



The theory of

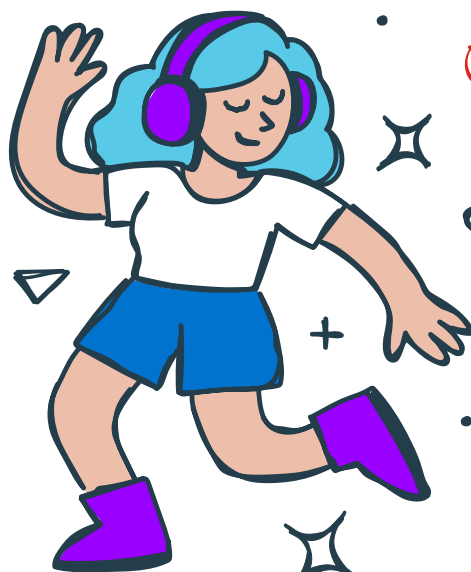
# Change

2025

Prevent and Respond to Child  
Marriage in Humanitarian and Forced  
Displacement settings



Save the Children



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# Acronyms

<b>CEFMU</b>	child, early and forced marriage and unions
<b>CMR</b>	clinical management of rape
<b>CP</b>	child protection
<b>CVA</b>	cash and voucher assistance
<b>GBV</b>	gender-based violence
<b>IDP</b>	internally displaced person/people
<b>INGO</b>	international non-governmental organisation
<b>MHPSS</b>	mental health and psychosocial support
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organisation
<b>PSEA</b>	protection from sexual exploitation and abuse
<b>RGA</b>	rapid gender analysis
<b>TOC</b>	theory of change
<b>SOGIESC</b>	sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and/or sex characteristics
<b>SRHR</b>	sexual and reproductive health and rights
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>SC</b>	Save the Children
<b>WASH</b>	water, sanitation and hygiene

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# Background

**The term “child marriage” is used in this document to refer to any marriage, formal or informal union (for example, cohabitation), where at least one party is under the age of 18.** It considers that most child marriages are forced given the age of the child and the power dynamics or lack of alternative options available to the girls concerned, and their families, especially those affected by crises and displacement.[1], [2] The term **“ever-married” refers to a person who has experienced child marriage**, and who may or may not still be in a child marriage. Examples of ever-married girls could include girls who are living in a marriage, are widowed, divorced, or separated, or are young mothers irrelevant of marriage status or history.

Child marriage is a violation of human rights that disproportionately affects adolescent girls. It is itself a form of gender-based violence (GBV) specific to children and adolescents, and at the same time, being a married child elevates the risks of experiencing other forms of GBV, especially for married girls.

Child marriage has a profound and life-changing impact on the lives of girls, their families, their community and wider society for subsequent generations.[3] Child marriage often prevents children, particularly adolescent girls, from exercising their rights. These rights include access to quality healthcare, completing their education, and living free from all forms of violence. Girls who marry before turning 18 are more likely to face emotional, physical and/or sexual violence from a partner throughout their lives, as well as potential abuse or violence from members of the family-in-law. The majority of married girls describe their first sexual experience as forced.[4], [5]

Child marriage is practised to varying degrees in every country of the world. It is not specific to a continent, region, religion, ethnicity or culture. Despite global progress over the last 20 years that has protected some 25 million girls from entering child marriages, recent trends show pockets of rapid increase in child marriage rates. In part this is due to the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic,[6] but is also because of the effects of humanitarian crises and displacement.[7] Recent research from UNICEF documents that a 10 per cent change in rainfall due to climate change creates a 1 per cent increase in child marriage rates. Extreme weather events can disrupt sources of income, exacerbate food insecurity and incur costs for rebuilding and recovery. Climate impacts such as drought can also put a strain on communal resources, which can drive conflict, violence and displacement – conditions that increase the vulnerability of girls.[8]

**Child marriage often prevents children, particularly adolescent girls, from exercising their rights. These rights include access to quality health, completing their education, and living free from all forms of violence.**



**Child marriage has a profound and life-changing impact on the lives of girls**

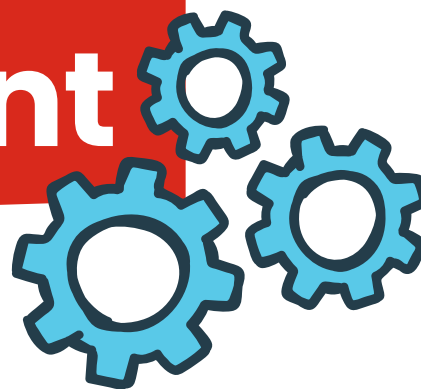
The drivers of child marriage vary across contexts, but there is global recognition that the practice is universally rooted in gender inequality and discrimination. A recent systematic review of research focused on child marriage demonstrates three commonalities that underpin child marriage across most settings: gender roles and opportunities, gender and sexuality, and gender and socio-economic status. Crises and displacement exacerbate all three of these commonalities.

A growing body of evidence shows how crises and displacement substantially elevate the risk of child marriage for girls.[9-21] This is because crises and displacement have a negative impact on household economic security and access to resources; they erode social protection networks and systems; they lower opportunities for education for children; and they result in increased risks of all forms of violence within and outside of the home. All these factors compound to push parents to marry their daughters early, justifying the decision to do so in different ways: as a form of protection, perhaps by building alliances with families of higher social or economic status; as a deterrent of sexual violence in order to protect family honour; or as a means for the family to access more aid or reduce the overall household economic burden. Girls themselves in these circumstances may feel impelled to seek out marriage as a way to meet their basic needs. Crises and displacement can also force changes in household power dynamics as women who ordinarily would look after the family may need to work, and adolescents may have greater opportunities to meet in crowded camps and transit centres. These occurrences may further reinforce social and cultural norms, pushing parents to arrange marriage for their children and adolescents.[20]

It is no coincidence that the ten countries with the highest child marriage rates are either fragile or extremely fragile.[3] With an estimated 28 million girls under the age of 18 years currently forcibly displaced,[22] and many thousands more living in fragile and crisis-affected settings, all humanitarian actors and duty bearers should make it an urgent priority to tackle child marriage as a harmful coping strategy and to support married girls.

# Development

## process






The **theory of change to prevent and respond to child marriage in humanitarian and forced displacement settings** has been developed as part of a collaboration between Plan International (Plan) and Save the Children (SC). The theory of change (TOC) is premised on research conducted on child marriage in diverse humanitarian settings in [Jordan and Uganda \(refugee settings\)](#), [Zimbabwe \(food insecurity\)](#) and the [Philippines \(internal conflict and IDPs\)](#), in partnership with the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) and the Human Rights Centre (HRC) at the University of California, Berkeley. It considers existing evidence on child marriage across all settings and builds on what is already known and proven to be effective. It draws on the global leadership on child marriage prevention and response from several organisations: [Girls Not Brides](#); [UNFPA-UNICEF's Global Programme to End Child Marriage](#); programmatic work from Plan International's [Adolescent Programming and Girls' Empowerment in Crisis Settings Initiative](#); Save the Children's [Preventing and Responding to Child, Early, Forced Marriage and Unions Technical Guidance](#); [IRC's Girl Shine Programme Model](#); and [Girls Decide: Life skills to protect and empower girls affected by migration and displacement](#) – among others.

