

OVERVIEW

UNTYING THE KNOT

March 2013



Girls at a World Vision-funded school in rural Bangladesh. A study by the Government of Bangladesh found that, as a result of the closure of many schools following Cyclone Sidr in 2007, it became 'very common' for adolescent girls to be forced into marriage without their consent. © Anthony Luk/World Vision



Students in Bangladesh play in the mustard fields before class. School enables girls to reach their full potential, close down gender gaps in education, and delay the age of marriage. © Xavier Sku/World Vision

“Tying the knot.” It’s an expression that for most of us evokes happy emotions, dreams or memories. However, the fun of planning a wedding and the heady initial excitement of marriage will not be the experience of 13.5 million girls this year. Instead, driven by fear, threats or coercion into marriage as a means of protection, nearly one in three girls in developing countries will marry before the age of 18.

Early marriage is a brutal curtailment of childhood and affects women throughout their lives. Our hope is that World Vision’s report looking at this issue, *Untying The Knot*, provides the evidence needed to protect girls around the world from the harm of early marriage, and prevent the practice from affecting millions more in the decades to come.

Excerpt from *Untying the Knot: Exploring Early Marriage in Fragile States*  
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# Early marriage: a growing issue

Every year, 13.5 million girls around the world marry before their eighteenth birthday<sup>1</sup>. This number is tragically increasing every year; an estimated 142 million girls will be married in the decade to 2020<sup>2</sup>.

Early marriage is a global problem that cuts across countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities. It denies children, particularly girls, their rights: to protection from exploitation, to maximum support for survival and development. It cuts short girls' education and traps them, their families and their communities in a cycle of poverty. Women who have married early face an ongoing denial of their human rights for their entire lifetime.

One in three girls in the developing world marry before their eighteenth birthday, while one in nine marry before they turn 15<sup>3</sup>. They tend to be poor, under-educated and living in rural areas where birth and death rates are high, where conflict is common, and where there are lower overall levels of development including education and healthcare<sup>4</sup>. We know that poverty, weak legislative frameworks and enforcement, harmful traditional practices, gender discrimination and lack of alternative opportunities for girls, especially education, all drive early marriage. And we know that more than 1.5 billion people in fragile contexts have missed out on a decade of concerted international action on poverty reduction<sup>5</sup>.

But our latest research highlights the impact conflict and disasters have on early marriage. The majority of the worst 25 countries for the practice experience fragility or are at high risk of natural disasters. In these cases, early marriage is often used as a coping mechanism and means of survival for families – it is seen as a way to “protect” girls from real or perceived risks.

**‘When there is no food, some families give their daughters into marriage.’** *Girl under 16, Somaliland*

## An impossible choice: early marriage as protection

Girls living in countries facing humanitarian crises are the most vulnerable of all. As social networks and formal systems are destroyed or disrupted by crises, parents see marriage as a safeguard for their daughters. In extreme cases, during violent conflict for example, community welfare networks can break down entirely, wiping out any support for the protection of children.

Our research in a number of countries found that families often perceive early marriage as a protective measure and communities use it as a response to crisis. Parents and children told us fear of rape and sexual violence, of homelessness and hunger, of pre-marital pregnancies, of family shame and dishonour, often drove them to early marriage. Conflict and disasters heighten this fear and anxiety.

But the lifelong impact of marriage on girls and boys can be catastrophic, from severe sexual and reproductive health complications and an increase in child mortality, to social isolation and extreme poverty. These effects are further compounded in areas of conflict or disaster as a result of weak health, education and protection systems and government inability to protect and fulfil the rights of its people. The tragic irony is that in seeking to protect their children, parents can end up exposing them to situations they were aiming to protect them from.

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<sup>1</sup> UNFPA, 2012, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> ‘These estimates do not include women who die before age 20 and could be underestimates of number of women 20-24 years of age who married before age 18 if the levels of mortality are higher for these group of women than the one observed for those marrying after age 18,’ (Ibid, p.59, note 33.)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, Table 9, p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> UNFPA, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> World Bank, World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security and Development (April 2011).

# A way forward: removing the impossible choice

We believe that governments can take a number of steps to build protective systems that prevent early marriage and, in the case of donor governments, reform existing development and humanitarian policy to ensure that the practice of early marriage is ended by 2030. In cases where girls have been married early, we must ensure they have access to health, education and protection services to ameliorate the worse effects of their circumstances. Global institutions, such as the United Nations (UN), and major donors, have a number of policy frameworks and strategies in place that recognise early marriage as a development challenge. However, there is a major gap in that they have so far failed to recognise the role of conflict and disasters as a major driver of early marriage.

**“When my father told me I was going to be married off, I felt my life had been ruined. All my dreams were shattered.”**

*Girl under 16, Bangladesh*

We call on governments and the international community to:

- **Commit to ending early marriage by 2030**

Strong global leadership on the rights of women and girls requires proactive work to end early marriage, through commitments and increased funding. All governments must recognise that early marriage is a violation of children's rights, and a form of violence against girls.

- **Include early marriage prevention in all humanitarian responses**

Early and forced marriage is used as a coping mechanism and means of survival for families in crisis situations. Joining up humanitarian responses to existing or planned development work that seeks to tackle violence against women and girls will help to ensure that in contexts of greater stress, families have alternative means of protecting their children.

- **Comprehensively tackle the factors that drive early marriage**

Recognise and support the need for a long-term approach and programming: work with faith leaders to help break down the myths surrounding early marriage; include early marriage prevention in education, maternal health and other programmes to prevent early marriage; ensure Female Genital Mutilation/ Cutting prevention programmes promote later marriage; support those who are already married, with education – break the cycle.

**“When the poverty here gets worse, we see an increase in young girls getting married.”** *Woman over 25, Somaliland*

## WHO CAN AFFORD TO MARRY MY 12-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER?

Life as a Syrian refugee in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley is beset by uncertainty and fear – and is expensive. It's a life Amira isn't sure she can continue to afford. She's considering marrying off her 12-year-old daughter, Sheereen. She doesn't want to, but “Sheereen would be our survival,” says Amira. The early marriage would mean Amira could feed her family of five for just a little bit longer. Beautiful Sheereen covers her face and sits in silence at the thought of being married at 12. There are no words. Does Sheereen dream about her future? Her mother answers for her: “She doesn't answer you because no one has ever asked her this before.”

Women in Somaliland walk home after their weekly check-up and rations from a World Vision-funded clinic; 45 per cent of girls across Somalia are married before the age of 18. © Ashley Jonathan Clements/World Vision





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