

Child marriage in emergencies: new evidence from the Syrian crisis

By Camilla Burkot
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A new [report](#) [pdf] from CARE published last week makes a strong case that the issue of child marriage in emergencies cannot be neglected any longer. Titled 'To protect her honour', the report details new research showing that Syrian families are increasingly marrying off their daughters at a young age as a strategy for protecting them from rape and abuse in the conflict, and (less commonly) for reducing the cost of providing food and shelter for large families.

Though child marriage was already recognised as a relatively common practice in Syria – before the crisis began, an estimated 13 per cent of Syrian women aged 20-25 were married as children (p. 7) – child marriages have increased significantly in the wake of the crisis. The number of marriages of girls aged 15-17 in Syrian refugee communities in Jordan has tripled since 2011, making up 32 per cent of all registered marriages by the beginning of 2014. It is believed that increases of a similar magnitude are occurring in Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt as well.

While evidence from focus group discussions with parents suggests that their intentions behind arranging early marriages for their daughters are often caring ones, doing so can place girls in harm's way. The age and resource differential that results from girls being married to older men (nearly 50 per cent of girls aged 15-17 who had married in Jordan in 2012 married men who were at least 10 years their elder) places them at increased risk of rape, physical assault, and other forms of gender-based violence. Girls are also less likely to complete their education after they marry, increasing their likelihood of social isolation and dependence on their husband.

In addition to the risk of abuse, child marriage also carries significant health risks. The report notes that annually nearly 70,000 girls die of complications due to pregnancy and childbirth, making this the second highest cause of death worldwide for girls ages 15 to 19. Gender and power inequality in marriages involving a girl often decrease her ability to make decisions about contraceptive use, which can result in insufficient spacing between births and thus adverse effects on girls' health and that of their children.

The report also includes preliminary findings from CARE's Information Volunteers program (originally developed to respond to the [massive exodus of refugees](#) from Kobane into Turkey

in late 2014), which is working within refugee communities to redress the logic of protection driving child marriage. While CARE's experience so far suggests that these volunteers can be effective in dissuading parents from arranging early marriages for their daughters, the report also includes a number of recommendations targeted to donors, implementing agencies, and refugee-hosting governments to prevent child marriage before and during the early onset of emergencies.

About the author/s

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Camilla Burkot was a Research Officer at the Development Policy Centre, and Editor of the Devpolicy Blog, from 2015 to 2017. She has a background in social anthropology and holds a Master of Public Health from Columbia University, and has field experience in Eastern and Southern Africa, and PNG. She now works for the Burnet Institute.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/child-marriage-in-emergencies-new-evidence-from-the-syrian-crisis-20150702/>

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