanitarian settings, especially during the acute phases of an emergency but also moving into more protracted situations. Documented challenges include the feasibility of obtaining informed consent, timescales and constraints, security of respondents and data collectors, and the need for extensive testing of tools to make sure they are appropriate.[15]

Respondents noted that accurate, disaggregated (by gender, host community or refugee/internally displaced person community) child marriage prevalence numbers are hard to come by. They also noted that child marriage statistics provided by the government are likely to undercount cases, as most often child marriages are not officially registered. In some cases, there is no recent representative household survey such as the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) or Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) from which to estimate rates and changes, as evidenced in Table 3. Some countries, such as Lebanon,[16] have completed baselines with refugee populations, but these are old and, notably, respondents did not mention using or knowing about these data, suggesting that they are not widely used. The lack of recent data is particularly challenging given the dynamic nature of some humanitarian contexts due to movement of people and changing situations. As shown elsewhere in this study, humanitarian situations exacerbate the drivers of child marriage. But without data, it is difficult to know the extent to which these factors affect rates.

Table 3: Most recent MICS or DHS surveys by country[17]

Country	Round	Year	Status
Iraq	MICS6	2018	Completed, 2025 in survey design
Jordan	DHS	2023	Completed
Lebanon	MICS4 (Palestinians) MICS2	2011 2000	Completed
Syria	MICS3	2006	Completed
Yemen	MICS3	2022–2023	Completed

In Syria, the lack of data was attributed to a general lack of data collection or statistics since the start of the war. As noted by one local NGO respondent in Syria, "I don't know if there is data, even statistics aren't made in a correct way, especially after [the] war, and if available most probably it is inaccurate" (local NGO, Syria). In Yemen, respondents perceived a lack of data as a deliberate effort by the government to avoid a conversation around child marriage; as one respondent put it: "we are not allowed to address child marriage, even in our data" (UNO/INGO, Yemen). In either case, respondents noted the need for data to understand the extent of the issue, data on the drivers to properly address them, and prevalence data to motivate donors and governments to prioritize the issue.

Contributing to the lack of data is that there are few reported *evaluations* of programmes and limited monitoring data. Even when some UNO and INGO respondents mentioned pre- and post-assessment and post-programming conversations with beneficiaries, most of these were not published, publicly available, or actively disseminated. Monitoring data are similarly missing. Perhaps related to the lower prioritization of child marriage outcomes, or the lack of child marriage as a primary focus in humanitarian settings, it appears to not be actively tracked as part of existing monitoring efforts.

Duration of programming as a barrier to data and monitoring

A recurring barrier to evaluation was the perception by respondents that existing programmes to address child marriage or programmes in which a child marriage component was embedded were too short term to evaluate in humanitarian contexts. Awareness sessions, the most mentioned child-marriage-related activity, were mostly one-off sessions resulting in limited interactions with any individual participant: "There is no measured outcome, as the session is done once. It may be repeated but for a different group" (UNO/INGO, Syria). Other programmes were reported to run for short timeframes, a few weeks or months. Local NGO respondents mentioned tracking how many individuals attended and other potential monitoring efforts, but few mentioned tracking data points or metrics that could be used for evaluation.

Prioritization

Ending or reducing child marriage in humanitarian settings was not perceived as a *priority* for government, implementing organizations, programme participants or funders. In countries with protracted crises, including Syria and Yemen, and in Lebanon, child marriage was perceived to be of low priority for those who could intervene. Government, donors and implementing organizations were viewed to be focusing specifically on meeting basic needs and on what were described as more immediate life-saving activities necessitated by the humanitarian context.[18] The focus on these specific life-saving activities extended to the communities and individuals targeted by programmes to address child marriage. Individuals worried about income and food were argued to be unable to prioritize attending sessions such as awareness sessions around child marriage:

"Sometimes the commitment of the caregivers to attend several sessions and several interventions, specifically considering the economic situation, has been a difficulty at a certain point. When we decide to implement any kind of curriculum or interventions in a certain community, the first thing we hear is people objecting to us talking about gender and GBV when they are unemployed."
– UNO/INGO, Lebanon

In Iraq, in particular, reductions in funding across the board, combined with the low priority set by the government, were seen as preventing child marriage from being viewed as a primary goal.

As a result, it is perceived as difficult to get community buy-in on child marriage programming: "If I go to a community, I say awareness, I'll be kicked out. People are dying of hunger. People are lacking services" (UNO/INGO, Yemen). Local NGO respondents echoed this sentiment, sharing that child marriage was not a priority for them because it was not a priority for their donors, but also not a priority for their communities. Even within the realm of GBV and child protection, "there are many other competing protections needs that are more critical to society than child marriage" (local NGO, Yemen), and "compared to other types of violence like physical assault, sexual assault, and so on, child marriage was not a priority for them" (UNO/INGO, Jordan). However, respondents felt that addressing the drivers, specifically life-saving activities and economic empowerment, will ultimately prevent child marriage: "If you fix the health, the education and the economy, this could help to prevent child marriage later on" (local NGO, Syria).

Funding and investment

Respondents from all countries noted the difficulty of *funding* programmes to address child marriage. Donors were seen as prioritizing other, sometimes more acute, humanitarian crises, which limited the pool of funds available for Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. With limited resources, child marriage was not often the priority of the funds available from donors, and existing programmes were facing reduced budgets. Child marriage programming in some humanitarian situations was seen as necessitating a larger investment than if it had been in another type of setting due to the complexity of the humanitarian situation. Limited access to some communities requiring additional investment arose out of a number of scenarios, including physically limited access due to security concerns and armed conflict, geographic remoteness, and the taboo of discussing child marriage by the local government.

Social and gender norms

Unequal gender norms, including social, cultural and religious norms, put restrictions on girls' mobility and ability to participate and benefit from programming. Social expectations can also become a barrier to the successful implementation of child marriage programming in humanitarian settings. Respondents reported that girls are often not able to attend programmes, even if they are implemented, because they have limitations on when they can leave the house and how far they can travel:

"On paper, it might seem that there are all types of programmes, but in reality, these girls might be only allowed to leave for one or two hours a day to attend a protection or education programme and that's it."
– UNO/INGO, Lebanon

Thus, programming targeting girls' empowerment or attitudes about child marriage may not be as effective due to the limited space in which girls can exercise agency. These spaces vary considerably from community to community, and unequal gender norms are not unique to humanitarian situations. However, displacement and added stress from security threats may increase the perception that girls need additional protection, limiting their ability to participate.

Norms around sexual and reproductive health were also seen as a barrier to effective programming for girls. Again, these are not necessarily unique to humanitarian contexts, but may be exacerbated by them. As one respondent said:

"They are shy to talk about the idea of the body, sexual and reproductive health, because it is a very important matter in child marriage issues as it focuses on sexual and reproductive health. Therefore, the topic is very sensitive in some communities … they refuse when they know that their daughters will attend a session related to child marriage. They feel that their daughter is still young to hear this kind of talk."
– Local NGO, Jordan

Stakeholder coordination

According to respondents, the main stakeholders with whom to engage to effectively address child marriage included the family, community, religious leaders, United Nations and international NGOs, and various government ministries. The prevailing sentiment was that government needs to be involved in order to have a measurable effect on key outcomes. Respondents generally reported that there was insufficient *coordination* between all the actors in the space – that each organization was working in a silo – and that the government should play the convening role. Without adequate coordination mechanisms between the various stakeholders involved, children who are married or adults who were married as children can often fall through the gaps. For example, respondents in Jordan felt that keeping married girls enrolled in school was the role of the Ministry of Education. However, we found that the Ministry of Education perceived this as the Ministry of Interior's role, to "bring the girl back to school, bring the father" (government official, Jordan).

Facilitating factors

Few respondents mentioned factors that facilitated the design, delivery, funding and implementation of programmes to address child marriage in humanitarian settings. In Jordan and Lebanon, respondents reported the benefit of the existence of a national action plan on child marriage, which offered a structured approach to coordination and implementation. In Jordan, the role of the National Task Force on Child Marriage in Jordan was highlighted as a key mechanism for coordination and monitoring the implementation of the national action plan. Other facilitating factors specific to countries are highlighted in the country sections if mentioned by respondents, but no regional patterns emerged.

Recommendations

The following outlines a set of recommendations that are consolidated from the evidence collected at the country level and discussed in a regional validation workshop with United Nations and civil society stakeholders from both the study countries and other countries in the region experiencing humanitarian contexts. The countries represented were Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen (the study countries), and Egypt, Morocco, Somalia and Sudan (the non-study countries). These recommendations are thought to be applicable across the region and are directed towards a wide variety of actors, including regional ones, but also country- and community-level actors who can benefit from more generalized learnings. The recommendations in Table 4 are directed at a particular stakeholder (third column), with a summary keyword in the first column and a more detailed description in the second.

Table 4: Recommendations

Recommendation		Stakeholder
1 Coordinate and engage stakeholders	Develop, lead and implement a joint strategy at the regional level to address and prevent child marriage in humanitarian settings which explicitly convenes and coordinates governments, UN, NGOs, CSOs, women's rights organizations (WROs) and other stakeholders.	Regional Action Forum to End Child Marriage (RAF)
2 Develop theories of change	Fund and develop joint theories of change that incorporate adequate timelines to enact and measure change in relevant outcomes.	Donors, implementing partners
3 Understand humanitarian versus development settings	Investigate, document, acknowledge and incorporate in country and regional programming the unique challenges to addressing and preventing child marriage in humanitarian versus development settings.	Upper-level staff and management of INGOs, UNOs and local NGOs
4 Design multisectoral programming	Design programmes with a multisectoral and systems strengthening lens, building on existing frameworks such as the Global Programme to End Child Marriage, leveraging the existing evidence on what works, leveraging contextualized local knowledge of stakeholders, and addressing the various drivers and contextual factors as well as the consequences – e.g., economic empowerment and income generation; informal and formal education; sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR); and social and religious norms. This entails coordination among social protection, education, health and judicial stakeholders.	Senior-level programme staff and sector specialists, with support from upper-level staff and management of INGOs, UNOs and local NGOs
5 Develop monitoring and evaluation processes	Develop monitoring and evaluation plans that reflect programme theories of change. This requires data collection needs beyond programme outputs (i.e., attendance numbers) to include programme outcomes determined by the theory of change (i.e., disaggregated data by population targeted versus not targeted). These plans need to include associated analysis and dissemination plans to be able to leverage programme data and share lessons on best practices across communities and contexts and will require technical and financial support from more-resourced organizations to those less so.	Senior-level programme staff and sector specialists, with support from upper-level staff and management of INGOs, UNOs, local NGOs, CSOs and WROs
6 Localize and contextualize	Investigate the nuances of multiple and interacting levels of influence, including individual, family, community, institution and social levels in which programmes are implemented. Contextualize and localize programmes at the community level to reflect the cultural, religious and socioeconomic heterogeneity within each country, as each presents unique challenges that must be addressed differently.	Programme implementers and designers
7 Collaborate with local experts	Closely partner and collaborate with local NGOs well versed in the context at each stage of the programme design, implementation and monitoring process to ensure appropriate contextualization and localization of programming. Provide flexibility to implementing partners to operate independently enough to address local concerns.	Donors, UNOs, INGOs, CSOs and WROs
8 Identify decision-makers at different levels	Identify and target the decision-makers in the household and community. This entails buy-in from all the relevant local actors beyond the children themselves and the nuclear family to include extended family, and community and religious leaders.	Programme implementers

Country-level findings

In the next sections, this report will present the findings from each of the five study countries – Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. Each section begins with a discussion of the particular humanitarian context and prevailing social and cultural norms and practices around child marriage, including statistics where available. Each country section then presents a summary of the data collection process and key findings.

