Guidance on Child Marriage

Programming for married girls and girls at risk of child marriage in forced displacement and crisis settings

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Protecting Girls and Transforming Futures: Responding to Child Marriage with Urgency and Care

Rising levels of forced displacement driven by conflict, human rights violations, and climate shocks, are eroding protection systems, increasing economic vulnerabilities, deepening gender inequality and placing immense strain on families and communities. For adolescent girls, these overlapping crises have created a perfect storm – one that strips away protection, opportunity and choice.

In displacement settings, child marriage is not just a symptom of broken systems – it has become a desperate act for survival rooted in fear and fragility. Its impact is devastating – denying girls their rights to a childhood, to education, health, safety, and participation, and perpetuating gender-based violence and poverty across generations.

We must respond with urgency – and with purpose.

Today, more girls are being pushed into marriage than at any point in the past decade. In conflict zones and refugee-hosting communities, child marriage rates are nearly double the global average, and over 90% of the countries with the highest prevalence are currently crisis-affected.

While crises and displacement can heighten risks and vulnerabilities for girls and their families, child marriage must never be accepted as an inevitable or unavoidable consequence. Preventing child marriage – and supporting those already married – must be integral to protection and gender equality efforts, and central to the humanitarian imperative itself.

This joint guidance by UNHCR and Plan International provides the tools to do exactly that. It guides us in turning commitment into action – assisting staff and partners to analyse risks, design girl-responsive programmes, and deliver coordinated prevention, risk-mitigation and response interventions. It strengthens case management systems, connects to refugee protection procedures, and integrates child marriage prevention into education, livelihoods, health, and other key sectors.

At its heart lies an adolescent girl-responsive approach – one that recognizes girls in all their diversity and places their voices, agency, and aspirations at the centre of humanitarian action. The guidance reflects lessons from operations around the world – from South Sudan to Bangladesh, from Niger to Indonesia – and offers practical steps to ensure that every programme, policy, and partnership delivers real protection and choice for girls.

We have seen what is possible when responses are grounded in evidence, driven by communities, and shaped by girls themselves. This guidance calls on all of us – governments, humanitarian actors, donors, and communities to act with urgency, coherence and courage. Let this guidance be more than a reference. Let it be a catalyst for systemic change – so that every girl, everywhere, can live free from violence, make her own choices, and build her future with dignity and hope.

Ruvendrini Menikdiwela
Assistant High Commissioner for Protection,
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Reena Galani
Chief Executive Officer,
Plan International

This guidance is intended for the UNHCR and Plan International (herein Plan) staff and partners. It provides guidance on adolescent girl-responsive marriage prevention, risk mitigation and response programs and encourages a comprehensive, multisector, multilevel approach.

It includes considerations for case management for ever-married girls and girls at risk of child marriage and looks at the specific situation of refugee and asylum-seeking girls with regards refugee protection procedures. Refugee protection procedures comprises identity management and registration, refugee status determination, statelessness determination and comprehensive solutions. The latter may include local integration, voluntary repatriation, resettlement and complementary pathways for admission to third countries, including family reunification, private or community sponsorship programmes, humanitarian pathways, education, and labour mobility schemes.[1]

The guidance generally refers to girls because child marriage impacts girls in greater numbers, with serious and lifelong consequences. See Girls Not Brides, Child marriage in conflict- and crisis-affected settings: Evidence and practice, 2024.

Globally, the practice of child marriage happens because of gender inequality and the gender-based social norms that have been built on a system that discriminates against girls and women. Girls are affected by child marriage at six times the rate that it affects boys. Worldwide, one in every five women was married or in a union before reaching the age of 18 (approximately 20 per cent of the female population). See UNICEF, Child Marriage, 2023.

Therefore, this guidance centres on girls. However, many of the approaches, tools and strategies in this guidance can be adapted to meet the needs of boys at risk of child marriage or ever-married boys. Each operation should analyse child marriage in each unique and specific context and implement measures for girls and boys based on the risks and those who are most vulnerable.

This guidance complements and is consistent with existing guidance relating to UNHCR refugee protection procedures, child protection and gender-based violence (GBV) best practices and minimum standards, as well as current guidance on UNHCR's Best Interest Procedure for asylum-seekers and refugees.

The guidance does not cover information related to reporting cases of child marriage involving UNHCR, Plan or partner staff. Such cases are considered child sexual exploitation and abuse and are against the organizations' code of conduct. For more information about the prevention of sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse (PSHEA), including how to report or seek advice, please refer to the UNHCR publication Tackling sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, and/or the Plan International Global Policy on Safeguarding Children and Programme Participants which includes the Preventing Sexual Harassment, Exploitation, and Abuse (PSHEA) Policy.

This guidance has been co-authored by Amel Amirali (UNHCR) and Clare Lofthouse (Plan International). Special recognition to the technical contributions made by Amanda Melville, Janis Ridsdel, and Clifford Speck from UNHCR; Anita Queirazza, Lotte Claessens and Marta Ricci from Plan International.

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The images used in this guidance are for illustrative purposes only and should not be interpreted as depicting or implying any association with child survivors of GBV or children who are married.

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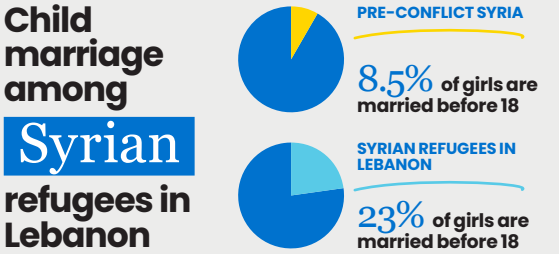

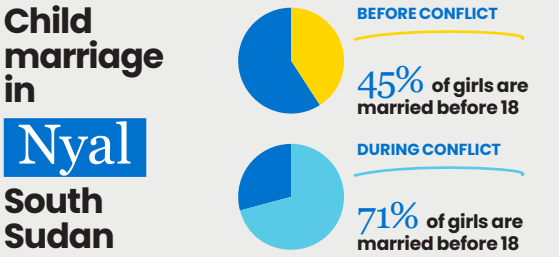

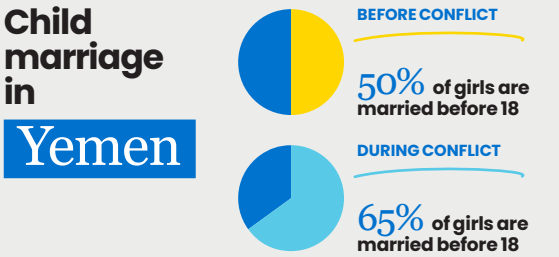

By the end of 2025, approximately 25 million girls (ages 0–17) are forcibly displaced.* Moreover, girls in fragile settings like forced displacement, are twice as likely to be married as a child than girls in stable settings.[2]

Forcibly displaced and stateless children face a range of protection risks, including sexual abuse, child marriage and other often compounding forms of exploitation and gender-based violence (GBV). Preventing, mitigating and responding to all forms of GBV and protecting children are core elements of UNHCR's protection mandate.

Child marriage is a child-specific form of GBV that mostly affects adolescent girls and is a common child protection risk, especially among communities affected by crisis and forced displacement. UNHCR identified child marriage as one of the top 10 child protection risks reported by UNHCR and its partners across operations globally.[3] Every year, 12 million girls are at risk of being married before the age of 18.[4] According to UNICEF, ten years ago, one in four young women aged 20 to 24 was married as a child. Today that number has fallen to one in five.[5]

However, this global progress does not tell the full picture since national statistics and global reporting on child marriage do not systematically include internally displaced, refugee, migrant and other informal, transient or marginalised groups. We know from research and evidence in recent years, that child marriage rates tend to increase as a response to mass displacement, conflict and other crises. Furthermore, there are unique risks and vulnerabilities that often emerge among forcibly displaced communities that increase the likelihood they will resort to child marriage practices.

The instability caused by forced displacement or any crisis, such as conflict or prolonged drought, not only exacerbates the pre-existing drivers of child marriage but also creates new context-specific risks that push more girls and their families toward the practice of child marriage.

*This is an approximate range based on overall displacement figures and typical age–sex distribution assumptions

The practice of child marriage and its impact on girls has been increasingly well-studied in recent years, with growing evidence from diverse crises settings. However, there has been little information to date about the rates and impact of child marriage among boys. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has found that in all 82 low- and middle-income countries for which there is data, the prevalence of child marriage is significantly lower for boys than girls. Only 1 in 25 boys (3.8 per cent) marry before they reach the age of 18, and marriage before the age of 15 is much lower for boys (0.3 per cent). Only 10 countries have a child marriage prevalence for boys over 10 per cent.[6] As a result, this guide focusses on girls but may also shed light on how to support married boys and unmarried boys at risk.

1.1 Purpose of the guidance

This guidance is applicable for programmes targeting girls at risk of child marriage, married girls, divorced girls, widowed girls, girls in informal and unregistered marriages, girls in polygamous marriages and refugee girls married to citizens of the host country, among others.

The purpose of this guidance is to provide UNHCR, Plan International and partner staff with an understanding of child marriage, its causes and consequences in forced displacement settings, and the measures to be employed for prevention, risk mitigation and response. It provides guidance for designing multisectoral prevention, risk mitigation and response strategies, including specialized services such as case management. Throughout you will find examples of programmes and partnerships as well as tools and resources for each chapter.

This guidance is also intended for staff involved in refugee protection procedures and offers guidance for handling child marriage cases during refugee registration, refugee status determination and durable solutions procedures.

1.2 How was this guidance developed

This guidance was developed by the UNHCR Division of International Protection and Solutions in collaboration with Plan International, drawing on practices around the world, including in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Asia and Pacific regions. UNHCR consulted with staff and global external experts and has drawn on existing guidance and expertise from Girls Not Brides and other Inter-Agency tools and documents. This guidance also incorporates practices and lessons learned from the UNHCR-Plan collaboration on child marriage between 2021-2024 in Indonesia, Bangladesh, South Sudan, Mauritania, Morocco, Yemen and Niger.

1.3 When and where is this guidance applicable

This guidance is applicable in the full range of settings in which UNHCR and Plan operate. It includes specific protection considerations for refugee situations.

Steps to tackle child marriage should be established early on in a crisis response. However, essential and lifesaving services must be in place before some activities are started.

Sustainable Development Goals 2030

Target: 5.3 » Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations

Leaving no one behind also means that refugees and other displaced persons should not be left behind in the achievements of the SDGs or in the planning and roll out of strategic national action plans to end child marriage.

2

Understanding child marriage


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This section outlines the key concepts relating to child marriage, including defining child marriage, analysing and identifying risk factors, including understanding how displacement increases the risk of marriage.

2.1 Defining child marriage

The approach to child marriage outlined in this guidance is based on international law and policy on the rights of the child.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women have defined a child marriage (sometimes referred to as early marriage) as a marriage where at least one of the partners is under 18 years of age.[a]

A marriage requires the *"full and free consent of both parties".*[b] Children, in the context of marriage, are *"incapable of giving consent or of exercising the right of refusal".*[c] This means that marriages involving a child cannot be consensual and therefore, under international law, child marriage has no legal effect.[d] In addition, the power dynamics, social and cultural norms and pressures, as well as the added hardship in displacement settings where rights and opportunities are often even more restricted, hinder children's agency, particularly that of girls, and limits their ability to assent or consent. For more information on international legal instruments listed and the types of laws to review in an operational context, please see the section on law and policy.

The marriage of a child is a violation of a child's rights, and all feasible steps should be taken to prevent the marriage and respond to the child's needs, in line with the best interests of the child. It is important to recognize that the primary responsibility for preventing and responding to child marriage lies with the State.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child *"strongly recommends that State parties review and, where necessary, reform their legislation and practice to increase the minimum age for marriage with and without parental consent to 18 years, for both girls and boys".*[e]

a. See "Joint general recommendation/general comment No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on harmful practices", CEDAW/C/GC/31/Rev.1 and CRC/C/GC/18/Rev.1, 8 May 2019, para. 20. This is notwithstanding the fact that Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as any person below the age of 18 unless under the law applicable to the child majority is attained earlier, see "Convention on the Rights of the Child", 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3, Article 1.

b. See United Nations General Assembly, "Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages", 7 November 1962, Res 1763 A (XVII), Article 1. Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Article 16(1)(b).

c. See United Nations Human Rights Council, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Aspects of the Victims of Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children", Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 60/251 of 15 March 2006, A/HRC/4/23, 24 Jan. 2007, para. 21.

d. See United Nations General Assembly, "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)", 18 December 1979, A/RES/34/180, Art. 16(2); United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, "General Recommendation No 21: Equality in Marriage and Family Relations", 1994 HRI/GEN/1/Rev.8, para. 10.2; Organization of African Unity, "African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child", 11 July 1990, CAB/LEG/24.9/49 (1990), Art. 21(2).

e. See United Nations General Assembly, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights", Article 16, which notes the rights of men and women "of full age" to marry. See Committee on the Rights of the Child, "CRC General Comment No. 4", 2003, CRC/GC/2003/4, para. 20 and Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, "General Recommendation No. 21: Equality in Marriage and Family Relations", 1994 HRI/GEN/1/Rev.8, para. 36, p. 315 for statements to the effect that the minimum age of marriage should be 18 for both women and men.

Parents often consent to the marriage of their child, and in many cases arrange the marriage and pressure the child to marry due to a variety of pressures and beliefs. In many national legal systems, parental consent legalizes marriages of children often at a lower age than the national legal age for marriage. However, child marriage remains a violation of the rights of the child regardless of parental consent and is in opposition to international law.

2.1.1 Terminology

The term "child marriage" will be used throughout this guidance to refer to any marriage, formal or informal union or cohabitation, where at least one party is under the age of 18.[7] However, different organizations and regions of the world use different terminology when speaking about child marriage. The below intends to provide clarity on these terms.

Child marriage refers to any form of marriage or contractual bond, whether a formal marriage or an informal union, where at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age[f] and where full consent is therefore lacking. The vast majority of child marriages are also considered forced marriages, since the child has limited power to consent, given their age and other determinants.

- A **formal child marriage** is a marriage of a child that is recognized and legalized by the State.
- **Informal child marriages** represent the majority of cases of child marriage and where there has been no legal registration of the marriage. Examples include marriages according to traditions, cultural rites, customary laws, agreements, unions, cohabitations or other such arrangements whereby a child is living in a marriage-like situation with specific expectations and responsibilities.

The terms **child marriage** and **early marriage** are often used interchangeably to signify the above definitions.

Early marriage, however, "can also refer to marriages where both spouses are 18 or older but other factors make them unready to consent to marriage, such as their level of physical, emotional, sexual and psychosocial development, or a lack of information regarding the person's life options."[g]

A **forced marriage** "is any marriage which occurs without the full and free consent of one or both parties and/or where one or both of the parties is/are unable to end or leave the marriage, including


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as a result of duress or intense social or family pressure".[h] Adults can be equally forced into a marriage as well as children. For example, where refusal by either party may lead to violent and abusive consequences. Forced marriages involve varying degrees of force, coercion or deception, ranging from emotional pressure by family or community members to abduction and imprisonment or threats to life. Deception may also include promises or incentives that are not lived up to once the marriage takes place, for example, that girls will continue their education.

Although the vast majority of child marriages are considered forced, there are very few exceptions. For example, older adolescent girls marrying adolescent boys closer to their age, of their free will, for love and with no coercion. Even if no coercion is involved, adolescent-initiated marriages are still a form of child marriage.

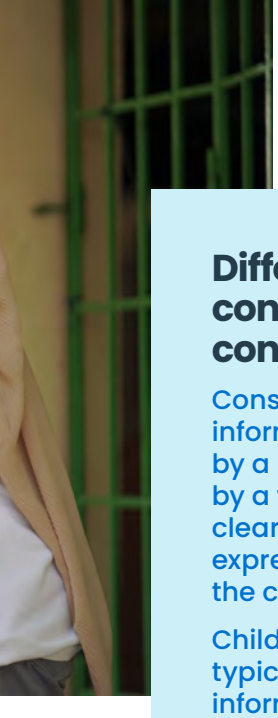
Ever-married children refers to girls or boys who have experienced any form of child marriage, including informal marriage or unions. This includes girls or boys who are currently married as well as those who are widowed, divorced or separated. We often also include young mothers in this group due to the similar barriers and challenges they face as a result of being a young parent.

Child marriage may be interlinked with trafficking in persons and more specifically linked with the constituent elements of the offence of child trafficking, i.e. acts of, or with the purpose of, exploitation. Marriage may be a means of trapping or recruiting a child for sexual exploitation, forced labour or domestic servitude.[8] Child marriage may also take the form of servile marriages and fall within the definition of practices similar to slavery, which are listed among the purposes of trafficking.[9]

f. See "Joint general recommendation/general comment No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on harmful practices", CEDAW/C/GC/31/Rev.1 and CRC/C/GC/18/Rev.1, 8 May 2019, para. 20.

g. See the United Nations Human Rights Council, "Preventing and eliminating child, early and forced marriage: Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights", 2 April 2014, A/HRC/26/22, para 5.

h. Ibid, para 6.



Difference between informed consent and assent in the context of child marriage

Consent is any freely given and informed indication of an agreement by a person, which may be given either by a written or oral statement or by a clear affirmative action. Assent is the expressed willingness or agreement of the child.

Children under the age of 18 are typically considered unable to give informed consent, or of exercising the right of refusal. In the context of marriage, children cannot fully consent to a marriage because they lack the capacity and maturity to fully understand the marriage – in terms of its impact on them and their life, expectations and responsibilities. In addition, there are unequal power dynamics regarding the decision-making which often denies children the right of refusal safely.

Children can provide their assent to marriage, which should be understood in context.

When assessing the best interests of girls at risk of marriage or ever-married girls (see 3.3.4), it is important to understand their views in relation to a marriage, and to establish whether or not they have provided assent, based on a full and informed understanding of the situation. This however does not change the fact that the majority of child marriages are considered to be forced. It should be noted that girls who agree to marry usually do so under duress and in situations with very limited alternatives. Girls may also provide assent based on their knowledge of the marriage celebration, but have a limited understanding of what marriage entails, including household responsibilities, relationship issues, risks of intimate partner violence and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) issues. For more information about girls consenting to marry and decision-making processes in child marriage see the Context analysis toolkit].

2.1.2 Policy framework on child marriage

UNHCR and Plan consider child marriage a form of GBV and of violence against children. **UNHCR Executive Committee Conclusion 107** identifies "children who get married under the age specified in national laws and/or children in forced marriages" as children at heightened risk[10] and calls for States, UNHCR, Plan and partners to work to prevent and respond to child marriage in such situations. UNHCR guidelines on **International Protection No. 8 on Child Asylum Claims** also highlight "forced or underage marriage" as a unique child-specific form of persecution.[i]

The UNHCR **Policy on the Prevention of, Mitigation and Response to Gender-based Violence** and the **Policy on Child Protection** provide institutional frameworks for addressing child marriage as a common form of GBV and violence against children in forced displacement settings. The issue is also addressed in other UNHCR policy documents and guidelines.[j]

In addition, UNHCR and Plan have endorsed both the **Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action**[11] and the **Inter-Agency Minimum Standards for Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies**,[12] both of which provide specific standards and guidance for preventing and responding to child marriage in humanitarian contexts.

Child marriage can affect all children, but UNHCR and Plan's work to prevent, mitigate the risk of and respond to child marriage focuses mostly on girls because child marriage disproportionately impacts girls, with lifelong and life-threatening consequences. UNHCR and Plan do include boys at risk of marriage and married boys as children at risk in programming and responses for child marriage.

Little is known about how child marriage may impact upon the lives of children of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). UNHCR and Plan seek to respond to the needs of such children where cases are disclosed or identified and to promote an environment in which they are kept safe.

i. See UNHCR, "Guidelines on International Protection No. 8: Child Asylum Claims under Articles 1(A)2 and 1(F) of the 1951 Convention and/or 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees", 22 December 2009, HCR/GIP/09/08, para. 18.

j. See, for example, UNHCR, "Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls", 2008; "UNHCR Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child", 2021; "Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity", 2018.

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2.2 Child marriage root causes

Child marriage is rooted in gender inequality and perpetuated through patriarchal systems that seek to control female behaviour and sexuality.

2.2.1 Gender inequality

Gender equality means that all persons, regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, gender expressions, gender identity or sex characteristics enjoy the same status in society; have equal entitlement to all human rights; enjoy the same level of respect in the community; can take advantage of the same opportunities to make choices about their lives; and have the same amount of power to shape the outcomes of these choices, as one another. Gender inequality is the denial of these rights to members of society based on identifiers as listed above. Child marriage is one expression of gender inequality.[14]

Gender norms and stereotypes that regard girls and women primarily as wives and mothers can reduce the value of girls in society, reduce their access to education and increase pressure on girls to marry early given the limited alternative life options. Gendered disparities in economic opportunities can also increase the likelihood of girls marrying early. In some countries, the legal age of marriage is often lower for girls than for boys, thus further institutionalizing the inequality. Displacement exacerbates economic hardship and this, interlinked with gender inequality and stereotypes, increases the risk of child marriage for girls.

2.2.2 Social norms and practices

Social norms and practices are the informal rules of behaviour belonging to a certain group. They are learned rules and are built around traditions, social expectations and shared history. People follow and express social norms to show that they belong to a group as a sense of pride, identity and because they believe in the norms as "right", or because these norms generate social pressure and coercion by the power-holders of the group. Equally, social norms are maintained based on the justification that this is how things have always been done and thus, it is the "correct" way.[15] Social norms and practices play a significant role in shaping the fabric of societies, influencing individuals' behaviours and choices. While on the most part the variety of social norms celebrates the diversity of people around the world, some deeply ingrained norms and attitudes are global and they also contribute to the perpetuation of harmful practices and gender inequality, such as child marriage.

2.2.3 Safeguarding "honour" and seeking redress or protection from sexual violence

As a result of patriarchal systems[k] that control female sexuality and commodify girls' purity, many families believe that marriage protects girls from sexual violence, rumours and helps to safeguard girls' reputations in line with social standards and norms. In situations of conflict, the elevated risks (real or perceived) that girls will experience GBV due to the insecure and unstable environment, can also contribute to an increase in the rates of child marriage and lowering the age of marriage as parents try to shield daughters from harm. In focus group discussions and interviews with Syrian refugees in Jordan, Care International found that communities saw child marriage as a form of protection and a safeguard for their so-called "honour", which was perceived as being linked to a girl's virginity.[16] In some contexts, it can be a common practice for child and adult survivors of rape to be forced to marry the perpetrator in order to overcome social stigma associated to sexual violence, sexual initiation or pregnancy outside of marriage or as a form of community justice for the violation.

k. Patriarchal systems, i.e. systems controlled by men, which value girls according to their virginity and impose limits on female sexuality and reproductive choices. This can mean controlling how a girl behaves and dresses, where she goes, who she sees and whether, whom and when she marries. It can also criminalize her sexuality and block her access to care and information.

2.3 Child marriage is exacerbated by crisis and displacement

Conflict and displacement exacerbate the drivers and risks of child marriage, typically making the practice more widespread.[1] Faced with insecurity, breakdown of the rule of law, and disruptions in social networks and family routines, families and parents may see child marriage as an extreme coping mechanism. In resource-constrained settings with very limited safe options, child marriage may be seen as a solution to sudden economic hardship given dowry or bride price practices (income) and reduced household costs as married girls often live with their spouse. Parents may also rationalize or believe that the marriage will increase the girl's economic situation and opportunities.[19]

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Nigeria, Sudan and Syria, armed groups and militias have systematically abducted and trafficked girls and women into forced and child marriages as a weapon of war. Girls who are forcibly married with armed groups and militia are at high risk of experiencing rape, sexual abuse and exploitation, slavery and forced pregnancies, among other concerns.[20]

The following sub-sections demonstrate examples of risks and pressures that girls and families experience that can lead to child marriage as a result of the dynamics of the crisis or displacement. These risks are not mutually exclusive but intersect with each other to compound the pressures on girls and their families to marry early.

