

# Through their eyes

Exploring the complex drivers of child marriage in humanitarian contexts

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# Executive summary

## Overview

Child marriage, while declining in most parts of the world, remains common in many communities – especially in countries beset by conflict and other humanitarian disasters. Indeed, all 10 of the countries with the highest rates of child marriage are considered fragile, and research has found that child marriage is one of the issues most sensitive to conflict. A growing body of evidence underscores that this is because although the drivers of child marriage tend to be similar across development and humanitarian contexts – and revolve around physical and economic insecurities and deep-seated gender norms – fragility, conflict and disaster augment concerns and can increase the risk of child marriage.

Buoyed by evidence that the practice has intergenerational costs to families, communities and national economies, child marriage has risen steadily up the development agenda in the 25 years since the Beijing Declaration highlighted its cost to girls. However, even as the contours of humanitarian crises have continued to evolve, with more people displaced and for longer periods of time than since the second world war, the humanitarian sector has been slower to embrace ending child marriage as necessary for progress. Two years on from the Global Compact on Refugees, and as the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to undo decades' worth of progress towards eliminating child marriage, it is more important than ever that the global community refocus its efforts to support the capabilities of refugee and stateless adolescents – and foster refugee self-reliance – by stepping up efforts to ensure that they are not married as children.

This report begins with a brief overview of the evidence base. It then describes the sample and methodological approach used by Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) to explore the drivers of child marriage in humanitarian settings and how tailored policy and programming might be brought to bear to reduce it. We first lay out the high-level drivers of child marriage – disentangling economic drivers, gender norms, and drivers related to crisis. We then explore the diverse views of the actors involved in the marriage decision-making process, looking at preferences through their own eyes and seeking

solutions in their own narratives. The report concludes with priority recommendations for programming, policy, and research and evaluation.

## Methods

This report draws on data collected between 2017 and 2020 as part of the GAGE programme to understand adolescent and parental perspectives on the patterning and drivers of child marriage in humanitarian contexts and to explore options for prevention. The broader GAGE programme, which adopts a capabilities approach, is the world's largest study focused on adolescents in the Global South. It uses mixed methods to follow 20,000 young people – in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia – over the course of nine years as they transition into, through and out of adolescence into early adulthood.

The data used for this report represents a subsample of respondents, all of whom are refugee or stateless adolescents, from four contexts all experiencing humanitarian crisis: Bangladesh, Gaza, Jordan and Lebanon. In Jordan, GAGE's midline qualitative research used a set of innovative tools designed to hone in on how to prevent child marriage. The tools focused on decision-making about marriage, and asked those involved in the decision-making process what might encourage them to make different decisions. These tools will also be used with Rohingya respondents when midline data is collected in Bangladesh.

## Findings

**Humanitarian crises can lead to shifts in the incidence and timing of child marriage, but it is important to understand that adolescents' risk varies – primarily due to family differences that pre-date the crisis.** Factors emphasised by the Palestinian, Rohingya and Syrian respondents in our sample included differences in the way parents value girls' education, differences between families' (and clans') adherence to tradition, and whether families were from rural versus urban areas. In our sample, Syrian and Rohingya girls married at age 15 – often to men substantially older.

Of the married girls in our sample, their marriages were almost universally arranged – but also almost universally ‘voluntary’. Very few girls – exclusively those who married a cousin – admitted that their marriage was forced. Indeed, two-thirds of Syrian and Rohingya girls reported that they had been ready to marry at the time of their marriage. In Jordan, while most girls are carefully coached into consent by their parents, some *feel* considerable agency over their decision by the end of that coaching. Misinformation is also important to understanding girls’ preferences for child marriage; they believe that child marriage is more common than it is, which leads them to fear they will be ‘left on the shelf’ should they choose to delay marriage until adulthood.

Gender norms are central to the perpetuation of child marriage. While not all girls are at risk, because populations are diverse, Palestinian, Rohingya and Syrian respondents – in Bangladesh, Gaza, Jordan and Lebanon – were nearly unanimous that where girls are at risk, it is because child marriage is seen as a way to ensure that girls do not experience sexual activity prior to marriage. Because marriage and motherhood are central to feminine value (and are often the only pathway to gaining adult status in the family and community), and because the likelihood of a desirable marriage is reduced if girls’ honour is besmirched, child marriage is seen by many families as the best way to secure girls’ futures because it provides them with a ‘place’ and associated social standing. Girls’ purity is also central to family honour and demonstrates to the community that their parents have parented successfully.

Although economic drivers are important to understanding preferences for child marriage, our findings suggest a need to embrace complexity and look beyond narratives that focus solely on household poverty. Some families – in our sample particularly Palestinians – do marry their daughters as children to free up resources by reducing the number of mouths to feed. Other families – in our sample, particularly Syrians living in formal refugee camps – marry their daughters as children to access tangible benefits for the household, such as cash bride price or a relationship that confers citizenship. But this is only one dimension of the economic factors at play. In contexts where girls and women have only the most limited access to livelihoods, families also frequently marry their daughters as children in order to improve their daughters’ own lives. Sometimes (especially in our Rohingya sample), these efforts are aimed at survival

needs. Other times (and, in our sample, especially among the Syrians, who had enjoyed a higher standard of living prior to displacement), they are aimed at trying to help girls access a more comfortable life.

Crisis and conflict add yet another layer of complexity to the child marriage decision-making process, further entangling gender norms and economic drivers and then adding complications of their own. For example, crisis renders it more difficult for girls to access the schooling that acts as a protective factor against child marriage by preventing the ‘idleness’ that accelerates their transition from childhood to the marriage market. In our sample, this was most evident for Syrians, many of whom indicated that they had married years before they would have in Syria. Crisis also limits household breadwinners’ access to labour markets, making poverty deeper and more protracted. Sometimes, as in Gaza, this is due to economic collapse; other times, as in Bangladesh, Jordan and Lebanon, it is due to legal restrictions on refugees’ employment. Crisis and conflict both introduce new safety concerns and exacerbate old ones that child marriage is seen to mitigate. Across nationalities and countries, respondents highlighted increased sexual harassment of girls and a pervasive fear of an uncertain future. Findings – especially from Bangladesh – highlight that crisis can also lead to increases in child marriage by disrupting the rule of law, which allows for regression towards longstanding cultural preferences. In Jordan, we found evidence that crisis can also alter the pathways and timelines by which boys become men, enabling them to marry at younger ages. Because husbands are almost universally older than wives, this in turn drives down the age at which girls marry. Conflict itself can also drive child marriage for boys, as families pressure them to father children to replace family members who have died in war.

It is important to recognise the diversity of perspectives among actors involved in child marriage decision-making – and to acknowledge that preferences are shaped by actors’ age, gender, and their respective needs to fit into and/or strengthen their families, clans and communities. This means, for example, recognising that some Syrian and Palestinian fathers are under considerable pressure from their brothers to provide wives for their nephews, and that they may genuinely damage family and clan relationships by refusing such a marriage. Similarly, it is important to recognise that mothers may be shamed by the community – and made to feel as if

they are abrogating their maternal duties – for turning away desirable suitors before their daughters are adults. It is also important to acknowledge that adolescent girls (and some boys) do often prefer to marry as children. Sometimes – especially among our sample from Syria – this is because they are young and attracted to short-term gains, such as parties and fitting in with their friends. Other times, however, these choices are deeply rational given the constrained contexts in which adolescent girls live, and their limited opportunities for securing economic independence on account of truncated labour market opportunities – particularly for women, and especially among refugee and stateless communities. Where girls experience violence, food insecurity or other serious problems at home, child marriage may actually be in their best interests in the absence of other harm-free solutions.

**More attention needs to be paid to the role played by girls and women in perpetuating child marriage.** While it is true that child marriage is fundamentally rooted in gender inequalities that devalue girls and women relative to boys and men, there is an element of agency in how girls and women sustain child marriage that has been largely overlooked. Research and interventions have focused on men as the final arbiters – and beneficiaries – of marriage decision-making. However, among Syrians and Palestinians, our findings highlight the **critical role of**

**mothers, of both grooms and brides, in upholding norms vis-à-vis encouraging child marriage.** Grooms' mothers often have preferences for younger, more malleable girls as brides for their sons and brides' mothers are afraid that their daughters will be forced to settle for less desirable husbands should they wait until adulthood. **More attention also needs to be paid to girls and the peer pressure that some adolescent girls exercise over each other.** Sometimes this pressure is aimed at improving conformity and directly encourages girls to leave school and marry as children. Other times it is the result of girls' efforts to protect and promote their own social status within the peer group and the broader community, with innuendo aimed at vilifying their peers who are seen to be violating social norms by speaking to boys. Those who are targeted often try to protect themselves by immediately agreeing to marriage.

In Jordan, where child marriage decision-makers were queried as to what policies and programmes might have helped them delay marriage until adulthood, **married girls and their parents agreed that the best way to prevent girls from marrying until adulthood is to incentivise their families to keep them in school through to the end of secondary school.** Parents noted that this is because when girls are in school, they are not seen as idle.



Young Syrian family in an ITS in Jordan © Nathalie Bertrams

## Recommendations

Overall, our findings underscore the importance of embracing complexity and designing multi-faceted, context-resonant interventions that acknowledge that child marriage decision-making is a complicated and culturally embedded process with many actors with multiple and diverse motivations. With this in mind, we recommend the following priority actions for policy, programming and research aimed at preventing child marriage – and ultimately fostering refugee self-reliance – in humanitarian contexts.

### 1. Interventions to empower girls:

- Ensure that girls are able to stay in school, including through social assistance, through to early adulthood.
- Invest in safe spaces that afford girls opportunities for social interaction and recreation, and empower them with information, skills and psychosocial support.
- Develop and scale up interventions that acknowledge girls' maturation (e.g. interest in romantic relationships) and provide information on their sexual and reproductive health rights.

### 2. Interventions to engage families:

- Work with parents to expand girls' options and 'value', including through cash transfers and parenting education classes, and with tailored behaviour change communication that directly addresses gender norms and the risks of child (rather than adult) marriage – especially to cousins.
- Work with women (e.g. mothers and future mothers-in-law) to help them fully see and process the ways in which gender norms shape and limit their own lives and how they perpetuate these norms in the next generation.
- Work with men (e.g. fathers and uncles) to recognise their role as providers and protectors within the family and community, and to expand notions of protection that include eschewing child marriage – especially to cousins.
- Work with boys and young men to reframe masculinity in terms of becoming champions for a world without sexual harassment and gender-based and sexual violence for girls and women – and also to shift norms so that girls and young women are valued for their agency rather than malleability.

### 3. Interventions to engage communities:

- Work with faith leaders to raise awareness of the risks of cousin marriages – as these are often the earliest marriages, and are nearly always forced.

- Work with faith leaders to discourage child marriage and encourage adult marriage, as it is less likely to end in divorce.
- Use mass and social media campaigns to publicise the incidence and risks of child marriage, framing messages for parents around the risks they are primed to hear (e.g. violence and divorce) and for girls in ways that balance the 'glamour' and romance of made-for-television marriages with reality.

### 4. Interventions that harness national legal frameworks and enforcement:

- Enforce compulsory education laws, given the protective role of education (for girls) against child marriage.
- Codify 18 years as the minimum age for marriage in all contexts.
- Explicitly penalise marriages with large age gaps (5+ years) involving girls younger than 16 years.
- Ensure that girls are asked for their consent in private, ideally by female officers of the court who are trained on how to detect child marriage power dynamics – prioritising girls' best interests at all times.

### 5. Interventions that harness the UN humanitarian system:

- Ensure that all changes in household registration for adolescents under the age of 18 trigger a one-on-one, face-to-face meeting between UNHCR case management staff and the adolescent in question.
- Use a labelled cash transfer such as UNICEF's *Hajati* to incentivise parents to educate their daughters through secondary school.
- Consider using UN humanitarian social assistance benefits as both incentives and deterrents to encourage behaviour change.
- Leverage engagement and support for host communities to secure improved access to labour markets for refugees, and especially female refugees.

### 6. Addressing data gaps:

- Develop tools to measure and track the incidence of child marriage that can be used in a timely manner in humanitarian contexts.
- Invest in longitudinal research and evaluations to better understand both the drivers and impacts of child marriage in specific humanitarian contexts to inform policy and programming.

# 1 Introduction

Child marriage, while declining in most parts of the world, remains common in many communities. Each year, an estimated 12 million girls marry before the age of 18 (United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), 2020e). These girls are disproportionately located in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) beset by conflict and other humanitarian disasters. Indeed, all 10 of the countries with the highest rates of child marriage are considered fragile, and research has found that child marriage is one of the issues most sensitive to conflict (*Girls Not Brides*, 2020b; Human Rights Council, 2019; Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2019; UNICEF, 2020c). Fragility also shapes sub-national vulnerability to child marriage, with girls (and some boys) who are internally displaced or living in regions particularly affected by violence or natural disaster more affected than their peers who live elsewhere (Higher Population Council (HPC), 2017; *Girls Not Brides*, 2018; UNICEF and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2020b). A growing body of evidence underscores that this is because although the drivers of child marriage tend to be similar across development and humanitarian contexts – and revolve around physical and economic insecurities and deep-seated gender norms – fragility, conflict and disaster augment concerns and can increase the risk of child marriage (Leigh et al., 2020; Mazurana and Marshak, 2019; Mazurana et al., 2019; *Girls Not Brides*, 2018; UNICEF, 2020c; OHCHR, 2019).

In the 25 years since the Beijing Declaration highlighted child marriage as having ‘severe and long-term adverse impacts’ on girls’ lives, the issue has risen steadily up the global development agenda, buoyed by evidence that the practice also has intergenerational costs to families, communities and national economies (Malhotra and Elnakib, forthcoming; Mazurana and Marshak, 2019; Wodon et al., 2017a). Not only is ending child marriage targeted by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – nested under SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (United Nations (UN), 2020) – but successive UN resolutions call out child, early and forced marriage as violations of girls’ human rights. They urge member states to set and enforce a universal marriage age and to ensure that the rights of married girls are protected

(see, for example, UN, 2018a). In this vein, a growing global community of practice – spearheaded by *Girls Not Brides*, and UNFPA-UNICEF’s Global Programme to End Child Marriage – has sought to scale up programming and learning across diverse contexts (UNICEF and UNFPA, 2020a; *Girls Not Brides*, 2020h).

However, while development objectives have embraced ending child marriage as necessary for progress on a range of developmental outcomes, the humanitarian sector has been slower to do so (Mazurana and Marshak, 2019; Mourtada et al., 2017; Murphy et al., 2016). This is despite the evidence linking child marriage and fragility, and despite the fact that the contours of humanitarian crises are continually evolving, with more people displaced for longer periods of time than since the second world war (Ferris and Kirişci, 2016; UNHCR, 2018b). The 2016 Agenda for Humanity, for example, calls only for ‘empowering and protecting women and girls’; none of its core commitments mention child marriage. It was not until 2017 that OHCHR paid any significant attention to the links between child marriage and humanitarian contexts (OHCHR, 2019). The 2018 Global Compact on Refugees does not mention child marriage (UN, 2018b). UNHCR’s (2018a) policy on age, gender and diversity details commitments to inclusion and singles out efforts to end sexual and gender-based violence – but mentions child marriage only in a footnote. Finally, while UNICEF acknowledges that there are opportunities to integrate child marriage programming into an array of humanitarian response options – from water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) to education and food security (UNICEF and UNFPA, 2019) – and although phase 2 (2020) of its Global Programme to End Child Marriage is focusing on humanitarian spaces (UNICEF and UNFPA, 2020b), its Humanitarian Action for Children 2020 overview makes no mention of child marriage (UNICEF, 2019).

## Overview of the report

Two years on from the Global Compact on Refugees, the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to undo decades worth of progress towards eliminating child marriage (Save the Children, 2020a). It is thus more important than ever that the global community refocus its efforts to support

the capabilities of refugee and stateless adolescents by stepping up efforts to ensure that they are not married as children. To address evidence gaps on child marriage in humanitarian contexts (highlighted, for example, by Mazurana and Marshak, 2019; Freccero and Whiting, 2018; UNICEF and UNFPA, 2020b), this report explores the push and pull factors that shape household decision-making about child marriage and how those factors are impacted by humanitarian crises. Using data from the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research programme, which is working in four crisis-affected countries in the Middle East and South Asia, we identify entry points for interventions to prevent child marriage by triangulating insights from adolescents, husbands, parents and in-laws to tease out the interplay between economic drivers, social norms, and conflict-induced vulnerabilities. This report will be followed by a companion report highlighting the experiences of girls once they are married.

The report begins with an overview of the evidence base on child marriage in development and humanitarian settings and then describes the GAGE sample and methodological approach. GAGE findings are presented in four sections. The first discusses the incidence, timing and types of child marriage in the humanitarian contexts in which GAGE is working. The second lays out high-level drivers of child marriage – disentangling economic drivers, gender norms, and drivers related to crisis. The third explores the diverse views of the actors involved in the marriage decision-making process, looking at preferences through their own eyes. The final section on findings focuses on interventions to prevent child marriage in contexts of fragility – both taking stock of programming that is already in place, and highlighting the implications of our findings for future actions. The report concludes with priority recommendations for programming, policy, and research and evaluation.

## 2 Overview of the evidence base

Child marriage, although declining globally, still truncates the futures of millions of children each year – the overwhelming majority of whom are girls (UNICEF, 2018, 2020e). Thanks to large-scale national surveys, such as demographic and health surveys (DHS) and multiple indicator cluster surveys (MICS), our understanding of child marriage patterning and trends in more stable contexts is good overall (Malhotra and Elnakib, forthcoming; Mazurana and Marshak, 2019). We know, for example, that 23 girls are still married every minute (*Girls Not Brides*, 2020a) and that the percentage of young women (aged 20–24) who married as children has declined over the past decade, from a quarter to a fifth (UNICEF, 2018) – though significant slowdowns and even reversals are predicted due to the impact of COVID-19 (see Box 1). We know that the largest number of child brides live in South Asia (due to population size) but that girls in sub-Saharan Africa are at highest risk and girls in Latin America have seen the least progress (UNICEF, 2018, 2020e). Similarly, we know that child marriage disproportionately impacts girls from the poorest households and those with least access to education (Malhotra and Elnakib, forthcoming; Wodon et al., 2017a, 2017b). We also know that while child marriage overwhelmingly affects girls – who are both more likely to be married as children and to bear higher costs for having

done so – some boys also marry as children (Malhotra and Elnakib, forthcoming). Gastón et al. (2019) report that across countries with reliable data, just under 5% of young men (aged 20–24) had married before the age of 18. Rates are highest in Latin America (8%) and lowest in the Middle East and North Africa (2%).

### The complexity of child marriage drivers

The drivers of child marriage are complex and multi-layered. Research from development contexts around the world has found that the drivers of child marriage include both push and pull factors, and are so intricately interwoven that they are difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle. Analysts note that child marriage is fundamentally rooted in gender inequality and social norms that assign different roles and different value to girls and boys and women and men, and which overly emphasise girls' sexual purity (Malhotra and Elnakib, forthcoming; *Girls Not Brides*, 2020c; Harper et al., 2018). At a more proximate level, there is broad agreement that child marriage is driven by poverty and economic insecurity, adherence to tradition (especially religious customs), a lack of other viable options for education and livelihoods, and by violence and physical insecurity (ibid.).

#### Box 1: COVID-19 threatens decades of progress on child marriage

The COVID-19 pandemic – which saw nearly all of the world's students sent home when schools closed, health systems abruptly reoriented away from preventive care (including sexual and reproductive health services), and unemployment and poverty rates soar – is expected to undo decades worth of progress towards eliminating child marriage (UNICEF, 2020a). Szabo and Edwards (2020) estimates that 500,000 extra girls are at risk of child marriage and 1 million girls are at risk of adolescent pregnancy in 2020 alone. It predicts that the pandemic may ultimately set the world back 25 years in terms of eliminating child marriage (ibid.). UNFPA (2020) projects that over the course of the next decade, COVID-19 may be responsible for an extra 13 million child marriages. Girls living in humanitarian contexts, who are at elevated risk of child marriage during normal times, are expected to be at greatest risk.

While the broader focus is on how COVID-19 is contributing to increased rates of child marriage, emerging analysis from GAGE's virtual research suggests that there are two divergent patterns. In rural communities, and especially where lockdowns and school closures coincided with traditional wedding seasons, child marriage has increased. In other contexts, however, child marriage has become less common due to COVID. This is the case in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, where economic malaise means prospective grooms have less opportunity to assemble the necessary financial resources, and girls are loathe to compromise on a scaled down 'corona wedding' (Baird et al., 2020a, 2020b).

The vast majority of research aimed at exploring the drivers of child marriage – rather than merely the correlates of child marriage – is geographically focused. This body of work, while occasionally expanding beyond national borders (e.g. sub-Saharan Africa) (Petroni et al., 2017), is most often focused on individual countries (such as Ethiopia) (Jones et al., 2016, 2020) or even particular villages (such as a village in India's Goalpara district) (Khanam and Laskar, 2015) or ethnic minorities within a country (for example, the Maasai in Tanzania) (Ndaula, 2018). While much of this work is exploratory, effort is often made to weigh the relative 'strength' of different drivers, in order to identify effective – and cost-effective – entry points for intervention.

A recent synthesis (Kohno et al., 2020) drew on this disparate evidence to attempt to find common ground. It identified six main drivers of child marriage: human insecurity and conflict (including feelings of insecurity, financial constraints, and fear of opportunity loss); legal issues (including insufficient legal protection, legal and social divergence, and knowledge of the marriage law); family values and circumstances (including marrying away from the family, and family values normalising

child marriage); religious beliefs (including religious justifications for child marriage and extramarital sex as a taboo); individual circumstances, beliefs and knowledge (including loneliness and lack of input into decisions); and social norms (influence of patriarchal ideology, threat to social order, and the engagement of children). The authors note that some themes – including social norms and family values – are almost universally addressed by individual studies; others, including legal issues and insecurity and conflict, are far less so.

Malhotra and Elnakib (forthcoming) – while observing that in most studies child marriage is itself identified as a gender norm, so framing social norms as a 'driver' of child marriage may be nothing other than tautological – note that gender inequality is so central to understanding child marriage that it is worth 'unpacking' the ways in which it is embedded. They identify three primary pathways: gender and sexuality (e.g. concerns about chastity and honour); gender and economics (e.g. child marriage as a way to mitigate poverty, demonstrate wealth, or attract/ reduce marriage payments); and gender roles and opportunities (e.g. girls' limited access to education and employment, vis-à-vis marriage and motherhood).



Young adolescent married girl with her baby © Nathalie Bertrams

## Child marriage interventions in development contexts

The evidence base on what works to prevent child marriage in development contexts has grown in recent years, albeit at a slower pace than other aspects (Malhotra and Elnakib, forthcoming; Siddiqi and Green, 2019; Freccero and Whiting, 2018; Chae and Ngo, 2017; Kalamar et al., 2016; Lee-Rife et al., 2012). Malhotra and Elnakib, in their forthcoming report on the evolution of the evidence base, note that they were able to identify only 31 evaluations of programmes that included child marriage prevention as an outcome in the two decades between 2000 and 2019. Of those 31 studies – most of which were provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and were targeted at other outcomes such as educational retention and pregnancy prevention – only six included child marriage as a main outcome of interest, none were at scale, and none were sustained. Interestingly, while there is broad agreement – reflected in *Girls Not Brides*' theory of change – that ending child marriage will likely require an ecological approach that combines empowering girls, engaging families and communities, strengthening services, and establishing laws and policies (*Girls Not Brides*, 2014), evaluations of these intervention modalities have been mixed, with no clear consensus about what works and what does not, and what must be bundled together in order to be efficacious (Malhotra and Elnakib, forthcoming; Chae and Ngo, 2017; Kalamar et al., 2016; Lee-Rife et al., 2012). Indeed, despite growing interest in complex multi-modal programmes (Lo Forte et al., 2019), Malhotra and Elnakib (forthcoming) conclude that evidence is strongest for simple cash and asset transfers that keep girls in school. They add that there is some evidence that families can be directly incentivised to eschew child marriage – at least in some contexts (see also Buchmann et al., 2017; Erulkar et al., 2017; Nanda et al., 2016). They also add that two interventions – unconditional cash transfers aimed at alleviating household poverty, and legal approaches – have no discernible impact on child marriage. Evidence for community norm change is similarly lacking, though as Freccero and Whiting (2018) note, this is largely because of the long timeframes needed to create norm change and the lack of established methodologies for measuring it.

## Evidence gaps on child marriage risks in humanitarian crises

Despite the overwhelming consensus that humanitarian crises – which are affecting ever larger populations and becoming ever more protracted (see Box 2) – impact child marriage, we know very little about how they do so and to what extent (Mazurana and Marshak, 2019; *Girls Not Brides*, 2020b; UNICEF and UNFPA, 2020b; UNICEF, 2020c). In the shorter term, this reflects the nature of crisis, which does not lend itself to data collection; in the longer term, the lack of evidence speaks to the global tool set and how it is poorly designed to capture need that evolves in unanticipated ways. For example, because large-scale surveys such as the DHS and MICS aggregate girls aged 15–19 into a single category (which includes 18- and 19-year-olds who are, in legal terms, adults), the child marriage incidence rate is calculated by asking women aged 20–24 if they married before the age of 18. While Malhotra and Elnakib (forthcoming) observe that this metric is a huge step forward, it means that we do not know how many girls are marrying until some years after they have married. In development contexts, where patterns are stable, extrapolation is possible. However, in humanitarian contexts, it is generally not possible. In addition, even where crises are longstanding and patterning ought to be visible, surveys are only rarely disaggregated in ways that would allow us to focus on the specific populations (such as refugees or internally displaced persons) most impacted by crises.

For example, the most recent Jordan Population and Family Health Survey (JPFHS) (Department of Statistics (DOS) and ICF, 2019) stands in stark contrast to the most recent Myanmar DHS (Ministry of Health and Sports and ICF, 2017) in that the former renders visible the differences between Jordanians and Syrians, whereas the latter does not mention the Rohingya, despite their decades-long marginalisation. Furthermore, even when we have high-quality data from large-scale surveys, it can be difficult to interpret that data accurately. For example, figures from Jordan and Lebanon suggest a threefold increase in the rate of child marriage among Syrian girls (from 12% in 2011 to 37% in 2018 in Jordan) (DOS and ICF, 2019; Fry et al., 2019). However, longitudinal comparisons do not take adequate account of the fact that the population of Syrians living in Jordan and Lebanon has radically shifted since the onset of the Syrian civil war, and that

those who arrived as refugees are disproportionately likely to be from areas of Syria that favoured child marriage. Unsurprisingly, given data issues, much of what we know about child marriage<sup>1</sup> in humanitarian contexts is the result of either small-scale studies that focus on highly localised communities, or anecdotal rather than research-based evidence (Mazurana and Marshak, 2019; Girls Not Brides, 2020b; UNICEF and UNFPA, 2020b; UNICEF, 2020c). Because boys are far less likely to marry as children than girls, they remain an almost completely understudied group, even in developmental contexts. Gastón et al. (2019), in their work on the incidence of child marriage among boys, did not touch upon the issue of fragility. Only Leigh et al. (2020) – working with Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and with those who were impacted by the earthquake in Nepal – appear to have included boys as more than a footnote.

Most research suggests that natural hazard-related disasters increase the risk of child marriage. For example, in Indonesia (a country prone to such disasters), Dewi et al. (2019) found that events tend to lead to spikes in child marriage, as families try to cope with economic shocks. Similarly, in western Africa, Risso-Gill and Finnegan (2015) found that the Ebola epidemic led to increased risk of child marriage, as girls simultaneously lost access to sexual and reproductive health services and were forced to find other ways to support themselves. Other research suggests that disasters can shift not only the incidence of child marriage, but also its timing. In Bangladesh, for example, climate change – which is leading to flooding that is increasing poverty levels – appears to be driving down the age at

which girls are expected to marry, as younger girls require smaller dowries (Alston et al., 2014).

Highlighting how context-dependent impacts can be (Mazurana and Marshak, 2019), the same natural hazard-related disaster can have different impacts on different groups of children in the same country. In Ethiopia, for example, the 2015 drought is reported to have reduced incidence of child marriage in some areas because families could not afford weddings (Mazurana and Marshak, 2019; *Girls Not Brides*, 2020b), but to have increased it in others because families could not afford to feed their daughters (Migiros, 2015). Similarly, in Nepal, Leigh et al. (2020) found that while child marriage tended to increase after the 2015 earthquake – primarily due to service disruption that left adolescents out of school and with nothing better to do than marry – in some communities it declined, largely due to NGO efforts to provide education and awareness.

The impact of conflict on child marriage appears similarly diverse. A majority of research has found increased likelihood of child marriage in conflict-affected contexts, from Mali to Tajikistan (Mazurana and Marshak, 2019; UNICEF and UNFPA, 2020a, 2020b; *Girls Not Brides*, 2020b; Schlecht, 2016; Neal et al., 2016). For example, in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, a number of studies have found that the Syrian conflict has led to higher rates of child marriage among Syrian girls. Evidence also suggests an increased tolerance for 'risky' grooms (for instance, those who are older or are from out of the country), as families try to stretch limited resources, protect their daughters from violence, insulate their daughters (and their daughters' 'honour') from cultures they perceive as more liberal, and ensure that their daughters are not 'left on the

## Box 2: Humanitarian crises are increasingly large scale and long term

In previous decades, humanitarian crises tended to affect relatively small populations for relatively limited periods of time. However, due to the evolving nature of conflict (which some authors estimate to last an average of 26 years) and the accelerating impacts of climate change, this is no longer the case (Ferris and Kirişci, 2016; World Health Organization (WHO), 2018; Haines and Ebi, 2019). Today, it is estimated that nearly 170 million people in 25 countries are experiencing humanitarian crises (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2019a). In part because the countries most likely to experience crisis tend to have young populations, a disproportionate number of those impacted are children and adolescents. For example, the United Nations reports that while children under the age of 18 make up only one-third of the world's population, they account for half of all refugees globally and 40% of internally displaced persons (ibid.).

Only a very few refugees are able to return to their home country in a given year (2.5% in 2016). Due to this, there are increasing calls for the humanitarian sector to focus on concerns such as child marriage – which would previously have been treated as a development issue – and for the two sectors to work together to find more effective solutions to promoting the refugee self-reliance that is core to the Global Compact on Refugees (Ferris and Kirişci, 2016; UNHCR, 2018b).

<sup>1</sup> The 2006 MICS reports that the rate of child marriage in Syria's Daraa region (where most Syrian refugees in Jordan come from) was twice the national average of 13% (Central Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Health, Syria, 2006).

shelf' in a shifting marriage market (Spencer, 2015; Higher Population Council, 2017; UNICEF and ICRW, 2017b, 2017c; Fry et al., 2019; DeJong et al., 2017; Bartels et al., 2018; El Arab and Sagbakken, 2019; Chakraborty, 2019; Wringe et al., 2019; Gausman et al., 2020). Similar effects have been reported in South Sudan and Yemen, as families try to keep girls safe and make ends meet (Buchanan, 2019; UNICEF and ICRW, 2017d) and in Uganda, where conflict has reduced adolescents' access to education and led to breakdowns in parent-child communication (Schlecht et al., 2013). In Bangladesh, two recent studies have found that increased child marriage among the Rohingya – which is difficult to capture given the total absence of data pre-displacement – appears related to the lax ways in which marriage laws were enforced in the years immediately following displacement (Leigh et al., 2020; Melnikas et al., 2020). There are also hints that polygyny has increased (Leigh et al., 2020).