Iraq

Iraq has moved from a country-wide humanitarian setting affecting most of the country and its inhabitants to a geographically focused humanitarian setting focused on specific refugee and internally displaced person populations.

Context

The humanitarian situation in Iraq has remained complex and challenging since 2017. Protracted internal displacement, weakened social cohesion and widespread explosive ordnance pose significant threats to internally displaced persons, returnees and host communities. Slow and unsustainable returns of internally displaced persons persist due to unresolved barriers in areas of origin, with many returnees lacking adequate housing, economic stability and access to essential services. The COVID-19 pandemic and plummeting oil prices in 2020 exacerbated socioeconomic vulnerabilities, including increased unemployment and food expenditure, particularly affecting internally displaced persons and returnees. Movement restrictions and disruptions in public services further compounded protection issues and limited access to legal and community-based support. Additionally, the already inadequate basic services in displacement and return locations were further strained due to school closures, increased health and sanitation demands, and the closure of internally displaced person camps, leading to forced evictions and secondary displacement.[19]

With approximately 1.8 million internally displaced persons and nearly 250,000 refugees from Syria, Iraq's humanitarian landscape is marked by insecurity, shattered social structures and disrupted livelihoods, hindering the prospects of return for many. Within this context, poverty, insecurity and limited access to essential services like education are exacerbated, creating conditions conducive to early marriage.[20]

Currently, child marriage in Iraq is aggravated by various factors, including displacement, which has led to increased trafficking of women and girls and limited access to vital services, driving some parents to marry off their daughters for perceived protection. Moreover, girls who lack formal education are at higher risk of child marriage, compounded by prolonged school closures during the conflict. Poverty also plays a significant role, with economic strain post-war leading to increased incidences of girls being married off to alleviate financial burdens or escape dire circumstances. Additionally, religious and cultural factors, and notions of family honour, may perpetuate child marriage by providing limited legal protection for girls and imposing societal pressures on families to safeguard honour through early marriages. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these vulnerabilities, with economic downturns and prolonged school closures leading to a surge in negative coping mechanisms, including child marriage and labour, highlighting the need for comprehensive interventions to address this issue.[21]

Early marriages remain a significant concern in Iraq, with deep-rooted societal norms and humanitarian crises aggravating vulnerabilities and increasing risks for children, particularly girls. Effectively incorporating an understanding of the drivers of child marriage into programming and theories of change for humanitarian settings is essential for developing comprehensive strategies to address this harmful practice.

Data collection

Qualitative data collection was conducted with nine key stakeholders. Stakeholders were chosen based on their involvement and influence in programmes addressing child marriage and related issues in humanitarian settings within Iraq. The selection aimed to cover a broad spectrum, including government bodies, United Nations organizations, international non-governmental organizations and local non-governmental organizations. One notable limitation of our data collection was that some government representatives within Federal Iraq did not consent to participate in the study.

Geographic coverage/distribution

The data collection covered two locations in Iraq: Erbil and Baghdad. Notably, there were no participants from southern Iraq, which would constitute a different context and likely yield different findings:

Findings

Describing the humanitarian context

Respondents provided insights into the pressures exacerbated by the humanitarian context and the ways in which various factors interplay to impact vulnerable populations. Most respondents emphasized the significant impact of conflict on humanitarian settings, particularly highlighting the vulnerability of women, refugees and internally displaced persons. They noted that certain regions face acute challenges due to the large presence of camps and returnees. One respondent from the government highlighted the compounded vulnerabilities:

"Certainly, women who are exposed to war and conflict ... Yazidi women or refugees who came to Iraq from Syria because of the ISIS war and are internally displaced."
– Government official, Iraq

There was consensus on the importance of addressing basic needs like food, shelter and healthcare:

"Our previous work can be considered humanitarian as we were working a lot in camps, in random settlements, and in areas where there are returnees for internally displaced populations."
– UNO/INGO, Iraq

Respondents defined humanitarian settings to include not just conflict situations but any circumstance involving significant vulnerabilities or protection risks. Socioeconomic factors such as poverty and food insecurity were frequently mentioned as exacerbating pressures, with one respondent from the government stating:

"Poverty is one of the major reasons that many families resort to marrying their daughters because they get rid of the economic responsibility."
– Government official, Iraq

Most respondents recognized the need to balance immediate humanitarian needs with long-term development goals, acknowledging a shift in donor support towards development programming:

"We have projects within humanitarian settings, but at the same time, we are trying to have programmes that are in line with the Iraqi government."
– UNO/INGO, Iraq

Understanding the practice and drivers of child marriage in humanitarian contexts

The findings from the data collection on the context of child marriage in Iraq reveal a complex landscape shaped by legal, cultural, religious and social factors. Respondents provided insights into the prevailing norms, legal frameworks and challenges in addressing child marriage.

Most respondents agree with the UNICEF definition of child marriage. However, several respondents pointed out legal nuances in the local context, highlighting discrepancies between international definitions and local laws. For instance, respondents shared that although the legal age of marriage is 18, the law allows for exceptions. Under the Iraqi Personal Status Law, the legal age of marriage is set at 18 for boys and girls but allowed as young as age 15 with court and parental permission in cases of compelling necessity. An amendment to the Personal Status Law leaves that provision in effect, but allows couples to choose whether the secular or religious laws should apply to their marriage and recognizes unregistered marriages. The effects of these changes on average age of marriage and other outcomes are as yet unknown and should be explored in future resaerch. During data collection, which occurred prior to the these changes, respondents mentioned cases of girls below the age of 15 married outside the court. Respondents reported that when cases of girls married below the age of 15 were presented to the judges, judges approve the marriage even though the law prohibits it and considers it a crime with a penalty of imprisonment and a fine:

"Now, the judicial system allows girls to get married at the age of 12 or 13. They call it the extreme necessity. It means that girls must get married. Families say that they must get married. When they go to the court, the judge has to approve it because he cannot refuse as it will be an illegitimate marriage, especially if the girl has a child."
– Government official, Iraq

The legal age of marriage in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has also seen adjustments, with one respondent from the government saying, "let us not forget that the age of marriage in Kurdistan has been increased by one year from 15 and 16 before" (government official, Iraq). This divergence in legal age frameworks underscores the complexity of addressing child marriage within different jurisdictions in Iraq. While there is a shared understanding among respondents of the importance of using a consistent definition for international discussions, they acknowledged the challenges posed by existing local laws.

Respondents reported that child marriage in Iraq is shaped by deep-rooted norms and customs, particularly in rural and displaced communities. In times of conflict and economic instability, the incidence of child marriage rises, driven by poverty and the need to reduce economic burdens on families. Marrying off daughters is often seen as a solution to economic hardships and a way to protect family honour. One respondent from the government highlighted the profound influence of cultural practices:

"Our laws are extended from norms, traditions and customs, and they are based on them more than they are based on human rights."
– Government official, Iraq

Religious interpretations and societal pressures further reinforce this practice, making it a complex issue to address. Awareness campaigns and education initiatives aim to combat child marriage, yet according to respondents, they frequently face resistance due to entrenched beliefs and the restricted mobility of young girls. These cultural barriers make it challenging for organizations to intervene effectively.

Facilitators and challenges to extant programming to address child marriage

The desk review of interventions to address child marriage found that programmes to address child marriage in humanitarian settings in Iraq emphasize a multifaceted approach. This includes integrating awareness campaigns, community engagement and comprehensive support services. A strong emphasis was placed on awareness campaigns targeting different community segments, particularly religious leaders, to combat early marriage.

Many programmes are implemented through partnerships with other organizations, reflecting a collaborative effort in executing activities on the ground, especially for United Nations organizations, international NGOs and government entities. These projects target specific regions and communities, both urban and rural, including camps for internally displaced persons, with activities often focused outside major cities.

The majority of identified programmes addressed child marriage as a secondary objective. Child marriage prevention is frequently integrated into broader educational initiatives and awareness campaigns, highlighting the importance of education and girls' rights. Structured programmes and toolkits, such as the Adolescent Girls Toolkit and specialized curricula, are utilized to address multiple aspects of girls' rights, including early marriage prevention. The Ministry of Youth and Sports and civil society organizations, in partnership with UNICEF, offer programmes in youth centres which have included targeted awareness-raising sessions on child marriage. Similarly, safe spaces for women and girls provide environments where awareness and education on child marriage can be effectively disseminated, along with comprehensive support services like legal, medical, psychosocial and cash assistance.

The desk review also found that initiatives to address child marriage are often implemented under the umbrella of GBV or SRH. For example, the Iraq Health Access Organization is implementing the Adolescent Girls project, which targets adolescent girls aged 10–19 years in Iraq, including internally displaced persons, refugees, returnees and host communities. The target population of the project explicitly includes girls who are married. The project aims to generate data on the needs of adolescent girls, promote adolescent-friendly SRH and GBV services, connect girls to resources, and encourage girls to join community conversations.

The details of programmes to address child marriage found via desk review were corroborated by key informant interview respondents. However, the level of detail about specific projects varies, with some respondents providing limited information due to their lack of knowledge.

Despite the various programming efforts made, most respondents highlight significant barriers to effective programming. Limited and diminishing funding is a major concern, affecting the ability to maintain and expand necessary services and safe spaces for girls:

"The funding is limited, the funding quickly diminishing, and many safe places have closed."
– Local NGO, Iraq

Additionally, there is a shift in donor priorities towards development projects rather than humanitarian aid, making it difficult to secure funding. Respondents reported sensing that child marriage was predominantly perceived as part of humanitarian programming by donors and others. Consequently, as humanitarian aid budgets shrink, initiatives targeting child marriage suffer. Development programmes, which typically receive more stable and long-term funding, do not prioritize child marriage to the same extent, resulting in a gap in resources. This shift means that while development projects flourish, essential programmes aimed at preventing child marriage and supporting affected girls are left underfunded and unable to meet the needs. The decline in funding has led to the reduction or closure of awareness campaigns, education programmes and safe spaces for at-risk girls. Without adequate financial backing, organizations struggle to provide continuous support and intervention, leaving many girls vulnerable to child marriage.

The lack of comprehensive services and centres is another critical barrier. Most respondents emphasized the need for more community centres that provide a wide range of services to girls and their families before and after marriage. Several respondents also pointed out that existing programmes primarily focus on awareness-raising without addressing other critical components, such as behaviour change, law enforcement and social norms. Highlighting the gap in financial support for education, one respondent noted, "Cash for education is a very important issue to be present" (government official, Iraq). The consensus is that current programmes are not sufficiently practical or effective.