2.3.1 Poverty and access to livelihoods

Girls from poor families are over three times more likely to marry before the age of 18 than girls from wealthier families.[21] For refugee and internally displaced families who have lost livelihoods and productive assets and who may have difficulty accessing decent work, child marriage can present as an extreme coping strategy for both the family and their daughter to survive. As noted above, families may believe that a girl will have access to more resources as a wife, while they will have one less child to feed and provide for.[16] In contexts where dowries or bride prices are exchanged, the prospect of receiving an income may economically incentivize child marriage among financially desperate communities. In settings where the girl's family pays the dowry to the husband (and his family), higher dowry costs for older girls can be a driver of lowering the age at which girls marry.[22]

2.3.2 Food insecurity

There are well-established links between increased risks of GBV and food insecurity. In various participatory assessments conducted by UNHCR and its partners, the issue of food shortages is a major concern for many displaced populations, particularly for women and girls, who often face the brunt of the impact due to the gendered dimensions around food collection, preparation and eating. In some settings increased household tensions around access to food can lead to intimate partner violence, child marriage and the exploitation of children, especially adolescent girls, due to the extreme situation and lack of alternatives.[23] When families are confronted with restricted access to food resources, they may resort to marrying off their daughters as a strategy to alleviate the strain on their limited access to food. This underscores the intricate relationship between sociocultural norms, economic hardship and the unfortunate recourse to child marriage in the face of food scarcity.[20]

Child marriage can be both a cause and a consequence of food insecurity and malnutrition. The intersection of discriminatory gender norms, undervaluation of the roles of girls within the family and community, and the challenges of food insecurity and poverty, constitutes a potent catalyst for girls to be pressured into marriage and for married girls. In many cases, girls who marry early remain trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty which continues to perpetuate child marriage practices and does not alleviate food security. Further, married girls may be denied resources by in-laws or husbands as a result of their low status in his family.

2.3.3 Lack of access to education

School dropout or disruption to education heightens the risk of child marriage for girls. Conversely, child marriage (and early pregnancy) also makes school dropout much more likely. Forcibly displaced and stateless children may not have the right to access formal education and may not be able to attain qualifications which hinders access to the job market.[24] Only 63 per cent of refugee children attend primary school compared to 91 per cent of children globally.[25] The gap widens significantly for secondary school, where only 24 per cent of refugee children attend compared to 84 per cent of children globally. Girls are less likely to attend secondary school, with only about seven refugee girls for every 10 refugee boys enrolled.[26] While early adolescence is the time they become vulnerable to child marriage, children who have lost years of schooling during conflict may be unable to re-enter formal education or may be reluctant to do so at a lower level to others their age. In addition, many refugees have few opportunities for legal work even with educational qualifications, which may in turn undermine the perceived value of education.

2.3.4 Perceived benefits of marriage

Many girls may see marriage at a young age as normal and desirable, with perceived benefits including romance and intimacy, increased social status and independence from family. Refugee families may have additional reasons to view child marriage as beneficial. In some contexts, marriage may be a coping strategy that facilitates entry into countries, helps to regularize status, improves freedom of movement and increases access to resources and services if they marry someone from the host community.[27] In certain countries, refugee girls who marry men from the host community may enjoy certain privileges, such as greater freedom of movement, or access to labour markets, health facilities and education for their children. Marriage to a man who is a national of the country of asylum can also facilitate access to lawful residency for refugee girls and can sometimes provide access to nationality for refugee and stateless girls as well as their children.

There is also an increasing awareness among the humanitarian community that some girls 'choose' to marry in order to access basic or luxury items. This "choice" may be perceived as girls expressing their agency to seek out a better future with a person they feel safe with, or it may be perceived as a lack of other ways to survive and escape current hardship as a result of crisis or displacement. However, often such arrangements do not lead to increased safety.[28]

2.3.5 Unregistered marriages and short-contract marriages

Barriers in accessing civil documentation and laws that prohibit and criminalize child marriage can contribute to the increase of unregistered marriages (informal child marriages). This may happen in refugee settings in particular where populations often do not have access to documentation or the ability to pay for legal documentation, especially in communities that were already disadvantaged by poverty, insecurity and marginalization prior to displacement. Short-contract marriages involve a temporary marriage with no lasting social or legal effect. "In some cases, families will agree to the temporary 'marriage' of their daughter in exchange for financial gains, also referred to as a contractual marriage, which is a form of trafficking in human beings".[l] This can introduce additional protection concerns in certain contexts, as unregistered marriages may reduce the legal protections of the spouses and any children they have under national law. For girls in particular, this may include their rights to alimony, inheritance, property and child custody.


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2.3.6 Lack of birth registration

Birth registration is a fundamental right and an enabler of other rights. This legal proof of identity can help protect children from violence, abuse and exploitation. Without a birth certificate, children are unable to prove their age, their parentage and access rights, which puts them at a much higher risk of being forced into marriage or the labour market, recruited into armed forces or armed groups, and in some cases may increase the risk of statelessness.[29]

Lack of birth registration can also reinforce existing gaps in areas like education, which is considered one of the main deterrents of child marriage. Girls without birth certificates who are unable to legally prove their age are even more susceptible to marrying early and missing out on education.

2.3.7 Climate change

In a 2020 quantitative analysis of data from 180 countries explored the impact of climate change on child marriage, utilizing economic, climatic and cultural variables. The findings revealed that climate change contributes to the prevalence of child marriage by exacerbating vulnerabilities and inequalities. This occurs through a confluence of factors such as diminished household incomes, heightened gender discrimination and exacerbated extreme poverty. According to the analysis, adolescent girls find themselves confronted with the dual challenges of gender inequality and poverty. Climate shocks were identified as intensifying established catalysts for child marriage. These shocks manifest themselves in the displacement of individuals from their residences, loss of assets and income-generating opportunities, disruptions to education, diminished access to SRH services and the creation of environments conducive to heightened sexual violence and fear thereof. The cumulative effect of these circumstances is to compel families to marry off their daughters prematurely, posing a significant threat to the sexual and reproductive health (SRHR) and rights of adolescent girls.[30]

l. See United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "Joint general recommendation/general comment No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on harmful practices", 2014, para. 24.

2.3.8 Global health crisis and pandemics

Pandemics and other public health crises can have a devastating toll on children, girls, women and other vulnerable groups. For example, efforts to contain COVID-19 led to lockdowns, school closures, interruptions to health and social services and lost livelihoods opportunities. Despite the lack of adequate national data on child marriage in 2020, the UNICEF/UNFPA study on Child Marriage in the Context of COVID-19 estimated that an additional 10 million girls were at risk of entering into a child marriage, mainly due to interrupted education, economic shocks, disruption of healthcare services that led to increase in numbers of early and unplanned pregnancies and the death of a parent or caregiver. The study identifies the simplicity of marriage procedures and the reduction of costs during this period as factors contributing to this increase. In addition, in the medium to long term, the threat of child marriage is far greater when communities are affected by economic shocks and have limited access to basic services such as health, education and child protection.[31]

Self-initiated marriages

Recent child marriage context analyses conducted in partnership with Plan in Bangladesh, Niger and Indonesia, as well as other studies, show that in some cases girls – particularly older adolescents – are initiating marriage themselves. In Bangladesh, some see marriage as a respite from the boredom of life in the camps; or the only viable option available to them. Additionally, unaccompanied girls may seek out marriage in the hope of securing a more stable living situation.

According to this research, adolescents are driven into child marriage out of a desire to improve their financial and living situation; however, different factors drive marriage for girls and boys. For girls, safety and security are the prime motivators, especially for those who are unaccompanied or separated. Respondents reported that adolescent girls were strongly influenced by their peers and community expectations of finding a husband as early as possible as a marker of success. Cultural and religious norms severely restrict the independence and mobility of girls in Cox's Bazar, making it almost impossible for girls to get an education and earn money through employment. Hence, securing an economic provider through marriage is viewed as a girl's only option for financial security. For boys the drivers are slightly different, with those choosing to marry typically already having an income. As there are no cultural and religious prohibitions on their movement, they are able to leave the refugee camps to work as day labourers. Respondents also mentioned sociocultural norms as drivers of marriage for adolescents, since child marriage has existed for generations and adolescents are socialized to normalize these practices and the gender discrimination that underpins them.

In reality, the pre-displacement rates of child marriage among the Rohingya communities were extremely low due to the strong legal framework and enforcement in Myanmar.

Peer pressure also plays a significant role. In Cox's Bazar, the child marriage context analysis revealed that girls often believe they will experience difficulty in finding a husband if they delay marriage too long. This fear becomes a stressor and a push factor to marry early. Fear of remaining unmarried leaves Rohingya girls vulnerable to human trafficking and risky onwards movements to countries such as Malaysia. The context analysis found that peer pressure works in both directions, and can also act as a protective factor to deter child marriages if girls from the same group or community do not value marrying early the others will feel more empowered to deter it. Hence the need to invest in peer-to-peer activities with adolescents and targeted and effective messages for adolescents.

Similarly in Niger, context analysis revealed that the age at which girls marry for the first time is strongly influenced by when other girls in their peer group marry. Within the community, a girl's marriage is a source of pride for both her and her parents, with prevailing attitudes favouring a marriage before that of her peers. The first girl to marry will be held up as an example in the community, praised for her intelligence and sense of strategy that enabled her to find a husband so quickly. Her mother will share the social validation and be praised for raising such an easy-to-marry daughter. This stimulates competition, which in turn contributes to higher rates of child marriage among younger and younger girls.

Source: UNHCR and Plan International: context analysis reports for Niger, Bangladesh and Indonesia

2.4 Consequences of marrying early

Child marriage has devastating consequences on a girl's life in both the short and long term. Girls are forced into adulthood before they are physically and mentally ready. Married girls are frequently deprived of their rights to health, education, safety and participation. Young married girls are far less likely to stay in school, with a high risk of lifelong reduced earning capacity. They are often isolated, with their rights restricted, and are at higher risk of physical, emotional and sexual violence including child sexual abuse and intimate partner violence from either the husband or family members. Child marriage is strongly correlated to early pregnancy which carries with it high-risk obstetric complications and morbidities on account of her prematurely bearing children. Given the power dynamics between her and her husband, she faces a higher risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS due to her reduced capacity to negotiate safe sex.[32]

Furthermore, in many contexts, child marriages prove short-lived, resulting in a significant number of girls who were married but no longer live with their husbands. These girls might have chosen to leave the marriage or find themselves in situations of abandonment, separation, widowhood or divorce. They may be left caring for their children or face challenges in accessing them if the children reside with the husband or his family. The intricate social dynamics associated with child marriage and the limited alternatives available to girls living in displacement and crisis settings significantly affect their ability to establish a secure economic future or be able to make safe decisions for their well-being and their children.

Below are some key consequences for girls in forced displacement and crisis settings as a result of marrying early. It is important to note that depending on the context, some of the consequences can also be causes of child marriage and vice versa and should not be understood as mutually exclusive.

2.4.1 Limited agency

Child marriage denies girls the right to choose whom and when to marry. Choosing if and when to marry is a major decision, one that should be made freely and without fear or coercion. On this, virtually all countries agree.[49] Girls that are married early are denied the right to equality, education and an adequate standard of living for their health and well-being and that of their family.[33] As a result of sex and age, unmarried girls are often neither given agency in the marriage decision-making process, nor as a wife once married.

2.4.2 Protection risks

Abuse faced by girls in child marriages, particularly those who have been forcibly displaced and/or are stateless, has been widely documented and includes child abuse, rape, psychological and economic abuse and physical violence, intimate partner violence and murder.[34] Husbands are often the primary perpetrator, but sometimes other family members will also abuse married girls emotionally, physically and verbally – including through the denial of resources such as food or education. A married girl may also suffer abuse or rejection from her own family if she attempts to return home or seek support. In such violent situations, married girls often report feeling isolated, depressed and even suicidal. In child marriages where both spouses are children, the gendered power imbalance still exists and the husband may also face certain negative impacts from being a child in an adult union, such as poor mental health as a result of expectations to provide for and protect his family.

Where marriages are not legally registered, girls and their children may also suffer a variety of long-term consequences, even once they become adults. In several contexts, a child's right to birth registration is conditional upon on the parents having a valid marriage certificate. Children born out of unregistered and informal marriages are thus at considerable risk of being left undocumented, unregistered and without evidence of legal identification. In addition, children resulting from these marriages may not be considered the father's responsibility under prevailing cultural norms.[35] If children are left unregistered and undocumented, they face many protection risks and may face the risk of statelessness.[36] Both short-term and unregistered marriages leave girls even more vulnerable in cases of divorce (or when the contract ends), abandonment and spousal death, which may leave them with no legal claims to property, possessions or their children. Without documentation, these arrangements create challenges in identifying child marriage cases, which can limit a child spouse's access to programmes and resources.

There are a number of potential reasons why child marriages may be characterized by greater violence: women who marry as children are more likely to be uneducated, live in poverty and feel bound by traditional gender norms. Child marriages are often (but not always) characterized by considerable spousal age gaps, power imbalances, social isolation and lack of female autonomy; these are all demonstrated risk factors for intimate partner violence and represent potential causal mechanisms. It has been well cited that the majority of girls who were married as children describe their first sexual experience as forced. Child sexual abuse or intimate partner violence is also a serious and common consequence of child marriage.


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Research suggests that child marriage places young girls and women at elevated risk of intimate partner violence, which is in turn linked to additional adverse physical and mental health outcomes.

The abduction of girls and their marriage to fighters is a grave and complex form of violence, having a long-term impact on their mental and physical health. Child marriage can be used as a weapon of war by armed groups. In 2021, The United Nations received reports of women and girls being abducted by fighters from armed groups in several conflict-affected countries including Afghanistan, Mozambique, Mali, Iraq, the Central African Republic, Columbia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Yemen and Syria.[37]

2.4.3 Lack of access to health including mental health and well-being

Married girls often experience early and unplanned pregnancies. Oftentimes the pregnancy is the driving force behind the child marriage. In many contexts, there are family expectations to begin child-rearing soon after marriage which puts pressure on girls to conceive early. Girls often lack information about their bodies or knowledge of and access to SRH care. Furthermore, due to power imbalances due to their age and gender, the have limited to no decision-making power around negotiating safe sex. Risks associated to early pregnancies include obstructed labour[38] and maternal and neonatal mortality or morbidities such as disabilities for mother or child as a result of fistulas.[39] Childbirth and pregnancy related complications remain the leading cause of death among girls aged 15–19, and with 90 per cent of adolescent births happening within a marriage the causal link is evident.[57]

Research conducted by Plan with the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC)[17] in Zimbabwe revealed that girls, especially those who are married, experience ostracism and a profound sense of disconnection, contributing to poor mental health and psychosocial outcomes. Married girls often find themselves trapped in a cycle of abandonment and violence, subjected to mistreatment not only from their parents but also from their husbands and their husbands' families due to societal norms. This recurrent pattern of adversity can lead to severe mental health consequences, including instances of suicide, exacerbated by the absence of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services.

2.4.4 Limited access to education

Child marriage often has the immediate consequence of girls dropping out of school for various reasons.[40,41] Household responsibilities, change of support systems and peer network after marriage, denial of access to education by her husband or family in-law, bullying or stigma from peers, not-inclusive school-based services, early pregnancy and, in many contexts, the existence of policies that exclude pregnant girls, all make it highly likely that a married girl will be pushed or pulled out of school. Additionally, in some contexts, low expectations of girls in terms of education and future employment, combined with the normalization of marrying early, make families ambivalent about their commitment to school, which harms their school performance and often leads to them dropping out. Research conducted in conflict-affected communities in the Philippines by Plan and WRC, found that married girls often experienced bullying, harassment and stigma from peers when continuing their education. This was so extreme that it was cited as the main driver for girls to drop out of education.[28]

2.4.5 Reduced livelihoods and economic opportunities

Poverty and lack of livelihoods and economic opportunities are both a cause and a consequence of child marriage. Child marriage has economic impacts and costs on the married children as individuals, their families, their communities and society at large.[42] It limits girls' future prospects and has the long-term consequence of limited access to employment for girls thereby increasing the risk of perpetuating a cycle of poverty. At the same time, poverty, coupled with discriminatory gender norms, drive girls into marriage (see Section 2.2 on causes). In many refugee and humanitarian situations, dependence on aid and restrictions on the right to work and move freely block access to safe job markets and economic opportunities, reinforcing the cycle of poverty.

3 Programming for prevention, risk mitigation and response to child marriage

Child marriage prevention, risk mitigation and response programmes should adopt an adolescent girl-responsive approach[43], be context specific and be integrated into existing child protection and/or GBV programmes. They should be based on a context analysis that informs programming and service delivery as well as advocacy efforts and ensures appropriate prioritization among actors, based on the scale and impact of child marriage.

3.1 Applying an adolescent girl-responsive approach in child marriage programming

Given that child marriage is rooted in gender inequality and has a significantly greater impact on girls, especially adolescents, child marriage programming and projects need to adopt an adolescent girl-responsive approach to programming, and to the attitudes and behaviours of service providers, in order to be successful.[44]

This means acknowledging that adolescence is a crucial period of growth and self-discovery[64] and recognizing that within this complex journey, girls encounter distinctive challenges, often struggling to be seen and heard in general, but also within humanitarian programming.[45] Adopting a responsive approach means recognizing the importance of adolescent girls' perspectives on and their role in their safety and well-being, actively involving and empowering them and creating safe spaces tailored to their unique developmental and emotional needs. These can serve not only as platforms for expression but also as collaborative spaces in which girls can co-create solutions and support systems, ensuring that their holistic development is nurtured with care and understanding.

Key resources for adolescent girl-responsive approach

Adolescent programming toolkit: Guidance and tools for adolescent programming and girls' empowerment in crisis settings

PLAN INTERNATIONAL (2020)

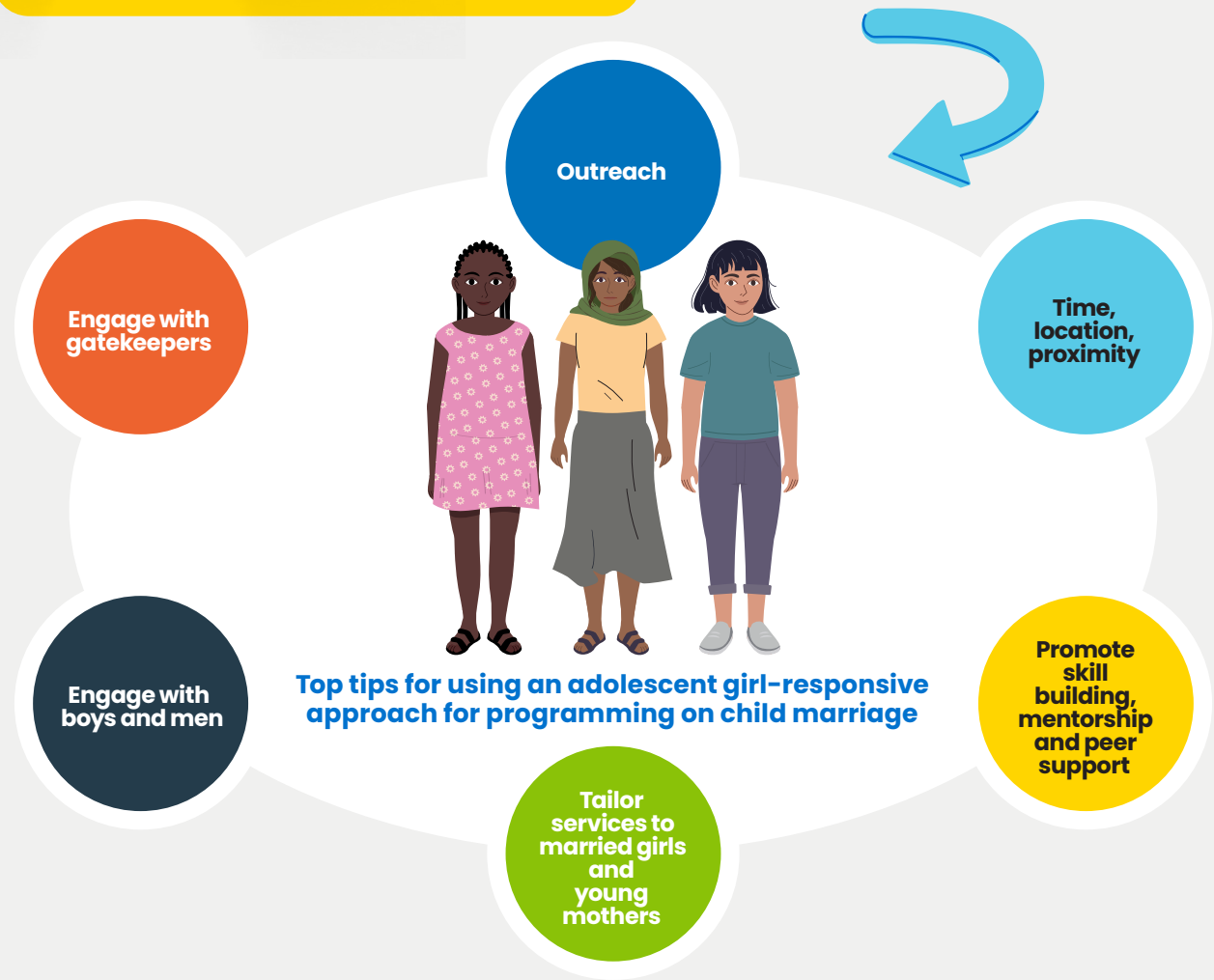
E-learning module: Adolescent girl-responsive approach for child marriage programming

PLAN INTERNATIONAL AND UNHCR (2024)

An adolescent girl-responsive approach also ensures that programming is appropriate, safe and needs-based and tackles the issue of child marriage in a way that makes sense to those who are experiencing it.

In order for it to be successful, there are several key elements on which to base programming and service provision, and certain key attitudes and behaviours are required of service providers to:

- Adopt adolescent girl-responsive attitudes and behaviours
- Do no harm
- Be gender-transformative (power and intersectionality)
- Be multisectoral and multilevel (sectors and socio-ecological domains)
- Work in the best interests of the child
- Consider age-appropriateness
- Enable meaningful participation
- Be community-driven



Top tips for using an adolescent girl-responsive approach for programming on child marriage

3.1.1 Key elements of adolescent girl-responsive programming

This involves the intentional design and implementation of actions and attitudes that meet the diverse needs, priorities and capacities as identified by adolescent girls themselves. It leverages an intersectional and rights-based lens that is responsive to adolescent girls in all their diversity, with special attention to those most at risk and hard to reach, like ever-married girls.

An adolescent girl-responsive approach has several key elements; these apply to both programming and our attitudes and behaviours as service providers. In programming, these are:

Gender-transformative (power and inter-sectionality)	Gender-transformative programming explicitly seeks to redress gender inequalities, remove structural barriers and empower disadvantaged populations
Multisectoral and multilevel (sectors and socio-ecological domains)	Multisectoral means that we aim to address child marriage in coordination or integration with different sectors. Multilevel means that we aim to tackle child marriage by working across the different levels of the socio-ecological model
Age appropriate	All interactions with and services for adolescents should be child/adolescent friendly. This means adapting services according to the needs, development stage, sex and gender of the child. This may be through adapting language or making sure that services are appropriate for the intended age bracket.
Meaningful participation of girls	Girls should participate in all decisions affecting them, in a manner appropriate to their level of maturity and their evolving capacities. Girls should not just be consulted, but be an integral part of decision-making.
Community-driven	To ensure that all work and activities are meaningful and relevant, draw from existing community practices and knowledge, and enhance local capacity and greater downward accountability.
Best interests of the child	The best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all UNHCR actions and decisions directly or indirectly affecting groups or individual children, as well as in all child protection support given to authorities and other actors by UNHCR. These are broadly based on the well-being of a child, which is determined by a variety of individual circumstances (such as their gender, age, level of maturity and experience) and other factors (such as the presence or absence of parents, the quality of the child's relationships with their family/caregivers, and other risks or capacities).
Do no harm	Ensure that child marriage projects do no harm. Take a step back from an intervention to look at the broader context and mitigate potential negative effects on the social fabric, the intended target groups (e.g. girls), the economy and the environment.

Zoom in on gender-transformative programming

Gender-transformative programming explicitly seeks to redress gender inequalities, remove structural barriers and empower disadvantaged populations. It is important to aim for gender-transformative solutions, but this is not always possible for all activities for a variety of reasons.