Plan and Save the Children held a co-design workshop together with research partners WRC and HRC in January 2022 to jointly review research findings and design the TOC structure. A Joint Technical Review Group comprised staff from Plan and Save the Children, with technical insights from WRC and HRC. In 2022–23, with the contribution of Save the Children Denmark, this TOC was piloted and integrated into a one-year education and protection programme in Jordan. This TOC will be reviewed based on programming impact and revised accordingly.

## Who is the theory of change for?

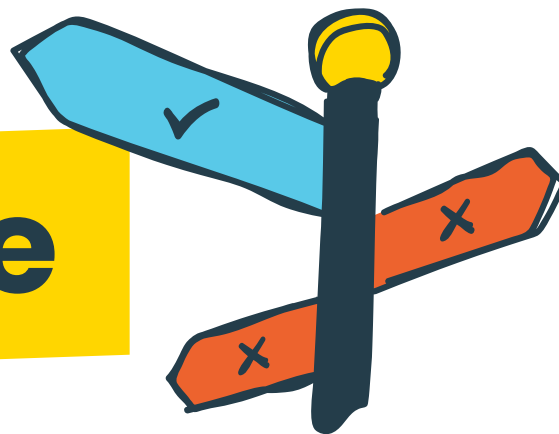
This TOC has been designed for a diverse range of people including those working across programme, policy and advocacy, communications, and fundraising in a range of organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), INGOs, United Nations agencies, government, donors and philanthropy to guide both project design and set strategic priorities and areas of work. It covers the following areas:

-  The problem, vision and impact: including a brief outline of the drivers and consequences of child marriage in crisis and forced displacement settings
-  The programme approaches to tackling child marriage in humanitarian programming
-  The four programme pathways, including example interventions.





# The theory of Change



Since child marriage is a form of GBV, there is a high risk that poorly designed programming can unintentionally reinforce harmful norms, attitudes and practices that perpetuate and condone child marriage. Or even worse, that unintentionally such programming can incentivise families and girls to engage in child marriage to access more resources. Similarly, it can also be harmful only to conduct awareness raising on the impacts and consequences of child marriage without having a system in place to support girls and their families to deter child marriage and support realistic alternatives to child marriage – or without providing services that reach married girls. This theory of change should support safe and ethical programming to tackle child marriage across the sectors, centring on the empowerment and wellbeing of adolescent girls.

Preventing and responding to child marriage in crisis and displacement settings is a complex undertaking, subject to fast-changing dynamics, especially in acute crises. Different approaches are required which are sensitive to the wellbeing of girls. No single approach will end child marriage. Yet reducing its prevalence, lessening the acute risk factors that force families and girls to use child

marriage as a coping strategy, and responding to the needs of ever-married girls can all be effective – and fall within the humanitarian mandate to protect adolescent girls from further harm.

Child marriage can be addressed in humanitarian response either through stand-alone programmes and advocacy or as a key issue within a larger single-sector or multisector programme, for example child protection and health. Whichever direction is available and selected, a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and potential risks of child marriage in that setting, must form the basis of action.

This theory of change is designed to support integrated programming that centres on adolescent girls' needs and priorities when preventing, mitigating and responding to child marriage in crisis settings. The TOC can be used to develop stand-alone programming to respond to child marriage, or to add components into broader sectoral programming such as within Child Protection. It is intended to be contextualised and adapted to ensure that girls and their communities are driving the design and implementation.

**IF adolescent girls' needs are ignored, misunderstood or assumed by adult-led decision makers and organisations;**

**AND families and communities receive untailored and poorly contextualised prevention strategies;**

**AND humanitarian actors and donors remain resistant and uninformed about how to respond to child marriage in their context,**

**THEN child marriage will continue to be practised with impunity and girls' mental health, safety and wellbeing will continue to be compromised and undervalued.**

# Theory of Change

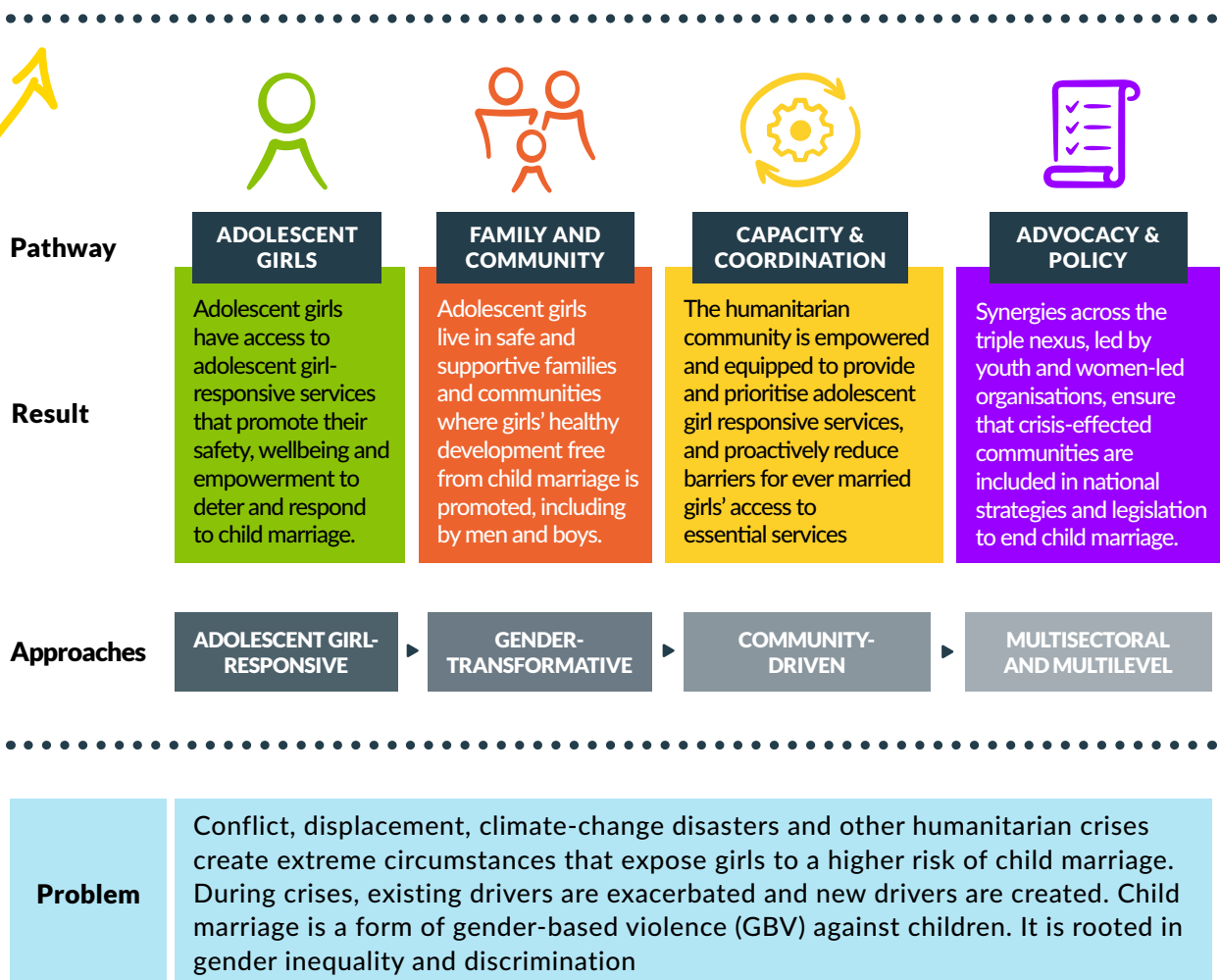
## Child Marriage in Crisis and Forced Displacement Settings

