

Circumscribed Lives: Separated, Divorced, and Widowed Female Youth in South Sudan and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Overview

Globally, one in five girls marry under the age of 18.² However, rates of early marriage are believed to *increase* during conflict and humanitarian crises.³ Early marriage may have devastating consequences for the child bride, including higher rates of child and maternal mortality, poor physical and mental health outcomes, loss of access to education, and increased exposure to violence and poverty.⁴ While the problem is clear, the solution is less so. One barrier is the lack of empirical knowledge on early marriage in conflict settings. Research conducted to date is very limited; what does exist arises mostly from development settings, is anecdotal, or is based on one-time assessments.⁵ Moreover, girls who are already married, married as children and then divorced or were widowed, or are living with disabilities are rarely included in studies on early marriage. To address some of these gaps, Save the Children Denmark and the Feinstein International Center (FIC) of the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University created the Leave No One Behind (LNOB) research project in 2019 to study female youth and early marriage in displacement and conflict settings.

The LNOB project is currently conducting research in South Sudan and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

(KRI). South Sudan has experienced multiple decades of conflict, ongoing political insecurity, extreme environmental events, and regular economic crises, which has left more than two-thirds of the population in need of humanitarian assistance.⁶ Approximately 2.3 million South Sudanese have become refugees in neighboring countries. An estimated 2 million more South Sudanese are internally displaced persons (IDPs), with humanitarian conditions reportedly worsening as of early 2022.⁷ As of 2020, South Sudan's rate of child marriage was higher than the Sub-Saharan Africa average, with 52% of girls estimated to be married before the age of 18.⁸

The KRI has hosted Syrian refugees since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, with approximately 253,000 Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in the territory by early 2022.⁹ The KRI also hosts about 600,000 IDPs, predominantly those from the Yazidi minority group, seeking refuge from internal conflicts, including the 2014 ISIS occupation of Sinjar and Mosul and subsequent military interventions.¹⁰ Many of IDPs these populations live in substandard housing, are unable to access social safety nets, and have little opportunity to achieve durable solutions.¹¹ Rates of early marriage are lower within the KRI than in South Sudan, but these averages mask differences

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² UNICEF, "Child Marriage," October 2021, <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>.

³ UNICEF, "A Study on Early Marriage in Jordan 2014" (UNICEF Jordan Country Office, 2014); Jennifer Schlecht, Elizabeth Rowley, and Juliet Babirye, "Early Relationships and Marriage in Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings: Vulnerability of Youth in Uganda," *Reproductive Health Matters* 21, no. 41 (2013): 234–42; UNICEF, "Falling through the Cracks; The Children of Yemen," 2016; Girls Not Brides, "Child Marriage in Humanitarian Contexts," Thematic Brief, August 2020.

⁴ UNFPA and UNICEF, "Addressing Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings," February 2021; E El Arab and M. Sagbakken, "Child Marriage of Female Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: A Literature Review," *Global Health Action* 12 (2019): 1–12; Yvette Efevbera et al., "Girl Child Marriage, Socioeconomic Status, and Undernutrition: Evidence from 35 Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa," *BMC Medicine* 17, no. 55 (2019); Save the Children, "Too Young to Wed: The Growing Problem of Child Marriage among Syrian Girls in Jordan," 2014; World Bank Group, "Voice and Agency: Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity," 2014.

⁵ Dyan Mazurana and Anastasia Marshak, "Addressing Data Gaps on Child, Early and Forced Marriage in Humanitarian Settings" (Save the Children and Tufts University, December 2019).

⁶ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "South Sudan: Humanitarian Snapshot," February 2022, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/south_sudan_humanitarian_snapshot_february_0.pdf.

⁷ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

⁸ UNICEF, "Some Things Are Not Fit for Children-- Marriage Is One of Them," Press Release, October 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/southsudan/press-releases/some-things-are-not-fit-for-children>.

⁹ UNHCR, "UNHCR Syria and Iraq Situations: 2022 Response Overview," 2022, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/1799>.

¹⁰ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OHCA), "Iraq: Humanitarian Dashboard for KRI (January to December 2019)," 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/iraq_humanitarian_dashboard_2019_summary_for_kri.pdf.

¹¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OHCA).

in early marriage rates among refugees, hosts, and IDPs. In a representative study conducted by the Women's Refugee Commission, IDPs showed the highest rate of early marriage among the three groups, with 13% of those currently aged 20–24 having married as minors.¹² This study also showed a potential increase in the rates of early marriage for refugees after displacement.¹³

The Project This briefing paper is one in a series of outputs arising from the LNOB research.¹⁴ LNOB relies on longitudinal, participatory research methodologies to understand the wide range of experiences, difficulties, opportunities, and constraints faced by female youth who have been displaced by or have experienced conflict. While the project's focus is holistic and multisectoral, particular attention is paid to the practice and experience of early marriage. The project examines multiple displaced and conflict-affected populations. These include internally displaced South Sudanese living in formal and informal camps, and Syrian refugees and displaced Yazidi and Arab Iraqis located in camp and non-camp settings in the KRI. Four local researchers from affected communities (two from each case country) were central to the design of the study, participant interviews, and analysis of data.

LNOB's main source of data comes from a cohort of female youth, predominantly between

the ages of 14 and 23,¹⁵ who were regularly interviewed in 2020 and 2021 using surveys, semi-structured interviews, and participatory methods that include drawings and photographs. Members of the cohort are unmarried, married as minors, divorced, or widowed. The cohort also includes female youth who became pregnant under the age 18, and female youth living with physical, emotional, or intellectual disabilities, regardless of marital status. Family members of participants were interviewed when possible. LNOB also interviewed key informants, which included representatives from government entities, the United Nations, international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), camp managers, teachers, health workers, and community and religious leaders. At the time of this brief (April 2022), 600 interviews have been conducted. One hundred and thirty-nine female youth have been interviewed as part of the cohort. Each participant was interviewed an average of four times (range: 1–13 interviews). In addition, 87 key informants were interviewed, as well as 17 family members of female youth. LNOB is currently seeking funding to continue following the cohort into the future and to expand the number of country cases, methodologies, and sample size.

¹² K Hunnerson et al., "Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in the Arab States Region: Study Results from Djibouti, Egypt, Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Yemen" (Women's Refugee Commission, 2020). For this same age group the rates of early marriage were 3.4% for Syrian refugees and 4% for the host community. However, for girls aged 10–19 at the time of the study, 1 in 8 IDPs were married and 1 in 10 host and refugee communities were married.

¹³ Hunnerson et al.

¹⁴ See additional briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>

¹⁵ The sample also includes a subset of participants over the age of 23 because they represented an interesting set of characteristics such as: widows with teenage daughters who married as children; unmarried women above the "typical marriage age."

Introduction

This briefing paper provides an overview of the main challenges faced by female youth who have been displaced by conflict and are either separated or divorced from their husbands, or are widowed. Most of these participants with these marital statuses in the study were married under the age of 18. We have chosen to concentrate on these special categories of research participants for several reasons. First, most studies on early marriage do not consider these specific groups. Second, through our own research process, we noticed that the situation of separated, divorced, or widowed female youth is qualitatively different from that of the unmarried or married participants in our cohort. These respondents possess a unique set of vulnerabilities vis a vis their children, natal families, in-laws, and the communities in which they live. They also described facing a variety of complex challenges that cut across sectors—from livelihoods, to protection, to education, to mental health and social connection.

Sample characteristics: This briefing paper discusses the experiences of 24 divorced and separated female youth (9 in the KRI and 15 in South Sudan), and 17 widowed female youth (9 in the KRI and 8 in South Sudan), ranging in age from 16 to 41. The research team conducted multiple interviews with these respondents, ranging from 2 to 12 per individual female. The analysis also incorporates information from interviews with select family members of these cohort members as well as the perspectives of key informants regarding the experience of divorce and widowhood in displacement. Within this sub-sample of separated, divorced, and widowed female youth, none were living with disabilities.

Across the sample in the KRI and South Sudan, the average age of marriage was 15.6 years for female youth who later separated or divorced. The average age of marriage for currently married and widowed female youth was slightly older, age 16, but this difference is not statistically significant.¹⁶ The

research team analyzed the degree to which female youth who married underage participated in the decision to marry. By analyzing the narratives of their marital circumstances, the team coded each marriage along a 5-point scale-- from complete agency or participation to complete force.¹⁷ When comparing the degree of participation in the decision to marry between those who separated or divorced and the rest of the sample (which includes married and widowed youth), differences in the degree of participation to marry were statistically significant, but in the KRI only.¹⁸ In other words, in the KRI, separated and divorced female youth entered their marriage with a higher degree of force or with less choice than those who remain married or are widows.