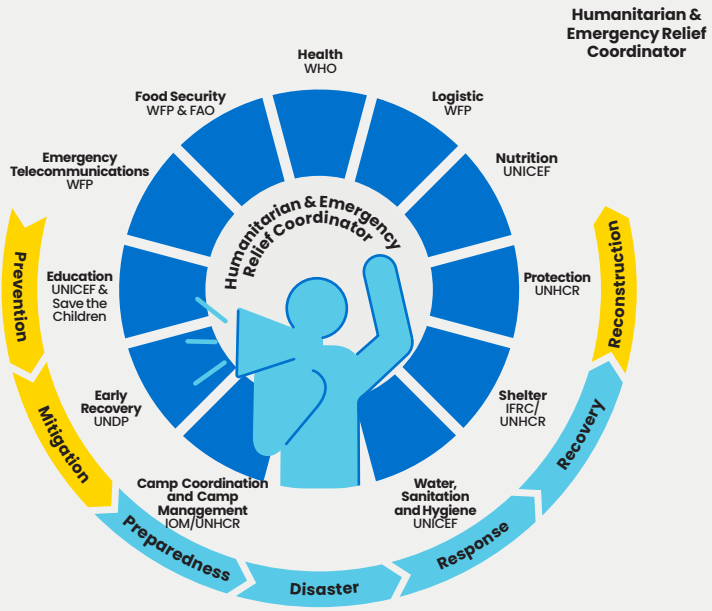
When looking at child marriage prevention and response in a crisis or displacement setting, it is necessary first to understand how child marriage is manifesting itself in the context and then assess whether and how the root cause (gender inequality) and/or the drivers of child marriage can be tackled.[46]

It may not always be possible to tackle the root cause, (gender inequality), due to the dynamics and instability of the crisis or because the affected population cannot prioritize shifting norms over other pressing survival needs. Gender-transformative programming is generally longer-term (2+ years), as sustained effort is needed to change attitudes and norms. As a result, these projects may not be feasible in every setting, but building some gender-transformative activities into projects puts in place building blocks to help future projects and longer-term efforts.

To learn more on gender-transformative approaches to end child marriage, see some examples in the UNFPA/UNICEF Technical note.

Zoom in on multisectoral and multilevel programming

Recent research by UNICEF has shown that progress on an issue as complex as child marriage is possible, but that for this progress to be sustained and accelerated, a holistic, multisectoral and multilevel response is required. Multisectoral means that we aim to address child marriage in coordination or integration with different sectors. Multilevel means that we aim to tackle child marriage by working across the different levels of the socio-ecological model[47] : from girls to parents, communities, institutions, and within the humanitarian response. Single-level interventions alone – such as adolescent girls empowerment programming – will not fully meet girls' or their family's needs nor reduce the risks and their vulnerabilities to child marriage, as it will only tackle the issue in one domain and not remove the structural barriers for change.[48]



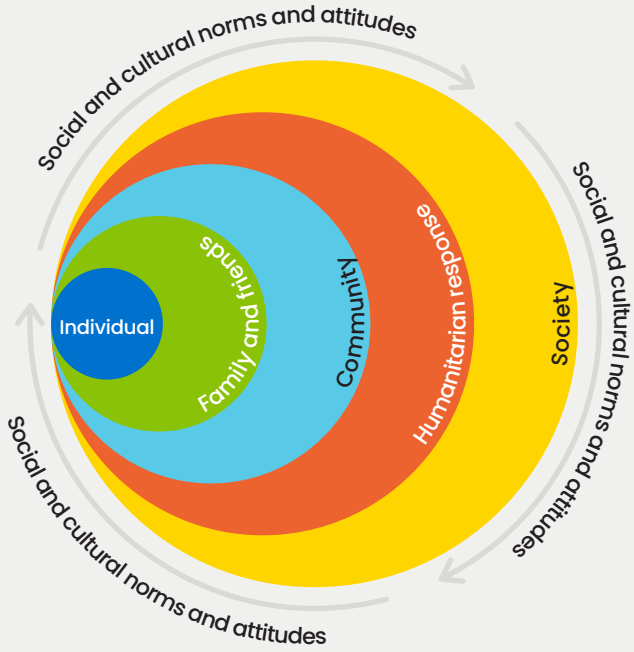
Aim to address one problem by working across different sectors, such as health, education, and child protection.

Multisectoral

&

Multilevel

Aim to address one problem by working at the different socio-ecological levels that affect individuals.



3.1.2 Adolescent girl responsive attitudes and behaviours

Attitudes, knowledge and behaviours, much like the harmful norms and beliefs service providers are trying to shift in communities, also exist within our staff. Everyone is born into cultures and societies that imprint on them. These cultures shape a sense of belonging, but they can also have some negative aspects such as biases or negative attitudes towards some groups or actions. It is important not to reinforce the harmful attitudes and norms that girls are faced with, but rather create safe spaces for non-judgemental communication with them.

Service providers and practitioners need to maintain the same values and beliefs that child marriage programming and projects aspire to when interacting with girls, their families and wider community, including: gender equality, non-judgement, non-discrimination, awareness of power and privilege, and do no harm.[43]

3.2 Child marriage context analysis

Child marriage can be a complex and dynamic issue and it is crucial to understand how it is practised in the communities we work with and how the crisis or displacement has affected the practice, not only to ensure that programmatic actions do not reinforce the structures and beliefs that perpetuate the practice, but also to increase programme impact. In forced displacement settings, new drivers can emerge because of the restricted access to rights, as well as from the humanitarian response itself.

The socio-ecological model can help to understand child marriage by analysing the complex interplay between the individual, family and friends, community, and the societal factors underpinning the practice.

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In crisis and displacement settings, it is also important to consider the broader humanitarian response as a level of its own to account for the impact that the humanitarian response can have on risks or protective factors towards child marriage.

The evidence base for programme planning, strategies and interventions can be improved across all sectors by integrating the methodologies and tools provided in the new UNHCR and Plan Toolkit for child marriage context analysis in crisis and forced displacement settings. It leverages an adapted socio-ecological approach to analyse child marriage in specific contexts. The approach and tools from this toolkit can also be integrated into multisector needs assessments and rapid gender assessments.

A key tool of the Toolkit, What we need to know (WWNK) about child marriage, helps to unpack all the different information that could be useful in order to understand the risks and pressures girls and their families may be experiencing that drive child marriage in a given context:

Resources for conducting a context analysis on child marriage

For more detailed guidance on conducting a context analysis on child marriage in your setting, see UNHCR and Plan International's new toolkit.

Summary version of the WWNK-CM tool

LEVEL	WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CHILD MARRIAGE
Individual e.g. girl / child Vulnerability to child marriage, access to basic needs and services, hopes and aspirations	• Vulnerability profile of children and adolescents and their family vis-à-vis child marriage • What protection concerns are girls facing? Is this different for boys? • Who is at risk of child marriage and why? • Who is already married or has experienced marriage (i.e. "ever-married")? Why did they get married? Was the marriage self-initiated or forced by others? What capacities or barriers do ever-married girls face in accessing services and support? • Impacts of child marriage on girls (and/or boys), early pregnancy and/or motherhood, education and access to rights and registration. • Participation and decision-making power of adolescents, especially girls.
Relationships and family Risk and protective factors at the level of caregivers and the family	• Who are girls married to (spouse profile)? • What factors push parents/caregivers to practise child marriage? For example, household access to food security and livelihoods to meet basic needs including income-generating opportunities for parents/caregivers or spouse. • Safety of the home environment. • Social and gender norms: Expectations and values placed on girl children versus boy children, including caregivers' attitudes to education, employment, marriage and relationships. • Influences of peers on decision making in favour of or against child marriage, such as idealising marriage, peer group engaging in marriage practices or not.
Community Risk and protective factors in the community environment, social norms and community services	• Access to information on the benefits of delaying marriage and availability of alternatives to marriage for girls. • Perspectives and rewards for community leadership (community, administrative, religious leaders) to engage in or deter child marriage. • Community capacities and attitudes to protect girls from child marriage – e.g. support structures. • Capacities and attitudes of community-level services to support at-risk and ever-married girls and their families. • Social and gender norms and cultural practices that influence the acceptability of child marriage, such as practices that may be associated with puberty, menstruation or other markers of adolescence and/or transition to adulthood.
Humanitarian capacity and coordination Staff knowledge and attitudes risk mitigation, and prioritization of child marriage and adolescent girls.	• Shifts in trends of child marriage practices and decision making, now vs. before the crisis. • Capacity of the humanitarian response and coordination to identify and address risks associated with the delivery of aid and child marriage and include girls who are married, pregnant and/or young mothers. • Programme and practitioner attitudes and knowledge to support all adolescent girls. • What barriers do ever-married girls face in accessing services and support? • Status of refugee protection processes with cases of child marriage. • Prioritization and visibility of tackling child marriage as a major protection concern across the sectors and among donors and government.
Society Laws, policies, legislation, services and enabling environment	• Child marriage policy and legislation at national and regional level including legal age of marriage and exemptions, legal age of consent to sex, married and pregnant girls' access to education. • Legal framework and enforcement of laws and rights for refugee and/or displaced communities. • Identification of national organizations and action plans to tackle child marriage and their capacity to do so. • Formal and informal marriage registration and ceremony processes, main strengths and gaps. • Status of (child) marriage and birth registration and information management systems.

3.3 Child marriage key programmatic areas

Once there is a clear understanding of the needs and realities facing girls at risk of child marriage and ever-married girls, together with the capacity of the humanitarian response, it becomes possible to determine the key programmatic interventions to tackle child marriage and support girls and their families. Depending on the context, not all of the following programmatic areas may be feasible as a first intervention:

- Strengthening laws and policies
- Working with ever-married girls and girls at risk of child marriage
- Working with families and communities
- Case management and child marriage
- Refugee protection case processing and child marriage
- Working with other sectors to tackle child marriage

3.3.1 Strengthening laws and policies

Strengthening the legal framework is a key priority to deter the practice of child marriage and safeguard the rights and well-being of children, particularly girls. A robust legal foundation:

- Provides a clear and unequivocal stance against child marriage, serving as a deterrent and signalling societal disapproval.
- Establishes a legal basis for prosecution and holds perpetrators accountable for their actions.
- Helps create a protective environment for vulnerable individuals, offering a sense of security and recourse for those at risk.
- Sets the stage for comprehensive information campaigns, education programmes, and community engagement initiatives, reinforcing the message that child marriage is not only socially unacceptable but also legally punishable.

Example of actions to strengthen laws and policies related to child marriage

- Analysis or literature review of the child marriage laws in a specific country for a specific population
- Targeted advocacy with government and key stakeholders to strengthen gaps in the law and its enforcement
- Provision of information to refugee and host community on the laws surrounding child marriage
- Community dialogues with community leaders and members on their role in protecting children from marrying child marriage


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Legal frameworks provide a crucial foundation to deter child marriage and protect married children, especially girls, but it needs to be combined with other interventions to effectively deter or halt child marriage. The complex socioeconomic, cultural and humanitarian causes of child marriage thus necessitate a comprehensive approach. Forcibly displaced communities often face unique circumstances that can make the implementation of existing legal protections against child marriage more difficult. Only through a synergistic combination of legal measures and comprehensive community-based initiatives can we make meaningful strides in preventing child marriage in forced displacement settings.

Child protection and GBV actors must understand the legal framework within which they are operating, in order to design prevention efforts that align with the protective elements of the national legal framework and to be able to advocate with the government, communities and other humanitarian actors for necessary changes in legal frameworks. Service providers should consider the practical implications of these legal insights within their specific roles, to enable legal knowledge to be translated into actionable strategies that can effect meaningful change within the context.

Analysing existing laws and policies

Child marriage context analysis should include an analysis of existing laws and policies.[46] It should consider the complexity of laws and policies pertaining to marriage, as well as the various areas of law relevant to child marriage and its consequences, including family law, personal status law, criminal law, nationality law, refugee law and laws dedicated to addressing child protection and GBV issues. In countries that have a different set of laws governing specific religious communities, such as customary, religious laws or other informal justice mechanisms, it is important also to consider what role those laws and judicial processes play for specific communities.

Laws that set a minimum age for marriage, a legal age for consent or an age of maturity are important tools in child marriage prevention, risk mitigation and response. Yet, even with a minimum age for marriage, States often lack clear legislation to effectively address the issue of marriages involving children that prioritize the best interests of the child. In many countries, parental consent is sufficient to permit marriage for a person under the legal minimum age. Legal systems should ensure that marriages involving persons under 18 are not legally recognized. In exceptional situations, where recognition of the marriage is necessary as a harm-reduction measure, thorough procedures should be in place to weigh the risks associated with various options and identify measures to mitigate harm associated with remaining in the marriage.

There are laws that impact upon child marriage, even if they do not address it directly. For example, laws that stipulate a compulsory number of years of education and a minimum age for leaving school will help prevent girls from being married.[49] Furthermore, if there are legal prohibitions for pregnant girls to continue to attend school, this can deter married girls or unmarried mothers from staying in school thereby increasing her risk factors. Other examples include legal barriers to birth registration and policies that limit birth registration for refugees. Without a proof of age, refugee girls are at greater risk of being married under 18. Any laws, policies or regulations, including mandatory reporting mechanisms, that affect the rights of the child may intersect with child marriage. For example, in settings where contraception is only available to married women and/or with the permission of the husband.

Even where strong legal frameworks exist, enforcement and implementation can be inconsistent or limited. Undocumented marriages and short-contract marriages, may increase among refugees.[16,27] These marriages can occur due to a lack of understanding of how to register marriage in host communities or an inability to pay associated fees. Other times they occur because the family is aware that the marriage is not permitted by law. In many cases, short-term marriages can be a short cut for sexual exploitation, in which the girl and/or her family may receive money for the marriage, which is ended after a short period of time.[m] Stricter enforcement of positive and protective elements of the law is needed to address these issues, along with providing information to girls and families on marriage laws, the impact of child marriage and positive alternatives for girls.

Advocating for laws to align with international standards

Alignment of national laws with international standards is a key strategy to prevent child marriage. According to the African Report on Girls and the Law – Getting Girls Equal[50] the prevalence of child marriage is 40 per cent lower in African countries with consistent laws against child marriage than in countries without such laws.

The rights of children, particularly girls, are directly or indirectly protected through international and regional instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which is the basis for recognition and protection of the rights of children in international law. It encompasses all children and Article 22 specifically addresses the situation of refugee children. In addition, several other international and regional instruments outline standards relating to marriage that address issues of age, consent, equality within marriage and the rights of girls and women. These instruments include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, (CEDAW), the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery, and the African Charter on The Rights and Welfare of The Child (ACERWC).

m. Short-term marriages are in many cases a form of child trafficking for sexual exploitation, domestic servitude or forced labour. In such cases, stigmatization and ostracism by the community may be heightened.

With the exception of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is generally regarded as stipulating norms of customary international law binding on all States, the above-mentioned instruments are legally binding on their State parties. Furthermore, CRC, CEDAW and ACERWC all have dedicated treaty bodies that monitor and report on the progress of States in complying with their respective obligations as parties to these instruments. A key mechanism and opportunity for examining compliance, reinforcing accountability and encouraging specific reforms, where necessary. Even where States are not party to these instruments, their standards are considered authoritative in international law and are thus instrumental in clarifying the rights framework to which all States should adhere in relation to the issue of child marriage.

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Despite this, there is often a discrepancy between these international and regional instruments and national and local law, policies and procedures, especially when States are not party to these instruments. To help navigate that discrepancy, consider the following:

Challenges and solutions in laws relating to child marriage[51]

Challenge » Married girls are considered adults by law or by custom.	**Solutions »** Even if a married child is considered an adult under the legislation of a particular State or perceived as an adult due to her marital status, advocate for the recognition of married girls as children in accordance with the joint recommendation of CRC and CEDAW.[n] Advocate for them to have access to the same rights and protections as unmarried children, without exception.
Challenge » Different ages of marriage for girls and boys.	**Solutions »** Advocate for the minimum legal age of marriage for both males and females to be set at 18, in line with the joint recommendation of CRC and CEDAW.[o] Harmonize all legal systems (civil, criminal, family and customary) to that standard. Depending on the domestic legal system, international law may take precedence over domestic laws.
Challenge » Child marriage occurs informally.	**Solutions »** Work with religious and community actors to raise awareness of the law and the harmful impact of child marriage on girls as well as the community. Work with girls and the community to identify alternative opportunities to marrying early. Understand the driving forces and motivations of marriage officiants and how to combat these to limit marriages involving children. Work with marriage officiants to persuade them to request proof of age before officiating a marriage and clarify with them the reporting requirements and penalties for cases of child marriage under the relevant legal frameworks.
Challenge » Birth and marriage registration is weak or non-existent.	**Solutions »** Together with other partners, strengthen the civil registration system by investing in the infrastructure and training of local civil registration authorities. Support national civil registration authorities to ensure that birth and marriage registration is mandatory and free of charge (or low-cost) that cannot be easily amended without legal proof e.g. to change the year of birth.
Challenge » Child marriage is justified by interpretation of religious texts or traditions	**Solutions »** Meet and create space for respectful dialogues between religious and traditional leaders. Work with religious leaders to identify and promote values that support alternatives to child marriage while respecting the community's values and beliefs. For example, advocating to increase the age of initiation rites instead of trying to ban them. Identify influential role models among religious and traditional leaders to advocate on the benefits of delaying marriage for girls, highlighting the negative impact of marrying early and practical alternatives to child marriage.
Challenge » Child marriage happens in contexts where resources to implement the law are scarce.	**Solutions »** Work with child protection and GBV partners to advocate for increased investment in this area. Support legal aid systems and services including capacity building with customary judicial systems to protect children's rights.
Challenge » Underage married children face barriers to take their case to court, due to their age, knowledge or resources.	**Solutions »** Train local law enforcement authorities and social services to respond to child marriage and all forms of GBV cases without discrimination. Strengthen access to free legal and social services for victims of child marriage. Provide civic and political skills and knowledge training for children, particularly girls.

n. See "Joint general recommendation/general comment No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on harmful practices", CEDAW/C/GC/31/Rev.1 and CRC/C/GC/18/Rev.1, 8 May 2019, para. 20. This is notwithstanding that Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as any person below the age of 18 unless under the law applicable to the child majority is attained earlier, see "Convention on the Rights of the Child", 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3, Article 1.

o. Ibid.

3.3.2 Working with ever-married girls and girls at risk of child marriage

Research on what works to tackle child marriage has found that one of the most successful approaches is to work directly with girls to strengthen their agency by increasing their self-awareness, self-confidence and self-efficacy and providing them with the information, skills and social support that they need (see section 3.1 Adolescent girl-responsive approach). When programming to tackle child marriage, it is imperative to create services that centre on girls' needs, priorities and realities.

This section refers to working with married girls and girls at risk of child marriage in programming broadly. For specific guidance on supporting girls through case management, see Section 3.3.4.

Using the term *survivor* in the context of child marriage

The term "survivor" has been widely adopted and replaces more stigmatizing or disempowering terms like victim. But when it comes to child marriage, the use of "survivor" is much more complicated – and, in some cases, problematic.

1. Child marriage is a form of GBV. As such, having experienced child marriage is often synonymized with being a survivor of GBV. However, the experience of child marriage is not necessarily perceived as "violence" by the child/girl or her community. Many girls who are married early do not always self-identify as "survivors of violence." They may experience harm – health consequences, loss of education, social isolation, deprivation of resources – but the marriage itself might be normalized or even framed by their families as protective or desirable.
2. Using "survivor" can sometimes impose an external judgment or narrative on the person's life, particularly if that girl hasn't yet processed or recognized the harm. It risks making her feel labelled or defined by a term that doesn't match how she understands her own experience at that time.
3. It's also context dependent. In settings where child marriage happens under duress (e.g., conflict-related child marriages, child/sex trafficking under the guise of marriage), the term "survivor" might fit. But in contexts where it's systemic and normalized – even if harmful – it's more complex.

The risk of using "survivor" by default in child marriage work may:

- Unintentionally stigmatize the girl or woman, especially in communities where child marriage is widespread.
- Create a disconnect between programmes and the people they're meant to support, if the language feels imposed.
- Prioritize the external advocacy narrative over the lived reality of the person we're talking about.

We therefore need to be more intentional and nuanced:

- Use "survivor" where it fits – especially when girls are subjected to forced, exploitative or coercive marriages, or when they have explicitly identified harm
- Use "survivor" when girls refer to themselves in this way. When girls or women self-identify as a survivor in the context of child marriage, you can reflect their own language back to them as it reaffirms their empowerment.
- In other contexts, consider using person-first language, like: "girls affected by child marriage", "girls at risk of child marriage", "married girls", "girls who have experienced child marriage" or "ever-married girls".


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Key considerations

Targeting girls at risk of child marriage and ever-married girls

The needs of adolescent girls and the risks they face may differ based on factors such as age, religion, disability, socioeconomic situation, displacement and other diversity factors. In addition to their marital or parenthood status.

Girls at risk of child marriage and ever-married girls are often harder to reach through the typical approaches used when targeting unmarried or less vulnerable girls. When thinking about how to strengthen, expand or create a programme for girls, the following questions need to be answered: **"Who am I reaching?"** and **"Are they the girls I want to be reaching?"**[52] Answering these questions is essential in understanding how to target ever-married girls and unmarried girls at risk of marriage. This information can be gathered as part of a context analysis (see section 3.2), or during project design or strategic planning phase. Consideration of girls' intersectional factors, i.e. the power imbalance or discrimination they may face according to their age and background, language and literacy, mobility, etc., and how this affects their access to resources and thus how this impacts targeting, is essential. For instance, targeting girls through schools can be a useful model of engagement, but if this is pursued in isolation, it will exclude girls who are out of school. In some cases, girls at risk of marriage or ever-married girls may be mostly homebound. Also, adolescent girls' circumstances may change rapidly. For instance, relying on case management referrals to reach married girls may overlook recently married girls or girls who have not disclosed their marriage.

Do's and Don'ts when working with adolescent girls

- **Do not group all adolescent girls together:** Younger adolescent girls (10–14), older girls (15–17) and girls in their late adolescence (18-19) have different cognitive abilities, interests, needs and life experiences. Grouping them together in one programme or category runs the risk of excluding the younger or older girls, and likely weakens the effectiveness of the programme. Younger girls may not understand what is communicated for older girls, and older girls may find that the information for younger girls does not meet their needs and become disinterested.
- **The same programme for married and unmarried girls may not work:** The goal of programming for unmarried girls is child marriage prevention. However, for ever-married girls, it is helping them to lead empowered lives within or after their marriage, or finding an alternative to their situation. Although ever-married and unmarried girls are peers, their needs, challenges and opportunities are different. Be careful not to target ever-married girls in a way that might seem to reward child marriage or be stigmatizing. In some contexts, the parents of unmarried girls or young mothers, may not want their daughters to have joint activities.
- **Best interest of the child and do no harm:**[p] Remember that the best interests principle requires us to assess what is in the best interests of the child before taking any action. The do no harm principle requires that all interventions on child marriage do not cause further harm by carefully weighing the risks and benefits for the girl of any action. These two principles must be key considerations in both programme design and decisions regarding individual girls.

p. See United Nations General Assembly, "Convention on the Rights of the Child", 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, Article 3.

- **Do recognize the unique situation of married girls:** Married girls are in an adult union with adult responsibilities, and they are likely considered as adults within their community. The national authorities, in a given context, may also cite the marriage as a basis for legally treating married children as adults, thereby depriving them of their rights as a child and the unique protections established within the CRC.[q] However, married children do not become adults simply because of their marriage. They still have the physical, emotional and cognitive needs of other children of their age, development and level of maturity. While still children, married girls may have experiences and a social standing that their unmarried peers do not share. The challenges they face are unique and the circumstances of each girl will determine individual needs and opportunities. Married children, especially girls are often extremely vulnerable and marginalized due to isolation from family, social and support networks. Like all children, married girls have the right to be heard. Take their views, ideas and dreams into consideration when planning interventions intended for them.

Girls' engagement and empowerment

Effectively engaging girls starts with ensuring their meaningful participation, which is a core part of the adolescent girl-responsive approach.[r] Concretely, meaningful participation for girls means that girls should be able to share ideas, provide input, determine priorities, set agendas and propose solutions.

There are often intersectional factors that determine or influence the possibility and scope of girls' meaningful participation. These are compounding forms of discrimination and unequal power dynamics such as gender inequalities, social and legal status, marital status, domestic and household responsibilities, disability, education and resources, among others. To ensure girls' full participation, it is important to: assess the degree to which girls, in all their diversity, can participate in decision-making structures and processes; understand the barriers that prevent different groups of girls from participating; and then take targeted actions to remove or minimize those barriers.