Cultural and systemic barriers further complicate efforts. Deep-rooted cultural norms and beliefs perpetuate early and forced marriage, making it challenging for programmes to have a lasting impact:

"The issue is that this exists in the customs, norms and beliefs of the community."
– UNO/INGO, Iraq

Respondents also criticized the lack of systemic change despite significant investments in training and system-strengthening by international organizations.

However, several facilitators were also identified. Respondents highlighted that engaging community and religious leaders is crucial in raising awareness and changing attitudes towards child marriage. In displaced or crisis settings, where traditional structures are disrupted, religious leaders often remain as stable and trusted figures. They can leverage their positions to advocate against child marriage, emphasizing the ethical and moral imperatives to protect children and support their education. By interpreting religious teachings in ways that discourage child marriage, these leaders can shift community perceptions and reduce the social acceptance of this practice. Moreover, religious leaders can act as powerful advocates for the benefits of keeping girls in school and delaying marriage until they are older. They can work with other community leaders to create an environment where the rights and well-being of children are prioritized. Their endorsements can lend credibility to awareness campaigns and educational programmes, making them more effective:

"Religious leaders are very much influencing the community … if they have a campaign every Friday about the effectiveness of the early marriage on the children and the family."
– UNO/INGO, Iraq

Integrated and holistic approaches that combine multiple facets such as health, education and awareness-raising activities were also highlighted as effective. Additionally, continuous learning and adaptation, such as having regular learning sessions and sharing lessons learned, were emphasized as essential for the success of programmes.

In summary, while there are programmes and initiatives aimed at addressing child marriage in humanitarian settings in Iraq as a secondary objective, significant barriers remain, including limited funding, cultural resistance and systemic inadequacies.

Iraq country-level recommendations

These recommendations aim to create a comprehensive, multifaceted approach to combatting child marriage in Iraq, leveraging community engagement, innovative programming and systemic changes. They were developed through a facilitated session following a presentation of the findings with representatives from UNICEF and UNFPA country offices and civil society organizations, as well as the consultant conducting the Iraq data collection, and were reviewed and updated by members of RAF and regional offices of UNICEF and UNFPA. Table 5 represents recommendations that emerged from the data and discussions with individuals from the UNICEF and UNFPA Iraq country offices.

Table 5: Iraq country-level recommendations

Recommendation		Stakeholder
Addressing social norms and practices		
1 Context-specific approach	Develop and adopt a comprehensive, context-specific approach based on the ecological framework addressing the multiple and interacting levels of influence, including individual, family, community, institution and social levels.	UNOs, INGOs, implementing partners
2 Engagement of religious leaders	Open and facilitate dialogue with the religious leaders with authority over officiating marriages to ensure that sharia laws governing marriage align with the national laws. This engagement is crucial in shifting harmful social norms and practices.	Government, implementing partners
3 Create innovative awareness campaigns	Utilize innovative platforms such as social media, youth and women's networks to raise awareness sensitively and effectively and to target key decision-makers and influencers. Monitor and adapt to mitigate potential unintentional negative impacts of these campaigns, and work with the community to determine messages that resonate within the community.	UNOs, INGOs, implementing partners

Recommendation		Stakeholder
Service provision, referral mechanism and new entry points for child marriage programmes		
4 Provide multisectoral services	Fund and incorporate the availability of comprehensive services for girls and women, including those at risk of or survivors of child marriage into programming. This includes integrating GBV services into the health sector as a safe entry point for girls by training health staff and educators to provide multisectoral services such as mentorship, coaching, tutoring and empowerment training.	UNOs, INGOs, implementing partners
5 Collaborate with education directorates	Work closely with the Directorates of Education (DoE) to create girl-friendly school environments and encourage girls to stay in school, as this is perceived as a deterrent to child marriage. This involves addressing daily admissions and obstacles such as school bullying, harassment and exploitation.	UNOs, INGOs, implementing partners
6 Build capacity for education staff	Invest in and provide training to enhance the capacity of education staff on learning methods and creating a safe environment for learning. Training should focus on methods to prevent and address bullying and harassment, ensuring schools are safe spaces for girls. School policies that foster gender equality, such as codes of conduct that address discrimination, harassment or exploitation, can also ensure a respectful environment for girls. Activate school counsellors to identify at-risk girls, offer psychosocial support and guide them. Engage counsellors in educating parents about the benefits of education and the risks of child marriage and GBV, ensuring a supportive environment for girls to stay in school.	Government, UNOs, INGOs
7 Promote government social support	Collaborate with the Ministry of Education to assess and, where appropriate and evidence-based, encourage the use of government social support programmes, such as cash transfers to vulnerable groups, to help keep girls in school.	Government, UNOs, INGOs
8 Provide vocational and extracurricular programmes that fit the needs of women and girls	Fund, design and scale up vocational programmes, sports and training programmes inside schools to attract and retain girls, using their voices and input. These programmes can serve as significant pull factors to encourage school attendance and completion when designed with participatory approaches and sustainability in mind. Existing efforts should be evaluated and assessed to ascertain impact and make improvements.	UNOs, INGOs, implementing partners
Multilevel holistic programming, contextualization and data		
9 Create multiple entry points	Design programmes with multiple entry points to reach adolescent girls, such as through schools, primary healthcare or hospitals, youth centres, and online and virtual platforms. Design these programmes with a focus on long-term interventions that can be sustained from childhood through adolescence. This approach ensures that girls can access sustained support from various fronts.	UNOs, INGOs, implementing partners
10 Develop evidence-based programming	Develop innovative and focused programmes based on evidence and provide training to implementing partners on how to interpret and incorporate evidence in programme design. This could include cash transfer programmes or school retention initiatives aimed at reducing the economic pressures that lead to child marriage.	UNOs, INGOs, implementing partners

Jordan

In Jordan, the humanitarian settings are clearly delineated and confined to refugee camps and populations residing within host communities. Given the protracted nature of these refugee camps and populations, most programming in Jordan fits more within the umbrella of development programming responding to long-term needs amid relative stability as opposed to response to immediate humanitarian crises. The exit of many Syrian refugees in December 2024 will bring new challenges to these situations.

Context

Since 1948, thousands of forced migrants have been displaced to Jordan due to regional wars and conflicts, which increased after the Arab–Israeli War in 1946 through the Lebanese and Gulf civil wars in 1991 and 2003, as well as the Syrian and Yemeni conflicts that have flared up recently.

According to the data from the Department of Statistics, Jordan hosted more than 2 million registered Palestinian refugees, the largest number of Palestinian refugees in the world. Almost one-fifth live in the 10 recognized Palestinian refugee camps throughout the country. Additionally, there are three unofficial camps, and other refugees live near the camps. Most of these refugees have full citizenship, but ones who have recently arrived from Syria do not.[22] Since the advent of the Syrian crisis, tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees displaced from Syria have sought assistance from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in Jordan.

In addition to Palestinian refugees seeking to leave Syria, many Syrians have sought refuge in Jordan, which now hosts the world's second-highest number of refugees per capita. The influx of Syrian refugees since 2011 brought 1.36 million people by 2020. It is expected that the population of Syrian refugees in Jordan is growing by 3 per cent annually,[23] with only 717,864 registered as refugees and asylum-seekers by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), of which almost 82 per cent reside in urban communities and only 18 per cent inside camps.[24]

In Jordan, the term 'child marriage' is not legally used, and though there is a legal definition, there is a disconnect between practice and the law. The Supreme Court uses the definition "marriage for those who have completed fifteen years of age but not eighteen years of age".[25,26] Child marriage is defined as "any marriage [that] occurs under the age of 18". However, a bylaw issued in 2017 allows an exception; it allows for marriages between the ages of 16 and 18 under specific conditions.[27,28] Recently, the Supreme Court built an automated system to track child marriage cases, to make sure the cases are reviewed based on unified standardized indicators among all judges.[29] This system was developed in response to a Save the Children study which revealed that the requirements for allowing marriage under the age of 18 were not clear or specific.[30]

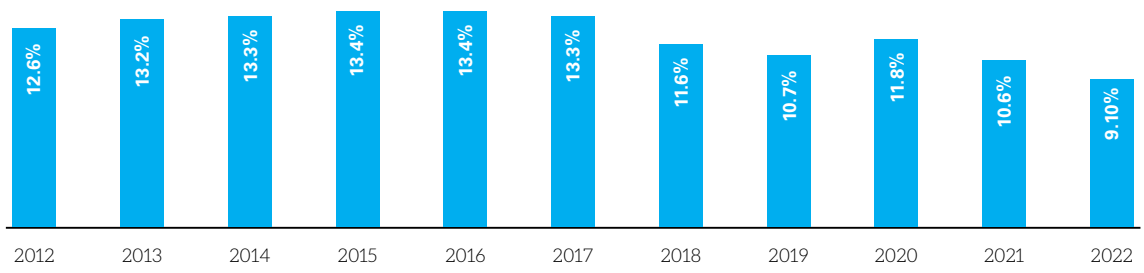
In 2004, the National Council for Family Affairs and the Ministry of Planning in Jordan developed the National Plan for Children (2004–2013),[31] highlighting child marriage as a priority issue for intervention. Then, the National Action Plan to Implement the Recommendations of the 'Marriage of Underage Girls' study (2018–2022) was launched to provide a general framework for programmes to reduce the marriage of girls under the age of 18, with the National Council of Family Affairs as the designated monitoring body. The timeframe was later amended to extend from 2020 to 2024. The plan aims to unify the national efforts to reduce marriage under the age of 18 and create a supportive environment

through a result-oriented framework by providing: (1) supportive legislation to limit the marriage of those under the age of 18; (2) health and psychological services to support negatively affected cases and implement programmes to reduce the marriage of those under the age of 18; and (3) positive change in the beliefs and behaviours of community members regarding the issue of marriage for those under the age of 18.[32]

Other national strategies also include a component to address child marriage. The National Strategy for Sexual and Reproductive Health (2020–2030)[33] includes a component on spreading awareness on the issue of child marriage. The National Population Strategy (2021–2030) stressed the importance of strengthening Jordan's commitment to addressing gender-based violence, including marriage of those under 18 years of age, and implementing plans to reduce it. Additionally, the National Youth Strategy (2019–2025)[34] includes a special axis for youth health and physical activity, concerned with building the capabilities of young people in the field of life skills, which has been linked to reducing the marriage rate of those under 18 years of age.

The national figures reveal that marriage of girls under 18 years old is decreasing in Jordan for all nationalities, even while there was a clear rise in the *number* of marriages of girls who are below 18 years old during 2011–2016. The ratio declined from 13.4 per cent in 2015 to 9.1 per cent in 2022.[35] Figure 2 shows the percentage distribution of girls' marriages of all nationalities under 18 years of age from 2012 to 2022.

Figure 2: Percentage distribution of girls' marriages under 18 years, 2012–2022 (all take over nationalities)



Note: Numbers for the above figure were derived from the Supreme Judge Department of Jordan (https://sjd.gov.jo/).