This study does not make a hard distinction between female youth who are permanently separated and those that are legally divorced. In the KRI, all of the permanently separated women in the sample were legally divorced. In South Sudan, some participants were separated permanently, others were separated temporarily, and a sub-sample were formally divorced. While many of the themes between the two countries are similar, we have chosen to keep the analysis separate because we felt that the narratives were qualitatively distinct and deserved their own dedicated spaces for elaboration and discussion.

¹⁶ In the KRI, the average age of marriage for those who are separated or divorced was 15.4. For the rest of the sample (who are still married or widowed), it was 16.7. In South Sudan, the average age of marriage for those who are separated or divorced is 15.7 years, and for the rest of the sample (who are still married or widowed), it was 15.28 years.

¹⁷ For an in-depth analysis of participation in the decision to marry, see the related briefing paper on our project webpage: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

¹⁸ P value = 0.04.

Separation and divorce in South Sudan and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Separation and divorce in South Sudan

- » ***In order to divorce in South Sudan, the wife's family is obliged to repay bridewealth, regardless of the reason for the end of the marriage. Divorce is negotiated directly between the wife's father (or uncles) and the husband and his family.***
- » ***The two main causes of separation and divorce across the sample were the non-payment of bridewealth and severe domestic violence.***

Key informants described that divorce occurs most commonly in South Sudan for two main reasons, both of which were corroborated by the actual experiences of study participants. The first is when a husband is unable to provide the full bridewealth as agreed upon with the bride's father (or male relatives) as part of the marriage process. Under such circumstances, the bride's family may pursue a divorce. The second predominant reason for divorce relates to a husband neglecting or abusing his wife or children. Examples include a husband being unable to provide for his family's basic needs, abusing drugs or alcohol, and/or behaving violently towards his wife and children. Key informants explained that divorces arising from physical abuse and neglect only occur in the most severe cases, because, in order for a divorce to occur, the wife's family must repay the full bridewealth to the husband and his family. As such, regardless of the reason for the breakdown of the marriage, the bride's family and their financial standing will determine whether or not a divorce can be pursued. Additional reasons cited for divorce, although not reflected in the direct experiences of research participants, include a wife's inability to conceive or adulterous behavior on her part. At times the line between being married and not married was

fluid in the South Sudan case, and several study participants had irregular or unclear marital statuses, mostly arising as a result of conflict and displacement. Each of these circumstances will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

The non-payment of bridewealth as a driver of divorce

Across the cohort in South Sudan, the most common reason for separation and divorce was the husband's inability to pay the full bridewealth agreed upon at the time of the negotiation of the union. In this case, the bride or her family (most often the father) pursued a divorce. The non-payment of bridewealth occurred in marriages that had transpired between agemates, were based on romantic love, and did not involve arrangement or force. A subset of these marriages had followed an unintended pregnancy. Marriages in which the full bridewealth went unpaid tended to transpire without the full blessing of the bride's parents, often because the husband was not seen as sufficiently wealthy.

At age 15, one participant described that her father had betrothed her to a man she didn't want to marry. She ran away with her boyfriend, and her father acquiesced to her marrying her boyfriend. He reluctantly agreed to accept bridewealth from the boyfriend and accept the marriage. However, the new husband was unable to pay the full amount, and, within a month, the participant's father forced a divorce. She quickly learned that her father had promised her hand to another man and had already received bridewealth—both without her consent. She described that the intended husband was “a friend of my father who is my father's age. I would be his third wife.”¹⁹ At the time of interview, she was in hiding to avoid this marriage.

Other participants described that their divorces arose after fathers had harassed and pressured

¹⁹ Interview with participant # SSB_CO_1_F_DIV_16, Bentiu, South Sudan.

their husbands to “a breaking point.” One 22-year-old described the relationship between her father and husband in the years following her marriage at age 15: “The talks [over bridewealth payment] became worse until my husband got tired and divorced me...I felt bad, because my father was only concerned about the number of cows and nothing else.”²⁰ A similar situation unfolded when a 15-year-old ran away to marry her boyfriend. She described that as her family became more demanding of bridewealth payments, her husband became increasingly abusive. She said, “He started biting and hitting me and told me that if my family wants to divorce me, they can do so after he has removed all my teeth and eyes so that no other men will marry me.”²¹

The woman is generally not active in the divorce process when bridewealth is not fully paid. However, there was a notable exception in which a participant found her husband’s non-payment disrespectful to herself and her family. She had become pregnant at the age of 17 out of wedlock. Her boyfriend proposed, paying partial bridewealth and promising to pay the rest “soon.” When he didn’t follow through, the participant decided on her own to leave the marriage and return to her natal home. She described, “I feel bad because my husband’s family refused to pay my proper bridewealth like all other women in our community. People will look down upon me and my family and say that I did not get married with enough cows...A girl feels good if her family is proud of her through marriage...and I was not happy with my husband and his family not paying my full bridewealth.”²²

Domestic abuse as a factor in divorce

In South Sudan, several separated and divorced participants described that domestic abuse was the cause of their breakups. For the sub-sample of youth who divorced explicitly for this reason, such marriages had begun with a range of participation in the decision-making process. Some had married for love, others after an unintended pregnancy, and others through force—either by family members’

coercion or through abduction and rape. The occurrence of domestic abuse cannot be predicted based solely on the circumstances of the marriage. The range of experiences are discussed below.

One participant who had been forcibly married at the age of 13 described the circumstances of her marriage and eventual divorce: “I would refuse to sleep with him, and he would beat me. I kept going running back home, but my brother would return me...sometimes I would sleep under the bed to hide from him. I became so ill, and my body was full of wounds because of his beating. When I was hospitalized my mother came and took me home, saying she would rather pay back the bridewealth the man paid than see me dead. So she did [paid back the bridewealth], and I never went back to his home again.”²³

Another participant described that her husband was physically abusive and did not provide for the basic needs of their children. As such, she returned to her family’s home. While her parents “accepted her home” with her young children, at least temporarily, the father refused to pursue a divorce both because he believed it “shameful” and because he did not want to return the bridewealth to the husband. She describes, “I blame my father very much because he is the one who forced me to get married to a person I did not know.”²⁴

It was not just husbands who were abusive, however. In-laws were at times violent, a theme that also arose in the KRI context. One cohort participant described how she ran away from her marriage because the husband’s other wives were extremely abusive towards her.²⁵ Another participant had been kidnapped, raped, and forcibly married. She eventually ran away from her captor in Khartoum with the help of the police. She has no means to pursue a divorce and is in hiding with her family in a displacement camp.²⁶

Violence also occurred within marriages that had transpired without force. One participant had married the father of her child after an unintended

²⁰ Interview with participant # SS_CO_41_F_DIV_22, Juba, South Sudan.

²¹ Interview with participant # SS_CO_43_F_DIV_21, Juba, South Sudan.

²² Interview with participant # SS_CO_46_F_DIV_21, Juba, South Sudan.

²³ Interview with participant # SS_CO_36_F_DIV_22, Juba, South Sudan.

²⁴ Interview with participant # SS_CO_39_F_DIV_21, Juba, South Sudan.

²⁵ Interview with participant # SS_CO_38_F_DIV_20, Juba, South Sudan.

²⁶ Interview with participant # SSB_CO_19_F_DIV_20, Bentiu, South Sudan.

pregnancy. After facing extreme domestic abuse, her father intervened and pursued a divorce on her behalf. She described, “In 2018, my father became very angry when he heard of how my husband was treating me. He called me and told me that he was going to divorce me from [my husband]. I accepted, and my father talked about the divorce to my husband and his family. He gave them their cows back and I went back home...I felt very happy because I had finally divorced. I was not happy in that marriage.”²⁷

Another described that her husband became extremely abusive towards her, their children, and those who tried to protect her, including her brother and local NGO workers. One of her children had been kidnapped by the husband but was later returned unharmed. At the time of the interview, her family was being supportive to her cause. Community leaders had barred the husband from entering the camp, but she had been discouraged from seeking help from the police because her situation was seen as “a family issue,” and her family believed the ex-husband “might do worse things.”²⁸

A different participant described that her husband, a soldier, became mentally ill and violent after his experience in war. She describes the change: “We were happy in our marriage all these years, and we raised our children well. In 2018 when I came to Juba [where he was stationed] with my children, I noticed that he was very different. He had mental issues, and the doctors said that he was traumatized from the wars. He became very violent. Sometimes he seemed well and other times he seemed very dangerous. His situation became worse, and so I moved with my children to a different shelter away from him. He left the POC [Protection of Civilians site], and he lives outside now. We don’t talk anymore.”²⁹ His family did not request the return of bridewealth in this case.