Girls' empowerment is the expansion of girls' current and future ability to make and act on strategic life and daily choices.[53] For an unmarried girl, this includes being able to choose when and if to marry, as well as choosing the partner for herself, the ability to delay or decline a marriage proposal, and/or decide on the circumstances of her marriage. The ability to choose one's own spouse and to marry only with one's free and full consent are fundamental rights recognized in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). For a married girl, empowerment also includes being able to decide the number and spacing of her children, negotiating rights and decisions within her marriage, remaining free from all forms of violence and coercion and having the right to separate and leave the marriage.

There is no one-size-fits-all tool to empower girls. It is also not something that can be given or trained, but the result of environmental shifts that rebalance power dynamics among community members who traditionally have held less power, such as girls. Empowerment programmes that only target girls can be harmful if the environment surrounding the girls remains unequal and unchanged. An effective girls' engagement and empowerment programme entails a sequenced curriculum contextualized to the specific social, cultural, legal and religious factors in a given community and works across the socio-ecological levels with different groups such as parents, teachers and the police.

For more information see key actions and guidance notes on women's and girls' empowerment programming in the Inter-Agency GBV Minimum Standard 2 on Women's and Girls' Participation and Empowerment as well as Core Concepts section of the IMC and IRC Women and Girls Safe Spaces: A Toolkit for Women's and Girls' Empowerment in Humanitarian Settings.[s]

q. See United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), "General comment No. 4 (2003): Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child", 1 July 2003, CRC/GC/2003/4.
r. See UNHCR, "Gender Equality Toolkit", 2020, which explains that "Meaningful participation implies the full and equal involvement of girls in all decision-making processes and activities in the public and private spheres that affect their lives and the life of their community. It also includes working with the community, especially men, to open the space for women to participate and support their participation."
s. See Standard 2 in the "The Inter-Agency Minimum Standards for Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies Programming", 2019

A note on safe spaces

A safe space is any kind of space, formal or informal, physical or virtual, in which groups or individuals are supported through processes of empowerment and can feel physically and emotionally safe.[54,55] Safe spaces often facilitate trust and sharing and thus provide an opportunity for girls to disclose child marriage and other forms of GBV, and be referred to case management and other specialized services. They also offer an opportunity for girls' other needs to be identified and for them to be referred to relevant services such as education.

Girls need to know where they are safe within their community. This is especially important for refugee and displaced girls who find themselves in a completely new environment. Safety audits can help girls identify both safe and unsafe spaces by enabling them to map their community and identify safe locations, places that create risks and actions to mitigate those risks.

There are several options for safe spaces, including:

- **Women and girls' safe spaces** (sometimes referred to as female friendly spaces) are recognized as a key protection and empowerment strategy for women and girls in emergencies. Women and girls' safe spaces are used as places for multisectoral GBV response services and as places to obtain non-stigmatizing information on SRH and children's[t] and women's rights and services. They are also female-only spaces as opposed to child friendly spaces (CFS) which are often mixed for girls and boys. Multisectoral programmes often take place in women and girls' safe spaces as well. These spaces serve as a platform for programming, information-sharing and contact with peers. They can also be a place for confidential and sensitive conversations when conducting assessments.
- **Children or youth spaces (or child-friendly spaces)** provide support and protection for children and youth and often also cater for adolescent girls. Unmarried girls may be more likely to go to child- or adolescent-friendly spaces while married girls may be more likely to go to women's spaces.
- **Virtual safe spaces for women and girls** are intended to facilitate access to information and services for adolescent girls and women in a safe, culturally appropriate, age and gender-sensitive manner in hard to reach areas or for groups with restricted mobility or access.[56] They are typically based on the use of technology such as WhatsApp or through specially created Apps.

Good safe space programmes consider girls' status (i.e. married or unmarried, in school or out of school, living with parents, not living with parents, etc.) and adapt to ensure that all girls have a safe space to go to which is appropriate to her specific needs. This may include adapting a CFS to have dedicated days or times for different ages and/or for boys or girls with staff that match the sex of the intended participants.

Despite the existence of different options, safe spaces for ever-married adolescent girls are often lacking due to poor planning and community norms. Married adolescents tend to go to women's and girl's safe spaces, but the accessibility of these services may be limited by a number of barriers. These services may not be attuned to the specific needs and issues facing adolescent girls and younger married girls resulting in them not seeing the value in going to these spaces, or staff may lack child- or adolescent-friendly attitudes or capacity. Alternatively, older women may push younger girls out or restrict their access to the space for a variety of reasons.

See Safe spaces dos and don'ts and guide in creating a safe space and assessing the effectiveness of existing safe spaces and Strategies and impacts of adolescent girls' safe spaces in Kita, Mali, Plan International.

t. Children's safe spaces should cater for different ages including adolescent girls. Sometimes these spaces may be specifically for adolescents; youth centres may also cover adolescent girls.

A study of Syrian girls interviewed in Jordan found that the respondents cited spending time with friends as their favourite activity; however, their only opportunity to spend time with friends was during formal programmes because of family-imposed restrictions on their movement. When girls build their social support networks, which is a key goal for such programming, they have the opportunity to share experiences, problem-solve, break their routine and even forget about the challenges they face. This social support builds resilience and is a key protective factor for unmarried girls to find solidarity, or for ever-married girls to create bonds with other girls affected by child marriage.[57]

Life skills as a strategy to engage and empower adolescent girls

Life skills are defined as psychosocial abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to develop and deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.[58] Life skills can be embedded into multisectoral programmes and can help girls negotiate their best interests and mitigate risks. For instance, life skills can help unmarried girls delay marriage by enabling them to think critically about the marriage, weighing options and understanding the impact. By empowering girls to communicate their needs and wishes to their parents or caregivers, girls may be able to influence marriage decision-making in some contexts.

Similarly, life skills can help married girls to develop their confidence and negotiate their rights in their marriage and with other family relationships. It can also provide an opportunity to create social networks for married girls who may be experiencing isolation or exclusion.

Life skills curriculum can also target parents and caregivers, siblings, teachers, faith leaders, community members among others to shift the norms that perpetuate child marriage and other forms of GBV. It is strongly recommended to target adolescent girls and the community around her with complementary curriculum to reduce potential backlash or harm from girls' growing empowerment, participation and confidence.


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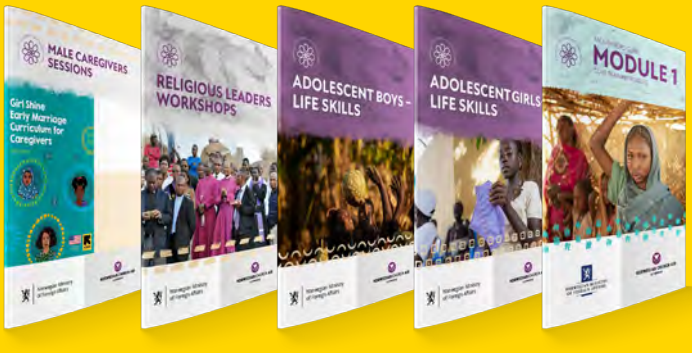
In settings where it is common for older adolescent girls to marry boys close in age, you may also want to consider life skills programmes for boys and/or young husbands and fathers. Creating allies and strong peer groups among men and newly married young men can help to improve equitable relationships, and mitigate from future violence. For example, the REAL Fathers programmes or Young Husbands Clubs with youth 18-24 years using adapted life skills programmes such as from Plan's PALS Programme or NCA's ENGAGE. Additional guidance can be drawn from comprehensive sexuality education curricula adapted to the operational context. See Plan's Comprehensive Sexuality Education Topics: what to cover from early childhood to 18+ for guidance on content by age group.

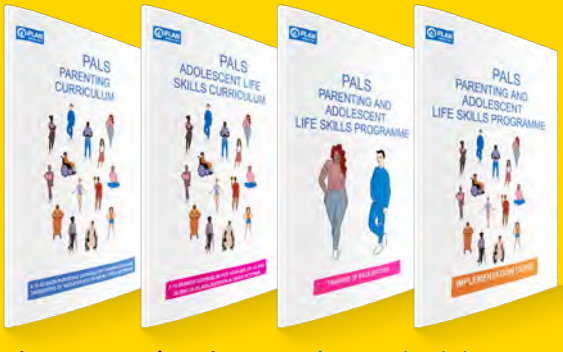
Despite the widespread use of life skills programmes, their effectiveness can vary depending how they are implemented, and the dynamics of a given context. It is recommended to document and evaluate the impact of your life skills interventions to increase the evidence base and improve quality programming.

Key resources on strategies to engage and empower girls, including ever-married girls



Engage – Enhancing Girl's Agency and Gender Equality, NCA

Girl Shine: Early Marriage Curriculums for married girls and girls at risk of marriage, and their caregivers, IRC.



Plan International's Parenting and Adolescent Life skills Programme – with new curriculum coming in 2026 specifically for married girls and young mothers with complimentary sessions for supportive adults

Save the Children
Girls Decide: Life skills to protect and empower girls affected by migration and displacement

Lahaa – online safe space for women and girls, UNICEF

UNICEF MENA Life Skills and Citizenship Education – Conceptual and Programmatic Framework

3.3.3 Working with families and communities

Girls, as everyone, live in households and communities that are governed by gender-based social norms with complex power structures. In order to create change and deter practices that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination, such as child marriage, programmes must be co-created and implemented with girls, their families (parents, siblings etc.) and their communities. When these actions are co-created and implemented by and with the community, they are more likely to be effective in making lasting change as they are more transparent, participatory, and better able to enhance local capacity and accountability.

Evidence shows that positive change of any kind – be it empowerment of adolescents or a decision made by a parent to prevent their child's marriage against the norm – is more likely to happen when the whole socio-ecological environment, i.e. children, families, communities and societies, is strategically engaged to support this process. This whole-of-society approach requires interventions to expand from focusing solely on the individual (e.g. an adolescent girl or boy) to addressing changes at all levels of the child's environment. Social and behaviour change communication (SBCC)[59] is commonly used to facilitate such multilevel engagement processes in child marriage prevention.

Social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) is an evidence-based and strategic process that aims to achieve positive change in the knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, social norms and behaviour of individuals, communities and the society at large. In order to prevent or delay child marriages from taking place, the attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate the practice need to be shifted to reflect a more gender-transformative approach towards girls.

As the practice is driven by complex motivations and pressures, understanding what these are is the key to successfully shifting harmful attitudes and beliefs.

SBCC uses three core engagement approaches to reach and sustain positive change:

1. **Behaviour change communication,** in which tailored messages and activities facilitate mainly individual-level changes.

2. **Social mobilization** whereby relevant and influential (formal and informal) social groups are strategically engaged, informed and supported to take action on an issue. Mainly at the community level.

3. **Targeted Advocacy,** in which decision-makers, policy officials, service providers, media representatives, professional associations, academia, celebrities and social influencers are engaged to create wider societal discussion of an issue, create and reinforce supportive policies and allocate sufficient funds to basic services, etc.

In addition, when working to promote changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviour concerning sensitive issues such as child marriage, it is essential to follow basic principles of social and behaviour change communication to ensure that change is facilitated in a respectful and sustainable manner.

Many families see child marriage as a way to protect their daughters.

When refugee and displaced families lack access to livelihoods, they search for an alternative to provide their family with economic security and alleviate food insecurity.[60] This may result in child marriage as a way to secure both themselves and their daughter with a better opportunity for economic security and access to her basic needs. Child marriage can be perceived as an easier path for parents when girls lack access to quality education and future decent work opportunities.[60] Parents often cite that they believe that marriage will protect their daughter from sexual violence and other abuses,[60] or that it will prevent their daughters from being abducted and forcibly married to combatants or members of militia or armed groups.[61] During the CARE Rapid Gender and Protection Assessment of the Kobane refugee population in Turkey (October 2014), refugees indicated that a primary reason for leaving Syria was to protect girls from sexual violence.[16] Marriage may seem like another means of protection for families who have fled violence but continue to face and/or fear violence, discrimination or exclusion in both camps and host communities.

To tackle child marriage, it is important to implement programmes that educate parents and caregivers about the benefits of delaying marriage, the detrimental effects of marrying children early and exploring alternative options to marriage. These programmes should facilitate constructive group discussions involving parents and influential community members, which build upon positive values in the community and amplify positive existing efforts. It is crucial to encourage parents to engage in conversations with their children on these issues and to consider their children's perspectives.

Adolescent girls, including ever-married girls and young mothers, should be consulted to identify the messaging and strategies to engage key family and community members to deter the practice, centring their voices and experiences. Advocates for change, particularly women who have experienced child marriage themselves or women who want a better alternative for their daughters, should be identified and supported to lead community dialogue and action. Similarly, identifying role models and positive deviants who are of the community and already influential, should lead these prevention strategies to amplify their impact.

These activities serve not only to prompt reflection on the benefits of delaying marriage and the consequences of gender inequality and child marriage, but also to inspire collective action. Programmes that involve parents or caregivers of girls at risk of child marriage in income-generating opportunities or provide financial support and incentives can alleviate some of the immediate economic pressures that drive families to marry off their daughters prematurely. Furthermore, initiatives offering education or economic prospects for girls can demonstrate to parents that viable alternatives to child marriage exist to delay marriage by a number of years. Campaigns can also seek to challenge practices that act as a precursor to marriage, such as initiation practices and ceremonies. Working with influential members of the community to raise the age limit or adapt the practice to be more gender-empowering and safe can be a positive step in tackling the harmful impacts that protects the community practices while reshaping cultural norms to protect girls.

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Female relatives

It is not uncommon that mothers, aunts, older sisters and grandmothers may share similar motivations to fathers (who are often key decision makers) when it comes to endorsing child marriage. However, some women in the family will support delaying or preventing child marriages. Recent research indicates that providing literacy training to mothers can contribute to delaying their daughters' marriages. Through skills building, newly literate women feel more empowered to influence family decisions and equip them with a greater understanding of the rights of women and girls.[62]

Similarly, married girls' in-laws and other influential figures play crucial roles in arranging child marriages and shaping their lives after marriage. Mothers-in-law, in particular, often wield considerable influence in the household, exerting pressure on girls to conceive early, controlling decisions over their education and managing household resources and assets that significantly (and often negatively) impact married girls. This is especially true in multigenerational households, as is often the case in refugee camp settings. It is imperative for programmes to actively engage mothers-in-law, aunts and other key female role-players in educational efforts aimed at raising awareness of the benefits of delaying early childbearing, child spacing and the detrimental health consequences associated with early and frequent pregnancies. These programmes should encompass discussions pertaining to societal norms and the decision-making process, encouraging mothers-in-law to contemplate how allowing young brides to exercise autonomy in decision-making can lead to improved social, economic and health outcomes within the household and better relationships in the family.

It is also impactful to support women as advocates for reducing child marriage. Programmes should facilitate group discussions for women in which they can openly share their experiences of marriage, explore the benefits of delaying marriage and the harmful repercussions of child marriage and consider alternatives within their communities. Therefore, programmes should forge strategic partnerships with women's groups, including women-led organizations. These initiatives should offer support to these groups to raise awareness and create alternative opportunities for girls (for example by improving accessibility to quality education or fostering income-generating prospects) and establish support networks accessible to ever-married girls and young mothers. While women can serve as powerful champions for girls' rights, it is important that these programmes have pathways to engage both women and men.


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Male relatives

Given their pivotal role in shaping decisions that profoundly affect girls' lives, including the timing and conditions of marriage, it is imperative to actively involve male family members, particularly fathers and brothers, in efforts to prevent and address child marriage. Engaging fathers in meaningful dialogues is crucial to increase their understanding of the benefits of delaying marriage, the adverse consequences of child marriage, the detrimental norms that hinder their daughters' potential, and the available alternatives for their daughters. Programmes designed to support the fathers of adolescent girls to reflect on gender norms and stereotypes relating to their roles in caring for their girl and boy children, and their expectations and hopes for their future, can also help transform fathers' roles and combat child marriage practices. Some examples of programmes targeting fathers include Men Care and REAL Fathers (programme tools and curriculum available, contact Plan International).

Similarly, in many cultures, brothers often wield significant influence in household and community decision-making processes or even monitoring their sister's behaviour. Their respected position within the family, coupled with their close proximity to and shared experiences with their sisters, mean that brothers of girls at risk of child marriage have a unique opportunity to champion the rights of their sister and influence how their families and communities perceive the role of girls. Gender norms are formed throughout childhood, so it is important to engage and support boys throughout this period to promote more gender-equitable norms. Targeting boys for child marriage prevention activities with tailored and integrated gender-transformative interventions can be impactful for both their sisters and also the relationship they want to build with their future wife.

"All GBV Prevention Programming should only be initiated once essential services are in place to respond to incidents."

UNHCR GBV POLICY

Working with men and boys who are not family members

Research on the impact of child marriage on boys is currently limited. In countries where data is available, statistics reveal that, on average, 4.5 percent of young men aged 20 to 24 years were either married or in a union before reaching the age of 18. Boys who enter into child marriages often perceive it as a symbol of manhood and may feel compelled to demonstrate their fertility shortly after marriage.[18]

Given that men and boys play a crucial role as current or future husbands, programmes aiming to shift gender norms and reshape power dynamics within relationships can be instrumental in working with boys who are vulnerable to child marriage or those who are already married. To tackle child marriage, initiatives can commence at a young age, helping boys become allies, cultivate equitable gender norms that emphasize respect for and appreciation of women's contributions while addressing harmful aspects of masculinity and building skills and attitudes needed for equitable, respectful relationships.

There are many examples of focused life skills programmes to reach adolescent boys and youth (including brothers and male family members), such as Plan's Parenting and Adolescent Life Skills (PALS) adapted for crisis settings or see examples in Engaging Men in Accountable Practices (EMAP) from IRC.

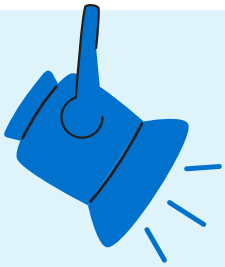
Furthermore, programmes that target the same underlying factors perpetuating child marriage among girls – such as improving access to quality education, income generation, and savings and loan opportunities – can also include boys and their families. This inclusive approach may alleviate some of the social and financial pressures that drive parents to marry off their children at an early age.

Working with community and faith leaders and groups

Decisions relating to marriage often intertwine with social norms. Community and faith-based actors frequently participate in guiding families through the process of establishing marital unions and might even oversee the marriage ceremonies themselves. Moreover, in numerous regions where child marriage prevails, customary law takes precedence and community members turn to community and faith leaders for guidance, rather than strictly adhering to governmental regulations. Given their pivotal role in upholding societal conventions, it is imperative to involve community and faith leaders in endeavours to prevent and address child marriage. For more information on the link between child marriage and faith leaders, see this brief from Girls Not Brides.

Key actions may include:

- **Facilitate dialogues** with faith-based actors to help them to identify existing values and practices aligned with delaying the marriage of girls until they are adults and exploring alternatives pathways for girls to bring change in their community.
- **Provide information** about women and girls and children's rights, the negative impacts of child marriage and the broader impacts of child marriage on community advancement
- **Encourage these actors to engage** in candid dialogue to provide them the opportunity to voice their perspectives, challenge their own beliefs, engage in constructive debates and foster gender-equitable norms.
- **Identify faith leaders** who can act as catalysts for change and role models among their peers and community members.
- **Understand the pressures** and drivers on faith leaders to perform ceremonies for child marriage and what could deter the practice.



Spotlight: child marriage prevention

Child marriage prevention seeks to address the root cause and the attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate and maintain this practice, including gender inequality, systemic discrimination and unequal power relations. By using social behaviour change and communication strategies and gender-transformative approaches, prevention aims to:

(i) delay marriage;
(ii) seek alternatives; and
(iii) reduce discriminatory attitudes and behaviours towards pregnant, married or ever-married girls.

Changing gender norms and behaviour should be a community-led process that engages with diverse groups including men and boys. This requires long-term, sustained action and commitment which is not always suited to acute crisis settings but rather once situations have become fairly stable.

For a child marriage prevention strategy to be successful, it is essential to co-create it with girls, especially ever-married girls and young mothers, their families and communities. Community-driven prevention can tap into existing positive community practices and knowledge, reinforcing viable alternatives to child marriage, and ensure more transparency, participation and greater accountability.

While evidence-based prevention programmes exist[63], it is important to identify the strategies best suited to each context and community to develop a unique and tailored community-driven prevention strategy.

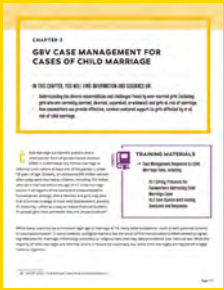
To learn more about how to develop a child marriage prevention strategy with the community, see our e-learning module 'Co-designing child marriage prevention strategies with girls and their community' on Kaya or workday.

Key resources for managing cases of child marriage in case management

E-module on Supporting married girls and unmarried girls at risk of child marriage in case management, available on Kaya and Workday.

Improving case management services for married girls and girls at risk of child marriage in crisis and displacement settings, learning paper, staff checklist and brief.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), "Caring for Child Survivors of Sexual Abuse Guidelines 2nd Edition", 2024.



Updated chapter on child marriage in the Interagency GBV Case Management Guidelines, including the updated training package.

Remember to check the complete list of resources on page 73.

3.3.4 Case management and child marriage

Case management is a service that should be available to all children who have experienced marriage or are at risk of it. However, this section focuses specifically on girls, as working with them involves a unique level of complexity. Girls married early and girls forced into marriage often endure compounding forms of GBV such as domestic abuse, including physical, emotional, sexual violence and denial of resources. Due to these complexities, additional considerations for staff working on case management involving child marriage are detailed below.

The guidance provided adopts a rights-based approach and supports girls' agency, particularly for older girls, in decision-making. UNHCR and Plan recognize that in certain cases of child marriage, the involvement of authorities may be required. Examples of such cases may include child marriages of young children or young adolescents, marriages resulting from abduction, recruitment into armed groups or armed forces, or trafficking. These situations require immediate attention and intervention to ensure the child's safety and well-being.

To learn more or refresh your skills, please see UNHCR and Plan's 2024 e-learning module on case management and child marriage.

Case management is a way of organizing and carrying out work to address an individual's (and, where appropriate, their family's) needs in an appropriate, systematic and timely manner, through direct support and/or referrals, and in accordance with a project or programme's objectives.[64] Cases of child marriage may be handled by child protection or GBV case management actors. However, in refugee settings, cases of child marriage identified through refugee registration processes are typically referred to child protection, and due to the additional procedural factors involved in refugee case processing, it is recommended for cases of child marriage in refugee settings to be handled by child protection actors. Noting of course, that this will also depend on the capacity and availability of services in a given setting.

In this guidance, "child marriage cases" refers to three types of situations: (i) girls at risk of being married soon, (ii) girls who are already married and (iii) girls who are separated, abandoned, widowed, or divorced.[u]

Overarching considerations for case management

A common approach between Child Protection and GBV actors

When an individual girl at risk of marriage or a married girl is identified, there are a variety of case management responses that can be initiated by specialized child protection and GBV service providers. In all settings, child protection and GBV actors should, first and foremost, **agree on common referral pathways and which actors are best placed to handle cases** involving child marriage. Actors working with girls at risk of marriage or married girls should have appropriate **training and capacity** on child protection case management and Best Interests Procedure (BIP) (for refugee settings), GBV case management, caring for child survivor of sexual abuse, child-friendly communication and interviewing. In refugee settings, UNHCR and partners must also ensure that cases of child marriage have been factored into the refugee protection case management, including registration, refugee status determination and durable solutions processes.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u. To learn more about handling cases of child marriage through case management, take the UNHCR and Plan Internation e-course on Kaya

Applying both the best interests principle and the survivor-centred approach

The best interests of the child and the survivor-centred approach are complementary. Both emphasize, inter alia, non-discrimination, treating the girl with respect and dignity, assessing her needs, taking her views into account, and building on her strengths and capacities.[65,66] The survivor-centred approach requires caseworkers to empower the survivor and support their decision making. The best interests principle requires four key factors to be considered and weighed, including the girl's views, and giving due weight to such views according to the girl's age and maturity. As such, all girls should be provided information and supported in forming and expressing their views.

When working with girls at risk of child marriage or ever-married girls, we should apply the survivor-centred approach, as much as possible taking into account limitations on consent and ensuring decision-making gives due weight to girls' views in line with her age and maturity, in accordance with the best interests principle. A trusted adult should be involved in the process wherever possible, in line with the girl's best interests.