### Vision

Adolescent girls affected by crises and displacement are prioritised, supported and empowered to make and take decisions about their lives, including around if, when, and who to marry

### Impact

Adolescent girls are protected from child marriage, and are supported if they experience child marriage across the humanitarian response



# The problem

Conflict, displacement, climate change disasters and other humanitarian crises create extreme circumstances that expose girls to a high risk of child marriage. During crises, existing drivers are exacerbated and new drivers are created. Child marriage is a child-specific form of gender-based violence (GBV). It is rooted in gender inequality and discrimination.

Child marriage is well documented globally with a growing body of evidence that supports the need for long-term sustained efforts at national and sub-national levels. However, in humanitarian and forced displacement settings worsening security, poverty and reduced opportunities degrade the protections and safeguards that may have been in place prior to the crisis or event. This exacerbates the pre-existing drivers of child marriage and risks putting more girls and families at risk of the practice, including girls at an increasingly young age. In addition, new factors arise as a direct or indirect consequence of the crisis or displacement. These drivers and risks vary across settings, across different groups within an affected population, and across the timeframe of a crisis. Attempts to be gender transformative in programming in an often fast-changing and low-resource setting remain a challenge. While these environments can cause regressive norm change that entrenches inequality, they can also present opportunities for progressive norm change, which can act as a catalyst for shifting harmful norms and attitudes that perpetuate child marriage.

Structural barriers within the humanitarian sector limit the sector's ability to adequately respond to

child marriage. These barriers include short-term and limited funding dedicated for adolescent girls; an organisational culture that puts child marriage outside the scope of a humanitarian response despite evidence linking crises to spikes in prevalence; a lack of capacity and confidence among staff to respond to child marriage; and weak coordination across the key sectors (child protection, GBV, education, health and livelihoods) and with national and local partners.

This situation in the humanitarian sector may be related to the failure to prioritise gender inequality as an issue, including child marriage, in each response, or by the donor community; the inadequate funding for addressing child marriage in national budgets; the typically short funding cycles of 6 to 12 months; or insufficient organisational knowledge, expertise and experience.

Given the complex and dynamic drivers of child marriage that cut across all sectors, humanitarian actors' capacity to respond and coordinate a response to the practice of child marriage remains weak, especially in early and acute crises, and compounded by short-term humanitarian funding cycles. This leaves girls under-prioritised and unprotected.





## The vision

Adolescent girls affected by crises and displacement are prioritised, supported and empowered to make decisions about their lives, including around if, when and whom to marry.

The vision is centred around an aspirational hope for adolescent girls who are affected by crises and displacement to be prioritised, supported and empowered by the actions and efforts of the response. This vision, while aspirational, is also practical in that it should motivate all actors during a response to ensure that their actions contribute towards ending the practice of child marriage globally. Further, it encourages efforts that complement and link to the long-term sustained efforts that are required to uproot the harmful norms and discriminatory attitudes that perpetuate the practice.

The scope of this theory of change is purposefully limited to mitigating, responding to and preventing the practice within the crisis context. This scope, we believe, will better support project design by focusing on the populations affected by the crisis.

## The impact

Adolescent girls are protected from child marriage, and ever married girls are supported across the humanitarian response, if they experience child marriage.

Adolescent girls in all their diversity must be protected across all sectors and all levels within the context of a humanitarian response by their families, communities and service providers. Adolescent girls who are vulnerable and those who are ever married are provided the space to dream, hope and explore their potential even amid a crisis setting. In complex and acute settings this may be more challenging, however simple interventions tailored towards girls' specific needs and priorities can help to increase their safety and wellbeing.

# Programme

## Approaches



The four key approaches are building blocks to guide project design and implementation. These approaches should be contextualised to ensure that any future programme considers the gender and social norms and structural barriers in a given context.

## Adolescent girl-responsive

**What does it mean to be adolescent girl-responsive?** It means intentionally designing and implementing actions that meet girls' diverse needs, priorities and capacities as identified by adolescent girls themselves, with special attention to those who are most at risk and hard to reach. It is about responding to the holistic needs of all adolescent girls and tackling the often-complex issues affecting adolescent girls – which requires dedicated investment, resources and expertise. An adolescent girl-responsive approach is based on the following principles:

- 1** Adolescence is a unique stage of development and growth, with risks and opportunities for girls.
- 2** Adolescent girls have specific needs and face specific challenges in terms of being seen and heard in humanitarian programming.
- 3** Adolescent girls should be part of all decisions concerning their wellbeing and be supported to advocate for issues that affect them.
- 4** Adolescent girls should be provided with safe spaces that they co-create in response to their unique developmental and emotional needs.

These principles derive from research with and by our partners in this work.[19, 21, 23-27]

Adolescent girl-responsive means that all those who work in this area centre on the wellbeing, protection and healthy development of adolescent girls. It means that girls take leading roles in figuring out the “what”, “where”, “when”, “why”, and “how” of that support, from start to finish. It may not always be possible to have fully girl-led approaches in crisis settings, but when decision-making is shared or driven by adolescents, it increases their sense of ownership. It also provides an opportunity to shift power back to girls, thereby improving their self-confidence, and providing opportunities to connect positively with peers, mentors and other stakeholders.

### What about boys?

Evidence from countries with available data indicates that child marriage is more common among girls than boys with a prevalence rate that is two-and-a-half times higher in East Asia and the Pacific, and ten times higher in West and Central Africa.[3], [28] Little research exists on boys' experience of child marriage, which may be associated with the fact that married boys do not experience the same serious health ramifications as girls. Importantly, the drivers of child marriage for boys are different due to both biological factors and the social norms and roles that boys and husbands are expected to fulfil. However, some social consequences, specifically the financial burdens associated with parenthood, and loss of education and work opportunities, may overlap with the many consequences experienced by girls. More research is needed to understand the drivers of child marriage among boys, specifically the social and gender norms that may influence this practice.

