

Perspectives on early marriage: the voices of female youth in Iraqi Kurdistan and South Sudan who married under age 18

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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

¹ The research team firstly acknowledges the respondents for this study who discussed their lives, stories, and aspirations, often over many conversations. We greatly appreciate funding from Tufts University, Save the Children Denmark, DANIDA, and the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 786064 that made this work possible. We acknowledge the many colleagues at Save the Children Denmark, Save the Children South Sudan, Save the Children Iraq, and Tufts University who provided support to the team and the research. We thank George Neville for his research support, and graduate research assistants Gabriela Cipolla and Julie Salloum for their assistance with literature reviews. We are grateful to Ruby Gardner for her time, perspective and engagement in the analysis process.

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

The following brief provides a snapshot of how early marriages transpire, as explained by those who *themselves* married under the age of 18. We center the voices of female youth who are personally and directly affected by early marriage in order to highlight the complex decision-making processes undertaken and the constraints faced by girls and their families living in displacement in South Sudan and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). By analyzing their stories, we are able to understand the degree to which female youth participated in the decision to marry, the main push and pull factors for their early marriages, and the circumstances that might encourage the postponement of marriage until adulthood. These insights put into question some assumptions held in international circles that all early marriages are forced marriages, and that

girls who marry young are victims of their cultures, families, religion, and/or communities. As a result of these misconceptions, programs tend to focus on individual empowerment—including capacitating a girl to “say no” to early marriage—and thus agency becomes defined as the successful avoidance of early marriage.¹⁶ Our results demonstrate that the realities are much more nuanced. Not all early marriages experienced by the participants were forced. Most female youth were involved, to varying degrees, in the marriage decision itself. The push and pull factors leading to early marriages span all sectors, which indicates that programs to prevent and respond to early marriage should be ecological, holistic, and cross-sectoral. Recommendations specific to humanitarian programming are provided in the final section of this brief.

Types of Marriage

The legal age for marriage in the KRI and South Sudan is 18, but customary practice allows for early marriage. The majority of the female youth in the sample married under the age of 18.

The legal age for marriage, and consent to participate in sexual activity, in South Sudan and the KRI is 18. However, rarely are such laws enforced. Customary practice in both countries allows for marriages at younger ages. In the KRI, key informants and participants described that some imams and Yazidi religious leaders¹⁷ officiated marriages for youth under 18 and that couples are later able to validate or legalize their marriage with state authorities after they turn 18. In federal Iraq, girls (not boys) can be married as young as 15 if a judge rules the case “urgent.”¹⁸ According to key informants, some families will travel to federal Iraq to marry their underage daughters. Others might try to forge the birth certificates of their

daughters to make them old enough to legalize their marriages, particularly if they want to travel outside the country. In South Sudan, customary law codes dictate that the marriage itself is the transfer of bridewealth from the groom’s family to the bride’s family—a subject to be discussed at length in subsequent sections of this brief.

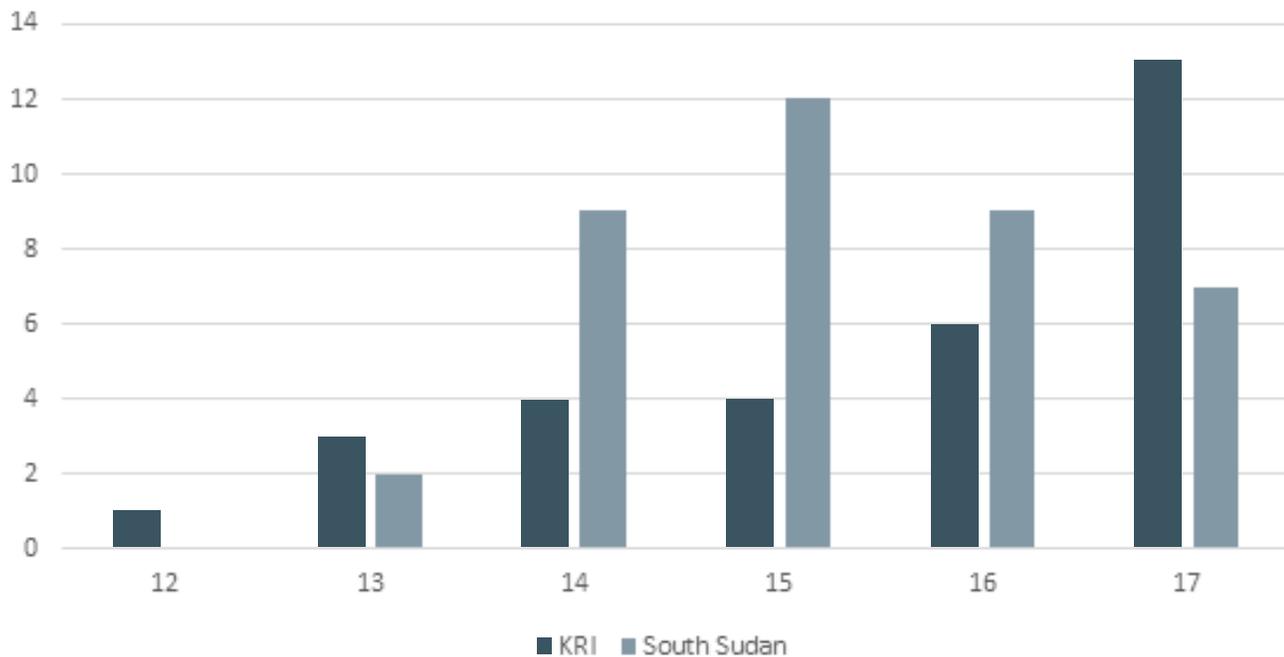
Of the 139 female youth participating in study from both countries, over half (57%; n = 79) were married or had previously been married at the time of the first interview. The majority of these marriages (89%; n = 70) took place when the participant was under the age of 18. The average age of marriage for participants was 16.4 years old in the KRI and 15.6 years old in South Sudan. (See Chart 1 for the distribution of participants who married under age 18 by country). The following pages describe the predominant forms of marriage as explained by the study participants. These practices are as

¹⁶ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Thais Bessa, “Informed Powerlessness: Child Marriage Interventions and Third World Girlhood Discourses,” *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 11 (2019): 1941–45; Michelle Lokot et al., “Conceptualizing ‘agency’ within Child Marriage: Implications for Research and Practice,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 117, no. 105086 (2021).

¹⁷ Key informants explained that all Yazidi marriages are performed by male adult members of one extended family—the Shekhsin family.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, “Iraq: Parliament Rejects Marriage for 8-Year Old Girls” (Human Rights Watch, December 17, 2017), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/17/iraq-parliament-rejects-marriage-8-year-old-girls>.

Chart 1: Age of Marriage by Country if < 18



influenced by norms related to gender, religion, and culture as they are by the experiences of conflict and displacement. Key informants and female youth consistently described that the practice of early marriage had increased in their communities as a result of conflict. This trend was described as a function of increased economic hardship, ongoing insecurity, as well as of individuals and families facing uncertain futures. These descriptions align with other studies that link conflict and humanitarian crisis with increased rates of early marriage.¹⁹

Marriage in the KRI

In the KRI, marriages are categorized as traditional (or arranged, often between family members) or love marriages. Both types of marriage may involve minors. While bridewealth may be exchanged, it is often not considered a driver for marriage.

In the KRI, displaced Yazidis and Syrian refugees described that their marriages took two predominant forms: love marriages and traditional marriages. Traditional marriages were characterized as those that take place at the initiative of and/or with the heavy involvement of parents and/or extended families. Traditional marriages are often, although not always, between cousins (first

degree or more distant). Traditional marriages may also be arranged when the bride and groom are children, although this practice was not a common occurrence in the cohort. More generally, the suitor and his family approach the potential bride's family to discuss the possibility of marriage. If the bride's family is in favor, the female youth is presented with the proposition and given time to reflect on it. A short courtship might ensue where the potential couple meet and/or connect by phone or internet. Key informants and female participants described that forced marriage is *haram* or forbidden in Islam and in the Yazidi religion (Yazidism), and that the girl should always give her consent for marriage. The degree to which this principle was respected in our sample will be discussed in subsequent sections.