When working with girls at risk of, or ever-married girls, you can apply the survivor-centred approach and best interests principle together by:

- Providing information in a non-judgemental and age-appropriate way
- Identifying which choices are appropriate for children of different ages to make, considering both the legal framework and the age and maturity of the child
- Explaining the limitations of confidentiality and decision-making procedures in an age-appropriate way
- Engaging with children as active participants in case management, and not passive recipients of assistance or protection
- Engaging trusted adults in the process, in line with the best interests of the child.

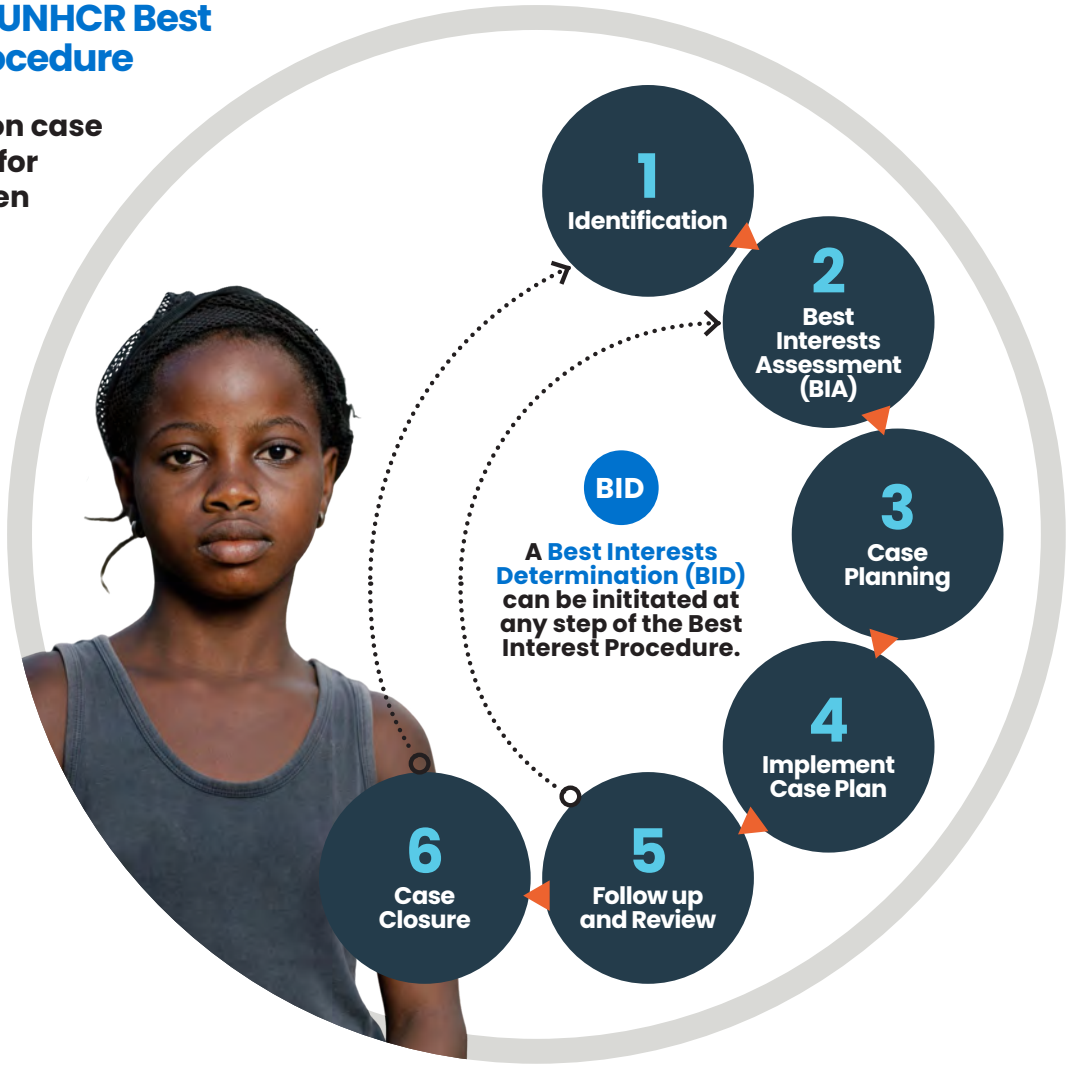
Key resources on child protection case management

Inter-Agency Guidelines for Case Management and Child Protection - 2nd Edition

UNHCR 2021 Best Interests Procedure Guidelines and the BIP Toolbox

Steps in the UNHCR Best Interests Procedure

Child protection case management for refugee children



Steps of Child Protection Case Management

1. **Identify and register** vulnerable children, including raising awareness among affected communities.
2. **Assess** the needs of individual children and families.
3. Develop an **individual case plan** for each child addressing the needs identified. Set time-bound, measurable objectives.
4. Start the **case plan**, including direct support and referral services.
5. **Follow up** and review.
6. **Close case.**

Steps of GBV Case Management

1 Introduction and Engagement

- Greet and comfort the survivor.
- Build trust and rapport.
- Assess immediate safety.
- Explain confidentiality and its limits.
- Obtain permission (informed consent) to engage the person in services.

2 Assessment

- Understand the survivor's situation, problems, and identify immediate needs.
- Provide immediate emotional support.
- Give information.
- Determine whether the survivor wants further case management services.

3 Case Action Planning

- Develop a case plan based on assessment with the survivor.
- Obtain consent for making referrals.
- Document the plan.

4 Implement the Case Action Plan

- Assist and advocate for survivors to obtain quality services.
- Provide direct support (if relevant).
- Lead case coordination.

5 Case Follow-up

- Follow up on the case and monitor progress.
- Re-assess safety and other key needs.
- Implement a revised action plan (if needed).

6 Case Closure

- Assess and plan for case closure.

Key resource for Inter-Agency GBV Case Management Guidelines.

In 2025 the child marriage chapter and training resources were updated and expanded to include safety protocols and other helpful resources specifically on handling cases of child marriage. See the Child Marriage Chapter & Module 16 Tools.

To provide effective support, a collaborative approach between child protection and GBV actors is crucial, to ensure a coordinated and high-quality response to meet the unique needs of the girls at risk of marriage or married girls. By working in tandem, child protection and GBV actors can develop robust case management strategies for girls affected by child marriage that may encompass various measures, such as:

- Establishing joint task teams and case conferences on child marriage.
- Formulating shared strategies and communication messages on child marriage.
- Incorporating insights gained from addressing child marriage in discussions with technical working groups addressing child protection and GBV concerns.
- Ensuring that service mapping and referral pathways identify specific focal points for child marriage cases and that the latter are trained in both GBV and child protection case management/BIP.
- Aligning standard operating procedures for child marriage case management between child protection and GBV.
- Collaborating with other sectors to disseminate findings regarding the risks and challenges driving child marriage rates among adolescent girls and identify solutions.

The role of the caseworker

When working with ever-married girls or girls at risk of child marriage, caseworkers should understand the situation of each girl, what she wants to happen, and assess and plan for her safety, provide information and support, make appropriate referrals and ensure that interventions made on her behalf are in her best interests, as per standard case management practice.[66,67,68]

It is important to remember that the role of the caseworker is not to stop a marriage from happening or force a separation of the marriage or to employ excessive pressure that goes against our guiding principles.

Depending on the case, applying pressure can put the girl and/or the caseworker in harm's way, which could then impact the organization's relationship with the community and its broader work. Too much pressure or reactive actions could mean that the girl will continue to get married, but she may not be granted permission to continue to seek supportive services or will feel hesitant to do so.

The role of the caseworker in child marriage cases

- **Build trust and a safe environment** with the girl and her trusted adult.
- **Carefully assess the risks** the girl faces in her particular situation and identify her needs and then identify what is in her best interests. In difficult cases, this may **be the least harmful option.**
- **Plan for her safety** and provide the best possible support to meet her needs and mitigate the risks she faces
- **Be compassionate** to her situation and ensure her well-being.

Preventing the marriage or exploring safe alternatives for married girls should make up one part of your case management action plan, that you create together with the girl.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Caseworkers should regularly **consult with case management supervisors** in cases of child marriage given the complexities. It is also equally recommended for complicated cases and decisions to **consult with either a child protection Supervisor** (if the case is handled by GBV caseworkers) or **a GBV Supervisor** (if the case is handled by child protection caseworkers) to seek another perspective.[69]

Caseworkers must not let their own beliefs, thoughts and attitudes affect how they react and support married or unmarried girls. For example, if girls are engaging in sex before marriage or if they sought out a marriage on their own. Remember to think about the adolescent-girls responsive approach in your attitudes as well as your programming:

- Gender equality
- No judgement
- No discrimination
- Awareness of our power and privilege

Case management Considerations for married girls

Caseworkers often perceive that once children are married, there is nothing more that can be done. This perception is often coupled with a limited capacity in difficult working conditions, which consequently further deprioritize ever-married girls.

Yet, the needs among the ever-married girls are extremely high and often surpass protection alone. Importantly, when working with married girls with children or unmarried young mothers, remember that there are two (or more) children involved: the mother herself and her child(ren).

The primary goal of case management with married girls is to keep the girl safe and mitigate the risks she faces.

To do this, caseworkers should create opportunities and space for the girl to safely engage with case management services and other essential services.

A girl who is already married, depending on the legal framework, may be considered emancipated in legal terms. In that case, she may have more legal capacity to make decisions for herself. However, the long-term consequences remain, including the need for long-term support, and must therefore weigh heavily in decision-making process.

Not all married girls will need to be registered for case management only on the basis of being in a child marriage. Especially in settings with a high prevalence of child marriage, among other child protection and GBV risks, registration must be based on each unique case and the specific protection risks and protective factors for an individual. This may mean that some older married girls receive a once-off intervention and referral for services versus registration to case management.

When working with married girls, caseworkers should always keep the girls' thoughts and feelings about their marriage at the forefront of the assessment of their best interests, while remembering how her age, maturity and level of cognitive development will determine her level of understanding and capacity to take decisions.

Tips for working with married girls

Caseworkers should always:

Involve the girl in the process and give her plenty of time to speak and share her views. Always keep her thoughts and feelings about marriage at the forefront of assessing her best interests. Always ask her, *"How does she feel about her situation" and "what does she want to happen"*, do not assume you know best.

Discuss the risks of marriage at a young age in a sensitive and age-appropriate way, discussing how the girl's social, emotional, health, and educational life may change. You may want to discuss the impact on

- Her health, including the dangers of early pregnancy, HIV and other STIs;
- Her physical safety and psychosocial well-being;
- Education and financial security;
- Her future.

Identify the support network. Support her in identifying and staying connected to a support network, mobilising problem-solving skills to help her think through her options, and, in the short term, reduce her risks of physical and sexual violence. Let her know that support services are available, including counselling on issues relating to her legal rights and options regarding marital status.

Do not make promises. Never promise her that leaving her husband is going to be better for her. You cannot guarantee this. Do not pressure her to do what you think is right. Agree on a plan together based on her circumstances. *If she has supportive parents/caregivers, you may be able to work with the girl and the caregiver to strategize how she can leave the marriage safely.*

Consider the unique context:

Assess age and maturity for decision-making. Remember that the girl's age, maturity, life experiences, and unique situation will impact her understanding and decision-making capacity. Be aware her community may already treat her like an adult. Adapt your language and communication to reflect this and subsequently weigh into decision-making capacity.

Understand her specific needs. Ever-married girls may have significant needs that go beyond responding to violence or abuse within the marriage. Focus on understanding and responding to her current needs and supporting to minimise the risks of violence and health complications.

Be aware of the legal framework. Be sure to know about the laws applicable to child marriage, and their enforcement to guide both caseworkers and the girl's case action plan. Be aware of any mandatory reporting requirements, given that she is a minor.

Understand the social norms. Take time to understand the social pressures girls may be under, and the impact of divorce or raising children as a single mother may have on her. Express empathy towards her situation without judgement.


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Case management considerations for girls at imminent risk of child marriage

Unmarried girls at risk, refers to girls who are going to be married imminently because they disclosed or someone else reported the information that a) they themselves are seeking out a marriage or have found a husband, or b) their family members are arranging a marriage for them.

Working with girls who are at imminent risk of child marriage requires a careful approach that considers all available options, and is sensitive to the girls age and maturity and gives due consideration to her views, prioritizing her safety.

Caseworkers should always carefully consider the individual situation of the girl as well as weigh the immediate and longer-term impact of stopping the marriage against other available options. The focus must be on identifying what is in the girl's best interests.

While stopping the marriage may always seem like the moral thing to do, some marriages will go ahead despite best efforts. In these situations, the priority for caseworkers is to focus on risk reduction, and this can only happen if contact with the girl is retained.

Staying in contact with soon-to-be-married girls is better than being blocked by the family for an overzealous approach to stopping the marriage that harms the service provider's ties to the girl, the family and possibly the community.

For these cases, the caseworker should seek to prepare the girl to navigate what married life may entail in a way that minimizes her risk of violence and health complications. Caseworkers should assess and remove barriers that she might face once she becomes married to increase the likelihood that she can continue to access case management and other protective services, especially if she will be moving far from the current services.

The Interagency GBV Case Management Guidelines[v] provide the following case management good practices for unmarried girls whose marriages are being negotiated, planned or discussed.

These good practices are written for caseworkers, but many are relevant for any practitioner in a trusted relationship with a child:

- **Understand how the girl feels about the marriage.** Some girls initially feel excited about the prospect of getting married and may not have considered the longer-term impact and the risks they may face when marrying before reaching adulthood. On the other hand, some girls may specifically ask for help to stop the marriage. However, you will need to be clear that while you have no authority to stop the marriage, you can discuss options including ways to prevent or delay the marriage. This may include engaging with trusted and supportive adults or family members, or referral to national authorities who have the capacity to intervene on behalf of the child, where this is in their best interests.
- **Understand her expectations of marriage.** You can support the girl by providing information that helps her to understand the realities of being married at her age. To do this effectively, it can help to understand her current expectations of marriage. You may want to start with an open-ended question such as:

  "How do you think getting married will impact your life?"

  "What do you think will change for you once you are married?"
- **Provide her with relevant and age-appropriate information.** Providing information on the likely impact of child marriage is essential. This can be done through discussions, communication materials, or referral to a specialist such as a health care professional. The information discussed should include:
  - Explaining her rights
  - Information on sexual and reproductive health (SRH), including family planning
  - Information on healthy relationships, including understanding GBV and intimate partner violence and where and how to seek help
  - Any other local resources and services specific to her needs, such as safe spaces, adolescent-friendly services, health clinics and legal services.

v. See United Nationals Population Fund (UNFPA), "Interagency gender-based violence case management guidelines", 2017, pp. 118–121.

- **Discuss her expectations of marriage.** It is also important to discuss her expectations of marriage and the gendered expectations of marriage in the specific context, in a way that does not encourage harmful stereotypes but helps to prepare her to understand and possibly be more able to negotiate with her husband. This may include expectations of marriage in terms of sex, contraception, early signs of pregnancy and the benefits of delaying pregnancy. It does not mean preparing her for marriage in terms of training related to household chores, how to be a good wife, how to pleasure her husband, or how to be a good daughter-in-law. Explore alternative ways to provide information, such as through a trusted female relative or through safe spaces that provide group discussions on these issues.
- **Keep the girl's safety the top priority.** Ensure that the child's best interests are a primary consideration, ensuring that any action taken keeps the child as safe as possible and does not increase risks to her safety. Remember to take the child's opinion into consideration before taking any action.

Don't's for caseworkers

What caseworkers should not do when they hear about a child marriage being planned:

- DO NOT bypass engaging with girl.
- DO NOT go straight to speak to her parents to tell them to stop planning the marriage.
- DO NOT try and engage the husband-to-be and his family to get them to stop the marriage.
- DO NOT speak with the faith leader to promise they will not perform the ceremony.
- DO NOT investigate through community members why this family is marrying their daughter.

BIP for refugee and asylum-seeking girls

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, States have the responsibility to implement procedures for assessing and determining a child's best interests in all decisions that affect them. Usually, for decisions on individual children this obligation is translated into child protection case management procedures within the national child protection system. Such procedures can include social welfare, as well as judicial processes that can be triggered when a child is at risk of child marriage or has already been married (formally or informally). Any organization assigned to make individual decisions that affect a child also has the obligation to assess and determine the best interests of the child and should do so within the national framework. In refugee settings, UNHCR may also implement Best Interests Procedure (BIP) to complement national child protection case management procedures for refugee children.[66]

At a minimum, a **Best Interests Assessment (BIA)** should be conducted for each girl identified as being at risk of child marriage, or ever-married, before any action is taken. This ensures that her best interests are properly assessed and treated as central to all decision-making. It is important to note that the situation of each girl is unique, and that each situation might require a different approach. However, all married children and children at imminent risk of marriage require an assessment by virtue of being a child in, or at risk of, a union made for adults.

All individuals in or at imminent risk of child marriages require counselling on health issues, including SRH, and can also benefit from counselling on issues relating to legal rights and options regarding marital status.[70]

A Best Interests Determination (BID) should be conducted for decisions which significantly affecting the child now or in the future, which require strict procedural safeguards. In cases of child marriage, a BID is n required in the following situations:

- Separation of the child from their parents against the parents will when the separation cannot be undertaken by the national authorities.[w]
- When a married child is being considered for resettlement with their adult spouse but without their parent/caregiver
- Where two married children are being considered for resettlement without their parents/caregivers
- Where there are indications that the child is or was subjected to violence, abuse or exploitation by their spouse or by people with whom they will be resettled.

w. See UNHCR, "UNHCR best interests procedure guidelines: Assessing and determining the best interests of the child", ch.4 for more information on when a BID is necessary, including in the context of separation from parents.

Common challenges when handling cases of child marriage in case management

A. Identification of ever married girls and girls at risk of marriage

Children who meet the criteria for case management are usually identified by programming activities aimed at children and adolescents, especially girls. During such activities, information can be provided about available services and how to seek help. However, married girls are often less visible to typical child protection identification processes due to their homebound status or living in large multigenerational housing, which may make it harder to detect that they are married.

In refugee situations, refugee registration and Refugee Status Determination (RSD) and durable solutions (including resettlement) interviews may also provide an opportunity to identify children at risk of marriage or married children.

There are three ways you might identify girls at imminent risk of marriage or already married:

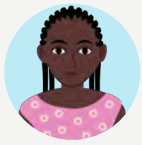
- Observation;
- Reports from third parties or referrals;
- Disclosures from the girls themselves.

In order to receive reports and disclosures, girls and community members will need to be aware of the available support services. Use different strategies to ensure that girls (and community members) are aware of the services available, how to access them and seek support. This includes providing child- and adolescent-friendly information through:

- Community centres
- Safe spaces (for children or for women and girls)
- Nutritional feeding centres
- Schools
- Health clinics
- Mobile outreach

Child protection and GBV case management staff need to work together to identify how to strike a balance between (i) being proactive in engaging with married girls and identifying protection issues and (ii) creating an environment where married girls come to seek help on their own.

Training and working with other actors such as health services or food distribution, who conduct home visits and community activities may help amplify messages and identify/engage girls in need of support without compromising their safety. As always, we must factor in the age, maturity and agency to inform how service providers should approach girls in the safest way.



B. Working with younger girls

While child marriage among very young girls is not as common as among adolescents, it does happen in many settings. For example, in some contexts girls may be promised for marriage from a very young age or even from birth, and may be subsequently raised by the future husband's family. In other settings, the exchange made between the bride's family and the groom or his family, 'the dowry', may be lower the younger the girl is, which may increasingly occur as resources become more constrained in crises. It is essential to understand what practices are happening where you are, who is affected, and what is driving them.

While age is not the only factor when determining the type of response to provide to an ever-married girl or a girl at risk of child marriage, age can be a helpful factor in determining a benchmark for taking more drastic measures. Child marriage forces children into adult roles and expectations which their bodies and their emotional development are not ready for. The younger the girl to be married is, the more serious the harm the marriage poses, such as taking on adult roles and responsibilities such as sex and childrearing. This is child sexual abuse.[71] (See UNICEF and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), "Caring for Child Survivors of Sexual Abuse Guidelines 2nd Edition", 2024.)

As described above, when handling cases of child marriage, it is always important to balance both the best interests principle with the survivor centred approach.

Cases involving younger girls and child marriage should generally be handled by caseworkers with strong expertise in child protection, particularly to assess the best interests of the child, as well as to ensure child-friendly communication.

When a young married girl or young girl at risk of child marriage are identified, caseworkers should:

- **Prioritize safety:** When deciding what is in the best interest of the girl, the priority is her safety and security
- **Mobilize intervention:** All efforts to delay the marriage should be mobilized for younger girls. Ensure you know the national laws and processes, such as who has authority to intervene and the quality of care arrangements if a child needs to be removed from a family or husband.
- **Report as needed:** Mandatory reporting, if obliged to do so and if deemed in her best interest, this should take place to trigger measures to keep the girl safe and out of marriage.
- **Seek consent:** When handling cases of younger girls, the consent of non-offending parents or caregivers is required. If not available, and considering the best interest of the child, caseworkers should seek the consent of another trusted adult or, ultimately, the authorities (for example, a judge). After exhausting all these possibilities, caseworkers may organise a case conference with specialized child protection and GBV actors to make an expert decision on moving forward without the parents' consent.

C. Intervening to prevent a marriage, or to remove a child from a marriage

Preventing a child marriage or supporting adolescent girls to make informed choices about their lives, including if they want to stay in their marriage or not, should be part of your case action plan. However, in extreme cases, there may be a need to intervene that overrides the wishes of the girl and/or her parents, e.g.:

- Cases where marriages are being arranged for very young girls
- Girls in marriages where she is in immediate danger

When considering steps to prevent a child marriage or removing a child from a marriage, the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration. Only national authorities can intervene to separate a child from their parents against their will, make decisions relating to custody and enforce laws relating to marriage and divorce. UNHCR, Plan and partners can provide children with information and support and help them to access services such as safe shelters and legal support.

In refugee settings, such decisions might be made through a best interest determination (BID) panel when refugee children do not have access to national child welfare services. BID panel decisions are, however, not legally binding, and it could be difficult to enforce them unless the government is represented in the BID panel.

Intervening to prevent a marriage or remove a child from a marriage poses specific risks for the girl. It is also important to recognize that work towards preventing or ending the marriage can result in damage to the relationships between the caseworker and the girl, the girl's family and the community, and/or create risks for the caseworker and potentially harm the reputation and access for the organization with the community across all services.

However, if the girl remains in the marriage or the marriage proceeds, this can result in lifelong risks for the girl, (see section on child marriage consequences). Furthermore, should information about the girl's engagement with the case management agency come to light, the girl may face new restrictions or other protection risks.

When working with girls at risk of child marriage, it is crucial to prioritize their voices, perspectives, and agency throughout the entire process. Bypassing the girl and engaging directly with parents, community leaders, or potential husbands without her consent and involvement can further disempower her and increase the risks she faces. Instead, caseworkers should:

- Establish a safe and confidential space for the girl to openly share her thoughts, concerns, and aspirations without fear of repercussions.
- Actively involve her in all decision-making processes, seeking her input and ensuring her wishes are respected and upheld.
- Empower her with information about her rights, available support services, and potential consequences of child marriage.
- Advocate for her best interests, while recognizing her autonomy and the complexities of her circumstances.

Failing to centre the girl's voice and treating her as a passive recipient of assistance and can undermine her well-being, reinforce harmful power dynamics, and increase the likelihood of negative outcomes.

Where UNHCR and partners are engaged in intervening in cases of child marriage, the caseworker, in partnership with the girl and her family or trusted adult, should:

- **Assess the risks:** Carefully assess the girl's risks in her particular situation and identify her needs. For example:
  - Is the marriage arranged?
  - Who is the husband-to-be?
  - Why was the marriage arranged?
  - Is the girl already living with her husband?
  - Does she have children?
- **Identify options:** Identify possible options and carefully weigh the benefits and risks of each option. The four-factor analysis undertaken as part of the BIP is available here and can serve as a helpful tool.[x]
- **Discuss the options with the girl:** This should include providing information on likely consequences, including risks, and taking her views into account.
- **Prioritize safety:** Plan for the girl's safety and provide the best possible support to meet her needs and mitigate the risks she faces. It is strongly recommended to complete a safety plan and keep it up to date.
- **Develop an action plan** including contingencies, based on the careful weighing of the risks and benefits of the various options.