These stories provide a snapshot into the severity of violence that some female youth face in violent

marriages. Given the centrality of bridewealth to the separation process in South Sudan, the wife’s natal family becomes instrumental in providing her with the option to leave. Without the economic support from family to repay the bridewealth, it is almost impossible for a woman to leave a marriage. In these stories, the protection mechanisms that helped women leave abusive situations were almost exclusively informal. Save for in one instance (in Khartoum, not in the displacement camps), no formal authority was brought in to intervene.

Lastly, there was one unique case of divorce, where a participant was in the process of divorcing because her father-in-law discovered that she and her husband were distantly related, after the marriage had taken place. She described, “Nuer people cannot marry a person that they share the same lineage with. It is the worst taboo ever.”³⁰ She described feeling sad and confused, particularly because her husband had stopped communicating with her. She also described that the bridewealth will not need to be repaid under this unique circumstance.

Life after Divorce in South Sudan

Child custody

Mothers who separated or divorced from their husbands expected to lose custody of their children, including the right to see them, after they turn age 7 or 8. Such loss provoked a sense of sadness, powerlessness, and despair.

After a separation or divorce in South Sudan, it is customary for the wife to return to her natal home. If there are children, they are considered the property of the father (and his family) after the child turns age 7 or 8.³¹ This custom holds for unmarried mothers as long as the pregnancy price was paid,³² as well as mothers who separate or divorce their husbands, regardless of the circumstances of the breakup.

²⁷ Interview with participant # SS_CO_34_F_EP_23, Juba, South Sudan.

²⁸ Interview with participant # SS_CO_43_F_DIV_21, Juba, South Sudan.

²⁹ Interview with participant # SS_CO_44_F_DIV_23, Juba, South Sudan.

³⁰ Interview with participant # SS_CO_35_F_M_20, Juba, South Sudan.

³¹ For more in-depth discussion on the laws and customs, including child custody in South Sudan, see: JK Edward, “South Sudanese Refugee Women: Questioning the Past, Imagining the Future,” in *Women’s Rights and Human Rights*, ed. P Grimshaw, K Holmes, and M Lake (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Rachel Ibreck, Hannah Logan, and Naomi Pendle, “Negotiating Justice: Courts as Local Civil Authority during the Conflict in South Sudan” (The Justice and Security Research Program and the London School of Economics, 2017).

³² For more on pregnancy outside of wedlock in South Sudan, see the briefing paper on early pregnancy in South Sudan on our project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

The father and his family can determine if and how much contact a child has with his or her mother. A mother has no fundamental right to visit or retain contact with her children (above approximately age 7 or 8) after a separation or divorce. Not only are girls and women who wish to leave their husbands potentially hamstrung by their family's inability to repay bridewealth and the financial burden that such a repayment would bestow, but they also face the prospect of losing eventual contact and custody of their children. For women contemplating leaving abusive marriages, leaving children with an abusive father is often a factor in their decision to stay. The majority of the separated and divorced female youth in the study were also mothers, mostly with children who were still under age 7 or 8 and thus remained with their mothers for the time being. In the following section, we summarize the hardships that divorced mothers in South Sudan anticipate once their children become of age.

Mothers of young children who were not married or who were divorced spoke openly about their expectation of losing their children in the future.³³ Many expressed sadness as well as a sense of powerlessness or defeat at this eventuality, such as this 21-year-old who was pursuing a divorce at the time of the interview:

Interviewer: What about the children, what will happen to them if you get the divorce?

Participant: Maybe he will take them when they become older because the children don't belong to the woman but to the man. They are his children.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that?

Participant: I will just accept it. I feel bad but I know there is nothing I can do to stop it.³⁴

Another participant, who anticipated that the father of her children will take them in the future, used the language of resignation: "This is part of Nuer culture...I am not sure if he will allow [me to see the children], but I hope I get to see them."³⁵ Another

described that she feels "bad because I know one day they [in-laws] will come and take my son."³⁶

Other participants were actively hiding from their ex-husbands in order to keep custody of their children, including some victims of domestic abuse.

Family and community attitudes

Female youth who divorced were often seen as responsible for the breakup of the marriage and suffered reputational costs within their families and communities.

Key informants described how divorce carries with it a stigma, but only for females. A local NGO worker explained, "Divorce is common, but women are more likely to suffer [than men]. Children are taken away, and she goes back to her father's house. She has less status, even if she remarries."³⁷ A camp manager in Juba described that divorced women can get remarried, "but people will have bad things to say...there is a stigma against girls that have been married before."³⁸ Another NGO worker used the word "shameful" when explaining how a divorced woman would be seen by the community, and even how she would perceive herself.³⁹

Within the sample, several female youth described that they felt stigmatized by their families or communities following separation or divorce from their husbands. Participants repeated the word "shame" frequently during interviews. One participant, who had experienced severe domestic abuse, touched on a subject that was echoed in the KRI as well: "Here if you talk about your man beating you people think it's not serious—not unless they see that you are almost dying. I told my mother [about the abuse], and she told me that is common for a husband and a wife to fight. This is not a new issue." This participant described the gendered dimensions to a formal divorce and the lack of agency for the wife: "A divorce can only take place with the support of the elders of the family, like my father and uncles and [the husband's] father and uncles and other community leaders."⁴⁰

³³ While the customary age is 7 or 8, one participant expects her ex-husband will take her child when he turns 5.

³⁴ Interview with # SS_CO_39_F_DIV_21, Juba, South Sudan.

³⁵ Interview with # SS_CO_41_F_DIV_22, Juba, South Sudan.

³⁶ Interview with # SS_CO_46_F_DIV_21, Juba, South Sudan.

³⁷ Interview with key informant # SS_KII_20_F, Juba South Sudan.

³⁸ Interview with key informant # SS_KII_32_M, Juba, South Sudan.

³⁹ Interview with key informant # SS_KII_25_M, Juba, South Sudan.

As in the KRI, divorced female youth in South Sudan described how women are always to blame in the event of separation or divorce. For example, this participant described her own experience: “People like gossiping about me in bad ways. People don’t like divorce, and they always assume that it is the woman’s fault, even if it’s the man who is bad.”⁴¹ Her divorce had been initiated after her husband had not paid the full bridewealth.

Participants described that the degree of empathy and support they received from family and community during separation and divorce was directly linked to their premarital reputations. For example, this 20-year-old participant, who married after an unintended pregnancy and later divorced, explained, “People always talk badly about me. They say I am spoiled and that is why I got pregnant before marriage. I have a bad reputation...I feel very badly about it.”⁴² Another participant, who was abandoned by her husband, described that her family had not approved of the marriage in the first place. As a result, they refused to support her emotionally or financially after she was abandoned. She described that her family sees her as “useless,” and that some men in the community speak to her in disrespectful ways as a result of her marital status.⁴³

On the flip side, some participants described having extremely supportive families and even respect from the community after separating or divorcing their husbands. These youth had been married to extraordinarily abusive men, which, according to them, solicited an empathic response from others. The participant whose husband became violent after his experience as a soldier described that even her in-laws supported her and did not ask her family to return the bridewealth. Within the community, she described that “no one talks ill of me and my children, because what happened to my husband is not my fault and I cannot do anything to help him.”⁴⁴ This sentiment was echoed by the participant described above whose husband had attacked her family and aid workers. She described that she has the full support of her family and that the

community saw how badly she was treated, so they stood behind her.⁴⁵

Two additional participants described that their mothers and fathers were instrumental in getting them out of abusive situations, including being willing to return the bridewealth despite the economic hardship doing so posed on the family.⁴⁶

Basic needs and well-being after divorce

- » ***Divorced mothers generally received no support from their ex-husbands to care for the children. Divorced mothers and children (under age 7 or 8) generally returned to the natal family, placing increased economic pressure on them.***
- » ***Divorced participants reported improvements in well-being after their divorces, particularly if they had been subjected to domestic abuse. However, well-being was often also influenced by two factors: 1) the degree to which the participant was involved in the divorce process and 2) the amount of emotional support provided by the natal family.***

Participants expressed a range of emotions following their breakups. For the respondents who escaped violent situations, they uniformly expressed relief and “happiness.” A couple of participants described sadness and disappointment when their fathers pursued divorce against their wishes after promises of bridewealth went unfulfilled. One female youth had an unintended pregnancy with her boyfriend at 15. They married, largely against her family’s wishes. She miscarried late in the pregnancy, and her father and uncles forced a divorce. She described the depth of her grief: “I felt very badly, because I lost both my husband and my child at the same time, just because of the pressures and hate from my family.”⁴⁷ In contrast, one participant described that after her divorce, her family encouraged her “not to lose hope in life...they support me however much they can,” even in going back to school.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ Interview with participant # SS_CO_39_F_DIV_21, Juba, South Sudan.