Interviews with cohort participants and family members revealed that marriage within extended families is viewed more positively than marriages between non-relatives (often translated as "strangers" in interviews). In interviews with parents of brides, they described a preference for intra-familial marriages because they are able to "know" more about the groom and his family (generally couched in terms of reputation and economics) and have a better sense of the conditions under which their daughter will be living. Marrying a family member thus provides parents with a type of

¹⁹ Girls Not Brides, "Child Marriage in Humanitarian Contexts."

“insurance” that their daughter will be well cared for. They can maintain a connection to her and potentially intervene should the relationship begin to deteriorate or if things go awry.

The other type of marriage was commonly described as a “love marriage.” Love marriages are prompted by the couple themselves—that is, the relationship develops first and subsequently families are approached for their approval for marriage. In this study, love marriages transpired between family members (e.g., cousins) as well as between youth who were unrelated. In Yazidi culture, *ravin* is a type of elopement between age-mates (who are often under 18) that occurs when a couple seeks their parents’ permission to marry, but the request is denied. The couple then “run away” together for a period of time, during which the parents of both parties negotiate the terms of the marriage. In describing her experience of *ravin*, a Yazidi who married at 13 explained, “We escaped for four days, and then my family came and asked us to come home. This is part of the tradition of *ravin*. I refused to return, so they said, ‘OK, we will let you marry him. We will accept this marriage.’ Money was exchanged, and we married.”²⁰

Participants described that *ravin* is today generally considered culturally appropriate, with only occasional negative consequences, usually for the bride. Two participants in the cohort described being shunned by their family as a result of being married through *ravin*. Several key informants and cohort participants described that *ravin* between minors has increased in prevalence over time and is the most common form of early marriage among returnees and displaced Yazidi communities at present.

In both Yazidi and Kurdish cultures, it is generally not acceptable to have romantic or love relations—emotional or physically intimate—outside of marriage. This cultural norm may prompt parents to accept or encourage marriage if or when they see their daughters developing emotional attachments to a boy or man. Encouraging marriage in such situations may be an attempt to prevent gossip or

other reputational harm for a girl and her family. For parents who do not believe that love is an acceptable reason for marriage, they may refuse such proposals and/or force marriage to a family member in order to prevent a love marriage or *ravin*. One Yazidi mother of a cohort member, who was forcibly married herself to her cousin at age 16, described that two of her daughters married through *ravin* because “in our culture, it is not acceptable to be in love with someone. So their father refused to accept the marriage proposals, and they escaped [through *ravin*].”²¹ Unlike in South Sudan, key informants and participants described that pregnancies outside of marriage were extremely rare.

Bridewealth, or the transfer of economic resources from the groom and his family to the bride and/or her family, is common in Syrian Kurdish and Yazidi cultures. For Yazidis, the head of the Yazidi religious community (Baba Sheikh) sets a price based on the “layer” (the social strata, similar to a caste) to which the couple belongs.²² Interestingly, participants described that bridewealth prices have decreased since the conflict in order to accommodate the increased poverty experienced by Yazidis. In Syrian Kurdish culture, the groom’s family offers bridewealth in the form of gold to the bride or as money/goods to set up her new home with her husband. Money may also be given directly to her family. Key informants and cohort participants in the KRI described that bridewealth is generally not substantial enough to be a motivating factor for marriage. In other words, save for two cases to be discussed below—where immediate economic resources were needed to pay for a surgery and a brother’s wedding—bridewealth generally does not change the fundamental economic standing of a family. This finding stands in sharp contrast with South Sudan, where bridewealth was often described as a significant driver of marriage, as discussed below.

For marriages in the KRI, the bride generally moves out of her family home to live with her husband and often her in-laws. Any children born to the couple are considered the children of the husband and his

²⁰ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_41_F_D_24, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

²¹ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_28_F_M_23, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

²² There are three layers, namely *sheikhs*, *pîrs*, and *murîds* in Yazidi society, and intermarriage between layers is forbidden. Additionally, according to key informants, the Baba Sheikh has decreased bridewealth prices since the invasion of ISIS in 2014.

family, which becomes particularly problematic in cases of divorce or widowhood.²³ While polygamy is not religiously forbidden in the KRI, the taking of a subsequent wife is legally contingent on the first wife's consent. Disagreeing with a husband who insists on being polygamous is grounds for divorce in the KRI. All of the married participants were in monogamous relationships with their husbands (except for one, whose husband had kept the presence of another wife secret when he married the participant).

Marriage in South Sudan

Marriages in South Sudan may be arranged (often dictated by the bride's male family members), based on love, or as a result of targeted kidnapping/sexual violence. Unintended pregnancies may also lead to early marriages. Bridewealth is considered a driver of early marriage in South Sudan.

Study participants from South Sudan described three types of marriages. The first is a planned marriage, largely initiated and dictated by the male family members of the potential bride (father, uncles, and/or brothers). For the female youth who underwent this type of marriage, they explained that the father (or uncles or brothers) announced her upcoming marriage to a particular man, and her opinions or preferences were not solicited. It appears that marriage negotiations of this type could have been prompted either by the suitor or the family of the potential bride.

A second form of marriage arises from an established romantic relationship. After a period of courtship, and often in the context of sexual relations, the suitor proposes marriage to the male relatives of his girlfriend. At times, this proposal arose from an unintended pregnancy. Twenty-three female youth in our sample had unexpected pregnancies under the age of 18, and about half of those relationships materialized into a marriage.²⁴ However, not all romantic marriages are prompted by a pregnancy.

The third type of marriage arises from sexual violence. That is, a girl is kidnapped (often translated as “carried away”) by a suitor (and sometimes his friends) and is kept at the man's home for a period of time. The man then communicates with the captee's family, and a marriage is negotiated. A girl may have already refused the advances and/or marriage proposals of the kidnapper, or she may have been observed by him as she went about her daily life. Seven girls in our cohort in South Sudan had been kidnapped, raped, and forcibly married to their abductors. Several participants described that this practice is more common in rural areas than in the displacement camps. This member of the cohort described her experience after she was kidnapped at 14:

What did your mother say when she heard that you were taken by force? “She was concerned about my safety but she said to me that it's a normal practice among Nuer people for a woman to be “carried” to a man's house.”

Have you ever seen this practice happen to any of your friends or a relatives? “I always hear about it but I have never seen someone being carried until I experienced it myself.”²⁵

Bridewealth was a spontaneous subject of discussion in all interviews focusing on marriage in South Sudan. Bridewealth is paid from the groom's family to the bride's family and is usually in the form of cattle or in money that is equal to the market price of a fixed quantity of cattle. When bridewealth is fully paid, the marriage is considered to be official or complete. Separation or unofficial divorce is common when only partial bridewealth was paid, and divorce can only take place if the bride's family pays back the full amount of bridewealth. Unlike in the KRI, bridewealth is described as a driver for marriage in South Sudan. For example, some female participants described that their suitors were refused because her male family members determined the bridewealth was too low. Others described that their husband was selected for them precisely because he could pay a high bridewealth.

²³ For more on the topic of child custody, see additional briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

²⁴ For more on the experience and consequences of early pregnancy in South Sudan, see additional briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

²⁵ Interview with participant # SSB_CO_4_F_M_18, Bentiu, South Sudan.

At times, bridewealth is paid in multiple installments. For several participants in the study, the non-payment of the balance led to separation or divorce, prompted by the bride's father. For cases of unintended pregnancy that does not lead to marriage, a common practice is for the father of the child to pay a "pregnancy price" (in our study, this price was usually three cows) to the woman who conceives and her family. If the pregnancy price has been paid, then when the child turns 7 or 8, it is expected that the father and his family will take custody of the child.²⁶ As in the KRI, the common practice in South Sudan is for the bride to move out of her family home to live with her husband and in-laws following payment of the bridewealth. Children born to this union are considered those of the husband and his family.