Before you attempt to prevent a child marriage or remove a child from a marriage, the following elements are required:

A legal framework and implementation

The ability of the national authorities to intervene to prevent child marriage or to support the child to leave a marriage will be determined by the legal framework in the country, as well as the extent to which it is upheld by the child protection and justice systems in the area. For example, even if there is a law preventing marriages below the age of 18, if it is not commonly enforced by police or courts, it is possible that reporting a case to the authorities will only put the child at risk rather than protect them.

Care arrangements

The preferred option for girls whose marriage has ended is reunification with their parents, insofar as this is in their best interests. However, options for alternative care for girls seeking protection from being married or those seeking to leave a marriage should also be in place before intervention.

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Actors need to identify foster families who are willing to care for and provide safety for:

- Girls who have been removed from their parents ahead of an arranged marriage
- Girls who want to leave a child marriage
- Girls who are being ostracized by their families for either of these reasons

Foster families will require support in terms of training, guidance and monitoring. Institutional care should be a last resort and for the shortest possible time.

Services and support

Refusal to marry or leaving a marriage may have long-term consequences for a girl. The availability of psychosocial support, education or vocational training and protection interventions must be considered and also explained to girls in these situations, to ensure that they can take an informed opinion of what they want to do.

For younger children, decisions to remove a child from marriage must consider the wishes of a child given their age, understanding and maturity while weighing the child's safety and security as the top priority.

Whatever option is chosen, children should receive ongoing support, including case management, whether or not they stay in or enter into a marriage.

x. See UNHCR, "UNHCR best interests procedure guidelines: Assessing and determining the best interests of the child", chapter 2.4.2, page 51, for more information on four factor analysis.

Legal services for ever-married girls and girls at risk of child marriage

Girls have the right to make fully informed decisions about their marriage, including whom and when they marry, and access to legal services can be an important part of ensuring the enjoyment of this right.

All girls who are married or at risk of marriage should have access to legal services that address their rights and opportunities under the laws of the country in which they reside, as well as possible gaps and risks within the legal system (for more on individual case management, see the section on case management).

Married girls are often denied access to their full rights by their spouse or through limited knowledge and access to information. Widowed girls, girls in informal and unregistered marriages, girls in polygamous marriages and girls married to host country nationals may all have different questions regarding the scope of their rights and recourse under the national legal framework as compared to girls registered in settings where their child marriage has been legally registered by the State.

In some cases, married girls may need information in relation to the possibility of divorce. Divorce can be complicated by issues relating to child custody, refugee status, repaying of dowries, and the legality of the marriage or customary or religious processes that permit (or deny) divorce instigated by the wife. These are complex issues under the jurisdiction of the host country.

Girls should be referred to confidential and impartial legal services to receive reliable specific information, counselling and advice – it is advisable that given the role of caseworkers, that they are familiar with some of these laws and able to answer some questions and refer to specialized services where available. Depending on the age and maturity of the girl, and her wishes, it may be helpful for a supportive adult to accompany her to legal services and guide her through procedures and options to help ensure that she receives information that she can understand and that her rights are respected throughout the process.

Remember that legal support is only one aspect of decision-making. For example, if a girl learns that she can legally get a divorce, she must be advised on the cultural and social repercussions of that action. In some communities, a divorce may create significant protection concerns and risks, which would need to be identified in advance, assessed and managed. A married girl seeking a divorce may face strong social pressure due to stigma associated with divorce in many communities and may find her safety and security threatened by her husband, her in-laws and even her parents, extended family or community. If she decides to move forward with a divorce, she needs to have safeguards in place to lower the risks that are identified. An unmarried girl refusing marriage may face similar risks.

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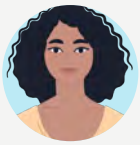


D. Engaging support persons in case management

It is important to determine at the outset whether there is a supportive family member or other trusted adult with whom to engage – **this must not be the husband** (see section on engagement of husbands).

Work with the girl to identify an adult in her close network whom she trusts and with whom she could safely share her feelings about the marriage.[y] Be aware that her initial conversation with the identified adult may be difficult. You can prepare the girl for this conversation by role-playing with her. Be sure that you thoroughly assess the risks that may be involved in sharing her feelings (e.g. how will this person react? What would happen if other family members knew that she had spoken to this person?).

If the supportive person identified is the child's parent/caregiver and you assess that it is safe to do so, engage them.

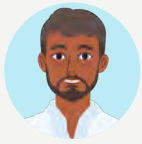
Support the parent/caregiver in thinking through the pros and cons of the child marriage and discuss the reasons for the marriage from their perspective. The fact that a girl missed years of schooling due to displacement is often used as a rationale for child marriage; as such, discussion in this case might focus on the advantages of and options for the girl to restart school, even if she has missed schooling. It might include mention of advantages for the family (e.g. she is fed at school; she can learn a skill that will help her to earn money for the family) and cite success stories of girls in the community who stayed in school. Remember to help the parent/caregiver to identify alternative options that address the concerns underlying the rationale of the marriage, such as economic hardships or lack of education options.

If the person identified is not the parent/ caregiver, but is a trusted adult, engage them.

Ask this adult if they think one of the girl's caregivers would be willing to speak with you and what the best process would be for doing so. Where there is some indication that the parent/caregiver is willing to speak with you, carefully assess the risks before proceeding. If the trusted adult has a doubt that it might negatively impact the girl then you should not do it. Instead continue to work directly with the trusted adult, who can support her in having conversations with her caregiver or other persons who have an influence over the proposed marriage.

If there is a community leader or respected person close to the family who supports delaying or stopping the marriage, this person could also be engaged.

As with any supportive adult, be sure to discuss any unintended consequences of an intervention with the parents/caregivers (i.e. thinking through what the potential negative reactions might be, how they might result in more harm and how to react to them, etc.). If necessary develop a plan to mitigate risks.



E. Engaging fathers and other male family members in case management

Work with fathers and other male family members must be based on the understanding that child marriage is rooted in patriarchal norms and power dynamics that disadvantage girls.[72] In any work with fathers and other male family members, discussions should focus on address existing gender norms that encourage child marriage. **Promoting opportunities to positively engage with fathers to jointly identify alternative ways to achieve the shared goals of protecting girls is an essential part of addressing child marriage,** should be undertaken a manner that upholds their rights, respects their choices and better safeguards their futures. Messages should be co-developed with the community to avoid judgement and blame. The focus should be on the benefits of delaying marriage, as well as the risks. These can be incorporated into programming aimed at fathers across sectors or addressed individually. Community-based programming to engage with men and boys and to change attitudes and behaviour is complementary to any messaging provided through case management processes.

Different actors may also have different stances in relation to how they work with men and boys. However, actors should not engage fathers and other male family members if they are a danger to the child, for example, because they are a perpetrator of or complicit in abuse of the child.[z] Typically, when working with children at risk of child marriage or children who are already married, the child's caseworker does not engage with husbands or men betrothed to girls, although referrals for them to access support can be made to other protection or community actors, e.g. to provide counselling on the legal, health and other consequences of marrying a girl under the age of 18 or MHPSS services for the men and/or the couple.

y. See, "Interagency guidance note on prevention of and response to child marriage in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq" for recommendations on identifying a trusted female family member.

z. See, "The inter-agency guidance note on prevention of and response to child marriage in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, 2015, p. 13, p. 27.

Engaging fathers or other male family members making the decision often means helping them to realize that the benefits of postponing marriage until adulthood outweigh the benefits of marrying during childhood. It may also be about them allowing a married girl who wants to divorce to be able to come home to her family and not be penalized or rejected. In many patriarchal societies, in the absence of a father, marriage decisions in the family may be taken by an uncle or a brother.

Engaging family members may entail addressing the specific reasons they want or wanted their daughters to marry early, such as fear of violence or the perception that there is a lack of preferable alternative options. As noted above, in situations of conflict and displacement, child marriage may be an extreme coping strategy that families choose out of desperation, fear for their daughters' safety and the perceived lack of better options. Addressing these issues may require multiple engagements.

F. Involvement of married girls' husbands in case management

Involving husbands in the case management process for girls who are under the age of 18 should be well-informed by a number of factors and thorough risk assessments. Namely, the best interests and consent of the girl, context and community factors, the capacity of the case management services and available referrals, the legal framework and mandatory reporting.

Husbands should never consent on behalf of married girls or be the trusted adult accompanying girls in case management. It is easy to harm the delicate trust built between caseworkers and married girls. Engaging with husbands may damage this relationship if the girl feels disempowered as a result.

Before reaching out to husbands, caseworkers should review and discuss the case with their supervisors to approve the planned actions and carefully monitor the situation. Caseworkers should reflect with supervisors on the following points:

- **Consent to services for children in child marriages**

  In child protection case management (or BIP for refugee and asylum-seeking children), a child's parents or caregiver usually provides consent for the service. If it is not in the child's best interests to include a caregiver in obtaining informed consent, the caseworker needs to identify whether there is a trusted adult in the child's life who can provide the consent. Work with the girl over time to identify someone outside her marriage that she can trust. If there is no other trusted adult to provide consent, the caseworker must determine if the girl, given her age, maturity, and experiences, can make decisions for herself.

  Remember, ever-married children over 15 years old usually do not need additional adult consent, especially if they are living with their spouse. Given their life experience and status as married people or mothers, they can usually provide informed consent for themselves.

- **Informing the husband to reduce barriers to access**

  Given the dynamics and sensitivities involved in child marriage, it may be necessary in some cases for the husband to be informed about the service in order to reach an agreement that reduces barriers to her participating in services.

  A comprehensive risk assessment should be carried out, involving the girl, to identify possible risks to her safety, the caseworker's and the organization's that may result from contacting the husband and ensure the benefits outweigh the risks, and that all measures are taken to mitigate any risks.

- **Legal factors**

  Marriage laws and customary marriage laws vary by context, and sometimes there may be different laws and enforcement within one country.

  – **Legal age of consent**

    The legal age of consent is a defined age when a person can legally consent to sex or sexual acts with an adult without the adult facing prosecution. This can be lower (for example, 16 years) or the same as the age of maturity.

  – **Age of maturity**

    The age of maturity, typically at 18 years old, is when a child reaches legal adulthood. Upon reaching this age, a person assumes legal control over their person, actions, and decisions, thus terminating their parents' or guardians' control and legal responsibilities over them. Therefore, in some contexts, when an adult has sexual relations with a child (under the age of 16 or 18, for example), either with or without their consent, this is a crime called statutory rape. As such, there may be legal considerations to weigh, and before taking action, caseworkers should have a clear understanding of any mandatory reporting requirements, the realities of law enforcement and criminal justice procedures for forcibly displaced and stateless persons.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- **Services and support for husbands**

  Make sure you know what services are available in your area for adult men, husbands, and male caregivers; work with the organizations providing these services to share information about certain individuals who should be discreetly targeted by outreach to participate in their services. It is not advisable to engage with husbands who are known to be perpetrators of violence.

  In some cases, for example, where both spouses are under 18 years old or were both children at the time of marriage or where marriages were initiated by the adolescents (i.e. not coerced), there may be more scope to engage with the husband. Given his young age, this could include outreach to participate in services that inform, educate and build knowledge on a range of topics as a risk mitigation strategy and to encourage a safe and equitable relationship.

- **When you know the husband has perpetrated sexual violence**

  Do not engage with husbands known to be perpetrators of violence. In cases of child sexual abuse, caseworkers should be aware of the level of control and input into decision-making that the husband and his family may have or be traditionally afforded as per community norms. They should also consider the possibility of long-term intimate partner violence that extends beyond the particular incident(s) of marital rape or other forms of sexual abuse the girl may be seeking services for.

- **Mediation for cases of child marriage**

  Mediation between husband and wife should not to be conducted by caseworkers in cases of child marriage. It can create risks for the girl and the caseworker. Rather, where agreed by the girl and confirmed to be in the best interests of the child, the couple may be referred to family counselling by a MHPSS provider outside the functions of case management. Mediation in cases of child marriage can imply the organization's approval of the marriage and suggests an effort to keep the child in the marriage.

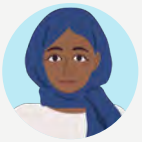
The caseworkers role vis-a-vis married girls' husbands

What it is

- ✓ Ensure that married girls understand their right to make their own decisions and why it is inappropriate for their husbands to be involved in their care and treatment, especially if they are seeking services due to any form of violence by their husband.
- ✓ Create a safe space for the girl to rebuild her inner strength and connect with supportive adults.
- ✓ Help the girl understand possible protection risks and identify strategies to address them, provide information on her options, and work together to create a safety plan.
- ✓ Inform the girl about available services, make referrals for specialized support, and foster connections to social support networks, such as youth or girls' clubs.

What it is not

- ✗ The caseworker should not negotiate with the husband to end the marriage or act as a mediator for the couple.
- ✗ Do not pressure or shame married girls into leaving their husbands. This cannot guarantee a better solution and can introduce significant risks to the girl, the caseworker, and negatively impact the organization's relationship with the community.



G. Mandatory reporting

Mandatory reporting laws typically require public service providers who regularly work with children, such as doctors, nurses, police officers, social service professionals and teachers, to report suspected or known cases of child maltreatment to specific State agencies. Depending on the context, reports may be made directly to the police, to designated child protection agencies, or to specific departments within justice systems. Where mandatory reporting laws exist in relation to child marriage, the goal is to protect children from harm and ensure that action is taken by proper authorities when abuse is known or suspected.

In GBV work, mandatory reporting is almost always considered harmful because it usually involves going against the expressed wishes of an adult survivor or compelling an adult survivor to report to authorities in order to access a needed service, which most often has safety implications. With children, this is not always the case. There are some scenarios in which mandatory reporting may be beneficial and of added benefit for the child and their non-offending caregivers; for example, in a setting with well-established social services and justice mechanisms, mandatory reporting could result in much-needed additional support for a child at risk of child marriage or already married and their non-offending caregivers.

Minimum actions for staff

- **Understand reporting requirements:** Have a clear understanding of mandatory reporting requirements under the legal framework and whether the mandatory reporting laws apply to caseworkers, health staff, and/or other service providers. Ensure you understand how these laws impact married girls' and their non-offending caregiver's access to services and support.
- **Explain mandatory reporting:** Clearly explain any mandatory reporting requirements to children and non-offending caregivers or trusted adults at the outset, i.e. when obtaining consent for service provision.
- **Assess best interests:** Determine whether mandatory reporting is in the child's best interests, discuss with supervisors, the girl and her trusted adult to decide when and how to report - including the potential risks of mandatory reporting for all child survivors (e.g. police ill-trained/not trained on child sexual abuse, punitive actions for child and/or non-offending caregiver, ineffective legal system with little likelihood of justice, etc.); or the potential risks of identity-specific mandatory reporting for child survivors (e.g. discriminatory practices against refugee children, sexual stereotyping resulting in re-victimization by the police or others in the justice system, specific harmful practices like honour killing and forced marriage).
- **Understand limits to confidentiality:** Adhere to the survivor-centred approach and the best interests principle, noting the limits to confidentiality under the following circumstances:
  - A child threatens to take their own life or to harm another person.
  - When reporting is in the best interests of the child (to be determined by staff with specific expertise).
  - When a girl has been subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). The alleged perpetrator's name and a general description of the incident must be reported to an investigative body. Staff should respect the wishes of the girl if she prefers to remain anonymous.

If a mandatory report is required, caseworkers must share the following information at the start of the first meeting with the girl or child and non-offending caregiver or supportive adult:

- The agency/person to which/whom the caseworker will report.
- The specific information being reported.
- How the information must be reported (written, verbal, etc.).
- The likely outcome of the report.
- The rights of the child and their family during the process.

Girls, particularly adolescents, and supportive adults should be part of the decision-making process on how to address mandatory reporting in the safest and most confidential way. This means caseworkers should seek and consider their opinions and ideas on how to draft and make the report. This does not mean that the caregiver and child can decide whether a mandatory report is made; rather, they can help decide how and when the mandatory report is made.

The best interests of the child should always be the primary consideration when taking actions on behalf of children, even in the context of mandatory reporting laws. The most beneficial and least detrimental course of action for the child, and the least intrusive one for the family, should be employed as long as the child's safety is assured. Where mandatory reporting is required the caseworker should discuss any risks with the child and supportive adult and put in place measures to mitigate these risks, including a safety plan if necessary.

Note on mandatory reporting

Note that some national laws require mandatory reporting for cases of child marriage, including child marriage for the purpose of trafficking, meaning that non-United Nations staff involved in work with children can be legally required to report instances of child marriage to local authorities.

Staff should, at a minimum:

- Have a clear understanding of mandatory reporting requirements under the legal framework and their impact on the child's access to services.
- Describe the mandatory reporting requirements to the child and trusted adult in the initial phase of service provision (or ensure that partners do)
- Abide by the survivor-centred approach and the best interests principle, respecting the wishes of the child, except to the extent that the situation is subject to limits on confidentiality under the following circumstances:

1. A child threatens to take their own life or to harm another person.
2. When it is in the best interests of the child (to be determined by staff with expertise on child protection and caring for child survivors of GBV).
3. When a child was subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA): the name of the alleged perpetrator and a general description of the incident will need to be reported to an investigative body, but staff should respect the wishes of children who prefer to remain anonymous.
4. Inform children (and non-offending caregivers/trusted adults) prior to making any referral to authorities (if the situation is subject to the above limits on confidentiality) and agree on a safety plan with the child to mitigate any potential risks associated with reporting.

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3.3.5 Refugee protection case processing and child marriage

Incorporating child marriage prevention, risk mitigation and response into UNHCR refugee case processing, including refugee registration, refugee status determination and durable solutions is an important component of programming for refugees. Although written for UNHCR staff in these respective roles, this section can be helpful for anyone working on the specificities of child marriage prevention and response in a refugee context who want to understand which protection services unmarried refugee children at risk or married children can be referred to. In addition, this section of the guidance may also be adapted for national asylum procedures where national authorities are responsible for refugee case processing.


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Refugee registration and identity management

In refugee settings, registration is often the first step in identifying married girls and girls at risk of child marriage among refugee communities.[115]

- Refugee registration provides the first formal opportunity to identify children at risk, including married children and unmarried children at risk.
- Registration and associated procedures, including biometric enrolment and document issuance should be carefully and individually explained to children to help them navigate the process and understand their options and their rights.
- The protection and specific needs information gathered at registration (and often already at reception) informs immediate support measures to provide care.
- Child marriage cases should be systematically referred to protection staff or partners following registration.
- Registration staff do not need to be child protection experts to interact in an appropriate manner with children. Empathy, sensitivity, active listening and effective interviewing techniques are sufficient to conduct procedures in a child-friendly manner.

Staff responsible for refugee registration play a crucial role in ensuring married children and unmarried children at risk are supported and contribute to UNHCR's efforts to prevent, mitigate the risks and respond to child marriage. This role can be played at different phases of registration:

At reception phase

- Ensure reception, registration and identity management Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) adhere to the UNHCR Technical Guidance: Child-friendly Procedures.[aa]
- Ensure below recommendations are taken into consideration in the development of reception procedures:
  - When possible, ensure child-friendly messages on the registration process as well as information on child marriage and available services are displayed or distributed.
  - Work with protection colleagues to develop and share key messages on child marriage, during waiting times at reception areas.
  - Ensure the registration schedule is managed in a way that allows protection colleagues to organize, when possible, discussions with different groups in waiting areas, particularly girls, on child marriage.

In light of limited contact with communities during emergencies, it is crucial to maximize every opportunity to disseminate information about child protection risks, particularly child marriage. The reception area during registration provides a valuable platform for this purpose. By strategically utilizing this space, critical information on child marriage and other child protection concerns can be shared with families and individuals as they undergo the registration process.

Sharing information about the registration process with children during the reception phase is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it ensures that children are fully aware of what they are participating in, which helps reduce anxiety and confusion. Secondly, it empowers children by informing them of their rights within the process, allowing them to advocate for themselves, if necessary. Lastly, this approach enables children to actively participate in decisions that directly affect their lives, promoting their agency and sense of control.

aa. See also Video on child friendly procedures.


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At the pre-registration counselling phase

- Registration staff may conduct counselling about the general purpose and process of registration (including the importance of continuous registration) as group counselling if necessary. However, counselling on assent/consent and other issues affecting individual rights and obligations must always be conducted individually, including with children.
- It is important to understand that during the registration process, some families may voluntarily disclose the marital status of children whereas others might be reluctant to share it, especially if they know that the marriage is informal or illegal.
- Pre-registration counselling is an opportunity to create an atmosphere of trust where families and children feel comfortable sharing sensitive information. Registration staff should therefore always aim to:
  - Create a safe and private environment for these conversations.
  - Use age-appropriate language when speaking with children.
  - Emphasize confidentiality and explain how the information will be used.
  - Be non-judgemental and supportive.
  - Be prepared to provide immediate support or referrals if a child discloses being at risk.
- During the pre-interview counselling, registration staff can use culturally-sensitive language to explain the process to families, including children, and the importance of collecting all information for each individual, to provide better care and support. This will reassure families if registration or protection staff have to speak to a child individually at a later stage.

When determining family composition phase

- Ask questions in a socially and culturally sensitive manner in order to encourage families to provide accurate information about family composition and relationships and to ensure that appropriate protection and services can be provided for all members of the family.
- Avoid stigmatizing married children to encourage disclosure.
- Gain a clear understanding of the relationships between registration group members before recording them in proGres.
- Systematically ask each family member their marital status, including adolescents. While this may be surprising for some parents, especially for younger adolescents, it will allow for more comprehensive identification of both children at risk of marriage and married children.
- Ask each family member for their age, except for very young children. While it is normal for the registration group focal point to want to speak on behalf of all the whole family, it is a good idea to establish from the beginning of the interview that, if they are old enough to do so, each family member should provide their own answers.
- Generally, start to ask if children are married when they reach the youngest age that it is possible for a child to be engaged to be married in that context. For example, if in a given context children of 10 have been engaged to marry, then ask the marital status of all children aged 10 and above.
- The process can be enabled by explaining to families that it is important to have full and accurate biographical data for refugees to ensure access to protection and services.

What to do once a married child or a child at risk of marriage is identified

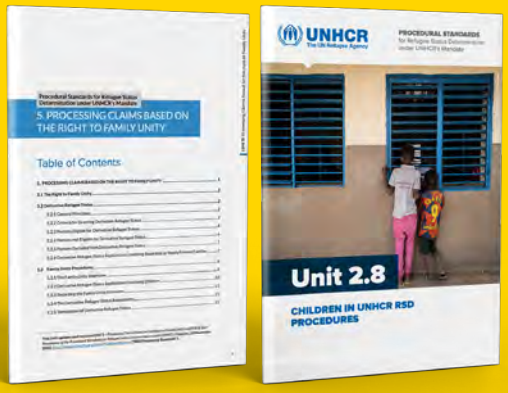
- **All child marriage cases should be immediately referred to child protection or GBV actors for assessment once registration is complete.** The actor to whom they should be referred should be defined in the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and context-specific referral pathways.
- **During registration, the legality of the marriage in the country of origin or country of residence is not relevant**. Even if in a given country, marriage is permitted by law at age 13, the child is still considered a child spouse by UNHCR until 18 years of age and should be referred to child protection or GBV case management.
- Families should be assured that referrals are a normal part of the registration process, during which individuals who may have specific needs are identified and provided with additional support.