Evidence indicates that involving boys as allies and peers in the process of preventing and responding to child marriage has proven to be very effective in reducing child marriage. Leaving boys out of the process can be a missed opportunity to lay the building blocks to shift discriminatory norms among peers and could result in unintended consequences for girls.[29] Involving boys in a way that maintains the goal of reducing risks for girls and increasing their agency also feeds into the Gender transformative programme approach.

Too often children's rights and involvement in the decisions that affect them are neglected in crisis and displacement contexts. When this occurs, it further marginalises children, especially girls on account of their age and sex, and it reinforces the structures that limit their agency. Adolescents, both girls and boys, should actively participate in decisions and be advocates for issues that affect them in every situation.

### Why do we take this approach?

All around the world, adolescent girls face unequal power dynamics that adversely affect their everyday lives. This affects their capacity to get the support they need, and to make their own decisions about various aspects of their lives. These structural inequalities shape their ability to claim their rights, such as the right to be heard, to access quality education and information, support services and community spaces, to make decisions about their own bodies, and to live free from violence. In times of crisis or displacement these inequalities get exacerbated, which tends to result in girls' voices being even more discounted or unheard, their safety, economic security, education, health and wellbeing being increasingly threatened, and their access to protection systems and safety nets becoming more restricted.[27], [29], [30] In this sense, girls are too often on the frontlines in times of crises. By involving girls from the very beginning, they are offered an opportunity to be part of shaping the positive changes taking place in their communities. You can learn more about the adolescent girl-responsive approach for child marriage programming by following [UNHCR and Plan International's e-module course](#) as well as in Plan International's [Adolescent Programming Toolkit: Guidance and tools for adolescent programming and girls' empowerment in crisis settings](#), and Save the Children's [Preventing and Responding to Child, Early, Forced Marriage and Unions Technical Guidance](#) (development settings).



**Evidence indicates that involving boys as allies and peers in the process of preventing and responding to child marriage has proven to be very effective in reducing child marriage.**



## Gender transformative

### What does it mean to be gender transformative?

A gender transformative approach relates both to our programmes and to our staff values, attitudes and behaviours. It refers to understanding and finding innovative approaches to tackling the underlying causes of child marriage. Gender transformative programming explicitly seeks to redress gender inequalities, remove structural barriers and provide space for co-creation and capacity sharing. We may not be able to tackle the root causes of child marriage (gender inequality) in every humanitarian project as deeply as we would want due to the dynamics of the crisis, limitations in funding cycles, instability or because the affected population cannot prioritise shifting norms over other pressing lifesaving needs. But we can put in place building blocks to help future projects and longer-term efforts.

In some settings, especially in acute crises, we accept that a gender transformative approach might not be feasible. However, it is very important to be gender sensitive at a minimum, so as to take into consideration the power dynamics and hierarchies that intersect with child marriage and decision-making in the given context. Conducting gender analyses with ever-married girls and their communities allows for a deeper understanding of girls' needs and priorities.

### Why do we take this approach?

Gender transformative programming allows us to address specific risks and barriers for girls and to engage with boys and men to tackle gender inequality, discrimination, violence against girls and women, and to exercise positive and diverse masculinities. It is important to be reminded that shifting discriminatory norms or tackling inequality takes time and may need a careful, time-intensive approach. Attempting to change long-held social and gender dynamics quickly, may cause tensions and result in a backlash especially against adolescent girls. It is important in crisis settings to respond to the practice of child marriage in a gender sensitive manner while also being aware of how the immediate humanitarian response can feed into and reinforce long-term gender transformation efforts, for instance on structural change. A risk mitigation strategy must be in place to anticipate and prevent any harm. See [Save the Children's Gender and Equality Marker](#) or see here for more information on the [Plan International Gender Transformative Marker](#) (access to Plan's marker is currently only internal).

# Community-driven

## What does it mean to be community-driven?

It means that activities for adolescent girls should be co-created with the support of families and communities. Approaches to prevent and respond to child marriage that are designed to work at community level should also be driven by the community. Aspects include activities and support mechanisms by community members to protect children and ensure their right to healthy development. Humanitarian actors should seek to understand existing community capacities for promoting children's rights, safety, development, wellbeing and participation (Child Protection Minimum Standard 17). Therefore, it is recommended that child marriage programming must be transparent and participatory, and it must facilitate local capacity and recognise full downward accountability. We must work with families and communities to provide safe spaces for girls to grow. We must be able to draw on existing positive community practices and knowledge to reinforce and contextualise new information on alternatives and deterrents to child marriage.

## Why do we take this approach?

Girls are part of a dynamic social system. Programming should strengthen the protective factors around girls as much as respond to the risk factors. Working with families and communities creates greater awareness of the harmful impacts of child marriage. It helps to change attitudes and reduces the acceptance of child marriage among those who influence girls' lives. Girls often do not have a say when it comes to making decisions about their futures, including on marriage. Therefore, it is important to engage with gatekeepers such as parents and grandparents, faith, community and traditional leaders to tackle the attitudes and norms that make child marriage acceptable. In some cases, gatekeepers may hold attitudes against child marriage, but feel the need to align with prevalent norms. Therefore, work is needed to leverage protective attitudes. Specific engagement is also needed with men and boys to tackle expectations associated with masculinity and marriage that feed into child marriage.[2] As humanitarians, it is essential to engage collaboratively with community members, particularly girls and boys, in shaping a future that reflects their needs and aspirations. Recognising and respecting the knowledge, agency and priorities of community members ensures that interventions are both relevant and sustainable. Meaningful change is most effective when it is driven by those who are experiencing a situation at first-hand.