The Ideal Age for Marriage

In both country contexts, the majority of participants, including those who married as minors, believe the ideal age for marriage is above 18 years of age.

In the KRI, we asked the cohort participants about their views on the ideal age for marriage, regardless of their own marital status. We asked the same question of family members. The ideal age for marriage cited for girls was between 18 and 30 years, with the most common answers clustering between 20 and 25. Interestingly, even female respondents who had married as minors suggested that marriage should take place later. A few parents who had allowed their daughters to marry under 18 expressed regret and said they wished they had waited until their daughters were in their mid-20s.

In South Sudan, cohort participants and their family members described the ideal age of marriage for females as between 15 and 28. As in the KRI, the majority of responses fell within the 20 to 25 age range. Some participants gave multi-tiered answers, describing that the girls in school should marry later than those who were not in school, highlighting the relationship that exists between school and marriage, a subject to be discussed later in this brief.

Degrees of Participation: Decision-Making and Early Marriage

Not all early marriages are forced marriages. The majority of participants in both countries described partial or full participation in the decision to marry early.

Some members of the cohort in South Sudan and the KRI experienced brutal, forced marriage. And yet, for the rest of the sample, stories of early marriage illustrated a diversity of circumstances, with female youth participating, to varying degrees, in the decision to marry early. Faced with this heterogeneity of experiences, the research

team opted to calibrate, on a scale of 1 to 5, the circumstances under which marriages came about based on the perspective of the participants themselves.²⁷ For this scale, 1 represents no participation in the decision to marry or a "forced" marriage, and 5 represents full participation in the decision to marry.²⁸ The "participation" scale is depicted in Chart 2 and captures only those female youth who married under 18 (n = 70).²⁹ Chart 3 includes the visual distribution by country. Both representations show that not all early marriages are forced marriages, and in fact there exists a wide

²⁶ For more on this topic, see additional briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

²⁷ The research team relied on the basic principles of fuzzy set qualitative case analysis (fsQCA) to create values for each case. We took into account local conditions, cultural context, age, and the text from the girl's own interviews.

²⁸ The values of 2, 3, and 4 comprised a variety of circumstances, including but not limited to: family pressure, unintended pregnancy, loneliness and boredom, a wish to improve economic and educational opportunities, and a desire to follow cultural norms, among others.

²⁹ When reviewing the marriage circumstances of the nine participants who married at age 18 and older in both countries (not depicted in the charts), they all described having partial or full participation in the decision to marry.

Chart 2: Degree of Participation <18 years Full Sample

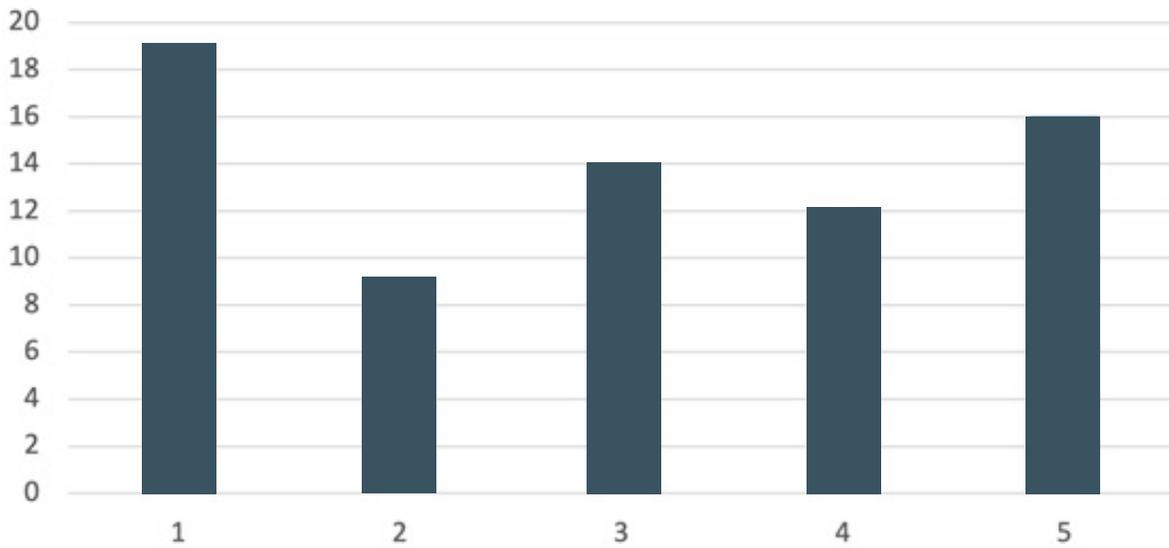
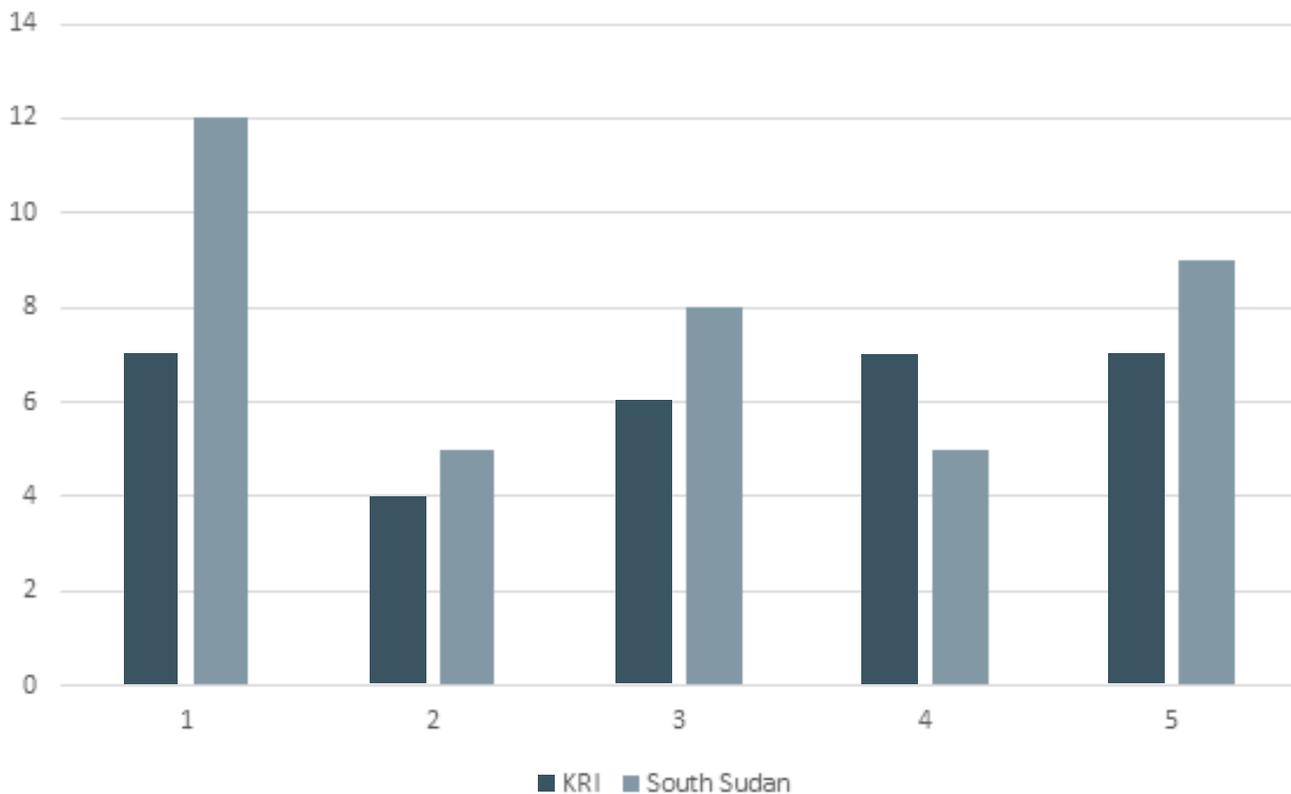


Chart 3: Degree of Participation if < 18, by Country



range of experiences around decision-making, agency, and participation on the part of the girls. We recognize that the marriage process is complex and nuanced and cannot be readily distilled to numbers on a graph. However, we feel that this exercise effectively displays the range and breadth

of experience of the young women and girls within our sample and facilitates further analysis. In the discussion that follows, we investigate trends apparent at either end of this spectrum as well as those that lie in between.