⁴¹ Interview with participant # SS_CO_46_F_DIV_20, Juba, South Sudan.

⁴² Interview with participant # SS_CO_45_F_DIV_20, Juba, South Sudan.

⁴³ Interview with participant # SS_CO_42_F_DIV_20, Juba, South Sudan.

⁴⁴ Interview with participant # SS_CO_44_F_DIV_23, Juba, South Sudan.

⁴⁵ Interview with participant # SS_CO_43_F_DIV_21, Juba, South Sudan.

⁴⁶ Interview with participant # SS_CO_34_F_EP_23, # SS_CO_36_F_DIV_22, and # SS_CO_38_F_DIV_20, Juba, South Sudan.

⁴⁷ Interview with # SS_CO_40_F_DIV_20, Juba, South Sudan.

⁴⁸ Interview with participant # SS_CO_46_F_DIV_21, Juba, South Sudan.

All of the mothers who were separated or divorced reported that they receive no support, financial or otherwise, from the fathers of their children. This theme of psychological stress stemming from material deprivation is also common to widowed female youth and will be described in subsequent sections.

Most separated and divorced mothers live with their young children in the natal family homes. Some participants described feeling guilty about the continued economic pressure they are placing on their families, which is compounded by the financial loss of having to return bridewealth during the divorce process. All separated and divorced mothers described a chronic worry about not being able to provide for the basic needs of their children, including food and medicine. However, all mothers in the sample in South Sudan—regardless of marital status—described that motherhood provided them with a sense of joy, meaning, and purpose. This separated mother shared sentiments that echoed across many other interviews: “I like to see my son, because even if I don’t have many things in life, I feel like he is a blessing from God.”⁴⁹ This joy was often countered with feelings of sadness and anxiety about the eventual loss of these children through customary custody practices.

Separation and divorce in the KRI

All divorced participants in the KRI cohort described experiencing severe domestic abuse. The majority of these marriages were forced marriages.

Eleven participants in the KRI sample reported having been divorced, and each was married as a minor. One participant had been divorced twice before the age of 17. Two divorced participants described that they had fully or mostly participated in the decision to marry, but the majority were mostly or completely forced to marry against their will by parents or other relatives.⁵⁰ As described in the introduction, the more force that was involved in the marriage process, the more likely the marriage was to end in divorce. Interestingly, the

relationship between forced marriage and divorce was spontaneously discussed by key informants. For some, they believed that parents are increasingly recognizing a connection between early or forced marriage and divorce, and that the fear of divorce and the shame it would bring on families may serve as a deterrent for the practice.

From a legal perspective, both Yazidi IDP and Syrian refugee participants followed a process of divorce that appeared to be a mix of state law and customary practice. In the KRI, divorce is granted by a judge, and parties are provided with documentation. Legally, either party is able to file for a divorce. A variety of conditions are considered legitimate grounds, including financial negligence, abuse, desertion, and a husband not seeking the permission of his first wife before taking a subsequent wife. Divorced participants also described that families were heavily involved in the divorce procedures.

Domestic abuse

All participants who were divorced in the KRI had experienced significant or extreme domestic abuse at the hands of their husbands. Participants described sexual, physical, and emotional violence—at times fleeing for their lives after sustaining serious injuries. In some instances, the marriage process itself was a form of violence, and this violence continued after the union. One Syrian respondent relayed that her stepmother arranged to have her sexually abused at age 12 or 13 to force her to marry her abuser. After experiencing years of abuse, rape, and forced impregnation, she was able to escape to the KRI and has been hiding in a shelter for several years. Another described that her family “put her in front of a gun” to marry a 30-year-old man at the age of 14. She described, “I couldn’t understand the situation. I was child. There were lies and abuse and beating and all of those kind of experiences [including sexual abuse].”⁵¹ After she became pregnant, he beat her so badly that she lost the pregnancy and suffered permanent damage to one of her kidneys.

⁴⁹ Interview with participant # SS_CO_35_F_M_20, Juba, South Sudan.

⁵⁰ For an in-depth analysis of participation in the decision to marry, see the related briefing paper on our project webpage: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

⁵¹ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_17_F_D_19, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Life after divorce in the KRI

Child custody

Syrian refugee and Yazidi IDP mothers in the study who divorced lost custody of their children, including the right to visitation, with profound psychological consequences.

While divorce resulted in some immediate protection for study participants from their abusers, participants described extreme negative impacts in the months and years following the separation and divorce. One of the most painful repercussions was especially felt by the mothers of the sample, who lost full custody of their children. In most cases, this included the right to contact or visit them.

Laws dictating child custody in the KRI and Syria deviated from customary practices reported by participants.⁵⁴ In both countries, the laws stipulate that children belong to the mother until the child is old enough to decide with whom he or she would like to live (unless the mother is deemed unfit by a judge).⁵⁵ In practice, however, the husband and his family are considered the rightful guardians of children in the case of divorce. This practice was often reinforced by the women's natal families, who generally refused to accept the children of divorced daughters into their homes. As one respondent explained, her parents refused to raise "the husband's children for him." In interviews with participants and family members, the children of divorced women were often referred to as "other people's children." One key informant described that while divorced mothers do have a legal right to visitation, some opt not to pursue this option, either because her parents discourage her because they see the children as no longer belonging to her; or because the ex-husband's family refuses visitation and she does not want to pursue a long and arduous court process; or because she believes that cutting contact may help her overcome the "trauma" of the divorce more quickly. This informant describes that some families do allow visitation, although it is

Other times, girls married for love, but their husbands became violent after their marriage. This 20-year-old described her marriage at age 15: "It was love, but I was a teenager and didn't think about the future...how I loved his handsomeness and did not think about what would come after marriage. A man is not a flower you put in your hair. He should have a good personality with qualities and skills and feel responsible for his family and his children."⁵² This man later abused alcohol and drugs and was violent towards her, often in front of the children. When his violence escalated to putting a knife to her throat in front of their three children, she divorced him, even though she risked losing (and later did lose) custody of her three children.

Similarly, this 20-year-old, who married at 17 by choice, described her experience of leaving her abusive husband:

After I got married, I discovered that my husband was a psycho. He used to abuse me, beat me, and prevent me from going anywhere, even to see my own family. And I became pregnant during the first year. I was afraid of him because he was always beating me, even when I was six months pregnant. I tried to commit suicide; I took 30 pills at once. I was afraid to tell anyone. I used to faint as I was waiting for him to come home because I was so afraid. I stayed in the marriage until the seventh month [of pregnancy]...I ran away and escaped to my parents' house. I remained here...and I gave birth [here].⁵³

She remains living with her parents, but her daughter was taken from her immediately after birth.

Unfortunately, all these accounts of divorce contained horrific stories of abuse, and yet none of the participants received support either from informal or formal protective services to help them escape. They relied exclusively on themselves or their natal families (who provided only mixed support) to help them leave.

⁵² Interview with participant # KRI_CO_9_F_D_20, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁵³ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_9_F_D_20, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁵⁴ See also: <https://landinfo.no/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Report-Syria-Marriage-legislation-and-traditions-22082018.pdf>; <http://wiki.dorar-aliraq.net/iraqilaws/law/21029.html>.

⁵⁵ See also: <https://landinfo.no/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Report-Syria-Marriage-legislation-and-traditions-22082018.pdf>; <http://wiki.dorar-aliraq.net/iraqilaws/law/21029.html>.

not always made public to the extended families or communities.⁵⁶

In the KRI sample, several mothers no longer had contact with their children, an emotional pain that was described as excruciating, debilitating, and continuous, even years after the separation.