The percentage of registered marriages of Syrian women under the age of 18 during the period 2011–2015 in comparison with the national rates reflects an increase from 12 per cent of the total number of registered marriages for Syrians in Jordan in 2011 to 18.4 per cent in 2012, 25 per cent in 2013, and 32.3 per cent in 2014. This increase continued until 2015, when it reached 34.6 per cent. This indicates that one-third of Syrian women who married in 2015 were less than 18 years old, while this percentage rose to 13.4 per cent at the national level.[36] In Zaatari camp, host to approximately 78,000 Syrian refugees,[37] 70 per cent of registered marriages were child marriages in 2018.[38] In many instances, parents within Syrian refugee populations are reported to evade the personal status law regarding age at marriage by recording an inaccurate, higher age, arranging the marriage contract in Syria, or using their connections to get the judge to invoke the exception clause.[39]

Data collection

Several different categories of participant were included in the key informant interviews and focus group discussions, which were conducted during March and April 2024. The focus group discussions were conducted with stakeholders who work in host communities and/or refugee camps. The sample is detailed in Table 6.

Table 6: Jordan sample

Overall sample	13
Government	3
UNO/INGO	6*
Local NGO	3*
Academic	1

Note: In the total sample count presented in the *Methodology* section, the academic was counted as a government official given their relevant experience. This table reports the number of key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Each category with an asterisk (*) had one focus group discussion that included multiple participants.

Findings

Describing the humanitarian context

Study respondents share a consensus on the definition of the humanitarian settings, where they framed the setting as the refugee camps and the host communities resulting from the Syrian and Palestinian crises over the years. Palestinian camps are run by UNRWA, while all registered Syrian refugees inside camps and in the host communities are under the mandate of UNHCR. One participant considered disasters in general, natural disasters, as well as chronic diseases or other diseases as conditions that might be considered as a humanitarian setting:

"We have about 20 per cent of the refugees living in camps, which are Zaatari Camp, Azraq Camp and some urban areas in Irbid. The majority of these refugees are living in the north in Mafraq, Irbid and Amman, while [a] few of them live also in the south."
– UNO/INGO, Jordan

In addition, some respondents highlighted the presence of informal refugee camps located in remote areas with no services, usually near farms and workplaces. The residents are refugees that were originally living in an official camp, but being dissatisfied with the services available, they decided to leave, looking for a source of income. These camps are not sanctioned and services are not covered.

Facilitators and challenges to extant programming to address child marriage

Child marriage programmes within all interviewed organizations are embedded under other programmes, including, but not limited to, child protection, GBV, SRHR, psychosocial support, education or health programmes. Child marriage is generally embedded in other projects and is only occasionally a standalone project. The programmes targeting married girls are minimal. The programmes fall under the following categories:

- life skills programmes, such as the Adolescent Girl Empowerment Led Centre, led by UNFPA and Save the Children Jordan (inside Zaatari refugee camp), Plan International's Champions of Change, and other life skills for protection programmes in refugee camps and host communities;
- safe spaces, such as Makani led by UNICEF, as well as the Women and Girls Safe Spaces led by UNFPA in host communities and in refugee camps;
- SRHR services with youth-friendly services, such as an adolescents' clinic by International Family Health, in refugee camps and host communities funded by UNFPA;
- education programmes, such as those from UNRWA for Palestinian refugees;
- cash for protection and cash for education, such as Cooperazione Internazionale's cash for protection programme targeting refugees and host communities in East Amman, Irbid (Al Mazar al Shamali), and Zarqa (Rusaifah), as well as cash within GBV case management, targeting both refugees and host communities in out-of-camp settings funded by UNFPA;
- awareness sessions and awareness campaigns, with initiatives such as the 16 Days of Activism against Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and 'No for child marriage' campaigns in Zaatari camp;
- comprehensive GBV case management services (such as psychosocial support programmes) in refugee camps and host communities, such as those provided by International Medical Corps and several other organizations, both in host communities and refugee camps; and
- social and behavioural change (SBC) programmes, such as the UNICEF community-based child prevention of violence programme that engages with parents and religious leaders.

According to the respondents and the intervention mapping, few programmes have addressed child marriage as the primary goal of the intervention. For example, Save the Children implemented a one-year 'Ending Child Marriage' programme in Zaatari camp in 2018. The programme provided case management for cases of children under the age of 18 who were married or engaged, providing referrals to services such as livelihood opportunities.

Data availability on child marriage projects is limited. The organizations' data protection policy sometimes limited the access to relevant data on projects. Also, there is limited information, such as reports about the child marriage programmes, on all levels. For example, there was a lack of detailed design information about programmes, manuals and packages, and monitoring and evaluation outcomes. Available data often are inconsistent; for example, discussions during the validation workshop highlighted that the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and sharia court report different numbers on the prevalence or number of child marriages in Jordan. In addition, the data on the prevalence of child marriage in camps and specific host communities are outdated:

"The available [data] are neither updated nor enough to reflect the real situation and the root causes."
– UNO/INGO, Jordan

Project design flexibility contributed to success. Some respondents pinpointed that changing the design of the project based on the needs and updates led to a successful intervention. When the project design meets the community's needs, it works well. Donors' flexibility is a facilitator in this aspect.

Some respondents considered building trust with the communities as crucial for the project success. This trust could be obtained through engaging the local community in committees and hiring volunteers in the project's activities. Applying home and school visits as well as targeting parents proved to be helpful.

Lack of funding is an obstacle to effective implementation. Most of the respondents indicated that the lack of funding affected the programming and the activities. In some cases, the governmental institutions managed to use other funded projects within the organizations to work on child marriage. According to respondents, there is a lack in allocated budget for child marriage programmes in general, not only in humanitarian contexts. Some respondents mentioned specifically the lack of funding for child marriage programming, while one respondent highlighted a general reduction in funding due to global and regional crises:

"We always had a major obstacle, which was financial support. Any [awareness] lecture you want to give required money. We went to schools and benefited from their classrooms and students during activity periods, but if we wanted to educate counsellors, parents, we couldn't do it because we needed a budget for it."
– Government official, Jordan

Donors influence programming. A few participants stated that the donor is influencing the location of implementation, targeting certain groups, and intervention types:

"We are normally driven by the donors. So, if the donor says we have to do this, the implementers cannot disagree."
– Local NGO, Jordan

Sharing projects' lessons learned and evaluation is minimal. According to the respondents, most of the organizations have internal monitoring and evaluation departments to tackle project evaluation. To reflect the projects' achievements, most organizations have a set of indicators, including number of direct beneficiaries, budget line, post- and pre-evaluations, etc. The evaluation process depends on the

requirements of the donor, who might have an external evaluation policy. According to respondents – and also determined during the mapping – the results of evaluation processes are subject to data privacy policies, and in most cases the findings are not published. In addition, the evaluation conducted addresses the short-term outcomes evaluation rather than a long-term impact evaluation.

Jordan country-level recommendations

Recommendations were drafted in a facilitated session during the validation workshop with the consultant from Jordan, staff from UNICEF and UNFPA country offices, and members of international and local NGOs working in Jordan. They were reviewed by members of the RAF and the UNICEF and UNFPA regional offices. They are listed in Table 7.

Table 7: Jordan country-level recommendations

Recommendation		Stakeholder
Multilevel holistic interventions, contextualization and data		
1 Increase community engagement	Convene focus groups with communities to inform the design of programmes, create personas of targeted populations (human-centred approach) and understand the drivers of child marriage to design and/or adapt programmes that address relevant drivers.	Implementing partners
2 Develop a power map	Fund and implement the development of 'power mapping' to understand the individuals, institutions and stakeholders relevant to child marriage across different contexts and communities.	Donors, UNOs, INGOs
3 Expand SBC training programmes	Expand SBC training programmes to include policymakers and service providers to improve capacity, genuine willingness and commitment of governmental entities to address child marriage.	Donors, UNOs, INGOs
4 Map roles and responsibilities	Fund and implement the mapping of the role of the various involved sectors and actors in the prevention of child marriage and clearly delineate the roles of each, beyond sending and receiving referrals to child protection/GBV case management.	Donors, UNOs, INGOs
5 Research localized child marriage risk factors	Fund the research of child marriage risk factors specific to Jordan to ensure that they can be advocated as criteria for targeting of beneficiaries in programmes beyond the protection sector (education, health, economic empowerment).	Donors, UNOs, INGOs
6 Design monitoring and evaluation frameworks	Design joint monitoring and evaluation frameworks to measure the impact of these sectoral programmes on the prevention of child marriage.	Donors, UNOs, INGOs, implementing programmes
7 Harmonize data	Facilitate dialogue between the various entities publishing data on child marriages (e.g., DHS and sharia courts provide different prevalence numbers) to create a harmonized and consistent source of data.	Government, UNOs, INGOs
8 Document and disseminate data	Fund the documentation of best practices within Jordan and dissemination of evidence and data.	Donors, UNOs, INGOs

Recommendation		Stakeholder
Legislation		
9 Tackle the exceptions to the child marriage law	Design training and open dialogues with sharia judges and the wider community on understanding the principle of 'best interest of the child'. In particular, reduce the number of child marriage applications considered as valid exceptions to the law on the marriages under the age of 18.	UNOs, government
Collaboration and coordination		
10 Plan for continued coordination and training	Plan for and fund a coordination, awareness and training mechanism that continues beyond the end of the National Action Plan. This will ensure that current efforts to end child marriage and recent success in reduction of child marriage nationally are sustainable.	Government

Lebanon

Lebanon has experienced a set of crises that has moved it towards a country-wide humanitarian setting. In Iraq, much of the programming is likely shifting towards a development lens; in Lebanon, programming is likely becoming more humanitarian in nature.

Context

Lebanon has faced a complex and multifaceted humanitarian crisis in recent years, driven by political instability, economic collapse and the influx of refugees from neighbouring Syria. This multifaceted crisis has led to widespread suffering and a significant strain on the country's infrastructure and social services.

Various crises and conflicts have significantly impacted the lives of the Lebanese population, Syrian refugees and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. In addition to the multiple and complex crises, Lebanon is also marked by deep sectarian divides and a congressional system leading to frequent deadlock and inefficiency. The economic collapse faced by the country since 2019, one of the worst in modern history, has resulted in the Lebanese pound losing over 98 per cent of its value against the US dollar, causing rampant inflation, unemployment and poverty. The banking system's collapse has further eroded public trust and devastated life savings. In addition, Lebanon hosts approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees, the highest per capita number of refugees globally, placing immense pressure on already strained resources. Refugees live in precarious conditions with limited access to basic services, prompting significant international humanitarian assistance.

Since 2019, the situation has deteriorated sharply due to the economic and financial crisis, widespread anti-government protests and the banking sector meltdown. The COVID-19 pandemic further strained the healthcare system, and the 2020 Beirut port explosion caused massive casualties and infrastructure damage, exacerbating the country's fragile economy. The ongoing 2024 conflict at the southern border has led to significant internal displacement, worsening living conditions and increasing the need for humanitarian aid.

The above illustrates how Lebanon's humanitarian situation has escalated from being localized and focused on refugee populations to a country-wide crisis. This shift is now significantly impacting the most vulnerable Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian refugees dispersed nationwide, particularly in rural areas.