## Multisectoral and multilevel

### What does it mean to be multisectoral and multilevel?

The two words describe complementary strategies for preventing and responding to child marriage, addressing the complex, interconnected drivers of the practice. Multisectoral means addressing child marriage in coordination with or by integrating actions with other sectors – in particular education, child protection and GBV, health including SRHR, and nutrition and food security and livelihoods. Multilevel refers to working across the different socio-ecological levels from girls to families, communities, institutions and legislation as well as with the humanitarian response to tackle child marriage – this is a key aspect of the gender transformation approach. Research and years of work preventing and responding to child marriage has built an evidence base for multisectoral and multilevel approaches.[19, 31-34]

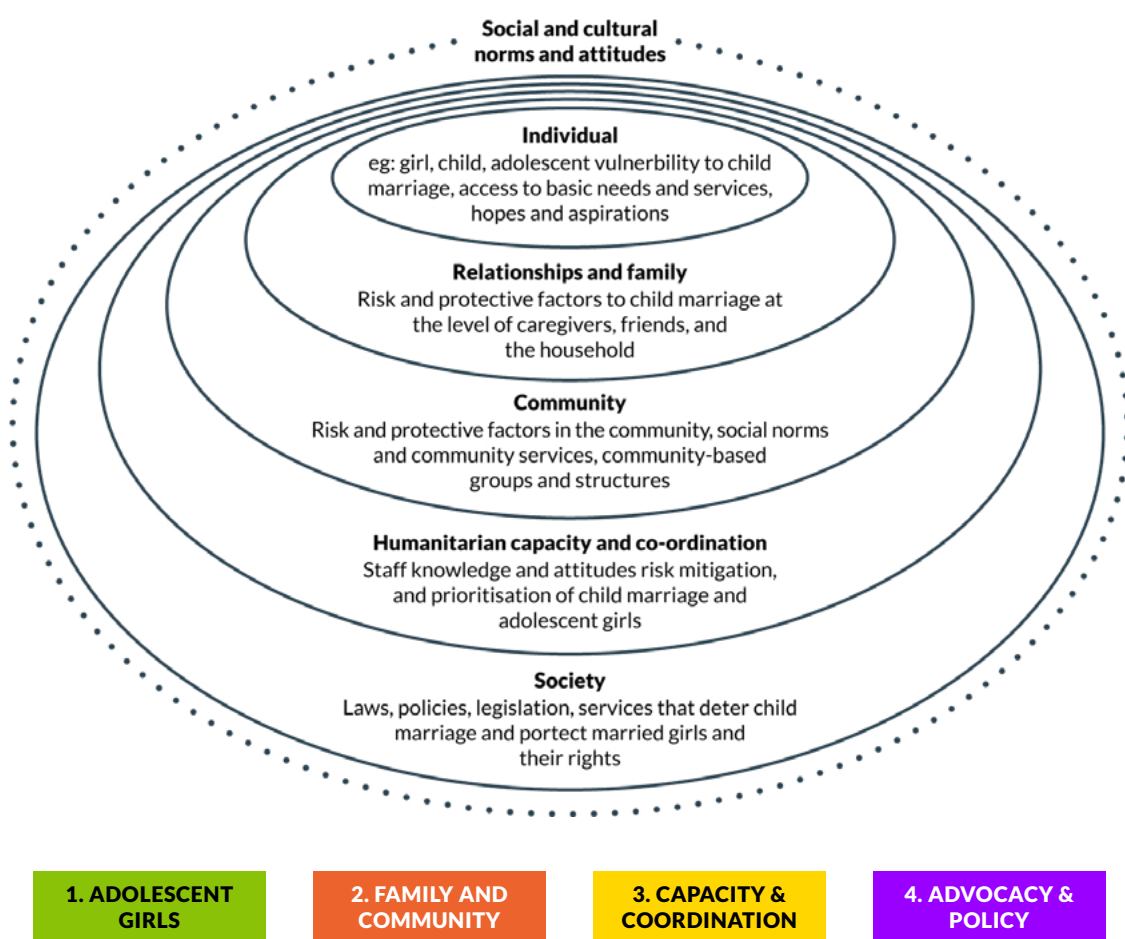
### Why do we take this approach?

Recent research by UNICEF has shown that progress on an issue as complex as child marriage is possible, but that for this progress to be sustained and accelerated, a multisectoral and multilevel response is required.[35] An analysis of available programme evaluations found that working across the individual, community, service provision and policy levels can be effective in delaying marriage and reducing adolescent pregnancy even among the girls who have been most marginalised.[32] There is no single solution for ending child marriage. However, the application of multisectoral and holistic strategies can bring tangible results in ending the practice. The rights violations of child marriage should not be addressed in isolation, but within a broader framework of changing laws and policies, providing and strengthening accessible services, mobilising families and communities, and supporting girls' empowerment.[2], [32] We need to build more evidence on how to do this in humanitarian programming, even if there will be limitations compared with longer-term programming.

# Programme pathways

## Results and the Socio-Ecological Domains

The pathways loosely follow the socio-ecological model. Note that this has been taken from the Plan and UNHCR adapted socio-ecological model:



The pathways are interconnected and should complement project planning and implementation, not create silos that reinforce barriers for girls and their families. Embracing their overlap ensures a more effective and holistic approach.

This section outlines how a combination of the strategies implemented at individual, family, community, institutional and policy levels will help to achieve the vision of ending child marriage. These strategies are descriptive and require contextualisation. It is advisable that before strategies are selected and adapted, a gender analysis is conducted to understand the context. It is very important to directly include and engage children and community members to fully understand the nuances around child marriage from their perspectives. Also important is building relationships with local, national and regional actors that are already addressing child marriage to avoid duplication and ensure synergy. Another important aspect is identifying how gender might intersect with other power hierarchies such as ethnicity, disability, refugee status, socio-economic status, age and class to increase risks of child marriage occurring in that setting.[2]

# Programme pathway 1:

## Adolescent girls



<b>Result</b>	Adolescent girls affected by crises have access to quality and inclusive adolescent girl-responsive services that promote their safety, wellbeing and empowerment to deter and respond to child marriage.
<b>Programme strategy</b>	Multisectoral and multilevel services and programmes are informed and driven by married and unmarried girls' needs and priorities to mitigate risks of child marriage and its consequences, across the humanitarian response.
<b>Socio-ecological level (target groups)</b>	Individual (children and adolescents, girls and boys)

Programme Pathway 1 focuses on services intended for adolescents at the individual level, with a strong focus on shifting gender and social norms that sustain child marriage. Interventions in this pathway can target girls or boys, but the goal of all interventions is to mitigate risks, prevent and respond to child marriage. For example, that could be pursued by providing life skills to adolescent boys to increase knowledge, skills and understanding of human rights, positive masculinities and gender equality.

The pathway seeks to create a more supportive and safer environment for all girls. Interventions in this pathway are direct services for girls and boys at the individual level, such as adolescent-friendly health services, informal or formal education, case management or livelihoods training for married girls. Activities under this pathway can be drawn from across any sector. Integrating or working across sectors is strongly encouraged to provide services that collectively tackle the risks, drivers and consequences of child marriage within the humanitarian response.

Activities must be designed to support girls (unmarried, married, divorced, separated, widowed or those at risk of marriage) to increase their confidence, capabilities, access and agency to make informed decisions about their bodies and relationships, and to both engage in and have influence over private and public life.

We recognise the challenges in reaching some girls affected by crisis, such as ever-married girls, girls with disabilities or girls with SOGIESC. This pathway also aims to enhance visibility for marginalised groups through better identification and strategies from programmes to include them in both design and implementation of projects.