One participant fled Syria with her infant daughter to rejoin her family in the KRI. She was obliged to leave her two older sons with their father in Syria. Her mother accepted her and the baby, but only after realizing the extent of her desperation when the respondent walked for hours across Syria carrying her newborn shortly after giving birth. For the respondent, the continued separation from her older children is extremely painful for her. Her sons call her and beg her to be reunited. She is unable to travel to Syria because she lacks documentation to cross the border. Her only option to see her children would be to return to her abusive ex-husband.

Another mother of three described how her children were now with her ex-in-laws. She wept heavily during the interview and explained: “I can see them, but every time I do, I feel very bad. I can’t do anything for them, I can’t take them with me. I’ve decided not to see them anymore, not to have contact. I deleted their pictures from my phone [begins sobbing heavily].”⁵⁷

The participant who ran away from her abusive husband during the seventh month of her pregnancy described her life following this separation:

On December 4, 2017, I became a mother to a girl which I didn’t hold or smell. I didn’t even get to feel motherhood, which I think is one of the most precious feelings for any mother in their life... The same day, my in-laws took my daughter. I didn’t even get to see her. Now she is living in the same neighborhood, near my house, and I can’t hug her or see her or hold her. They prevent me from seeing her. After they took my girl, I was in pain all the time...I became sick after that. I have a thyroid illness because I was sad all the time. I have to take medications and see a doctor. I never share this pain with anyone.

Later in the study, she began to see a psychiatrist who explained that she was having a traumatic reaction to the abuse and separation from her daughter—which was exacerbated each time she saw her daughter in the camp. She explained, “It has been three years since this happened. Every night I tell my family that I am going to sleep but I just cry myself to sleep. Every time I go out and I see a child, I think it might be her. I just cry and cry every day.”⁵⁸

Another participant, married at 13, described the difficulty in choosing personal safety over custody of her children. She left her abusive husband the month before she gave birth, but her in-laws forced her to return. She stayed for three months after the birth of the baby and continued to endure abuse from both her husband and in-laws. She described her decision to leave in an interview:

I thought to myself, “Even if I remained here all my life it would stay the same, and I would have more children. But leaving one child is better than leaving four or five behind.” So I prepared myself and left her. For four or five months, I wasn’t able to sleep or eat properly. I would sometimes wake up in the night and go to check on her even though she wasn’t there. Or I would dream about her and look for her and cry. I haven’t seen her. [The in-laws] won’t let me see her.⁵⁹

The role of the family and community

- » ***Natal families played supportive roles for some divorced female youth, while for others, natal families were emotionally or physically abusive in the aftermath of the divorce.***
- » ***Divorced female youth faced gossip, verbal and sexual harassment, and severe social exclusion. Many were not able to attend school, work, have friendships, or leave their homes.***

For a few divorced participants in the KRI, their natal families were essential in helping them escape the marriage and in supporting them through the

⁵⁶ Interview with key informant # KRI_KII_3_F, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁵⁷ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_110_F_DIV_20, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁵⁸ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_9_F_D_20, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁵⁹ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_41_F_D_24, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

aftermath of the divorce. One participant, who had lost both parents in a terrorist attack, described that her uncles, friends, and cousins supported her in leaving her abusive husband. They reassured her that she wouldn't "be the first person to get a divorce." They saw her suffering and told her she couldn't "spend her life like that."⁶⁰ Others escaped to their natal families and continue to feel emotionally (and financially) supported until this day. This 20-year-old described: "My family is very supportive and respectful of me, and they understand my experience. They know the experience that I went through wasn't easy. I was a child."⁶¹

Other respondents, however, see their parents as the cause of their suffering or a continued threat to their well-being. Some participants who had been forced to marry did not find refuge in their natal homes when leaving their abusive husbands, such as one female youth who is currently living in a safe house and has no contact with her family. Another participant was attacked by her uncle, who was armed and threatened to kill her, when her marriage broke up. She was living with her parents during the study period but reported that her mother frequently slighted her by saying, "If you were a good woman, you would not have been divorced... you should have accepted the abuse because he is your husband."⁶²

In addition to emotional violence, some female youth are abused by their families, which they attribute to having been divorced. One participant described that, since her divorce, she is continually bullied by her brother and other male relatives. She has tried to support other girls as they contemplate leaving abusive marriages and is seen as a "bad influence" on others because of it. She described that in her Arab community in Sinjar, girls who want to divorce are at risk of being killed by their own family members. She also described that many, including herself when she was married, are suicidal. This participant, who has since remarried, was hospitalized during the course of the study when her brother brutally attacked her. She had various

injuries and lost her pregnancy as a result of this extreme physical violence. She is now in hiding from her natal family.⁶³

Even for participants who do not face brutal violence from their natal families, many feel like burdens in their family homes. For example, a participant who experienced abuse in two underage marriages described, "I feel like women are nothing without a man. I feel like I'm not needed, and I feel like a burden on my family. It is my family that gives me these thoughts."⁶⁴

Beyond family relations, divorced participants described that communities were ruthless in their negative views and treatment of divorced girls and women. Several described being targets of community gossip, verbal harassment, sexual harassment, discrimination, and other forms of social exclusion. Several participants described being treated as outcasts, and that this negative view of them tarnished the reputation of their natal families. These behaviors are at least partially fueled by the general perception in the KRI, as in South Sudan, that a marital breakup is always the fault of the female, and that she should always accept her husband's behavior. The following quote reflects an attitude that was common across several interviews: "As soon as I left [my husband], everyone blamed me. They said, 'Even if your husband was abusive, you should accept it for the sake of your children.'"⁶⁵

Many divorcees described that they felt marked for life. For example, one participant explained: "I'm divorced. Everyone is talking about that. The community will never forget or let me forget."⁶⁶ Another described the connection between a girl, her reputation, and the family:

In our culture, if you are divorced, you are a bad person. No matter what happened, it was my fault. Even though it was just me who divorced, they blame the whole family. The whole community talks badly about [my] family. It's like the community puts a stigma on the family.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_41_F_D_24, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶¹ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_9_F_D_20, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶² Interview with participant # KRI_CO_16_F_D_23, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶³ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_4_F_D_23, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶⁴ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_16_F_D_23, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶⁵ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_16_F_D_23, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶⁶ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_41_F_D_24, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶⁷ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_4_F_D_23, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

With such harsh treatment of divorced girls and women, participants described that their lives are severely limited in terms of movement, education, work, and ability to socialize. One divorced participant had returned to school but faces gossip and harassment. Another described that while she would like to return to school, she does not dare try because she knows she will face gossip and harassment, “because the school is mixed right now. If I wanted to go...people will make assumptions. If they saw me talking to a boy they would say, ‘She wants to go to school now to meet boys.’”⁶⁸ Even her experience with employment has been marred by her experience of divorce: “One time I went to work in a tailoring factory. The working hours were from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Everyone saw me coming home at night and they were asking me, ‘You are a divorced girl, why are you coming back so late? What are you doing?’ They assumed I was doing something bad. I hated myself at that time, and I didn’t go back.”⁶⁹ Here we see clearly the connection between the experience of divorce, communal distrust (and assumptions of sexual promiscuity), and internalization of such social exclusion.

Many divorced female youth are discouraged or prevented from socializing and are not allowed to leave their homes because of how they and their families will be viewed. A 19-year-old who was forcibly married by her parents as a minor and later divorced explained: “I am not allowed to look out of the doorway or have friends. I will be killed immediately...by my younger brother. We girls are nothing in this community, we don’t have any value.” When asked to explain these circumstances further, she said, “Every night I stay awake trying to dream about a better life, but in the morning I wake up and my life is still the same. My family says ‘Now you have a new name—“divorced”—so you are not allowed to do anything or go anywhere.”⁷⁰

Psychological distress and prospects for the future

Female youth who were divorced in the KRI sample experienced many layers of traumatic events and have poor-to-extremely-poor psychological functioning. Few to no services exist for providing them with psychosocial support. Other female youth in the sample cited divorced female youth as extremely vulnerable and in need of services.

Divorced participants in the KRI suffered from extreme negative psychological distress.⁷¹ Many participants had experienced multiple traumatic events before being abused in their marriages, including exposure to conflict events and forcible displacement. Since their divorce, participants have suffered from harassment, social exclusion, and family abuse. Most divorced mothers have been separated from their children against their wishes. With so many layers of past and present trauma, these female youth reported having very poor mental health functioning. Their symptoms included insomnia, psychosomatic illnesses, extreme anxiety, depression, symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and suicidal thoughts. Several reported recent and past suicide attempts. Most do not have access to formal mental health services. Parents prevent them from seeking such care, others cannot afford the services, and in some areas, both informal and formal psychological support simply does not exist.