However, mirroring findings regarding the divergent impacts of natural disasters on child marriage, in some contexts conflict appears to depress the rate of child marriage (Neal et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2020). Reasons include: increased unemployment and poverty, which can render it too expensive to provide bride price or establish an independent household (in Lebanon and among Somali refugees in Ethiopia); the breakdown of social networks, which can make marriage feel less safe (Bosnia); and reduced partner possibilities, because men have either been conscripted or killed (Eritrea and Cambodia) (ibid.).

## Child marriage drivers in humanitarian contexts

There is emerging consensus – albeit only recently explicitly articulated – that the drivers of child marriage in humanitarian and development contexts are most often the same (Leigh et al., 2020). Rather than introducing new drivers, conflict and other disasters tend to augment and further entangle existing drivers (Mazurana and Marshak, 2019; UNICEF and UNFPA, 2020b; *Girls Not Brides*, 2018, 2020b; UNICEF, 2020b; Human Rights Council, 2019). Situations can be extremely complex; a recent study in Jordan, for example, identified 30 distinct drivers of child marriage, located at the institutional, community, school,

family, peer and individual levels (Hutchinson, 2018b). Crises exacerbate poverty and economic insecurity, which in most contexts contribute to increased child marriage. They also reduce girls' access to education, which is a powerful protector against child marriage; they reduce access to contraception, which can preclude the need for hastily arranged marriages; and they reduce employment, which can provide girls with other options. Crises also often reinforce the gender norms that simultaneously see girls as in need of protection and as the locus of family honour – in part because they introduce new (and greater) risks that girls need protection against, including violence, family breakdown, dislocation, and uncertainty about the future.

## Child marriage interventions in humanitarian contexts

Although the evidence base on what works to prevent child marriage in development contexts is growing, the same cannot be said for humanitarian contexts, where attention to child marriage remains secondary, fractured, and poorly integrated into sectoral programming (Mazurana and Marshak, 2019; UNICEF and UNFPA, 2020b; *Girls Not Brides*, 2020b). Indeed, Freccero and Whiting's (2018) review of nearly 400 published articles found that none of those reporting on interventions in humanitarian contexts met the criteria for inclusion. Despite the lack of evidence on efficacy, however, there are myriad interventions aimed at preventing child marriage in humanitarian contexts. As with interventions in development contexts, most focus on providing girls with safe spaces and educational and vocational alternatives to marriage (sometimes by providing a cash incentive), community awareness-raising (including with parents and religious leaders), and strengthening legal systems (*Girls Not Brides*, 2016, 2018, 2020b; CARE, 2018; UNICEF and ICRW, 2017a; Hutchinson, 2018a; UNICEF and UNFPA, 2020b). Anecdotal evidence, which has grown over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggests that it may be even more important to tailor programming to context imperatives in humanitarian settings than in developmental ones. For example, UNICEF and ICRW (2017c, 2017d) report that engaging religious leaders is proving effective in Jordan but counterproductive in Yemen.

# 3 Methodology and research contexts

## Methods and sample

This report draws on data collected between 2017 and 2020 as part of the GAGE programme to understand adolescent and parental perspectives on the patterning and drivers of child marriage in humanitarian contexts and to explore options for prevention. The broader GAGE programme, which adopts a capabilities approach, is the world's largest study focused on adolescents in the Global South. It is following 20,000 young people – in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia – over the course of nine years as they transition into, through and out of adolescence into early adulthood.

GAGE uses mixed research methods. In core countries, including Bangladesh and Jordan, the study is combining large-scale household surveys administered to adolescents and their caregivers alongside qualitative and participatory research. In other countries, including Lebanon and Gaza, we are conducting qualitative research only. To ensure that our quantitative samples were consistently drawn, and to minimise the risk of overlooking the most disadvantaged adolescents (including married girls), a door-to-door listing activity was undertaken in all research sites, following a specific protocol, and was complemented with purposeful sampling. Surveys were completed by adolescents (a younger cohort aged 10–12 and an older cohort aged 15–17 at baseline) and their female caregivers. The qualitative samples were purposively selected from the larger quantitative sample, deliberately oversampling the most disadvantaged adolescents in order to capture the voices of those at risk of being left behind. Interviews, built around a variety of interactive participatory tools, were conducted with adolescents as well as their caregivers, grandparents, siblings, husbands, government officials, and service providers.

In Jordan, GAGE's midline qualitative research used a set of innovative tools designed to hone in on how to

prevent child marriage (see Jones et al., 2019). Tools focused on decision-making, and asked those involved in marriage decision-making what might encourage them to make different decisions. These tools will also be used with Rohingya respondents when midline data is collected in Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup>

The data used for this report (see Table 1) represents a subsample of respondents, all of whom are refugee or stateless adolescents, from four contexts all experiencing humanitarian crisis: Bangladesh, Gaza, Jordan and Lebanon.

Verbal consent and assent were obtained for all respondents, depending on age. Quantitative and qualitative data collection took place via face-to-face interviews with interviewers who were the same sex as the respondent and who had been trained extensively on working with adolescents, child protection policies and referral protocols, best practices on conducting fieldwork, and on the overall GAGE research design and conceptual framework. Prior to commencing research, we secured approval from the Research Ethics Committees at the Overseas Development Institute (United Kingdom) and George Washington University (United States of America), as well as from relevant national research ethics boards in the countries in which GAGE is working.

## Research contexts

### Bangladesh

One of the world's poorest countries when it declared independence 50 years ago, Bangladesh has recently achieved middle-income status, with impressive gains across an array of development indicators, including girls' education (World Bank, 2020). However, Rohingya refugees – nearly a million of whom fled ethnic-based violence in Myanmar beginning in 2017 (after decades of

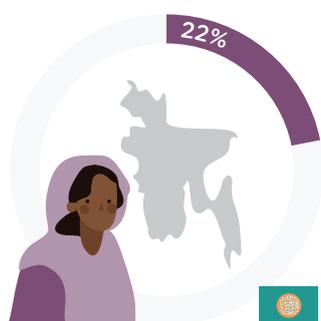
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<sup>2</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic and associated control measures have delayed data collection.

**Table 1: Samples used for this report**

	Quantitative		Qualitative		Participatory
Bangladesh	Baseline survey with 1,071 Rohingya adolescents and their caregivers		Baseline interviews with 112 Rohingya adolescents and their caregivers		
	92 girls and 8 boys had been married		10 girls and 1 boy had been married		
Gaza			Interviews with 132 adolescents and their caregivers in camp and non-camp settings		
			20 girls had been married		
Jordan	Baseline survey with 3,090 Syrian adolescents and caregivers in camps, host communities, and informal tented settlements	Baseline survey with 304 Palestinian adolescents and their caregivers	Baseline and midline interviews with 170 Syrian adolescents and their caregivers	Baseline and midline interviews with 35 Palestinian adolescents and their caregivers	Ongoing research with 22 Syrian and 16 Palestinian adolescents
	186 girls and 3 boys had been married		26 Syrian and 7 Palestinian girls had been married. We also interviewed 5 husbands		12 Syrian and 2 Palestinian girls had been married
Lebanon					Ongoing research with 22 Syrian and 20 Palestinian adolescents
					12 Syrian and 3 Palestinian girls had been married

**Rates of child marriage vary by country and nationality**



In **Bangladesh**, 22% of Rohingya girls between the ages of 15 and 19 are already married.<sup>1</sup>



In **Gaza**, 11% of women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before age 18.<sup>2</sup>



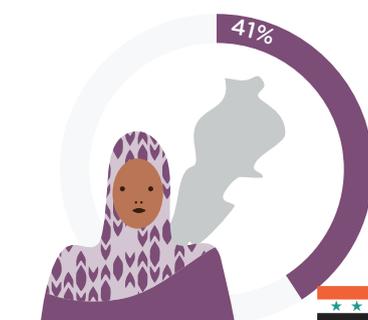
In **Jordan**, 37% of Syrian women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before age 18.<sup>3</sup>



In **Jordan**, 12% of Palestine refugee girls between the ages of 15 and 19 and living in formal camps are already married.<sup>4</sup>



In **Lebanon**, 12% of Palestinian women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before the age of 18.<sup>5</sup>



In **Lebanon**, 41% of Syrian women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before age 18.<sup>6</sup>

**NOTES:** 1 Source: Gordon, 2018. 2 Source: POBS, 2018. 3 Source: JPFHS, 2018. 4 Source: Tiltnes and Zhang, 2013. 5 Source: UNICEF and ICRW, 2017b. 6 Source: UNICEF and ICRW, 2017b.

persecution), and have now settled into a flood-prone area on the Bangladeshi side of the border – are seeing little benefit from this progress (UNHCR, 2020c). Rohingya are strictly excluded from labour markets in Bangladesh, and largely confined to 32 registered refugee camps, where they remain entirely dependent on international aid for survival (Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) et al., 2019a, 2019b).

Rohingya adolescents were also prohibited from accessing formal education in Bangladesh until January 2020, when the government agreed to permit them to access education until age 14 (Human Rights Watch, 2019a; Reidy, 2020; Guglielmi et al., 2019). A pilot programme launched by UNICEF in February 2020 was closed after one month due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the Joint Response Plan calls for educating young people through to 10th grade as soon as possible (ISCG et al., 2020).

The legal age of marriage for girls in Bangladesh is 18 years; for boys, it is 21. However, a legal 'loophole' (introduced in 2017) allows courts to grant special permission for child marriage, which continues to affect 60% of all girls nationally (*Girls Not Brides*, 2020d; UNICEF, 2020e). Child marriage estimates for the Rohingya population vary, partly because of how they are measured (e.g. percentage of girls aged 15–19 who are already married versus percentage of women aged 20–24 who married before age 18) and partly because older adolescents and young adults face different levels of risk, despite being close in age. A report by Plan International and Monash University's Gender, Peace and Security research centre (Monash GPS) (Gordon et al., 2018) found that 22% of girls aged 15–19 were already married. Leigh et al.'s (2020) findings suggest that many, if not most of those married girls are legal adults over the age of 18 (see also ISCG et al., 2020). They report that of young women aged 20–24, 6.7% of longer-term registered refugees and 10% of those recently forcibly displaced from Myanmar had been married as children. No young men had been married before age 18. Of those aged 18–19, however, 13.4% of girls and 4.1% of boys had been married before the age of 18.

## Gaza

The Gaza Strip, one of the territories making up the State of Palestine, is less than a quarter of the size of London and is bordered by Israel, Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea. In 2020, it was home to nearly 2 million people, three-quarters of whom were Palestinian refugees (United Nations Relief

and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), 2019b). After decades of occupation by Israel, a series of violent uprisings, and political infighting between Hamas (which controls Gaza) and the Palestinian Authority (which controls the West Bank), its economy is shattered. It has the world's highest unemployment rate, and 70% of its population is food insecure (Middle East Monitor (MEMO), 2019). UNRWA runs schools and health clinics for all refugees and the Palestinian government provides a cash transfer to the poorest households.

Schooling in Gaza – which is provided by both the government and UNRWA – consists of six years of primary school, four years of lower secondary school and two years of upper secondary school. In 2017, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) reported that 96% of boys and 98% of girls aged 12–14 were enrolled in school. Of those aged 15–17, figures were 80% and 90% respectively (ibid.). The PCBS (2019) also reported that in 2018, 86% of children completed lower secondary school, and 59% completed upper secondary school.

*Girls Not Brides* (2020e) reports that the legal age of marriage for girls in Gaza is 17 years, and for boys, 18. A new law, passed in 2019 and set to take effect at the end of 2020, sets the minimum age for girls and boys at 18 (Abumaria, 2019). It is expected that Hamas, which governs Gaza, may be slower to implement the law than the Palestinian Authority, which governs the West Bank, and may perhaps allow more religious exemptions. The PCBS (2018) reported that 11% of young women aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18 (as cited in Rasgon, 2019); rates in the West Bank are about half those in Gaza (PCBS et al., 2014).

## Jordan

Jordan is a small, upper-middle income country that sits at the crossroads of the Middle East and North Africa. Long a haven for the region's refugee population, approximately 1 in 3 of its nearly 10 million inhabitants are refugees – primarily Palestinian (2 million) and Syrian (1.5 million) (DOS and ICF, 2019). Jordan has struggled, economically and socially, to meet the needs of its own population and those who have sought refuge there. The Jordan Response Plan (JRP) (2020) observes that unemployment and poverty rates are high and that services are very stretched (Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, 2020). Syrian refugees – a large majority of whom live in Jordanian host communities though some (around a fifth)

live in one of two formal refugee camps or informal tented settlements (Operation Portal (OPD), 2020a) – are the most disadvantaged. Their unemployment rate is roughly twice the national average of 19.1% and their poverty rate is over five times as high as that of Jordanians (80% versus 15.7%) (Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, 2020), in part because the government tightly restricts the sectors in which Syrians are allowed to work (Human Rights Watch, 2020). While most Palestinians in Jordan were long ago granted citizenship, nearly 20% (primarily ex-Gazans) have not, and remain stateless (Tiltnes and Zhang, 2013). They continue to live in formal refugee camps, remain excluded from taking up professional work, and face high unemployment and poverty levels (31% in 2013) (ibid.). The World Food Programme (WFP) provides 480,000 Syrian refugees with cash to meet their food needs, while UNHCR and UNICEF provide additional cash to tens of thousands (33,000 and 10,000 respectively) of the most vulnerable households in host communities (but not camps). UNRWA offers health and education services to Palestinian refugees, as well as food vouchers to almost 60,000 of the most vulnerable refugees.

Basic education in Jordan – the bulk of which is provided by the government (including at more than 200 double-shift schools aimed at creating spaces for Syrian children) – is compulsory and consists of grades 1–10. It is followed by two years of secondary school. At primary level (ages 6–11), enrolment is nearly universal among Jordanian children. One-fifth of Syrian children,

however, are out of school (UNICEF, 2020d). At lower secondary level (ages 12–15), 4% of Jordanian children and 43% of Syrian children are out of school (ibid.), as are approximately half<sup>3</sup> of their Palestinian peers who live inside camps (Tiltnes and Zhang, 2013). It is also important to note that, across nationalities, girls are more likely to attend school than boys during adolescence (for example, at secondary level, national figures are 78% for girls and 65% for boys, according to the Ministry of Education, 2019) (DOS and ICF, 2019).

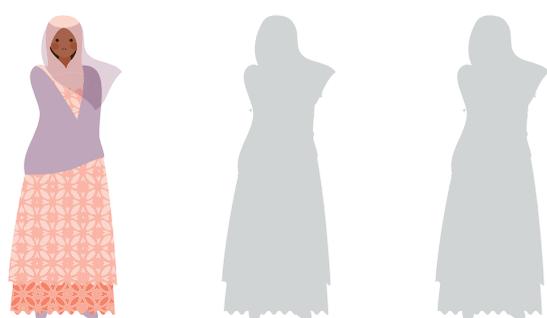
In Jordan, the minimum legal age for marriage is 18 years. However, girls are allowed to marry at 16 as long as they obtain the permission of a Sharia court (*Girls Not Brides*, 2020f). Rates of child marriage vary by nationality. The 2017–2018 Jordan Population and Family Health Survey found that nearly 37% of Syrian women aged 20–24 had been married before the age of 18 (and nearly 12% had been married by age 15). Figures for Palestinian females are lower. UNICEF’s (2014) study found that in 2013, nearly 18% of marriages to Palestinian refugees involved girls under the age of 18, while Tiltnes and Zhang (2013) found that 12% of girls aged 15–19 living in formal camps were already married (versus 6% living outside of camps). At a national level, only 0.4% of marriages involved a boy under the age of 18 (Fry et al., 2019).

## Lebanon

Lebanon is a small, ethnically, and religiously diverse country with levels of economic inequality that are among

### In Jordan, the youngest bride are the most likely to marry a relative<sup>7</sup>

Of married girls between the ages of **15 and 19**...



...one-in-three is related to their husband.

Of married women between the ages of **20 and 24**...



...‘only’ one-in-four is related to their husband.

<sup>7</sup> Source: JPFHS, 2018

<sup>3</sup> The JPFHS does not disaggregate Palestinians. Those with citizenship are included as Jordanians. Those without are included in an ‘other’ category. The most recent figures publicly available are from 2013 and report enrolment by age, not by level.

the world's highest. Still dealing with the impacts of its own civil war (1975–1990), and hosting hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees for decades (UNRWA, 2019a), Lebanon has absorbed an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees since that country's conflict broke out in 2011 (UNHCR, 2020b). On a per capita basis, Lebanon is home to more refugees than any other country in the world (ODP, 2020b). Most Palestinians live in one of 12 formal refugee camps scattered around Lebanon – the largest, most densely populated and poorest of which is Ein el-Hilweh, which is effectively cut off from the rest of Lebanon by army checkpoints (Anera, 2020; Chaaban et al., 2016). The remainder live in Lebanese host communities (ibid.). The situation for Syrians is reversed, with 80% in host communities and the remainder in informal tented settlements scattered around the countryside (UNHCR, 2019). Refugees are considered 'foreigners' and lack basic civil, political and economic rights. Palestinians are barred from 39 professions and must obtain a work permit in order to work at all (UNRWA, 2016). Refugees from Syria are allowed access to only three sectors: agriculture, construction and cleaning services. The economic crisis that began in 2019 has deepened the country's misery (Sewell, 2020).

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the warehouse explosion that levelled much of the Port of Beirut in August 2020, the World Bank (2019) had projected that the poverty rate in Lebanon would rise to 50% in 2020; in August 2020, it hit 55% (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 2020). UNHCR estimates that 75% of Syrian refugees live in extreme poverty – a jump from 55% in 2019 (UN News, 2020). The latest survey on Palestinian refugees, in 2015,

estimated that 65% of those from Lebanon and 90% of Palestinian refugees from Syria (but now living in Lebanon) were living in poverty (Chaaban et al., 2016). As in Jordan, UNRWA runs schools and health clinics for Palestinians, and UNHCR coordinates food vouchers and multi-purpose cash for Syrians, but coverage rates for social protection reach a fraction of those in need (UNHCR, 2020d).

Education in Lebanon, which is compulsory through to ninth grade, is characterised by extreme inequality. Those who can afford to attend private schools do so. At primary level, enrolment is nearly universal for Lebanese and Palestinian girls and boys (97%), although Palestinians from Syria are left behind (89%) (Chaaban et al., 2016). Syrian students predominantly attend the afternoon shift in government schools and at rates far lower than their peers: only 69% of Syrian girls and boys aged 6–14 are enrolled (UNHCR, 2019). Enrolment begins to fall as children enter early adolescence and then – especially for Syrians – plummets at secondary level. Only 22% of Syrian girls and boys are enrolled in secondary school (UNHCR, 2019) versus 61% of their Palestinian and 75% of their Lebanese peers (Chaaban et al., 2016).

In Lebanon, there is no national law on the minimum age for marriage; it varies by religion (*Girls Not Brides*, 2020g). While Greek and Coptic Orthodox girls may not marry until age 18, Save the Children (2019) reports that Shia girls are allowed to marry at age 9, Jewish girls at age 12, and Catholic and Syriac Orthodox girls at age 14. Rates of child marriage also vary by nationality. Among women aged 20–24, 41% of Syrians, 25% of Palestinian refugees from Syria, and 12% of Palestinian refugees from Lebanon were married before adulthood (UNICEF and ICRW, 2017b).

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Incidence, timing and types of child marriage

Although, as noted earlier, the bulk of the evidence base suggests that girls in humanitarian contexts may be at increased risk of child marriage, GAGE evidence is mixed. While some respondents were of the view that child marriage rates are climbing, others opined that it was stable or falling. Respondents also differed in whether they thought age at marriage was climbing or falling, and whether they saw displacement as a positive or negative influence on the incidence and timing of child marriage. Conflicting narratives are borne of the reality that context and perspective are key (Mazurana and Marshak, 2019). Palestinian and Rohingya experiences are vastly different, with the former having been displaced for decades and the latter only a few years. Quite often, however, there is also considerable diversity within refugee populations – for example, there is considerable variation in the patterning of child marriage among Syrians who fled rural areas compared to those who fled urban areas, or among those who settled in host communities compared to those who are in informal tented settlements. Perspective is also foundational, with women and men sometimes identifying different trends and patterns and other times identifying different drivers (Bartels et al., 2018; UNICEF, 2017d). Timelines also matter, with younger and older adolescents having significantly disparate experiences due to the ways in which environments, legal contexts, and service provisioning are in flux.

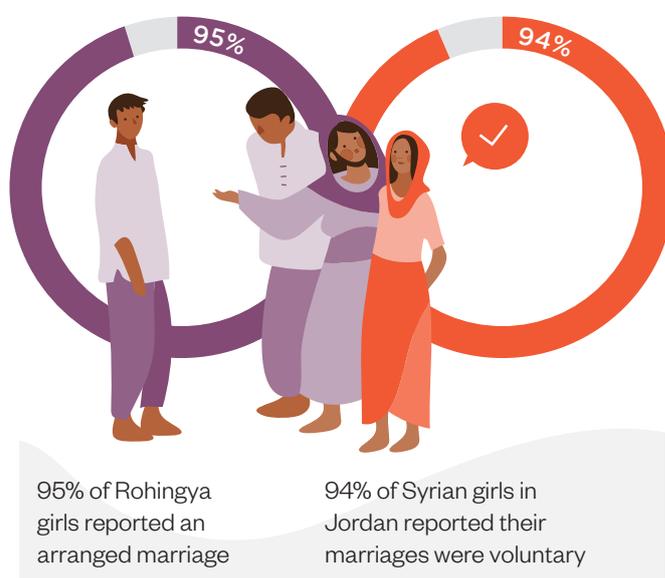
In the humanitarian contexts in which GAGE is working – Bangladesh, Gaza, Jordan and Lebanon – nearly all marriages are arranged by parents and other interested adults, rather than initiated by adolescents themselves. This is because marriage is seen as a family affair and young people are seen as in need of guidance, which is not necessarily the case in other humanitarian settings (see also UNICEF and ICRW, 2017a; Hutchinson, 2019; Fry et al., 2019; Haldorsen, 2013; Jones et al., 2020). Our observations and conclusions should be interpreted accordingly. Critically, while most marriages are arranged, nearly all the girls in our sample were explicit that they

were not forced (see Box 3). This distinction is not purely semantic in that it suggests (perceived) adolescent agency that may open spaces for intervention. The Palestinian and Syrian girls most at risk of forced marriage are those married consanguineously (see Box 4).

#### Box 3: 'Forced' is a weighted word

Because marriage is seen as foundational not only to family life but to community life, Islam stipulates that marriage must be a consensual agreement entered into by free will with no threat of force from any party, including parents (Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2018). Indeed, the Qur'an specifically states that both forced marriage and violence against women are proscribed: 'It is not lawful for you to inherit women by force. Nor may you treat them harshly... Live together with them correctly and courteously...' In order to meet religious mandates, those who officiate weddings are required to ask both parties whether they are entering into the marriage freely. Although this stipulation does not take into account power dynamics that constrain responses, verbal consent – not silence – is required.

**Nearly all child marriages are arranged –**  
but the majority are perceived as voluntary.



#### Box 4: Consanguineous marriage

While rates are declining, consanguineous marriage remains common throughout the Middle East, mainly between cousins. Indeed, the most recent Jordan Population and Family Health Survey (JPFHS) found that 27.5% of all marriages in the country were consanguineous (Department of Statistics and ICF, 2019). The most common pattern was marriage between first cousins (accounting for 23% of all marriages and 66% of consanguineous marriages) (as cited in Islam et al., 2018). The youngest brides are the most likely to marry a relative. According to the 2017–18 JPFHS, 33% of married girls aged 15–19 are related to their husbands, compared to only 26% of women aged 20–24. Older brides are not only less likely to have arranged marriages, but are also more likely to be urban, wealthier and better educated – and thus to have a better understanding of the risks of intra-familial marriage (ibid.). At the national level, rates of consanguineous marriage have declined significantly over recent decades, largely due to efforts to reduce cases of thalassemia (Alswaidi and O'Brien, 2009; Saffi and Howard, 2015). In 1990, 57% of marriages were consanguineous (Islam et al., 2018). Across all age groups (15–49 years), Syrian women are more likely to be married to relatives than Jordanian women (33% versus 27%) (Department of Statistics and ICF, 2019).

Mourtada et al. (2017) found that in Lebanon, refugees' preference for cousin marriages may be declining post-displacement – partly due to increased knowledge of its risks but partly also due to heightened family tensions as a result of cramped living quarters.

#### Rohingya girls

As reported in other research (Leigh et al., 2020; Melnikas et al., 2020; Ainul et al., 2018; Sang, 2018), Rohingya participants in our qualitative research explained that there is a window in which girls are expected to marry. That window opens a year or two after menarche (first onset of menstruation) and closes in early adulthood. *'We have to come inside the house at a certain age (12 years). And within two years of that we have to get married. If not after five, six years, we will be called old woman, which results in no marriage,'* explained a married 18-year-old. *'One daughter was 18 years old, another was 15 years old and the other was 21 years old,'* added a Rohingya mother, citing the ages at which her daughters had married. Critically, while the marriage of girls aged 12 and 13 is conceptualised as child marriage and is quite rare, by middle adolescence, girls are generally no longer seen as children. A 15-year-old married girl observed that her marriage was strong because she had waited until she was mature enough to marry: *'Now we both are mature. Now the brain works more than before.'*

While adolescents reported that they had heard of others who had *'run away and gotten married'* (17-year-

 We have to come inside the house at a certain age (12 years). And within two years of that we have to get married. If not after five, six years, we will be called old woman, which results in no marriage.

(A married 18-year-old)

old boy) without parental permission, nearly all (95%) of the married girls in our sample had been married by arrangement, with most (68%) adding that they were ready to marry. *'Parents get a good proposal. So, they get them married,'* explained a 17-year-old girl. *'My uncles arranged it... Everyone is happy. I like it, my mother likes it,'* added an 18-year-old of her marriage. Similarly, a mother of a married girl exclaimed, *'We marry them based on our choice. Why would they choose? They have parents.'*

As we discuss in more detail below, respondents reported that child marriage became more common in the first years after displacement, as refugee households took advantage of the fact that laws were more lax in Bangladesh than in Myanmar. *'In Burma [an older name for Myanmar] girls have to be 18 years old to get married. The government does not allow marriages earlier than 18 years,'* recalled one mother. Most agreed that compared to the initial displacement period, child marriage is now declining, as enforcement of the law has been stepped up in Bangladesh.

#### GAGE's sample of Rohingya girls in Bangladesh

- Of girls aged 15–17, 12% had already been married
- Girls who were already married did so at a mean age of 15.8 years
- Girls' husbands were on average 23.9 years old
- 95% of married girls report arranged marriage
- 68% of married girls report they were ready to marry

## Marriage: ready or not?

About two-thirds of Rohingya and Syrian girls reported being **ready to marry** — but about one-third would have **rather waited**.



### Syrian girls

In line with existent evidence, most GAGE respondents were clear that Syrian girls are expected to marry early – and as their parents direct – regardless of what their Jordanian and Lebanese peers do (Higher Population Council, 2017; Fry et al., 2019; UNICEF and ICRW, 2017b, 2017c; Hutchinson, 2018b, 2019; UNFPA, 2017; UNFPA et al., 2017; Save the Children, 2014, 2019; Mourtada et al., 2017; DeJong et al., 2017; Bartels et al., 2018; Gausman et al., 2020). The mother of a 16-year-old married girl from a host community in Jordan explained, *‘The situation in Syria is unlike Jordan... in Jordan, they marry girls after they finish their education... We follow the thoughts of Syrians [i.e. that marriage is more important than education for girls].’*

Respondents highlighted that while mid-adolescence (15–17 years of age) is a far more common time for girls to marry, even very young adolescent girls are sometimes at risk, usually because of preferences on the part of grooms and mothers-in-law for younger girls but occasionally because of girls’ own mothers’ preferences (see Box 5).

### GAGE’s sample of Syrian girls in Jordan

- Of girls aged 15–17, 21% had already been married
- Girls who were already married did so at a mean age of 15.4 years
- Girls’ husbands were on average 21.2 years old
- 94% of married girls report marriage was voluntary (as opposed to forced)
- 63% of married girls report that they were ready to marry

**D** I raised her, knew everything about her, and made her know everything about me while she is still young. For instance, I need special preparations when I get back home. To get my clothes, and dinner prepared and so on... It’s like the doll, you can move it as you like... It’s better than getting a mature girl who already has other things.

(The husband of a 15-year-old Syrian girl)

A Syrian father in a Jordanian host community reported, *‘We are from Syria, there are those who get married at the age of 12 years old.’* A 19-year-old married girl in Lebanon added, *‘When I got my period my mother got very excited. She said, “my daughter grew up!” ... She was very happy and she started searching for a groom for me.’*

### Box 5: Why girls rather than women?

Syrian and Palestinian respondents agreed that younger brides are usually preferred – by grooms and their mothers – over older girls, which explains the continued preference for girls who are in mid-adolescence rather than late adolescence. Critically, younger brides are preferred not because they are seen as more beautiful, or more sexually desirable, but because they are known to be more malleable (Malhotra and Elnakib, forthcoming; Haldorsen, 2013; Hutchinson, 2019, 2018b; UNICEF and ICRW, 2017b, 2017c; Fry et al., 2019). *‘Men want to marry young girls, so they could raise them by their own ways,’* explained a divorced 15-year-old Palestinian girl from Jordan’s Gaza camp. Mothers-in-law and husbands both admitted that this is true. The husband of a 15-year-old Syrian girl observed, *‘I raised her, knew everything about her, and made her know everything about me while she is still young. For instance, I need special preparations when I get back home. To get my clothes, and dinner prepared and so on... It’s like the doll, you can move it as you like... It’s better than getting a mature girl who already has other things.’* The preference for marrying younger girls is so ingrained that the father of a married Syrian girl living in a host community added that he found his own wife tiresome, because she had not been a child when they married. He stated: *‘I am tired of my wife, because I married her when she was mature, she was 20 years old, not 18 years old, until I got accustomed, and taught her about my habits and what I love and what I hate. By contrast, a younger girl will absorb more and acclimatise to her husband more.’*



### Norhan, a 15-year-old Syrian refugee girl from Al-Mafraq, Jordan

*'My aunt was 12 years old when she was engaged to her cousin who was four years older. It was customary for cousins to marry each other and my aunt could not reject the marriage. She got married at 15.'*

Notably, while the majority of GAGE's Syrian respondents spoke of child marriage as if it were an inevitable fact of life – *'almost 95%, the majority of girls here get married early'* (mother of a married girl, Azraq refugee camp, Jordan) – others were clear that they (or their daughters) were at no risk. *'Each family differs from the other. I'm Syrian, but my parents don't accept that a girl marries at an early age. My sister got married when she was 18, my mother raised hell,'* explained an adolescent girl living in a host community. Although a few girls reported being forced to marry a cousin, nearly all (94%) *'got married through the traditions and the customs'* (older married girl) and voluntarily accepted the young man selected by their parents, even if they would have preferred to wait. *'Nobody forced me to get married. Not at all,'* emphasised an 18-year-old divorced girl who was married at 15.

As we expand upon subsequently, Syrian girls living in Lebanon, more so than those in Jordan, blamed the war for increasing the incidence of child marriage and lowering the age at which girls should marry; what started as desparation has now become habit. Girls of 14, previously considered too young, are now considered *'at marriage age'*, explained a 19-year-old who was married at age 14, living in an informal tented settlement in Lebanon. In Jordan, respondents reported that the legal environment is increasingly protective. The law stipulates that *'we have to wait until the girl becomes 15 years old and one day to be able to perform the marriage contract,'* explained a father from a host community.