Lebanon has a complex legal system influenced by religious laws. The legal age for marriage varies depending on the religious community to which individuals belong. As such, traditional and cultural norms play a significant role in perpetuating child marriage in Lebanon.[40] In some communities, early marriage is seen as a way to protect girls' chastity and uphold family honour. Additionally, poverty, lack of education and limited opportunities for women and girls exacerbate the issue. Families may see marrying off their daughters at a young age as a way to alleviate financial burdens or secure alliances. Additionally, several humanitarian crises have exacerbated the issue, including the Syrian refugee crisis, with reports of increased child marriages among refugee communities in Lebanon.[41]

Recently, a National Study on Child Marriage in Lebanon (2024)[42] revealed that the average age of first marriage varies geographically, with a notable prevalence in rural areas such as Akkar and Bekaa, where it can be as low as 15 years old.

Other recent reports also indicate that approximately 6 per cent of Lebanese girls are married before the age of 18, and 1 per cent are married before the age of 15.[43] Among Syrian refugee girls in Lebanon, the prevalence is markedly higher, with around 29 per cent married before the age of 18.[44] These statistics, reflecting the situation as of 2023, underscore the ongoing concerns and efforts to address child marriage in Lebanon. Further data show that girls are predominantly affected, constituting approximately 76 per cent of child marriages compared with boys.

Data collection

The primary data collection comprised 12 interviews with key stakeholders in Lebanon addressing the issue of child marriage. These stakeholders included governmental actors, United Nations agencies/INGOs, and local NGOs/CSOs. The sample distribution is presented in Table 8.

Table 8: Lebanon sample

Overall sample	12
Government	2
UNO/INGO	5
Local NGO	5

Findings

Describing the humanitarian context

Research interviews revealed that humanitarian settings in Lebanon have evolved significantly over the years, driven by the series of compounded crises highlighted above. All respondents clarified that the response of international and local actors has expanded from a narrow focus on refugees (mainly Syrian refugees in Lebanon) to a broader inclusion of Lebanese vulnerable populations impacted by the economic crisis since 2019.

All humanitarian actors interviewed reported adaptation to these changes, ensuring their interventions meet the diverse and dynamic needs of all affected groups. The shifts in programming encompassed:

- **Geographic and demographic adjustments**: Interventions have had to be tailored based on geographic and demographic distinctions. For example, specific regions like Bekaa, Akkar and Tripoli saw different impacts and needs compared with more privileged areas.

- **Increased scope of work**: Organizations expanded their scope from purely humanitarian response to include more development-oriented work, aiming to address systemic issues and build long-term resilience among affected populations. However, a common perception among the majority of respondents was that economic challenges have resulted in limited productivity among public servants in Lebanon. As one respondent noted, "when a public servant gets only 200 USD per month, you can't expect them to be motivated and devoted to do the work" (UNO/INGO, Lebanon).

- **Gender-based violence (GBV) interventions**: Specific groups, such as adolescent girls, required targeted interventions to address unique vulnerabilities, which have increased during the crises.

Understanding the practice and drivers of child marriage in humanitarian contexts

All interviewed individuals demonstrated a clear understanding of child marriage, consistently aligning with the definition provided by UNICEF. When asked about drivers and barriers, the dominance of *patriarchal views in communities*, along with deep-seated traditions and social norms, were significantly reported as main drivers to child marriage in Lebanon by all interviewees. This issue is especially prevalent among Syrian refugees but is increasingly noticeable among Lebanese families too. In many areas, the belief that girls are mainly valuable as wives and mothers leads to early marriages, seen as a way to protect them and secure their future. It's worth noting that this was reported by all interviewees, often intertwined with religious practices under 'cultural norms'. One UNO/INGO staff member noted:

"The hindering factors … are the traditions, the social norms, and you know, as much as I hate to say it, but this is something that was taking place within the Syrian refugee communities prior to them fleeing to Lebanon."
– UNO/INGO, Lebanon

The *economic and financial crisis* in Lebanon has been a major driver of child marriage, as reported by all interviewees. The crisis has drastically increased poverty levels among both Lebanese and refugee communities, prompting families to marry off their daughters at an early age to reduce the financial burden. This desperate measure is seen as a way to secure the girls' future and alleviate immediate economic pressures on the family. The majority of respondents reported that these negative coping mechanisms are observed among Syrian refugees in Lebanon but also among Lebanese from lower income brackets living in rural areas:

"Another barrier is of course the harsh living conditions ... there are overcrowded accommodation units, so they need to get rid of girls first to free [living] space. Another behaviour is actually parents promoting child marriage [as] a protective measure for their girls not driving into sexual relations or harassment."
– UNO/INGO, Lebanon

Facilitators and challenges to extant programming to address child marriage

Programming to address child marriage in Lebanon is widespread and cross-cutting, appearing in several different efforts and sectors. A desk review of key interventions identified more than 35 programmes with child marriage as a primary or secondary objective. This preliminary mapping provided a robust foundation for understanding the landscape of efforts and guided the subsequent data collection process, which was also validated throughout the primary data collection with key stakeholders in Lebanon and within the validation workshop. These efforts involve collaborations between government bodies, NGOs and international agencies.

The following details notable programmes and outputs.

1. **Legislative efforts**: There have been ongoing efforts to pass laws that set the minimum age for marriage at 18 and penalize those involved in child marriages. Draft laws have been prepared by organizations such as the Lebanese Women's Democratic Gathering (RDFL) and introduced in parliament.[45]

2. **United Nations agencies, other INGOs and local NGOs/CSOs programmes**:

a. **With child marriage as primary objective**

– UNICEF has been actively working to combat child marriage in Lebanon through supporting the Ministry of Social Affairs in launching a national action plan[46] and a national social and behavioural change and communication plan – the QUDWA Initiative through UNICEF, which aims to address the root causes of harmful practices against girls, boys and women while encouraging behaviours and norms that promote their well-being, dignity and equality.

– Other initiatives (i.e., by ABAAD, KAFA, AND, LECORVAW, etc.) also include protection programmes (GBV), different awareness campaigns, educational programmes and community engagement with a focus on providing girls with the information and support needed to resist child marriage and promoting gender equality and child protection.

– The Girls Not Brides global partnership of organizations, including members in Lebanon, focuses on ending child marriage and enabling girls to fulfil their potential.

b. **With child marriage as secondary objective**

Several initiatives aim to combat child marriage through education and protection strategies. The latest initiatives include:

– Notably, Women and Girls Safe Spaces by United Nations agencies designed to offer a secure and supportive environment where women and girls can access comprehensive services. This includes psychosocial support, legal aid and health services. They are vital in providing life-saving interventions, particularly in humanitarian settings.

– The ANERA SAMA project, a comprehensive programme targeting this issue, particularly among vulnerable populations such as Syrian refugees, Palestinians and impoverished Lebanese communities through remedial classes and conditioned financial assistance to encourage school retention among girls at risk of child marriage.

3. **Research and data collection**: Several published research pieces with a focus on child marriage took place in Lebanon, particularly within the context of the Syrian refugee crisis and the broader humanitarian setting, such as those by: Women's Refugee Commission and Johns Hopkins Center for Humanitarian Health,[47] UNICEF,[48] Humanium,[49] Terres des Hommes,[50] and the International Rescue Committee.[51]

Implementing programming to address child marriage faces challenges in Lebanon, but also benefits from a strong enabling environment marked by many devoted actors. Several respondents from various backgrounds noted that having *numerous actors* is seen as a positive aspect, with many NGOs and CSOs actively working on protection issues, including child marriage, in Lebanon. They also emphasized the *capabilities* of some local actors (i.e., KAFA, ABAAD, RDFL, AND, etc.) as a significant facilitator. These local actors possess the knowledge, connections and commitment necessary to drive effective interventions and advocacy efforts.

Furthermore, the existence of a *national action plan (NAP)* on child marriage serves as a crucial starting point. This plan, as noted by several respondents, offers a structured framework for coordinated action and policy implementation. The Lebanese NAP to prevent and respond to child marriage was developed through collaboration between the Ministry of Social Affairs, represented by the Higher Council for Childhood, and UNICEF. It involved various government ministries, including the Ministries of Education, Justice, Health, Interior, and the National Commission for Lebanese Women. NGOs, international organizations and civil society groups also contributed. The major focus areas include legal reforms to set a minimum marriage age of 18 without exceptions, enhancing access to justice for girls at risk or already married, improving education and health services, and addressing economic vulnerabilities. The NAP also emphasized changing social behaviours and cultural norms that perpetuate child marriage, with a strong focus on protecting girls' rights, ensuring their safety and promoting their well-being. Additionally, the NAP aligns with Lebanon's international commitments to eliminate child marriage by 2030.

Additionally, in Lebanon the *localization* agenda[52] became more evident in various initiatives and programmes where international organizations are increasingly partnering with local NGOs by providing them with funding and capacity-building. This strategic shift – followed mostly by United Nations agencies and international NGOs working in Lebanon – is extremely beneficial, as reported by many interviewees:

"This approach enhanced the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions by empowering local organizations and ensuring that initiatives are well adapted to the local context."
– Local NGO, Lebanon

Efforts to address child marriage in Lebanon, particularly within humanitarian settings, face significant barriers that hinder effective intervention and prevention. According to all interviewees, these challenges are multifaceted and deeply rooted in the current socioeconomic and political landscape.

Interviews also revealed that the economic crisis has significantly affected caregivers' participation in available support programmes across all vulnerable populations. With increasing financial pressures, caregivers are often unable to engage in or prioritize activities that could help prevent child marriage, such as education and awareness sessions:

"The commitment of the caregivers to attend several sessions and several interventions, specifically considering the economic situation, is a difficulty at a certain point. We get a lot of dropouts of caregivers."
– Local NGO, Lebanon

Beyond economic challenges, the *political context* in Lebanon poses a huge barrier to addressing child marriage within humanitarian settings. The lack of a functioning government capable of passing legislative reform and overseeing and monitoring funds and actions complicates efforts to combat child marriage. This absence of governance and accountability mechanisms hinders the coordination and effectiveness of initiatives aimed at tackling this issue. The majority of interviewees reported that without necessary governmental oversight and support, implementing comprehensive strategies and allocating resources to fight child marriage become severely impeded:

"Let's not forget we got a point where we don't even have a government and now, we have to do the job that the government is supposed to do."
– UNO/INGO, Lebanon

"We're in a collapsed state and there is no monitoring or boundaries and everyone is going to act how they feel is right."
– Local NGO, Lebanon

Lack of data and evidence is also a hindrance to effective programming. Almost all interviewees noted the absence of impact and other comprehensive evaluations in their programming, relying solely on internal monitoring and evaluation departments to monitor indicators for donor reporting. As a result, there is little information on what works and what does not, limiting understanding of outcomes and the dissemination of information for shared learning among organizations.

Lastly, the *war situation in the south and territorial security* were cited by one respondent as hindering factors in reaching target populations. This highlights the impact of external factors, such as conflict and security concerns, on efforts to address child marriage.

