

Stolen Future

War and Child Marriage in Northwest Syria

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was prepared by World Vision. Lead author Nathan McGibney and contributing author Nadine Haddad, with support from Mays Alnawayseh, Caroline Anning, Yusra Ali and World Vision's partners in Syria: Syrian Expatriates Medical Association (SEMA), Ihsan Relief and Development (IhsanRD) and Syria Relief and Development (SRD). Significant contributions were provided by World Vision Syria Response Office.

Design: Diana De León

Cover photograph © Syria Relief & Development (SRD)

Interior pages photographs:

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The names of all children and adults quoted in this report have been changed to protect their identities.

Executive Summary

Child marriage is not and should not be considered an inevitability in conflict situations. Rather, it is an extreme response driven for many by desperation and vulnerability, and the collective failure to prioritise and secure child protection systems by both national and international actors. A rapid and systematic shift is required to prevent not only a lost generation of children but a fundamental breakdown of entire communities. Children are Syria's greatest hope for recovery and resilience, but they are being crushed by the consequences of conflict and the disproportionate burden of vulnerability placed upon them.

Syria is one of the most dangerous places to be a child. Ten years into the conflict, millions of children are entering their second decade of life in the thick of war, violence, death and displacement.

The situation in the country's northwest region is dire. The escalation of violence at the start of 2020 highlights the disproportionate cost children have borne in this conflict. Nearly 600,000 were forced to flee their homes since December 2019.ⁱ Pressed up against the Turkish border, they have nowhere to go. Children are pushed into extreme and inhumane living conditions in crowded camps and makeshift tents. Some have even sought shelter in the open under trees during a harsh and freezing winter.

Children in northwest Syria have faced grave violations and daily risks for years, and it is hard to find a new way to draw international attention to their situation. For the 10th year running, the situation for children in Syria has gotten worse, not better. This in itself is a stain on our collective moral obligation to uphold their rights.

This report looks at the most insidious price children must pay as a result of war: forced and early marriage. Their childhood and their future is being stolen.

Conflict and displacement are increasingly recognised and recorded as a driver of child marriage globally.ⁱⁱ

While thirteen percent of children were already being married under the age of 18 in Syria prior to the crisis,ⁱⁱⁱ reports highlight significant increases in the rates of child marriage since conflict began. This increased rate is a result of multiple drivers including displacement, poverty and social and cultural pressures^{iv}. The full extent of child marriage, its drivers and consequences are not completely understood. There are challenges identifying, monitoring and reporting cases inside Syria due to limited access to affected areas, security concerns and cultural sensitivities.

Early marriage can result in significant physical and psychological harm. This includes early pregnancy and birth complications; increased gender-based violence, domestic and intimate partner violence; early withdrawal from education; illiteracy and reduced self-protection capacity, including sexual and reproductive health knowledge; significant mental health and psycho-social challenges; and multidimensional, often intergenerational poverty.

Adolescence is a vulnerable age group that is often characterised by heightened physiological response to stress compared to children and adults, culminating in psychiatric problems throughout development and into adulthood. Many adolescents forced to marry face both harrowing and distressing realities. They are struggling to get by, sometimes taking their own life.^v



Between January and April 2020, World Vision spoke to **626 adolescent girls and boys, families, caregivers and community leaders** in northwest Syria to understand the impact of child marriage on their lives.

The findings confirm that **10 years into the conflict, child marriage has increased alarmingly.**



The **belief that child marriage has increased in Syria** as a consequence of protracted conflict is widely held by children and adults alike, reported by **eighty-six percent of all respondents.**

Almost 100 percent of adolescent girls and ninety-four percent of adolescent boys noted that child marriage has become more common since the start of the conflict, while **seventy-one percent of all respondents** identified conflict and insecurity as the top driver of child marriage.



This study looked at the views of boys and girls age 18 years and below. Almost half of all boys highlighted puberty as the right age for marriage for girls, noting this can be as early as age 10. Most girls on the other hand felt that the right age to marry is 18-23 years or higher.

It is clear early marriage among boys is largely driven by the need to seek independence from parents, pursue the social status of a “breadwinner” and to fill time in the absence of education or employment opportunities. For girls, it is an altogether different story. Conflict and repeated displacement have fuelled increased poverty and insecurity, which subsequently increases rates of violence including sexual violence, abuse and abductions. This results in increased family pressure and parental decisions to force girls into early marriage as a protective measure. This is evident with fifty-three percent of female respondents highlighting the fear of sexual exploitation, abuse and kidnapping as drivers of forced early marriage. While boys are at risk and do experience forced marriage, they often have a degree of autonomy – if limited – in the pursuit of adulthood and independence.

Adolescent girls are at far higher risk of early marriage because of how they are viewed by the opposite sex, parents and caregivers, and the wider community. Often girls are perceived as passive, vulnerable, with limited agency and in need of male protection.

Adolescent boys mostly identified the marrying of adolescent girls as a necessary outcome to protect family honour. Fifty percent more adolescent boys than girls highlighted this as a driver. This increased need to secure girls’ honour (*Sutra*) as a method of securing family honour puts them at a higher risk of forced, early marriage and the multitude of consequences including gender-based violence and domestic abuse.

Social media adds further complications, with parents expressing their frustration about their inability to monitor their daughters’ activities adequately over social media outlets and fearing for their “safety”. This ambiguity seems to pose a greater threat to family honour and reputation.^{vi}

Findings show that displacement clearly raises protection risks for women and drives perceptions of early marriage as a remedy. Women interviewed from the displaced communities **were fifteen percent** more likely to identify protection as a driver for early marriage than their counterparts from host communities.

Yet, adolescent girls and boys as young as 12 are keenly aware of the negative consequences of early marriage. Women and girls were on average thirty percent more likely to highlight protection risks within the household as a result of child

marriage. **Domestic violence topped the list with seventy percent of girls and women identifying this a key challenge during marriage.**

Violations against adolescent girls and women – such as domestic violence and conflict with the in-laws – happen in private, and the blame is usually placed upon the adolescent girl herself. Many of the men and boys interviewed blamed girls for conflict with the in-laws, citing that it is a girl's responsibility to know how to adapt. This renders their experiences unseen and unimportant.

Close behind, in the list of negative consequences, were loss of educational opportunities and a lack of basic reproductive and sexual knowledge. The threat of complications from early pregnancy was noted as a negative consequence by seventy-four percent of adolescent girls. Challenges in accessing health facilities and services because of conflict further exacerbated these concerns for all respondents. In contrast, when asked the same questions, boys and men identified loss of educational opportunities as the main threat of early marriage for girls, followed by the loss of opportunities to work.