## Nobody forced me to get married. Not at all.

(An 18-year-old divorced girl who was married at 15)

### Palestinian girls

Palestinian girls in Jordan, Lebanon and Gaza all reported that child marriage is accepted in their communities and encouraged by the most conservative clans<sup>4</sup> (see also UNICEF and ICRW, 2017b, 2017c; Haldorsen, 2013; Chaaban et al., 2016; Tiltnes and Zhang, 2013). A 17-year-old divorced Palestinian girl, from Jordan's Gaza camp, added that while outside the camp things are *'normal'*, child marriage is practically universal for the refugees languishing inside camps: *'In 2017, all the girls got married while they were less than 15 years old. These are our traditions.'* Girls living in camps in Gaza, several of whom had been married at 14, agreed. *'I have had an unfair life so far. I got married at the age of 14. It's been four years of absolute tragedy,'* explained an 18-year-old girl. Across countries, Palestinian girls reported that while mid-adolescence and late adolescence are more normal times for girls to marry, girls are considered eligible as soon as they have experienced menarche, *'since puberty for the girl means getting married'* (19-year-old married girl, Lebanon). Indeed, several young adolescent girls reported that they had been engaged before puberty, in order to solidify relationships within – and grow – their clan. A 12-year-old from Gaza explained, *'When my brother and his wife got married, it was a badal<sup>5</sup> marriage. She marries*

#### GAGE's sample of Palestinian girls in Jordan

- 51% of Palestinian boys and girls aged 15–17 report that adults in the community expect girls to marry before the legal age
- Among Palestinian girls aged 15–17, 71% agree that most girls in their community actually do marry before the legal age

4 Due to survey sample construction, which was shaped by difficulty in accessing married girls (because husbands and mothers-in-law refuse permission), we do not have enough married Palestinian girls from Jordan to reliably estimate the incidence or timing of child marriage.

5 A badal marriage is when pairs of siblings marry one another. Usually, neither family is responsible for paying bride price.



### Atheer, a 15-year-old Palestinian refugee girl with a hearing disability from Gaza camp in Jerash, Jordan

*'This is my mother's wedding dress. My mother got married when she was 16. She was forced to leave her school and to marry my father. My mother and women of her age did not have any choice or say about their marriage. Families used to control the girl's life before, and this is still ongoing today in Gaza camp, where girls are still forced into marriage at an early age. I fear that this will happen to me as well.'*

*my brother and I marry her brother. It means that I am promised to him.'*

Although a UNRWA study in Jordan (Haldorsen, 2013) found that one-third of child marriages among Palestinians were forced, most girls in our research reported that the marriage was arranged rather than forced. Narratives were, however, complex and suggested considerable pressure. *'My family agreed. I refused him 4 times... They told me, "This is your life and we won't push you. Keep praying." I agreed the last time,'* explained a 19-year-old who married at age 17.

As we explain below, we also found some evidence that the Syrian conflict has increased the rate of child marriage among Palestinians living in Jordanian and Lebanese camps, as increased competition for jobs, coupled with declining funding for social assistance, has resulted in greater and deeper poverty.

### Boys

Across nationalities and contexts, our respondents agreed that boys were less likely to marry as children than girls: *'Of course, the boy is different from the girl'* (Syrian father, Jordanian host community). Despite their comparative rarity, however, the GAGE sample does include some boys and young men who married as children. In Gaza and Jordan, several girls' husbands had been married when they were 16 or 17 years old. In Bangladesh, the youngest husband was only 14. Our qualitative work found that, as with girls, the age at which boys marry is most often determined by when their parents decide they should

▮ If they are from the same generation... it is a problem... One of them must be aware and know how he runs the house.

(A Syrian father in a host community)

marry. However, this is not always the case; some boys and young men choose their own timing and their own partners, asking their parents only to formalise proceedings.

Our research suggests that it is also critical to attend not only to the boys who marry as children, but also to the young grooms who are legally adults, because of spousal age gaps. Boys who are married early are necessarily married to girls who are married earlier – and men who marry in early adulthood almost always marry adolescent girls. In Bangladesh, our survey found that the average spousal age gap was 8 years<sup>6</sup>; in Jordan – among Syrians – it was 6 years. Respondents noted that husbands must be older than wives because they must be mature providers. A Syrian father in a host community reported, *'It is always our nature that the difference in age between a husband and his wife ranges from 5 to 10 years.'* Another added, *'If they are from the same generation... it is a problem... One of them must be aware and know how he runs the house.'* Girls agreed with this view. A 19-year-old admitted that she had refused an age mate in favour of an older man. *'He was young, I am 19 years old and he is 20... It was clear from his picture that he is young and can't take responsibility.'*

<sup>6</sup> Haldorsen (2013) found an average age gap of 8.5 years among Palestinian girls married as children in Jordan

**The average child bride marries a man substantially older than she is**



**In Jordan, of the married Syrian girls in GAGE's sample:**

Girls married at an average age of...

**15.4** years

Girls married men an average of...

**21.2** years



**In Bangladesh, of the married Rohingya girls in GAGE's sample:**

Girls married at an average age of...

**15.8** years

Girls married men an average of...

**23.9** years

**4.2 High-level drivers of child marriage**

GAGE findings add to emerging consensus that the drivers of child marriage in humanitarian contexts are similar to those in developmental contexts, only more so. Our findings also speak to the near futility of trying to disentangle drivers, even in contexts uncomplicated by crisis. For example, how is it possible to tease out the effects of financial insecurity versus the effects of being shut out of education when poverty shapes both access to education and the risk of child marriage, and when both are fundamentally shaped by gender inequalities? How is it possible to distinguish between threats to girls' 'honour' and threats to girls' food security when in many contexts girls' only access to a financially stable household is through marriage, and their odds of marriage are reduced if their 'honour' is besmirched? Crisis adds yet another layer of complexity, interacting with economic drivers and social norms to augment (albeit inconsistently) the risks that girls and boys face. With the caveat that it is not possible to neatly separate the drivers of child marriage in any context, here we present a high-level picture of the three drivers most commonly believed to shape child marriage in humanitarian contexts: economic factors (which we separate into push and pull factors), gender norms, and crisis and conflict. This panoramic view is needed to contextualise the close-ups on the more individual perspectives that will then be explored in section 4.3.



Adolescent Syrian married girl with her two children, Jordan © Nathalie Bertrams

## Economic drivers of child marriage

- Economic factors are twofold. Poverty pushes some girls into child marriage, while hope for a more secure future pulls others into child marriage.
- Effects are highly varied and depend on whether marriages require dowry or bride price, and whether refugees have access to social protection and the employment that would facilitate self-reliance.
- Camp settings add an additional push factor in that marriage is seen by many families as a means to escape the confines of the camp and its truncated employment opportunities – especially in the case of stateless Palestinians.
- Poverty generally delays marriage among boys and young men, who need to be able to demonstrate sufficient economic resources to secure a bride – unless they have other assets to offer, such as citizenship or non-camp residency status.

### Poverty as a push towards child marriage

Especially in humanitarian contexts, where extreme poverty and day-to-day uncertainty is the norm, the literature suggests that families' need to reduce daily expenses is a driving force behind child marriage (UNICEF and UNFPA, 2018, 2020b; Freccero and Whiting, 2018; *Girls Not Brides*, 2018, 2020b; Higher Population Council, 2017; Bartels et al., 2018; Hutchison, 2019, 2018b; UNICEF and ICRW, 2017a; Haldorsen, 2013). In contexts where husbands provide bride price, it is often also suggested that families seek to arrange their daughters' marriage to better-provisioned suitors, as a way of bringing some kind of income into the natal household. Noting that the countries in which GAGE is working have, at this point, relatively well-developed humanitarian responses, we found only mixed evidence that poverty pushes families into marrying their children before adulthood.

### Rohingya communities

In Bangladesh – where the international Rohingya response dates only to 2017 and Rohingya communities are formally precluded from entering the labour market, which all but eliminates opportunities for refugees' self-reliance – no respondents mentioned marrying daughters in order to reduce household expenses or mitigate household

▶▶ I have no money, so, how I will marry my daughters? Grooms want dowry during marriage.

(A father from the Rohingya community)

poverty. In addition, because dowry, rather than bride price<sup>7</sup>, is a Rohingya custom, there is no motivation for families to marry their daughters to better-off suitors as an income-generation strategy. Indeed, the prevailing concern of Rohingya respondents is that providing daughters with dowries is difficult for the poorest. *'I worry more about my daughters... I have no money, so, how I will marry my daughters? Grooms want dowry during marriage,' explained one father.*

### Syrian communities

Despite a strong negative correlation between household wealth and child marriage in Jordan (Higher Population Council, 2017; Fry et al., 2019), with better-off households less likely to marry their daughters before age 18, GAGE's Syrian respondents were mixed as to whether child marriage is ever driven by parents' efforts to improve the economic situation of the natal household. Several fathers – who were, unsurprisingly, more likely to mention poverty and economic push factors given that they are seen as household breadwinners (see also Bartels et al., 2018) – dismissed the proposed link. *'From the financial side, we have a difficult situation, but for marriage, there is no relationship to money,'* noted the father of a married girl from a host community. Parents added that not only do girls' families often continue to contribute to their financial upkeep after marriage, but that in the case of families in informal tented settlements (where poverty is deeper, child marriage is more common, and the age at first marriage is lowest), marrying girls as children is counterproductive as the girl's family loses access to her wages. *'You continue to bear the concerns of a girl and a young man under the age of 18 until they are able and have a good income,'* explained the father of a married girl from a host community.

By contrast, other respondents – in both Jordan and Lebanon – admitted that there is some degree of truth to child marriage being deployed as a way to stretch household resources. *'Most refugees need a large house*

<sup>7</sup> Dowry refers to cash or gifts provided by the bride's family to the groom and his family. Bride price refers to cash or gifts provided by the groom and his family to the bride and her family.

**D** Most refugees need a large house and expenses. Sometimes, we have to get our daughters married for these reasons.

(A father of a married girl)

*and expenses. Sometimes, we have to get our daughters married for these reasons,' explained the father of a married girl from a host community. In our family, child marriage 'is normal because we are a large family, we are 7 girls at home,' added a married 19-year-old girl from Lebanon. 'He (my father) wanted to marry us because of his bad financial circumstance,' explained a 16-year-old in a host community who was married at 14, and whose younger sister has parental support to aim for university. 'But it's more about the traditions than the expenses' emphasised a 15-year-old in another host community, who was also married at age 14.*

While many parents acknowledged that girls are expensive, because *'the girl likes to go to the beauty salon or buy a new dress'* (mother of a girl married at age 17, host community), and a few respondents acknowledged having friends who had married their daughters to wealthy Saudis *'as he will have some cash'* (father of a married girl, host community), the vast majority of our respondents – like those of Hutchinson (2019) – downplayed the role of bride price<sup>8</sup> in encouraging child marriage. *'If a stranger came to want to marry her, I do not allow him to marry her even if he paid her weight in gold,'* stated a father from a host community. *'I do not give my daughter to someone who pays 5,000 dinars but is not a good man. Even if my daughter becomes an old girl,'* added a mother from Azraq.

Married girls added that bride price is generally fairly small, often just large enough to cover the cost of the trousseau and wedding. This is especially the case if the groom is a relative or from the same region of Syria as the bride's family, both of which were key considerations in shaping marriage decision-making.

### Palestinian communities

Although Haldorsen (2013) reports that child marriage among Palestinian girls in Jordan contravenes the usual pattern and is positively correlated with household wealth – with girls from better-off households more likely to marry as children than those from poorer households – GAGE findings, echoing those of Fry et al. (2019), tended to emphasise poverty as a driver of child marriage. This likely reflects GAGE's sample, which in Jordan is drawn from Gaza camp and in Lebanon is drawn from Ein el-Hilweh camp – both of which are particularly poor and vulnerable communities (and, in the case of Ein el-Hilweh, physically cut off from nearly all labour market opportunities). A mother from Jordan's Gaza camp explained, *'When the father can't cover their expenses he will find himself forced to marry his daughters to reduce expenses.'* A 17-year-old girl from Lebanon's Ein el-Hilweh camp agreed, *'Families in the camp always want to marry off their daughters... Families are very poor in the camp and some people cannot even eat, so they have to marry off their daughters.'* Girls from Gaza concurred. *'In Jabalia [a UNHCR camp], poor families encourage early marriage for their daughters to decrease pressure on their lives,'* reported an older adolescent girl in a focus group discussion. Indeed, a pregnant 15-year-old from Gaza admitted that she had repeatedly approached a cleric, trying to find a husband for



### Suha, a 16-year-old Syrian refugee girl from Al-Mafraq, Jordan

*'Life was easier for my mother who grew up in our village in Syria. People did not need much money, they had their farms and animals, and the neighbours used to help each other. Life is so different for my generation now, we live in Jordan. My mother kept a 200 Syrian pound note with her when we had to flee Syria. She told me that 200 Syrian pounds used to buy many things. They could buy fabrics to make clothes or all the groceries they needed for the house. Today, though, the 200 pounds can only buy a packet of gum.'*

<sup>8</sup> While dowry is the word used by Syrian respondents, this is technically bride price.

**D** A brother is for life. A marriage may not be. We need to agree on such major life decisions when it affects our clan.

(A Palestinian refugee father)

her sister-in-law (her husband's sister), *'so that she could move out and reduce the expenses'*

It should be noted that while GAGE's Palestinian respondents highlighted poverty as an economic driver of child marriage, they were less likely overall than Rohingya and Syrian respondents to mention economic drivers. Rather, they were more likely to highlight clan dynamics and the importance of ensuring that all adult men in the family (including uncles and brothers of the girl) were involved in vetting the groom's character and approving the match. As one father explained: *'A brother is for life. A marriage may not be. We need to agree on such major life decisions when it affects our clan.'*

### Future economic security as a pull factor towards child marriage

Across the humanitarian contexts in which GAGE is working, respondents were unified that it is vital that girls do not get 'left on the shelf' and jeopardise their only real opportunity – marriage – for securing their future. For Rohingya, Syrian and Palestinian women, who have very limited access to paid work (due to restrictive gender norms), marriage is overwhelmingly what keeps women and their children fed, clothed and housed. Where child marriage improves girls' chances of marrying well, it is a valued way of improving their longer-term economic security – and possibly that of their natal families (El Arab and Sagbakken, 2019; Bartels et al., 2018; Acosta and Thomas, 2014; Mourtada et al., 2017; Hutchinson, 2019, 2018b).

### Rohingya communities

Rohingya respondents in Bangladesh were most likely to emphasise marriage as a way to ensure girls' futures. Indeed, due to the custom of purdah, which prohibits girls from leaving home after puberty (Sang, 2018; Tay et al., 2018; Wake et al., 2019; ISCG et al., 2020), most respondents noted that girls' survival depends on marriage. For girls who have lost one or more parents, or have no brothers, child marriage is often preferred over adult marriage. An

unmarried 15-year-old girl reported that she cannot wait to marry, to improve her diet: *'If I had a husband he would bring rice and other ingredients for me. There wouldn't be any shortage of food.'* Similarly, a 17-year-old divorced adolescent girl, whose mother is terminally ill, explained that getting remarried is her highest priority. Only if she is married will she have a place to live and enough to eat after her mother dies. *'If I can get married I won't have any tension. I wouldn't feel tense if I didn't have to starve twice a day. The only tension is where will I go after the death of my mother? Where will I get shelter?'* Several Rohingya respondents observed that the poorest girls, who are most likely to require the security that marriage can offer, are the hardest to marry. This is because, as a 19-year-old married girl explained, *'to get daughters married, the father of the girl has to give a dowry to the groom's family'*. This leaves the poorest girls at the highest risk of being married to 'an old man' (married 18-year-old girl) or being forced to 'marry a man who already has a wife' (key informant). The desire to marry their daughters well encourages even some better-off families to prefer child marriage over adult marriage, because younger girls tend to attract the most desirable grooms.

### Syrian communities

Syrian respondents differed in whether they framed child marriage as a way to improve girls' future economic security. In Lebanon, where poverty is broader, deeper and more intractable – both because the labour market is almost entirely off limits and there are no formal camps (which tend to have better service provision) – none of the adolescents taking part in our participatory research discussed child marriage as a way of improving girls' lives. This is different from Jordan, where several respondents highlighted that child marriage brought relief from abject poverty and more saw it as a way to improve girls' standard of living. For example, a 17-year-old girl, married at 12, recalled that she had married in order to escape the gruelling factory work she had been engaged in since she was 10: *'I was working as long as 12 hours a day, I was the only child, and without a father or a brother in the household my mother had no choice. But I felt tired and broken and so my mother accepted the marriage proposal even though it was at a considerably younger age than would have been the case had we still been in Syria.'* The mother of a girl from a host community who had married at age 16 added that she had chosen to marry her daughter to

▶ I was working as long as 12 hours a day. But I felt tired and broken and so my mother accepted the marriage proposal even though it was at a considerably younger age than would have been the case had we still been in Syria

(A 17-year-old girl, married at 12)

improve her wardrobe. She explained, *'the girl needs many requirements and the mother doesn't have the capability to provide for the girl's needs... I can let my girl stay with me until the age of 18 and 19 years old, but I can't see my girl not dressing as other people... So, when a good man wants to marry her, I consider this as a chance. I say: "Let me marry her to this man to bring her what she wants".'*

### Palestinian communities

Palestinian respondents in the GAGE sample stood out because they rarely emphasised child marriage as a way to secure girls' economic futures. Unlike the Rohingya, there were no discussions of marriage as a mechanism for improving food security. Unlike the Syrians, there were no discussions about how husbands might better afford to buy girls the things that make them happy. Only one Palestinian girl, originally from Syria but now living in Lebanon, mentioned marriage as a way to secure her future. She had been engaged to the son of her Lebanese landlord, nearly two decades her elder, in part because the family was afraid of being evicted if they said no and in part because her parents *'thought he was a good person and I will be happy with him'*.

It seems likely that the protracted nature of Palestinian displacement, coupled with the particular contexts in which GAGE is working, accounts for this difference. In Gaza, Lebanon's Ein el-Hilweh camp, and Jordan's Gaza camp, households have been relying on international assistance for decades, and with more lucrative employment options severely limited (in Gaza due to economic collapse, in Jordan due to legal restrictions, and in Lebanon due to both, plus refugees' physical isolation), the economic inequality that might shape marriage markets is largely absent.

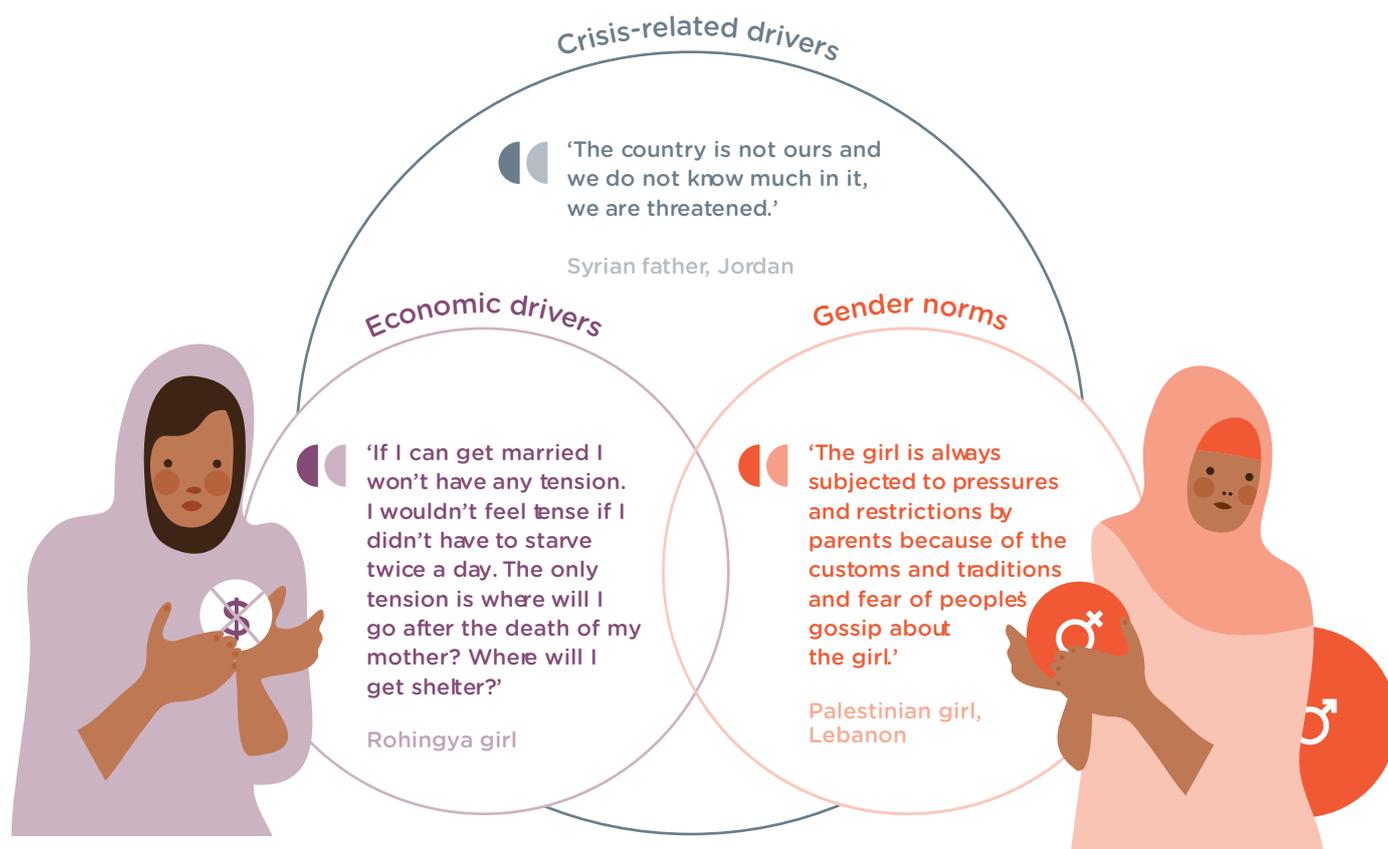
## Gender norms as drivers of child marriage

- While often couched in terms of religious mandate, protecting girls' sexual purity – and their families' honour – is the primary reason given by nearly all respondents, across contexts, for marrying girls as children.
- In formal camps, where conditions are crowded and populations diverse in terms of clan and location of origin, study respondents noted heightened concerns about security for their daughters and reported that these led to accepting very early marriage proposals.
- While our findings underscore that parents rather than adolescents initiate marriages and make final marriage decisions in all GAGE study communities, girls note that the timing of their marriage may be also partly influenced by peer pressure and a desire to fit in when other girls are dropping out of school and marrying.
- Boys' behaviour is less policed by families, but parents sometimes encourage their sons to marry in order to ensure they have a socially acceptable venue for sexual activity – and so that they can have grandchildren.

As noted earlier, existent research is all but unanimous that the root cause of child marriage – at least for girls, and in both development and humanitarian contexts – is gender inequality (Malhotra and Elnakib, forthcoming; *Girls Not Brides*, 2020c; UNICEF, 2018, 2020b; UNICEF and UNFPA, 2018, 2020b; Harper et al., 2018; Fry et al., 2019). Where girls and women are valued less than boys and men (and primarily for their sexual purity and reproductive capacities), have only limited means to secure their own independent economic futures, and are at perpetual risk of violence, they are at elevated risk of marrying before adulthood. GAGE evidence, across countries and nationalities, overwhelmingly supports this position, though there are differences in how respondents frame their beliefs and how intricately entwined those beliefs are with the economic drivers, as discussed above.

It should be noted that although in many contexts, girls' limited access to sexual and reproductive health information and services drives child marriage (because girls who become pregnant prior to marriage must be hastily married in order to protect the family's reputation), in the humanitarian contexts in which GAGE is working – which are all conservative and predominantly Muslim

The drivers of child marriage are intricately intertwined:



– this is not the case. Premarital relationships are very rare among Syrian, Palestinian and Rohingya communities. Indeed, even cross-gender conversations are largely prohibited.

**Rohingya communities**

GAGE's Rohingya respondents, when asked why girls marry as children, most often first mentioned the Islamic mandate for marriage. 'Everyone has to marry. The prophet Allah also did,' explained a father. Similarly, the mother of a married 18-year-old asked 'Why [wouldn't] I marry her off? It is the rule of Islam.'

When pressed to explain why girls marry as children, rather than waiting for adulthood, most respondents identified the need for girls to have a husband to safeguard their honour. The mother of an unmarried girl exclaimed, 'They will have to get married. It's a sin for girls to go out... We want to get her married right now!' A married 15-year-old girl, who reported that her younger sisters were also married, added that her father had had to marry them all because their mother had died and they could not be left at home alone while he worked. She explained, 'We don't have a mother. Our mother died during our childhood. So

people could talk bad about us as our father used to go to his job.'

Rohingya adolescents were often forthright about girls having sinful natures that need controlling. Boys, in a focus group, noted that girls must marry 'early so that they can't do evil'. Girls, also steeped in gender norms that position them as second-class citizens, were sometimes even more direct about needing to be protected from themselves. A 15-year-old divorced girl explained, 'If I had a husband half of my problem would be solved. The respect and honour of a girl can be controlled by her husband. A girl can't be okay without a husband. If I have a husband I won't look at anyone with bad intentions. My mind would be controlled. I want to marry again. Then I will be happy.'

Discussions of marriage as a way to protect girls' honour almost always immediately segued into discussions about how girls' honour is a cornerstone of family honour – and child marriage a way to ensure that the family reputation stays intact. A father of a married girl observed that any gossip about his daughter would reflect negatively on him. 'If I can't marry my girls then they will stay at home. If they co-habit with boys before getting married or have a relationship with boys, then people will make

▮ I married one of my sons off at the age of 17. When I saw that my son was having a relationship with a girl and roaming everywhere, I married him off, thinking of my reputation.

(A Rohingya mother)

*bad comments about me.* Another emphasised: *'I'll be disgraced!'* The mother of an unmarried girl explained that she and her husband are desperate to marry their daughter and are prevented from doing so only by poverty. *'People will say bad things about our girls... If we can get her married we can be free... If something wrong happens to her we will be disgraced, right?'*

While less common, a Rohingya mother admitted that the same reasoning led her to marry one of her sons as an adolescent. She explained, *'I married one of my sons off at the age of 17. When I saw that my son was having a relationship with a girl and roaming everywhere, I married him off, thinking of my reputation.'*

### Syrian communities

Syrian respondents emphasised tradition first, not religious mandate. Many noted that Syrian girls marry as children because Syrian girls have always married as children. *'In Syria, there are no decisions regarding marriage. There are customs and traditions,'* noted a mother from Azraq. When asked why it is a tradition for Syrian girls to marry as children, Syrian respondents, like Rohingya respondents, emphasised the centrality of marriage to Islam. A mother from a host community observed, *'Marriage is good for her. Marriage is the half of the religion.'* Adult respondents often added that the prophet himself had married a child. *'Ms Aisha "the mother of Muslims" got engaged at 7 years and the prophet Mohammed married her when she was 9 years old,'* explained a father in a host community.

Most Syrian parents, after first anchoring their preference for child marriage in tradition and then religion, explained that marriage is also the way to ensure that girls are 'safe'. A father from a host community explained, *'everyone is looking to have their daughters married before the age of 18, to have peace of mind and take her responsibility off their shoulders... There are many bad guys around here, and getting her married is safer for her.'*

▮ We marry the girls off at a young age because there is no safety.

(A Syrian mother from a host community)

A mother from a host community added, *'We marry the girls at a young age because there is no safety.'*

Diverging from the broader evidence base, which underscores the very real threats to girls' safety in many humanitarian contexts, Syrian respondents in our research in Jordan and Lebanon noted that reported rates of actual violence are relatively uncommon. *'The region is safe, but our heart still feels afraid,'* reported a mother from a Jordanian host community. Respondents clarified that, like their Rohingya peers, they are largely concerned about rampant sexual harassment (which is so extreme that boys and young men occasionally climb over school walls and enter the girls' toilets to take photos) and the threat it poses to girls' reputations. Marriage is seen as a way to safeguard honour. *'It is about honour and they are afraid for their daughters... She grew up and was afraid to have a bad reputation, so he prefers to make her get married,'* explained a father from an informal tented settlement. *'Parents believe that if the girl does not marry, she will bring shame to them, so they force her to get married early,'* added a 19-year-old boy from Jordan's Azraq camp.

Syrian girls, who are very aware of how important their reputations are, agree that while assault is relatively rare, they are terrified of being sexually harassed. *'He was riding on a bike, and I was walking, he approached me and he reached out to his hands, I was scared of him,'* reported an 11-year-old girl from Azraq. *'It's fear for my reputation,'* added a 17-year-old girl from a host community. Highlighting how gender norms and economic drivers interact, several Syrian parents noted that girls from the poorest households are most vulnerable to attacks on their honour, because they are most likely to be out of school and therefore most likely to be considered eligible for – and in need of – marriage (see Box 6). *'If the girl studies and goes to school, her family will be convinced to allow her to complete her study before marriage. If the girl stays at home with you, they will not be convinced,'* explained the mother of a married girl from a Jordanian host community.

Syrian respondents, like Rohingya respondents, observed that concerns for girls' reputations are linked to concerns about family honour. A younger girl in a host



### Ola, a 15-year-old Palestinian girl from Ein el-Hilweh camp, Lebanon

*'Knowledge is light, but it was not like this before. My mother left school when she was not even eight years old. No one urged her to finish her studies and her parents never cared about it. Therefore, she overcame everything she went through by encouraging us to complete our studies and to seek a better future.'*

#### Box 6: The role of schooling in protecting girls from child marriage

As other researchers have noted, education and child marriage effectively serve as competing pathways for girls' futures (Malhotra and Elnakib, forthcoming; Harper et al., 2018). Girls who are in school are far less likely to marry as children than those who have dropped out, with secondary school being the most protective (ibid.). Across countries and nationalities, we are finding a variety of barriers – some policy-related, some economic, and some normative – that prevent girls from learning. For many girls, all three come into play.

As already noted, Bangladeshi policy has precluded Rohingya adolescents from accessing education. That said, of the Rohingya girls in GAGE's sample, nearly all were out of school even before they fled Myanmar. Indeed, the average girl left school before completing third grade (mean grade attainment=2.9) and many of the married girls in our sample had never attended school at all. *'The two brothers studied but the two sisters didn't study. I have never gone to school,'* explained a 17-year-old girl. *'There were many household chores to do,'* added a 19-year-old girl, who noted that her brothers were excused from chores in order to focus on their studies. For Rohingya girls who were allowed to attend school, the onset of puberty universally marked the end of access: *'My father said, "Our girl is grown up now. She doesn't need to go to school";'* reported a 17-year-old who was made to leave school after fourth grade. Married girls observed that gender- and age-related restrictions on their mobility, rather than poverty, were the primary reason they were made to leave school. *'When we are 12 and grown up, we have to be confined at home permanently,'* noted a 16-year-old. *'It is prohibited in our religion,'* added an 18-year-old.

Many Syrian and Palestinian girls also lose access to education in early adolescence. Unlike their Rohingya peers, poverty appears to play more of a role. *'Her father and her brothers forced her to leave school because the financial situation did not allow,'* explained the mother of a girl, living in Jordan's Azraq camp, who was married at 14. While attending school is free – in Jordan and Gaza and at government- and NGO-run schools in Lebanon – uniforms and school materials are not. For the poorest households, even relatively small costs are often too much to bear. In addition, in Lebanon and Jordan, for the Syrian families who live in informal tented settlements (ITSs), young adolescents often leave school permanently to work alongside their parents, picking vegetables to make ends meet. An 18-year-old married girl living in an ITS in Lebanon, added: *'We leave education and start working in the fields at an early age to help our family. Girls leave school as early as 10 years of age and start working in the fields to help their families due to the financial hardships that we face.'*

More often, however, Syrian and Palestinian girls – across countries and like their Rohingya peers – emphasised gender norms as the reason they had to leave school. *'In my family girls don't complete their education. They only study until grade seven or grade eight, as the girl will end up in her husband's house. These are our customs and traditions,'* explained a 17-year-old Syrian girl who had married at 14 and was living in a host community in Jordan. Palestinians originally from Gaza but now living in Jordan reported similar traditions. *'Here, the little girls are raised with a shattered heart, because they know that they will leave school in the sixth grade... They say that there is no use in educating a girl... They told us that girls are for the kitchen and these things,'* added a trio of older girls living in Jordan's Gaza camp.