The Circumstances behind Early Marriage in South Sudan

Female youth in South Sudan described that their early marriages occurred through force (prompted by their family or through sexual violence), because they wanted to help their family economically, because they were out of school or feeling idle, because of an unintended pregnancy, or for love.

Forced Marriage in South Sudan

Some female youth in both countries were forced to marry. In South Sudan, seven research participants were kidnapped and forced to marry their abductors. These girls had been targeted—they had been inquired after or watched as they went about their daily activities such as collecting water, going to the market, or socializing with friends. Some female youth in the sample had been kidnapped after they had refused a marriage proposal. The following story is representative of several kidnapping stories that came to light during interviews:

“I was married in 2017 [age 14]. I used to see my [future] husband every day when I went to get water. He was asking me questions about who I am and who my parents are. Every day I found him in the same place, where I went to get water. One day he was with four men, and as I was getting my water, they carried me by force, and I was screaming and calling for help, but they kept telling people that I am their spoiled sister who has slept out of home for three days and that they were going to discipline me. They took me to my [future] husband’s uncle’s home, and I spent three days there. That’s when they went to see my mother and my uncles, and they paid 15 cows.”³⁰

In all of these kidnapping cases save for one, the aggressor successfully negotiated the bridewealth with the girl’s male relatives and the marriage ensued. There was one exception, however, where a 22-year old temporarily postponed a marriage after her kidnapping:

“I got married in 2013. When I was 15, the man that married me kidnapped me when I went to get water from the river. I was alone, and he came with three other men and carried me by force to a taxi. He was covering my mouth, and the other men were holding me by force. He took me to his home, and after one day he sent a message to my family that he had me and they should not look for me. He even sent people with cattle as bridewealth, to show that he intended to marry me soon. My father was very mad when he heard this, and he immediately came to take me from his home, because he said I was too young for marriage, and he returned the cows to the man...”

How did you feel about the situation? “I did not like it, because I did not want to get married at that time. I was very happy when my father took me back home. But after two months my husband kidnapped me again. I had gone to a wedding ceremony, and he kidnapped me with four other men, but this time he took me to a different place and not his home, and after one week he sent word to my family that he had me, and he wants to marry me. He gave 50 cows to my father, and my father agreed to the marriage.”

Did your father talk to you? “No, but I know that he did not want to bring me back home again because my husband kept me for a longer time, and people would start to talk if he brought me back home because I would already be considered a married woman, because I stayed in a man’s house for one week.”

How was this experience for you, the second time? “I was sad. I kept crying for weeks and I felt even bad when my father did not come to get me again. I missed my family. I was not talking to anyone. Even when my husband took me to his home, his mother and sisters tried comforting

³⁰ Interview with participant # SSB_CO_4_F_M_18, Bentiu, South Sudan.

me and treated me well, but I was not happy because it was not my wish to get married.”³¹

This respondent’s description of deep unhappiness is characteristic of the girls who were forcibly married—they all expressed extreme sadness and regret. Another, now divorced at 21, described how she felt about her forced marriage at 16: “I was very sad, I am still very sad, and I blame my father for this life that I have right now because he is the one who forced me to get married. Now I am suffering with my children.”³²

In South Sudan, several participants described being forced into marriage to men chosen by their relatives. In such situations, participants described that the men had been preselected and at times, the bridewealth already paid before the girl was informed. If the girl refused, she was frequently physically abused and/or thrown out of the house until she conceded. One girl described her sadness having been forcibly married at 14: “I didn’t even know his name.”³³ In one brutal case, an older sister arranged for the sexual assault and subsequent marriage of her 13-year-old sister. The participant explained that her sister had been “complaining to our mother about the life we were living. She kept saying that the man had money to help us.”³⁴ Bridewealth as a driver for marriage was a common explanation for forced marriage in interviews with both female youth and key informants. As with all marriage negotiations in South Sudan, fathers frequently reign over forced marriages, but uncles and brothers are also implicated. This participant described the circumstances of her sister’s forced marriage as a minor:

“I remember three of my uncles came to our home and told my mother that it was time for my older sister to get married. My mother refused, she tried to fight them but they really beat her badly. She did not walk for one week. My uncles took my sister with them...My uncles, they were

brothers of my father. Since my father died, they felt like they are the ones responsible for us.”

These same uncles later forced the respondent to marry at 16.

Stories of Bravery and Escape in South Sudan

Within our cohort were stories of female youth who managed to escape forced marriage. Often, mothers were instrumental in defending their daughters. In two cases, authorities were sought out for protection. This 17-year-old described what happened to her at 15:

“I have uncles who live here, and they were threatening my mother and me about giving me out for marriage. In 2019, my three uncles told us that there is a man who wants to marry me, and they are ready to have the marriage negotiations with him. My mother refused, and they beat us up because we are women and we cannot argue with men. My mother and I had to run, and we went to report them to the child protection agencies in the POC [Protection of Civilians site]. My uncles were threatened with arrest if they give me out for marriage, and so they stopped.”³⁶

One participant had been kidnapped and forcibly married but managed to run away from her husband and seek help from the police. The police helped her locate her family, and she is currently in hiding.³⁷

A handful of the respondents had fled forced marriages and were using the displacement camps as a place for cover. This 16-year-old described that her father had betrothed her to a friend of his, and the bridewealth had already been transferred: “I was supposed to go to him, but I pretended to be very sick, and I asked my father if I could go to the hospital. He accepted, and I have been here [in the POC] ever since. I am hiding from my father.”³⁸ Another escaped through a fence the day after she married and found a woman in the POC who

³¹ Interview with participant # SS_CO_27_F_M_22, Juba, South Sudan.

³² Interview with participant # SS_CO_29_F_DIV_21, Juba, South Sudan. For more on mental health and marriage, see additional briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

³³ Interview with participant # SSB_CO_8_F_M_17, Bentiu, South Sudan.

³⁴ Interview with participant # SS_CO_36_F_DIV_22, Juba, South Sudan.

³⁵ Interview with participant # SSB_CO_25_F_M_20, Bentiu, South Sudan.

³⁶ Interview with participant # SSB_CO_6_F_U_17, Bentiu, South Sudan.

³⁷ Interview with participant # SSB_CO_19_F_D_20, Bentiu, South Sudan.

³⁸ Interview with participant # SSB_CO_1_F_DIV_16, Bentiu, South Sudan.

knew her mother. The woman has been hiding the participant ever since.³⁹ And another became suicidal after being forced to marry, ran away from her husband, and eventually found her way to the POC.⁴⁰

Marriage as Helping Family in South Sudan

One reason for early marriage, explained by at least four cohort members in South Sudan, was the wish to help the natal family via the bridewealth that the marriage would bring. For some, their words were tinged with a sense of obligation, particularly when considering their young age at the time of marriage. This 20-year-old described how she was married at 13: “My mother said, ‘You have to get married because he has money and he can take care of us.’ So I said, ‘OK, if this is what you want, if this will help the family, I will do it.’”⁴¹ For others, marrying for the bridewealth bestowed on them a sense of pride, particularly in a situation of extreme poverty and deprivation. A young woman disabled through a war incident described her decision-making process:

“I thought about the struggles that my mother goes through to feed us, and so I just decided to get married so that I can at least reduce some responsibilities. I am the first-born child. I told my mother about the man’s intention for marriage, and she accepted it. My husband then came with his father and uncles to meet my older brothers. He paid 30 cows, and I went to his home.”⁴²

Female youth in the sample who married to help their families via the bridewealth payments were often the first born. They also generally came from families where the father had passed away, so there were limited sources of economic livelihoods.