The clear distinction of how adolescent girls understand their own position in society, their

vulnerability and autonomy creates a tension that is likely to continue far beyond the end of the conflict. This needs to be further unpacked to inform preventative and response programmes. **The gendered differences in drivers and perceptions of child marriage give insight into the different types of responses that are required to address the problem.**

The facts and stories presented in this report paint an unacceptable picture. Children are suffering. Urgent, holistic and multi-sectoral interventions are required to combat increased rates of child marriage in northwest Syria. At-risk families must be supported with essential life-sustaining assistance including social protection, food security and livelihoods, as well as access to basic services including health, education, gender-based violence prevention and child protection services. This is vital before a family reaches a point of desperation where irreversible coping strategies seem the only option. Faith and community leaders must inculcate in men and boys a negative attitude towards this pervasive practice to prevent it becoming a deep-rooted, longer-term norm, and to prevent further threats to generations of children beyond the end of the Syria conflict.

Based on our experience talking to and working with children in Syria, World Vision recommends immediate adoption of the following measures:

1. Scale up sustainable and adequate funding to address child protection concerns including child marriage in northwest Syria.
2. Invest in a long-term and sustained multi-sector approach to build strong and resilient child protection, health and education systems and integrate a strong Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) component across key sectors.
3. Invest in scaling up quality, safe and inclusive education and empowerment interventions, especially ensuring access to secondary education for girls to offer girls and families alternatives to child marriage.
4. Invest in and scale up long-term community-level sensitisation and awareness campaigns to change those social and gender norms and behaviours that place girls at increased risk of child marriage.
5. Ensure programmes address the underlying drivers and norms through a gender transformative agenda.
6. Parties to war to immediately abide by International Humanitarian Law to ensure the protection of health and education facilities and unhindered humanitarian access to communities.

Introduction

Conflict, displacement and child marriage

A triple crisis for Syria's most vulnerable children

The crisis in Syria is a child protection crisis.^{vii} Between December 2019 and March 2020 children witnessed an unprecedented escalation in violence and mass displacement in the country's northwest. One million Syrians were displaced – the highest recorded rate of displacement in such a short period of time. United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock attested that “the crisis in northwest Syria has reached a horrifying new level”.

Of those displaced in early 2020, sixty percent – 600,000 – are children.^{viii} They were forced to seek protection in makeshift, last-resort shelters, overcrowded apartments, often partially destroyed buildings, or completely in the open under trees in sub-zero temperatures. This latest round of displacement, adding to multiple waves of preceding ones, brings the total number of displaced people in the northwest close to 3 million. All depend on humanitarian assistance. COVID-19 now threatens to wreak havoc on top of an already drastic humanitarian crisis.

Children are not a homogenous group. Conflict and risks affect them differently. Multiple factors determine vulnerability, including age; gender; diversity and capacity; status, including being part of a displaced community, host community, refugee or returnee population; and household demographics. Young and adolescent girls are one of the most vulnerable populations in Syria and the most deeply affected by household and community vulnerability. For internally displaced children, protection risks intensify with the erosion of household and children's support networks. Increased vulnerability forces families to resort to negative coping mechanisms, among them child marriage.





COVID-19 as a multiplier of child protection risks

A COVID-19 outbreak would overwhelm Syria's already decimated healthcare system, further reducing children's access to care. Only sixty percent of public hospitals are currently functional. Moreover, many families live in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions, making following CDC *Quarantining and Social Distancing Guidance*^x to prevent the spread of the virus practically impossible.

COVID-19 prevention and response measures will push households already living in extreme poverty and dire conditions to new depths of vulnerability. Impacts include a potential further reduction in household income and food security, and increased stress, mental health and psycho-social challenges for parents and caregivers. This places children at heightened risk of neglect, violence and forced early marriage, with households adopting it as a negative coping strategy or viewing it as a protective measure.

COVID-19 restrictions would also further hinder access to education, healthcare and child protection services, all of which are vital to children's care and protection.

Preliminary findings from the COVID-19 needs assessment in northwest Syria (May 2020)

Preliminary data shows that children are exposed to several risks, including child labour, exploitation, early marriage and neglect in each targeted location. Adolescent girls reported significant changes in behaviour including isolation from the community, violent actions, melancholy, crying and nightmares.

Women and girls face aggravated domestic violence, verbal violence, psychosocial or emotional violence, and economic violence. They experience psychological and social problems, including divorce, inability to raise children, psychiatric disturbances, isolation and fear.

Methodology

The objectives of this report are to assess whether rates of child marriage increased over the lifespan of the 10-year conflict and to what extent; identify at-risk and vulnerable children and the drivers and conditions placing children at risk; understand decision-making around child marriage, including the individual agency and autonomy of children; and understand the consequences of child marriage as identified by children and community members.

The research took place between January and April 2020, in collaboration with three World Vision partner organisations in northwest Syria. The mixed methodology employed reached participants from both displaced and host communities, including participants actively fleeing a military escalation. A comprehensive literature review before and after also informed data collection and analysis.

World Vision consulted **626 children and adults**



We surveyed:
54 children
 (26 girls and 28 boys)
179 adults
 (111 women and 68 men)



We interviewed:
36 key informants¹

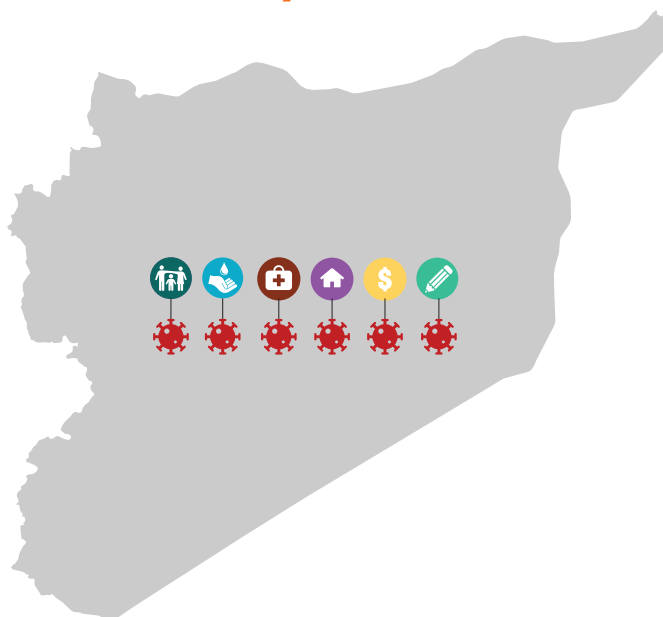


We conducted **52 focus group discussions** with:
221 children²
 from 12 to 18 years (114 girls and 107 boys)
136 adults
 (93 women and 43 men)

World Vision in Syria

Sectors

-  Protection & Child Protection
-  Health & Nutrition
-  Shelter & Non-Food Items
-  WASH
-  Education
-  Livelihoods
-  COVID-19 Response



¹ Key informant interviews included medical professionals, religious leaders, representatives across women and protection groups and teachers.

² Children's ages ranged from 12 to 18 years.



Child marriage

A growing problem

Child marriage existed in Syria before the crisis – thirteen percent of girls under 18 were married in 2011.^x But now, 10 years into the conflict, child marriage has increased alarmingly.