Although the density of actors in the space was noted as a positive by some, the majority of respondents highlighted the challenges posed by the proliferation of *communication pathways* and numerous working groups, taskforces, coalitions and more. Working groups themselves were reported as internally very beneficial; however, the abundance of channels for communication was perceived as resulting in fragmented information flows between local and international actors from different sectors, complicating coordination efforts and hindering the exchange of crucial data among stakeholders when designing and implementing multisectoral programming:

"We have several different meetings going, such as the GBV working group, child protection working group, the PSS [psychosocial support] working group, [and the] case management working group."
– Local NGO, Lebanon

Interviewees also recognized the need for integrated approaches to effectively combat child marriage through tackling all underlying causes of vulnerabilities in Lebanon's complex and escalating context (i.e., increasing poverty, gender inequalities, negative coping mechanisms, psychological distress, etc.). One such approach, validated by a governmental actor and two other respondents, involves integrating education sector initiatives with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) to promote awareness at the school level, such as the UNICEF–MEHE Back to School campaign:

"The problem is with the organizations that work with children. Gender isn't being mainstreamed through their work. There are programmes that could be educational tools, and they can be very creative. Changing cultural norms should start with educating children."
– Local NGO, Lebanon

Lastly, interviews also revealed that the gap remains apparent, particularly in the lack of prioritized funds for *safe shelters* and consideration of this crucial refuge resource in cross-sectoral programming. This gap, as reported by two interviewees, underscores a significant challenge in Lebanon's efforts to address child marriage effectively.

When asked about enabling factors impacting child marriage in humanitarian settings programming in Lebanon, interviewed actors highlighted notable facilitators that provide a foundation for progress:

1. Several respondents from various backgrounds noted that having *numerous actors* is seen as a positive aspect, with many NGOs and CSOs actively working on protection issues, including child marriage, in Lebanon. They also emphasized the *capabilities* of some local actors (i.e., KAFA, ABAAD, RDFL, AND, etc.) as a significant facilitator. These local actors possess the knowledge, connections and commitment necessary to drive effective interventions and advocacy efforts.

2. Furthermore, the existence of a *national action plan* on child marriage serves as a crucial starting point. This plan, as noted by several respondents, offers a structured framework for coordinated action and policy implementation, providing a beacon of hope for addressing child marriage amid Lebanon's complex humanitarian landscape.

3. Additionally, in Lebanon the *localization* agenda[53] became more evident in various initiatives and programmes where international organizations are increasingly partnering with local NGOs to provide them with funding and capacity-building. This strategic shift, followed mostly by United Nations agencies and international NGOs working in Lebanon, is extremely beneficial, as reported by many interviewees.

Lebanon country-level recommendations

Table 9 lists recommendations that emerged from the data and facilitated discussions with individuals from the UNICEF and UNFPA Lebanon country offices, the consultant, and staff from INGOs working in Lebanon and regionally. The recommendations were reviewed by members of RAF and the regional offices of UNICEF and UNFPA.

Table 9: Lebanon country-level recommendations

Recommendation		Stakeholder
Legislation		
1 Reactivate national action plan on child marriage	Reactivate the discussion on the National Action Plan to Prevent and Mitigate Child Marriage in Lebanon (2020–2025) prepared by the Ministry of Social Affairs with technical support from UNICEF. The NAP aims to reduce child marriage by 60 per cent by 2025. This discussion should entail clarification of roles and responsibilities for the relevant stakeholders, including clarification of the steering committee.	RAF, government
Multilevel holistic interventions, contextualization and data		
2 Address the absence of evidence	Conduct research to properly assess the current status of child marriage rates among the Lebanese population amid increasing vulnerabilities to complement the already extensive research having been done on child marriage rates among Syrian refugees. Implement needs assessments and comprehensive impact evaluations to understand what is best practice in Lebanon regarding child marriage programming and to inform evidence-based programming and enhance effectiveness.	Donors, implementing partners
3 Design multisectoral programming	Design multisectoral programming integrating social protection, education, health and justice to promote girls' rights and prevent child marriage while considering successful community-based approaches in programming (i.e., QUDWA).	UNOs, INGOs, implementing partners
4 Consider setting	Design programming strategies that incorporate security considerations to reach vulnerable populations.	UNOs, INGOs, implementing partners
Addressing social norms and context		
5 Prioritize addressing drivers	Prioritize and increase funding for support programmes and initiatives addressing economic drivers of child marriage.	RAF, donors
6 Advocate for improved governance	Advocate for improved governance to enable effective oversight and implementation of child marriage prevention policies through lobbying with key stakeholders (such as MPs and legislators/ religious leaders/media) to push towards conducting legal reforms and ratifying the law to prevent child marriage in Lebanon.	Donors

Recommendation		Stakeholder
Coordination and collaboration		
7 Collaborate among stakeholders	Foster collaboration and networking among actors (NGOs, CBOs, WROs, INGOs, stakeholders, legislators, etc.) to join efforts and contribute together according to specific and clear strategy, guided by the NAP, to fight against child marriage.	RAF, government
8 Coordinate resources	Facilitate coordination efforts to streamline resources and eliminate redundancy in service provision while implementing the NAP through developing a monitoring and tracking tool.	Government, UNOs, INGOs
9 Consolidate communication	Consolidate communication pathways and working groups under unified governmental oversight for better coordination (in line with the roles and responsibilities of the NAP steering committee).	Government, UNOs, INGOs
Funding		
10 Advocate for funding	Advocate for sustained and flexible funding mechanisms to ensure stability and effectiveness of interventions.	RAF, government, UNOs, INGOs

Syria

Context

The humanitarian setting in Syria has witnessed a stormy crisis since 2011, classified as one of the most severe and complex crises of the century. The effects of this crisis extended beyond Syrian territory, through waves of displacement and migration, which begins inside Syria and extends with high intensity to neighbouring countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey) and to other countries at less intense levels.

Displacement movements were accompanied by deteriorating political and security conditions, as the Syrian government reports not controlling the northern, north-eastern and north-western regions, which in turn are subject to the actions of non-state actors (organizations that act in a political and military capacity), supported by the opposition forces and the Turkish government, in addition to the region under Kurdish control or under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

The social and economic impacts have deepened over the years, and increased with the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, as the Syrian economy contracted and the exchange rate of the national currency (Syrian pound) against the US dollar declined by more than 99 per cent (the exchange rate of the US dollar against the Syrian pound in 2011 was less than 50 Syrian pounds to one US dollar; today the exchange rate against the US dollar is approximately 15,000 Syrian pounds).

The humanitarian setting worsened due to the devastating earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria in February 2023, as villages and towns were completely or partially destroyed in the northern and western regions, which include the governorates of Aleppo, Latakia and Hama.

Additionally, the economic sanctions imposed by the United States of America and several European countries on the Syrian regime contributed to the decline in government services, including electricity, roads and the internet, in addition to the severe shortage of fuel and other energy sources.

The lack of accurate data and information is one of the challenges that increases the severity of the effects of the Syrian crisis. In terms of numbers, the number of internally displaced people is estimated at 6.7 million people, 90 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line, and 13.4 million people need humanitarian assistance.[54]

National laws set the minimum age for marriage after completing 18 years of age for both sexes:

"Marriageable age shall be realized by completing 18 years of age for boys and girls."[55]
– Personal Status Law, Article 16

However, the law permits the marriage of children of at least 15 years of age under certain conditions:

"If a male or female teenager claims to have reached puberty after completing fifteen years of age and requests marriage, the judge will permit it if he finds out the truth of their claim, the physical tolerance of their bodies … and their knowledge of marital rights."
– Law No. 4 of 2019, Article 18

Act No. 24/2018, issued in 2018, amended certain articles of the Penal Code of 1949 concerning the marriage of a minor outside the approval of the competent court:

"(1) A penalty of one to six months' imprisonment and a fine of fifty thousand to 100,000 Syrian pounds shall be imposed on anyone who concludes the marriage of a virgin minor outside the competent court without the consent of the guardian.

(2) A fine of 25,000 to 50,000 Syrian pounds shall be imposed on anyone who concludes a minor's marriage outside the competent court if the marriage was concluded with the consent of the guardian."
– Penal Code, Article 469

Child marriage in general was common in Syria before 2011, with the Pan Arab Project for Family Health survey from 2009 estimating it made up 17 per cent of marriage cases.[56] The reason was mainly due to social customs and religious beliefs, and most cases were concentrated in rural areas.

With the beginning of the deterioration of the humanitarian setting in Syria, child marriage rates rose for many reasons, including providing protection, especially for girls, during periods of conflict and displacement. The deterioration of economic conditions also reinforced the cultural practice of child marriage. But the absence of data still poses a challenge; data are needed to determine the extent of the problem and thus address it.

Data collection

Stakeholders for key informant interviews were selected from partner NGOs of UNICEF and UNFPA, in addition to officials from both agencies at the national and local levels. Government stakeholders were not included in the sample given the sensitivities around the topic of child marriage in Syria.

The data collection sample was distributed across three geographical areas:

- The southern area includes the governorates of Damascus and rural Damascus.
- The central area includes the governorates of Homs and Hama.
- The northern area includes the Aleppo governorate and its surroundings.[57]

Tables 10 and 11 show the characteristics of the sample. Emphasis was placed on the method of in-person interviews rather than the virtual method, to ensure greater interaction from the respondent.

Table 10: Syria sample by area and stakeholders

Area	Number of key informant interviews	NGOs	UNOs
Southern (Damascus and rural Damascus)	7	4	1
Central (Homs and Hama)	5	3	1
Northern (Aleppo)	4	2	1
Total	**16**	**9**	**3**

Note: The number of respondents is greater than the number of interviews because some interviews were with more than one person from the same stakeholder.

Table 11: Syria sample by gender and interview method

Area	Number of key informant interviews	Male	Female	Method
Southern (Damascus and rural Damascus)	7	3	8	In person
Central (Homs and Hama)	5	2	3	In person
Northern (Aleppo)	4	2	2	Virtual
Total	**16**	**7**	**13**	

Note: The number of respondents is greater than the number of interviews because some interviews were with more than one person from the same stakeholder.

Findings

Describing the humanitarian context

Respondents' answers related to defining the humanitarian setting were divided into two parts. United Nations agency officials identified which areas and population categories to target through assessments conducted annually by agencies and organizations, led by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which adopts risk and severity scales to determine focus areas and target groups:

"In its interventions, UNICEF relies on the humanitarian situation through assessments carried out by organizations every period according to the risk and severity scale (from 1–5)."
– UNO/INGO, Syria

Another United Nations organization's interventions focus on the affected areas in Syria, which include almost all the governorates, and the areas are decided according to the risk scale classification.