**Girls' empowerment in humanitarian contexts** may be limited or restricted due to many drivers, such as the security situation, loss of appropriate care, impact of the crisis on household income as well as socio-cultural, displacement, legal and other factors. However, even in very restrictive or fast-changing environments, there are still small interventions that can help girls and their families to better equip themselves to face the risks and drivers associated with child marriage. Even a one-off information session for girls on the move can provide essential information about their rights, and how and where to access services along the way which may be invaluable.

Empowerment means different things to different people at different times. For girls in crisis settings, it may mean having the necessary confidence, capabilities, access or agency to make informed decisions about their lives at that very moment, and to be involved in the decisions that affect them such as service delivery, or working on issues that they care about. Examples of interventions related to strengthening girls' empowerment are educating girls about their

rights; creating spaces for girls to make friends and collectively act with others through peer groups; improving girls' access to alternative social and economic opportunities; enabling married girls to benefit from improved outreach and access for essential services. Youth engagement also contributes to girls' personal development and can contribute to increasing their skills, empowerment and motivation to stand up for their rights and speak out.

#### Programme Pathway 1 aims:

- Increase uptake and funding for adolescent girl-responsive programming where girls in all their diversity participate in project decision-making and design.
- Improve access to quality essential services for hard-to-reach groups, in particular ever-married girls, pregnant girls and young mothers, and girls with disabilities.
- Raise awareness and knowledge among girls and boys about the harms of child marriage, and how to seek support and guidance.
- Strengthen the peer relationships between girls to reinforce solidarity and support.
- Increase knowledge for girls to claim their rights and access learning opportunities on a range of topics that are important to girls.
- Respond directly to the needs of all girls at risk (unmarried girls, ever married girls and young mothers) for example with mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and case management services.
- Increase potential for boys (brothers, cousins, friends etc.) to act as allies to girls and work together to advocate for equal access and opportunities.
- Increase funding to girls' rights movements, girl-led organisations and youth-led organisations.

#### Activities could include:

- ✓ Adolescent girl **safe spaces** that provide services and information as well as strengthen social networks that are inclusive and appropriate for all girls, including younger and older unmarried adolescents as well as ever-married girls and young mothers.
- ✓ Adapted **life skills programmes** to address crisis-related risks and vulnerabilities of child marriage for unmarried and ever-married girls and boys.
- ✓ Strengthened child protection and GBV **case management** services to better meet ever-married girls' needs.
- ✓ Strengthened access to quality age and gender **responsive SRHR services** for married and unmarried adolescents.
- ✓ Strengthened access to quality, age and gender responsive **formal, non-formal and informal education**, including accelerated education, catch-up clubs, numeracy and literacy clubs, peer-to-peer learning and mobile education for ever-married and unmarried girls who are out of school.
- ✓ **Vocational or skills training** for ever-married girls for income-generating activities and livelihoods, including child daycare services or support for girls with children to participate.

When designing programmes for adolescent girls especially those who are married or parenting, it is essential to actively involve them in identifying barriers and challenges that may limit their access and participation. Always consult the girls you aim to reach to better understand their needs and tailor your approaches to support their meaningful engagement

Approach	Rationale & Impact
<b>On-site childcare or daycare services</b>	Enables young mothers and married girls to attend education, life skills, or support programs without childcare constraints. Especially impactful and sustainable when run through women's associations or groups.
<b>Working with female teachers, facilitators, and health workers</b>	Increases comfort and trust, especially in conservative or patriarchal communities. Encourages participation and disclosure.
<b>Flexible timing and local venues</b>	Activities held at times that suit girls' caregiving responsibilities, and in safe, nearby locations to minimize travel risk and other barriers.
<b>Incentives for participation</b>	Providing small incentives (e.g., hygiene kits, learning materials, meals) can boost engagement while meeting girls' basic needs.
<b>Male engagement as allies</b>	Involve fathers, husbands, brothers, and male leaders in support of girls' participation, decision-making, and delaying marriage.
<b>Safe transport and referral systems</b>	Arrange reliable, confidential ways for girls to access services or report concerns, especially in unsafe areas or where mobility is restricted.



## Programme pathway 2:

### Family and community



<b>Result</b>	Adolescent girls live in safe and supportive families and communities where parents, caregivers, leaders and other influential persons promote girls' healthy development and support alternative options to child marriage.	Boys and men value and advocate for girls' rights and encourage girls (and women) to participate in decisions that affect them.
<b>Programme strategy</b>	Parents, caregivers, family members, faith and community leaders, and others are engaged to form a supportive system around girls to promote their healthy development and agency, shifting harmful norms and behaviours related to child marriage and gender inequality.	Boys and men encourage positive masculinities and develop respectful and equitable relationships at home, school, work and in the community.
<b>Socio-ecological level (target groups)</b>	Family, peers and community (Parents/caregivers, relatives, spouses, young men, leaders, faith leaders and community-based structures)	

Programme Pathway 2 focuses on the socio-ecological levels of immediate family (spouses, parents, siblings), extended family (uncles, aunts, grandparents, in-laws), and the community level (community, faith and traditional leaders, networks and community-based organisations and structures). This programme pathway can be applied to any sector and strongly complements Programme Pathway 1 to create multilevel approaches that strengthen and promote a protective environment for girls' safe and healthy development and participation. Programming should be anchored in a contextual analysis that draws out the gender and power dynamics driving child marriage. Programmes should also be respectful of the community's cultural, religious and traditional practices by working with the community to tackle the harmful elements that condone and justify the practice of child marriage. This should be done in a measured and understanding way that considers the stage and realities of the crisis dynamics.

In a crisis setting, different risks and drivers may be more pronounced, with more emphasis placed on immediate and survival needs. Often

the economic and security factors can be the most obvious and pronounced drivers of child marriage. Therefore, tackling child marriage at the family and community level is likely to be strongly associated with the promotion of cash and voucher assistance (CVA) including CVA for Protection, livelihoods (for parents, caregivers, spouses or leaders) and shoring up community-based services and mechanisms for identification and disclosure. There is evidence that CVA has a positive effect on reducing child marriage when used intentionally for protection outcomes and combined with CP case management. It's likely to be the most common population-based approach both before and during a crisis [36].

It is worth also considering engaging and working closely with women's and youth groups including refugee-led groups, as well as with young adult women who were married as children, to be trained as facilitators, role models and champions. Working with community groups and role models will not only better inform project design and implementation, but the services would more easily relate to girls' realities and therefore would build trust and boost impact.

Even though the target groups for these activities are not usually adolescent girls, the goal of activities should always be to increase the safety, wellbeing and empowerment of girls who are at risk of marriage or who are ever married or parenting.