While comprehensive data is notably lacking due to the challenges of data collection in an active conflict zone, research respondents confirmed child marriage in northwest Syria has significantly increased. While occurring across girls and boys and displaced and host communities, the drivers, conditions and consequences are largely dependent on age, gender and status.

The findings reveal that child marriage disproportionately and significantly affects adolescent girls. While boys are at risk and do experience forced early marriage, they often have a degree of autonomy – if limited – in the pursuit of adulthood and independence. There are numerous reasons why adolescent girls are at increased risk. As the conflict

continues, families' resilience is eroded as income insecurity and poverty rises and as they are forced to move. At the same time, there is a strong belief in the need to protect children, especially daughters, from conflict-affected violence and the threat of sexual violence.

Child marriage in situations of conflict and displacement is not an inevitability. Rather, it is an extreme decision, driven for many by increased vulnerability and perceived limited choice, the breakdown of social functions and services, and the collective failure of both national and international actors to prioritise and secure child protection systems. We cannot discount the occurrence of child marriage owing to other circumstances, including pre-existing social and cultural norms. We must, however, listen intently to the voices of affected and at-risk children and communities, who outline plainly the conditions driving child marriage and, importantly, the supports needed for prevention and response. We hope this report contributes to a necessary and rapid shift in how the international community responds to child marriage in conflict and humanitarian settings.

Drivers of child marriage



“Child marriage has risen by ninety percent after the war, due to migration and poverty, and in order to reduce the number of family members, especially in families with many daughters – it is rare to see a girl who is 13 and is not married.”

Fatima, a Syrian mother in northwest Syria

Given the significant impact of the decade-long conflict on children, with some respondents born only two years before the crisis began, it is critical to understand perceptions on the ideal age and necessary conditions for individuals to marry, as

reported by children. Most adolescent girls and boys believed that children should not be married before the age of 18, with less than seven percent believing it was appropriate to marry before age 18.³

Most respondents identified the age range of 18-23 as the best time for women to marry, chosen by close to sixty percent of female respondents and seventy percent of male respondents. Sixty percent of male and fifty percent of female respondents believe that ideal age for man to marry is 23-28 years of age, while only thirty-five percent of females and twenty percent of males believe that this is the ideal aged for women to marry. This demonstrates a clear distinct gender roles and responsibilities, most notably that of the male breadwinner.

Parents and caregivers highlighted shifting social norms driven by war, displacement and associated poverty, with some mothers saying that society is now very accepting of child marriage. The belief that child marriage has increased in Syria because of the protracted conflict is widely held by children and adults alike, reported by eighty-four percent of all respondents. **Almost 100 percent of adolescent girls and ninety-four percent of adolescent boys noted that child marriage has become more common since the start of the conflict.**

These figures were consistent regardless of status as a member of the displaced or host community. Ninety-five percent of women interviewed noted that child marriage has increased due to the conflict. There is a small difference between the respondents from host and displaced communities, with slightly more displaced women identifying the correlation compared to their peers from host communities.

Fathers and male caregivers similarly highlighted increasing trends of child marriage and shifting levels of acceptance due to the protracted conflict: *“Before the war it was not acceptable, but now families are forced to marry off their children at a young age because of immorality, the society, the densely populated camps, and because there are no more barriers to prevent young men from getting married like mandatory army service.”*

³ Note: the highest reporting of 12-18 as an appropriate age occurred within host community females aged 12-18 totalling 20 percent of respondents.

PERCEIVED REASONS PARENTS/CAREGIVERS MARRY DAUGHTERS BELOW AGE 18

(As identified by children)

Driver for girls as identified by adolescent girls



69%

Lack of security



34%

No education opportunities



34%

Protect family honour

Drivers for girls as identified by adolescent boys



84%

Protect family honour



75%

Lack of security



44%

Puberty is the right age

(As identified by adults)

Driver for girls as identified by women



69%

Lack of security



53%

Inability to financially support young girls



46%

Puberty is the right age

Drivers for girls as identified by men



73%

Lack of security



52%

Puberty is the right age



49%

Inability to financially support young girls

In response to the distinct and disproportionate risk posed to adolescent girls from both host and displaced communities, all respondents were asked to identify the top reasons they believed parents and caregivers would marry their daughter before the legal age of 18. There are clear distinctions on household drivers. Adolescent girls identify largely the external environment and breakdown in essential services. Adolescent boys – while recognising lack of security as a priority driver, particularly among internally displaced respondents – mostly identified the marrying of adolescent girls as a necessary outcome to protect family honour. Fifty percent more adolescent boys than girls highlighted this as a household driver. Comparatively, only twenty percent of host community females highlighted the issue

of such protection. Almost half of adolescent boys highlighted puberty as the right age for marriage for adolescent girls. This response increased within the host community and further still among adult male respondents.

Among adult responses, lack of security featured across both genders and across internally displaced and host communities, with the issue of family honour decreasing within this age group. With minor differences, economic insecurity and puberty as a right age featured across both male and female respondents. This demonstrates worrying trends and a distinct change in opinion, particularly among adolescent girls and women.

Child marriage: A protective measure



“The ideal age to get married is 18 and above because [girls] will be mature to bear the responsibilities of a house and a husband. Also her body would be developed to be able to get pregnant and have a child without complications.”

Amira, a 15-year-old Syrian girl

Typically, child marriage in the Syrian context is understood to disproportionately affect girls, with girls seen as needing protection from a male and

males only being ready for marriage once they attain stability and maturity.

Despite these differences, independence seems to be a shared reason for both males and females to marry young. Adolescent boys seek their independence and adulthood in securing and raising a family and fulfilling their breadwinner, head of household duties. Adolescent girls, by contrast often feel trapped in their current familial situations physically, socially and economically vulnerable.^{xi} Parents scared for their daughters' protection and honour severely limit their movements and impose confinement within the household, which in most cases is overcrowded, with limited or no basic amenities and extremely limited privacy. This causes significant challenges related to education and health access, and mental and psychosocial health. Many adolescent girls see early marriage as a viable “exit strategy” to exercise greater autonomy and secure independence from their current reality.

TOP THREE DRIVERS OF CHILD MARRIAGE FOR ALL ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Drivers for girls as identified by adolescent girls



53%

Pressure from family



51%

Economic security



40%

Protection

Drivers for girls as identified by adolescent boys



63%

Social status and position



58%

Protection



55%

Pressure from family

TOP THREE DRIVERS OF CHILD MARRIAGE FOR ADOLESCENT BOYS

Drivers for boys as identified by adolescent boys



57%

Fatherhood



53%

Independence



50%

Pressure from family

Drivers for boys as identified by adolescent girls



50%

Independence



46%

Social status



39%

Partnership and romance

Females are typically viewed by males across host and displaced communities as passive and vulnerable with two perceived standout drivers: protection and economic security. Dominant across male responses is the notion of protection and honour associated with unmarried adolescent girls, who are seen to require protection in the form of a typically older husband. Adolescent girls identified the pursuit of economic security as a leading driver for girls marrying before age 18. This is driven by the significant impact of poverty and dire living conditions on both individuals and households.