Palestinian girls also emphasised the role of peer pressure in driving girls to leave school. An 18-year-old separated girl from Jordan noted that she had left school in the sixth grade, despite her parents' wishes, because her friends had started leaving: *'I lost interest. I saw other girls doing it so I did it because I was jealous.'* Other girls observed that they had left school in early adolescence because their peers had pushed them out – through innuendo that carries real risks, given the importance of girls' honour to their safety. A 15-year-old engaged girl from Jordan, who left school after only fifth grade, explained that she had dropped out because *'my classmates would always talk about me in a bad manner behind my back, so that's why I left.'*

Here, the little girls are raised with a shattered heart, because they know that they will leave school in the sixth grade... They say that there is no use in educating a girl... They told us that girls are for the kitchen and these things.

(A trio of older girls living in Jordan's Gaza camp)

community reported that a peer had been rightly confined to home, on a permanent basis, for having been seen speaking to a boy: *'She affected the family's reputation negatively... She deserves this.'* A male community key informant highlighted that the number one reason for child marriage in the Syrian community is *'concern for the family's reputation... they are afraid that their daughter knows someone.'* Mothers added that parents' concerns for honour are fed by community gossip, and innuendo that parents are bad parents if they jeopardise their daughters' futures by not immediately moving to arrange a marriage. The mother of a 16-year-old married girl from a host community explained, *"Do you want her to sit with you? Do you want to bear her sin?" So, you will be convinced by their talk and you will say to yourself: "It would be wrong to NOT marry her. It is very important that I marry her now!"*

Several Syrian parents observed that they had encouraged their adolescent and young adult sons to marry in order to protect family honour as well. For example, a Syrian mother in an informal tented settlement in Jordan

I will tell you about myself when I was a girl. The girl is deprived of everything.

(A 14-year-old Syrian girl, married at 11)

noted that her husband had made their son marry as an adolescent in order to give him an acceptable outlet for his sexual energy: *'The boys started to look at the girls around us and they made problems for us... The father forced his son to marry at a young age to be busy with his wife... then he can do what he wants.'* Fathers added that improved access to technology has made controlling their sons considerably more difficult. Using mobile phones, boys not only contact girls but also access pornography. *'Their psychology has changed,'* explained a father in a host community.

A small number of Syrian respondents identified gender inequality itself – not girls' safety or honour – as a reason for child marriage. Girls, unsurprisingly, were most likely to underscore how little they are valued as people. *'I will tell you about myself when I was a girl. The girl is deprived of everything ,'* explained a 14-year-old Syrian girl, married at 11, when asked what had led her to marry so young. *'In our community, the guy is important, but the girl has no worth. He's the rock of the family,'* added a 14-year-old from a host community who recently married. Fathers sometimes agreed. One, from a host community, admitted that girls' only value was as wives and mothers: *'It is my firm conviction, from start to finish, that a girl should be at home with her husband, taking care of her children.'*



**Ola, a 15-year-old Palestinian girl from Ein el-Hilweh camp, Lebanon**

*'At the time of my mother's adolescence, there was no worth for women and their opinions, and girls' opportunities were limited. The society is like a closed vortex to women within which they are trapped, and they do not have the power or capability to express their opinions. Today, however, a girl can express her opinions and enjoy more freedoms within the boundaries of customs and traditions'*



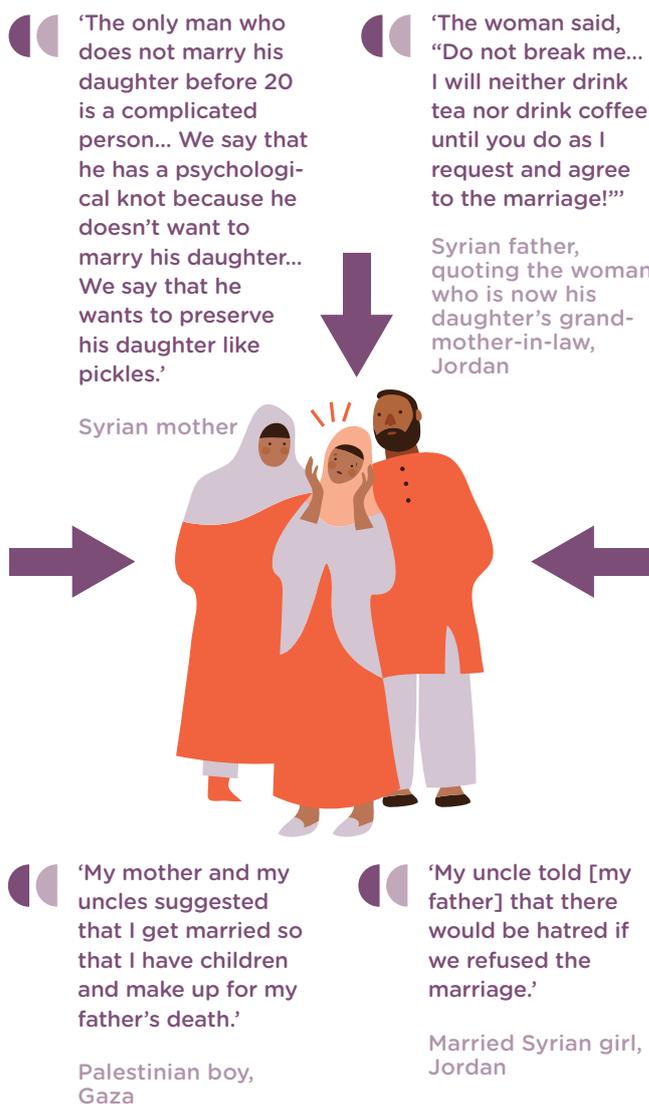
17-year-old adolescent Syrian girl, married with a child, Jordan © Nathalie Bertrams

### Palestinian communities

Unlike Haldorsen's (2013) respondents, the respondents in GAGE's Palestinian sample were less likely to speak of tradition or religion as a driver of child marriage. Although they occasionally mentioned the age of the prophet's wife, they tended to do so in a way that suggested that they saw the story as a justification, not as a driver per se. This may be because the bulk of Palestinians living in Jordan and Lebanon are not especially likely to marry their daughters as children, and so families who choose to do so feel more as if they are doing so by choice, rather than due to pressure to conform. Echoing Haldorsen's (2013) findings, however, concerns about Palestinian girls' honour, or *'sutra'*, were as pronounced as they were for Rohingya and Syrian respondents, and underscore the importance of gender norms to the perpetuation of child marriage.

*'Parents believe that marriage is protection for the girl,'* explained an older Palestinian girl living in Lebanon's Ein el-Hilweh camp. *'People are afraid that girls might be exposed to something bad or dangerous,'* noted a young Palestinian woman from Jordan's Gaza camp. *'There are many stories about girls being kidnapped in the streets and raped... girls are blamed for everything... We hear of many stories of girls also killed by their families,'* added a 17-year-old girl from Lebanon's Ein el-Hilweh camp. In Gaza, a girl married at age 14 to a 23-year-old man reported that her now husband had followed her everywhere for months, even after her uncles had explained to him that there would not, under any circumstances, be a marriage. Ultimately, he won – because her family considered the threat to their honour too great. She recalled, *'I didn't want*

### Pressure to engage in child marriage comes from all sides



to get married in the first place... It was like a scandal in the whole neighborhood... He kept following me everywhere. He came to my house and shouted that he wants to marry me... The whole neighborhood was watching at that time. Everyone was astonished by what was going on. But he was about to commit suicide and all people, including my father, forced me to marry.' Across countries, Palestinian parents tended to agree with their daughters, seeing marriage as a way of lightening their own lives because responsibility for their daughters' honour then fell to their sons-in-law, relieving them, as parents, of the burden. A mother from Gaza camp explained, 'They want to marry their daughters to be free of their burden.'

## Conflict and crisis as drivers of child marriage

- Conflict and crisis augment existing preferences for child marriage, but do so in ways that vary across contexts and timeframes.
- Crisis-related poverty, experiences of sexual violence during conflict, and truncated educational options – combined with lax enforcement of marriage laws – tend to lead to spikes in child marriage in the initial years after displacement.
- Gender norms become more salient among many communities in contexts of displacement as families often feel marginalised and have concerns that, due to discrimination and stigma against refugees, their daughters may be especially vulnerable to the sexual harassment and assault that could threaten family honour.
- Continued lack of access to quality education strengthens preferences for child marriage over time.
- A stronger focus on the risks of child marriage (especially with regard to divorce) and better enforcement of the law appear to reduce rates of child marriage – or at least delay timings.
- The risks facing girls are also compounded in some contexts where parents are opting for older spouses to avoid the violent behavior and drug addiction that some younger men are exhibiting as negative coping responses to the desperate conditions in which they are living as refugees or as stateless communities.
- The effects of crises on boys' and young men's timing of marriage are highly varied. In some cases, crisis-related poverty delays marriages for years; in others, displacement facilitates earlier marriages and leads to some boys being encouraged to marry as children in order to produce the next generation of children needed to strengthen the family line, particularly after loss of family members during conflict.

Conflict and other humanitarian crises add yet another layer of complexity to child marriage decision-making (Mazurana and Marshak, 2019; Girls Not Brides, 2018, 2020b; Human Rights Council, 2019; UNICEF, 2020b; UNICEF and UNFPA, 2020b). Even where child marriage is common, the way in which crisis interacts with economic drivers and gender norms can shift decision-making, forcing families to weigh the costs and benefits of child marriage in new ways (DeJong, 2017; Mourtada et al., 2017; Hutchinson, 2018b). GAGE research, like that of Mazurana and Marshak (2019), underscores that context is key. It matters not only which crisis and which population, but which moment in time.

### Rohingya communities

The Rohingya respondents in the GAGE sample offered contradictory accounts of how recent conflict and displacement have impacted child marriage, which Ainul et al. (2018) note has long been favoured among such communities. Contradictions appear largely born of timelines, with the situation in flux as data was being collected. On the one hand, as reported by Leigh et al. (2020) and Melnikas et al. (2020), it appears that in the first year or two after displacement there was a sharp spike in child marriage among Rohingya refugees. Many respondents attribute this to the lax way in which laws were enforced inside Bangladeshi camps versus in Myanmar. 'They declared that whoever gets married under 18 will be given a huge fine,' noted a father in a focus group. Other respondents attributed the spike to overcrowding in camps, which is leading boys and girls to interact with one another and increasing the 'defamation' that threatens girls' honour, and to the fact that girls who have lost one or more parents are in greater need of the economic security that marriage can provide. 'They [adolescents] make love relationships... Parents don't allow it,' noted a

 I was 16. But here we can't get married at 16 years of age... So, the head Majhi [community leader] and Moktar [clan leader] told us to write 18 years [on the marriage document], as I don't have a mother.

(A 16-year-old married girl)

17-year-old girl when asked why parents arranged child marriages. A 16-year-old married girl added that she had been instructed to lie about her age in order to marry: *'I was 16. But here we can't get married at 16 years of age... So, the head Majhi [community leader] and Moktar [clan leader] told us to write 18 years [on the marriage document], as I don't have a mother.'*

On the other hand, it was not uncommon for respondents to report that child marriage rates were reducing over time since the initial period of displacement had receded. In stark contrast to the broader evidence base about the impacts of the law on age at marriage (Malhotra and Elnakib, forthcoming), some attributed this to stepped-up legal enforcement inside camps. *'Here we have to take permission from the CIC [Camp In-Charge] before getting married,'* noted the father of an adolescent girl. *'The government changed,'* added the father of an adolescent boy, because CICs were constantly having to arbitrate quarrels between immature couples. Others linked decreased child marriage to increased awareness, largely due to donor and NGO efforts. Both adolescents and adults were able to recite the specifics of Bangladeshi law, and mothers reported that training and awareness sessions on child marriage had helped them understand that *'it's good to get them married after 18 years.'*

Several respondents also hinted that displacement has not only increased the odds of child marriage, but the risks to girls once they are married. As we explore in more detail in a forthcoming companion report, parents

are not only accepting proposals from much older men (some of whom already have wives while others are Bangladeshi men interested in *'marrying adolescent girls in order to get the rations and other assets'*, according to a key informant), but boys and men may be becoming more violent, as hopelessness spurs increased drug use. *'They are addicted to different kinds of drugs,'* explained a woman in a focus group discussion.

### Syrian communities

In Jordan and Lebanon, nearly all Syrian respondents in the GAGE sample echoed findings from previous research (Gausman et al., 2020; Schlecht, 2016; AFAD, 2014; Fry et al., 2019; Hutchinson, 2018b; UNICEF and ICRW, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Bartels et al., 2018) and agreed that child marriage significantly increased in the years immediately following the war. *'The state of war... forced us to do things we did not previously do or even think about... things that were not present in our customs or norms,'* explained the father of a married girl in a Jordanian host community.

In part, an uptick in child marriage was due to families' need to protect their daughters. Rampant sexual violence in parts of Syria drove marriages at the earliest of ages. *'Because of rape cases in Syria, the people started giving their daughters at 13, 14 years old and gave them in marriage because they were afraid,'* explained a married 19-year-old now living in Jordan. *'We feel afraid for the girls from the army soldiers and the guys,'* explained the mother of a married girl in a Jordanian host community. As



### Sahar, a 17-year-old Syrian refugee girl from Al-Mafraq, Jordan

*'My mother's family bought her a camera when she was seven years old. My mother's first picture was of my father's family house. During my mother's time, women who wore abaya [long, dark coloured clothing] or burqa were stigmatised and called bad names. Girls used to wear short skirts and jeans, but today the abaya is forced on girls and most married women are forced to wear the burqa. During my mother's time, women enjoyed more freedoms and mobility, and were more trusted. Love was not a crime back then. But today, girls are forbidden from loving and are denied their freedoms. This was all a result of the war and displacement, and the rumours about girls that people circulate in our community.'*

**▶** A lot of girls only had their clothes on them when they left, so a lot of marriage cases happened in a random way just to protect their girls.

(A 15-year-old girl in a Jordanian host community)

families sought refuge in Jordan and Lebanon, increases in child marriage were also driven by a lack of adult men, who were more likely to have been killed in conflict or left behind in Syria. *'When I came here, no one had come from among the men, I was the first one to arrive in Jordan from our region... I wanted someone to protect my house in my absence, this is one of the reasons that made me marry my daughter,'* recalled the father of a married girl from a Jordanian host community.

Desperate poverty led others to push their daughters into marriage. *'A lot of girls only had their clothes on them when they left, so a lot of marriage cases happened in a random way just to protect their girls,'* explained the husband of a 15-year-old girl in a Jordanian host community. *'We marry girls at a young age because of the socioeconomic status only; there is not any other reason,'* noted a mother in a host community. Several respondents added that it was not uncommon in the years immediately following displacement for Syrian families to arrange

marriages to better-off Jordanian and Saudi men, who not only promised girls a better life (including access to citizenship), but also offered families large dowries. *'He paid 25,000 dinars to marry her,'* recalled the mother of a married 17-year-old girl from Azraq, of an especially beautiful girl who had married a Saudi man.

A lack of educational opportunities in the early years of displacement – a gap which remains large in Lebanon – also helped drive up child marriage, as girls who could not attend school were compelled instead into the marriage market. *'The school didn't accept Syrian refugee students,'* said a married 19-year-old girl, explaining why she had not enrolled in school after her family arrived in Jordan. *'Girls cannot go to school outside the camp,'* explained a married 18-year-old from Lebanon. *'We used to have a school in our camp... but the school closed and since then we have not been able to get any education,'* added another, the same age.

Now, nearly a decade into displacement, Syrian respondents' narratives about how conflict and displacement are impacting child marriage are more complicated than those of the Rohingya in Bangladesh. Most agree that child marriage remains more common, that girls are marrying at younger ages, and that families are less selective about who girls marry. Others, exclusively in Jordan, argue the reverse, and believe that child marriage is now declining.

### Girls believe that child marriage is more common than it is



Some Syrian respondents – perhaps especially in Lebanon given that access to the labour market is more restricted there than in Jordan – cited household poverty as the main reason that child marriage patterning has shifted post-displacement. The continued unaffordability of secondary and tertiary education is seen as the primary link. *'If you were there [in Syria], you would complete your study and not get married until 20 years or older,'* explained an older adolescent girl living in an informal tented settlement in Lebanon. Unfortunately, tertiary education is prohibitively expensive for the overwhelming majority of refugee households.

In Jordan, as noted above, parents (and especially mothers) often expressed shame or regret that they cannot provide the things their daughters want. Noting that what many girls want has shifted with improved access to TV and the internet, this was most often the case for families who had been better off in Syria and who were looking to reclaim for their daughters some semblance of what they had lost. The mother of a girl who was married at age 17 explained, *'She dressed perfectly [fashionably] in Syria, but we had money...'* A father from a host community added, *'Here, life is difficult, people always feel humiliated.'*

The majority of Syrian respondents who reported longer-term impacts on child marriage focused not on poverty, but on displacement-related uncertainty and how it has shifted marriage decision-making. A father from a Jordanian host community explained that simply living outside of Syria feels threatening: *'The country is not ours and we do not know much in it, we are threatened.'* A mother from Azraq added that this is because in Syria, *'I know my community.'* Overcrowding, mixing between boys and girls (which is more common in Jordan and Lebanon than in Syria), sexual harassment, anti-refugee sentiment, and expanded opportunities for girls and women – all related to displacement – also drive parents' concerns. *'Especially for our time, the girl has an openness, she has departed from our customs and traditions, she works with things that you did not think one day either a girl or a woman would do, or tell or hear, so that you say that you do not want your daughter to be exposed to this,'* explained a father from a Jordanian host community.

Concerns about safety were especially pronounced in Azraq camp, which is a high-security camp with an uneasy mix of inhabitants whose late arrival in Jordan suggests either ties to the Syrian regime or to ISIS (because they were able to survive in Syria for so long). Levels of suspicion

 During my mother's time, women enjoyed more freedoms and mobility, and were more trusted... Today, girls are forbidden from loving and are denied their freedoms. This was all a result of the war and displacement and the rumours about girls that people circulate in our community.

(A 17-year-old from an informal tented settlement in Lebanon)

and distrust are high, particularly in relation to those who originated from Raqaa, an ISIS stronghold. *'We live in a camp, where there is no safety, and I am very afraid for my daughter,'* reported the mother of a girl married at age 15. Adolescent girls reported that parental fears had become so strong that former freedoms afforded to girls were now denied them. *'During my mother's time, women enjoyed more freedoms and mobility, and were more trusted... Today, girls are forbidden from loving and are denied their freedoms. This was all a result of the war and displacement and the rumours about girls that people circulate in our community,'* explained a 17-year-old from an informal tented settlement in Lebanon.

Although a small number of Syrian respondents, in both Jordan and Lebanon, noted that high unemployment rates have made it more difficult for young men to marry in recent years, pushing up the average age of marriage for men, most highlighted the reverse situation. As also observed by Hutchinson (2018b, 2019), they reported that it is now easier for young men to marry and that as men's marriage age drops, the marriage age of girls drops in tandem, because *'the girl should be 4, 5 or 6 years younger than the man'* (mother, host community). Young husbands explained that in Jordan they can marry when they choose, whereas in Syria they had to first finish their military service. *'In Syria, 90% of people get married after finishing the military service,'* observed the 19-year-old husband of a 15-year-old girl. *'The young man goes to the army at the age of 18 years and returns when he is 21 years. After returning from the army he must work to obtain money in order to be able to marry,'* added a 17-year-old married girl from a Jordanian host community.

Other respondents reported that a declining bride price is making it easier for young men to marry, because it does not take them as long to accumulate sufficient resources, and that easy access to caravans (in formal camps) simplifies setting up separate households. With few exceptions, respondents agree that marriages – and girls – have suffered as men marry at younger ages and without having stable employment. *'Even a 20-year-old young man, he can't take the responsibility of marriage,'* explained the mother of a married girl from Azraq. *'The husband is not conscious [of his responsibilities],'* added a father in a host community.

A sizeable minority of Syrian respondents in Jordan argued that child marriage trends have moderated in recent years and are now reversing. Notably, respondents were talking less about child marriage incidence rates than they were about the age at which girls marry – because girls of 16 and 17 are often not regarded as children. Jordanian law was credited with much of the improvement (see also Hutchinson, 2018a, 2019; Tasker, 2018). Quite a few parents reported that the marriage of girls aged 12 and 14 – relatively common in rural Syria – was extremely rare in Jordan, due to the law. GAGE respondents also highlighted awareness-raising efforts, though Fry et al. (2019) found that only 60% of refugees – and just over 40% of male refugees – had heard any message about child marriage in the past 12 months. *'Because of the workshop about the topic, most people support marriage at ages older than 16 years,'* explained the mother of a girl who was married at 16. Rising divorce rates were particularly singled out as instructive, as parents are increasingly aware that the

 Once we came here in 2013–2014, the number of early marriage cases was very high. Then, the number of divorce cases had risen because they got married at a young age, so they got divorced... people and families stopped marrying their daughters at the age of 14, 15 and 16... they marry the girl at least at the age of 17 years.

(A father from a host community)

youngest girls are least likely to have successful marriages. *'Once we came here in 2013–2014, the number of early marriage cases was very high. Then, the number of divorce cases had risen because they got married at a young age, so they got divorced. When the number of divorce cases had risen, people and families stopped marrying their daughters at the age of 14, 15 and 16. So, they think to marry their daughters at 18 years old; they marry the girl at least at the age of 17 years,'* added a father from a host community.

### **Palestinian communities**

Unlike Syrian and Rohingya respondents, who proffered complicated narratives about the positive and negative impacts of conflict and displacement on child marriage, Palestinian respondents reported only negative impacts. In Gaza, respondents observed that unemployment and poverty are severe and intractable, leaving girls without hope and increasing pressure on girls' families to find ways to cut costs. They also observed that recent bombings by Israel have left many families in especially precarious situations, as their homes were destroyed – a situation which has been exploited by international religious organisations (largely from countries on the Gulf of Arabia) who have sought to recognise Palestinian 'martyrs' by funding weddings for their widows, according to a key informant from Gaza City. Noting that Haldorsen (2013) observed that child marriage appeared to be increasing in camps even as it decreased in host communities as far back as 2012, in Jordan's Gaza camp and Lebanon's Ein el-Hilweh camp, several adolescent girls reported that the arrival of Syrian refugees has made life even more difficult for Palestinian refugees. Not only has unemployment increased while costs have gone up, but overcrowding has led to chaos – and, in Ein el-Hilweh, rampant violence – that has caused parents to tighten restrictions and girls to seek escape routes. *'Right now, girls aged 14 and 15 years want to get married more. It's chaotic at the camp right now, many young girls want to get married,'* explained a 15-year-old who was engaged, from Jordan's Gaza camp. *'Families want to marry off their daughters because it is not safe for the girls in the camp,'* added a 17-year-old Palestinian from Lebanon's Ein el-Hilweh camp.

A mother added that chaos has cascaded due to peer pressure, as once girls begin marrying en masse, their friends follow out of *'jealousy'*. A young woman living in Lebanon's Ein el-Hilweh camp, and participating in GAGE participatory research, added that pressure and patterns



18-year-old girl with her baby and husband, Chittagong © Nathalie Bertrams

have been building for decades, with the prolonged displacement endured by Palestinians mostly borne by girls and women. She explained, *'The girl is always subjected to pressures and restrictions by parents because of the customs and traditions, and fear of people's gossip about the girl. This has become worse with time, especially with all the conflicts in the camp and the dire living situation there, which is negatively reflected on the girls.'*

### 4.3 The diversity of decision-makers' perspectives

Focusing on high-level drivers necessarily overlooks the different perspectives held by the myriad actors involved in child marriage decision-making processes, and how they understand and feel about the advantages of child marriage versus the disadvantages (McDougal et al., 2018; Hutchinson, 2019; van Veen et al., 2018). Different decision-makers involved in the same marriage, even those who frame their preferences using the same language and high-level concepts (such as poverty or honour), often have very different personal reasons for preferring child marriage – or at least agreeing to it. GAGE evidence from Jordan<sup>9</sup>,

where data collection is most advanced, highlights that fathers and mothers of brides and grooms, as well as brides and grooms themselves, make decisions in ways that are shaped by their age and gender. For example, in line with their developmental imperatives, our findings indicate that adolescent girls are often attracted to the glamour of weddings and do not understand that marriage entails work and responsibilities. Decisions are also shaped by actors' relationships with one another, with extended family, and within the broader community. Fathers, for instance, feel obligated to maintain family and clan harmony by providing brides for their brothers' sons. Our research suggests that it is by using a socio-emotional lens and focusing on these human perspectives – obscured not only in broader discussions about the import of gender norms but even by more focused attention to girls' socialisation into docility – that more nuanced and context-relevant interventions can be built.

That said, given the diversity of human experience, it is clearly not possible to attend to every perspective. In Table 2, we have clustered drivers into the three main categories presented in this report: economic drivers and

<sup>9</sup> For this section, we have woven in Syrian and Palestinian voices from Gaza and Lebanon where possible. Rohingya voices are notably absent. Due to the fragility of the Rohingya community in Bangladesh, interviews are necessarily shorter and less able to explore sensitive subjects such as child marriage.

**Table 2: Overview of how different drivers shape the child marriage decision-making of different actors**

	Economic drivers (and quest for a better life)	Gender norms	Crisis and conflict drivers	Socio-emotional lens
 Girls' fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To secure daughters' future food security/housing more generally</li> <li>To improve daughters' economic/ living situation (eg move up or out of camp)</li> <li>To reduce the number of people in the HH to stretch resources</li> <li>To acquire bride price</li> <li>To protect daughter from actual violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fathers often cannot conceive of options outside of marriage and motherhood that will ensure daughters' futures</li> <li>Fathers often have a preference for marriage and motherhood on daughters' behalf</li> <li>Girls are at risk of SGBV that leaves their bodies and reputations at risk</li> <li>Fathers want to ensure that girls stay sexually pure, to protect family honour</li> <li>To protect male lineage by supporting the marriage of their brothers' sons</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased threats to girls' bodies and reputations – with over-crowding, GBV, more liberal culture, etc – may threaten family honour</li> <li>Lack of legal enforcement in host countries</li> <li>Increased poverty</li> <li>To provide structure to future in face of uncertainty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To protect social status by demonstrating adherence to custom/ appropriate caretaking</li> <li>To enjoy the social status that a wedding/ daughter's marriage confers</li> <li>To feel that paternal duty is discharged</li> <li>To maintain good relationships with brothers and other family members</li> <li>To feel that daughter is safer</li> <li>To have a son-in-law that is respectful and congenial</li> </ul>
 Girl's mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To secure daughters' future food security/housing more generally</li> <li>To help daughter escape poverty or have a chance at better living conditions</li> <li>To reduce the number of people in the HH to stretch resources (for other children)</li> <li>To help daughter escape actual violence in the HH/ community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mothers often cannot conceive of options outside of marriage and motherhood that will ensure daughters' futures</li> <li>Mothers often have a preference for marriage and motherhood on daughters' behalf</li> <li>Girls are at risk of SGBV that leaves their bodies and reputations at risk</li> <li>Mothers want ensure that their daughters marry well, which requires them to be sexually pure</li> <li>Mothers' subordinate position in the family means they often cannot gainsay fathers' decisions – esp when his own natal family is involved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased threats to girls' bodies and reputations – with over-crowding, GBV, more liberal culture – may reduce her options for marriage/good marriage</li> <li>Lack of legal enforcement in host countries</li> <li>Increased poverty and household stress/violence</li> <li>To provide structure to future in face of uncertainty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To feel that daughter is safer</li> <li>To improve daughters' access to desirable grooms</li> <li>To feel that maternal duty is discharged</li> <li>To protect social status by demonstrating adherence to custom/ appropriate caretaking</li> <li>To enjoy the social status that a wedding/ daughter's marriage confers</li> <li>To improve domestic tranquility by eliminating point of friction with husband</li> <li>To form bond with the family of a close friend</li> <li>To get grandchildren</li> </ul>
 Grooms' fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To acquire dowry from brides' families</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents – esp fathers – want to ensure that son's sexual activity takes place in marriage</li> <li>Parents want see the male line continue</li> <li>Parents – esp mothers – have a preference for younger brides as they are more tractable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To get children to replace family members who have died/ suppress memories of those who have died</li> <li>Shifted/reduced expectations on boys/young men may lead to increased "aimlessness"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To protect social status by demonstrating adherence to custom</li> <li>To enjoy the social status that a wedding/ son's marriage confers</li> </ul>
 Grooms' mothers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To get domestic labour to replace daughters who have married</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To protect social status by settling their sons down</li> <li>To enjoy the social status that a wedding/ son's marriage confers</li> <li>To get grandchildren</li> </ul>

	Economic drivers (and quest for a better life)	Gender norms	Crisis and conflict drivers	Socio-emotional lens
<p>Brides</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To escape poverty/ improve food security</li> <li>To improve economic/ living situation (eg move up or out of camp)</li> <li>To reduce the number of people in the HH to stretch resources for natal family (esp to improve the lives of siblings)</li> <li>To escape violence in the HH or community</li> <li>To secure Jordanian citizenship for children by marrying a Jordanian man</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Girls are homebound after purity to protect them</li> <li>Girls are vulnerable to SGBV that leaves them unsafe and feeling unsafe even in situations where they are at little real risk</li> <li>Lack of options outside of marriage and motherhood mean that girls cannot support themselves</li> <li>Girls are socialized to never see options outside of marriage and motherhood</li> <li>Girls are often socialized to have a preference for marriage and motherhood</li> <li>Girls are expected to obey their fathers/ adult family members and often perceive no space to hold or express their own opinion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased risk to person and reputation could mean reduced access to marriage/ desirable grooms</li> <li>Reduced access to education</li> <li>Reduced access to SRH services (in some contexts)</li> <li>Increased poverty and HH stress/ violence</li> <li>To provide structure to future in face of uncertainty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Romantic/ sexual attraction</li> <li>Boredom/ loneliness</li> <li>Weddings/ bling are exciting</li> <li>To feel like an adult</li> <li>To improve social status in eyes of peers and adults</li> <li>To please mother or father</li> <li>Fear of losing access to desirable grooms by waiting</li> <li>To feel safe</li> </ul>
<p>Grooms</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To acquire dowry from brides' families</li> <li>To provide natal family with support for domestic work (when living in extended family households)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Boys/men often feel an obligation to family/clan to reproduce – as the male line is of primary importance</li> <li>Boys/men often have a preference for younger girls as they are more tractable</li> <li>Boys/young men experience privilege that allows/ encourages the predation of younger girls</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To improve access to social protection/food</li> <li>Shifted/ reduced expectations regarding need to earn/ serve</li> <li>Lack of legal enforcement in host countries</li> <li>To provide structure to future in face of uncertainty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Romantic/sexual attraction</li> <li>To feel like an adult</li> <li>To improve social status in eyes of peers and adults (including parents)</li> <li>To please mother by providing grandchildren</li> </ul>
<p>Other actors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uncles want to obtain “inexpensive” brides for their sons – which makes them prefer their brothers’ daughters</li> <li>Brothers want to obtain bride price to buffer family finance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Religious / traditional leaders are vested in encouraging adherence to tradition/ tenets</li> <li>Uncles consider children property of the paternal line, giving them say over their brothers’ daughters</li> <li>Girls’ brothers consider their sisters property of the paternal line and consider that they have a right to police them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Religious / traditional leaders have less legal oversight in displaced contexts</li> <li>Religious/ traditional leaders may feel increased pressure to encourage adherence to define in-groups/ out-groups in times of stress</li> <li>Resources available for bride price are reduced – leading uncles to prefer cousins</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Other girls encourage girls to marry due to boredom and to promote their own status in the community</li> <li>Grooms’ sisters want SILs they like</li> <li>Girls’ brothers may encourage their friends – sometimes bc they think friends would be good husbands, other times to help friends find wives</li> <li>Girls’ siblings feel that girls are safer when they are married.</li> </ul>

the quest for a better life (including escaping poverty and food insecurity as well as the actual violence that exists in many humanitarian contexts), gender norms, and drivers related to crisis and conflict. To demonstrate how those drivers might play out – in concrete ways – from the perspectives of different decision-makers (including of brides and their parents, and grooms and their parents), in the last column of the table we have used a socio-emotional lens to highlight how child marriage can make actors feel good about themselves and more embedded in their communities. We also include, in the last row, other actors such as religious leaders, aunts and uncles, and siblings, who influence the decision-making process by encouraging or pressuring various primary actors. The examples presented in the table are just that – illustrative examples – and are not meant to be exhaustive. They will be explored in greater detail in the narrative that follows.