Out of School and “Nothing to Do” in South Sudan

Recent studies have underlined the relationship between early marriage and a lack of access to or enrollment in school in low- and middle-income countries.⁴³ This juxtaposition between early marriage and education was present in interviews with displaced female youth in both South Sudan and the KRI. In South Sudan, at least two participants, one married at 15 and the other at 16 and neither in school, described that they were happy to marry because they “had nothing else to do.”⁴⁴ Another described that she “was happy to get married and bear children because that was what was expected of me. I had nothing else to do at home. If you become old enough it’s good that you get married and go out of your house.”⁴⁵ Many participants believed that marriage could provide them with a different life, with an alternative set of responsibilities, and with different social connections than they had in their natal home. In other cases, not being in school became a justification for uncles or fathers to marry their nieces/daughters off as minors.

In South Sudan, as in the KRI, there were a few cases where girls negotiated a return to school after marriage as part of the terms of their engagement.⁴⁶ These were usually in families where there was strong and sustained support for the girls’ education.

Love Marriages in South Sudan

More than a third of the cohort participants who married under 18 in South Sudan described marrying for love. Within this category is the subset of girls who married following an unplanned pregnancy with a boyfriend.⁴⁷ Unlike the KRI, social norms in South Sudan permit males and females to have emotional and sexual relationships outside of marriage. Participants used language such as:

³⁹ Interview with participant # SS_CO_24_F_EP_21, Juba, South Sudan.

⁴⁰ Interview with participant # SSB_CO_24_F_M_20, Bentiu, South Sudan.

⁴¹ Interview with participant # SS_CO_17_F_M_23, Juba, South Sudan.

⁴² Interview with participant # SSB_CO_2_F_DIS_20, Juba, South Sudan.

⁴³ Quentin Wodon et al., “Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls” (Washington, DC: The World Bank, July 2018); Bruce Rasmussen et al., “Evaluating the Employment Benefits of Education and Targeted Interventions to Reduce Child Marriage,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 65, no. Supplement (2019): S16-24.

⁴⁴ Interview with participant # SS_CO_29_F_M_20, Juba, South Sudan and # SS_CO_21_F_M_23, Juba, South Sudan.

⁴⁵ Interview with participant # SS_CO_29_F_M_20, Juba, South Sudan.

⁴⁶ Interview with participants # SS_CO_8_F_EP_18, Juba, South Sudan and # SS_CO_26_F_M_18, Juba, South Sudan.

⁴⁷ For more information about early pregnancy and marriage in South Sudan, see additional briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

“We loved each other;”⁴⁸ “I was happy, I love him, he is a good person;”⁴⁹ and “I was happy because my husband was my friend.”⁵⁰ The spontaneous descriptions of love, happiness, and connection are in stark contrast to the emotions described by cohort members who were forcibly married.

For some, love-based relationships happened against the parent’s wishes—because the suitor did

not have sufficient economic resources in the form of bridewealth or because he came from a different clan. Several of these couples eloped. In at least two cases, when bridewealth was not paid or only partially paid, the bride’s family members (usually father and/or uncles) harassed the husband and forced a divorce.⁵¹

The Circumstances behind Early Marriage in the KRI

Female youth in the KRI described that their early marriages occurred through force (prompted by her family), because of family pressure, to improve their opportunities, to have a sense of meaning and decrease social isolation, to have protection against harassment, or for love.

Forced Marriage in the KRI

As in South Sudan, forced marriages in the KRI were generally orchestrated by male family members (fathers, uncles, brothers) of the girls and young women. While bridewealth was regularly described as contributing factor to forced marriage in South Sudan, respondents mentioned bridewealth less often in the KRI. However, three cohort members described that they were forcibly married in order for their families to receive bridewealth. Two, one married at age 13 and the other at 14, described that their parents needed money to pay for a brother’s wedding.⁵² The third, who was 17 years old at the time of betrothal, explained the combination of factors that prompted her forced marriage:

“I was considered “too late” [too old] to marry. I was refusing because I wanted to work and study. My family harassed me, and they were violent because I was postponing...My father and brothers beat me...And my brother was sick

[He needed a life-saving surgery.]...The person I married would provide *mahar* [bridewealth] to help my brother. So, I said yes only to help my brother...I married someone without my heart.”⁵³

A relatively common scenario in the KRI sample was forced marriage following the disclosure of a romantic relationship. As mentioned above, it is generally considered unacceptable, particularly for girls, to have emotional attachments or romantic and sexual contact of any form with males, including what might be considered “having a crush” on someone. Such relationships outside of marriage have the potential to generate community gossip, incite harassment, and/or otherwise tarnish the reputation of the girl and her family, including harming her prospects for a future traditional marriage. With such strict codes of conduct, several girls in the study were forced to marry someone else after a romantic relationship had been unearthed. As described by this cohort participant of her experience when she was 13, “My parents knew I was in love with someone else, so they made me marry my cousin.”⁵⁴ This was the case for another participant who was forced to marry her cousin in similar circumstances.⁵⁵ As described above, Yazidi parents at times took action to marry their

⁴⁸ Interview with participant # SS_CO_44_F_DIV_23, Juba, South Sudan.

⁴⁹ Interview with participant # SS_CO_17_F_M_23, Juba, South Sudan.

⁵⁰ Interview with participant # SS_CO_35_F_M_23, Juba, South Sudan.

⁵¹ Interview with participant # SS_CO_41_F_DIV_22, Juba, South Sudan and # SS_CO_43_F_DIV_21, Juba, South Sudan.

⁵² Interview with participant # KRI_CO_21_F_M_23, Kurdistan Region of Iraq and # KRI_CO_112_F_M_22 Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁵³ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_4_F_D_23, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁵⁴ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_25_F_M_19, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁵⁵ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_28_F_M_23, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

daughters as they feared the girls would use *ravin* as a way to marry the person they loved as opposed to a person selected by the parents.

In addition to the above descriptions, other participants in the study described that they were abused by immediate and extended family in order to force a marriage. This included physical, emotional, and sexual violence, as well as social deprivation.⁵⁶ For example, one cohort member was forbidden to leave her tent until she agreed to marry. She stayed inside the family tent for 21 days.⁵⁷ The stepmother of a different cohort member arranged for her sexual abuse at the age of 12 in order to force a marriage to get the girl to leave her natal home.⁵⁸

Yes, but under Duress

Aside from these brutal and harrowing forms of forced marriage, an additional subset of cohort participants in the KRI described “accepting” their marriage, but under duress. This generally involved extreme pressure by parents or extended family members (often uncles). A Syrian refugee who was 17 at the time explained, “I didn’t want to marry because he was 17 years older than me. Then my parents insisted. They said that he is a good person, you will be happy with him, he will protect you. So I went to Syria and married.”⁵⁹ A second described that after having arrived in the KRI as refugees with her family, her family’s tent burned, worsening their already poor economic situation. With five family members living in one room, a friend of her father proposed. She initially said no but eventually caved under her family’s pressure.⁶⁰

Opportunity, Meaning, and Place in the KRI

In the KRI, many of the girls who participated in the decision to marry early did so to access or expand opportunities available to them. They described that marriage, for them, may include love but was also tied to new possibilities and potential life improvements. For example, several cohort participants accepted marriage proposals from

Yazidi or Syrian refugees currently living in Europe. These suitors were either extended family or were known by family members who have themselves resettled. These marriage arrangements offered the girls the opportunity to reach Europe and—they hoped—have a better future.