The number one driver identified by all male respondents for males was fatherhood, indicating a level of choice for perceived adulthood and status. Respondents from both sexes identified independence as a driver for boys. Conversely for adolescent girls, drivers identified by both sexes typically reflect limited agency and autonomy and can be characterised as pull factors driven by the deteriorating environment.

Displacement

Displaced communities feel more vulnerable than host communities. Females interviewed from the host communities were fifteen percent less likely to identify protection as a driver for females compared to displaced female respondents. Fatherhood was identified by ten percent more male respondents from the host community compared with male respondents from the displaced community, who prioritised independence. Pressure from family also ranks thirteen percent higher for males from the host community than for displaced male respondents. Lastly, independence features once again as a leading driver for males as identified by both sexes, and markedly lower for females with just twenty percent of male and female respondents recognising this as a driver for females, representing the largest gap between genders.





Syria: A Child Protection Crisis

Case study 1: Hadeel's Story

Living in the North-West of Syria, Hadeel,* the eldest of five other children, has had to carry many burdens and responsibilities to support her family during the war.

Her father was forced to quit his job, leaving him unemployed and unable to provide for his household. Hadeel stopped going to school in order to help him plough and cultivate their land, leaving behind her hopes and dreams. Sadly their circumstances didn't improve and eventually, at just 16 years old Hadeel married a man 13 years her senior.

"My father approved of the first man who asked for my hand in marriage. Our financial situation was deteriorating, and as part of the traditions in my country, young girls had to get married before they missed the boat," Hadeel explained.

Hadeel barely knew the man she was getting married to, as he was from a neighbouring town.

"On my wedding day, my husband's sisters dressed me in my gown, then they put my makeup on because it was not possible for me to go to a hairdresser... I cried so much that day over the dreams I had to throw away, and over having to depart from my family – especially my siblings," she recalled.

Life hasn't been easy for Hadeel, working every day until she is exhausted, and struggling with conflicts in her husband's family.

She says: **"I regret getting married. I dreamt of living a different life; a life like any other girl would dream of".**

"I advise every girl not to get married like I did. Even if your parents insist; do not be swayed by what they say and stand your ground, remain strong at least until you finish high school. That way, you would be able to face married life with full force, patience, awareness and ambition."

*Name has been changed to protect identity.

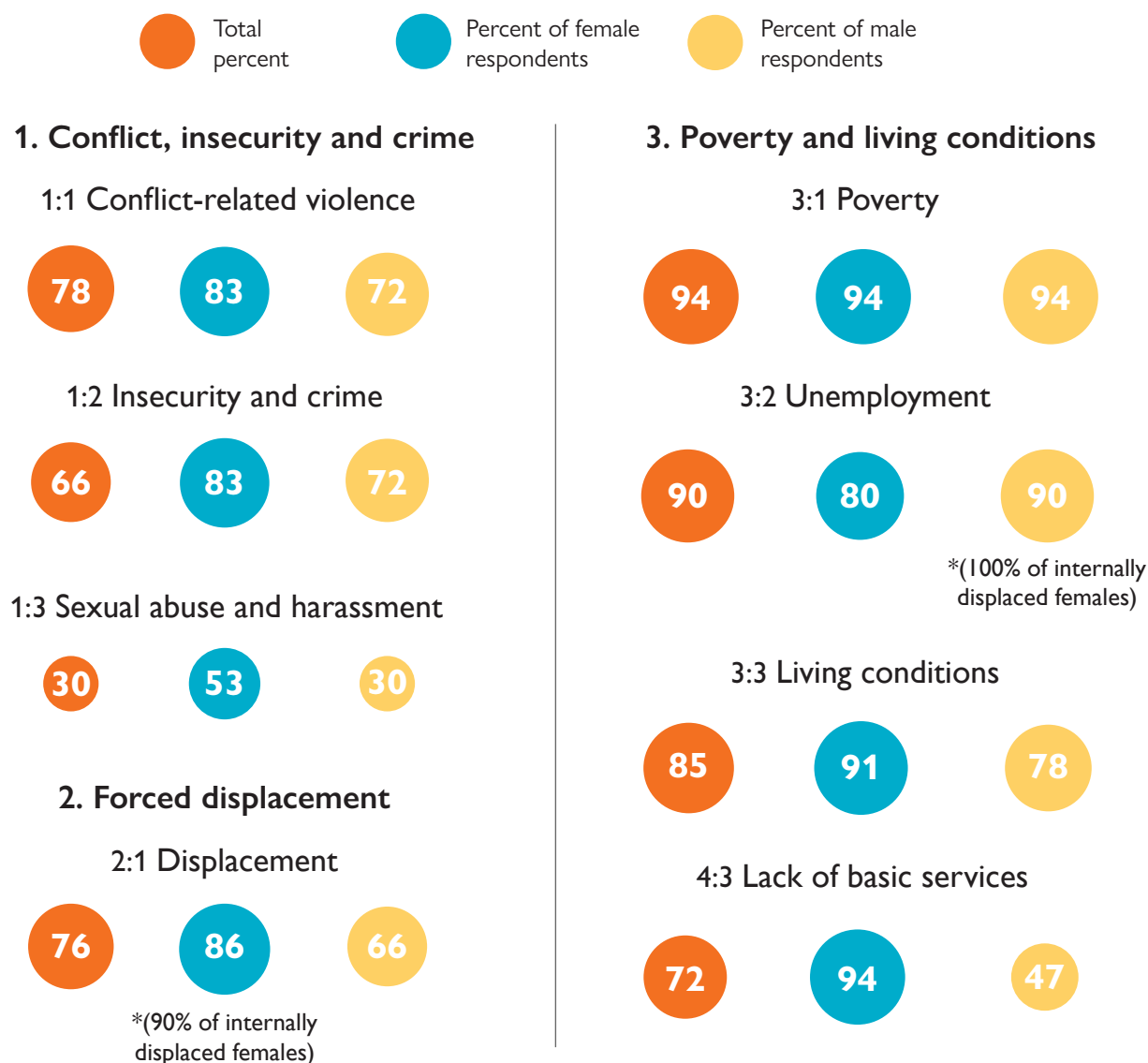
Children are increasingly vulnerable in armed conflict. They are acutely aware of how violence around them exacerbates their vulnerabilities.

They⁵ shared with us five challenges that make them more vulnerable to forced early marriage:

1. Conflict and insecurity
2. Poverty and living conditions
3. Lack of safe access to quality education
4. Displacement and living conditions
5. Social media

CHALLENGES AFFECTING THE COMMUNITY AS IDENTIFIED BY ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND BOYS

Top community problems identified-



1. Conflict and insecurity

Conflict-related violence⁴ and insecurity were identified across communities, gender and age as a major challenge facing communities and as a leading driver of child marriage, particularly for adolescent girls. Among internally displaced and host community respondents, seventy-one percent identified conflict and insecurity as the top driver.