## Girls' fathers

- Girls' fathers are almost universally identified as the final 'deciders' of child marriage.
- Fathers' preferences for child marriage are most often framed in terms of girls' honour and what it means for their own reputation and role in the extended family and clan. Concerns about honour have deepened due to crisis and limited social cohesion in host communities.
- Fathers' role in child marriage decision-making varies with the type of marriage; they are most in control of consanguineous marriage.
- Fathers sometimes delay their daughters' marriages for several years.
- Fathers feel obligated to uphold family, clan and community traditions, and are often heavily pressured by those around them – including their brothers, sons, wives, and neighbours – into agreeing to child marriage.

In deeply patriarchal Palestinian and Syrian cultures, fathers are considered not only the heads of household but the final arbiters of decisions – including who their daughter will marry, and when (Fry et al., 2019; Leigh et al., 2020; UNICEF and ICRW, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Mourtada et al., 2017; Hutchinson, 2018b, 2019; Hossain and Juhari, 2015). GAGE evidence, however, suggests that this conclusion dismisses a great deal of complexity that could be used to better inform interventions. Not only do fathers' roles range significantly from forcing their daughters to marry against

their will to merely giving official blessing to a match that others have made, but fathers themselves also often feel pushed by others into facilitating child marriage.

GAGE respondents almost uniformly agreed that fathers make the final decisions regarding child marriage. *'If he says yes, then it's a yes,'* explained an 18-year-old Syrian girl who married at 16. Indeed, even many respondents who first reported that decisions were made by both their parents subsequently added that *'parents don't agree on everything relating to girls'* (13-year-old Palestinian girl) and clarified that *'the final decision refers to the father'* (17-year-old Syrian girl married at 14). Fathers themselves often highlighted that while they take their wife's opinion into consideration, they often do so in a perfunctory way. A Syrian father in a host community explained, *'You take her advice, of course, if her advice is sound. But a woman always gives her opinions only with her affection, and you know these things.'* Mothers agreed. Several acknowledged that while women can fairly easily push their husband into agreeing to a child marriage, once the father has made up his mind, the mother cannot gainsay his decision. *'If my husband agrees about his daughter's marriage, I can't talk,'* explained the mother of a married 17-year-old Syrian from Azraq.

Fathers' role in child marriage is most visible in the minority of marriages that are forced, with the girls concerned noting that their own wishes were completely over-ruled under threat of violence. A now 18-year-old Syrian girl from an informal tented settlement in Jordan, who was married at age 12 to a 20-year-old cousin, recalled, *'I cried and told my parents that I did not want to marry him. I would feel scared... I saw how my uncle treated his wife. He was short-tempered. His wife had face scars. So, I was scared my husband would also beat me... I refused, but my parents forced me.'* A 20-year-old from Gaza, who was married at age 16, added that she had tried to kill herself to avoid marriage, but had still been over-ruled: *'I refused and I tried to commit suicide, I didn't want to... I was young and I would hear about problems from girls. I said I will grow up a little and understand life then, but at the end they accepted and I didn't.'* Married girls added that it is not only girls who are forced into marriages they do not want; some young men are also forced to marry as they are told, often with tragic consequences (see Box 10 in the grooms' section below).

Respondents noted that what these forced marriages almost universally have in common is that they are between cousins. In Jordan, where recent research has found that about one-third of Syrian women (Department of Statistics

and ICF, 2019) and Palestinian women (Haldorsen, 2013) are married to relatives, an older married girl living in Gaza camp explained that cousin marriages are all but required by some families. *'To us, the cousin is something important. If the cousin wants me, he has priority over the stranger,'* she said. A 16-year-old married girl from Gaza added that the preference for cousin marriages can effectively leave girls invisible, as it is not the individual girl who matters but the position in the family that she occupies: *'My uncle asked for my elder sister to be married to his son. However, my other cousin wants to marry my elder sister. Since my dad did not want to disappoint my other cousin and my uncle insisted, they took me for their son.'*

Fathers' positions on cousin marriage were explained in two ways. Fathers themselves often insisted that they preferred nephews because they believe that their daughters will be best taken care of in such relationships (see Box 7). *'If it were not my nephew, it would have been impossible for me to marry her,'* stated the father of a Syrian girl from an informal tented settlement who was married at age 15. Mothers added that their brothers-in-law work hard to make this point. One, from a host community, reported that her brother-in-law had said: *'My sister, I want the girl and I will be her father.'* Fathers added that choosing

cousins has particular benefits during displacement, as not only are shared customs and traditions comforting, but if return to Syria becomes possible, cousin marriages leave their daughters more accessible to them. A father from a host community explained, *'The first thing we look for is the son of the clan, secondly the son of the same village, and thirdly, the son of the neighbouring village... The most important thing is to be close to you.'*

Girls, however, were unanimous that fathers' decisions to make them marry cousins were less about fathers' fears for girls' own safety and more about fathers' fears for their own role in the extended family. Girls married to cousins reported that their fathers had been under considerable pressure from their own brothers (and other family members) to uphold tradition and see their nephews safely – and inexpensively (given that cousins are allowed to proffer lower bride price) – married. *'My uncle told him that there would be hatred if we refused the marriage,'* explained a 19-year-old Syrian mother. *'He was my cousin; his family... insisted so much and there were many problems because of me,'* added a 17-year-old Syrian girl who had married a cousin at age 14. *'They manipulated my father's mind and mine,'* concluded a 15-year-old from a host community who had married at age 14.

### Box 7: Balanced on a tightrope

Sarah\* is a 16-year-old Palestinian girl from Gaza. She was married at 15 to a cousin, as her father demanded, despite not wanting to. She did not feel she could say no, as she sees her father as her protector and believes that he has only her best interests at heart. While she feels that marriage is killing her, Sarah is afraid to speak up because of what it would cost her father.

Sarah's mother, having been married in mid-adolescence to a cousin, did not want the same for her daughter. Sarah reported, *'My mom married like me, she was 15. She wasn't satisfied with me marrying at a young age. She didn't want me to marry a relative. She would do everything – cooking, cleaning, by herself – although they were a big family house. She suffered a lot. They didn't like her – my uncles' wives – though she was their cousin. They never invited her to lunches or weddings or any occasion, they would always keep her in the house.'*

Sarah's father, on the other hand, was insistent, because he trusted his brother to act in his stead and to look out for Sarah as his own: *'My dad told me "he is your relative and he will take good care of you".'*

Because Sarah loves her father, and wants desperately to please him, she agreed to swallow her reservations and marry her cousin. *'I love my father, he is very tender... I did not want to get married early, but then I accepted in order to avoid family troubles,'* she explained.

Sarah is deeply unhappy in her marriage. She is never allowed to leave home, even to visit her grandparents, and both her husband and her uncle (now father-in-law) yell at her and control her every move. She confessed, *'I feel suffocated... I want to kill myself.'*

While she would like to find a way out of her situation, Sarah is afraid to tell her father how she feels, because she knows it would cost him his relationship with his brother. She explained, *'My father would ask me to get a divorce if he knows that my husband or my uncle yell at me. My dad is very protective, and if he hears that my husband, for example, yells at me or tells me to go to my family's house or treats me badly, my father would make a big deal out of it and transfer it to the court. I do not want problems to happen between my father and my uncle because of me.'*

\* All names have been changed to protect respondents' anonymity.



**Shaymaa, a 19-year-old Palestinian refugee girl from Syria, Ein el-Hilweh camp, Lebanon**

*'Parents struggle between submitting to customs and traditions, and following reasoning and rationality in giving their children more margins of freedom. Although the margins of freedom have expanded across generations and I have a greater margin than my grandmother did and my mother, society still imposes rules that limit girls' freedom. Parents are still submissive to society's rules, fearing gossiping and exclusion even if they do not want to do so.'*

Respondents observed that fathers' decisions – once made – are not amenable to pressure from relatives other than fathers' own brothers. *'I know a mother refused to marry her daughter... Her husband beat her,'* explained a Syrian woman. Girls added that their brothers and aunts are also unable to change their fathers' minds. My brother *'disapproved this marriage and told my father it won't last,'* recalled a divorced 16-year-old Palestinian girl from Gaza camp who had been forcibly married to a cousin at age 14. *'It's none of their business. He is my cousin, they can't say anything,'* added a 17-year-old separated Palestinian girl from Gaza camp, describing how her aunts had had no input into her marriage.

Several fathers reported that while they pushed back against their brothers, hoping to delay rather than prevent their daughters' marriage, at best they were able to delay for just a few months. *'I wanted to delay the marriage for four months... my brother interfered... He said that he wanted her to celebrate the feast with them...,'* explained the father of a married Syrian girl from a host community. The father of a married girl from an informal tented settlement added, *'My brother... he is in a hurry because his son is 20 years old... I told him to leave this topic alone. I told him to postpone it for two years... He forgot about it for four or five months, he then came back and re-opened the matter.'*

GAGE evidence suggests that even outside of cousin marriages, fathers are often pushed into facilitating child marriage. Sometimes they are pushed by their own wives or the relatives of their soon to be sons-in-law. For example,

a 19-year-old Syrian girl from an informal tented settlement in Lebanon explained that her father had married her at age 14 because her step-mother had insisted: *'I got married when I was 14 years old in Syria. My stepmother married me off to get rid of me and my father thought that I was at marriageable age back then.'* The father of a married Syrian girl from a host community explained that his daughter's now grandmother-in-law had worked for months to convince him to allow his daughter to marry. He recalled, *'I told her "The girl is too young. She still cries on a quarter of a dinar!" But she replied, "do not break me... I will neither drink tea nor drink coffee until you do as I request".'*

Other times, fathers are pressured by social shaming, with community members letting fathers of older unmarried daughters know that they are jeopardising their daughters' futures by delaying marriage. The mother of a married 17-year-old in a host community explained, *'The only man who does not marry his daughter before 20 is a complicated person... We say that he has a psychological*

**More than 20 young men proposed to marry my daughter... I said no until the right person came to her. I never consulted her, whoever asked me to marry her I refused him because she was young.**

(A father of a Syrian girl married at 17)

*knot because he doesn't want to marry his daughter... We say that he wants to preserve his daughter like pickles.'* Fathers added that they feel more susceptible to this shaming because it is layered on top of constant fear that they will not be able to protect their families. *'We always live in fear... I may bother the authorities thus they can expel me to the border. If they expel me to Syria, I will be executed or die,'* explained a father from a host community.

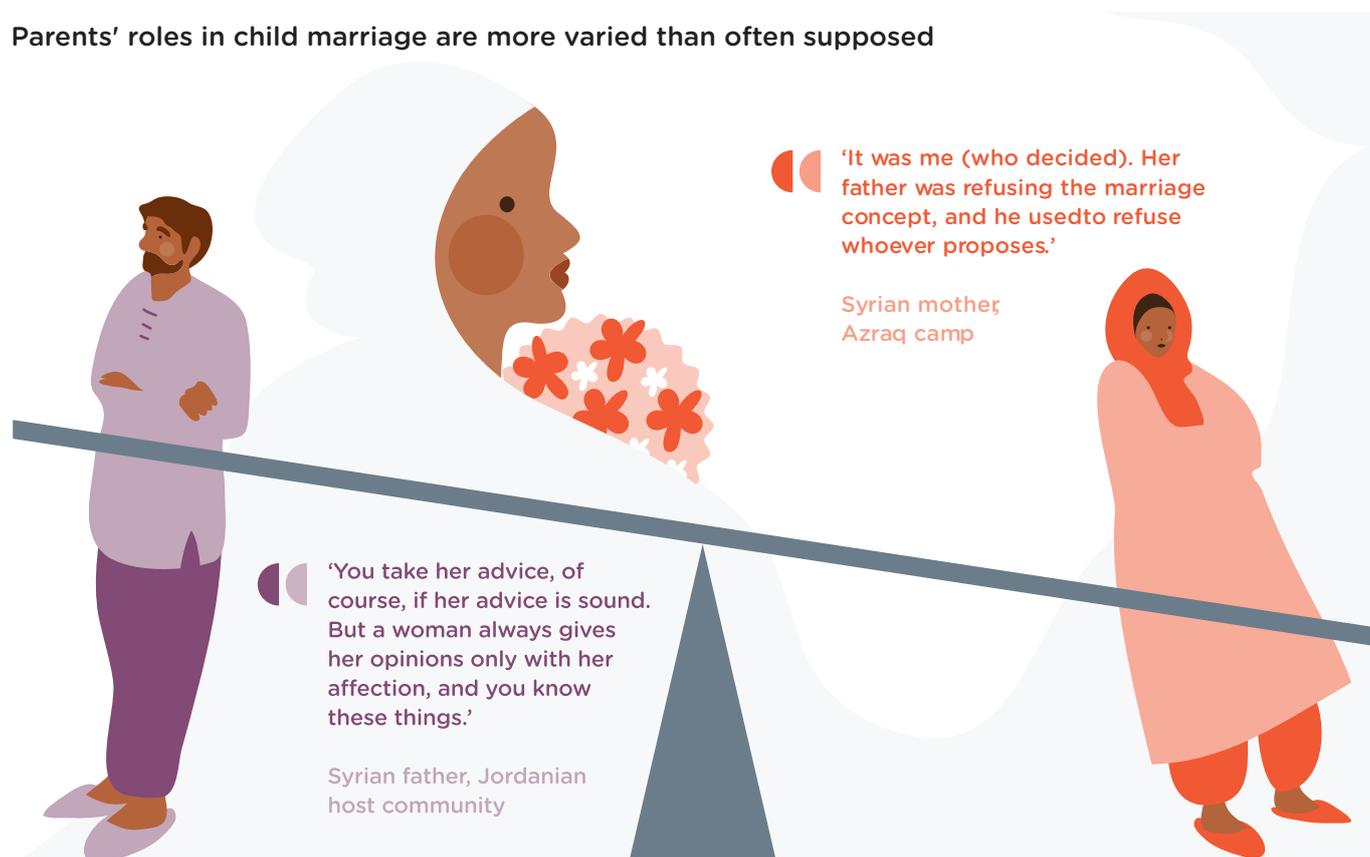
The bulk of GAGE evidence suggests that while fathers are the ones who make the decision to remove their daughters from school – a decision that often cascades into child marriage because it signals to the community that the girl is considered of marriagable age – fathers' primary role in any given match is to decide whether to present it to their daughters for acceptance or rejection. *'The father knows more... my husband refused some people without asking her opinion because he knows*

*that these people are not good without even asking me,'* explained a Syrian mother in a focus group discussion. Indeed, echoing Hutchinson (2019), GAGE respondents suggested that in many cases, fathers manage to delay girls' marriages, sometimes by years, as they wait for her 'fate' – or at least a young man they like – to come along. The father of a Syrian girl married at age 17 reported that he had turned down nearly two dozen offers for his daughter. *'From the eighth grade, the grooms began to propose to marry her... More than 20 young men proposed to marry my daughter... I said no until the right person came to her. I never consulted her, whoever asked me to marry her I refused him because she was young.'* A married 15-year-old, who received dozens of proposals starting at the age of 12, said (with no irony) that her father had delayed marrying her until she was mature. *'My parents didn't want to marry me early; many guys wanted to marry me, but my parents refused because I was young.'* A 20-year-old unmarried Palestinian woman – an outlier in that she is studying at university – observed that while she is now 'expired', her father has been like a wall protecting her from her extended family: *'My cousins used to tell my dad that your daughter will end up in the kitchen while you are paying all this money for her education. My dad ignored their talk and said he is happy doing that for me.'*

**▶** Marriage is... bringing two families closer together, and it is supposed to be an agreement on the level of all families.

(A father from a host community)

### Parents' roles in child marriage are more varied than often supposed



A sizeable minority of fathers emphasised that they had sought input from family and friends in deciding which marriage proposals to decline. *'I am the oldest one and I asked my young brothers for their opinion. I also asked my father... my cousins who live surrounding me, and I asked one of my uncle's relatives. Furthermore, I asked a number of the guy's friends,'* explained a father from a host community. Fathers offered several reasons for seeking family input. With the caveat that most investigations were extremely short and hardly thorough, some reported that they needed to ensure that their future son-in-law was a good person. *'My dad talked with me, he said "it is up to you, I am not forcing you at all". He said "I am going to find out more information about the guy..." My dad also questioned the origin of his family, my husband's grandfather knew my grandfather. When we asked people, we found that my husband's reputation was perfect,'* explained a 17-year-old from Azraq who married at 16. Other fathers noted that because marriage is not just a relationship between two people but between two families, it is vital to consider the opinions of all those involved. *'Marriage is... bringing two families closer together, and it is supposed to be an agreement on the level of all families,'* observed one father from a host community.

## Girls' mothers

- Girls' mothers are usually instrumental in matchmaking and often encourage – even pressure – their daughters into accepting marriage as a child.
- Mothers' preferences for child marriage are shaped by their desires to optimise their daughters' futures, which feel very uncertain given the crisis they are living through.
- Protracted crises, which has led to increased rates of child marriage, have made mothers more concerned that their daughters will get 'left on the shelf'.
- Mothers feel heavily pressured by other women to marry their daughters early, and are sensitive to both gossip and direct persuasion.

Although other studies have found that women profess wanting to see child marriage ended (Fry et al., 2019), GAGE evidence echoes the findings of Hutchinson (2019) and Haldorsen (2013), which suggest that outside of forced marriages to cousins, child marriages among Syrians and Palestinians are very often arranged by women – including girls' own mothers. Some mothers choose child marriage

for their daughters in order to keep them safe from a particular threat. Most, however, appear to choose child marriage because they see marriage as central to the worth of girls and women, and believe that by supporting girls to marry as children they are simultaneously providing their daughters with a stable future and upholding the cornerstone of their culture.

Most matches start with the mothers of grooms, who – when they decide their sons must marry – begin approaching the mothers of girls they believe to be eligible. *'Any woman searching for a bride for her son, she knocks on the door and then the mother of the female adolescent welcomes her and answers "yes, we have a daughter for marriage,"'* explained an older married girl from Gaza. Girls' mothers then become central to the process, encouraging their husbands to allow the match to be presented to their daughters. *'It was me [who decided]. Her father was refusing the marriage concept, and he used to refuse whoever proposes,'* explained the mother of a girl from Azraq who was married at age 17. Girls' fathers admitted that they generally left the matchmaking process to their wives and relied on them to know which potential suitor was most preferable. *'It is mothers who know who is suitable for the girl,'* noted a Syrian father from a host community. *'She knows more about her daughter's ability, whether physically, mentally, or if she can live with another family. We are husbands or men, most of our time is outside the house. Who is the closest person to the girl?'* asked another father.

Some mothers gave quite specific reasons for encouraging their daughters to marry – pushing a match even when they understood the risks of child marriage because they believed the benefits outweighed the costs. In the early years of displacement, physical protection was important. *'My mother wanted me to get married because my father was dead and we are three girls without a father to protect us in a country that is not ours,'* recalled a Syrian girl who was married at 13. Other mothers saw child marriage as a way to help their daughters escape

 My mother wanted me to get married because my father was dead and we are three girls without a father to protect us in a country that is not ours.

(A Syrian girl married at 13)

intra-household violence. For example, the mother of a Syrian girl who was married at age 16 explained that she had pushed her daughter into marriage to get the child away from her paternal grandmother, who was abusive. She recalled: *'The atmosphere in our house was miserable, fighting and problems... The house turns into hell... I am trying to protect my family like a cat when she protects her kittens... In her husband's family, although they are poor their life is good and the atmosphere is more decent to live. It was not right, even her body was immature, but I kept saying that to get married is better than staying in such an unhealthy atmosphere with her father's family.'* Other mothers reported that they had used child marriage to get their daughters out of Azraq camp – which they saw as *'unsafe'*, *'disgusting'*, and having poor schools – or to avoid taking them back to Syria, parts of which remain an active war zone. The mother of a married 15-year-old from an informal tented settlement explained, *'We wanted to go back to Syria... the girl's uncles who live in Syria say: "If you want to go back to Syria, don't bring her with you. Marry her to anyone – to her uncle's son or her aunt's son. The most important thing is that you don't bring her with you on the road!"'* In Lebanon, girls reported that their mothers are encouraging them to marry men who have migrated to Europe, as a way of getting them out of the country. A 19-year-old explained, *'Girls are getting engaged to men whom they know nothing about at all.'*

However, most of the child marriages currently arranged by women appear to have little to do with specific threats facing girls. Instead, narratives highlight the value of marriage to women and what they are prepared to risk to see their daughters settled (see Box 8). In line with existent evidence, which suggests that unmarried girls continue to face considerable stigma, the fear that their daughter may get 'left on the shelf' if she does not marry in adolescence was all but palpable in many interviews with mothers (Schlecht, 2016; Hutchinson, 2018b, 2019; Fry et al., 2019; UNICEF and ICRW, 2017b, 2017c). Given that marriage is central not only to women's identity but to their longer-term financial and social security, this fear drives many mothers to push their daughters into marriage well before adulthood so that when they do reach adulthood, they are appropriately provisioned. The mother of a Syrian girl who married at age 17 (from a Jordanian host community) explained, *'When the girl reaches 20 years old and she doesn't get married that means that she will stay at her family's house and she will not marry.'* She added that her two sisters-in-law, who turned down proposals when they were adolescents, remain unmarried spinsters. A 16-year-old Palestinian girl from Gaza camp, married at 15, added that her mother had been far more in favour of her marriage than her father, fearing what would happen if the opportunity were missed: *'My mother feared that I would never get married and get old or be 20 before I did.'*

### Box 8: Love and heartbreak

Aisha is a 14-year-old Syrian girl living in a host community in Jordan. She was married last year, after her mother encouraged her to believe herself in love with a cousin chosen because he was a trustworthy protector. She has a three-month-old baby, currently in protective custody.

When Aisha was only 13, her mother was approached by her now mother-in-law with an offer of marriage. *'Both our mothers agreed together. His mother saw me one day earlier and came to marry me the next day,'* she explained. Her mother – who has been a single parent for more than a decade, as Aisha's father went missing early in Syria's civil war – was attracted to the match because the young man in question was a relative and could ostensibly be trusted. She convinced Aisha that marriage was her best option.

Given Aisha's age, it did not take much to convince her that she wanted to marry. She confessed to the interviewer her undying love for her husband: *'We girls have a long list to ask people when we want to get married... I loved him at first sight... I wanted to get married.'*

Aisha gave birth three months ago. Because she was only 14, two years too young to be married, *'the hospital called the police'*. The Family Protection Unit immediately took custody of the baby – *'they did not allow me to breastfeed my daughter... she broke my heart'* and the police took custody of her husband.

Aisha is pleased that the courts have agreed to make *'an exception'* and that she and her husband *'are good'* now. She is allowed to go to Amman to at least see her daughter.

Aisha's mother ended the interview when Aisha's husband returned home. She admitted that it was not safe for her daughter to speak (implying that Aisha's husband was violent).

**D** I did not want to marry my husband, but my family knew that I am in love with a boy and they did not want him because they think his family is not good.

(A Syrian girl living in Lebanon)

Mothers added that the need to feel that their daughters are settled had grown more intense during displacement, as a sense of alienation and uncertainty about the future weighed on their minds. *'God willing, maybe my children in the future will make up for all these things,'* explained a mother in a Jordanian host community. Syrian girls suggested that mothers' attachment to tradition had also solidified, as mothers try to keep girls from adopting Jordanian and Lebanese customs. For example, a 17-year-old Syrian girl from an informal tented settlement in Jordan reported that she had fallen in love with a Palestinian man with whom she worked, but her parents forced her to marry her cousin instead. *'He wanted to get engaged to me, but my mother refused. My mother said that they refused to marry their girls to Palestinian men. We marry our cousins.'* A Syrian girl living in Lebanon told a similar story: *'I did not want to marry my husband, but my family knew that I am in love with a boy and they did not want him because they think his family is not good.'* Palestinian mothers, who have been displaced for decades now, were

also overwhelmed by the *'drugs and violence'* and *'feeling afraid of harassment'*, and saw child marriage as a way to assuage their fears about their daughters' safety amid uncertainty.

With exceptions, including one marriage that neighbours apparently tried to delay, mothers acknowledged that they – like their husbands – are under considerable pressure from the community to conform to social expectations, particularly around marriage. Many mothers reported that they were encouraged by community gossip to start considering marriage well before they personally believed their daughters to be old enough. *'People talk about girls and we don't like people talking about our daughter,'* explained a mother from Azraq, whose daughter married at 17. *'When my daughter wears short clothes, the neighbours come and tell my husband that your daughter wears unacceptable clothes,'* added another mother from Azraq, whose daughter married at 15.

Other mothers reported considerable pressure, from their daughters' future in-laws as well as the broader community, to commit to a particular match. They added that they were made to feel as if they were jeopardising their daughters' futures by not accepting the proposal. The mother of a 16-year-old married girl from a host community explained, *'They say: "No one will come like this guy! So, do you want your girl to be 20 years old and no one come to her?"'* The majority of mothers in our research appeared to understand the risks of early marriage, which

### Perspective is everything.



have become more openly talked about as child marriage has become more common and divorce has increased. Several noted, however, that their own beliefs pale beside community norms. *'I think that the problem is that we follow what others do in the community,'* noted the mother of a 15-year-old married girl from a host community.

While the mothers of married girls are, in general, supportive of child marriage (which is perhaps to be expected), respondents agreed that many mothers are able to resist community pressure and, indeed, to combat family efforts to see their daughters married. A Syrian mother from a host community, whose own daughter married as a child, reported that despite desperate poverty, her sister refuses to marry her 18-year-old daughter: *'My sister is very poor. She lives in debt and borrows money from here and there. Her daughter is 18 years old but my sister does not think to marry her daughter... she does not accept to transfer her from one bad level to another bad level, there is no difference.'* Several young women studying at university, some of whom were Palestinian, others Syrian, reported that their mothers had been their staunchest allies, refusing to allow them to marry and working for years to allay their fathers' fears about their lack of marriage. *'My mom used to refuse, she used to convince him,'* explained a 20-year-old Syrian from an informal tented settlement in Jordan.

## Grooms' mothers (and other family members)

- Having decided their sons are ready to marry, grooms' mothers instigate nearly all matches, sometimes with the assistance of grooms' sisters and grandmothers.
- The needs of grooms' parents to see their sons married stem from a desire to see their sons settled down, partly to keep them safe during displacement, and partly to have them produce grandchildren for the paternal line.
- Most grooms' mothers prefer their sons to marry girls rather than women, and many prefer younger adolescent girls because they are seen as more malleable.

As noted earlier, even though they are all but invisible in the literature, grooms' mothers play a key role in perpetuating child marriage. Echoing the findings of Hutchinson (2019) and Haldorsen (2013), GAGE research suggests that grooms' mothers often start the process, seeking out

a bride when they and their husbands agree that their sons should marry. *'My mother was in the market, his mother asked her "do you have daughters for marriage?,"* explained a 17-year-old Syrian girl from a Jordanian host community who was married at 14. *'I chose a girl through my mother, my mother used to see her as idol [indicating her great admiration for her], she lived next to us, and she always spoke about her,'* added a 19-year-old boy from Azraq camp. While grooms' mothers typically make the match and guide their sons through the process, in a few cases they take a more direct role. For example, a 19-year-old Palestinian girl from Lebanon's Ein el-Hilweh camp reported that her mother-in-law had even done the proposing – *'she asked for my hand in marriage'*.

Respondents were able to identify many reasons why grooms' mothers chose to initiate a match. Some, as already noted, were driven to protect their sons' – and their families' – honour. Where boys and young men are expressing a level of interest in girls considered culturally inappropriate, parents often agree that they must be married to protect them from themselves. *'The father and mother know that the girl and the boy communicate together,'* explained a father from a host community. *'Boys are reckless,'* added a mother from an informal tented settlement.

Parents' need to ensure that their sons are safe also leads grooms' mothers to initiate marriage, as parents hope that marriage will help their sons settle down. *'We have a quote that you get your son married so that he becomes a man,'* reported a Syrian father from a host community. Young husbands see this through the eyes of young adults and focus on parents' need to control sons' behaviour. *'This is the first thing parents think about. They think that marriage won't make him stay out of home late at night, make them cancel their bad friendships, and be committed to a job,'* explained a young Syrian man in a host community married to a 15-year-old girl. Grooms' parents, on the other hand, are clear that they need their sons settled to keep them safe, as young men who are out at night are more likely to attract legal attention that will see them deported back to Syria, where they will be conscripted into the army. A father explained, *'If they are*

 We have a quote that you get your son married so that he becomes a man.

(A Syrian refugee father from a host community)

*bothered by my son, they will send him to Syria, then he will go to the military.*' An unmarried girl from a host community added, *'The regime in Syria needs replacements because there are many martyrs.'*

Several married boys added that they had been pressured by their parents into child marriage in order to acquire a girl to take on the work of managing the household. A 19-year-old Syrian boy living in Lebanon, whose mother is very ill and whose father threatened to take a second wife, explained, *'My father was constantly pushing me to get married since I was 15 years old, but I did not want to marry and he always threatened me that if I do not get married, he will remarry again... My mother got very sick last year and my siblings were left without anyone to take care of them.'* Another 19-year-old Syrian boy, also living in Lebanon, added, *'[My mother] wanted someone to help her with the work at home as well.'*

A few young wives offered a different interpretation of why their mothers-in-law push their sons into early marriage: they are exhausted by catering to their sons' needs. A pregnant 15-year-old Syrian girl explained, *'She married her son to find a woman to bathe him. I have to cook food for him and I have to make coffee and tea for him. I have to do everything he wants.'* Young husbands sometimes admitted this was true. *'I used to do everything by myself. [Now] I got everything prepared when I go back home,'* reported an adolescent husband from a host community.