### Programme Pathway 2 aims:

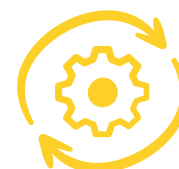
- Create and reinforce supportive environments where girls can learn, grow and shape their futures.
- Increase the target group's ability to recognise the harmful impacts of child marriage and identify alternatives to child marriage among families and the community.
- Increase access to alternatives to child marriage while empowering girls to participate in decision-making.
- Strengthen men's and boys' support for girls' empowerment, rights and opportunities, and counter harmful ideologies that encourage men and boys to marry girls who are children.
- Influence all stakeholders to use their power to challenge inequitable gender norms and attitudes that maintain the practice of child marriage.
- Encourage positive and supportive relationships between parents/caregivers and their children, especially towards girls.

### Activities could include:

- ✓ Training and capacity strengthening for **community-based protection committees** on identifying child marriage cases, handling disclosures, and referring at-risk or ever-married girls for specialised services.
- ✓ **Life skills and mentorship programmes for male and female parents and caregivers** of adolescent girls to provide them with knowledge and skills about girls' development, children's rights and positive parenting approaches.
- ✓ **Life skills programmes for husbands** who are married to girls under 18 and young men to provide them with knowledge and skills about adolescent development, children's rights, establishing positive and healthy relationships, deconstructing toxic masculinity, power sharing in the home and the community, violence prevention and response.
- ✓ **Community co-designed child marriage prevention strategies**, e.g. working with existing community mechanisms and tailoring strategies adapted to specific decision-makers and influential parties involved in child marriage processes. This could include:
  - creating a **Champions Programme with faith and traditional leaders** to understand their attitudes, identify role models among (refugee and host) community leadership to facilitate dialogues to reduce incidence of child marriage.
  - **community theatre productions** to shift norms that devalue girls' education, and norms on adolescent SRHR, adolescent pregnancy, relationships and marriage.
  - **working with leaders of initiation practices** to increase the age of participation and remove harmful messaging that undervalues and undermines girls' (and women's) role and participation in the community.

## Programme pathway 3:

### Capacity and coordination



<b>Result</b>	Humanitarian actors and staff across sectors are equipped to provide and prioritise adolescent girl-responsive services, and to proactively reduce barriers for ever-married girls' access to essential quality services.	
<b>Programme strategy</b>	Humanitarian coordination structures, national service providers, policy makers and duty bearers have increased knowledge and skills to deliver programmes and prioritise child marriage coordination, across the sectors, that is responsive to all adolescent girls, and integrated with national plans and existing strategies.	Donors are informed and engaged to increase funding for child marriage programming and coordination.
<b>Socio-ecological level (target groups)</b>	Humanitarian response (INGOs, UN, NGOs, coordination mechanisms, donors, government institutions)	

Programme Pathway 3 is a new and distinct level that has been added to the standard socio-ecological model and targets the humanitarian response actors. This level captures the humanitarian architecture, such as the response actors, structures and coordination mechanisms, as well as the humanitarian donor community. We know that there are both risks and benefits that come with the humanitarian aid system in communities. As such, this pathway has a strong focus on training, risk mitigation and ensuring prioritisation of addressing rates and impact of child marriage across the humanitarian response. For example, by strengthening the competencies and capabilities of staff and partners on the frontline, as well as the teams providing technical backstop to ensure a safe, protective and empowering environment for adolescent girls during and after crises and displacement. This pathway can also be used to embed efforts to transition from acute crisis response to longer-term programming, nexus programming or preparedness and recovery through better coordination with existing strategies to end child marriage.

It is critical for humanitarian responders to recognise that child marriage is often prevalent in affected communities and is likely to increase

during crises whether before, during, or after an emergency. Even when programmes do not directly address child marriage, all interventions must be designed to help reduce related risks and avoid unintentionally increasing them. For example, actors working on food distribution, cash and voucher assistance, or livelihoods should apply targeting criteria that are sensitive to the risks of child marriage; education partners should monitor school dropouts and prioritise follow-up with adolescent girls; and community-level health and protection staff should consistently share information on the benefits of delaying marriage and the support services available to families.

A key component of this pathway is the prioritisation of child marriage within humanitarian coordination structures across the sectors and with key decision-makers at national and governmental levels. In general, work to tackle child marriage in humanitarian programming has traditionally fallen under the thematic area of health to address the consequences of child marriage (early pregnancy and childbirth, physical injuries). To a lesser extent, it has also fallen under protection (case management) or education initiatives (keeping pregnant and young mothers in school).[37]

Depending on the scope of your project, you can focus in on local-level capacity and coordination or look to national or even global-level coordination. For example, this could be about building awareness within the humanitarian community on ways to tackle child marriage through training and mentoring initiatives; technical support to develop adolescent girl-responsive programmes; or by increasing engagement with existing civil society organisations (local, national and grassroots organisations) to integrate humanitarian efforts with national strategies. By building stronger alliances and partnerships with national actors and aligning to existing national action plans to end child marriage, efforts made during crises and displacement can feed into longer-term solutions and actions rather than creating silos.

### Programme Pathway 3 aims:

- Increase knowledge and skills of humanitarian actors and staff to better understand child marriage practices as a result of crises, and what works to prevent and respond to child marriage in humanitarian programming.
- Provide the skills and competences necessary to integrate and roll out activities and programmes that prevent and respond to child marriage including within needs assessments and response plans – e.g. Humanitarian Needs Overviews, Humanitarian Response Plans, Multi-Cluster/ Sector Initial Rapid Assessment and Rapid Gender Analyses (RGAs).
- Strengthen in-country coordination to prevent and respond to child marriage across the sectors, including among various clusters, sub-clusters and working groups.
- Build stronger prioritisation of child marriage to increase funding for programming activities, including ensuring access and availability services for ever-married girls and young mothers.
- Forge stronger linkages with national and government strategies and action plans, which include refugee and displaced groups, to end child marriage.
- Improve knowledge and support among donors, resulting in increased availability of funding for initiatives that tackle child marriage in humanitarian and displacement settings.

### Activities could include:

- ✓ **Needs assessments** or rapid gender analysis with and for adolescent girls to better capture the needs and realities for vulnerable and ever-married girls.
- ✓ Establishing a **joint multisectoral task force to coordinate activities** and actions to prevent and respond to child marriage led by co-chairs from child protection and GBV that includes girls (where possible) and community representatives, national partners and representatives of existing national action plans to end child marriage.
- ✓ **Attitudes, norms and value training** for frontline service providers to tackle unconscious bias and barriers to girls accessing essential services such as health, protection or education services. For example, training health providers to deliver non-judgmental SRH services (including contraception services and clinical management of rape (CMR)) to both unmarried and married adolescents.
- ✓ **Developing Standard Operating Procedures** between all actors on how to register and manage cases of child marriage to ensure access to food rations and other basic needs for girls. In refugee settings, liaise with UNHCR on how child marriage is handled in refugee case processing and socialise the approach among partners.
- ✓ **Training across the sectors** on adolescent girl-responsive programme approaches to prevent and respond to child marriage.
- ✓ Updating **PSEA and Safeguarding policies** and procedures to adequately respond to and prevent cases of child marriage among staff and partners.