The desire for resettlement in Europe was a common goal among respondents in the cohort. Moving to Europe represented an opportunity to pursue studies, find employment, have a secure life free from war, avoid sexual harassment and gossip, and/or be free from the gaze of neighbors and community members who scrutinize the behavior of female youth. Such sentiments are found in the words of this 19-year-old Yazidi respondent: “In Europe, no matter if you are a mother, single, or married, you can work, and no one will talk about you. But here if I would want to work, people would make a shame of me.”⁶¹ A Syrian refugee longs for Europe, imagining a place where she can break free of strict gender norms:

“No one interferes in the other people’s lives. There is more freedom. Each person can do what she wants. Freedom of speech, opinion, work. For example, I’m trying to work here [in an upscale hotel]. If people heard I am working in a hotel, it would be a crisis. I would be seen as a prostitute. For me it is normal, I don’t give a space for any man to harass me. Maybe he will try, but I will refuse. But in the people’s minds, they think you have hundreds of relationships if you were in a place like here.”⁶²

Parents are also aware of the possibilities between marriage and resettlement. As described by one mother of a Syrian teenage girl living in a refugee camp:

“Half of the girls in the camp are wishing and praying for a fiancé in Europe.”

Are these family members or strangers? “They are not complete strangers. You might know a

⁵⁶ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_38_F_W_35, Kurdistan Region of Iraq and # KRI_CO_17_F_D_19, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁵⁷ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_25_F_M_19, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁵⁸ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_100_F_D_20, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁵⁹ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_16_F_D_23, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶⁰ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_26_F_M_21, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶¹ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_25_F_M_19, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶² Interview with participant # KRI_CO_38_F_W_35, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

neighbor who has family members in Europe, for example.”

*And do the families here accept such proposals? “For sure they would accept—they see the poverty here. Why wouldn’t they let her have a better life?”*⁶³

On the flip side, perceived restrictions related to resettlement processes may unintentionally encourage early marriages. For example, at least two youth in the cohort married early because they feared that they would not be able to resettle with their families if they “aged out” of the process by turning 18. Faced with the prospect of leaving their daughter alone in the KRI, a number of families sought to secure their daughters’ marriages prior to resettlement.⁶⁴

Other participants who married as minors described that marriage provided them with an opportunity to leave their immediate family’s home. Some describe leaving an abusive family behind.⁶⁵ Others described that their husband and in-laws allowed them more freedoms than their natal families.⁶⁶ And yet others described that their in-laws provided them with a better economic situation than they had previously.⁶⁷ These various factors illustrate the complexity of marriage decisions and the wide range of considerations that underage girls and their families must weigh when deciding if and when marriage should take place.

Participants also described finding meaning in marriage. One salient example is this female youth who married at age 16. She described that her mother had died of cancer when she was a child. Her mother’s dying wish was for her to marry her cousin. Fulfilling this wish provided the girl with a sense of purpose and a feeling of closeness to her mother.⁶⁸

An Antidote to Social Isolation in the KRI

Female youth in the KRI described that social isolation and foreseeing a bleak future played a

role in their decision to marry young. This was particularly pronounced for girls who had either no access to school or had dropped out due to learning difficulties or medical problems. A lack of space for girls to congregate, particularly in camps, heightened the sense of social isolation among many in the cohort. One Syrian refugee with no formal education, who was located in a camp, suffered from intense loneliness and symptoms of depression. She described:

“Before [in Syria], we were living in houses, attending school, seeing friends...Now everyone is a stranger. I don’t have friends, I don’t have school, we don’t know anyone. We don’t have a routine in our daily lives...We don’t have a specific time when we wake up. We don’t do anything all day; we just stay in the tent. Nothing to do, nowhere to go...For sure getting married young is not a good thing. But now we are living in an emergency situation, people don’t know their future...All of the girls my age, we need someone to trust and listen to us and support us, to not be against us. We need someone to share our feelings with.”⁶⁹

She married and moved to Syria during the study and described finding the social connection she had been seeking in her new husband and a profound sense of meaning in becoming a new mother.

As in South Sudan, many participants in the KRI described that early marriage is more likely to occur when a girl is not enrolled in school or is unsuccessful in school. Marriage thus becomes something to do, an occupation, and a new role that may permit girls to have more freedom of movement and, thus, new experiences. The research team did, however, hear from key informants that it is common for “continued education” to be a part of a negotiation for marriage to an underage girl. In other words, the groom and his family will commit to funding the girl to continue with school. However, within our sample, these promises were often not kept. There were a few notable exceptions, such

⁶³ Interview with family member of participant # KRI_CO_35_FAM_U_17, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶⁴ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_101_F_M_21, Kurdistan Region of Iraq and # KRI_CO_113_F_M_20, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶⁵ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_26_F_M_21, Kurdistan Region of Iraq and # KRI_CO_31_F_W_11, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and # KRI_CO_37_M_19, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶⁶ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_26_F_M_21 and # KRI_CO_19_F_M_18, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶⁷ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_11_F_U_17, Kurdistan Region of Iraq and # KRI_CO_19_F_M_18, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶⁸ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_37_F_M_19, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁶⁹ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_11_F_U_17, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

as one cohort member who did continue school not only after marriage but also after she became a mother. She completed university with extensive support from her husband. The continuation of education was a condition for marriage at the behest of both the girl and her father, who was extremely supportive of her studies.

For some respondents, marriage, and particularly love marriages, provided an emotional antidote to the pain of loss and/or the suffering experienced during the war. As described by this female youth who married at age 15:

“We left everything—our happiness, our house, our relatives, our childhood, our memories, our streets, our schools. We left it all behind us, and we came to Iraq. When I married, I felt like I had a friend. I felt free with him, and I could talk to him and be anywhere with him. He loved me, and more than that, he respected my ideas and my thinking.”⁷⁰

Marriage as Protection and a Fresh Start in the KRI

In the KRI, female youth and their relatives described a continual pressure from family, neighbors, and the community to behave within specific parameters that are highly gendered. These norms, as described above, dictate how different sexes interact. Such norms are enforced through a form of social policing, in which girls are watched closely with regard to how they dress and speak, where they go and with whom and when, and other types of public behavior. Rumors and gossip are employed as a common weapon to insult and bring shame upon girls and family members. In addition, cohort members and their relatives described that girls and women are often blamed for bringing sexual harassment upon themselves. An additional form of abuse relates to a type of revenge or blackmail in which boyfriends publicize photos or communications of their (ex) girlfriends. The consequences of such actions are long-lasting and can effectively destroy the reputation of a girl and her family, including her prospects for future marriage. This type of slander can have profound mental health consequences for the girls. Several female youth in communities where the study took

place committed suicide following this type of experience during the course of the study. (These girls were not study participants.)⁷¹

Participants described that harassment is a serious problem and one that unmarried girls in particular face regularly. Cohort members described having to curtail their movements to avoid the risk of harassment. One participant left school because her mother worried that she would become a victim of this form of abuse. A number of cohort members and key informants felt that harassment had increased over time. They hypothesized that displacement had brought many different groups and clans together in the camps. This “mixing” may have broken former social ties that had ensured that codes of conduct dictating respectful behavior towards girls and women were respected.