A large proportion of mothers (and some fathers) want their sons to marry in order to father children – especially boys, to continue the paternal line. *'We have a quote that to make your son a man, he needs a son to catch him,'* noted a Syrian father from a Jordanian host community. *'My mother always wanted me to get married and have children... When I had a girl child, she was upset because she wants boys and is pressuring me to remarry another girl, but I do not want to have more than one wife and I love my daughter,'* added a 19-year-old Syrian boy living

in Lebanon. The mother-in-law of a girl married at 14 explained that she had been insistent about when her son should marry. She allowed the marriage to be postponed for a few months but was unwilling to consider the two years that her daughter-in-law's family had requested. When asked why, she highlighted that her 17-year-old daughter-in-law has already produced two children. Interest in grandchildren (on the part of mothers-in-law) was most evident in the narratives of young wives, several of whom observed that their fertility was being micro-managed. For example, a 20-year-old woman from Gaza, who was married at 16, explained that her husband had been quite frank about the need to procreate quickly – and who would pay if pregnancy was not forthcoming: *'My husband would tell me, because of his parents' pressure on him, that if everyone had children but him, he would hurt me and I had to suffer.'*

This desire for grandchildren appears particularly common where family members have died in conflict, which creates not only an emotional hole in mothers' lives but also a pressing interest in repairing the family tree. The mother of a Syrian boy, who married at 16 to a 13-year-old girl, explained, *'... the man of the house is dead, may he rest in peace. I wanted to celebrate something... So I suggested to let him get married.'* A 19-year-old boy from Gaza, married at 17, added, *'My mother and my uncles suggested that I get married so that I have children and make up for my father's death.'*

Why grooms' mothers prefer child marriage, rather than adult marriage, is a question that several respondents discussed. There was universal agreement that the preference stems from a desire for control (see Box 9) (see also Malhotra and Elnakib, forthcoming). *'The mother-in-law wants to impose her opinion and her thoughts,'* noted the mother of a Syrian girl from a host community who married at 16. *'They prefer to marry a little girl, in order to bring her up with their hands,'* added a 17-year-old from a host community who married at age 14. A 19-year-old from a host community, married at 18, noted that she was an accidental choice, in that her mother-in-law misunderstood her birth order. *'We are three sisters at home. My sisters and me sat with her because we do not know who does she want? She told my mother that she wants me for her son. She thought that I was the youngest girl.'* This need for control on the part of mothers-in-law shapes not only the age at which girls marry, but nearly every aspect of their married lives.

 She married her son to find a woman to bathe him. I have to cook food for him and I have to make coffee and tea for him. I have to do everything he wants.

(A pregnant 15-year-old Syrian girl)

### Box 9: Standing by the custom of child marriage with authorities

Amara is a Syrian mother who lives in an informal tented settlement (ITS) in Jordan. She *'married all her sons to girls at 13 and 15 years old'* because she believes strongly that younger wives are better than older wives. She explained, *'you marry the girls at old age and they are aware,'* but with younger girls it is easier to *'control them and make their minds as yours'*. This strategy seems to have paid off for her (though not necessarily her daughters-in-law) in terms of teaching her sons' wives to live as she lives: *'they become merged with the family'*. It has, however, made seeking medical care difficult – because of the way health care providers are now reporting under-aged wives to the police (as part of Jordan's child marriage prevention efforts).

Amara explained that her youngest daughter-in-law was only 13 at the time of marriage. By 14, she was pregnant. One evening, she fell on some rope at the farm and injured herself badly enough to need to go to *'the governmental hospital in Al-Mafraq'*. As it was late, and Amara did not want *'to annoy her family in the night'*, Amara accompanied her daughter-in-law to the hospital. When they arrived, staff immediately *'asked us about the marriage contract'*. When Amara explained that there was no marriage contract, staff said *'she became pregnant by illegal way... she doesn't have any proof'*.

Two phone calls were made. Amara called her son – and told him to stay away. *'I told him to not come to the hospital until we know what will happen.'* Hospital staff then called the police. *'Four policemen came to us, then another four policemen came...'* When the police arrived, Amara argued with them that while there was no contract, the marriage was valid, due to Syrian customs. She seems to have been able to convince them of this. While a police officer told her that *'this situation will not work with us,'* no one was fined or sent to jail. She reported:

*I said to the police: "Please, good man, God blesses you! We are Muslims and she is my son's wife... It is not prohibited; all of us marry like this. My mother married at 13 years old. My sister married at 12 years old. My aunt married at 12 years old. I married at 14 years old. We marry like this in Syria..." I am not afraid of anyone except God because I didn't do anything wrong to make God angry...*

In a few cases, married girls reported that matches were initially suggested by future sisters-in-law, who – due to gender-segregated environments – can have better knowledge of who is and is not available for marriage. *'His sister is married to the brother of the man my cousin is married to. I visited my cousin. And she saw me there,'* explained a 15-year-old Syrian girl from a host community who married at 14. For some girls, friendship was important to making the match. With girls largely confined to home after marriage, having a sister-in-law who is a friend is often a girl's only real social opportunity. *'We are like sisters,'* explained a married 17-year-old from Azraq. For other girls, household economics matter. Several girls reported having suggested matches for their husband's sisters in order to free up resources.

Interestingly, it was relatively common among the girls in our sample, especially Syrian girls, to rapidly fall 'in love' with the young men brought into their lives by their future mothers-in-law. A 16-year-old from Gaza, for example, explained that her mother and mother-in-law had worked to set her up with her husband (who is five years older than she is) and then fanned the flames of young love, even supporting her to lie to the court so that she could marry immediately. *'My mother and my mother-in-law are friends and we are used to visiting each other... As time passed, we fell in love with each other and his mother talked about getting married with my mom. When we went to the court*

*for the marriage, the judge refused that and asked that we wait for one year until I became 15 years old. But my husband couldn't wait and some people helped us with forging our identities so we could get married in court.'* An 18-year-old Syrian girl from an informal tented settlement noted that while she had been initially unenthusiastic about her husband, now *'seeing him is equal to the whole world'*

### Grooms

- Boys and young men generally allow their parents to drive the timing of their marriage, and their mothers to choose their wives, but they have substantially more agency in the process than girls.
- Boys and young men marry for age- and gender-related reasons, including to spend time with females (because they cannot date) and to improve their social status among peers and in the family.
- Young husbands, some of whom are boys, are pressured into marriage by their parents (especially mothers) and religious leaders – in part because their lives have become less structured during displacement, and to foster a sense of stability within the family.

Despite the age-stratified hierarchies common in the Middle East (Milton-Edwards, 2018), which leave even young men forced to marry to suit their parents' objectives (see Box 10), young grooms – regardless of whether they

are adolescent boys or young men – tend to have more agency over their marriage than young brides. Some told their parents that they were ready to marry and then waited for their mothers to make a match. A few selected the girl they wanted to marry, and then either approached them themselves or sent their mother or other female relative to serve as intermediaries.

Several married Palestinian and Syrian girls reported that it was not the women in their marital families who had initiated the match, but their husbands, and it was not their parents who had been approached with a match, but themselves, with a declaration of love. An 18-year-old separated girl from Gaza camp explained that her family had encouraged her to marry a man in his early twenties when she was in early adolescence – to silence the neighbours, who were beginning to gossip. *'I refused him five times and after that he talked to my uncles,'* she said, adding that she had married him shortly thereafter. A 17-year-old Syrian girl added that she was only 12 when her now husband, then a young adult, had picked her out, bought her a phone, and

*'made me feel that he cared about me'.* While her father *'refused every time'* the young man wanted to visit, her mother helped her hide the phone, so that she could text the young man. She was married at age 13.

Respondents offered several explanations for why boys chose when and whom to marry – outside of assuaging familial needs for children and domestic labour. Unsurprisingly, given that boys and girls are allowed little contact with one another, the most common explanation was in order to explore their own romantic and sexual feelings. In a context where dating is rarely allowed, marriage takes its place. *'If you have a girlfriend, people will talk about you and utter rumours,'* explained a 16-year-old boy from Zaatari camp. *'Now I am with a girl... I want to get married to her,'* added an older boy in Zaatari.

Other boys noted that they had chosen to marry to enhance their social status, sometimes among their friends and sometimes within the family. The mother of a boy from Azraq, who tried to marry at 17 despite his grandmother's protestations that he was too young, reported that her son

### Box 10: Rising rates of divorce among young couples

In Jordan, we found that a surprising number of marriages were failing – or had failed – because young couples had been forced into marriages they did not want. Many had been arranged after young people had fallen in love with someone of their own choosing.

Amina is a 19-year-old Syrian from a host community who married a cousin, Ahmed, at the age of 17. Ahmed was in love with someone else, but his family had denied him permission to marry that girl, because she was seen as too 'open' (modern) for the family to tolerate. *'His father refused to marry him to his beloved... because she is not like us... She wears pants and her scarf's style is different. She has a different lifestyle,'* explained Amina. When Ahmed was told to abandon his girlfriend, he became suicidal. His grandmother believed that he would snap out of it if only he had another girl, so she chose Amina. *'They didn't find a good girl for him. He wanted to commit suicide,'* recalled Amina. Ahmed was not interested in the marriage at all, but he told his family to do as they wished. *'He told them "It's up to you. You can choose whoever you want",'* recalled Amina. Amina and Ahmed tried to make it work in the early months of their marriage. However, when Amina was seven months' pregnant, she *'checked his phone and found a conversation between him and his beloved'.* Afraid to confront Ahmed, Amina *'didn't let him touch me for one month without telling him why'.* When their daughter was born, Ahmed named her after his girlfriend, which Amina found very difficult. *'I kept calling her "My little girl" for five months. He asked me to call her Areej in front of people but I refused,'* she explained. Amina and Ahmed's marriage is struggling. *'I don't feel comfortable with him,'* she concluded.

Fatima is a 17-year-old from Gaza camp, who is currently separated from her husband, Ali (her cousin). She noted that she had agreed to marry Ali because three times her parents had refused to allow her to marry Amir, the cousin she preferred. Amir begged Fatima to tell her parents, before the marriage, that they wanted each other, but she did not feel strong enough to do so. *'He would tell me that I should have the courage and tell my parents about what's happening and not hide anything from them. But I couldn't,'* she explained. Fatima and Amir are still close. When Fatima needed to process her wedding night, which she found challenging given that she does not love Ali at all, she called Amir to do so. When Fatima was considering taking the pill, to avoid becoming pregnant with Ali's child, she called Amir to get his opinion. *'He said "why are you doing this? It's a sin,"'* she recalled. Fatima is not alone in finding marriage complicated by past relationships. Ali has a girlfriend as well. Fatima reported: *'On our wedding night I saw her. He was talking to her. He would talk to her and check up on her. And he would tell her he loved her. He was just enjoying his time with her.'* Fatima initially tried to claim Ali's affections. She even called his girlfriend to tell her that Ali was now married and that she should move on: *'I said ... "hello, I'm his wife..." She laughed and said goodbye.'* After months of trying to attract Ali's attention – during which Ali would *'have sex with me but he would not even greet me... or talk to me'* – Fatima gave up. *'I tried to commit suicide twice. I hate him. He didn't make me feel like I was his wife. He'd make me feel that I'm only there for his own good. He doesn't make me feel like he loves me.'*



**Jouri, a 19-year-old Palestinian girl from Ein el-Hilweh camp, Lebanon**

*'No one likes their chains, even if they are made of gold. The girl in our society is forbidden from many things. She can only enjoy freedom from behind the bars that confine her. She cannot share her opinion on any matter; men make the decisions on behalf of women, just as my ex-fiancé did and forbade me from studying. The girl's life passes from the father's hand to the husband's hand while she is just a silent bystander. This has been the case for my grandmother and mother, and continues to be the case for my sisters and me.'*

was trying to ensure that he, and not his friends, 'scored' the prettiest girl. 'He insisted on marrying this girl, the girl is beautiful and there are a lot of young men wanting to marry her,' she explained. A Syrian girl in a host community explained that a friend had married very early, because the boy was 'afraid if he loses her'. Young husbands added that they see early marriage as a source of pride as, particularly after they become fathers, it cements their adult status. An 18-year-old Syrian boy, married at 16, stated: 'I am happy I got married... [I am] proud that I worked at a young age, and started a family.' Indeed, a young husband from a host

community explained that after he got married, his cousin insisted on marrying as well: 'My cousin felt jealous when I got married and asked his family to be married.'

A few young husbands – all married to adolescent girls but not adolescents themselves – reported that they felt pressured by religious leaders to marry, to make sure they did not commit 'haram' acts such as engaging in premarital sexual activity. 'There is encouragement... not once there was a sheik against early marriage,' explained one young man. 'He said to marry a girl of 15 years to complete your religion,' added another.



A girl holds up a drawing of a bride and groom during a discussion about child marriage with teenage Syrian refugee girls in a community centre in southern Lebanon © Russell W

## Girls

- Most girls marry when and to whom their parents suggest – but all feel they have some veto power over the process.
- Girls have complex age- and gender-related reasons for engaging in child marriage, some of which highlight their immaturity while others are deeply rational.
- Crisis has complicated girls' decision-making, because it has left them with fewer options other than marriage.
- While girls are pressured by their parents (and sometimes their siblings) into agreeing to marriage, they often feel substantial ownership over their agreement.
- Only very few girls were given the information they would need to understand why refusing marriage would be a good option.

Nearly all of the girls in GAGE's sample who were married as children were married by arrangement. That does not, however, mean that most girls were opposed to marriage. Of the married girls in the GAGE Jordan sample, most reported being ready to marry – and in interviews, many expressed open enthusiasm (rather than acquiescence) for marriage. Our research, echoing other studies, highlights the importance of social norms to girls' choices (Malhotra and Elnakib, forthcoming; Fry et al., 2019; Haldorsen, 2013; Hutchinson, 2019). With some exceptions, where girls were happy to be married, it was generally because girls

themselves saw marriage and motherhood as central to adult femininity – most often because they had been carefully led there by their mothers, older sisters and cousins, and friends (Fry et al., 2019; Hutchinson, 2019) (see Box 11). Where girls more quietly acquiesced, it was because they had been socialised – and sometimes threatened – into compliance. Only very few girls had been given the information they needed to make 'no' seem a desirable answer to a marriage proposal (Hutchinson, 2019, 2018b; UNICEF and ICRW, 2017b, 2017c; Fry et al., 2019). Notably, while our evidence overwhelmingly supports the goal of empowering girls with information to make and express their own choices, it also underscores the importance of careful framing – as girls themselves reported that they already feel they have considerable agency in the process.

A few Syrian adolescent girls reported having married for love (and told stories that suggested that affection was not arranged or manipulated), and that they had chosen the timing of their marriage. *'I told my mother that we both love each other and that I constantly think about him and that I really want to get married to him,'* explained a 17-year-old Syrian girl, who was born in Jordan but is now living in Zaatari camp with her husband and his family. *'My family refused my sister's marriage, but she insisted, she wanted to get married... They told her that "you are still a little girl" but she insisted,'* added a 15-year-old unmarried girl from a host community, of her older sister, who married at 15. Although parents recognise that girls are not so much in love as in 'puppy love' and that they are too young to

### Girls' feelings about child marriage vary widely – from horror to total agreement:

**'I refused and I tried to commit suicide, I didn't want to... I was young and I would hear about problems from girls. I said I will grow up a little and understand life then, but at the end they accepted and I didn't.'**

Palestinian girl married at 16, Gaza



**'If I had a husband half of my problem would be solved. The respect and honor of a girl can be controlled by her husband. A girl can't be okay without husband. If I have a husband I won't look at anyone with bad intentions. My mind would be controlled. I want to marry again. Then I will be happy.'**

15-year-old Rohingya divorcee



### Box 11: Misinformation

Among the Syrian adolescents in our sample, the majority (78% of girls and 65% of boys) agreed that most girls in the community marry before the age of 18 (the legal age for marriage). Similarly, most adolescents (70% of girls and 62% of boys) agreed that Syrian girls are expected by adults in the community to marry before the legal age. Adolescents' responses are interesting from several perspectives. First, most Syrian girls do not marry as adolescents. While numbers are high, the most recent Jordan Population and Family Health Survey (2017–18) reports that 'only' 37% of young Syrian women had married before the legal age. Second, girls are more likely to have incorrect information – and beliefs about traditional expectations – than boys. This suggests that making information about the rate of child marriage more readily available may help girls – and their mothers – feel better about girls' odds of being 'left on the shelf' if they delay marriage until adulthood.

Disaggregating married girls' responses lends further credence to this idea, as it highlights that their information is even less accurate. Of married Syrian girls, 84% believe that most girls in the community marry before the legal age, and 78% believe that adult community members expect girls to marry before adulthood.

## My family refused my sister's marriage, but she insisted, she wanted to get married... They told her that "you are still a little girl" but she insisted.

(A 15-year-old unmarried girl from a host community speaking of her older sister, who married at 15)

be making sound decisions, they often feel they have no choice but to agree to a proposal, yes given that if girls transgress social norms, the long-term consequences for their futures can be severe. *'The young girl does not know how to solve her problems by herself... She is unaware of the subject 180 degrees, unaware, unaware,'* explained a Syrian father from a host community. *'She always dreams of wearing the wedding dress,'* added a Syrian mother from Azraq. As already noted, not all girls who fall in love as adolescents are given permission to marry the partner they have chosen; in some cases, parents quickly arranged a marriage to a more 'suitable' partner. *'All of it was ugly. Because I didn't marry the one I love,'* explained an 18-year-old married girl from an informal tented settlement who agreed to give up the young man she loved and marry a husband of her parents' choosing.

Other girls, although not involved in partner selection or timing, agreed to proposals enthusiastically for reasons that highlight the central importance of marriage and motherhood to girls' broader identities. A 19-year-old girl from a host community, who married at 17, explained, *'I like the idea of marriage.'* A 19-year-old mother of two from Gaza added that her most treasured possessions were her rings, which are *'precious... because they mean I*

*have a husband and the husband is safety'.* Other married girls emphasised not marriage per se, but romance. An 18-year-old married girl from Jordan's Gaza camp recalled that she had believed that marriage *'is like Indian movies... romance and so on'*. A 15-year-old Syrian girl from a host community, married at 14, added that she while she had been highly opposed to marriage – preferring instead to complete secondary school and then attend university, *'not thinking about marriage and children'* at all – as soon as she was introduced to her potential husband, *'my heart longed for him'*.

Quite a few girls' narratives highlighted how young girls are when they marry. For example, a 17-year-old from a host community admitted that she had married in order to be allowed to leave school, which her parents had prohibited: *'(My fiancé) told me to quit and I was so happy and celebrated!'* A divorced 16-year-old, also from a host community, explained that she had married a young man chosen by her parents just to *'tease'* the young man she really loved. For most girls, however, their immaturity was evident in the way they focused on the external trappings of marriage: handsome boys, beautiful clothes, and shiny gifts (see also Hutchinson, 2019). For instance, a 15-year-old Syrian girl from a host community reported that what matters most to her is that her husband *'looks good and beautiful'*. Similarly, a 19-year-old girl from a host community explained why she wanted to marry: *'I wanted to have a party and to wear a dress.'* An 18-year-old Syrian from a host community added that she had been focused on the gifts. *'The tradition is that when a girl gets engaged, she gets small presents from the family of her fiancé.'* As noted earlier, whether girls were attracted to the idea of marriage or a particular young man who made them feel special, in nearly all cases they were supported in their feelings by their mothers, who encouraged them to see

## Even when girls feel they have a choice — their agency is shaped by others



marriage as their 'destiny' and particular young men as their 'fate'.

Also highlighting girls' youth and naivety, some girls chose marriage because they thought it would secure their freedom from overly strict parents (see also Fry et al., 2019; Bartels et al., 2018; UNICEF and UNFPA, 2019; Haldorsen, 2013; Hutchinson, 2019). 'I didn't like my parents' treatment,' explained a recently married 17-year-old Syrian. 'I got married because I thought that I would feel free and to have my freedom,' added a pregnant 15-year-old Syrian from a host community. This was especially the case when mothers were identified as the strict parent and even more so when girls perceived that their mothers allowed their sisters more freedom. 'If a girl agrees to get married at a young age, it's mostly because her parents treat her badly. I have issues with my mother and it makes me feel sad. Whenever I use the phone or go out or wear an outfit she doesn't like, she tells my uncles about it,' observed a 16-year-old (engaged) from Jordan's Gaza camp, who added that her father gives her permission to do as she chooses. 'I know families who prevent the girl from opening the curtains and the girl wishes to get out of the house even if the groom is 200 years old,' added the father of a married girl in a host community.

Other Syrian and Palestinian girls reported that they had chosen to marry in order to escape more palpable threats (Fry et al., 2019; Bartels et al., 2018; UNICEF and UNFPA, 2019; Haldorsen, 2013; Hutchinson, 2019). 'I am the one who agreed to marry him. My life was hard. I couldn't tolerate it,' explained a 19-year-old from Gaza. Several noted that they had married to avoid returning to Syria. 'I was 15 years old when I got married and I accepted the fact that this is the only option for me to avoid going back to Syria, I do not want to go back and live in the war,' explained a 17-year-old Syrian girl, married at 15, whose mother had to return to Syria from Jordan when her father was released from prison. Respondents also reported that some girls chose to marry in order to access immigration and to secure citizenship. 'I recently got engaged to our

I know families who prevent the girl from opening the curtains and the girl wishes to get out of the house even if the groom is 200 years old.

(A father of a married girl in a host community)

## Box 12: Child marriage can be a haven from natal family violence

Yara is a 14-year-old Syrian mother who was married at 12 to a 21-year-old man, and gave birth at 13. Although this series of events could be categorised criminal and most probably traumatic, because her childhood was so full of violence and trauma, Yara sees her husband as her saviour.

Yara's mother died when she was a child, leaving her to be raised by her father (who soon remarried a woman not interested in mothering someone else's child), and her older brother and his wife. Extreme abuse was part of Yara's daily life. Her brother used physical violence and her sister-in-law used emotional violence and social isolation. 'My life was very difficult... my brother hit me with a stick or iron stick... My brother's wife accused me of many things and my brother believed her... They punished me, and they locked me in the room... They would not let me go out and play with the girls,' she recalled.

Yara began trying to kill herself before the age of 10, because she 'used to feel upset and sad' and could not see a way to a better life. A neighbour saved her life. Her own family, rather than getting her help, responded with more violence. 'I just tried to commit suicide more than once... Once, I drank a bottle of chlorine and, once, I opened the gas jar... and once, I drank a whole bag of medicine, it was my father's medicine... Our neighbour came and put all of her hand in my mouth, and she forced me to vomit then she took me to the hospital... My family came and beat me.'

When she was 11, her aunt came to propose. While her father initially rejected the match, after three proposals he agreed and said 'if you still want the girl, you can come and take her... without a party or anything'.

Her husband quickly became her protector. When her brother came to her marital home and threatened her with violence, her husband stepped in and told her brother, 'I will not allow you to strike her.' When her brother-in-law and sister-in-law made trouble between Yara and her mother-in-law, who then used to 'quarrel with me and incite my husband on me... on cooking, the house working and everything,' her husband threatened to throw his own brother out of the home. 'I do not allow anyone to insult you or upset you,' he told her.

Yara's husband then set about trying to rehabilitate her from the damage inflicted by her natal family. 'I said to him that I don't know anything, he said to me that it's normal, you can learn, bit by bit you can learn.' Some of his lessons were about basic good health. For example, he taught her that smoking shisha is bad for her health and that she should eat a balanced diet. 'Even when he is working, he calls me and tells me I must eat, and he asks me to promise him, I will eat, my husband is the one who made me eat.' Some of his lessons were less practical and more about helping her gain confidence. For example, he encouraged her to go to the market by herself – just to prove to herself that she could. 'When I was at my family home, I didn't go out, I didn't know anything in the market. Once, my husband said to me that I must depend on myself, go alone.' Now Yara and her husband live in their own home with their young son – his choice, because he did not like how his mother was treating Yara. He is helping her learn how to care for an infant. 'When the child cries at night, he carries him and silences him.'

Yara knows that she was too young to marry. Sex was terrifying at first, and she was too young to 'give birth in a natural way'. That said, Yara is delighted to be married. 'As long as my husband is with me, I am not afraid of anything.'

*neighbour's son who is in Germany,'* reported a 19-year-old Palestinian girl from Syria but living in Lebanon. 'There are many girls who married Jordanian young men,' added the mother of a married girl from Azraq, who then explained that this had the additional benefit of conferring Jordanian citizenship on future children. A few girls mentioned escaping violent fathers or brothers (see Box 12) or wanting to get out of camps, because host communities are 'more comfortable and cleaner' (15-year-old married Syrian girl who formerly lived in Zaatari). 'There used to be a lot of girls in my neighbourhood. They got married and left,' added an unmarried girl from Azraq, who is planning on marrying a cousin in Lebanon just to get out of the camp.

Girls, like their parents, also highlighted that marriage could bring relief from constant community gossip about their behaviour: 'They will say: "Why did she do that, why did she do wrong things?"' explained a 15-year-old Syrian

**I lost a friend to suicide because people started talking about her relation with a boy... They said that she slept with him and her brother knew so she killed herself because she was afraid of her family...**

(A 17-year-old Palestinian girl from Lebanon's Ein el-Hilweh camp)

girl from a host community in Jordan, about why she chose to marry. Gossip can be so intense that some girls reported voluntarily cloistering themselves at home, giving up friends and sinking into self-loathing and depression – even when they knew they were blameless – just to

protect their families. A 17-year-old Palestinian girl from Lebanon's Ein el-Hilweh camp explained that marriage is the rational alternative given girls' lack of other options: *'I lost a friend to suicide because people started talking about her relation with a boy... They said that she slept with him and her brother knew so she killed herself because she was afraid of her family... I don't know what happened but she was really a very good person.'*

Across countries, Syrian and Palestinian respondents also noted that for out-of-school girls, boredom – which has grown worse during displacement as education has become harder to access – drives child marriage. *'My daughter used to spend all her time at home, so she was feeling bored... It is normal for us that the girl gets married young, my sister-in-law got married when she was 10 years old, and when she turned 11 she had a child... So I told my daughter when the suitable person comes, I will agree,'* explained the mother of a divorced 17-year-old Syrian girl who had married at 14, living in a Jordanian host community. *'I thought that when I get married my life will change,'* added the girl herself. With their mobility severely restricted and their access to peers practically non-existent, television (TV) – including romantic dramas that feed girls' imaginations – is all that many girls have to occupy any free time. *'I watch TV a lot of the time, there is nothing to do at home so I watch TV,'* reported a 15-year-old from Jordan's Gaza camp, who was made to leave school after fifth grade. An unmarried 19-year-old from Lebanon's Ein el-Hilweh camp added that marriage is simply the only option once girls are out of school: *'What else would we do?'* she asked.

While unmarried girls (and adults) sometimes reported that peer pressure encourages Palestinian and Syrian girls to agree to child marriage, out of *'jealousy to have her*

*friend married'* (Palestinian mother, Gaza camp), married girls tended not to mention pressure from their friends. Where it did feature in girls' narratives about their thought processes on marriage, it was almost always second tier (behind parents) and linked not to jealousy but to concerns about missing out on their *'fate'* and being left either unwed or forced to marry someone less desirable. For example, a 19-year-old Syrian girl from a host community, who married at 18, reported that her father had told her that she had said no to too many suitors and would soon be left on the shelf. *'I agreed... All my friends had gotten engaged,'* she explained. Several girls, on the other hand, reported that their sisters and female cousins had encouraged them to marry. *'My older sister encouraged me and said God will make you happy with him,'* explained a 16-year-old Palestinian girl from Gaza, who was forced to marry a cousin at age 15.

For girls who had no compelling personal reason to agree to marry, but who ultimately did so in a way that left them feeling as if the decision had genuinely been theirs (see Box 13), a more nuanced perspective on the concept of 'forced' marriage is required. Dean et al. (2019) emphasise that girls are often coached into what they call 'manufactured consent'. This appears most common among Syrian girls, who were also the most likely to hint that they had agreed to a marriage in order to free up financial resources in their natal families. A 16-year-old Syrian girl living in Jordan, married at 14, reported that she was engaged at 13, which her parents judged the *'perfect'* age. While she began her engagement *'crying, as I was young and knew nothing about marriage,'* by the time she was married she had *'changed her mind'* because she knew that her parents wanted only *'what was good for me'*. A 17-year-old Syrian, married at 15 and also living in Jordan,



**Jenan, a 17-year-old Syrian refugee girl from Al-Mafraq, Jordan**

*'My mother got married when she was 20 years old to my father, who was 50 at the time. During her time, she was considered too old to marry a younger man. She wanted to have a family and children before it became too late for her to find a groom. That is why she married an older relative. But my mother never loved my father'*

### Box 13: Stakeholder analysis

One of the tools used by GAGE in Jordan explored the marriage-making process and how power is distributed among the stakeholders involved. It provided a fascinating window into girls' agency with regard to marriage – and how decisions are shaped by their mothers and paternal uncles.

Married girls were three times more likely to report that they had wanted the marriage than not wanted it (13 versus 4). They were overwhelmingly more likely to report that their mothers had wanted the marriage (15 versus 2). While only half of married girls judged their fathers to be in favour of the marriage, paternal uncles were rated as highly supportive (10 versus 1).

Girls were just as likely to cite themselves, their mothers and their fathers as having a 'high' level of power in the decision-making process. Because they were more likely to cite their mothers (as opposed to themselves and their fathers) as having a 'medium' level of power, taken as a whole mothers were rated as the most powerful decider. This stands in stark contrast to other research, which typically finds fathers to be the primary deciders about child marriage (Fry et al., 2019; Hutchinson, 2019; Haldorsen, 2013). The power of paternal uncles was mixed, and no clear pattern emerged.

Because girls and mothers were generally in agreement – that is, supporting the marriage – girls were more likely to consider their mothers as allies and their fathers as opponents. This is remarkable given that the broader evidence base tends to highlight the role of fathers in forcing girls to marry as children.

This pattern is repeated with girls' siblings, although they were never ranked as particularly powerful. Because brothers were more likely to oppose marriages than sisters, and because girls themselves mostly wanted to marry, brothers were considered as opponents more often than sisters.

who had initially demanded to stay in school, explained that her whole family had worked together, telling her that her intended husband *'is cute, a good man, and awesome'*. A 17-year-old Syrian, living in Lebanon, told much the same story: *'My family did not force me but they told me that my husband is a good man and will protect me... I think I made the right decision by listening to my mother because she knows better.'*

Some married girls who claimed ownership of the marriage-making process reported pressure from their fathers, usually related to securing their futures and often not focused on any particular prospective groom. *'My father asked me, he said that it is better to marry because he won't stay with me. My father is an old man and he goes to doctors and takes medication. After that, I agreed to marry,'* explained a 16-year-old Syrian who married at 15. *'He talked to me and convinced me to get married. He said that marriage is to protect you as a woman,'* added an 18-year-old mother of four from an informal tented settlement. Girls' narratives highlighted how much trust most place in their fathers: *'No one has stood with me in my life as my father did with me... There are days when he was upset and angered because of me but for my benefit, I knew that it was for my benefit'* (17-year-old Syrian girl, married at 14 to a cousin whom she divorced when she was 15) (see Box 7 in the fathers' section).

Other girls reported pressure from their mothers – often in favour of a particular match but sometimes simply in favour of marriage. *'My mother said that we will not find*

*anyone like him because he is a good man... also, his family is good,'* said an 18-year-old girl who married at 14. *'I told her that he is a good man... he will bring to you what you want, he will pamper you, I will not remain with you and I may die,'* added the mother of a married Syrian girl from a host community.