Recording cases of child marriage in proGres

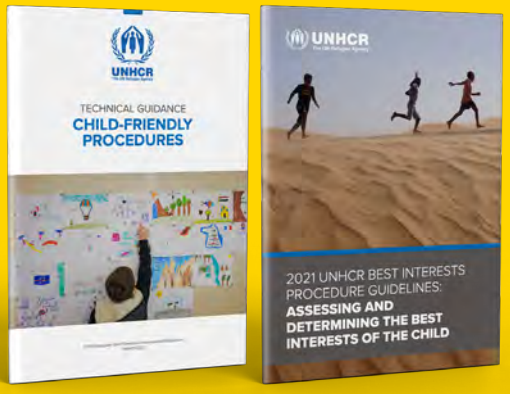
- It is important to note that recording data in proGres on child marriages does not confer any legitimacy to the marriage or constitute any kind of endorsement of the marriage.
- Recording data in proGres about children who are married allows UNHCR to make sure that their specific needs are captured and ensures that adequate protection measures are put in place for them in all future case management.
- By not recording the information, or by making the registration process difficult for married children, we make it more likely that children and their families and spouses will try to hide the marriage, in turn affecting the child's access to services and our ability to assess the scale and nature of child marriage at an operational level.
- When registering married children the following should be applied:
  - All children below the age of 18 should be registered with their parents, regardless of their marital status.
  - If parents reside in a different area and their case is managed by a different registration process (e.g. inside the camp), the child should be registered alone. Links with the spouse's case should be established on proGres to ensure accuracy of information.
  - Married unaccompanied/separated children should be registered alone. Links with the spouse's case should be established on proGres to ensure accuracy of information.
  - In exceptional situations, and based on best interest assessment, the child might be registered with the spouse to:
    - » Avoid any further harm and exacerbation of protection risks.
    - » Ensure the best interest of other children involved (e.g. the child's own children)
    - » Respond to the child's expressed wishes, based on their age and maturity (e.g. a 17 year old girl married to a 20 year old man who wish to be registered together and no protection risk was identified during the best interests assessment)
    - » Guarantee access to services, now and in the future.

Key resources on the processing of child asylum claims

Guidelines on International Protection No. 8: Child Asylum Claims under Articles 1(A)2 and 1(F)



Procedural Standards for Refugee Status Determination under UNHCR's Mandate, especially Chapter 2.8: Children in UNHCR RSD Procedures and Chapter 5: Processing Claims based on the Right to Family Unity.



See also the Technical Guidance: Child Friendly Procedures and 2021 UNHCR Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child for age- and gender-appropriate and child-friendly RSD procedures, and the best interests of the child as a primary consideration in RSD procedures, which supports the handling of child marriage cases.

Refugee Status Determination (RSD)

RSD can be a vital step in the protection of children at risk of child marriage or married children. In some cases, RSD might be the point of identification, since it may be the first time that a child and their family have been interviewed and told their story in detail. In the case of married children, RSD can also play a vital role in providing additional protective measures and services.

This section will review some of the key considerations in relation to RSD for unmarried children at risk of child marriage and ever-married children. It is recommended to become familiar with the guidance documents linked in this section for a complete understanding of the processes.

First and foremost, it is important to underline that children have the right to make an independent refugee status claim, regardless of their age, family and civil status, whether they are accompanied, unaccompanied or separated, or whether or not they are married. This is important because it is often assumed that children do not have the right to their own claim, separate to those of their families. All persons applying for asylum have the right to have their claims assessed individually and on their own individual merits.

Claims for children at risk of child marriage

It is important to remember that child marriage may give rise to child-related manifestations of persecution and/or child-specific forms of persecution and can be the basis for a claim to refugee status.

A key aspect of providing protection from child marriage is the assessment of a child's own refugee status claim, including as a result of child-specific risks, such as the risk of child marriage. Where country of origin information indicates that child marriage for girls is a particular concern, this could be an indication of a particular risk upon return and therefore be the basis for the girl's claim, depending on the individual circumstances of the child.[bb]

It is also important to consider that deprivation of economic, social and cultural rights may be as relevant to the assessment of a child's claim as that of civil and political rights. The Guidelines on International Protection No. 8 remind us that, "it is important not to automatically attribute greater significance to certain violations than to others but to assess the overall impact of the harm on the individual child". It also recalls that a violation of one right may expose the child to other abuses, including child marriage, and vice versa.

bb. See UNHCR, "Guidelines on international protection no. 8: Child asylum claims under articles 1(A)2 and 1(F) of the 1951 Convention and/or 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees", III (a) para. 13.

For example, there is a direct correlation between primary school enrolment levels for girls and major reductions in child marriage.[cc] As such, it is clear that a comprehensive and child-sensitive approach to assessing children's claims to refugee status can contribute to the prevention of potential child marriage, as well as be a key element in protecting children who are or have already been married.

Claims for married children

In situations where one or both of the parents and the child have independent claims for refugee status, it is preferable that each claim be assessed separately. This is also the case for married children and their spouse.

It is possible that a married child will have grounds for an individual claim to refugee status if the consequences of child marriage, such as risk of persecution in the event of return to the country of origin, are likely to result in violations of the child's rights. However, married children are eligible for derivative status under the right to family unity with their spouse.

The RSD Procedural Standards Chapter 5, paragraph 5.2.3. on Processing Claims based on the Right to Family Unity notes, "In the case of an underage spouse, a best interests assessment (BIA) would generally be required to determine whether derivative refugee status is in his or her best interests". In this case, the BIA may serve to provide additional information as to whether the child may have their own claim or, if they do not, to identify what alternative options there might be for the child (e.g. deriving refugee status from parents or other caregivers instead of from the husband).

Depending on the individual circumstances, the risk of or actual exposure to child marriage may constitute a basis for a claim to refugee status (see section above). Wherever possible, it is likely to be in the best interests of the child in such a situation to be recognized in their own right, for a number of reasons. Firstly, having independent refugee status can provide better protection as this status will not be automatically affected by a subsequent cancellation, revocation or cessation of the refugee status of their spouse.

It is also important that in such a case, based on the principle of family unity, derivative refugee status can be granted from the child – recognized in his or her own right – to the family members and/or other persons in a relationship of dependency with the refugee child, if they do not qualify for refugee status in their own right (including children, parents and others).

Such family members and dependants would not be able to acquire derivative refugee status solely on the basis of a family/dependency relationship with a child who has derivative refugee status.

Lastly, independent refugee status recognition for children may protect them from spouses who are refugee status applicants and may try to misuse the concept of derivative status in order to exert additional power and influence over their child spouse.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cc. See United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (hereafter "CESCR"), "General comment No. 11: Plans of action for primary education (art. 14 of the covenant)", E/1992/23, 10 May 1999, para. 4.

Durable solutions

In considering durable solutions for ever-married girls and unmarried girls at risk of marriage, family unity is paramount. Unmarried children should be kept with their parents and married girls should also remain with their parents, even if not in their parental home. Any durable solution should enable a girl, whether married or not, to live in safety and in dignity. A best interests procedure must be conducted during when identifying the most appropriate durable solution for both married girls and unmarried girls at risk of marriage.

Family reunification of married children with their spouses

Durable solutions for married children may often involve considerations for family reunification. A child should always remain with their parents, except when this is not in the child's best interests. Family reunification with spouses, whether it involves an adult that married when they were a child or a child spouse, is more complex and requires a delicate balance between respecting legal frameworks, protecting children's rights, and considering individual circumstances.

Legal Framework and Country-specific Policies

It's crucial to understand and respect the legal framework of each country while working on family reunification. The legal systems and regulations governing family reunification and child marriage vary between countries. For instance, some countries have policies that approve family reunification only when the child reaches 18 years of age. These policies can serve as deterrents to child marriage and help mitigate protection and health-related risks associated with children residing with adult spouses.

Assessing Family Reunification Cases

When working on family reunification cases involving married children and adults who were married while they were children, consider the following:

- If the applicant is an adult but was married as a child, no action is required as adults are capable of making their own choices.
- If the applicant is a child spouse, assessment of their best interest with regard to the reunification should be conducted for each case individually, as every situation is unique and requires careful consideration of the child's best interests[dd], including the:
  - Views of the child, taking into consideration the child's age, development and maturity.
  - Family and close relationships, including potential separation from parents/caregivers and relationship with the spouse. It is important to take into consideration the age difference between the child and spouse, and the nature of their relationship (e.g. whether they live/lived together).
  - Safety and security, including potential risks of reunification (e.g. risk of intimate partner violence or exploitation), or non-reunification (e.g. risk of domestic violence if the child remains with in-laws/their own family).
  - Well-being and development (e.g. impact of reunification on the child's education and development, the community network in reunification country.)
  - The best interests of other children involved in the family reunification (e.g. child's own children).

Collaboration and referral mechanisms

- For those working in the receiving countries, it is important to establish contact with organizations operating in releasing countries to support assessments related to the family reunification requests.
- For those working in releasing countries, it is important to establish linkages with child protection services in receiving countries for referrals and support.
- Cross-border collaborations should always be formalized with relevant data protection and information sharing agreements.

dd. See UNHCR, "UNHCR best interests procedure guidelines: Assessing and determining the best interests of the child", ch.2.4.4, for more information on four factor analysis.

Resettlement

Typically, unmarried children should be resettled with their parents, legal guardians, other family members or close relatives. However, if such a solution is not in the individual child's best interests, unaccompanied children may be resettled on their own or with their unrelated caregiver, and separated children may be resettled with their caregivers.

Children at risk of marriage may be prioritized for resettlement consideration, based on a consideration of their best interests through BIP. Resettlement can help address many of the contributing factors for child marriage, including providing livelihoods opportunities for families as well as education and other options outside of marriage for girls and boys.

In principle, UNHCR does not submit cases of married children for resettlement[ee] as this not compliant with international law and the practice of child marriage is widely considered to constitute a form of GBV where children cannot give their informed consent.[ff] In some resettlement countries, extraterritorial jurisdiction for statutory rape may apply to the spouse of a married child, while parents or caregivers found to have arranged the marriage of a child may also be liable to prosecution. The prospect of resettlement may prompt parents or caregivers, in some cases, to quickly arrange the marriage of a child before resettlement if they believe that the spouse can be resettled with them. This is not the reality of the situation. In most cases, being a married child will block a child from resettlement opportunities.

There are situations, however, in which a resettlement submission of a married child and their spouse may be in the best interests of the child and therefore warranted. This may be on the grounds of compelling protection needs or vulnerabilities of the child and/or the family. Resettlement may be considered for a married refugee child with their spouse when the following prerequisites are met:[gg]

- There are compelling protection or medical needs within the resettlement case and resettlement is the most appropriate option for addressing these identified needs.
- The married child wishes to be resettled.
- BIA or BID has assessed or determined that resettlement is in the best interests of the married child and any other children impacted.

Where married children are being considered for resettlement on the above grounds, these married children should be submitted for resettlement with their parents, unless it is assessed or determined to not be in their best interests; their parents are not able or unwilling to be resettled; or there is a risk of possible prosecution of the parents which is likely to have negative impacts on the child's well-being in the resettlement country.

ee. See UNHCR, "Resettlement handbook", ch. 3.5 Children and adolescents at risk.
ff. See UNHCR, "Resettlement handbook", ch. 3.3 Women and girls at risk.
gg. See UNHCR, "Resettlement handbook", ch. 3.3 Women and girls at risk.

Any married child whose parents/caregivers are not present in the country of asylum with the child should be treated as unaccompanied. All married children should have a BIA, even those accompanied by their parents as well as their spouse (unless they require a BID). If the child's adult spouse is considered for resettlement with the married child and their parents/caregivers, a BID may be required, depending on the age and views of the child concerned. This includes situations in which:

- The child is below the legal age of marriage in the country of asylum and/or country of resettlement.
- There are indications that the child did not assent to the marriage.
- The child was married under 15 years of age.

BIDs are always required in the following situations:

- When a married child is being considered for resettlement with their adult spouse without the parent/caregiver of the child.
- Where two married children are being considered for resettlement without their parents/caregivers.
- Where there are indications that the child is subject to violence, abuse or exploitation by their spouse or people with whom they will be resettled.

It should be recognized that some resettlement countries are reluctant, as a matter of policy or on the grounds of legal and public interest considerations, to resettle couples or families that include married children. Some resettlement countries have also taken a strict approach to cases involving adult women who were married before the age of 18, especially if they conceived a child before turning 18 years of age and if the father of the child is included in the submission. If in doubt whether a married refugee child can be resettled to a specific country, UNHCR Field Operations may consult UNHCR Regional Resettlement and/or DIPS Resettlement and Complementary Pathways colleagues.

Resettlement of a married child without the spouse may be considered when this is assessed or determined to be in their best interests and the best interests of other children who are likely to be impacted. In such cases, the resettlement case composition could, according to the views of the child and findings of a BIP, include the child's parents and/or other family members/caregivers, for example.


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The risk of child marriage can be grounds for considering the resettlement of a child with their parent(s)/caregiver(s), under either the Children and Adolescents at Risk submission category, or the Women and Girls at Risk category. Resettlement often reduces the risk of child marriage as it addresses many contributing factors, provides families with livelihoods opportunities and offers girls and boys access to education and options outside of marriage. Prior to departure, and/or upon arrival in a resettlement country, refugees receive cultural orientation that includes information about the cultural and legal framework of the resettlement country. These programmes, together with other resettlement support from trained service providers, help to make families aware of laws, practice, and attitudes about child marriage.[hh]

It may also be appropriate for UNHCR to suspend resettlement processing or withdraw the submission of a resettlement case until the concerned child reaches the age of 18, depending on their protection needs, the views of the child and applicable laws in prospective resettlement countries.

Resource

Learn about Amira in this short video from UNHCR. This guides you though key considerations regarding resettlement and child marriage.

hh. See UNHCR video, "BIP: Married Under Consideration for RST".

Voluntary repatriation

Voluntary repatriation can present risks for married children and unmarried children at risk of marriage. In some refugee situations, girls in particular may be encouraged to voluntarily repatriate to be married back in their country of origin.[ii] Voluntary repatriation can also separate families as girls who return for the purpose of getting married may do so without their parents/caregivers. In addition, returning parents may leave children behind, which can separate them from married children living in another household or raise the risk of children who are not married getting into unions for survival. Married girls receiving services in the country of asylum may or may not have access to similar services if they repatriate, and depending on how long they have been away they may not be able to fully adjust to the new environment, especially with limited family support.

To address these risks, UNHCR should incorporate adequate screening procedures to identify married children or unmarried children at risk, assess and determine their best interests, provide them with information and link them to appropriate services and interventions. The Risks Specific to Children section of the UNHCR Operational Guidelines on Voluntary Repatriation provides a non-exhaustive list of suggested procedures that should be implemented in the country of asylum and/or country of origin prior to the voluntary repatriation of children at risk, including married children and unmarried children at risk of marriage:

- Strengthen the national child protection system and operationalize child protection programmes, including protection and services for ever-married girls and girls at risk of marriage.
- Ensure staff are recruited, including through partners, and build the capacity of voluntary repatriation/reintegration teams on identifying and referring children at risk. Capacity development should include knowledge and skills related to child marriage.
- Where this is not in place and not provided by the State, establish BIP in the country of asylum, including developing or updating BIP Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) with specific measures and referral pathways for married children and children at risk of marriage.[66,73]
- In the country of return, support the establishment/strengthening of child protection case management SOPs with measures and referral pathways for married children and children at risk of marriage.
- Establish linkages with the child protection and GBV case management system in the country of origin[66], including through development of joint repatriation/reintegration child protection SOPs, and messaging for children and caregivers, and referral pathways.
- Ensure child-centred, safe and confidential cross-border referral systems are in place for child protection, including child marriage cases.
- Consider establishing a cross-border working group to ensure information-sharing and collaboration.
- Develop individual care plans for married children or unmarried children at risk of marriage for sustainable reintegration, drawn up in collaboration with the children's caregivers.
- Ensure community-based child protection mechanisms are aware of the key messages related to child marriage and voluntary repatriation.[74]
- Establish counselling services for unmarried children at risk, including married children and non-offending caregivers, on their rights, what to expect, existing child protection services (psychosocial, education, reproductive health, etc.) in the country of origin, and reintegration support upon return to the country of origin. For married children or unmarried children at risk of marriage, it is essential to provide information on the risks, services and options concerning voluntary repatriation.
- In the country of origin, establish an adequate monitoring system for returnee married children or children at risk of marriage, particularly those not reunited with family members.


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ii. See UNHCR, https://statics.teams.cdn.office.net/evergreen-assets/safelinks/2/atp-safelinks.html, 2022, ch 7.1. Risks specific to children.

BIP in voluntary repatriation

A BIA should be conducted for all married children, even those accompanied by their parents as well as their spouse (unless they require a BID). This includes:

- Married children not accompanied by a parent, whose spouse is 18 years old or over and who are of legal age to be married in the country to which they are returning.
- Unmarried children at risk of marriage. If capacity allows, it is advisable to identify the profile of children at risk of marriage and systematically conduct BIAs for these children. Note that all separated children should have a BIA before undergoing voluntary repatriation.

If the child's adult spouse is considered for voluntary repatriation with the child and their parents/caregivers, a BID may still be required, depending on the age and views of the child concerned. This includes situations in which:

- The child is below the legal age of marriage in the country of asylum and/or country of origin.
- There are indications that the child did not assent to the marriage.
- The child was married under the age of 15.

BIDs are always required for:

- Married child couples not accompanied by parents (BID required for both children)
- Married children not accompanied by a parent, whose spouse is 18 years old or over,but who are under the legal age of marriage in the country to which they are returning.
- Unmarried children at risk of marriage, accompanied by their parents, where the risk of marriage upon return raises doubts as to whether the child should return, or where the risk is sufficiently significant and imminent and would constitute grave harm to the child.

For more information on BIP, including for married children, see Best interests procedure for refugee and asylum-seeking girls and "2021 UNHCR best interests procedure guidelines: Assessing and determining the best interests of the child".


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Where delays in processing the child's case could result in the child, spouse, and/or family opting to return spontaneously, simplified BIA and BID may be used.[jj] Where spontaneous returns take place, operations should as much as possible:

- Provide information on the legal situation of married children, services and risks in the country of return, options and services in the country of asylum.
- Document any information about returning at risk children, including married children and set up a mechanism to ensure information is shared with the receiving operation in order to ensure continuity of support once the child returns to the country of origin. Information sharing should be governed by data protection and information sharing protocols and should be based on the child's best interests.
- Where children and their families are receiving case management, including children at risk or married children, they should be counselled on their options, risks and alternatives to spontaneous returns, including as it relates to marriage issues.

jj. See UNHCR, "2021 UNHCR best interests procedure guidelines: Assessing and determining the best interests of the child", section 5.3, 2021.

Local integration

The prospect of local integration, whether official or de facto, through marriage can act as a pull factor for child marriage. Even where refugees are officially confined to camps or settlements, in reality, they often mix with local populations for the purposes of work, trade, education, religious worship, safety, accommodation and, indeed, marriage. Children born of mixed marriages (that is one refugee parent and one parent from the host community) may be able to acquire the citizenship of the non-refugee parent. As such, marriage to a national of the country of asylum may appeal to parents and children as a way to access privileges afforded only to citizens (the ability to register a business, to own property, to access national social protection assistance etc.). Conversely, in some situations, host community members may seek to marry into refugee families, for a variety of reasons; for instance, dowry costs for marriage with refugee girls may be lower than those for girls from the host communities, or marriage to a refugee girl may be perceived to bring benefits in terms of material assistance. In establishing prevention, risk mitigation and response programming for refugees, it is therefore important to monitor the dynamics of intermarriage between refugees and members of host communities. Where girls have already married a national of the host country, this may also afford them certain rights, including potentially the right to local integration and even citizenship. Support and counselling can be provided to ensure that these unions are legally recognized, where this is in the best interests of the child.

3.3.6 Working with other sectors to tackle child marriage

Responding to delay, mitigate and respond to child marriage in humanitarian settings goes beyond the protection needs of girls and their families. It is recommended and encouraged to work on integrated programmes that work across sectors to address the pressures that girls and their families face that result in child marriage. Leveraging an adolescent girl-responsive approach that centres on girls and meeting their holistic needs demands integrated programmes.

Therefore, all sectors have a crucial role to play in contributing to outcomes that delay, mitigate and respond to child marriage. This includes ensuring all children's access to safe education – including married girls and young mothers, addressing the economic drivers of child protection risks and promoting safe and healthy communities for children and their families.[75]

Multisectoral approaches that combine multilevel interventions, i.e. at the individual, family, community and policy levels, can be effective in delaying marriage and reducing early pregnancy even among girls who are the most marginalized, particularly married girls and young mothers.

For holistic guidance on developing multisectoral and integrated adolescent girl programming, see Plan's Adolescent Programming Toolkit: Guidance and tools for adolescent programming and girls' empowerment in crisis settings.

The following section provides a non-exhaustive overview of how child protection and GBV actors can work with other sectors to better integrate programming and coordination on child marriage.

Health including SRHR

Child marriage can have a tremendous impact on the health of girls. Compared to women who marry as adults, married girls experience higher rates of: adverse sexual and reproductive health (SRH) outcomes throughout their lifetimes; GBV; malnutrition; maternal morbidity and mortality.[76]

SRH services are a critical intervention for the prevention, mitigation and response to child marriage.[77] The Convention on the Rights of the Child and other legal and policy frameworks[78] provide adolescents with the right to access reproductive health information and services and the right to protection from discrimination, abuse and exploitation.[kk]

For married and unmarried girls, health and health information services should provide accurate and unbiased information about puberty, menstruation, pregnancy and safe sex; sexuality; STI and HIV prevention and treatment; family planning and contraception, in an age-appropriate and adolescent-friendly manner. Health, including SRHR programmes should address age-appropriate life skills relating to SRH, such as understanding safe and healthy relationships and positive gender relations, negotiating relationships and condom use (for younger and older adolescents), etc. In communities where pregnancy is a push factor to child marriage, having access to SRH services will help reduce the risk of pregnancy and child marriages. Services should also provide girls with guidance on how to choose a contraceptive method within the context of their particular relationship dynamic.

kk. See United Nations General Assembly, "Convention on the Rights of the Child", 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3, article 1.

Culturally, many married girls are under pressure to bear children and service providers should be aware of the tension this creates. They should avoid creating additional barriers or risks for girls, such as, requiring the permission of their husbands or other adults to access SRH services.

Similar programmes can target boys as well, considering it is not only the responsibility of girls to delay early pregnancy (see Very Young Adolescent Sexual & Reproductive Health and Gender Program Design Guidance and Comprehensive Sexuality Education Topics: what to cover from early childhood to 18+).

Maternal and newborn health interventions are life-saving for adolescent girls. Pregnancy and childbirth put girls at risk of complications such as anaemia and malnutrition, prolonged or obstructed labour, obstetric fistula and death:[76,77,79,80]

- 76% of births to adolescent girls take place within marriage.
- Up to 99% of all maternal deaths occur among adolescent girls aged 15-19
- Pregnancy among girls aged 10-14 is much less common than over 15 years of age. It occurs most frequently in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Very early pregnancy is often the result of sexual violence and is strongly associated with child marriage and poverty.[135]

Married girls often experience poor mental health, including depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and severe emotional distress. This is often a result of exclusion from education and social support networks, lack of decision-making power, isolation, exploitation and abuse including bullying from peers.

Suggested integrated activities for Child protection, GBV and Health / SRHR actors include:[79]

- **Adolescent-friendly obstetric services:** Service providers should understand the health risks of early pregnancy and be able to provide confidential, non-judgemental and private services to adolescents. In line with the Do No Harm principle, and to avoid placing girls in conflict with the law, check legal frameworks to determine whether parental or spousal consent is required. While delivery in a health facility should always be encouraged, where this is not possible pregnant girls should be provided with clean delivery packages and assisted home deliveries. Adolescents should be provided with information and access to safe abortion services and post-abortion care where these are legal and available.
- **Engaging traditional birth attendants or community health workers:** If traditional birth attendants are already active in the community, they can serve as links to facility-based services, identifying married girls and pregnant adolescents in the community and informing them about where to seek care during pregnancy or childbirth. Supporting and training traditional birth attendants in engaging with adolescent girls safely and making safe referrals may reduce risks in relation to pregnancy and GBV.
- **Community-based antenatal and post-partum care strategies** (using medical outreach teams or community health workers) may make those services more accessible and acceptable to adolescents. Community-based workers can identify young pregnant mothers and link them to appropriate health services.
- **Birth plans** should be developed with pregnant girls, their partners and their families.
- **Maternity waiting homes** located near health facilities provide girls with a safe place to stay during the final weeks of their pregnancies. Making these homes available to adolescent girls may help ensure that these high-risk child mothers deliver in health facilities.
- **Family planning** options should be discussed during pregnancy and again at the post-partum visit, with referrals to family planning services. Appropriate contraceptive choices and technologies that are suitable for adolescents in the specific context should be made available.
- **Breastfeeding support,** including access to additional nutritional allocations, should be provided to ensure that adolescents use proper feeding practices and infants receive optimal nutrition.
- **Infant care support groups** should be established to help young mothers take care of their babies.
- **Mental health and psychosocial support** should be integrated into maternal and newborn health services.
- **Expand girls' access to comprehensive and quality SRHR information and services** and comprehensive sexuality education that is scientifically accurate, curriculum-based, non-discriminatory and accounts for young people's evolving capacities. This should be available both in and out of school.