One father highlighted the impact for his children: **“The major dangers facing my children are the fact that they are not getting their rights to life, to education and to play – this due to the war in our country. I do not allow my children to play outside the house because I am afraid for their lives from the bombings and the air strikes.”** Speaking on early marriage as a mitigation and protective measure, another father noted: **“I could die at any moment because of the war or for any other reason, so it is better to protect my daughter.”**

One mother spoke of the protracted instability experienced by children noting that **“the bombing and the migration is one of the biggest problems and dangers that our children face – the sound of bullets and airplanes are the dangers; my daughter woke up in total fear from the sound of the aircrafts, she said, ‘Mother is there a safe place in Syria that we can go to?’”**

Experiences of conflict and insecurity, while evident across all communities, are distinct and disproportionate for certain groups and determined by status, gender, age, household make-up and other key factors. Females from both communities were twenty percent more likely to highlight conflict and security as a major concern for their community and associated driver of child marriage than their male counterparts.

One 13-year-old girl from the internally-displaced community noted: **“There is no security, and there are challenges related to women’s rights, and human rights. Living conditions are very hard here; there are no human rights. I hope that we will get the attention that other women around the world have.”**

Insecurity and crime featured more highly among internally displaced groups across both male and female respondents, highlighted by sixty-one percent of internally displaced boys and men compared with thirty-nine percent of their peers in the host community. Equally, twenty percent more internally displaced girls and women highlighted insecurity and crime compared to their counterparts from the host community, while widely referencing the lack of civil documentation as a multiplier of insecurity.

2. Honour and protection

The second largest driver identified was the protection of family honour, highlighted by close to fifty percent of respondents. This driver is intrinsically linked to worsening conditions and widespread insecurity.

All respondents, in varying degrees, highlighted the fear of sexual exploitation and abuse and kidnapping, particularly of young and adolescent girls, as a major challenge and a driver of child marriage. This is associated with the high rates of insecurity and increased perceived inability among parents and caregivers to “protect” daughters.



“For girls, [families] are afraid of sexual harassment and especially due to the lack of security. That is why some families limit the freedom of movement for their girls, because they are afraid for their safety; or for fear of kidnapping.”
Lana, a 15-year-old displaced Syrian girl

Boys of the same age group from the internally displaced community were five times more likely to reference sexual exploitation and abuse as an issue in their community compared to boys from the host community. This demonstrates a clear association between displacement and sexual exploitation and abuse, or at the very least a willingness to discuss the issue.

⁴ Respondents noted airstrikes, shelling and armed fighting as key activities associated with conflict-related violence.

“Protection” as a distinct driver of child marriage for girls

Displaced communities feel more vulnerable than host communities. Females interviewed from the host communities were fifteen percent less likely to identify protection as a driver for females compared to displaced female respondents. Fatherhood was identified by ten percent more male respondents from the host community compared with male respondents from the displaced community, who prioritised independence. Pressure from family also ranks thirteen percent higher for males from the host community than for displaced male respondents. Lastly, independence features once again as a leading driver for males as identified by both sexes, and markedly lower for females with just twenty percent of male and female respondents recognising this as a driver for females, representing the largest gap between genders.



I think that [early] marriages are taking place for the sake of protection, but this has a very negative impact ... it's an education that protects a girl. They are marrying their girls off to protect their honour, so people do not bad-mouth them.” 13-year-old displaced Syrian girl

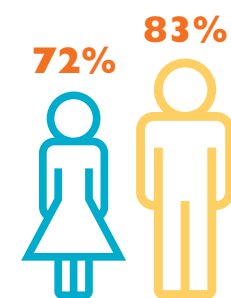
3. Poverty and living conditions

Participants of diverse age, gender and status repeatedly identified the correlation of poverty and living conditions with increased rates of child marriage. Parents confirmed that when faced with extreme poverty exacerbated by conflict, marriage was perceived to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their daughters, while also reducing the financial burden on the family – especially in large families.

POVERTY AS A MAJOR ISSUE IDENTIFIED FOR THE COMMUNITY



Internally Displaced



Host Community



My family is poor, I did not have any choice it was my brother's choice. The people who asked for my hand in marriage are relatives and I could not refuse so as not to annoy them. I married my cousin, and they were very persistent until I agreed. My father agreed with the groom and his family to marry me off. I knew nothing until the day of the wedding, not even the groom's name. I was not ready and no one explained to me anything about having a child. My cousins are the ones who planned this wedding. I dropped out of school when I got married. Poverty is the reason.”

Asma, a 17-year-old displaced Syrian girl

Poverty and displacement are challenging social norms. As one mother noted, **“Society is very accepting of early marriages, and the rate of these marriages has risen substantially after the war due to poverty and repetitive migration. I do not accept the idea of early marriages, but nowadays it has become a necessity because it reduces the number of family members.”**

More than fifty percent of respondents identified early marriage for adolescent girls as an important pathway for girls to escape poverty and provide financial relief for families, with one 15-year-old displaced female noting **“I am a burden to my family because of migration and harsh living conditions”**. As a World Vision Protection Officer highlighted, **“The reason why parents resort to child marriages is to get rid of the expenses, and in order to safeguard the girls (this is their opinion) and ensure protection for the girl and her family.”**

Lastly, protracted poverty resulted in reduction of marriage costs including the so-called bride price (*Mahr*), whereby a sum of money or assets is paid to the female’s family. While reduced *Mahr* not only highlights the deteriorating financial situation of many families, it is also a strong incentive for families wishing to marry off their sons.

The full impact of poverty and deprivation on households will be felt for decades stretching far beyond the end of the conflict. Within the last decade, increased rates of protracted poverty deepened existing gender inequalities and arguably resulted in new divisions and distinction across age and gender as a result of the erosion of pre-existing social norms and social fabric. As a result, the drivers of child marriage and individual agency and autonomy of females and males of different age and status were altered dramatically, arguably irreversibly.

4. Lack of education opportunities

“There are no schools and no education. The children are in the streets all the time, and the tents are not fit to live in.”
Samer, a teacher from a displaced community

Both host and displaced communities highlighted lack of access to education opportunities as a major challenge with more than seventy percent of respondents highlighting the issue. Again, adolescent girls are disproportionately affected with more than eighty percent of females identifying lack of education services as a major challenge. Respondents of differing age, gender and status identified the absence of quality and accessible education as a key driver for forced marriage and other major child protection risks, particularly for adolescent girls. Internally displaced respondents recorded a greater impact with respondents ten percent more likely to highlight education gaps than host community respondents. Importantly, child marriage is also identified as a driver of protracted or total absence from education services where available, once again disproportionately affecting adolescent girls.