Remarriage is often viewed as a so-called “solution” to reduce the stigma linked to being divorced. Three participants remarried during the course of the study, each of their own volition. Two additional participants wished to remarry in order to “start over,” as explained by this 18-year-old: “I want to get married and start a new life. My family is encouraging me to do so, but to marry under their supervision.”⁷² Remarriage may represent a break from the past for both female youth and their families.

⁶⁸ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_9_F_D_20, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶⁹ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_9_F_D_20, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁷⁰ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_36_F_D_19, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁷¹ For more on mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for divorced and widowed female youth, see our briefing paper on the project webpage: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

⁷² Interview with participant # KRI_CO_120_F_DIV_18, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

For others, however, remarriage was described as a form of pressure applied primarily by parents and reinforced by community members. Several participants said that they did not want to remarry under duress. One divorced participant who was forcibly married as a minor described:

My parents want me to marry whomever now. Do I look like I should marry a widower or someone disabled? What was my guilt to be punished like this? And what kills me is that people are saying I should marry them because I'm divorced...Every girl wishes to wear a white dress. For me, it was my wedding dress and my death dress [funeral attire] at the same time. I never wish to wear it again.⁷³

The researchers asked study participants in the KRI to discuss the challenges of displaced female youth and the services that were most needed. Participants, regardless of marital status, frequently stated that divorced girls were the most vulnerable members of their communities because of extreme social exclusion, violence, and poor mental health, including suicide attempts and suicides. They implored the international community to provide tailored services to this particular group.

⁷³ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_36_F_D_19, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Becoming widowed in South Sudan and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Becoming widowed in South Sudan

Overview

The eight widows in South Sudan who participated in the study were between the ages of 18 and 23, and all were married between the ages of 14 and 16 years. The degree to which this subset had participated in the decision to marry ranged from complete participation to fully forced.⁷⁴ Participants who were widowed in South Sudan described that their husbands passed away for two main reasons. The first was directly related to insecurity and the war. Husbands had been kidnapped, killed while traveling on business, or had been soldiers killed in action. The second main reason for death was related to illness, often described as tuberculosis. Challenges faced by widows were both similar to and different from those faced by separated and divorced female youth. Widows, like divorced youth, described severe emotional impacts, financial difficulties, tensions with their natal families, and disputes with in-laws over retaining custody of their children. An additional challenge is the practice of “inheritance”—where a widow is expected to marry the brother or other male relative of her deceased husband. This practice allows the man’s family to continue to benefit from the reproductive and domestic duties they have obtained by paying bridewealth at the time of marriage. The practice of inheritance also (at least in theory) ensures continued economic support to the woman and her children.⁷⁵ Each of these challenges faced by widows will be described below.

“Inheritance”

Widows in South Sudan expected to be “inherited” by her husband’s brothers to continue producing children for her in-laws. Widows described having little to no choice in this process.

An NGO worker described how the process of widow inheritance or levirate marriage transpires in South Sudan and the accompanying social norms: “When you are a widow, you are obliged to stay with [including having intimate relations with] someone in your deceased husband’s family. If you refuse, they will consider you a prostitute.”⁷⁶ Another NGO worker described that the surviving spouse has some agency in the process, although as seen in this example and the testimonies of participants, the notion of choice is highly exaggerated: “The [widowed] girls are asked, ‘Who do you want to continue bearing children with in the family—which brother [of your husband]?’ If she doesn’t want to be with anyone, she can ask for a divorce [from the deceased husband’s family]”⁷⁷ and will lose custody of her children. As described above, a divorce could only transpire with the full agreement of the widow’s father and if the full bridewealth is returned—an option available to very few girls, and none of the widows in the study.

Several widows in the study had been inherited by their brothers-in-law or were awaiting this partnership. None of the participants saw this process as their choice. One widow who was 23 and a mother of two was expecting to move in with her brother-in-law once he returns from Canada. She explained: “Once he is back, I will continue bearing children with him. It is not my decision at all. I even told my in-laws that I am not in agreement with this decision, but they told me that I didn’t have a choice. They said, ‘This is our culture, and this happened before you and will happen after you.’”⁷⁸ While not her choice, she explained in a subsequent interview that she is not fully against this process because she would like to have more children. She explained that if she were to have children with a man outside her husband’s family, those children would become the property and bear the name of her in-laws.

⁷⁴ For more information about decision making and early marriage, including the degree to which female youth participated in the process, see the related briefing paper on our project webpage: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

⁷⁵ For more information about decision making and early marriage, including the degree to which female youth participated in the process, see the related briefing paper on our project webpage: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

⁷⁶ Interview with key informant # SS_KII_1_M, Juba, South Sudan.

⁷⁷ Interview with key informant # SS_KII_25_M, Juba, South Sudan.

⁷⁸ Interview with participant # SS_CO_10_F_W_23, Juba, South Sudan.

Another widow, living alone with her daughter at the time of our interview, had recently been informed by her father-in-law that she would soon be inherited by her husband's brother. She described: "I don't like this because I don't love him and he has two wives and I am going to face a lot of challenges."⁷⁹ Another participant had been inherited by her brother-in-law after her husband's death but was then widowed a second time. Both men had been killed during the conflict. She described the negative and positive sides of the process: "I did not like it, but there was nothing I could do to help myself and my children. It is better to stay around family than go with strangers. My children and I would have suffered more, so I decided to stay with my brother-in-law instead."⁸⁰ In contrast, a 20-year-old widow in the study described that she is actively avoiding being inherited and planned to escape to a different region to circumvent the process.⁸¹

Economic difficulty, emotional impacts, and family tensions

Widows and their children faced severe financial insecurity. Many widows suffered negative emotional impacts from economic hardship and family tensions with both their natal families and their in-laws.

Every widow in the sample in South Sudan described facing severe economic hardship—including problems meeting the basic needs of their children—following their husbands' deaths. None received economic support (for themselves or their children) from their in-laws, although those awaiting levirate marriage expected to receive support in the future. One widow who was living alone in the Juba POC explained: "I feel very badly and also frustrated because I would like my children to go to school. I am the only parent they have, and it is hard for me to support all their needs by myself."⁸² When asked to describe how it is to be a widow in the camp, she said, "It's very bad. I see the UN as my husband, because the people in the UN give us food and somewhere to live."⁸³

Another widow was not subject to inheritance because her husband had no brothers. She described inhabiting an "in-between" space where she was simultaneously obliged to remain a part of her husband's family while also being nominally free to live as she liked. She had a son with her deceased husband and a daughter with another man after his death: "My husband used to support me and my son but now I don't have anyone to support us...the father of my daughter does not support me because he has his own family and wives...he also knows that my daughter is not his, but my late husband's according to our culture." She also reported that her in-laws were "very angry" with her for her liaison with the man and believe she should stay alone.⁸⁴

The interplay of psychological distress and economic hardship was a continuous theme for widows, particularly those who are mothers. An 18-year-old, who lost her husband a year before the interview, explained her experience of being a mother and widow and not receiving support from her in-laws:

I am not excited about anything because I am struggling about everything together with my child. Nothing is good in my life or in my daughter's life, and we are just living...I feel bad knowing that my life is very bad...I worry a lot about getting soap to wash her clothes...I also worry about getting her some milk to drink.⁸⁵

Aside from economic difficulties, several of the widowed participants described continued emotional suffering in the form of grief, sometimes years after having lost their husbands. One participant described that the day her husband died was the "worst day of my life,"⁸⁶ and another described it as her "most painful moment."⁸⁷ Unexpected death related to kidnappings and murder were particularly traumatic for those interviewed, and the researchers had particular concern for the mental health and well-being of several widows. Many of the widows in the South Sudan cohort appeared depressed, hungry,

⁷⁹ Interview with participant # SS_CO_12_F_W_21, Juba, South Sudan.

⁸⁰ Interview with participant # SS_CO_48_F_W_22, Juba, South Sudan.

⁸¹ Interview with participant # SSB_CO_12_W_20, Bentiu, South Sudan.

⁸² Interview with participant # SS_CO_22_F_W_23, Juba, South Sudan.