Parents, one of whom claimed *'we don't force the girl to get married'* (mother of a Syrian girl from an informal tented settlement, who married at 15), appear to know exactly what they are doing. A mother from a host community, whose daughter married at 16, admitted, *'She said that she didn't want to marry since the beginning... I played with her mind.'* A father from a host community added, *'She will say as you want' and 'it is impossible for a 15-year-old girl to be sane, mature, adult'*. Our research also found that some families can be so effective at convincing their daughters that they want to marry that even the judicial procedures meant to stop child marriages are unsuccessful. A 15-year-old from a host community, married to a 26-year-old man, explained: *'We made the marriage certificate in the court but they requested some documents from Irbid and Amman in order to give us the marriage certificate... A woman [from the court] asked me why I want to marry early and told me that I'm still young for responsibility. I told her that I can handle this responsibility.'*

For the one-third of girls who reported that they would have rather waited to marry, broader narratives suggested not coaching, but capitulation. Even girls who remained personally opposed to their marriage often reported that



An 18-year-old Rohingya refugee in a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh has just given birth to a baby boy at a health centre operated by Save the Children © European Union

## My father can't afford much. So, when we marry, there are fewer family members to pay for.

(A 15-year-old from a host community, married at 14)

they had agreed to a match – because they had been carefully socialised into compliance (Fry et al., 2019; Haldorsen, 2013; Hutchinson, 2019). A minority of girls hinted that they had agreed to marriage in order to improve the lives of their natal families, sacrificing their own needs for those of their younger siblings. For example, a 15-year-old from a host community, married at 14, explained: *'My father can't afford much. So, when we marry, there are fewer family members to pay for.'* Most girls, however, emphasised not household poverty but their own lack of voice. *'We don't like to say no to my mother. It's yes when she says yes,'* observed a divorced 16-year-old Syrian girl from a host community. *'Boys can say no. Girls can't. Not all in the camp,'* added a 12-year-old Palestinian girl living in Gaza camp.

As already noted, girls have the least space to gainsay cousin marriages. Some say yes because they do not want to disappoint much-loved uncles. A 12-year-old from Gaza camp, engaged to her cousin, explained that she cannot tell her uncle no even though it means *'listening and keeping everything inside'*. She is planning on running away and hiding in a cousin's closet when she hears that her marriage is imminent. Other girls were terrified to open rifts in the extended family. *'I wanted to say no but I couldn't... because of the traditions,'* explained a 19-year-old Syrian

who was married at 17 to a cousin. Most girls destined for cousin marriage added that they said yes simply because they can't say no.

A few girls (all Palestinian) admitted that they had capitulated and given formal consent due to threats. For example, a 16-year-old from Gaza, engaged to be married, reported that her father had told her he would find her a man *'that's not good... if she doesn't accept this man'*. A divorced 16-year-old, from Gaza camp, underscored that while she had cried and pleaded with her father, who had arranged a marriage on five days' notice, she then lied to the judge when he asked if she was being forced to marry, to save face in the courtroom. *'My father said there was nothing I could do... I said yes [to the judge] because my father was with me... I didn't want to let people know so I faked it [being happy].'* Only one girl in our sample reported having stood up to threats from family members (see Box 14).

Many of the married girls who participated in our qualitative research ultimately admitted that they had said yes to child marriage – happily or resignedly – because they had never been given enough information about what marriage entailed for saying no to seem a more desirable answer. As highlighted in other research (Fry et al., 2019; Haldorsen, 2013; UNICEF and ICRW, 2017b, 2017c; Hutchinson, 2018b, 2019), girls knew they would gain a husband and move into a marital home where they would be expected to take on at least some household work, but many knew nothing about the broader responsibilities – emotional and sexual – involved in being a wife. *'I did*

#### Box 14: Resisting marriage not of her choosing

Rima is a 19-year-old Syrian girl who is happily married to a man she is not related to. This was her doing, because despite real risks, she refused to marry the cousin her father had promised her to.

Rima explained that many young men came to propose to her, starting when she was a young adolescent. Her father refused them all, until his own brother came to demand that she marry his son. *'My uncle was insisting to take me to his son... he wanted me to get married immediately... My father was insisting on me to agree so his brother would not be angry with him... My father would tell me that the girls have no opinion,'* she reported.

Having grown up in an extended family characterised by consanguineous marriages, Rima knew the risks. *'I don't want to marry a relative... My sister's mother-in-law is my aunt and she treats her very badly... Also, my female cousin was married to my cousin, but they got divorced, because her husband beat and insulted her. I know my cousins so I don't want to marry one of them.'*

Showing remarkable courage – given that her father insulted her, accused her of having a lover, and threatened to beat her – Rima refused. *'I said to my father, I do not want to marry my cousin because I feel that he is my brother, we were raised up together and I can't imagine that he will become my husband.'*

Eventually her father realised she would not bend and her uncle and her cousin were sent away. When a match was proposed with a stranger, Rima said yes and left to live a married life uncomplicated by intergenerational demands.

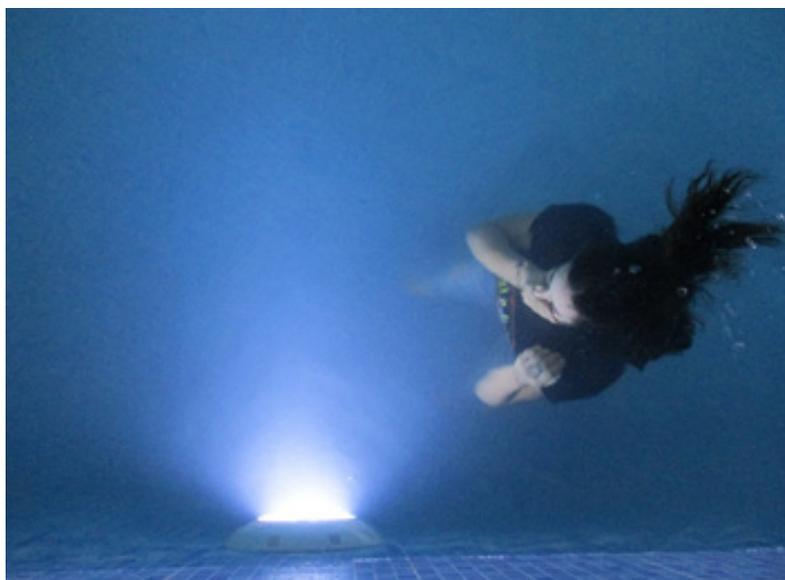
*not know anything. All I was happy about was the dress and the gold back then, ha ha,'* confessed a 16-year-old Syrian girl married at 13. A pregnant 15-year-old from Gaza noted, *'I had no idea what marriage was. I thought that marriage is all about supporting my husband. I had no idea that it included a sexual relationship. Nobody told me anything, even my family.'* Only a few married girls noted any attempts to talk them out of marriage. A 16-year-old from Gaza, married at 14, recalled that her friends advised her not to get married. She *'thought they were kidding'*.

Because families seek girls' input and, in most cases, believe they have girls' best interests at heart, 'no' is also an accepted response – at least for most girls and for some period of time. Most girls – as with their parents, who often reject proposals well in advance of those they actually put to their daughter formally – frame this as rejecting individual

▮ I had no idea what marriage was. I thought that marriage is all about supporting my husband. I had no idea that it included a sexual relationship. Nobody told me anything, even my family.

(A pregnant 15-year-old from Gaza)

matches, rather than necessarily trying to delay marriage per se. *'More than seven people [came to propose] and I refused... I love only the right person,'* reported a 20-year-old Palestinian girl. A few girls, however, admitted to trying to bargain for time. A recently married 18-year-old from



#### Jouri, a 19-year-old Palestinian girl from Ein el-Hilweh camp, Lebanon

*'Early marriage is the epidemic of every generation. This epidemic passed from my grandmother to my mother and sister and then to me. Parents believe that marriage is protection for the girl but it is actually injustice and suffering, and it burdens the girls with more responsibilities than they can bear. I only felt I was successful when I broke the early marriage cycle and went back to my studies and the life that every girl of my age should live'*

### Box 15: Second thoughts

Ajda is an 18-year-old Syrian girl from a host community who is yet to marry. Although she was engaged last year to a man she had known only a week, the year-long engagement period they set gave her time to see what kind of a man her fiancé was – and to think through what it might mean for her future.

Ajda did not know her husband when he came to propose. She liked him, however, almost immediately. *'I loved him and he loved me,'* she recalled. They agreed to marry and set a wedding date for one year ahead, to allow him to accumulate the resources needed to set up a home together.

Several months before they were due to marry, Ajda's fiancé got very drunk and made a public scene: *'It was late, past 2am. I saw him come back and he was drunk. His uncles and cousins saw him and he was saying everything. I couldn't believe the scene. He was barely able to walk because of what he did to himself.'*

Ajda's alarm grew as she thought about what it would mean for her if her husband were a drunk. She considered that she might be left alone too often, to be a servant for his mother. She considered that he might become violent – or that she may have to divorce him, ruining her chances of ever marrying well again. She explained, *'I started thinking that if I marry him, I won't see him till late at night... I can go crazy when alone... I will be like a maid for his mother... He may come home to me drunk and then beat me... We see such things on TV... If you get divorced three times, no one will marry you again.'*

In the end, despite the public humiliation and her love for her fiancé, she called off the engagement. *'It was a year and we shared so much... but I was over it,'* she concluded.

an informal tented settlement noted that she had wanted to wait until adulthood not only because her body and brain were immature, but because *'There were problems between my father and my mother, which has an effect on me.'* An older Palestinian girl from Gaza camp added that she tries to scare away potential mothers-in-law by appearing so incompetent that they will not want her: *'I keep praying that no one comes to marry me. When women come to our house, I start being random. I mess things up. I take a lot of time to serve them coffee.'* While rare, some girls are allowed to say no even after they have said yes, breaking already formalised engagements (see Box 15).

## 4.4 Preventing child marriage in humanitarian contexts

Very little is known about what interventions are effective at preventing child marriage in humanitarian contexts. Programming is primarily small scale and not rigorously evaluated. This is partly due to the nature of humanitarian contexts, where need is great and demands are constantly shifting, and partly due to the nature of humanitarian programming, which tends to be siloed and prone to erratic funding. Here, we present GAGE's findings on what works, does not work, and might work to prevent child marriage. We begin by exploring the strengths and weaknesses of three existent change strategies: legal and policy approaches, empowering girls, and engaging parents. While the broader evidence base from developmental contexts suggests that empowering girls is the most effective prevention

strategy, we begin with legal and policy approaches not only because they set the stage for understanding different contexts, but also because recent research suggests that in Jordan and Bangladesh, the law is particularly relevant to shaping outcomes (Leigh et al., 2020; Melnikas et al., 2020; Hutchinson, 2018a; Fry et al., 2019). We then draw on another set of GAGE's child marriage tools to explore what the actors involved in child marriage believe might help end the practice .

### Existent efforts

#### Legal and policy approaches

##### Jordan

Jordanian law stipulates that all marriages must be officially registered with the court and that girls who marry under the age of 18 must have the permission of a Sharia court, which is tasked with ensuring that girls give their free consent to marriage. Until 2019, courts were allowed to grant permission to girls once they were 15 years and one day old. After a contentious process originally meant to eliminate this loophole, and make 18 the legal minimum age for marriage, the law was changed in 2019 to 16 years plus one day old (Human Rights Watch, 2019b). The law also calls for couples to have blood tests, to ensure that carriers of beta thalassaemia (an inherited blood disorder) do not marry. Syrian respondents, many of whom have now been in Jordan for nearly a decade, highlighted the strengths – and limits – of legal approaches to ending child marriage.

Some Syrian respondents reported that the law works to delay marriages. *'When we went to the judge, my*

daughter was 15 years old, the judge refused her marriage. He told me that your daughter is still a little girl,' recalled the mother of a married girl from Azraq. 'Now, if anyone gets engaged to a girl, they let him wait. He can't perform the marriage's contract until she becomes 16 years old... This law is good. It stopped the marriage under 16 years old,' added the mother of a Syrian girl from a host community who married at 16. Judges not only refuse to marry those underage, but ostensibly verify that girls seeking to marry are not merely rubber-stamping previously unofficial marriages now that they are of legal age. 'They make some girls swear on the Holy Qur'an to make sure that they didn't make an illegal marriage certificate,' explained a 17-year-old girl who married at 15. Where judges believe that girls have been unofficially married, parents can be fined, which Makani ('safe space' centres, run by UNICEF, that provide child protection life skills programming, and tutorial support) facilitators note is very motivating. 'People fear the laws. They think they may have to pay a penalty or have legal issues and prefer to avoid that,' one explained. The mother of a now 18-year-old girl from a host community who was married at 14, reported such a fine: 'After they got married, we started to say that we want to make the court registration procedures. They said because you did the contract before and they have intercourse, they should pay a fine... We paid 1,000 JD [US\$,1,410] as a penalty.' Legal mechanisms are also being brought into play in hospitals – albeit inconsistently given the number of doctors willing to turn a blind eye in exchange for a bribe – with health care providers now obligated to call the police if a girl appears to be involved in an illegal marriage.

Other respondents – perhaps nearly 50% according to estimates by the Higher Population Council (2017) – reported that families intent on child marriage simply ignore the law, bypass the court, and have a religious leader perform an unofficial marriage, which they can then register as soon as their daughter reaches the requisite age. 'The court at that time didn't allow her to confirm the marriage contract at the court because of her age,' explained the

 People fear the laws. They think they may have to pay a penalty or have legal issues and prefer to avoid that.

(A Makani facilitator)

mother of a girl who was married at 14. Parents understand that the unofficial marriages performed by sheiks willing to turn a 'blind eye' (father, host community) are illegal, admit that they go out of their way to keep them secret, and know that girls married unofficially will have no legal recourse should their marriages fail. However, in line with the findings of Fry et al. (2019), several parents in GAGE's research observed that unofficial marriages are common in rural Syria and are a 'traditional' way for families to circumvent national law. 'It is the customs and traditions in Syria, until the age of the girl becomes regular... they bring the sheik, they do not go to the court or anything,' explained the father of a married girl from an informal tented settlement. Several respondents noted that not only does the law fail, but legal officials fail. Judges ask girls if they consent in public, where they have no option other than to say yes. One girl from an informal tented settlement, who approached the court to register her marriage when she was 15 years and one day old, was eight months' pregnant when she was asked if she was already in an informal marriage. She said no and the judge did not enquire as to her belly.

As noted earlier, health care benefits are also used as an incentive to eschew child marriage. Maternity care is free for girls who have legally registered marriages, but not free for those without paperwork. Married girls occasionally reported that medical staff appear cognisant of the fact that policies can put the most vulnerable girls at higher risk and sometimes choose to look the other way. A 17-year-old girl from a host community, who married at 14, reported that when she was engaged, the staff at an NGO-run medical centre tried to talk her into a delay, explaining that marriage is a lot of work. As the engagement had already been announced, however, she perceived no space for altering plans. 'Persons from the medical committee came to give me advice... They talked about marriage in general, about responsibility and also, they talked about early marriage... They interviewed me and said that they would refer me to UNHCR because I am still young... I just listened to them, I was engaged.'

Although there are UN policy efforts aimed at preventing child marriage in Jordan, they are not only weak, but are inconsistently implemented. UNHCR and WFP, for example, make no effort to use either cash transfers or food vouchers as an incentive for parents to eschew child marriage. Rather than mandating that girls must stay on their parents' registration until age 18, which

would at least make it more complicated for their marital families to collect UN benefits for them (because girls' natal families would have to collect benefits and then pass them off), girls may transfer to their husbands' registration as soon as their marriages are legal – at age 16. In addition, although UNHCR is ostensibly required to evaluate girls' best interests when transferring their registration – even making home visits where necessary – none of the married girls in our sample reported this type of follow-up. Indeed, even young mothers are not prioritised; their infants can be registered with UNHCR as soon as marriages are legal, without ever triggering a home visit.

### Bangladesh

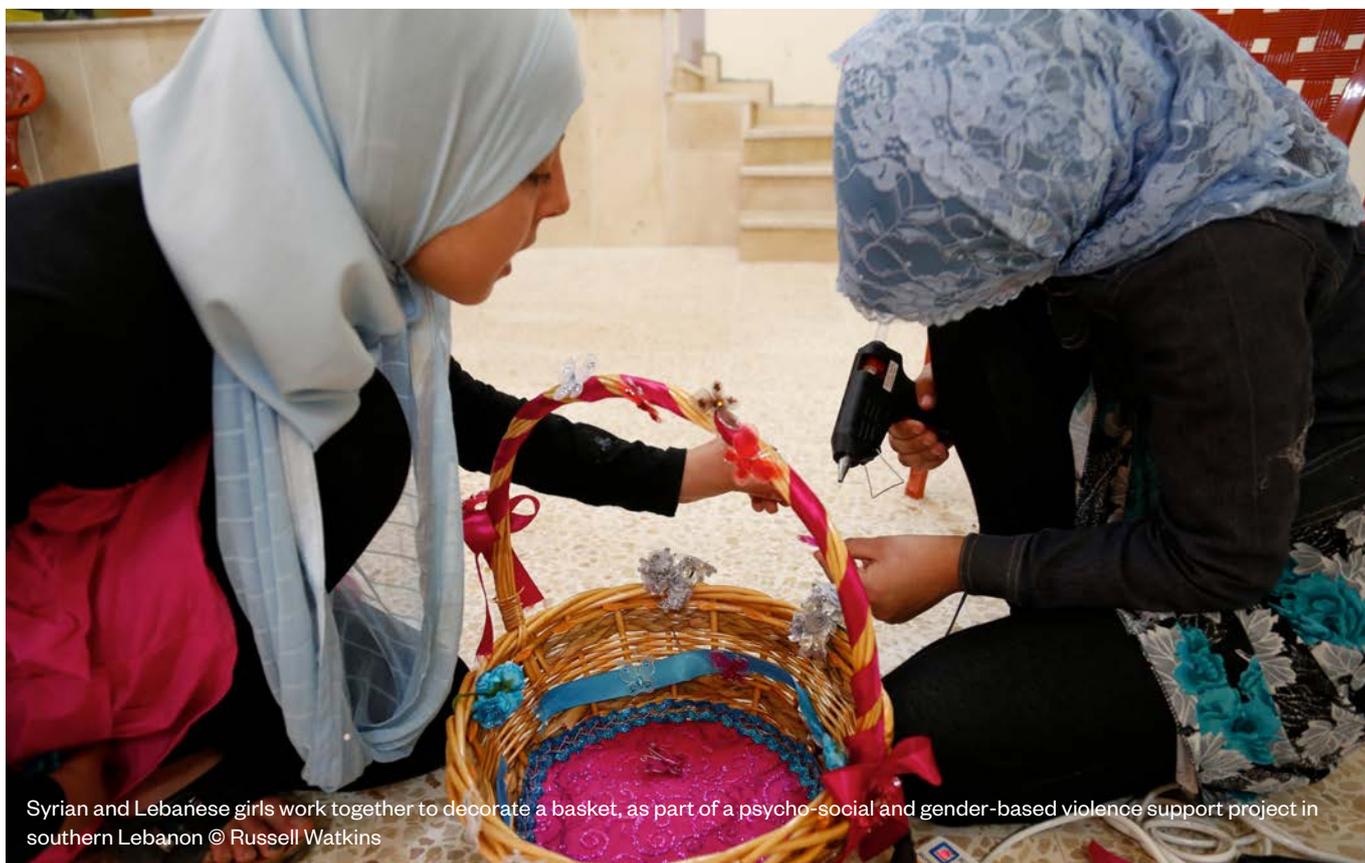
In Bangladesh, the legal age for marriage is 18 for girls and 21 for boys. That said, there is a loophole in the 2017 Child Marriage Restraint Act that allows courts to approve child marriages in 'special cases'. However, the law does not specify what those 'special cases' are (*Girls Not Brides*, 2020d). In Myanmar, home to the Rohingya population prior to 2017, marriage is generally legal for girls over the age of 14 and boys over the age of 18 (*Girls Not Brides*, 2020h). As already noted though, many of GAGE's Rohingya respondents reported that Bangladeshi law is now – after two years of rather lax enforcement – being

▶ They illegally change their age by giving a bribe just to get married.

(An older unmarried girl)

well implemented inside refugee camps. For example, a mother remarked that in Bangladesh, *'the law is very strict now'*. A grandmother added that *majhis* (camp community leaders) used to accept bribes, to help parents marry their under-age daughters, but that because several were caught and fined, this is now quite rare. *'I appreciate the law, which has been imposed on behalf of government,'* she concluded.

Key informants and adolescents, on the other hand, were more mixed about the impact of legal and policy approaches. While some key informants claimed that child marriage has *'been stopped'*, others acknowledged that it has merely become more hidden. *'Those who want to hide their marriage, they don't register here. They always try to raise their girls' age. Here you can find pregnant girls of 12 or 13 years old,'* explained another. Adolescents noted that bribes are still quite common. *'They illegally change their age by giving a bribe just to get married,'* explained an older unmarried girl. *'Majhis are given 2,000 or 3,000*



Syrian and Lebanese girls work together to decorate a basket, as part of a psycho-social and gender-based violence support project in southern Lebanon © Russell Watkins

*taka [US\$24–35] for this,' added an older unmarried boy. Key informants also observed that where adolescents are already married by the time the camp-in-charge learns of the marriage, 'then there is nothing to do... they have to provide knowledge about family planning, reproduction, etc.'*

The same gaps in UN policy highlighted for Jordan are also present in Bangladesh. There is no attempt to utilise UN benefits as an entry point for case management and to encourage adherence to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international agreements regarding child marriage.

## Empowering girls

### Jordan

Efforts to empower girls are widespread in Jordan, with myriad NGOs working to provide information and services on both child marriage in particular and gender equality more generally, as well as to strengthen girls' voices and support networks. However, efforts to empower girls in Jordan must be understood in the context of the region's generational hierarchies and deeply conservative gender norms. To avoid alienating parents, which would be counterproductive, programming must move slowly and, quite often, indirectly.

While some girls in the GAGE study sample mentioned learning about child marriage at school (from visiting lawyers) and from NGOs focusing on gender (such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC)), most girls who reported learning about child marriage – and the reasons it should be avoided – mentioned UNICEF's Makani programme. Though it has evolved considerably since it was launched in 2015, Makani provides more than 100,000 young people aged 5–24 with informal education, life skills programming, and child protection and psychosocial support. Facilitators not only help girls understand the risks of child marriage, but also help them develop the agency and voice they need to avoid child marriage and offer a potential path to having a planned marriage cancelled or delayed.

*'They've talked a lot about early marriage in Makani,'* reported a 15-year-old Palestinian girl from Gaza camp. *'They also show us videos,'* added a 12-year-old Syrian girl. Girls reported having learned about a wide variety of risks associated with child marriage, including heavy domestic chore burdens, loss of education, intimate partner violence, and dangerous pregnancies. *'The girl who marries early loses her right to study, perhaps she*

*will marry someone who controls her, or he may be a bad person and deal with her badly,'* recalled one older Syrian girl. *'We are still young to get married and to take the responsibility,'* added another. Critically, girls added that Makani programming is addressing both push and pull factors – teaching them the risks of child marriage while also encouraging them to expand their aspirations beyond marriage and motherhood. *'Makani's facilitators provided us with advice... to complete our study and to achieve any ambitions that we want,'* replied one girl when asked to identify the most significant change the Makani programme had made in her life. *'Marriage and children is not everything in this life. At first, the person should build herself and then she should think to build a family and things like this,'* added another.

In addition to providing girls with information, Makani programming also empowers girls to believe in and speak up for themselves. *'I learned to be self-confident and not afraid... and how to raise awareness among others,'* reported a 19-year-old Palestinian girl, describing what she had learned in Makani. *'I became able to express my opinion, and not have views by others imposed on me... If I like something I can say so. If I don't like anything, I can say so too,'* added a 13-year-old Syrian girl from a host community. Girls noted that these lessons translated into preventing child marriage in a variety of ways. Several, for example, reported standing up to the boys who harass them on the streets, making it clear that boys' advances are not acceptable. *'They taught us how to deal with problems, problems in the street... We could solve the*

▀ There was one adolescent... her age was 14 and she came to us because we... addressed early marriage and its harms, as the girl did not want to get married. We acted quickly as her mother comes to the centre. We did early marriage [the topic] in a rush and the next day the girl came, thanking us, saying that her parents had changed their mind.

(A Makani facilitator)

*verbal harassment in the street by strengthening our personalities... I became able to protect myself,*' explained an 11-year-old girl from Zaatari camp. Other girls added that they felt more secure in rejecting not only harassment, but also expressions of love. For example, a 14-year-old from an informal tented settlement reported that while a young man had told her that he wished to approach her family with a proposal, she had told him to desist because she was too young: *'He told me that he will come to ask for my hand but I stopped him as I am very young.'* Most critically, according to Makani facilitators and girls themselves, is that girls are learning to express their opinions to their parents. *'We worked on the children in the adolescent age group. They demand their rights and they said to their parents that they don't want [early marriage]... Now girls refuse this pressure,'* explained a Makani facilitator. *'Girls have started to refuse and to make their decisions,'* agreed a younger girl.

Though it was very rare for a girl to be determined enough to try to delay or cancel an arranged marriage by asking a Makani facilitator for help, one-on-one intervention sometimes paid off. Several facilitators reported having helped girls put off marriage and continue their schooling. One, in a host community, reported: *'There was one adolescent... her age was 14 and she came to us because we... addressed early marriage and its harms, as the girl did not want to get married. We acted quickly as her mother comes to the centre. We did early marriage [the topic] in a rush and the next day the girl came, thanking us, saying that her parents had changed their mind.'* Another facilitator, from Azraq, added that she had approached the uncle of the girl in question, as *'the girl told me that the closest person to her was her uncle, who was supporting her'* and that the uncle had been able to stop the marriage.

However, with a few exceptions (see Box 16), married girls in our sample were clear that empowerment programming is failing to reach those most at risk. Several,

#### **Box 16: Awareness-raising programming can support girls' agency around marriage decisions**

Sara is a 19-year-old Syrian girl who has spent her adolescence in a Jordanian host community. She married last year at age 18 after a slow and deliberate process that was the result of innate caution and intervention in the form of awareness-raising programming.

Sara received her first marriage proposal when she was only 13. *'The groom was my cousin from Lebanon,'* she explained. She had her mother send him away immediately. Since then, dozens of young men – some Syrian and some Jordanian – came to propose. Each time, she refused to meet them in person and had her mother send them away. *'I did not want to marry.'*

According to Sara, her caution stemmed from three things. First, *'there were problems between my father and my mother, which has an effect on me'*. Second, she has seen first-hand that young mothers are completely unable to care for their children. *'The daughter of our neighbours is 16 years old and has two children. If they cry, she cries with them because she cannot deal with them,'* she explained. Finally, she added, she has taken a wide variety of classes, run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and at schools, which helped her understand that *'if a girl is under the age of 18 her body and mind are incomplete and she cannot take responsibility, and if she gives birth to a child, she will be a child and raises up a child'*.

Sara's new husband works at a restaurant with Sara's brother. When he and his mother first came to meet her, Sara agreed to speak with him. Sara's mother, after years of refusals, was shocked. *'The glass of water fell from her hand,'* she recalled.

The young couple spent a month talking and getting to know one another. *'He asked me what does marriage mean to you? And I asked him the same question. I told him that the girl builds a new life with her husband and his family... He appeared happy, so I felt that my answer was correct,'* she explained.

When Sara's father (who did not live with her at this time because he had abandoned the family for a new wife) refused to allow the marriage – because her suitor was from a different clan – Sara stood up for her herself and humiliated her father into acquiescence. *'I told him that you do not care about me and no one sells his daughter as you sold me, you left me and went. But my husband will not leave me.'*

All of the wedding preparations and purchases were under Sara's control, though she talked over the options with her mother. *'I make a decision but after a long time of thinking... If I make a decision, I don't like anyone to oppose it, I like them to discuss with me... I make decisions with my mother because she discusses with me and tells me the negatives and positives.'*

Married life has been kind to Sara. She loves her husband. Her in-laws treat her gently, refusing to let her work at all. *'When I enter the kitchen, they say to me "you are still a bride" and they expel me.'* Sara and her husband are not rushing into parenthood. While she believes that *'the first boy strengthens the relationship between the spouses,'* they are taking their time to *'enjoy life, then to have children'*.

for example, noted that they had never learned about child marriage at Makani. They had been told that they had rights, but not that they had a right to refuse marriage. *'We only learned about some of girls' rights like the need to be taken care of, but nothing related to early marriage,'* explained a 15-year-old Palestinian. A 17-year-old Syrian girl attributed the gap to facilitators' fear of contravening customs: *'They were hinting at such topics, but through other topics.'*

Other married girls admitted that they had been presented with information, but had not found it compelling. *'They do a lot of lectures but no one applies the words... I swear that we became white-haired,'* observed an older Syrian girl in a group discussion. *'They keep asking us to participate... participants claim that they benefited a lot but in fact, no one listens,'* reported a 19-year-old from a host community who married at 17. Some girls underscored the role of tradition while reflecting on the reason for failed awareness-raising efforts. In families and communities where child marriage is expected, outsiders' lessons are considered irrelevant. *'I desired to do this. I wanted to get married and to be a mother,'* explained an older Syrian girl who had attended Makani sessions before her marriage. Other girls highlighted that risks are oversold, meaning that they learn to tune out of messaging. *'They said that at an early age the girl has an incomplete body and that her uterus also is incomplete, and early marriage affects her... I got pregnant and nothing happened,'* explained a 17-year-old from a host community who married at 14. She then added that it would probably not have mattered what messages programmers were emphasising, because as an adolescent, she would not have believed the risks they talked about were real until she had experienced them herself.

Girls who were married against their will noted that even when their own awareness about the risks of child marriage had been good, their voicelessness had left them powerless to protect themselves. A 16-year-old divorced Palestinian from Gaza camp, for example, observed that while she had learned at a Makani centre that she had rights, she was married without even being physically present to protest. Key informants admitted this was true and that in age- and gender-stratified Arab culture, there are real limits to what 'empowering girls' can accomplish: *'The problem is not with the student but with the family, the student has nothing to do.'* Indeed, several married girls added that even programme implementers' hands are tied by custom. When asked what facilitators at her centre had

done when she announced her engagement, a 16-year-old Palestinian reported that *'they wouldn't intervene'*.

## Bangladesh

Noting that GAGE baseline data was collected less than two years after the bulk of Rohingya refugees arrived in Bangladesh, which means that programming had not yet had time to mature and be taken to scale, our research found no evidence of efforts to empower girls, outside of attempts to educate the community about the risks of child marriage. Adolescent girls and boys knew the legal age of marriage in Bangladesh and were able to report that *'younger girls suffer a lot of problems during pregnancy'* (15-year-old boy) and that *'those who get married at an early age face hardship, she can't manage the family, can't manage the child'* (younger unmarried girl). However, although programming such as IRC's Girls Shine and Plan's Champions of Change (which target adolescent girls and boys respectively with tailored programming) are serving thousands of young people in Bangladesh, none of the girls in GAGE's sample reported participating in any programme aimed at growing their confidence and voice, and adolescent narratives did not include awareness of gender inequality (UNFPA, 2019).

## Engagement with parents

### Jordan

Child marriage prevention efforts are also aimed at parents in Jordan. While mothers report having attended sessions at a variety of gender-focused NGOs and at their children's schools, and fathers report mass media messaging on the relationship between child marriage and divorce, most awareness-raising appears to come through Makani centres. Facilitators reported that they deliver not only child protection sessions but also parent education courses aimed at broader health and development, so that parents do not feel that education efforts are solely aimed at denigrating culture and tradition. *'Sometimes, the parents don't have a clear idea about early marriage, so I explain to them the health, physical, psychological dangers of early marriage,'* explained one facilitator. Some parents and adolescents reported positive impacts from the Makani sessions. One younger girl noted, *'Many parents benefited from Makani regarding early marriage.'* A peer, when asked to identify Makani's most significant impact, replied, *'Now fathers believe that education is more important than marriage because of the great number of divorce cases.'*

► Sometimes, the parents don't have a clear idea about early marriage, so I explain to them the health, physical, psychological dangers of early marriage.