While education was highly regarded by the Syrian community before conflict, schools are no longer a safe place and parents reported they no longer feel safe sending their children. In 2019, there were 157 attacks on Syrian schools. Of these, eighty-five percent were in Idlib and seventy-six percent of all attacks were by airstrike or shelling.^{xii} As a consequence, the humanitarian sector is struggling to meet educational needs of more than 600,000 Syrian children, placing them at significant risk of exploitation and abuse, child labour, further psychosocial distress, and child marriage as a negative “protective” coping mechanism.

5. Displacement

“We are afraid our children will be injured during the attacks. Every time there are air strikes we are forced to migrate, and the children are demoralised.”
Kamal, a displaced Syrian father

In northwest Syria, many families were forced to flee multiple times, eroding household income and assets, family ties and support networks, and resulting in the widespread adoption of negative coping strategies including borrowing and debt accumulation, child labour and child marriage. eighty percent of all respondents reported forced displacement or

“migration”⁵ as a significant factor contributing to increased rates of child marriage.

Displacement increases girls' vulnerability to child marriage due to the breakdown of social networks and the risks of sexual violence for girls. Communities and households residing in informal camp settlements, overcrowded rented apartments, unfinished and overcrowded buildings, cars or even in the open (as we are witnessing in Idlib in 2020) are extremely vulnerable to violence, exploitation and abuse. Adolescent girls are at increased risk in such conditions when protracted, and the perceived correlation between protection and child marriage can become entrenched and widespread⁶.

“Life in camps is dangerous for boys and girls. It is not safe, nor are there any of the basic necessities of life. There is no medical treatment and they are deprived of an education. It is not acceptable, but someone living with five children in one tent may marry his daughter off at a young age to try and give her a chance to live a better life. [Child marriage] has increased a lot recently.”
Mohammad, a father of five in a displaced community

6. The role of social media

Social media is recognised as an essential resource for refugee and displaced individuals and communities to access information and maintain connections with loved ones and family members, and to support social and cultural identities and belonging in times of crisis. Furthermore, social media is regarded as providing essential escapism and distraction for displaced communities, and as a key coping mechanism for people in situations of heightened stress.^{xiii} Despite this, research on the correlation with child protection and in particular child marriage is not in abundance. As noted previously, young and adolescent girls in situation of conflict and displacement can be seen by parents and caregivers as vulnerable in need of protection. Social media complicates this, with parents perceiving the

limited ability to monitor interactions with the opposite sex as a greater threat to family honour and reputation.

Respondents from both the host and displaced communities raised increased social media use by adolescents and a reduced capacity to monitor and limit interactions with the opposite sex as a concern for parents and caregivers, and to a lesser extent adolescents and youth themselves – in particular males. Respondents from the host community, however, were almost twice as likely to reference social media concerns as a contributing factor. This indicates a possible distinction in the prioritisation of concerns and challenges for displaced communities and arguably more limited access to social media. Forty-three percent of all male respondents highlighted social media concerns as a driver of child marriage among adolescent girls, compared to just twenty-four percent of female respondents. Sixty-five percent of male respondents from the host community above the age of 18 highlighted social media.

“Children have nothing better to do except stay on their mobile phones – from morning to night. I have no idea what they are watching. The youth are suffering from the lack of job opportunities, and the feeling of instability. The excessive use of social media by the youth has caused the spread of immorality among them.”
Issa, a father in host community

The notion that morality is under threat was a reoccurring theme, particularly among men who further highlighted increased interaction between adolescents of different genders within and across communities due to social media. This is largely perceived as a threat to family honour. This fear of uncontrolled, unsupervised interaction and child marriage as a solution and means of control was commonly referenced, with one local community teacher noting that *“phones and social media channels are major factors leading to child marriage. There is a big fear of illegitimate relationships.”* Some parents are seeking out ways to adjust, and oftentimes resorting to desperate coping strategies, forcing their daughters into early marriages to provide protection.

⁵ Please note numerous respondents refer to forced displacement as ‘migration’.

⁶ Focus group discussions undertaken in 2019 for the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) Monitoring Report highlighted overcrowding in tents as a driver of increased early/forced marriages to normalise the fact that boys and girls from different families and communities are living together.

Case study 2: Nadia's Story

Globally, the total number of girls married in childhood is estimated at 12 million per year.^{xiv} The realities for children beyond the statistics are both harrowing and horrifying. Nadia* got married at the age of 15. She tells us: **"I was forced to drop out of my studies and agree to the first young man proposing to me on the pretext that he was a relative and appropriate for me, in addition to my family consisting of girls only, so they wanted us to get married quickly."**

From the outset Nadia struggled and her situation got worse by the day.

After Nadia and her husband's family were displaced to Idlib's countryside, a new wave of problems began. Her husband left the home and didn't return for months, leaving Nadia, who was now pregnant, alone with her

controlling mother-in-law. Nadia wasn't able to speak to her husband while he was away, and he didn't return until their daughter was two months old.

"I gave birth on my own; my husband did not come to stand with me... I was alone, broken and suffering on my own," Nadia recalled.

The marriage ended in divorce when Nadia was 19 years old. She and her daughter were expelled to her family home.

Nadia wishes she could have refused to marry and finish her studies, but is now determined to create a brighter future and go back to school. She is supported by a Mother's Club at a centre run by World Vision's partner in northwest Syria.

*Name has been changed to protect identity.



The consequences of early and forced marriage

The conflict in Syria has not only forced many children into early marriage, it has also denied children their rights and increased the risks to their physical, emotional and mental health.

Adolescent female and male respondents, even as young as 12, were keenly aware of the negative consequences of early marriages for girls and boys. Women and girls were on average thirty percent more likely to highlight protection risks within the household, including domestic violence that also extends to conflict with in-laws. Almost everyone

cited loss of educational opportunities as a key consequence.

Below the top five identified consequences of child marriage for adolescent girls, as reported by both children and community members, are outlined and discussed in further detail.

CONSEQUENCES FOR GIRLS WHO MARRY BEFORE AGE 18 REPORTED BY ALL RESPONDENTS

Consequences for girls as identified by females



70%
Domestic
violence



69%
Loss of educational
opportunities



67%
Conflict
with in-laws



64%
Lack of basic
reproductive and
sexual knowledge



58%
Conflict with
their husband

Consequences for girls as identified by males



56%
Loss of educational
opportunities



46%
Loss of work
opportunities



37%
Conflict
with in-laws



34%
Health issues related
to pregnancy and
childbirth



33%
Domestic
violence

Domestic violence and grave risk of physical and psychological abuse

Domestic violence was the leading consequence of child marriage identified by all girls and women. Boys and men were less than half as likely to identify this, demonstrating an important gender gap in the understanding of challenges faced by adolescent girls. When further disaggregated by age, adolescent girls were twenty percent more likely to identify domestic violence as a consequence, which may demonstrate either an increased knowledge or fear among younger generations owing to conditions exacerbated by the conflict, or perhaps an unwillingness of some girls to disclose domestic violence as an issue.