Marriage, for some, was viewed as way to protect against and prevent sexual harassment. It was also described as an antidote for girls who had already experienced sexual harassment by strangers or abuse by ex-boyfriends. Respondents explained that marriage can provide such girls with an escape from their “tarnished reputations” and a possible restoration of their dignity. Marriage may also provide a geographic solution if the bride is able to move to a different area with her husband. Several of the participants disclosed that they had been victims of this type of abuse and as such, welcomed the “fresh start” that their marriages brought them. As described above, parents may wish to encourage marriage if they fear that their daughters may be a victim of sexual harassment or if they are aware that their daughter is in a relationship with someone. As described by this mother of a 17-year-old cohort participant, “Families that encourage early marriage may have problems with their girls talking to boys, so they agree to early marriage to make sure there is not bad talk about their daughters.”⁷²

Love Marriages in the KRI

In addition to the wide range of factors that might push or pull female youth to marry early, there was a subset of participants who described having married exclusively for love. These participants described

⁷⁰ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_107_F_M_23, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁷¹ For more on the mental health of female youth in displacement, see additional briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

⁷² Interview with participant # KRI_CO_104_F_U_17, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

that they *first* chose their mates, and subsequently the parents gave their blessing for the marriage. For some, love marriages, including those that followed a *ravin* process, materialized in opposition to a planned traditional marriage (to someone she did not want to marry). For example, this youth who married at 16 explained, “I knew him from school. He asked my parents to for my hand, but my father refused because I had to marry my cousin. Then we decided to go through *ravin*.”⁷³ A widowed cohort member with a 16-year-old daughter explained that she encouraged her daughter to marry her boyfriend because:

“I wanted her to marry her boyfriend to avoid her marrying someone she doesn’t love. Like what happened to me. If it wasn’t her boyfriend, the family—my uncle—would have made her marry someone of *his* choice, not hers. But she and her husband are of the same generation, and they love each other. Without love, life is very difficult. You need to have love with everything you do. Life is a love story.”⁷⁴

While some parents may force marriage to prevent their daughters from engaging in romantic

relationships, the inverse was also found to be true, as evidenced in the previous quote. That is, some parents encouraged a love marriage, despite a girl’s young age, once they caught wind of an existing relationship. This also seemed to be a way to legitimize an informal relationship and thus prevent the possible reputational damage for the girl and her family. One participant who married at 17 described, “My father agreed because my husband is a respected man from a good family.”⁷⁵ Another, who was 14 at the time, described that her parents were initially against the idea of marriage, but eventually decided to accept her husband’s proposal “because they knew we were in love.”⁷⁶

At times, love marriages created conflict in the family, such as a 17-year-old who had secured passage with her family to Germany but ultimately decided to stay in the KRI in order to marry the man she loved.⁷⁷ Her family was very disappointed with her decision. In other cases, study participants described being isolated from their own families after having decided to marry through *ravin*.

Spotlight on Female Youth with Disabilities and Marriage

This study followed a subsample of female youth living with intellectual, physical, and emotional disabilities in South Sudan and the KRI (n = 12). In speaking with these participants, they highlighted the extent of stigmatization and marginalization experienced by girls and young women living with disabilities. In most study locations, there were no available resources or specialized services for people living with disabilities, including any adaptations for education.

In South Sudan, three of the female youth living with disabilities had unintended pregnancies—

none of which led to marriage. One participant with a physical disability explained, “Girls with disabilities are not marriageable,”⁷⁸ a theme that was heard in both South Sudan and the KRI. Another explained that a man had courted her with promises of marriage. After she gave birth, the proposal disappeared, although the father wanted to claim the child. He told her, “I don’t want to marry a cripple.”⁷⁹ Others in South Sudan explained that girls with disabilities are at times exploited by men, are seen as having low worth (e.g., will bring a low bridewealth), or may be pressured to marry into less desirable situations (e.g., to be one of many wives). In contrast, one female youth, who had been shot in the leg while

⁷³ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_27_F_M_20, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁷⁴ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_28_F_W_35, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁷⁵ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_109_F_M_20, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁷⁶ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_119_F_M_20, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁷⁷ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_102_F_M_18, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁷⁸ Interview with participant # SS_CO_1_F_DIS_19, Juba, South Sudan.

⁷⁹ Interview with participant # SSB_CO_16_DIS_20, Bentiu, South Sudan.

fleeing conflict and later had the leg amputated at age 14, married at age 18. She described having a positive relationship with her husband. She said that her marriage brought her a good amount of bridewealth (30 cows), and that she regularly received support from community members due to her issues with mobility.

In the KRI, female youth living with disabilities described that they did not see marriage in their future, as described by this 23-year-old:

“Because of my situation, I know that marriage is not possible. So I have removed this idea from my head. Disabled people don’t have the right to love. If a man loved someone with special needs, his family would say, ‘How could you be in love? She won’t be able to take care of your house!’”⁸⁰

Participants with disabilities described the multiple barriers they faced in an environment

without tailored supports and due to living in communities that see them as damaged. Many girls explained having to leave their studies due to their disabilities and expressed extreme regret over this. Others could not access or afford proper medical attention to address the suffering related to their conditions. However, some displayed a high degree of resilience, such as one Yazidi youth who has dedicated her life to raising the awareness of community members to people living with special needs. Another has become very active in her church, despite potential negative repercussions from her family and community for converting to Christianity from Islam. And another has tried several business ventures despite having severe mobility issues.

Why Not Marry? Perspectives of Those Who Postponed Marriage: The Role of Education⁸¹

Education appears to be a protective factor against early marriage in both the KRI and South Sudan.

In the KRI, many of the participants view marriage as the end point of a girl’s formal education. Accordingly, many of the unmarried female youth in the sample described that they did not want to marry until they completed their education (for some this was high school, and for others this was university) or until after they had started their own career. For the sub-sample of girls married at age 18 or above, they described that it was the completion of education and/or the beginning of paid work that

prompted them to consider marriage. Many of the female youth in the KRI who were unmarried or who married as adults had parents who placed a high value on education for their daughters—despite the parents having no or low levels of education themselves. Parents prioritized education because they wished for their sons and daughters to have a “better life” in terms of opportunity and economics. Education was also seen by parents as a way for their daughters to have more freedom in terms of gender roles, and more skills with which to stand up for themselves in the face of a “patriarchal society.” Education was seen as a way to delay the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood.⁸²

⁸⁰ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_20_F_DIS_23, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁸¹ For more on education, early marriage, and female youth in displacement, see additional briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

⁸² Interview with participant # KRI_CO_6_F_U_17_FAM, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

In South Sudan, the juxtaposition of education with marriage was also present in interviews with participants, their family members, and key informants. As described above, not being in school was seen as a justification for parents and uncles to impose or force a marriage. On the flip side, unmarried girls (who were above the average age of marriage) explained that their parents prioritized education over marriage. For at least four cohort members, mothers played a particularly powerful role in supporting their daughters to stay in school

and at times fiercely defended them against early marriage. One 18-year-old described her parent's views toward marriage:

“My mother always encouraged us to finish school first before we decide to get married. She says that if we educate ourselves we can live a different life than she did. Nuer people force girls to marry to get cows out of them and nothing else. My father? No, he has never talked to my sister and me about marriage.”

Cultural Constraints and a Wish for Change

Female youth recognize and name early and forced marriage as one of the main challenges displaced girls face. Improved access to education, increased economic opportunities, proactive leadership, and the eradication of bridewealth were proposed as solutions.

The international community has identified early marriage as a problem that needs to be solved through various legal, economic, and humanitarian interventions. But what do female youth *themselves* think? As part of the last round of interviews, we asked participants to reflect on the norms within their cultures that they would like to change and those they would like to keep. In the KRI, half of the respondents spontaneously described early marriage and forced marriage as practices that should be eradicated. This included some girls who had themselves married early and participated in the decision to do so. When criticizing the practice of early marriage, a number of participants focused on the burdens of domestic duties and motherhood faced by girls. Others described that marriage and motherhood prevent a girl from reaching her full potential, by cutting off opportunities for education and work. In the words of an unmarried 17-year-old, for someone who marries early, “they would not have had experienced anything!”⁸⁴ Another

downside attributed by cohort participants and their family members to the practice of early marriage is the view that such unions are more likely to end in divorce. Divorce has profound consequences for the woman when it comes to harassment and marginalization from family and community, economic insecurity, and difficulty maintaining custody of children, among other factors.⁸⁵

In a group interview with several Yazidis who had been married as minors, respondents described the problem of the cultural norms in their home communities that may encourage girls to drop out of school (usually around age 14) and to marry early. One solution arrived at together was to encourage more training of specific skill sets that would lead to employment opportunities for unmarried girls and/or girls who had been unsuccessful in school or discouraged from completing their studies. As described by one member of the group:

“Sometimes it is hard to change norms directly. But if you provided girls with livelihood skills and opportunities, because families need money, they will let them work. The girls will develop their skills and become more independent. Everyone will be happy for them to do this, and it will slowly change the norms, including inequality.”⁸⁶

⁸³ Interview with participant # SSB_CO_11_EP_18, Bentiu, South Sudan.