⁸³ Interview with participant # SS_CO_22_F_W_23, Juba, South Sudan.

⁸⁴ Interview with participant # SS_CO_47_F_W_22, Juba, South Sudan.

⁸⁵ Interview with participant # SS_CO_31_F_W_18, Juba, South Sudan.

⁸⁶ Interview with participant # SS_CO_47_F_W_22, Juba, South Sudan.

⁸⁷ Interview with participant # SS_CO_48_F_W_22, Juba, South Sudan.

extremely anxious about meeting the basic needs of their children, and worried about the potential of losing custody of their children in the future. These experiences are compounded by the traumatic experiences of conflict and displacement. One respondent relayed that she had even recently forgotten her children at the market (they were reunited, unharmed, several hours later), but this signals significant inner turmoil.

A few widows in South Sudan were able to rely on emotional and financial support from their natal families. Others, however, described that their natal families rejected them and their children after they became widows. One described that her family was “angry” with her for staying with them as she awaited inheritance by a brother-in-law. Another widowed participant had been forcibly married to a much older man with 24 wives at the age of 14. She fled her husband’s compound after some of his adult children attempted to rape her. She sought shelter at her natal home but found that they no longer saw her as part of the family, saying that “this is none of our business that your husband is dead. Go live with his family.” When she was interviewed, she had set up a tea shop to make ends meet for herself and her daughter.⁸⁸

Becoming widowed in the KRI

Overview

There were seven widows in the study sample from the KRI, which included four Syrian refugees and three conflict-affected Arab Iraqis living in Mosul. There were no Yazidi widows in the sample. Four widows were older than the rest of the participants in the cohort (three were 35 years old and one was 41 years old).⁸⁹ Five of the seven widows in the sample had married under the age of 18. Two of the widows had been forcibly married, while the rest had had substantial participation in the decision to marry.⁹⁰ While some of the themes were similar in the stories of Syrian refugees and Arab Iraqis, there were some significant differences that are highlighted below.

Widows in the KRI had lost their husbands to war-related events, accidents, and illnesses. In Mosul, two widows had been married to ISIS fighters who were killed in action. Another had lost her husband during an airstrike targeting ISIS, although he was not affiliated with the group. The Syrian participants had lost their husbands through a different set of circumstances, but each was sudden and unexpected. These included a motorcycle accident, the collapse of a building at a construction site where the husband was working, leukemia, and disappearance following government bombing of civilians in Damascus. Five of the seven widows were also mothers.

Widows living in the KRI described severe psychological difficulty related to the loss of their husbands, ongoing stress related to displacement and conflict, social exclusion, and economic problems in meeting the needs of their children particularly. Widows in the sample also consistently reported harassment, discrimination, and attempts at exploitation by community members, aid workers, and government employees based on their marital status. Furthermore, family tensions ran high for some widows, both within their natal families as well as with their in-laws.

Psychological impacts of loss, economic difficulty, and social exclusion

Widows suffered from negative psychological functioning as a result of traumatic losses, economic difficulties, and severe curtailment of personal freedoms resulting from their change in marital status.

Widows in the study eloquently described the suffering they endured after the loss of their husbands, particularly for those who had married for love. A 21-year-old, who married at 17 and lost her husband in a motorcycle accident, described her situation:

When I married, I felt a taste of happiness... Even though the economic situation was not good and we lacked many things, my husband

⁸⁸ Interview with participant # SS_CO_12_F__W_21, Juba, South Sudan.

⁸⁹ We chose to include older widows in the sample for two main reasons. First, this was a particularly difficult group to recruit; hence we expanded our age criteria. Secondly, these widows had teenage daughters that we could simultaneously follow in order to shed light on the practice of early marriage.

⁹⁰ For more information about decision making and early marriage, including the degree to which female youth participated in the process, see the related briefing paper on our project webpage: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

was able to bring me what I needed...After my husband died, I was very unwell with grief—I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep...My in-laws didn't take me to the hospital or anything. So, I am not speaking with them [even though my husband was my cousin].⁹¹

Another widow revered her husband, and explained he was “the best protector and supporter for [me and our children].” The happiest moment in life was when she married, and since her husband's death she has been so unwell that she has memory problems because of “all the sadness.”⁹²

Another participant, who is Arab Iraqi and living in Mosul, explained how constricted her life had become after her husband's death. She did not have children with her husband, and as is customary according to her explanation, she was obliged to return to her natal family. Strict social norms and a controlling brother prevented her from engaging in the freedoms she had enjoyed as a married woman. She explained, “It's true that as a widow I can't go outside—people will talk. I just sit at home and do nothing...[The community, if they see me outside the house] will say I am out looking for a husband...” Here she is referring to the severe reputational costs she and her family would incur if she did not follow the expected role of a widow. It would be acceptable for her to visit relatives, but many of them died during the war. Hence, as she explained, “I have no place to go or anyone to visit. I wake up and do some housework. I have breakfast, do cleaning, make the lunch, and everything until the evening when I sleep. I do the same thing with zero change every single day...This house is like a prison.”⁹³

Five of the widows in the sample were mothers, and all of them were the primary caregivers after the death of their husbands. None of participants received financial support from their in-laws, much to their surprise, as they had anticipated being cared for following their husbands' deaths. As in South Sudan, the economic impacts of being a single mother are enormous in the KRI, and widows described a constant stress and worry about being able to provide for their children. One widow,

whose husband was killed by a stray rocket in Mosul, had five children and ran a small tailoring business and sold sweets in a shop. She described her psychological state and the interplay of loss, experience of war, and economic deprivation:

My psychological situation is not good. I have a lot of responsibilities, and I always need to work a lot so I can pay all the bills at the end of the month—clothes, electricity, food, and more and more. And the shop is not covering all that. I don't even make enough to cover the costs in the shop. I struggled and suffered a lot. When we came back, our house was almost destroyed [by bombings]...It has been five years since I am a widow. Since that time, I have never had a restful moment at all. Even when I cook something I like, I feel it's tasteless. When I sleep I feel I am not comfortable or something is wrong. I always feel I am not happy.⁹⁴

Community norms and protection violations

Widows in the sample reported sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse based on their marital status from members of family, community, humanitarian organizations, and governments.

Participants from the KRI described how the change in marital status—from being married to becoming a widow—resulted not only in the loss of their husband and breadwinner for the family, but also corresponded with a loss of freedom and a significant contraction of their lives. The participant who described her home as a prison and who was cited in the prior section, explained this change: “[When I was married], I was so comfortable, we were visiting parks, open spaces, going to picnics... etc. My husband's family was more open than my family.”⁹⁵ A Syrian refugee described how the community regards widows: “Here people look down on widows. If I walk down the street, 10 people talk about me. Widows in our culture, they are kind of dead people. They have no rights. They have no dreams. Even if they want to do anything, the community would say ‘No, you can't.’”⁹⁶

⁹¹ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_103_F_W_21, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁹² Interview with participant # KRI_CO_30_F_W_35, Mosul, Northern Iraq.

⁹³ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_31_F_W_22, Mosul, Northern Iraq.

⁹⁴ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_30_F_W_35, Mosul, Northern Iraq.

⁹⁵ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_31_F_W_22, Mosul, Northern Iraq.

⁹⁶ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_33_F_W_35, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Widows described that they were regularly sexually harassed and targeted for exploitation and other forms of manipulation by aid workers, government representatives, and employers. One widow in Mosul was eligible for survivor benefits from the Iraqi government. Her cousin, who is a government employee, has blocked access to her benefits as a form of revenge because she refuses his marriage proposals. He, through his work in the security sector, has filed a claim that she was married to an ISIS fighter, which prohibits her from collecting survivor benefits. Thus, she and her five children are prevented from receiving essential financial support. He told her that he will remove this “status”, only if she agrees to marry him. Another widow in Mosul, who was married to an ISIS fighter, is not eligible for survivor benefits because of her husband’s affiliation. She cannot secure identification documents for her children. Without identification she cannot enroll her children in school. They are regularly bullied for having a father who was a member of ISIS.

Two other widows, both Syrian and living in camps, were approached by organizational representatives with the promise of additional benefits—resettlement benefits in one case and additional food aid in another—if they agreed to have sexual relations and/or marry. Another faced sexual harassment at her workplace, where she works as a cleaner. There is no recourse for any of these women who are exploited or face harassment. Participants expressed a deep sense of shame in sharing these stories during the interviews, and one can expect that the incidence is likely higher than what was reported.