Dana, a 22-year-old woman married before age 18 during the now 10-year conflict, recounted her harrowing and ongoing experience: “My parents made me marry a 41-year-old man who is married to three wives. I was 17 then. He promised me that he would help me raise my child. But from day one he said he doesn’t want this child with us, and he was violent. I was afraid, no terrified, and I went back to my parents’ home, and told them I want a divorce, but my father beat me up and said I need to go back to my husband’s house, and that divorce is forbidden. I am afraid my father will force me to go back to my husband’s house. I cannot live with him and his wives; they are always trying to hurt me.”

Sixty-seven percent of all female respondents noted **conflict with in-laws** as a leading consequence for females who marry before the age of 18. While male respondents overall were thirty percent less likely to highlight this, internally displaced male respondents were almost twice as likely to identify the issue compared with male respondents from the host community. This suggests greater tension among the displaced community as a result of protracted forced displacement, family separation or breakdown, and increased stress and tensions due to poverty and limited access to basic services.



“My parents married me off when I was 13 to a man who they said was 25 (he is good and his situation is good). After the marriage he started taking strange things which I later realised was hashish – a drug. After having many problems, I went back to my parents’ home, but they insisted that I go back to him. But he left me at his parents’ house, and he went to Ifreen. His family treated me badly until I was able to go to my parents’ house. Then my husband died. I was only 14 and with a baby.”

Amira, a Syrian girl living in host community

A number of men and adolescent boys interviewed blamed girls for conflict with the in-laws, citing that it is a girl’s responsibility to know how to adapt and treat her in-laws. **The stigma of divorce and the perception of shame** it will bring to girls and the family is a key reason why many are forced to stay in an abusive relationship. Many adolescent girls cited that they not only faced violence from her husbands and their in-laws, but, when forced to flee back to their parents’ house, they find no safe haven. This is due to the belief that divorced girls bring shame to their families.

Psychological development can be significantly stunted, resulting in limited or totally absent self-protective and wellbeing capacities already eroded by a decade of conflict.^{xv} Adolescents experience heightened physiological response to stress compared to children and adults, culminating in psychiatric problems throughout development and into adulthood.^{xvi} The realities for many adolescents forced to marry are both harrowing and distressing. In a 2017 Global Citizens Report, it was reported that 25 girls took their own life in rural Idlib as a result of both marrying early and family pressure to do so.^{xvii} **Data on violence and suicide**

associated with child marriage is limited and difficult to ascertain in levels that could be considered representative. Individuals and families are often unlikely to report incidents, particularly in situations of suicide.

“If the girl is put under pressure to get married, she could think of running away or committing suicide. She could seek the help of someone regarding this problem, but if she does get married she will be subjected to many problems like beatings, divorce, running away or committing suicide.”
12-year-old Salma

Education interrupted

“I think that [early] marriages are taking place for the sake of protection, but this has a very negative impact ... it’s an education that protects a girl.”
Amal, a 14-year-old displaced Syrian girl

The relationship between child marriage and girls’ education is two-way. Girls who are out of school may be more likely to marry, and returning to school can be difficult for married girls due to practical and legal obstacles^{xviii}. These include taking care of their husbands and homes, distance to school, childbearing and financial costs. This not only exacerbates gender inequalities and restricts girls’ ability to generate income and have financial autonomy, but also limits their ability to have friends after marriage, thereby increasing social isolation.

Limited or total absence from education and increased confinement as a result of conflict and displacement has significant immediate and long-term effects on girls. Consequences include psychosocial and mental health difficulties and conditions; limited or absent self-protection

capacities; limited knowledge of rights and entitlements; exploitation and abuse; and gender-based violence, which includes child marriage. Additionally, increased confinement can reinforce the perception that girls will become a financial burden, with girls believing marriage before the age of 18 will afford them greater autonomy, independence, and pathways out of poverty and their current realities^{xix}

“[Lack of education leads to] a decline in the child cognitive level and maturity. She will not be able to help her children in their schooling. This leads to widespread ignorance and illiteracy, and the inability of mothers to follow up their children’s education in the future.”
Maha, a Syrian teacher

Seventy percent of all girls and women interviewed cited the lack of educational opportunities as a key consequence. All boys and men respondents identified it as the leading negative outcome, increasing in frequency of reporting for respondents below 18 years of age. Women who married before 18 spoke about their lack of agency and decision-making power following marriage: “I dropped out after grade six, and I suffered a lot because I did not continue my education. They used to tell us that this is enough, and that a girl only needs to learn how to read and write. This affected me a lot; I regret not finishing my education.” — Zaina, a young Syrian mother

Deadly risk of early pregnancy and pregnancy complications

“During my first pregnancy I thought I was going to die. I was in labour for two days, then the baby died. I suffered a lot during my first pregnancy, because my body was still not well developed.”
Ruba, a 15-year-old child bride

Child marriage has devastating consequences for girls' health, resulting in sexual activity at a young age while their bodies are still developing and when they may have limited understanding of reproduction. Child marriage is associated with many harmful consequences, including those associated with early pregnancy. Early pregnancy can result in birth complications and sometimes death of the baby or mother, as noted by fifty percent of girls and women and thirty-four percent of boys and men. This figure rises significantly to seventy-four percent adolescent girls, representing a serious concern for this group.

This is further compounded with the lack of reproductive health knowledge as reported by sixty-four percent of girls and women. This is largely linked to limited or lack of access to education and health services. Displaced respondents were almost twenty percent more likely to highlight the lack of knowledge as a major consequence.



Moreover, challenges in accessing health facilities and services, due to a combination of transport issues and concerns over safety in a conflict area, including attack, must be highlighted by the international community.

Health centre data and testimonies from healthcare workers operating in World Vision-supported hospitals in northwest Syria present a concerning reality for adolescent girls. One health facility midwife highlighted the significant number of adolescent girls attending: **“A very big percentage are under 18. I think about sixty percent. Early marriages put the life of a girl at risk – miscarriages, and haemorrhaging during childbirth. Their lack of knowledge about contraceptive and family planning, and spacing between one child and the other not only puts her health at risk, but also the health of the child.”**

Speaking further on the complications of pregnancy among adolescent girls, one gynaecologist noted the pressures faced by young girls in addition to the physical and psychological risks: **“[Risks include] critical conditions during childbirth because the girls are so young, and the inability of their bodies to bear the hardships of pregnancy and delivery, like haemorrhaging. We also see many cases of frequent miscarriages which has a physical and mental impact on the girls. The younger the girls are, the more vulnerable they are to these risks, and the more difficult it is for them to get pregnant – with the in-laws nagging and wanting her to get pregnant, causing the girls to take all sorts of medication.”**

As COVID-19 pandemic reaches Syria, with large numbers of forcibly displaced and vulnerable populations, where health and protection services are weak or completely unavailable, the effects are likely to be catastrophic. Whatever health systems exist, will be overwhelmed by the epidemic response. Girls will have even less support than previously to address pregnancy and birth complications, let alone be able to access the few existing routine but critical primary and tertiary health care services.