- **Invest in training** for health care workers and ancillary staff to provide equitable, non-discriminatory and quality attention for adolescent girls' SRHR needs, including those who are married, pregnant or parents
- **Integrate SRHR into a multisectoral package of interventions,** developing, implementing and resourcing comprehensive preparedness plans in accordance with the Minimum Initial Service Package and informed by the SRHR needs and concerns expressed by children, adolescent girls and ever-married girls at the onset of humanitarian crisis.
- **Develop programmes that apply a life-stage and socio-ecological** lens to SRHR programmes for young first-time mothers, going beyond health to improve outcomes in couple communication, gender equitable attitudes and well-being
- **Create safe spaces for girls** to talk freely, support each other, voice their needs, and participate in the design of programmes and services.


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Health service providers should be aware of the risks of violence impacting married girls, including intimate partner violence, denial of resources, emotional and physical violence and child sexual abuse. The majority of married girls describe their first experience of sex as forced. In some settings, child marriage is also associated with female genital mutilation or cutting, which is a form of GBV against girls.[81] Female genital mutilation or cutting causes pain, bleeding, infections and even death, as well as infertility and future complications in childbirth and the onset of menstruation.[76]

In addition, married girls face higher levels of intimate partner violence, marital rape, denial of resources, emotional violence and violence during pregnancy. Service providers should keep this context in mind when providing services.

Health service providers may also play a critical role in the reporting and documentation of legal proceeding related to sexual violence or the clinical management of rape (CMR), and will also need to know the mandatory reporting requirements. See the WHO technical resources on CMR for humanitarian settings Clinical management of rape and intimate partner violence survivors Developing protocols for use in humanitarian settings.

Health sector programmes are in a position to address many health risks associated with child marriage, including in the area of mental health. Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programmes are often less sensitive than SRH programmes and can be used as an entry point for more controversial topics related to SRHR. For married girls, mental health programmes can help build skills to navigate new relationships and roles and mitigate the physical, emotional and psychological impact of child marriage.[82] The transition from child to child spouse, which is often made in isolation from friends and family, can cause stress, anxiety and depression.[83] The dynamics between the child's family and the child's in-laws can also contribute to this tension. Given her age and level of cognitive development, she may need support to develop adequate healthy coping mechanisms to deal with this stress and change.

Note on dignity kits

Dignity kits are essential for both girls at risk of child marriage and married girls. They typically contain menstrual hygiene materials, soap, underwear and information on available GBV and SRH services. Dignity kits may also include other items that, based on a context analysis, might help to mitigate GBV risks, e.g. radios, whistles and lights. The distribution of dignity kits provides an opportunity for UNHCR staff and partners to meet the girls, assess their well-being and raise awareness of SRH and multisectoral services.[12,84,85,86,87]

To learn more about who should distribute dignity kits, how they differ to hygiene or menstrual hygiene kits, and what's inside, see these helpful resources:

1. Global Protection Cluster, GBV Sub-cluster in Ukraine "Beyond Basic Needs: Understanding the Role and Difference of Dignity Kits and Hygiene Kits in Humanitarian Assistance", 2025.
2. Global Protection Cluster, GBV Sub-cluster in Ukraine, "The Role of Dignity Kits in Supporting Women and Girls: What Non-GBV Actors Involved in Distribution of Dignity Kits Need to Know", 2024.

And good programming examples from Türkiye and Ukraine:

1. Global Protection Cluster, GBV Sub-cluster in Türkiye, "Dignity Kits Guidance Note - Türkiye", 2020.
2. Global Protection Cluster, GBV Sub-cluster in Ukraine, "Dignity Kit Guidance Note for Ukraine", 2025.

Education

Education is a human right for all children, including married girls and young mothers. Globally, education is seen as one of the most effective child marriage risk mitigation strategies. Education is considered key because the longer a girl stays in school the less likely she is to marry as a child. For instance, girls with elementary or no education are three times as likely to marry as a child than those with secondary or higher education.[88,89]

Increasing girls' access to education and creating safe learning environments are specific components of the UNHCR Refugee Education 2030, a strategy for refugee inclusion.[90]

Educational interventions support girls by providing an alternative to marriage. There is growing evidence that access to schooling can delay marriage for girls through multiple pathways, including

- In contexts where marriage and education are mutually exclusive, just being in school can be enough to prevent child marriage.
- In school, girls acquire skills, confidence, connections and new opportunities outside the home, expanding their aspirations beyond marriage.
- A critical mass of girls going to school can transform social norms in families and communities to expand opportunities for girls

As outlined in the Secondary Education and Child Marriage in Forced Displacement Brief, education that is gender-responsive, inclusive, relevant, and safe is one of the most effective strategies for preventing child marriage. The links between child marriage, early pregnancy, and educational outcomes are significant. Increased secondary educational attainment for girls correlates with delayed marriage and improved outcomes for future generations.

In addition to preventing child marriage, there are substantial opportunities to support forcibly displaced and crisis-affected girls who are ever-married, pregnant, or mothers in re-engaging with secondary education through flexible learning pathways, such as accelerated education.

The UNHCR and Plan International led Secondary Education Working Group (SEWG) identified six key messages about secondary education:

1. All young people in crisis affected contexts should have the opportunity to access secondary education and have their right to education fulfilled.
2. Secondary education is life changing for adolescent girls
3. Secondary education needs dedicated financing
4. Reopening schools is an opportunity to design a more inclusive and equitable education system
5. The quality of the system depends upon great teachers
6. Quality secondary education equips young people with future skills

Challenges for adolescent girls, married girls and young mothers to access education

In crisis and forced displacement contexts numerous challenges block girls access and availability of education. There may be a physical lack of primary and secondary schools or a lack of space for learning centres, shortages of educational resources and few teachers in schools – especially female teachers. There may be violence and insecurity in and on the way to schools, damage or poor infrastructure and physical design in the school buildings, a lack of sex- and age-appropriate wash facilities, or a lack of private space for taking care of menstrual hygiene needs.

In settings in which refugees do not receive work permits, families may not see much value in education, or they may be denied access to formal education and certification. Families who have lost land and livelihoods may rely on their children to generate an income through informal labour and child labour. Furthermore, refugee children may face difficulties in accessing education due to cost, distance, limited freedom of movement and lack of documentation or legal status.

For refugee children who can access education face difficulties in educational achievement and retention, such as language barriers, discrimination and/or adapting to different curriculum and educational settings. Furthermore, in most cases education is limited to primary level with few opportunities to progress on to secondary or even tertiary education – especially for girls.

Secondary education and child marriage

Forcibly displaced and crisis-affected adolescent girls continue to be excluded from secondary education at higher rates than boys. Progress to close the gender gap is slow. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the situation, with an estimated 20 million secondary education-aged girls potentially never returning to school, many due to child marriage and young parenting.[91,92] Adolescent girls facing forced displacement and crisis encounter numerous barriers that diminish their participation and completion rates in secondary education. In many contexts, secondary schools have been destroyed or repurposed, forcing adolescents to travel long distances which particularly increases adolescent girls' experience of violence, abduction, and harassment en route to school. Adolescent girls also contend with inadequate sanitation facilities during menstruation, heightened risks of school-related GBV, and family pressures to prioritize household duties over education.[93] Economic hardships can also lead families to favour boys' education over that of girls.[94]

Once out of school, adolescent girls are more at risk of child marriage and early pregnancy, which can prevent their return to education.[95] Once girls are married or pregnant, household responsibilities often keep girls away from school. In addition, other families and educational staff often do not want married girls in school because they view them as negatively influencing other girls and as now having a different social role that is not compatible with their unmarried peers. In some countries and in some schools, pregnant girls are not allowed in school by law or a misreading of the legal framework and that is shored up by socio-cultural norms.

This combination of child marriage and education deficits leads to multiple negative outcomes across girls' lifetimes affecting their literacy, employment, empowerment and decision-making, health, and risk of GBV.

Education, child protection and GBV sectors can work together to promote the following principles underlying efforts to tackle child marriage:[98]

- Schools must make space for girls. Schools should welcome and include married girls – no girl should be excluded because she is married or plans to marry.
- No girl should miss school because the journey is too far or too dangerous.
- Schools must be adapted to girls' needs.
- There can be no room for GBV, bullying, harassment and violence in schools.
- Refugee families need incentives and encouragement to keep girls in school.
- Refugee pupils need more female teachers.
- With some extra help, girls can catch up and power on.

Case study from Pakistan[96]

UNHCR Pakistan provided cash assistance to adolescent girls in years 9 to 12 of secondary school in Balochistan refugee villages. Sensitive to the gender norms for adolescent girls in the area, UNHCR developed separate girls-only classrooms with female teachers. These seemingly simple adaptations to the programme design, combined with financial assistance to enable girls to remain in schools, encouraged families to keep their daughters there.

Suggested integrated activities for Child protection, GBV and Educations actors include:

- **Engage adolescent girls** who are ever-married, pregnant and/or mothers to understand the barriers they face accessing secondary education and take steps to remove barriers to support their continued participation or return to secondary education.
- **Strengthen the design of secondary education programming to be adolescent girl-responsive** through the meaningful participation of adolescent girls, including girls who are at risk of marriage, ever-married, pregnant and/or mothers across the programme cycle.
- Implement **accelerated education programmes** tailored to the needs of adolescent girls in all their diversity, including girls who are ever-married, pregnant and/or mothers to ensure they have flexible learning pathways to complete secondary education.
- Invest in **quality early childhood education and childcare services** within secondary education for the children of learners and teachers to support adolescent girls and women teachers' participation.
- **Invest in gender responsive and inclusive secondary education programming** including prioritising **women teachers'** recruitment, professional development, and leadership, using curricula, facilitation and safeguarding that promotes adolescent girls' well-being and rights.
- **Deliver adolescent girls' life skills and empowerment** programming to strengthen girls' secondary education aspirations and reinforce support networks. Utilize approaches which are designed for adolescent girls who are at risk of child marriage, ever-married, pregnant and/or mothers.
- **Engage women and men, parents, caregivers and in-laws** of adolescent girls who are at risk of marriage, ever-married, pregnant and/or mothers and other **women and men leaders and influencers** in the community to increase support for adolescent girls' secondary education and delayed marriage.
- **Collaborate between education and child protection and GBV actors,** including women and girls, and children and youth community led groups, to collectively work to prevent and respond to child marriage.
- **Work with child protection actors to establish identification and referral mechanisms at schools** to identify children at risk of or who are married or pregnant and refer them to child protection or GBV services.
- **Integrate education on rights,** risks, self-protection skills and SRH for students such as through in school and out of school adolescent clubs and life skills programmes.
- **Understand the unique causes** of school drop out for married girls and boys and develop measures to address them.
- **Make schools safer** by actively combating sexual harassment and abuse at school through improved reporting and teacher training, monitoring and safeguards such as establishing a code of conduct and safely responding to child protection/GBV incident
- **Explore a combination of unconditional cash transfers and conditional transfers for education.** These must be balanced with adequate investment in quality education and other social services. If conditions are applied to the cash transfer, they must include non-formal and vocational education and support access rather than punish non-compliance.[97]

Menstrual health and hygiene in schools[99]

In addition to issues around access to education and educational services, the lack of gender-sensitive health services and SRH awareness or capacity within schools can create a barrier to education for refugee girls during menstruation. If girls do not have access to information and commodities to manage their menstruation in a hygienic, culturally appropriate and comfortable way, they may stay home from school and other extracurricular activities and be at increased risk of dropping out and getting married early.

A few basic questions should be asked to guide effective menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) programming and services in school settings:

- What materials do girls prefer to use for managing their menstruation?
- How do girls dispose of used sanitary materials while in school? If reusable, how are these materials washed, dried or stored while in school?
- What taboos or cultural beliefs exist around menstruation in their communities regarding menstrual practices and disposal of materials?
- Do girls currently have access to sufficient supplies of sanitary materials?
- How could school toilets be designed to better support girls in managing menstruation? (E.g. water inside, lighting, locks, etc.)

Resource

"A toolkit for integrating menstrual hygiene management (MHM) in humanitarian response: The full guide"

by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, International Rescue Committee, and co-signed by 25 NGOs (2017).

Livelihoods and economic inclusion

Families often lose livelihoods in displacement and access to safe and dignified work may be challenging due to lack of opportunities for some refugees and legal restrictions on work in host countries. They may consider having an adolescent daughter marry to be able to provide food to younger children in the household. At the same time, they may believe that their daughter will be economically better off in a smaller husband-wife family unit than in their household among siblings.

Given the economic drivers, programmes that provide families with economic opportunities and support can help to protect girls from marriage. In many settings, cash and voucher assistance and livelihoods opportunities alone are not likely to be sufficient to counterbalance the economic incentives associated with child marriage such as a dowry. As such, interventions to address the financial drivers of child marriage should always be coupled with other support services such as empowerment programmes for girls and/or social change initiatives to address the gender norms associated with these economic drivers.

Programmes that remove financial barriers to formal education for girls can also help to mitigate socioeconomic vulnerability and contribute to the prevention of child marriage. In order to achieve more sustainable impact, programmes that provide subsidies or incentives should incorporate initiatives focused on shifting social norms around appropriate roles for girls and boys in contributing to economic stability.[100]

Income-generating activities for girls: supporting a girl's family with livelihoods may be better than providing her with direct support. Although adolescent girls should not be made responsible for the welfare of their families, income-generating activities for girls help to protect them from marriage, especially for out-of-school girls. Any income-generating activity undertaken by girls, also known as child work or child labour, must comply with international child labour standards, i.e. it must not be harmful to their health, safety or morals,[101,102] it must not interfere in education and it must comply with limitations in terms of the type and length of work that can be done by children of specific ages.[II]

II. See ILO, "Conventions 138 and 182", for more on the minimum age permissible for specific forms of work, clarify when and what forms of work may be seen as constructive and compatible with child rights, and also for definitions and prohibitions of the worst forms of child labour.

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These activities, as well as vocational training, minimize isolation. When girls are earning an income or a skill they are gaining self-efficacy. They are helping to alleviate familial poverty and food security, which helps the girls themselves as well as parents and other community members to see them as assets and not burdens. However, income-generating activities for girls should not become the primary income for families.

Income-generating activities can also create protection concerns. Some girls may feel pressure to drop out of school or to not enrol in school in order to contribute economically to their family. When a safe, legal process to earn an income is not available or accessible, girls may find themselves engaging in exploitative and/or unregulated work that can cause further protection risks, including sexual exploitation.

In some cases, married girls may not have their husbands' support to work and income-generating activities can create family conflicts. Assess the best interests of the child before linking her with any type of income-generating activity and work with the family and community to build support for girls to participate in safe forms of child work.

Strategies for integrating child marriage prevention, risk mitigation and response into livelihoods:

- Workforce education and training for married girls.
- Initiatives to increase financial literacy and improve savings and loan skills for households with young adolescent daughters in areas with high rates of child marriage.
- Connecting girls with mentors and job placement, gender- and youth sensitive entrepreneurship opportunities and enterprise-development training.
- Employment services, such as job placement and on-the-job training for young husbands, girls, female-headed households, etc.
- Community mobilization around the importance of investing in girls.
- Cash transfers for the purpose of supporting girls to enrol or remain in school or a programme.
- Financial support for school, such as scholarships, school fees, materials and uniforms.

Cash-based interventions

When livelihoods opportunities are not available, cash transfers may also mitigate the risk of child marriage.[70] However, the targeting, delivery and integration of cash-based interventions (CBI)[103] in multisectoral programming for girls at risk or married girls needs to be carefully designed to maximise impact. Food vouchers can also alleviate the economic strain on families that contributes to child marriage.[104]

The Girls Not Brides thematic brief Cash transfers and child marriage provides useful tips to ensure that CBI interventions have an impact on child marriage in a given context:

- Cash transfer programmes should be sensitive and responsive to local child marriage practices and drivers. They should include child marriage reduction as a specific objective.
- To reach girls at risk of child marriage, cash transfer programmes should cover high-prevalence communities and have inclusive eligibility criteria and outreach.
- Combined unconditional cash transfers and conditional or labelled transfers for education may be most effective, but complementary investment in education and other social services is also needed. Cash transfers for education should include non-formal and vocational education, and any conditions should support access rather than punish non-compliance.
- Cash is more efficient to deliver at scale than in-kind transfers and supports girls and their families own spending and investment priorities. The size and frequency of payments depends on the programme objectives, which should reflect the local drivers of child marriage.
- Gender analysis should be used to identify and mitigate the gendered social norms that drive child marriage, and the possible negative impacts of cash transfers on violence against girls and women, the unequal distribution of domestic work, and the risk of funding dowry and facilitating child marriage.
- Cash transfer programmes should encourage the active participation of girls and support their holistic needs, i.e. their needs as an interconnected whole, for better transitions to adulthood. Programmes should link with national child marriage reduction strategies, laws and policies, and other social and economic services and programmes.

Food security

Food insecurity and other unmet basic needs often increase the risk of girls being forced into child marriage or initiating their own marriage. “Lack of food” is often identified as one of the key factors driving adolescent girls to marry or enter into exploitative relationships to meet their basic needs.

Child marriage is well-cited extreme coping mechanism used by families and girls who face food insecurity. For example to lower financial burdens or to have one less family member to feed. Families may also use child marriage ahead of expected shocks and food insecurity. For example, marrying off their daughters in anticipation of losing livelihoods. In some cases, girls may also initiate marriages as a way to increase their own access to food. In limited instances, food insecurity may lead to a decrease child marriage, possibly due to other factors such as poverty and unemployment (i.e. inability of families to provide dowries and the migration of young men to other areas in search of work).[105]

Married girls may face increased food insecurity after marriage, especially if they are second wives.

Once married, girls’ needs are often not met; for example, access to food and resources in the marital home can be a challenge due to their lesser status as a young wife in multi-generational households. This is worse in situations where both spouses are children or youth. Numerous accounts highlight cases of married girls being deprived of food and resources by their husbands or in-laws as a form of coercive control over their behaviour.[105]

Research in Niger, which has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, showed not only that food insecurity was a driver of child marriage but also that child marriage further fuelled food insecurity.[106] A Population Council study showed that providing chickens or goats to poor families with adolescent daughters in Ethiopia reduced the likelihood of child marriage.[107]

Suggested integrated activities for Child protection, GBV and Food Security actors include:

- Work together to design, implement, and monitor integrated child protection and food security programs to address the multisectoral needs of food-insecure children and families resorting to negative coping mechanism such as child marriage.
- Conduct needs assessments that reflect the specific needs and risks faced by girls (unmarried girls at risk, married girls, young mothers) in food-insecure contexts and improve documentation of the linkages between food insecurity and child marriage (as extreme coping mechanism)
- Develop child- and adolescent-friendly information relating to child protection and GBV risks in contexts of food insecurity and alternatives to child marriage.
- Conduct dialogue sessions with at risk children and adolescents on the benefits of delaying marriage, the risks of child marriage and alternatives.
- Provide life skills sessions to children and adolescents from food-insecure households and communities, including children from households that are being targeted for food assistance or nutrition interventions.
- Form child or adolescent clubs for in-school and out-of-school children and adolescents from food-insecure households/communities to encourage positive coping mechanisms for food insecurity. Ensure they are gender sensitive and designed to address the needs of adolescent girls.
- Provide food assistance (in-kind or cash and voucher assistance [CVA]) to food-insecure and vulnerable households, including households at risk of child marriage as well sensitization on the benefits of delaying marriage.
- Establish food for assets or cash for work programmes, vocational training, income-generating activities, and other livelihoods interventions targeting food-insecure caregivers, caregivers of children at risk of child marriage, married girls and young mothers.
- Organize community dialogues, including intergenerational dialogues, to increase understanding of the linkages between the pressures of food insecurity and child marriage.
- Map existing child protection and food security services and ensure that a functional and updated referral pathway exists between food security and child protection/GBV actors that is sensitive towards identification of married girls.
- Organize joint targeting exercises between child protection/GBV and food security staff to develop beneficiary criteria to ensure that vulnerable children, including married girls, adolescent mothers, pregnant or breastfeeding adolescents and others, have access to age-appropriate food security programmes.

Nutrition

Access to adequate nutrition is vital for the health and well-being of married girls particularly, those who are pregnant or breastfeeding. Child marriage exacerbates existing nutritional vulnerabilities, as young girls' bodies are ill-equipped to handle the physiological demands of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. Breastfeeding requires nutrients that an adolescent body also needs for healthy growth and development. Supplemental nutrition for breastfeeding mothers is geared toward adults and it is important to remember that breastfeeding adolescents have additional nutritional needs that need to be considered as distinct to those of adult women. The tendency is to focus on the nutritional needs of the children of child mothers; however, we must recognize that **young mothers themselves also have urgent nutrition needs**.


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Suggested integrated activities for Child protection, GBV and Nutrition actors include:

- **Strengthen the Integration of Nutrition into Multisectoral Approaches** through
  - **Collaboration with health and education sectors:** Advocate for the inclusion of nutrition education and counselling in maternal and child health services, as well as in school-based programs.
  - **Community-based interventions:** Promote community-level initiatives that address food security, dietary diversity, and hygiene practices, involving traditional birth attendants and community health workers.
  - **Empowering adolescent girls:** Empower girls to make informed decisions about their reproductive health and nutrition, including family planning, breastfeeding, and complementary feeding
- Including girls at risk of child marriage and their families, married girls and young mothers in nutrition projects, such as agriculture projects.
- Engaging with girls, their husbands and their families about adequate nutrition through health and nutrition programmes. Ensuring functioning referral pathways between nutrition services and case management services.
- Promoting maternal nutrition, optimal breastfeeding, complementary feeding and appropriate foods for children under five, breastfeeding mothers of all ages and pregnant girls.
- Engaging with married girls and their families on water, hygiene, and sanitation, including safe drinking water, food hygiene, hand washing with soap and the safe disposal of excreta.
- Address the social and cultural barriers to nutrition through staff training and awareness on the cultural factors that may influence dietary choices and feeding practices, such as food taboos and gender roles.
- Highlight the importance of addressing gender inequality to improve women's access to resources, decision-making power, and control over their own health and nutrition.
- Integrate family planning services into nutrition programs to help delay early pregnancies and births among adolescent girls.

4

Key guidance and resources

The Legal framework around child marriage

- The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and Girls and the Committee on the Rights of the Child Joint general recommendation/general comments No. 31 and No. 18 on harmful practices
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- UNHCR and Plan International E-Learning course: Learning series to tackle child marriage in crisis and forced displacement settings, 2024, available in English and French:
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  - Module 2: Supporting married girls and unmarried girls at risk of child marriage in case management
  - Module 3: Co-designing child marriage prevention strategies with girls and their community
- UNHCR and Plan International Animated advocacy videos:
  - Leila's Story Forced Displacement and Child Marriage and
  - Suzi, Safi & Maria 5 Actions for Humanitarian Action on Child Marriage

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- UNHCR, Resettlement handbook, 2022.
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UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

About UNHCR

What we want to achieve

A world where every stateless person and every person forced to flee can build a better future.

Who we are

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is a global organization dedicated to saving lives, protecting rights and building a better future for refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people.

What we do

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, leads international action to protect people forced to flee their homes because of conflict and persecution. We deliver life-saving assistance like shelter, food and water, help safeguard fundamental human rights, and develop solutions that ensure people have a safe place to call home where they can build a better future. We also work to ensure that stateless people are granted a nationality.

Why we matter

Every year, millions of men, women and children are forced to flee their homes to escape conflict and persecution. We are the world's leading organization dedicated to supporting people forced to flee and those deprived of a nationality. We are in the field in over 130 countries, using our expertise to protect and care for forcibly displaced and stateless people.

The United Nations Refugee Agency

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Case Postale 2500, CH-1211 Genève 2 Dépôt, Suisse

T +41 22 739 8111 (automatic switchboard)

twitter.com/refugees
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PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Until we are all equal

About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organization that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters, and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crisis and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national, and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.

Plan International

International Headquarters
Dukes Court, Duke Street, Woking,
Surrey GU21 5BH, United Kingdom

T +44 (0) 1483 755155
F +44 (0) 1483 756505
E info@plan-international.org

plan-international.org

facebook.com/planinternational
twitter.com/planglobal
instagram.com/planinternational
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