## Programme pathway 4:

### Advocacy and policy



<b>Result</b>	Government, national and humanitarian actors ensure synergies across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus to ensure that crisis-affected communities are included and supported in national strategies and legislation to end child marriage.	
<b>Programme strategy</b>	Humanitarian actors have increased knowledge about the national and international legal frameworks surrounding child marriage and the enforcement of laws among crisis-affected populations.	Humanitarian actors work collaboratively with youth-led and women-led organisations to strengthen the legal framework to prevent and respond to child marriage.
<b>Socio-ecological level (target groups)</b>	Society (government ministries, UN agencies, policy and law makers, advocacy groups, youth-led and women-led organisations, administrative and customary leadership and structures, security and police actors)	

Programme Pathway 4 focuses on the society level of the socio-ecological framework. Extensive focus on this pathway is likely to be less feasible in an acute crisis or where needs are extremely high and addressing immediate life-saving needs are the only priority. Rather, this pathway is mainly for settings which are more stable or in protracted crises, and where linkages can be established for longer-term efforts to prevent and respond to child marriage, such as through the legal framework. This can include engagement with governments to include refugee groups in national action plans to end child marriage and to coordinate nexus programming such as through the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and other national or regional plans. This pathway focuses on structural challenges and constraints at the policy and legislative levels and can act as a transitional pathway to longer-term efforts to end child marriage outside the humanitarian response. Under this pathway, programmes and strategies could seek to address anticipatory actions such as disaster preparedness planning.

Laws and policies at every level – international, regional, national and local – are powerful tools that define the duties and expectations between duty bearers and rights holders (individuals). They are also critical normative guides for how

people are expected to treat one another – what behaviours are acceptable and what is not. In this way, laws and policies both reflect and help to shape societal norms.

If properly developed and implemented, robust laws and policies will help to shift attitudes in society and provide a framework to improve services for adolescent girls. If equally applied to all groups – including refugee and displaced communities and those seeking safety – then accessible, inclusive and gender responsive laws become crucial tools for those working to empower girls and families to avoid child marriage, despite being in situations of crisis. Advocacy and campaigning should be strengthened to create an enabling legislative and policy environment, while building sustainability through technical expertise and evidence.

The development and enforcement of laws, policies and political decisions should be informed by the participation of children and youth as key stakeholders in decision-making spaces. For that reason, duty bearers should promote the institutionalisation of children's right to participate in decision-making spaces, in alignment with international law, increasing their agency and inclusion. An integral facet of duty-bearer

accountability to girls is the systematic, safe and meaningful participation of girls in all policy decisions that impact their lives. This pathway aims to create spaces in humanitarian settings when working on meaningful child and youth participation, and when activism is safe and feasible.

Legal and policy change must always be complementary to services and investment in socio-cultural and social protection efforts such as community engagement and public awareness-raising interventions, working with customary, traditional and faith leaders. Legal and policy change must also be complementary to targeted social protection measures to support legal reform, education and health interventions to tackle child marriage across humanitarian programming.

#### Programme Pathway 4 aims:

- Ensure that communities affected by displacement or crises are not left out of national efforts, strategies or laws to end child marriage.
- Ensure that refugee rights are respected and granted to their fullest extent in line with the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.
- Improve child and youth participation in political processes and decision-making on issues that affect and interest children and young people, especially girls.
- Increase knowledge and engagement of humanitarian actors as well as community members – namely parents, caregivers and leaders – on laws and policies related to child marriage prevention and response.

#### Activities could include:

- ✓ Collaboration with women-led, girl-led and youth-led movements to **advocate for a robust legal framework** applied to all populations including refugee and IDP groups.
- ✓ **Informing and educating donors** about research and programming evidence on the harms of child marriage and how a crisis worsens the situation for girls and their families. Develop briefs, advocacy messages, videos and other media to boost dissemination and uptake.
- ✓ **Advocacy with the government** to enhance and strengthen civil registration systems for birth and marriage to better include forcibly displaced communities.
- ✓ **Strengthening the child rights act** by socialising and training institutions, organisations and actors that respond to children's needs about children's rights and child participation.
- ✓ Lobbying government and stakeholders for budget and increased technical capacity to **support the development of a national strategy and action plans to address child marriage across all settings** and for all communities.
- ✓ **Advocacy for amendments to laws and/or policies** that enable or promote girls and ever-married girls' re-entrance to school after marriage and/or pregnancy without criminalising them.
- ✓ **Advocacy for increased investments and/or the implementation of frameworks** that allow adolescent mothers and pregnant girls to stay in schools or continue their education.
- ✓ **Work with ministries of education** to include gender responsive measures in education plans, policies and budgets such as the integration in curricula of age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education.
- ✓ **Enhancing gender inclusive education**, by strengthening the recruitment and professional development of female teachers to create a more supportive learning environment for girls.
- ✓ **Improving school facilities for girls**, by providing access to gender sensitive WASH facilities and effective menstrual hygiene management to promote a safe and inclusive school experience.

# Helpful resources for humanitarian programming on child marriage

[Humanitarian Gender and Equality Marker](#), Save the Children, 2019  
English

[Gender & Power \(GAP\) Analysis Guidance . Save the Children. 2021 Humanitarian Gender Analysis Tool](#), Save the Children, 2023

[Guidance on child marriage: programming for married girls and girls at-risk of child marriage in forced displacement and crisis](#), UNHCR and Plan International, 2025  
English and French

[Context Analysis Toolkit on Child Marriage](#), UNHCR and Plan International, 2023  
Arabic, English and French

[What we need to know about child marriage](#) – Tool for identifying and understanding child marriage drivers, UNHCR and Plan International, 2023  
Arabic, English and French

[Case management and child marriage learning paper; brief and staff checklists](#), UNHCR and Plan International, 2024  
Arabic, English and French

**eLearning series to tackle child marriage in crisis and forced displacement settings**, UNHCR and Plan International 2023-2025  
[English](#) and [French](#)

- **Module 1:** The adolescent girl-responsive approach to child marriage programming
- **Module 2:** Supporting married girls and unmarried girls at risk of child marriage in case management
- **Module 3:** Co-designing child marriage prevention strategies with girls and their community

**Parenting and Adolescent Life Skills Programme for married adolescents and young caregivers**, Plan International (coming in 2026)

## GLOBAL GIRLHOOD REPORTS ON CHILD MARRIAGE - SAVE THE CHILDREN

[Global Girlhood Report 2024: Fragile Futures Girls' Rights, Child Marriage and Fragility](#)

[Global Girlhood Report 2023: Girls at the Centre of the Storm - Her planet. her future. her solutions](#)

[Global Girlhood Report 2022: Girls on the frontline](#)

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Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organization that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters, and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national, and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

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**We won't stop until we are all equal.**