Reinvent the future with Syria's children

The crisis in Syria can only be described as a child protection crisis. Child marriage is not and should not be considered an inevitability in conflict situations. Rather, it is an extreme response driven for many by desperation and vulnerability, and the collective failure to prioritise and strengthen child protection systems by both national and international actors. A rapid and systematic shift is required to prevent not only a lost generation of children but a fundamental breakdown of entire communities. Children are Syria's greatest hope for recovery and resilience, but they are being crushed by the consequences of conflict and the disproportionate burden and vulnerability placed upon them.

To date, child marriage in conflict settings has not been fully understood. Yet the need to bring different sectors together to develop interventions addressing the drivers and effects of child marriage is increasingly being recognised.

Holistic and cross-sectorial interventions are required to combat increased rates of child marriage and to prevent it becoming a deep-rooted, longer-term normative practice threatening further generations of children.

Child marriage rates were at thirteen percent prior to the conflict; global initiatives to end child marriage must give equal attention to humanitarian contexts to ensure child marriage continues to decrease, rather than increase. Households and communities must be supported with essential life-supporting and life-sustaining assistance, including social protection, income and food security, and access to basic services including health, education, and protection and child protection services. This must be available before reaching a point of desperation where irreversible coping strategies appear as the only option for the child and household.



How World Vision is Responding in Syria

World Vision and its implementing partners have assisted 2,414,230 people between October 2018 and April 2020, including 1,374,309 children, using a holistic approach through various programmes. World Vision provides water and sanitation by supporting water stations, and delivers emergency assistance, including kitchen kits, hygiene kits, winter assistance and multi-purpose cash grants through its Rapid Response Mechanism. The global aid agency also aims to improve health outcomes for the Syrian population, particularly women and children by providing them with protection from preventable diseases and increasing access to essential health services, including mobile health services. Humanitarian protection, tackling Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and improving Child Protection (CP) are at the centre of World Vision's response in Syria, not only as stand-alone sector but also through integrating and mainstreaming in other sectors. Additionally, the organisation aims at reducing barriers to education and facilitating continuity of learning for Syrian children.

In response to child marriage and the number of other child protection threats faced by girls and boys in Northwest Syria, World Vision is providing a number of essential services for children including health centre services, child friendly spaces, women and girl's safe spaces, mental health and psycho-social support, case management, GBV prevention and response services, and awareness raising sessions with children on child protection and gender-based violence. Adults, including parents and caregivers are also provided with psycho-social support services and parenting skills support.

To mitigate the immediate and longer-term impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on households and children, World Vision has adapted its work with a number of essential services and supports now temporarily provided remotely where possible, to ensure the safety of children and communities, including remote case management, mental health and psycho-social support, GBV prevention and response, parenting support, and remote learning resources and materials among other key interventions.



Recommendations

The consequences of child marriage can be extreme, numerous and far-reaching beyond the individual and the current generation. They include gender-based physical and sexual violence, serious health consequences, domestic and intimate partner violence, exploitation, mental and psychosocial challenges, poverty, homelessness, and marginalisation.

Based on its programming experience inside Syria and the findings of this report World Vision recommends the following.

Donor governments should:

- Urgently scale-up sustainable and adequate funding to address child protection concerns for children in northwest Syria by fully funding the United Nations Syria Arab Republic Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), and in particular expand budgets and investments aimed at ending forced child marriage and other forms of violence against children, especially women and girls;
- Protect ongoing humanitarian assistance for the most vulnerable in the face of COVID-19, ensuring that committed humanitarian funding is not diverted, but increased to address the added risk posed by COVID-19 inside Syria;
- Increase funding for stretched and under-capacitated health facilities, including referrals and information services for adolescent girls and essential pre and postnatal services; and
- Ensure mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for children within education, child protection and health is integrated across the across the Syria Arab Republic Humanitarian Response Plan.

All humanitarian actors should:

Invest in a long-term and sustained multisectoral approach to build strong and resilient child protection, health and education systems

- Provide economic support and incentives to at-risk adolescents and their families and invest in gender-sensitive social protection programming to reduce household vulnerability and insecurity.
- Invest in remote online child protection services and social media platforms to promote systematic awareness raising on the dangers and drivers of child marriage and relevant services available.
- Prioritise support to survivors of child marriage, such as access to age-appropriate education, case management, MHPSS, economic services and reproductive health services.
- Promote cross-sectoral collaboration on child marriage prevention and response through engagement with other sectors to expand and scale up interventions.
- Include and strengthen mental health and psychosocial support services as part of healthcare service provision and all existing referral pathways, with a focus on at-risk groups including adolescent females.
- Urgently scale up COVID-19 prevention and response measures for children and their families to strengthen health systems, maintain essential health service delivery, equip frontline health workers, engage and communicate effectively with communities including children, and provide critical child protection interventions and mental health and psychosocial support.

Invest in and scale up education and empowerment interventions

- Ensure provision of quality, safe and inclusive education in emergency programmes to reduce risk of dropout and child marriage.
- Develop programmes focused on alternative and vocational education with a focus on adolescent girls and boys at risk of child marriage or who previously married before 18.
- Engage and consult systematically with adolescent girls and boys to ensure their voices are heard on risks they face and their recommendations through accountability for affected populations mechanisms.
-

Invest in and scale up community sensitisation and awareness raising

- Invest in long-term community-level campaigns to change social norms and behaviour and ensure programmes address the underlying drivers and norms of inequality and build resilience through a gender transformative agenda.
- Partner and collaborate with religious and community leaders authorising child marriages, in order to raise awareness and prevent this practice from occurring.

Parties to the conflict must:

Abide by the international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles.

- Ensure the protection of health facilities and ensure unhindered humanitarian access to communities affected by conflict, displacement and poverty.
- Cease attacks on schools and the use of schools for military purposes.
- Ensure and maximise humanitarian access including creation of exceptions for humanitarian workers' movements and find alternatives to humanitarian programme suspensions where COVID-19 prevention policies are required.
- Urgently scale up efforts to negotiate an end to the decade-long conflict through diplomatic process.
- Respect the UN Secretary-General's appeal for a global ceasefire to ensure the prioritisation of actions to curb the COVID-19 pandemic and allow uninhibited access to children in need of care. Diplomatic efforts by the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy should be scaled to advance country-specific confidence building measures.

Dina, a 15-year-old Syrian girl:

“I take this opportunity to address the whole world. Stop the war!”

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World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. Inspired by our Christian values, we are dedicated to working with the world's most vulnerable people. We serve all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity or gender.

We believe a world without violence against children is possible, and World Vision's global campaign It takes a world to end violence against children is igniting movements of people committed to making this happen. No one person, group or organisation can solve this problem alone, it will take the world to end violence against children.