Representatives of local NGOs tended to consider that all Syrian regions and groups were afflicted and targeted, and that those who were not affected by displacement and conflict were affected by the deteriorating economic situation, and the decline of basic government services such as education, health, etc., and local communities became either the returnees or the hosts. Both points of view can be considered as a humanitarian setting in the Syrian case:

"Homs, the city and countryside, can be considered one of the governorates most affected by the crisis that began in 2011. In other words, every citizen is either displaced or returnees."
– Local NGO, Syria

Understanding the practice and drivers of child marriage in humanitarian contexts

Many respondents reported that there is a strong link between school dropout and child marriage:

"Continuing children in the educational process constitutes the first line of defence against child marriage."
– Local NGO, Syria

There is a large number of schools that have gone out of service due to the crisis and, recently, due to the earthquake, in addition to a shortage in the number of teachers, especially in rural areas, and direct conflict (northern Syria and north-western Syria). All these factors increased school dropout rates, especially for girls:

"Weak secondary education, especially in the countryside. About 60 per cent of villages do not have secondary or vocational education, which leads to girls dropping out of education and thus becoming more vulnerable to early marriage."
– Local NGO, Syria

Although there are laws to prevent school dropout, these laws are ineffective due to the absence of a reporting system for cases of school dropout or child marriage. The deteriorating economic situation of most of the population was also a major factor, as poor families tolerated the marriage of their girls at early ages.

Awareness-raising activities implemented by NGOs and international organizations on issues of child protection and gender-based violence have not significantly affected changing societal behaviour with regard to social norms that encourage child marriage, especially in rural areas. Child marriage is a deep-rooted problem in Syria, due to social norms, religious beliefs and a weak legislative structure, but during the Syrian crisis in 2011 and after, displacement and migration movements due to the conflict caused an increase in the rates of child marriage, especially among girls, as child marriage was resorted to as a form of protection:

"Protection from sexual and physical attacks in addition to securing living expenses."
– Local NGO, Syria

Religious beliefs clearly coincide with social norms in encouraging child marriage, and the influence of religion appears more clearly in large cities, while social norms are more influential in the countryside. Some respondents indicated the ability of religion to influence society in general and that dialogue with religious leaders could be a way to confront child marriage.

Respondents in the central and northern regions reported that child labour was a gateway to child marriage, especially for boys, which changes the stereotypical situation of feminizing child marriage. A working boy is perceived by society to have become economically independent and therefore ready to establish a family. As with school dropout, there is a law to limit child labour, but it is ineffective and there is no mechanism for reporting cases of child labour:

"Child labour constitutes a fertile environment for the increase in child marriage."
– UNO/INGO, Syria

Most respondents reported that although the laws prohibit child marriage under the age of 18, the same laws permit child marriage over the age of 15 under special conditions, and this point constituted a weakness in the legal system because it did not constitute actual protection.

Facilitators and challenges to extant programming to address child marriage

The desk review found no interventions with a primary stated aim of addressing child marriage, a finding that was validated by the key informant interviews. Most programmes identified through the desk review over the last 10 years addressed child marriage as a secondary aim, integrated within other programmes. Still, publicly available documentation and information on these programmes was limited; details and further information was provided through interviews and conversations with the UNICEF and UNFPA country offices. Many of these were programmes supported by UNICEF in the field of child protection and those supported by UNFPA in the field of GBV, defining child marriage as a form of GBV. UNFPA's Women and Girls Safe Spaces provided information, skills and services for adolescent girls, with the aim of spreading awareness of GBV – which included child marriage – and providing married girls with support in family planning and maternal health. Similarly, the Family Protection Unit, an anti-violence centre in rural Damascus supported by UNFPA since 2017, provides services for women and child survivors of GBV, which includes child marriage. Currently, UNFPA Syria is piloting a programme – 'GBV Social Norms Pilot' – that seeks to shift harmful norms that produce violence against women and girls, particularly intimate partner violence and early marriage. Piloted in an urban and rural area of Aleppo governorate, the programme consists of a couples' curriculum, an opinion leaders' curriculum, and a community activism component which aims to reduce families' and communities' tolerance and acceptability of intimate partner violence and early marriage. In

addition, there were programmes that were less relevant to addressing child marriage in the areas of reproductive health, gender, GBV, and youth and adolescent programmes.

Child marriage was not perceived as a government priority due to the deteriorating economic conditions in Syria and the presence of more urgent priorities such as providing bread and electricity and supporting health and education. Respondents shared that government efforts were limited to amending laws and conducting a number of studies. However, at the same time, United Nations organizations and INGOs reported that there is a desire among government stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Social and Labour Affairs, to address child marriage if technical and financial support is available.

Coordination among stakeholders in addressing child marriage was limited to coordination between United Nations organizations and local NGOs funded by them, by virtue of the processes agreed to in cooperation and partnership agreements. Coordination with the government was limited to procedural approvals, such as approvals of the Ministry of Social and Labour Affairs on NGOs' activities, or approvals of the Ministry of Education on programming in schools and implementing awareness sessions within the relevant programming. A number of respondents indicated that there is a gap in coordination between country offices of agencies and hubs in maintaining the level of planning and design of interventions.

Most of the respondents reported that there is an almost complete absence of data on child marriage, which they attributed to several reasons:

- Respondents from UNOs/INGOs and local NGOs perceived that child marriage was absent from the government's priorities and resulted in an absence of monitoring procedures:

"If the government does not recognize child marriage as a problem, why monitor its data?"
– Local NGO, Syria

- Respondents reported that they perceived the lack of data to also be driven by the weakness of the capabilities of the national bodies responsible for statistics, such as the Central Bureau of Statistics.

- In general, respondents shared that monitoring child marriage is a complex process, as most cases of child marriage take place informally outside the court and are not documented.

- Respondents pointed to the lack of a monitoring system and/or reporting mechanisms to monitor child marriage within health programmes or schools.

Many respondents reported the difficulty of measuring the results and impact of interventions to address child marriage in the short term, because interventions that target societal behaviour require a longer timeframe to effect change and measure impact. Instead, results were limited to quantitative monitoring indicators, such as the number of sessions, the number of beneficiaries, etc.:

"One of the difficulties that our programmes face is measuring the results and their impact, because societal behavioural changes do not appear directly, but rather appear in the long term."
– UNO/INGO, Syria

Syria country-level recommendations

Table 12 represents recommendations that emerged from the data and discussions during the validation workshop with individuals from the UNICEF and UNFPA Syria country offices, RAF, the consultant conducting the Syria data collection and analysis, and representatives from UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight. No representatives from civil society were available to join the Syria discussion sessions, but these were subsequently reviewed and revised by RAF and the UNICEF and UNFPA country offices. Recommendations and associated stakeholders were identified by participants in these discussions.

Table 12: Syria country-level recommendations

Recommendation		Stakeholder
Addressing context		
1 Support education systems	Provide resources and capacity-building for formal and informal education systems and vocational education systems to ensure that children, especially girls, continue in the educational process, which constitutes effective prevention against child marriage.	Donors, implementing partners
2 Support economic empowerment	Expand and adequately fund economic empowerment and livelihood programmes for girls and families, to provide incomes that reduce families' tolerance for marrying their daughters out of poverty.	Donors, implementing partners
Multilevel programming, contextualization and data		
3 Engage with religious leaders	Open and facilitate dialogue with religious and other community leaders to reach a common understanding about the health, social, economic and psychological risks of child marriage. Strive to rectify misconceptions in religious interpretations and to change negative social and cultural norms, considering that they have a strong influence on society and negative social norms. Encourage religious and other community leaders to use their influence to speak out about, sensitize communities to, and take action against child marriage.	Government and implementing partners
4 Localize and contextualize	Adapt and design primary interventions to address child marriage based on the local characteristics of each region, while continuing to support secondary interventions integrated with other interventions.	UNOs, INGOs, implementing partners, government
5 Support government monitoring	Finance and build capabilities for government to establish a monitoring and reporting system on cases of child marriage and child protection in general, to ensure effective implementation of laws.	Government
6 Measure impact	Develop monitoring and evaluation systems to measure the results and impact of interventions, with a focus on developing clear needs-oriented indicators, due to the inability of current systems to measure results and impact as required.	Donors, implementing partners

Recommendation		Stakeholder
Capacity and coordination		
7 Advocacy and partnership with government	Facilitate dialogue with government to build capacities and enhance engagement, mainly in leading efforts and coordinating with stakeholders from non-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies.	Government, donors, UNOs, INGOs

Yemen

Context

Suffering from a longstanding civil war and high tensions between governing groups across the country, Yemen remains one of the world's largest humanitarian crises, with an estimated 18.2 million people, including 9.8 million children, requiring humanitarian assistance and protection in 2024, with 4.5 million people estimated to be internally displaced.[58]

According to the 2022–2023 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), 3 in 10 women aged 20–24 years were married before the age of 18 and after the age of 15 in Yemen.[59]

Yemen was considered a humanitarian situation even before the current armed conflict, having the highest poverty rate in the Middle East and North Africa region, and the war has further aggravated the situation. This is especially the case for internally displaced persons – and there are now more than 4.5 million of them in Yemen – who have not only lost income opportunities but are often denied all kinds of basic services, including the possibility for girls to go to school. Most internally displaced person children in camps are out of school, depriving them of an education and exposing them to greater risks of recruitment to armed groups and to child marriage.

The issue of child marriage gained significant media attention during Yemen's national dialogue in 2013. It was a contentious topic, with debates over its prioritization in the national dialogue and its use by right-wing religious parties to garner popular support for traditional dogma and oppose a foreign-dictated agenda on family and religious views. Religious groups divided into those who pointed to Aisha's marriage at age 9 as the Prophet Muhammad's third wife, and those who point to the marriage of Fatima (the Prophet Muhammad's daughter) at age 18. Liberal and human rights groups, both national and international, supported the age of 18. Such political divide seems to have led to the topic not being prioritized by authorities, who attempt to resolve humanitarian, social and economic needs that are considered to be more pressing.

Religious texts differentiate between puberty (marking the end of childhood) and maturity (the onset of adulthood), with local practices often considering 15 as the transition age from child to adult, as suggested by several study participants. This age coincides with the completion of mandatory primary education (up to 9th grade) in Yemen. Secondary education extends for three more years, making the age of 18 another significant milestone in a person's life. As a result, the common age for marriage

often corresponds to educational attainment: 15 in rural areas (where only primary education is typically available) and 17 or 18 in urban areas with access to secondary education.

In local cultures, there is less of a focus on the specific age at the time of marriage, but rather more on a person's readiness for marriage, as perceived by the family. As a result, there are three terms that could be used, as described by a local NGO study participant for the topic: early marriage, youth marriage, and child marriage. Early marriage is defined as before age 18, youth marriage is defined as after puberty and before school, and child marriage is defined as before puberty. It is important to note that marriage is often viewed as a part of a chronological milestone, where young boys and girls mark a step forward in their lifetime.

Data collection

Five local NGOs and seven international NGOs/United Nations organizations were interviewed, along with one government representative and one focus group discussion. All respondents have senior positions dealing with child marriage and gender-based violence (GBV) in their organization. Study participants included child protection and GBV cluster coordinators, programme managers and project coordinators looking after work in Sanaa, Sa'dah, Hodeidah, Aden, Shabwah and Raymah, and have had experiences in other governorates in Yemen, such as Marib, Taiz, Jawf, Lahj, Ibb and Hajjah. Interviews were conducted face to face as well as virtually. In addition, one focus group discussion with government officials was organized.