As alluded to above, widows described that they are required to follow strict social norms after losing their husbands. Their movements—including where they go and with whom, how they dress, and all activities outside the home—are continuously monitored by family, neighbors, and community members. Widows described that they are the subject of gossip and face reputational damage should they not conform. These norms were particularly strict for the widows living in Mosul, where they reported not being allowed to leave the home without a male escort who is a relative. One woman who had tailoring skills was forbidden from

working outside of her home because she would be exposed to “strangers”—meaning people outside of the family.⁹⁷

In addition, two participants faced harassment by their in-laws—including one who received threats of kidnapping, physical violence, and death. These widows were targeted because their in-laws wanted to take custody of the children. One case was so severe that the respondent sought protection from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and was subsequently resettled to Europe with her four children during the course of the study. The other believed that the only solution for her to achieve true security was also to be resettled in another country.

The change in status from married to widowed, and the accompanying exploitation, harassment, gossip, loss of livelihoods, and lack of participation in social activities, has left all of the widows in the KRI sample with poor mental health functioning. They describe feelings of depression, anger, anxiety, insomnia, a range of physical problems, and, in one case, multiple suicide attempts.

Widows, remarriage, and teen daughters

Widows were generally expected to remarry, although natal families play a role in this process, regardless of the age of widows.

Teenage daughters of widows were potentially at risk for early marriage because of economic and social pressure.

Compared to South Sudan, the practice of levirate marriage (inheritance of a widow by a male in-law) in the KRI is less common. One key informant explained that it was a historical practice in Syria but is not very common today. In Mosul, it is more common for widows to marry their husband’s brothers, but it is more of a custom than a requirement. For the widows in the study from Mosul, none of them had married their brothers-in-law, either because no one was age appropriate (brothers-in-law were much younger than the widowed women) or the brothers-in-law had already married.

⁹⁷ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_31_F_W_24, Mosul, Northern Iraq.

Remarriage to others, however, was one strategy that several participants discussed as a natural antidote for or exit strategy from their current negative circumstances linked to widowhood. Two participants were eager to marry their suitors, with whom they had fallen in love, but their male relatives forbade these unions in both instances. In one instance, the participant's brother expected her to be his housekeeper and to care for younger family members. He thus prevented her from marrying. In the second, a 35-year-old woman who was forcibly married at 17 by her father was still prevented by her family from choosing whom she marries. She described:

Participant: That person I told you about last time and I broke up. My family refused the proposal.

Interviewer: Who said no to the proposal?

Participant: Everyone—uncles, aunties, cousins. Only my mother was on my side. My uncle is very controlling because he has some political influence—he is a high-up member in the [political] Party. In our community, everyone is involved in a proposal and marriage. The girl is not really able to decide.⁹⁸

The psychological effects on both the above participants were extremely negative. One attempted suicide after her brother refused her marriage, although this did not change his behavior. The other described, “I have been having health problems since. I wasn't able to work. I had problems with blood pressure.”⁹⁹

Other widows in the study were averse to remarrying, even those who had been encouraged to do so by their families and the communities. In these instances, families considered remarriage a way to alleviate financial problems and severe restrictions in the widows' movements. However, despite receiving multiple proposals, these participants expressed a strong dislike for the idea of remarriage. Two described their fears that if they were to remarry, they would not be able to take the children with them to the new marriage—either because the in-laws of the deceased husband or

the new husband would refuse. In the words of one widow from Mosul who had a significant trauma history: “My children have been broken once when they lost their father. I don't want to break them again and leave them or marry another man. Also now, I really don't feel attracted to men anymore. I really hate them...because they are the reason of all our suffering.”¹⁰⁰

Several widows in the sample have underage teenage daughters. They each reported that men target their daughters specifically for marriage, believing that the participant is unable to manage her life as a single parent. One participant recounted her experiences with multiple proposals for her 15-year-old daughter:

They sometimes propose to my daughter. She is 15. They say, “Just give her to me. It will release you from this burden.” And I say to them, “She is a child, she cannot marry right now.” One time it was a man and two times it was a woman that came directly to the door—they asked [for my daughter's hand]—even in front of the children. And I said, “You are not asking for a vegetable! You are asking about a soul! I'm not interested!” As long as I am here, I will be exploited by everyone, and my children will be maltreated.¹⁰¹

Another widow faced pressure from suitors, the community, and her own family to marry off her underage daughter. During the course of the study, it became clear that this widow would have no choice but to eventually acquiesce to this immense external pressure. Faced with limited choices, she decided to allow her daughter to marry her boyfriend, an agemate—rather than follow the wishes of male relatives—which would have materialized into a forced marriage to an older man. While unhappy about her daughter marrying underage, she was pleased to support her love marriage and protect her from a forced marriage.

Key informants also described that male and female children of widows are more likely to drop out of school, and that male children often are solicited to work as laborers, often in dangerous conditions.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_38_F_W_35, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁹⁹ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_38_F_W_35, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_32_F_W_24, Mosul, Northern Iraq.

¹⁰¹ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_39_F_W_41, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

¹⁰² Interviews with key informants # KRI_KII_6_F & #KRI_KII_8_F, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

While widows may be “free” to remarry, many—despite their age—are still obliged to follow the preferences of their natal families. Widows are perceived as vulnerable—economically and otherwise—and thus may be exploited, pressured to marry, or may receive pressure to marry their daughters early. This study thus highlights a relationship between widowed mothers and the possible practice of early marriage.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Displaced female youth who are separated, divorced, or widowed (and their children) face specific challenges and have unique vulnerabilities that are related to their marital status. While this study was not statistically representative, the themes presented here were found across *all cases* of female youth that are divorced and widowed. More quantitative research is needed to estimate how many displaced youth have these marital statuses. Humanitarian organizations should better understand these difficulties through participatory empirical research and tailor programs—or create new programs—to support these groups of female youth across sectors. Specific recommendations include the following:

- Many marriages that end in divorce were characterized by severe domestic abuse. Service providers (e.g., mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and health) and protection actors should anticipate these realities and provide culturally appropriate protective services to ensure the safety of female youth and their children, including safe passage from abuse.
- Female youth living in abusive marriages may choose to stay because of the anticipated loss of their children after separation in divorce. In the KRI in particular, tailored legal services should be provided for women who seek divorces and wish to retain custody of their children.
- Separated and divorced female youth face abuse from their natal families and in-laws, community harassment and sexual harassment, and extreme social exclusion. In the KRI in particular, they are unable to attend school, work, socialize, or leave their homes. Humanitarian organizations should work with tolerant community and religious leaders to support the positive change of social norms for female youth who are separated and divorced. This includes increasing access to education, livelihoods, and safe public space. In terms of normative change, this may include attempts to decrease victim blaming and a broader dismantling of patriarchal systems.
- Separated and divorced women have extremely poor psychological functioning and require informal and formal trauma-focused MHPSS services for themselves and their children. These services should include formal psychiatric consultation, supportive spaces where separated and divorced youth can congregate without fear of reputational harm or of being targeted for harassment, and informal support groups.
- Female youth who are separated, divorced, or widowed should be brought into a participatory process with humanitarian and development practitioners, where they collaboratively design relevant, supportive interventions that are culturally and contextually appropriate. This study has shown that outreach is possible through word of mouth and engagement with community leaders and outreach workers.
- Mothers who are widowed, separated, or divorced generally have poor economic situations. In both contexts, such mothers should be targeted through cash, and educational and livelihoods programs.
- Widowed female youth and their children, like separated and divorced female youth, should be provided with a range of tailored trauma-informed MHPSS services.
- Widows are often targeted for sexual exploitation by community members and authorities (humanitarian and government) because they are seen as economically vulnerable. Children of widows are also vulnerable to exploitation—this exploitation includes early marriage and child labor. Economic and protection programs should simultaneously prioritize widows and their children and link to cash programs. Given that these programs might increase the risk of sexual exploitation, humanitarian programs need to reinforce their hiring practices to include more female representatives and to improve anonymous complaints processes.
- Female youth who are separated, divorced, or widowed and who face abuse—by families, community members, and authorities—should

be prioritized by protection services and for possible resettlement.

- Additional empirical information is needed on the situation of separated, divorced, and widowed female youth living in fragile settings and their children. As part of a larger research program, participatory methods should be utilized to collaboratively design interventions (single and cross sector) for supporting these populations. The efficacy of interventions should be empirically tested.