⁸⁴ Interview with participant # KRI_CO_35_F_U_17, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

⁸⁵ For more explanation on the situation of divorced female youth, see additional briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

⁸⁶ Group interview # Group_YAZ_October_2021, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Another solution offered by this group and other Yazidi participants to reduce gender inequality (including early marriage and inequitable access to school) was to involve more explicitly the person whom they thought was the most influential in their community—the religious leader of Yazidism or the Baba Sheikh. They explained that the Baba Sheikh, through his religious teachings, had the potential to change rigid gender norms that disadvantage girls and women. Syrian Kurdish participants, on the other hand, did not think that an imam or mullah would hold as much sway in their own communities.

In South Sudan, participants wanted to change the cultural norms that prevented girls from going to school and those that allowed for intra-community, inter-community, and partner or family violence. However, the most frequently cited wish was to stop early marriage, forced marriage, and the general practice of bridewealth. This 22-year-old, who was forcibly married at age 13 and is now divorced, described:

“I would remove forced marriage because if somebody forces you to do something that you do not wish for in your heart, then they make you feel very hopeless about your life and you can even do bad things like things like killing yourself, because it is not your wish.”⁸⁷

Other participants talked more specifically about the gender inequalities linked to being female, and the role that bridewealth plays in early marriage and forced marriage. For example, one cohort member, forcibly married at 16, described:

“In my culture, if you are a girl people only see your use when you get married. Your mother will teach you how to cook and other things so that you will know them when you get married, and they tell you if you get married you will do this is for your husband. I think always telling girls about marriage is not very good because they will only think that marriage is the greatest thing in their life. Girls should not be seen as something that will bring people wealth and many cows. They should not be forced for

marriage because of getting cows for her family or her brothers to marry.”⁸⁸

This mother of a cohort member described these norms in similar terms:

“For us in Nuer culture, it is normal for a girl to get married at 15. Even I got married at 15. People here, they value cows more than anything. When a girl reaches a certain age, it will be time to get the cows. They just wait for her to reach that age, and they see their problems will be solved by this girl.”⁸⁹

A 20-year-old married girl described her opposition to bridewealth:

“In my culture when it comes to marriage, I see that people care a lot about having cows, and that is the first priority and not the happiness of the man or woman. I feel like the payment of bridewealth should be stopped, because even during divorce, you are forced to pay back the cows that were paid as bridewealth. And if you don’t return them then you cannot be allowed to divorce, even if you’re in a very bad situation in your marriage.”⁹⁰

Critiques of patriarchy and the practice of bridewealth were also present in conversations with key informants in South Sudan. For these participants as well as female youth and their family members, there was a general sense that these norms were “cultural” and difficult, if not impossible, to change. Many also described that early marriage as a means to secure bridewealth had become more widespread as a result of the conflict, displacement, and the resulting economic deprivation.

⁸⁷ Interview with participant # SS_CO_36_F_DIV_22 Juba, South Sudan.

⁸⁸ Interview with participant # SS_CO_6_F_M_22 Juba, South Sudan.

⁸⁹ Interview with family member of participant # SS_CO_6_FAM_M_22, Juba, South Sudan.

⁹⁰ Interview with participant # SS_CO_29_F_M_20_D Juba, South Sudan.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has shown that not all early marriages are forced marriages. While some marriages certainly are, female youth participate, in various ways, in the decision to marry early. Some marriages involve love—either with the support of family or against family’s wishes. Others are pursued to fulfill cultural or family ideals, to combat loneliness, isolation, and boredom, to provide economic benefit to one’s natal family, to improve one’s future opportunities, or as protection against family or community violence. Each of these decisions is influenced by structural constraints, including patriarchy and gender inequality, and these decisions are largely shaped by the experience of conflict and displacement. For the study participants, the experience of conflict and displacement has influenced their lives in a myriad of ways, including: 1) increased poverty and economic pressure; 2) disrupted social ties; 3) difficulty accessing or remaining enrolled in school; 4) increased exposure to community violence; 5) trauma and poor mental health functioning; and 6) limiting of future opportunities. Changes brought about by conflict impact decision-making for all life choices, including marriage. The following recommendations for humanitarian organizations follow from this research:

- » Humanitarian organizations should recognize that early marriage awareness campaigns, which tend to focus on individual empowerment, will likely not influence the decision to marry early because they do not address the wider context of patriarchy, gender inequality, and conditions stemming from conflict and displacement.
- » Humanitarian organizations should recognize that early marriages exist on a continuum from forced to voluntary. They should seek to understand these nuances and the differing degrees to which girls participate in their own decision to marry based on conflict and local context. Any intervention to prevent or respond to early marriage should be premised on this knowledge. Programs addressing early marriage should be integrated across sectors to better address the drivers of early marriage as outlined in this study and should seek to be gender transformative.⁹¹

- » Forced marriage is a form of sexual and gender-based violence and is a human rights violation. Humanitarian organizations should strengthen referral pathways for legal support and access to safe spaces, if available. In addition, locally accessible protection mechanisms should be reinforced. These include legal and customary mechanisms such as law enforcement, camp management, religious leaders, and humanitarian protection programs.
- » Humanitarian organizations should improve access to information about sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and contraception, particularly in South Sudan. Such programs should also target mothers after they have given birth.
- » Humanitarian organizations should design mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programs that address the psychological consequences of war, distress related to uncertainty about future, and ongoing protection issues in the family or community.
- » Humanitarian organizations should create adolescent-friendly, gender-responsive spaces for female youth to congregate in order to engage in social and educational activities. Such spaces will help to decrease social isolation, particularly for female youth outside of school.
- » Humanitarian organizations should expand livelihood programs to target and include female youth.
- » Humanitarian organizations should improve the economic security of displaced families to decrease the pressure of marrying daughters for bridewealth.
- » Humanitarian organizations should increase access to education, including adaptations for youth with physical, emotional, and intellectual disabilities.
- » Humanitarian organizations should improve protection mechanisms in communities in order to decrease sexual harassment and other insecurities that prevent girls and women from

⁹¹ See for example, the Child Early and Forced Marriage and Unions Conceptual Framework for Change, as part of the Child Marriage Research to Action Network (CRANK) sponsored by Girls Not Brides, forthcoming May 2022.

engaging in school and other activities outside the home.

- » Humanitarian organizations should ensure that resettlement policies are clearly articulated to concerned families in order to decrease fears that families will be split if a minor reaches the age of 18 during the resettlement process.
- » Partner violence and violence from male relatives targeting female youth was commonly described in both South Sudan and the KRI. Humanitarian organizations need to understand local patterns of violence and their underlying causes, and support men and boys through various interventions to decrease violent behavior.
- » In both case study contexts, there were many cases of female youth and families delaying marriage. Understanding local patterns of positive deviance and integrating this knowledge into programs across sectors is essential to preventing early marriage. Further research is needed to understand the positive factors that support positive deviance in order to work towards creating a broader enabling environment.
- » Female youth who have postponed marriage often have higher rates of education and/or are currently working. Humanitarian organizations can directly support such individuals, and/or if appropriate, help them connect with or mentor other female youth and their families.
- » Humanitarian organizations should engage with influential community leaders and other local, community-based protection mechanisms to identify where there are locally relevant openings to influence change regarding sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and early marriage.
- » Further research is needed to understand the experiences of female youth in other contexts and countries, and to include boys and men and the children of early unions in research designs. Longitudinal research should be supported in order to have a deeper understanding of this complex and intimate phenomena and how individuals, families, and communities change over time. In addition, there needs to be further research measuring the effectiveness of

interventions seeking to prevent and respond to early marriage.

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