



GIRLS NOT BRIDES

The Global Partnership
to End Child Marriage

Child marriage and humanitarian situations

I'm coming to you today from GNB, a global civil society partnership to end child marriage, which brings together over 700 organisations working in 90 countries.

You may be wondering why I'm here to talk about child marriage in a conference about humanitarian aid. With these remarks, I want to focus on 3 things:

- Why it does make sense to talk about CM in humanitarian contexts
 - The impact of CM – why it is 'essential' that we tackle it from 'the start of any intervention'
 - What we can do about it
- 1 in 4 girls worldwide is married as a child – that's 15 million girls every year. Child marriage is a truly global problem – it cuts across countries, religions, and cultures. While it is most prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, you may be surprised to hear that some of the countries with the highest numbers of child brides include Brazil, Mexico, Indonesia and Thailand.
 - Child marriage happens to girls because they are girls – because girls are valued less than boys, by families and societies.
 - It is a practice driven by multiple, complex factors including poverty, lack of alternatives, tradition and insecurity
 - There is mounting evidence to suggest that girls in humanitarian crisis situations are particularly vulnerable to child marriage. In fact, 7 out of the 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage are also considered fragile states.
 - These crises can be triggered by floods, earthquakes, wars or famines or wars.
 - We've seen a number of examples of this very recently, including:
 - **Syria** – before the war, the rate of child marriage there was around 13%, by 2014 with the conflict still raging that rate had gone up to 30% in refugee camps, and probably even higher today
 - **Nepal** – after the devastating 2015 earthquakes
 - **Bangladesh** – where in the wake of natural disasters families struggling to re-build their lives and livelihoods are turning to child marriage as a way to provide for their daughters.

So, what is it about humanitarian contexts that leads to a rise in CM?

- CM is seen as a way of **protecting** girls. Many parents believe that marriage is the only way they can protect their daughters from physical harm, sexual harassment, rape, and unwanted pregnancies. It can be seen as a way to protect a girl's honour and that of her family. *Girls Not Brides* members work with many girls who are in this situation.

- It can be seen as a way of **providing for girls** or **reducing the economic burden on families** when money is very limited
- For other girls, their parents see marrying them off as either a way of providing for them or because they need to reduce the economic burden on the whole family by having one less mouth to feed.
 - Child and forced marriage is sometimes used as a **weapon of war**
- During crisis situations girls (and women) are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and sexual exploitation.
- In various conflict situations, including Sierra Leone and Iraq warring groups have abducted girls and women as ‘spoils of war’ to be raped, sold, offered, and forced into marriage. In Nigeria, for example, Boko Haram have forced many of the girls they kidnapped to become child brides.
- Forced prostitution, sometimes under the disguise of “marriage”, is also been used to weakening families and communities.

What is the impact of child marriage?

- Child marriage is devastating for girls.
- Child brides face a wide range of social and health consequences including:
 - **Higher rates of maternal mortality and complications during pregnancy and childbirth** – these complications are the 2nd highest cause of death among adolescent girls aged 15-19

Child brides are often ignorant about sex and their own bodies, they don’t know the ‘mechanics’ of sex or how pregnancy occurs and how to prevent it.

There is an intergenerational impact as well – the children of child brides are less likely to reach their first birthday than those who were born to older mothers.

- They also experience **higher rates of physical and sexual violence** – parents think they are protecting their daughters but the reality is they are often, inadvertently, putting them in the path of violence from perpetrated by husbands and in-laws.

This violence can have grave health and psychological implications for girls.

- Child brides also have **poor educational and economic opportunities**
- As well as **limited freedom and social interaction with their peers and others**
- All of these consequences are exacerbated further in humanitarian situations
 - For example, according to UNESCO, girls in conflict affected countries are almost 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys.

Young women living in conflict settings are nearly 90% more likely to be out of secondary school than their counterparts living in non-conflict affected countries.

- Health services including maternal and sexual and reproductive health services are often disrupted or severely reduced; placing girls at risk.

Maternal mortality is 60% higher in conflict and post-conflict countries

When fleeing conflict child brides sometimes have to give birth 'on the run' without any health or medical personnel to help. Similarly, in refugee camps there is often very limited access to information and services.

So what are the solutions?

- Child marriage is a cross-cutting issue. No one sector alone can solve it. To address it **requires coordinated action across all sectors and actors** involved in a humanitarian response.
- As a global partnership made up of over 700 members across 90 countries, *Girls Not Brides* has many members in countries which are or have experienced a humanitarian crisis. Countries like Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Lebanon and Bangladesh.
- Over the past 18 months we have sought our members' insights into what they are doing to address the issue and what more needs to be done.
- There are many things can be done to help girls avoid marriage in humanitarian situations.
- In crisis situations, child marriage needs to be addressed from **the earliest stage**

There are four overarching strategies needed to end child marriage: empowering girls; working with families and communities; providing services; and ensuring a supportive legal and policy framework.

Some specific examples include:

Working with girls themselves

- **This is vital.** Girls (and women) themselves best understand their own needs so they should be at the centre of decision-making
- **Base strategies on the risks they identify and their needs**
- Depending on the context, work with local community groups – can provide invaluable knowledge of how the local communities work
- **Provide safe spaces in camps** for married and at risk girls where they can meet and interact with their peers and form social networks
- **Ensure good lighting and security** in places such water points, in and around toilets etc. make toilets sex-specific

- **Prioritise the re-establishment of education** after a crisis – these should be safe, accessible and provide quality education

Set up non-formal education spaces where girls can learn life, literacy, finance and other skills to boost their economic empowerment

- **provide access to psycho-social care and comprehensive health information and services** including sexual and reproductive health

Working with families

- **ensure that families' basic needs are met** and that they have the resources to care for their daughters without turning to child marriage as a coping strategy
- **increase efforts to keep families together where possible** in order to avoid the breakdown of social networks, especially among displaced populations
- **run awareness about** child marriage with community members in refugee and other settings to address social and cultural norms which influence discussion of child marriage

Working with service/aid providers

- **Raise awareness of child marriage among humanitarian actors and host government where refugee camps have been established**
- **Recruit female humanitarian staff on the ground and train all staff** – including camp managers - to be able to address issues faced by adolescent girls.

What else is needed?

More investment to fund targeted programmes which can then be evaluate to increase learning about what works to address child marriage in crisis contexts.

And

More investment in research to understand:

- How different types of crises affect child marriage rates
- How programmes which tackle child marriage in non-crisis settings can be adapted for crisis settings, and
- How child marriage can be integrated into humanitarian response efforts from as early as possible.

So, the 3 key things I would like to leave you with are:

- Child marriage is increasing in humanitarian crises and can no longer be ignored. When we asked our members what key messages I should highlight here today, one of them told us: “Governments and humanitarians should pay as much attention to child marriage in refugees/internally displaced population camps, as they do to nutrition...”
- the reasons why girls are being married in that context are: parents see it as a way to protect and provide for girls, and child and forced marriage is sometimes used as a weapon of war

- Tackling CM in humanitarian settings requires a co-ordinated approach involving multiple sectors - health, education, child protection etc – so that girls' needs are identified and met **and no girl is left behind.**

Thank you.