(A Makani facilitator)

Indeed, one father added that he was now totally on board with community education about child marriage: *'I wrote a song and I composed it, which treats the early marriage issue as a method to raise people's awareness.'*

Some parents agreed that *'awareness sessions are fundamental... in particular for the mother and the father'* (father, host community). Indeed, a few fathers of married girls living in an informal tented settlement broke down in tears and admitted that if they had only had better information, they would have never made their daughters marry as children. However, most facilitators and parents agreed that child marriage sessions are yet to produce noticeable change. *'We attended some meetings about these issues, but they did not produce any result. Every person does what is in his mind only,'* explained a Syrian father from a host community. *'All solutions and facilitations won't change her mind. Customs and traditions rule,'* added a Palestinian mother from Gaza camp. Indeed, several key informants in host communities expressed concern that as messages about child marriage have proliferated, the practice is simply moving underground. As a facilitator from a host community noted, *'UNICEF started pressuring UNHCR, who in turn pressured the Syrians on the topic of early marriage, because it's forbidden for any child. And now they do it secretly, because it's illegal for a 14- or 15-year-old to get married.'*

### Bangladesh

Most probably due to the timing of baseline data collection, there was very little evidence of concerted efforts to engage Rohingya parents or the broader Rohingya community in preventing child marriage. Several mothers reported having undertaken training that had shifted their beliefs about the desirability of child marriage. One explained, *'After training we understand... and we don't get them married at early age.'* Key informants added that they are *'meeting with majhi of camp committees and block committees'* (refugee representatives in camp governance, who are supposed to help 'activate' the broader camp population)

(ACAPS, 2018) to raise awareness about the risks of child marriage and early pregnancy.

## Proposals for prevention

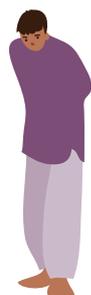
In Jordan, GAGE used several new tools designed to explore – with early married girls, their parents, and their husbands – what types of programming might have changed their behaviour and prevented the marriage. Using carefully tailored third-person vignettes, to facilitate honest communication, stakeholders were asked who might have changed their beliefs, *what messages* might have changed their beliefs and – in the absence of belief change – what incentives might have shifted their behaviour. Several parents (most often those of girls who had experienced significant violence and are now divorced) broke down crying during interviews. They confessed that marrying their daughters as children had been a terrible decision that they now regretted, and wished that more targeted awareness-raising had been aimed at them early in the match-making process (though given that Hutchinson (2019) found that most parents well understand the risks of child marriage, it is unclear that more information would have helped). *'The biggest mistake I made in the world. A crime, really it is a crime,'* explained a father from an informal tented settlement. *'I felt very remorseful,'* added a mother from Azraq. Other parents, however, were clear that they continue to see marriage in mid-adolescence as desirable. A mother from an informal tented settlement announced, *'The Jordanian system is good. It is excellent... It is better to marry at 15 years old... not 13 or 12 years old.'* A father from a host community agreed – but from the opposite perspective: *'The minimum age of marriage at 18 years is too much... We can say 16 or 17 years old, we can accept that.'*

## Which actors could influence marriage decision-making?

Echoing existent evidence, which highlights the central role of family in marriage decisions, fathers of early married girls reported that their beliefs might be swayed by their own fathers and brothers – and by their wives and daughters (Haldorsen, 2013; Hutchinson, 2019). Which actors are best positioned to create change, and how they might do so, varies considerably, highlighting the fine line that most fathers walk in terms of maintaining their standing in the family and community, and positioning their daughters to be happy in life. On the one hand, fathers admitted that their

## Child marriage decision-makers have ideas about how to prevent child marriage.

**Decision-makers** have mixed opinions about using law and policy to eliminate child marriage. Some believe that if parents were fined (and even jailed), parents would have an easy 'out' to refuse proposals. Others believe it would drive child marriage underground.



**Decision-makers** agree that it is important to work with communities to reduce pressure on families to engage in child marriage.

### Grooms

**Grooms** find no messages about child marriage to be compelling – but would listen to their parents and clan elders.

**Grooms** could be incentivized to eschew child marriage if they were rewarded for marrying those 18+.

### Girls

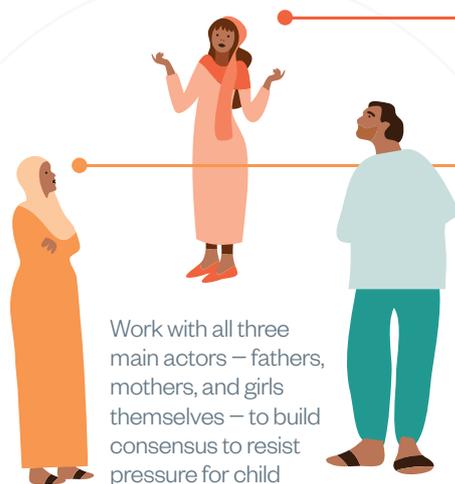
**Girls** need information about how common child marriage really is – and what marriage entails.

### Parents

**Mothers** prioritise messages about future poverty, girls' health, and over-work due to marriage.

**Fathers** prioritise messages about educational trade-offs and marriage-driven emotional distress.

**Mothers** and **fathers** agreed that cash would help keep girls in school and unmarried – mothers because it would allow their daughters to buy the things that make them feel part of their peer groups and fathers because it would support the household economy.



Work with all three main actors – fathers, mothers, and girls themselves – to build consensus to resist pressure for child marriage.

male relatives are very important in shaping their thinking. Their own fathers have 'a *big opinion*' (as explained by a father from a host community), especially in terms of which potential suitor and which potential family to accept. As marriage is not merely a union between a husband and wife, but between families, the extended family is invited to weigh in with information – something that was commented on by several men. *'I am the oldest one and I asked my young brothers for their opinion. I also asked my cousins who live surrounding me and I asked one of my uncle's relatives,'* added another father from a host community. Although in consanguineous marriages, the input of paternal family is

often all that matters, in non-consanguineous marriages, the majority of fathers reported that the opinions of their wives and daughters were also important. As already noted, wives are tasked with understanding which young men might best suit their daughters' needs and daughters have the (admittedly limited) right of refusal, *'because if she doesn't want a specific guy, you shouldn't marry her to him'* (father, host community). None of the fathers in GAGE's research reported that NGOs or media campaigns could shift opinions.

Mothers of early married girls reported that while they may seek input from an array of family members, their



19-year-old adolescent girl who is married and pregnant, Rangapani © Nathalie Bertrams

own opinions are primarily swayed by their husbands and daughters. Older sons and (maternal) brothers are seen as useful, if they know something about a particular suitor that the mother might not know, but on the whole, mothers were clear that even their own fathers have a limited role to play. A mother from Azraq explained, *'I will*

*not respond to my father's opinion, do you know why? I will tell him that "you are my father and I respect your opinion, but in the end the opinion is for my husband and my daughter".'* Interestingly, several mothers of early married girls answered the question of *who* might drive belief change from a perspective that clearly indicated that mothers are as, if not more, committed to child marriage as fathers. A mother from a host community stated that fathers are the only people who can change mothers' opinions: *'I mean, if the man argues with his wife and he doesn't want to marry his daughter, he will not marry her.'* A mother from Azraq added, *'If a woman is convinced of something, no one can change her opinion except her husband. No one can change his opinion, but her husband can say to her "I don't agree" so she can't do anything, even if her father convinced her, she can't act without her husband's consent.'* Only one mother reported that NGOs or media campaigns might shift opinions, though another (from a host community and whose daughter married at 16) added that community awareness-raising matters in terms of shifting norms, because *'the more people stop doing it, the more awareness increases'*.

Husbands of early married girls reported that the opinions of their parents and uncles were by far the most important – but added that clan leaders also have a say. *'I will cancel everything if the clan leader disagreed or told me that it's not the right time to marry,'* explained the husband of a 15-year-old from a host community. None of the husbands in GAGE's research reported that influential community members, celebrity role models or media campaigns might shift opinions.

Although a few parents of early married girls claimed that they would ignore religious leaders if they preached against child marriage, a majority of fathers, mothers and husbands gave them at least some scope for altering beliefs about the practice. Mothers reported that if the head sheik spoke out against child marriage, *'the whole community would change'*, but added that no sheik has ever done so: *'No one said: "She is a young girl, you shouldn't perform the contract".'* Interestingly, given existent evidence of the importance of religious leaders to child marriage decision-making, no stakeholders considered imans a key messenger – perhaps because, as noted by Hutchinson (2019), religious leaders are not consulted until the proposal has already been accepted.

Noting that Hutchinson (2019) highlighted how the legal landscapes of Jordan versus Lebanon shape beliefs and

## When the government imposes on you to not marry her, the issue is over.

(A father from a host community)

behaviour regarding child marriage, we specifically asked the parents and husbands of early married girls whether messaging from the Jordanian government or UN agencies might alter beliefs about child marriage. While answers were mixed, most respondents said yes, with the caveat that they answered a slightly different question: they spoke not of beliefs, but actions. Quite a few parents were unequivocal that if the law changed – and was enforced – child marriage would be eliminated. A mother from Azraq explained, *‘Of course, if a police officer came and told me not to marry my daughter, I cannot marry her, because he threatened me. The government has an authority and influence, the government is the foundation.’* A father from a host community agreed: *‘When the government imposes on you to not marry her, the issue is over.’* Other parents added that UNHCR and UNICEF policies are nearly as important, because having one’s daughter followed by child protection services is humiliating. *‘We follow the rules applied by the UNHCR,’* noted a mother from a host community. Several parents of early married girls candidly admitted that they would be relieved if legal and policy changes unilaterally prohibited marriage before the age of 18, because it would take the onus of decision-making off their own shoulders. If child marriage were always illegal, respondents noted, then girls’ parents would have a ‘face-saving’ way to say no when approached for their daughters. *‘They must give a firm decision, marriage is forbidden except from the age of 18 years old and above... So that you do not have this responsibility,’* explained a father from a host community.

A minority of respondents felt just as strongly that policy and legal changes would be ineffective – a position supporting the Higher Population Council’s (2017) finding that a large proportion of Syrian marriages are not legally registered. Some noted that beliefs, unlike actions, cannot be changed in a top-down manner. *‘These are Western laws, which they try to apply on us,’* explained a father from a host community. These are deeply held *‘personal convictions’*, added the husband of a 15-year-old girl from a host

community. UNHCR was seen as similarly inefficacious, because respondents felt ignored and marginalised. *‘We do not care about the opinion of the Commission [UNHCR], whether they reject or approve that... Because they don’t care about the matters of refugees, in terms of housing, food, expenses and everything,’* said a father from a host community. Others noted that the law cannot even change actions. A mother from an informal tented settlement explained that Syrian laws had failed to compel parents to educate their adolescent daughters – and that Jordanian efforts to outlaw child marriage would fail as well. She noted, *‘Five years before we came here... the president announced a rule that the girl can’t leave the school until she finishes ninth grade... This law didn’t work with the people except the person who wants to educate his daughter.’* A Palestinian mother from Gaza camp observed that determined parents can always find a way around the law: *‘My 16-year-old neighbour was engaged in her house. They circumvented the authorities.’*

### What messages could influence child marriage decision-making?

Noting that Fry et al. (2019) found that 42% of Syrian males and 29% of Palestinian males already strongly agree that marriage before 18 has negative consequences,<sup>10</sup> which suggests that messages already enjoy widespread penetration, fathers in our sample – when asked to evaluate what messages would be the most likely to alter their beliefs – focused on the trade-off between child marriage and education. This is interesting given that a large majority of married girls were already out of school before they were married. While several fathers highlighted that education benefits girls themselves, because *‘with education the girl’s mind is expanded and no longer like a child’*, fathers were more likely to hone in on girls’ reproductive roles and observe that more schooling would help girls become better mothers. *‘With education she can educate her children,’* explained one father. Echoing findings by Hutchinson (2019), fathers in our research also focused on the psychological impacts of early marriage. One noted that *‘when a girl is older she can take more responsibilities and deal with complicated husbands’* while another added, *‘when the girl is older, the chance of being abused is less as she is more aware’*. Fathers were less compelled by the health risks of adolescent pregnancy

<sup>10</sup> Figures rise to 90% and 57% respectively when ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ are combined.



### Lana, a 15-year-old Palestinian refugee girl with a hearing disability from Gaza camp in Jerash, Jordan

*'My mother did not have any options in her life. Her life was controlled by her in-laws and her only role was to take care of their needs, cook for the family and wash their clothes. My mother faced all types of oppressions in her life and she lived a very hard life that is different from mine. She was not allowed to go outside the house, was deprived of education, and was never allowed to make any choices. My mother is trying to give me a different life, one with more opportunities and freedom.'*

– *'these things are only known by God'* – and completely uninterested in improving girls' access to employment, given that paid work is not seen as culturally appropriate for females.

Mothers' responses were markedly different from fathers', which is perhaps unsurprising given that Fry et al. (2019) found nearly universal agreement – 100% for Palestinian females and 95% for Syrian females<sup>11</sup> – that child marriage has negative consequences. Though mothers agreed that education helps girls become better mothers, especially in regard to their ability to support their future children's education, they were also more swayed by links between child marriage and future poverty. Mothers commented that girls younger than 15 did not have the capacity *'to deal with financial issues'* (mother in Azraq camp) and also noted that more education might allow girls to get a job and contribute to household income. A mother from a host community explained, *'It is a big responsibility to manage children's lives and provide food and housing. With education she can get a job to provide and raise a child.'* A mother from an informal tented settlement added, *'If she grows up, she can work because she has a certificate... she can provide for her husband and children.'* Mothers also found health messaging more compelling than fathers and observed that both early married girls and their babies are at risk. *'Her body is incomplete to make pregnancy and her children would be weak,'* stated a mother from a host community. In terms of the psychological risks of child marriage, mothers emphasised different themes from

fathers. They highlighted the difficult transition between a *'pampered'* childhood and onerous marital responsibilities, noting that their daughters found total obedience to be crushing and motherhood to be exhausting.

Husbands in host communities were, by and large, not interested in messaging aimed at eliminating child marriage. Although one mentioned that adolescent pregnancy is dangerous and one mentioned that 18-year-old girls are more *'reliable and tolerable than girls at 15'*, their broader narratives about preferring younger girls undercut their observations.

### What incentives could shift child marriage decision-making?

In line with Malhotra and Elnakib's (forthcoming) conclusions on the efficacy of child marriage interventions, parents and husbands almost universally agreed that the best way to prevent child marriage is to incentivise girls'

▶ If the girl studies and goes to school, her family will be convinced to allow her to complete her study before marriage... but if the girl stays at home with you, they will not be convinced.

(A mother from an informal tented settlement whose daughter was married at 16)

<sup>11</sup> Looking only at 'strongly agree', figures were 71% and 58% respectively.

education, because girls who are in school are largely protected from child marriage. As noted earlier, girls who are in school are far less likely to be seen as available on the marriage market. A mother from an informal tented settlement whose daughter was married at 16 explained, *'if the girl studies and goes to school, her family will be convinced to allow her to complete her study before marriage... but if the girl stays at home with you, they will not be convinced.'*

The question then becomes how best to incentivise parents to keep their daughters in school given the gender norms that currently serve as a barrier to doing so. Cash stipends were the overwhelming first choice among GAGE respondents. When presented with a list of options, more than half of fathers selected *'cash for every grade daughter completes'* and several others chose *'cover costs of girls' education'*. Mothers were more equally split between these two options, but also preferred them over other options (e.g. stepped up awareness raising, imams preaching against child marriage, provision of school transport, etc.). Interestingly, mothers and fathers (and husbands) had slightly different perspectives in explaining *why/how* cash would improve educational uptake. Mothers emphasised that cash would help girls buy the things they need to feel good about going to school. A Syrian mother explained, *'The first incentive is to give her an amount of money every semester so that her daughter can complete her education, this is the first thing that will encourage her to allow her daughter to complete her education... Because she is young and she needs new clothes to wear in front of her friends... She will need things from the mall and market such as clothing and shoes... She will need at least 60 JD every three months.'* Fathers (and husbands) placed more emphasis on the household economy. *'I think if he has enough money that covers him and his family and he can afford educating his daughter, I think he will change his mind,'* added a father from a host community.

Other incentives that ultimately result in (or replace) higher household income – including job training, job placement, transportation, rent assistance, and increased food vouchers – were also seen as ways to support girls' schooling and reduce child marriage, though less so than cash. Job permits alone were not seen as effective. As one father from a host community summed up, *'Most people do not need the permit... because there are no jobs'*. Public recognition of girls' education success was also considered by parents to be insufficient to create change.

Men married to girls reported that they might have been incentivised to marry young adult women if elders refused to officiate marriages involving girls or if they were offered cash, rent assistance, or a transport allowance on the condition that they marry someone over the age of 18.

Noting that *'we follow our ancestors'* (mother, informal tented settlement), and that if some families are presented with both scholarships and grooms, they will *'choose the groom... she can complete her education later'* (mother, Gaza camp), one mother in an informal settlement added that incentives would be more effective if fewer elder relatives were alive to judge them. *'Honestly, maybe five or six of the old persons die and the girls can study if the education is available,'* she explained.



Adolescent Syrian girl who is divorced, with her child  
© Nathalie Bertrams

### What penalties could shift child marriage decision-making?

With some exceptions, mothers – despite their role as matchmakers – were more attracted to the idea of penalties for child marriage than fathers. They supported the notion of large fines for parents of early married girls. They also spontaneously brought up the idea of jail. *‘The girl’s parents should pay an amount of money. They should pay a large amount of money as a punishment for them,’* offered a mother from Azraq whose daughter was married at 17. *‘Imprison the father of the girl and the guy for two or three months. When they imprison two or three persons and they announce this on TV, that’s enough,’* added a mother from an informal tented settlement whose daughter was married at 15 (and whose daughter-in-law was ironically only 13). While noting that a few fathers felt strongly that legal penalties should be enacted *‘the day before tomorrow’*, as it would give them a socially acceptable ‘out’, most fathers were less convinced that penalties could effect change, as the pressure to conform to social norms makes even jail worthwhile. *‘Even if he has to be imprisoned for a month or two, the important thing is to feel psychological comfort, because the matter becomes a burden on him,’* noted a father from a host community.

Mothers and fathers also suggested making child marriage more expensive, as a way of discouraging parents

 Dowry has a huge effect. A large deferred dowry must be imposed, such as 10,000 dinars. If the husband divorced his wife, he must pay 10,000 dinars. He will think well before making a marriage decision, because if he wants to divorce his wife, he will pay 10,000 dinars.

(A mother from an informal tented settlement)

and in-laws. Fathers proposed altering the fee structure for marriage permits, making permits for younger girls more expensive than permits for those who are over 18. Mothers recommended requiring extremely high deferred dowries as a way of forcing young men to slow down and think about whether they were ready to commit to marriage. *‘Dowry has a huge effect. A large deferred dowry must be imposed, such as 10,000 dinars. If the husband divorced his wife, he must pay 10,000 dinars. He will think well before making a marriage decision, because if he wants to divorce his wife, he will pay 10,000 dinars. Where will he get this amount from?’* asked a mother from an informal tented settlement.

## 5 Conclusions and recommendations to prevent child marriage in humanitarian contexts

- **Gender norms that value girls in terms of their sexual purity and upholding family honour, as well as for their roles as future wives and mothers, are at the root of child marriage.** Marrying girls in adolescence is a culturally sanctioned demonstration of successful parenting.
- **It is important to acknowledge that economic drivers of child marriage have both push and pull factors.** Much-needed attention has been paid to the ways in which households use child marriage to reduce poverty and stretch food budgets, and there is some evidence that this is a driver in humanitarian contexts, especially in the context of truncated labour markets for refugee and stateless communities. However, there has been less attention to the ways in which households use child marriage as a strategy to improve girls' economic futures and broader security and well-being.
- **Conflict and crisis primarily drive child marriage by augmenting and further entangling pre-existing economic and social drivers** – by reducing livelihood options (and deepening poverty), limiting access to the schooling that protects girls from child marriage, creating new safety risks and compounding old ones, and generating a pervasive sense of uncertainty.
- **It is vital to recognise the many actors involved in child marriage decision-making,** and to understand that their personal preferences are shaped by their age, their gender, and their roles in the family, clan and wider community.
- **Positioning men as 'perpetrators' and girls and women as 'victims' of child marriage is overly simplistic and not helpful.** In particular, it overlooks the strong family and social pressures to which fathers are subject, as well as the complex ways in which mothers – and sometimes girls, through peer pressure – actively work to sustain child marriage, albeit within highly constrained choice structures.

Our research adds to the growing body of evidence that despite the diversity within and between populations, **gender norms are central to understanding why child marriage is preferred** by many families in humanitarian contexts. Across countries and nationalities, our respondents highlighted that child marriage is seen as a way to maintain girls' – and families' – honour by reducing the risk that they will experience sexual activity prior to marriage. Because marriage and motherhood are central to feminine value (and often the only pathway to adult status within the family and community), and because the likelihood of a desirable marriage is reduced if honour is besmirched, many families see child marriage as the best way to secure girls' futures because it provides them with a 'place' and associated social standing.

While the existent literature focuses on abject poverty and food insecurity and the way in which they can push families into using child marriage as a coping strategy to

benefit the broader household, our research suggests that **economic drivers are more complex** than this, even in humanitarian contexts. Some families do marry their daughters as children to free up resources by reducing the number of mouths to feed, and some do so to access tangible benefits for the household, such as cash bride price or to secure citizenship. But this is only one dimension of the economic factors at play. In contexts where girls and women have only the most limited access to livelihoods, families also frequently marry their daughters as children in order to improve their daughters' lives. Sometimes these efforts are aimed at meeting survival needs; other times, they are aimed at helping girls access a 'nicer' life, especially in contexts where refugee families are seeking to compensate for the standard of living they had enjoyed prior to displacement.

In line with Leigh et al. (2020), our research finds that **crisis and conflict do not fundamentally shift the**

**deep-seated drivers of child marriage.** Instead, they exacerbate complexity by further entangling existent social and economic drivers and adding yet another layer of complication. For example, crisis and conflict render it more difficult for girls to access the schooling that reduces their risk of child marriage (by preventing the 'idleness' that accelerates their transition from childhood to the marriage market) and limit family breadwinners' access to labour markets (making poverty deeper and more protracted). They also introduce new safety concerns and exacerbate old ones that child marriage is seen to mitigate (such as exposure to a more modern way of life, and to sexual harassment and violence). Crisis can also lead to increases in child marriage by disrupting the rule of law, which allows for regression towards longstanding cultural preferences. It also alters the pathways and timelines by which boys become men, enabling them to marry at younger ages. Because husbands are almost universally older than wives, this in turn drives down the age at which girls marry. Conflict itself can also drive child marriage for boys, as families pressure them to father children to replace those who have died in war.

Our research also suggests that **addressing child marriage requires taking into account the diversity of perspectives among actors involved in child marriage decision-making** – and doing so in a way that recognises the age- and gender-related perspectives of different actors, and how decisions are shaped by actors' needs to fit into and/or strengthen their families and communities. To have any hope of ending child marriage, it is important to shift our collective perspective and seek to see through the eyes of those who prefer the practice (or at least agree to it) in order to understand *why they do so*. This means, for example, recognising that fathers may genuinely damage their relationships with their brothers and broader clan by refusing child marriage, and that mothers are made to feel as if they are abrogating their maternal duties by turning away desirable suitors before their daughters become adults. It also means acknowledging that adolescent girls (and some boys) do prefer to marry as children. Sometimes this is because they are young and attracted to short-term gains, such as parties, wedding clothes, and fitting in with their friends. Other times, however, these choices are deeply rational given the constrained contexts in which they live. Where girls experience violence, food insecurity or other serious problems at home, child marriage may be in their best interests. Disentangling,

or even identifying, adolescent agency is difficult, given generational hierarchies, gender norms that encourage compliance, and parents who admit to actively subverting adolescents' (usually girls') own preferences. Nevertheless, ignoring young people's perceived agency and treating them solely as if they are in need of protection from child marriage ignores not only the 'evolving capacity' spelled out in the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child, but also the other threats from which they need protection.

Finally, our research underscores that **more attention needs to be paid to the role of girls and women in perpetuating child marriage.** While it is true that child marriage is fundamentally rooted in gender inequalities that devalue girls and women relative to boys and men, there is an element of agency in how girls and women sustain child marriage that has been largely overlooked. Research and interventions have focused on males as the final arbiters – and beneficiaries – of marriage decision-making. However, our findings highlight the **critical role of mothers**, of both grooms and brides, in upholding norms vis-à-vis encouraging child marriage. Grooms' mothers often have preferences for younger, more malleable girls as brides for their sons and brides' mothers are afraid that their daughters will be forced to settle for less desirable husbands should they wait until adulthood. **More attention also needs to be paid to the peer pressure that some adolescent girls exercise over each other.** Sometimes this pressure is aimed at improving conformity and directly encourages girls to leave school and marry as children; other times it is the result of girls' efforts to protect and promote their own social status within the peer group and broader community, with innuendo aimed at vilifying their peers who are seen to be violating social norms by speaking to boys. Those who are targeted often try to protect themselves by immediately agreeing to marriage.

Overall, our findings underscore the importance of **embracing complexity** and designing multi-faceted, context-resonant interventions that acknowledge that child marriage decision-making is a complicated and culturally embedded process involving many actors with multiple and diverse motivations. With this in mind, we recommend the following priority actions for policy, programming and research aimed at preventing child marriage – and ultimately fostering refugee self-reliance – in humanitarian contexts.

## 1. Interventions to empower girls:

- i. Ensure that girls stay in school through early adulthood, including where needed through the provision of: girls'-only schools; safe, accessible and affordable school transport; in-kind support such as school supplies, uniforms, and menstrual hygiene materials; tutorial support; and cash transfers.
- ii. Invest in safe spaces that afford girls opportunities for social interaction and recreation, and empower them with information, skills and psychosocial support. Girls need support to learn: how to disentangle their own best interests from those of their parents (and other family members); how to recognise the gendered limits on their lives and support one another to cope with and expand those limits; how to speak up for themselves in myriad contexts; and that marriage requires maturity and multiple responsibilities. Over time, as norms shift and gate-keepers allow, girls also need access to the training, skills and opportunities that would allow them to build more independent futures that do not only revolve around marriage and motherhood.
- iii. Develop and scale up interventions that acknowledge girls' maturation (e.g. interest in romantic relationships) and provide information on their sexual and reproductive health rights. At a minimum, all young people need to know how their bodies work. Because contexts vary, this could also include expanding girls' access to sexual and reproductive health services and supplies, as well as developing programming and spaces where girls and boys could interact with each other in sanctioned ways – perhaps using religious instruction to make this more palatable in conservative communities.

## 2. Interventions to engage families:

- i. Work with parents to expand girls' options and 'value'. This could include: cash transfers aimed at keeping girls enrolled in school (or training) until adulthood; parenting education classes that emphasise adolescence as a unique stage of life which – if well supported – will pay dividends in terms of adolescents being able to succeed in the adult roles that parents cherish; and tailored

behaviour change communication that directly addresses gender norms and the risks of child (rather than adult) marriage – especially to cousins – that parents are primed to hear (e.g. increased risk of divorce or poverty).

- ii. Work with women (principally mothers and future mothers-in-law) – in culturally appropriate women-only spaces – to help them fully see and process the ways in which gender norms shape and limit their own lives and how they perpetuate these norms in the next generation.
- iii. Work with men (principally fathers and uncles) – in culturally appropriate men-only spaces – to recognise their role as providers and protectors within the family and community, and to expand notions of protection that include eschewing child marriage – especially to cousins.
- iv. Work with boys and young men, perhaps including in the context of sexuality education, to reframe masculinity in terms of becoming champions for a world without sexual harassment and gender-based and sexual violence for girls and women – and also to shift norms so that girls and young women are valued for their agency rather than malleability.

## 3. Interventions to engage communities:

- i. Prioritise targeting cousin marriages as these are often the earliest marriages, nearly always forced, and generally carry the highest costs for girls as families have more invested in these marriages lasting. Where possible, interventions should be cascaded through religious and clan leaders to promote norm change, using multi-pronged behaviour change communication approaches, including face-to-face conversations, and mass and social media.
- ii. Work with faith leaders to discourage child marriage and encourage adult marriage (as it is less likely to end in divorce), acknowledging but contextualising the historical precedent of child marriage as appropriate, and directly addressing notions that girls and women are sinful and in need of male keepers to control them.
- iii. Use mass and social media campaigns to publicise the incidence and risks of child marriage: to reduce girls' and women's concerns

about girls being *'left on the shelf'*; to ensure that the glamour of 'made-for TV' marriage is balanced with the reality of domestic burdens and child-rearing; to make communities aware that child marriage entails costs that adult marriage does not; and to provide common 'talking points' that can be used to address community pressure and shame head-on.

#### 4. Interventions that harness national legal frameworks and enforcement:

- i. **Enforce compulsory education laws**, where such laws exist, given the links between school dropout and child marriage.
- ii. **Codify 18 years as the minimum age for marriage in all contexts** – with no loopholes. The law is clearly no panacea, and criminalisation can have unintended consequences that are borne by those the law is meant to protect. However, there is emerging evidence that in humanitarian contexts, where refugees are often more fearful of contravening host country laws, consistent enforcement of existing laws – including with fines and jail terms – can be an especially powerful tool to prevent child marriage. Indeed, crisis may be sufficiently disruptive that stepped-up enforcement provides girls' parents in particular with a socially acceptable 'out' to refuse child marriage proposals from extended family and other parents seeking a child bride for their sons.
- iii. **Explicitly penalise marriages with large age gaps (greater than five years) to girls younger than 16 years**. Ensure that parents are not persuaded to arrange a marriage for their daughter in situations where adult men are effectively preying on adolescent girls by using immediate legal action – including jail sentences – for age gaps greater than five years when a girl is younger than 16 years.
- iv. **Ensure that girls are asked for their consent in private**, preferably by a female officer of the court who is trained in dealing sensitively with the power

dynamics underpinning child marriage decisions, and that girls' best interests are always prioritised.

#### 5. Interventions that harness the UN humanitarian system:

- i. **Ensure that all changes in household registration for adolescents under the age of 18 trigger a one-on-one, face-to-face meeting** between UNHCR case management staff and the adolescent in question. Where there is any doubt as to the best interests of the adolescent, a home visit should be mandatory and a case worker – who is responsible for quarterly monitoring – should be assigned.
- ii. **Use a labelled cash transfer such as UNICEF's *Hajati* to incentivise parents to educate their daughters** through to completion of secondary school, adjusting payments as needed to maintain sufficient buy-in.
- iii. **Consider using UN humanitarian benefits as 'carrots' and 'sticks' to encourage behaviour change**. This might include, in camp settings (for example), only providing young couples with their own caravan if both parties are over 18, and – after a suitable grace period – refusing to allow registration changes (and benefit adjustments) for marriages contracted prior to the age of 18.
- iv. **Leverage engagement and support for host communities to secure improved access to labour markets for refugees** in order to reduce the economic constraints that may encourage child marriage.

#### 6. Addressing data gaps:

- i. **Develop tools to measure and track the incidence of child marriage that can be used in a timely manner** in humanitarian contexts – perhaps by linking them to other surveys administered regularly (e.g. on food security).
- ii. **Invest in longitudinal research and evaluations** to better understand the impacts of single-component versus bundled interventions to tackle child marriage in diverse humanitarian contexts.

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## **About GAGE**

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year longitudinal research programme generating evidence on what works to transform the lives of adolescent girls in the Global South. Visit [www.gage.odi.org.uk](http://www.gage.odi.org.uk) for more information.

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