Findings

Describing the humanitarian context

As discussed above, we have categorized Yemen as a protracted humanitarian situation that envelops the whole country. Responses from the qualitative data collection confirm this categorization. The majority of respondents agreed that Yemen has been in a humanitarian setting for the past 10 years since the war erupted in 2015. However, some respondents felt Yemen should have been classified as a humanitarian crisis earlier, since the Arab Spring uprising in 2011 when the government was faulted for failing to provide basic services. Some went as far back as 2002 to Yemen's Sa'dah Wars.

Understanding the practice and drivers of child marriage in humanitarian contexts

The prevailing notion that a girl is grown up and ready to be married at age 15 has been deeply entrenched for centuries in Yemeni society. For this reason, it is sensitive to even use the words 'child marriage' in advocacy against this practice. Organizations have instead been forced to talk of marriage under the legal age. According to a key informant, "Most girls are married after primary education (15 years). This is the social norm; it's a shame if [she is] 18 and not married" (local NGO, Yemen).

Most respondents agreed that it is usual for desperately poor families – and not just limited to internally displaced persons – to use child marriage as a strategy to cope with conflict-related hardship. In addition, social insecurity caused by the conflict has turned child marriage into a way for parents to protect their young daughters from both harassment and destitution:

"Child marriage in humanitarian settings occurs mostly when people have to move from a stable life to unstable life, so people have to cope with the situation and then they could be forced

to marry their daughters. This is more relevant when people are in IDP [internally displaced person] camps and people lose their privacy and daughters are subjected to harassment in camps, so their families protect them by marrying them off."
– UNO/INGO, Yemen

Facilitators and challenges to extant programming to address child marriage

The desk review – and subsequent key informant interviews and focus group discussions – found that there are many interventions that support women and children implemented by local NGOs in Yemen, often in partnership with UNICEF and UNFPA. Two different approaches within the types of programmes to address child marriage were found: protection and prevention.

The customary approach has been advocacy combined with case management for survivors, where girls suffering the consequences of child marriage are seen as a subgroup of GBV survivors. This approach focuses on *protection* after the occurrence of a child marriage and its negative consequences.

Three different strategies can be identified within this approach, as garnered from key informant interviews with representatives of national and international NGOs:

Strategy 1 focuses on medical and psychosocial services to girl survivors of child marriage, who get assistance from a psychiatrist to treat traumas if needed, are provided shelter if required, and take part in education and empowerment interventions. Training includes life skills as well as skills to take up various self-employment income-generating activities. If possible, girls are brought back to formal schooling. Child marriage survivors who have been abused are also given legal aid if needed. Case management has a typical duration of one year for each individual case.

For example, one NGO implements a programme teaching girls reading and writing through a methodology called 'Reflect', which was developed by the United States Agency for International Development. The programme is implemented in 23 districts of 5 governorates by a local NGO, Yemen Women Union, in partnership with UNFPA. It is based on participatory discussion with no dedicated curriculum. This programme employs functional literacy training combined with awareness-raising, a variant of 'pedagogy of the oppressed' that was globally pioneered in the 1970s.

Strategy 2 focuses on strengthening the legal framework, which is complicated by the fact that Yemen is now a divided country with two sets of authorities based on geography and administration set-ups. Such work is carried out through influential people, judges, sheikhs and a network of lawyers, who are trained on GBV ethics as well as how to deal with GBV survivors in general, including survivors of child marriage.

Strategy 3 aims to change cultural norms through gender transformative programmes. This, among other aims, involves raising the awareness of parents, and gender-transformative programmes and approaches.

The other approach was an integrated *preventive* approach, attempting to prevent child marriages before they occur through addressing the main root cause, which, according to several informants, is poverty. In this category of programmes, the child marriage prevention aspect is packaged as an integrated part of many other interventions. International NGOs have a sound understanding that they need to build on what organizational capacity and motivation exists in the country to deal with child marriage. It is important to join hands to do things together. As expressed by a key informant from a UNO/INGO: "I cannot protect your child more than you yourself do, than your community does, than what your country does" (UNO/INGO, Yemen). In the projects it supports, UNICEF has often combined case management and life skills training, as well as integrated child protection and education. There is also integration with healthcare activities, although this is not yet equally developed.

An innovative approach is the arrangement of a tribal social contract, known as 'Marquoom', that bans harmful social practices. In response to the organization's support to the local community, tribal leaders commit to support advocacy against child marriage as well as various support activities for women and girls, women's right to inheritance, dropout girls going back to school, and so forth. A local NGO in the north described Marquoom as a powerful advocacy strategy. Another in the south pointed to contracts with families to postpone marriages for cash transfers:

"Community committees with influential people is one of the very strong strategies that you can [use to] implement advocacy, dialogue, community campaigns, and we have managed to have advocacy documents, a tribal document like Marquoom, that bans harmful practices."
– UNO/INGO, Yemen

The majority view among organizations seems to be that only integrated programmes that include education and economic empowerment will effectively work against child marriage. Projects in the past tackled only education, or only child marriage, or only children in conflict with the law, or disability, or girls' empowerment, but these one-dimensional interventions did not work. Respondents noted that interventions need to provide the whole family with a number of support activities, such as income to the family (including cash transfers) combined with economic empowerment, school rehabilitation, teacher support, school kits, etc., and be sustained for a longer period of time. One respondent defined long term as five years. In a previous project (before the war), girls were helped to find jobs as schoolteachers after they finished secondary education.

There are, however, also NGO voices to the effect that an agenda of economic empowerment of adolescent girls only results in giving them the additional responsibility of breadwinner in the household. Local NGO respondents shared their perception that interventions need to provide the household with income and services to enable the caregivers to support girls, rather than enabling girls to economically support their caregivers:

"We need to first tackle the family before the adolescent. If you target girls, then the family will depend on these girls, and she becomes responsible for family support. So, interventions need to provide the household with income and services to enable the caregivers to support girls … Sometimes we train the girl with economic empowerment, then the girl takes the responsibility of the entire household."
– Local NGO, Yemen

Interventions that aimed to keep girls in school up to the age of 18 were perceived as an effective disincentive against child marriage. This is important, not least for internally displaced person families,

whose children are often denied access to schooling. However, there are observations that this is not always helpful; secondary schools are not always accessible to girls, either due to distance or capacity. But a general focus on education of girls helps organizations fulfil goals to discourage child marriage.

According to study participants, the authorities – in the case of both north and south Yemen – do not give priority to curb the incidence of child marriages. The situation is especially politically sensitive in north Yemen, where organizations' ability to implement activities is severely circumscribed by the Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. While case management for girls and women who married as children is accepted, advocacy and behaviour change interventions against it are not. In the south, implementing partners face religious groups that label NGOs as having a western agenda, as indicated by study participants.

Respondents note a lack of capacity – both the capacity of organizations engaged in the prevention of and response to child marriage, and government capacity to enforce laws. NGO staff dealing with GBV have seldom received any training from the organization to help them deal with prevention or response. There are psychiatrists and doctors engaged to deal with psychosocial trauma and medical cases, and there are lawyers ready to deal with legal issues, but NGO staff responsible for project management and field implementation have received no special training. There is also a need for hands-on mentoring arrangements in carrying out work.

In addition, a lack of resources is perceived to impede effective law enforcement. For example, the recent law to prevent human trafficking includes a number of government responsibilities to protect children, but they are not carried out due to lack of funding. As reported by NGO and UNO/INGO respondents, there is a lack of capacity to detect and deal with cases of forgery of birth certificates and other documents. Forgery of documents is more common in rural areas. Legal trustees need training on registration of marriage certificates at courts to ensure proper documentation. In some cases, the legal trustee needs training on how to identify forged personal IDs and how to document marriage certificates in court. The government representative interviewed agrees that the ministries do not have the required resources. They cannot afford to pay staff salaries, let alone have the means to implement proper policy to support action against chid marriage. Raising the capacity of various stakeholders, such as community leaders, to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem, however, is also seen as a challenge.

Organizations interviewed seem to recognize the desirable outcomes of their interventions, even though firm evidence is elusive. Political and social sensitivities make it difficult to measure results precisely and accurately. In general, programmes known to the key informants have not been evaluated. Some pointed to standard programme evaluations where child marriage is a secondary aim. The success of child marriage response interventions is known from anecdotal evidence on the success of individual cases. There are, however, privacy aspects to consider in the publicity of results for all programmes dealing with survivors of GBV. The integrated support programmes, where discouragement of child marriage is wrapped within a much larger envelope, generally do not capture what reduction, if any, in child marriages has occurred.

NGOs interviewed are of the opinion that there is sufficient cooperation between various organizations and coordination of their interventions through the clusters. The one government representative interviewed, on the other hand, has not seen much of such cooperation between organizations.

Coordination challenges identified by organizations are mainly related to local authorities needing time to review and approve programmes related to child marriage. This, in turn, leads to a need for donors to understand the time constraints of NGOs and the need for localized adaptation of interventions.

Yemen country-level recommendations

Country-level recommendations were drafted by participants in the validation workshop and included the representatives from UNFPA and UNICEF and the consultant conducting the data collection. They concluded that addressing child marriage should be part of a holistic approach to women's and girls' development and empowerment. From this perspective, the focus group discussion looked into Yemen's humanitarian situation and, inter alia, offered the following recommendations of priorities. Table 13 represents recommendations that emerged from the data and discussions during the validation workshop. These were subsequently reviewed and revised by members of RAF and the UNICEF and UNFPA country offices.

Table 13: Yemen country-level recommendations

Recommendation		Stakeholder
Addressing context		
1 Support economic empowerment	Fund and design economic empowerment projects for poor families on a sustainable basis to ensure the integration of girls into education. As girls' education is seen as a deterrent to child marriage, addressing the economic barrier to school integration will reduce child marriage.	Donors, UNOs, INGOs
2 Support school enrolment	Fund the training of Ministry of Education officials in designing and implementing incentive programmes for families with the aim of enrolling their girls in education, which is seen as a deterrent to child marriage.	Government, donors
3 Support economic empowerment	Fund programmes that provide economic empowerment of women through small and micro businesses, training in entrepreneurship, and marketing facilities.	Donors, UNOs, INGOs
4 Integrate child protection in national plans	Integrate social and child protection needs in recovery plans for Yemen.	Government, donors, UNOs, INGOs
5 Create training for local leaders and community members	Design and fund training for community leaders, religious leaders and local authorities on the negatives of child marriage and how to protect children at risk of marriage. This training should include all community and family decision-makers, engaging men and boys in the conversation as well as women and girls.	Donors, UNOs, INGOs
6 Prioritize funding for internally displaced persons	Prioritize funding for the design of programmes to address child marriage specifically in internally displaced person camps for support of these households.	Donors, UNOs, INGOs

Recommendation		Stakeholder
Legislation		
7 Develop education legislation and policy	Draft and pass policy, laws and regulation to enforce free education until the completion of secondary school, as education is seen as a deterrent to child marriage.	Government, donors
8 Develop database on child marriage	Create buy-in to develop a legal database on child marriages to enable accurate, disaggregated statistics on child marriage victims, including areas of concentration, causes and consequences.	Government, donors
9 Assign responsibility of issuing marriage documentation	Lobby for the Ministry of Justice to undertake the task of issuing official marriage documents and require the legal secretaries to officially receive and document marriage documents.	Government, donors

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