

The Regional Action Forum to End Child Marriage in Arab States/MENA (RAF) is delighted to share its March 2026 newsletter covering the latest child marriage updates.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY STATEMENT

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2026 STATEMENT: RAF WARNS OF INCREASED RISKS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS AMID ESCALATING CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

 PUBLISHED DATE: 08 MAR, 2026



On International Women's Day 2026, the Regional Action Forum (RAF) raised alarm over the escalating risks facing women and girls across the Middle East amid ongoing crises. Rising displacement, disrupted services, and economic hardship are increasing exposure to gender-based violence and child marriage, as families resort to harmful coping mechanisms. RAF calls for urgent action to protect girls through strengthened services, access to education and healthcare, legal protections, and sustained investment in locally led prevention efforts.

[Read the full statement here.](#)

EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF THE RAF KICKS OFF IN MARCH

Matthew Dalling, Senior Protection Specialist, has been engaged to lead the 2026 external review of the RAF. As highlighted during the last all-members meeting, the review will assess RAF's relevance, effectiveness, and value as a regional platform, including its role in coordination, knowledge sharing, advocacy, and member engagement. Findings will help inform RAF's future direction under the next phase of the Global Programme to End Child Marriage.

The review will take place over the coming weeks, during which members will be invited to complete a short online survey and may be contacted for key informant interviews. Participation will be selected to ensure diverse and representative perspectives. RAF members' inputs will be essential to shaping the platform's future, and their engagement in this process is highly encouraged. The results of the external review will be presented at the next all members' meeting of 2026.



RAF DISCUSSION ON CM PREVENTION IN CONTEXT OF RETURNS TO SYRIA

On 30 March 2026, the RAF convened a closed discussion with members and partners to examine child marriage risks in the context of large-scale returns to and within Syria. With over 3 million people – including refugees and internally displaced persons – returning since late 2024, participants highlighted how ongoing economic hardship, disrupted services, and protection gaps continue to heighten risks for girls. The discussion explored emerging trends, gaps in prevention and response, and promising approaches to support returnee populations. Particular emphasis was placed on the need to develop contextually appropriate tools that would allow for sustainable social and behavioral change among the various communities of Syria.



INTRODUCING NEW RAF COORDINATOR

After three impactful years, Evita Mouawad is stepping down from her role as RAF Coordinator. We extend our sincere thanks to Evita for her leadership, dedication, and invaluable contributions in strengthening RAF as a dynamic regional platform to end child marriage. As we bid her a warm farewell, we are also thrilled to welcome Zeina Merhi as the new RAF Coordinator.

Zeina is a Communications and Social and Behavior Change Specialist with over ten years of experience designing and leading communication, advocacy, and community engagement programmes with UNICEF, UNDP, and partners across the MENA region. Her work has focused on preventing violence against children and gender-based violence, promoting positive parenting, and shifting harmful social and gender norms through evidence-based, locally grounded approaches. Combining her expertise in child protection and gender advocacy with a systems-thinking and innovation-driven approach, Zeina brings strong experience in social marketing, partnership building, and scaling sustainable behaviour change. We look forward to her leadership as RAF continues to grow and drive collective action across the region in close collaboration with members and partners!



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